

MEDIA



ABC News president Kim Godwin leading a 'culture of fear' after layoffs: sources

By Alexandra Steigrad
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ABC News president Kim Godwin has created a "culture of fear" after chopping several veteran staffers in an alleged bid to plug leaks about her mismanagement at the Disney-owned network, insiders told The Post.

Godwin — who drew widespread criticism from many at the network as news spread of the salacious affair between "GMA3" hosts TJ Holmes and Amy Robach — huddled with a coterie of her close-knit aides before firing a slew of workers as part of a phased rollout of 50 job cuts last month, sources said.

"Everyone says it was a score-settling and that it was badly handled," one source said, explaining that people who had been at the company for over two decades were told to leave without any explanation.

"Somebody called it the 'Red Wedding,'" the source added, referring to a bloody massacre scene from HBO's hit show "Game of Thrones."

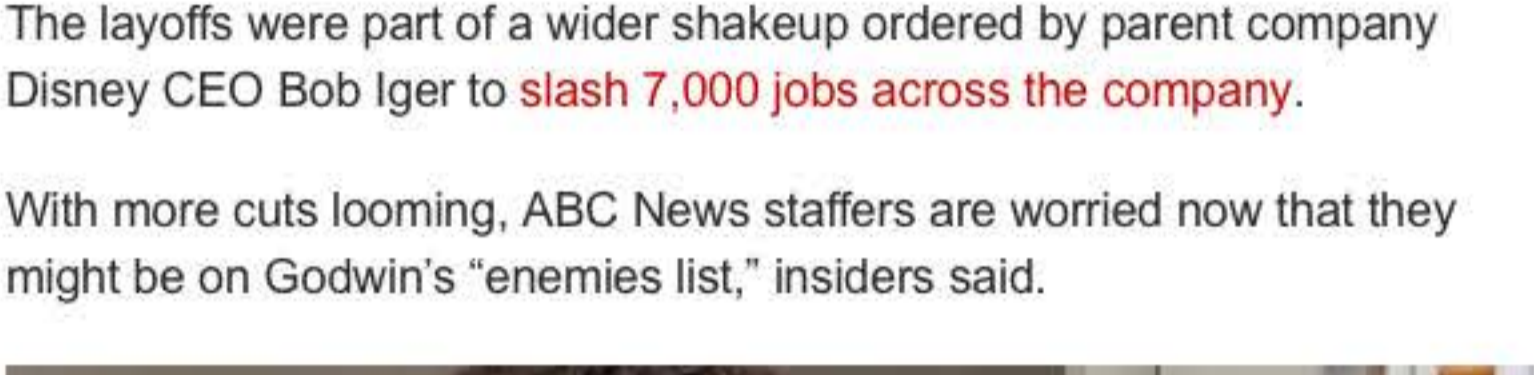
Insiders say the decision was made by Godwin and confidants that included executive editor and senior vice president Stacia Philips Deshishku, executive vice president Derek Medina and Godwin's right hand Jose Andino, vice president of process management. Andino followed Godwin from CBS News, where she had worked since 2007 before becoming the first black woman to lead a network news division in 2021.

One insider said Godwin and her new leadership group have taken the "keys to the car" and turned ABC News' culture of asking questions and being inquisitive into a "culture of fear."

"ABC News is an organization built on questioning but under Kim, there will be no questioning ever," a source said.

A source close to the matter denied that the layoffs were done in retribution over stories including the Holmes-Robach leaks.

ABC News declined to comment.



Some insiders claim Godwin laid off a group of senior ABC News staffers for leaking stories about her to the press.
Getty Images for The Alliance for Women in Media

