

Tucker Carlson's Vulgar, Offensive Messages About Colleagues Helped Seal His Fate at Fox News

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Updated April 26, 2023 8:50 am ET

Several weeks ago, as Fox News lawyers prepared for a courtroom showdown with Dominion Voting Systems, they presented Tucker Carlson with what they thought was good news: They had persuaded the court to redact from a legal filing the time he called a senior Fox News executive the c-word, according to people familiar with the matter.

Mr. Carlson, Fox News's most-watched prime-time host, wasn't impressed. He told his colleagues that he wanted the world to know what he had said about the executive in a private message, the people said. Mr. Carlson said comments he made about former President Donald Trump—"I hate him passionately"—that were in the court documents were said during a momentary spasm of anger, while his dislike of this executive was deep and enduring.

The messages were part of a trove of emails and texts from Fox executives and hosts that were made public as a result of [Dominion's defamation lawsuit](#). The voting-machine company accused Fox networks of airing false claims by hosts and guests that Dominion helped rig the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election in favor of Joe Biden. Fox News parent [Fox Corp.](#) [FOX 1.04%increase; green up pointing triangle](#) last week agreed to pay \$787.5 million to settle the dispute.

On Monday, Mr. Carlson's famously combative stance toward members of Fox News management and other colleagues caught up with him, as the network abruptly announced it [was parting ways with him](#), just minutes after informing Mr. Carlson of the change.

The private messages in which Mr. Carlson showed disregard for management and colleagues were a major factor in that decision, according to other people familiar with the matter. Although many portions of the Dominion court documents are redacted, there is concern among Fox Corp. executives that if the redacted material were to become public, it would lead to further embarrassment for the network and parent company.

With an average audience of 3.2 million viewers during the first quarter, Mr. Carlson's "Tucker Carlson Tonight" was the network's most-watched evening show over that period and second most popular telecast overall behind the afternoon talk show "The Five."

Within Fox's management, reservations had been mounting about risks Mr. Carlson presented for the network, people familiar with the matter said. Some of the people pointed to concerns that the populist firebrand had come to believe himself bigger than the network—a cardinal sin in Fox Corp. Chair Rupert Murdoch's empire—and was increasingly operating as his own island.

Mr. Murdoch and his family are large shareholders in Fox Corp. and Wall Street Journal parent [News Corp.](#)

On air, Mr. Carlson had turned up the volume on commentary that had expanded beyond a conservative viewpoint on politics into more of an attack on marginalized groups. His show, more than those of his prime