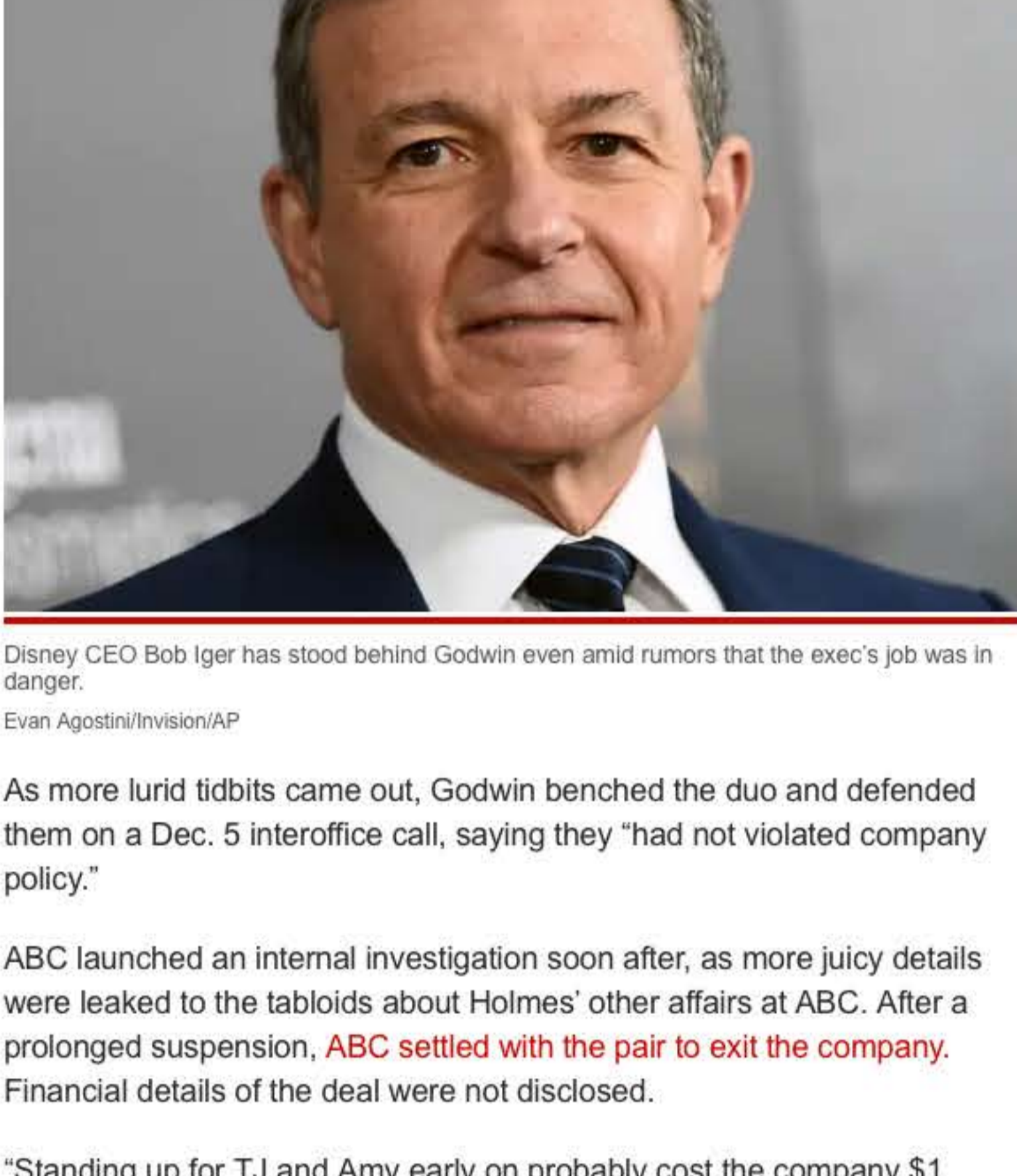
Among those fired were award-winning investigative journalist Chris Vlasto, newsgathering senior vice president Wendy Fisher, talent vice president Mary Noonan, talent and strategy senior vice president Galen Gordon, executive editorial producer Heather Riley, and communications vice president Alison Rudnick.

The ABC source said longtime employees would normally be offered buyouts or severance packages. However, in this case, no buyouts were offered and severance was only offered to a select few, sources with knowledge said.

Some have looked into suing ABC News, according to the Daily Beast, which said Vlasto is reportedly being repped by legal eagle Bryan Freedman.

The layoffs were part of a wider shakeup ordered by parent company Disney CEO Bob Iger to slash 7,000 jobs across the company.

With more cuts looming, ABC News staffers are worried now that they might be on Godwin's "enemies list," insiders said.



Since joining ABC News in 2021, Godwin has been under fire for a slew of missteps including her handling of the Amy Robach-T.J. Holmes scandal.
Instagram/@newsmom8

Prior to the layoffs, there had been buzz that Godwin, who has had her fair share of missteps during her two-year tenure, would be pushed out of the high-powered role.

"She has made a ton of mistakes at the company's expense," a media source said.

Most notably was her head-in-the-sand approach as the Holmes-Robach scandal burst into national headlines.

Details of the affair spilled out in late November, but Godwin permitted the "GMA3" pair to remain on the air, causing a spectacle which led to more news stories.



Disney CEO Bob Iger has stood behind Godwin even amid rumors that the exec's job was in danger.
Evan Agostini/Invision/AP

As more lurid tidbits came out, Godwin benched the duo and defended them on a Dec. 5 interoffice call, saying they "had not violated company policy."

ABC launched an internal investigation soon after, as more juicy details were leaked to the tabloids about Holmes' other affairs at ABC. After a prolonged suspension, ABC settled with the pair to exit the company. Financial details of the deal were not disclosed.

"Standing up for TJ and Amy early on probably cost the company \$1 million," a media exec speculated.

"The bottom line is Bob Iger is a professional and he wants to work with people who don't cause headaches. The story had legs because of the way she handled it," the exec added.

Godwin recently told Vanity Fair that she's "very comfortable" with cutting ties with Robach and Holmes after the scandal.

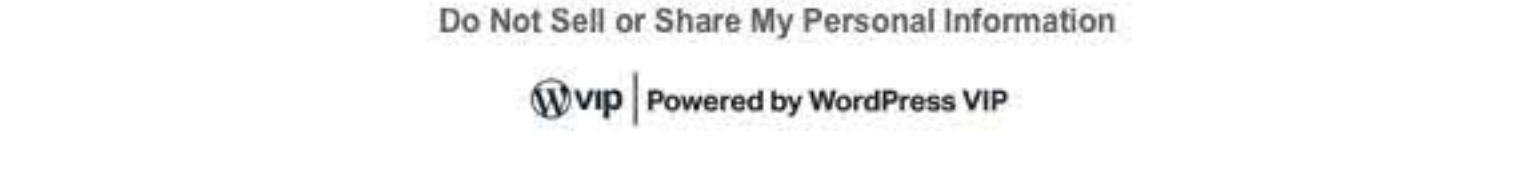
"We ended up where we needed to be," she said.

Sources told Page Six that coverage of the scandal resulted in the company "launching an internal investigation" to find out who was dishing details to the press.

A source close to the matter said the investigation is ongoing.

"The process was fair and there wasn't retaliation," the source said. "Kim is not that type of person."

Vanity Fair's profile of Godwin also claimed that "staffers were interviewed as part of a search for employees leaking information" — after Puck published an article about Godwin's performance.



Godwin has come under fire for her self-promotional approach to leading the Disney-owned news network.
REUTERS

"I didn't call for it" or "approve it," she told VF, adding "confidentiality is important in all organizations."

In 2021, Godwin also found herself in hot water with her then-boss Peter Rice when she called for an independent probe into the groping allegations against former "Good Morning America" producer Michael Corn.

Other missteps included the awkward handling of Whoopi Goldberg's suspension after she made anti-Semitic comments on "The View."

Some employees are also irked by Godwin's self-promotional style that glosses over the serious mission of the news division. They pointed to Godwin being led on stage by actors dressed as Wakanda warriors from Marvel's "Black Panther" at the opening reception of the National Association of Black Journalists convention last year.

Others cited a Puck News article that called out Godwin's promotion of her university, suggesting she was looking to join the board of trustees.

Staffers said the exec's constant "efforts to turn ABC News into a cheerleading organization for her alma mater Florida A&M University" have caused problems as "Good Morning America" oddly broadcast live from the school's homecoming in October.

"She's the president of news tourism, not the president of the news division," an ABC News insider told The Post.

Still, despite all the bad press, Disney appears to be standing behind Godwin — at least for now — thanks mainly to the success of the network's morning and evening news shows.

"If Kim Godwin was on her last legs, would Bob Iger allow her to do all these things?" one ABC source said. "I think the feeling is she's safe until the next mistake. They've allowed her to gut the place and establish her team. As long as the ratings remain No. 1 at the network's two big shows, 'Good Morning America' and 'World News Tonight with David Muir,' she's fine."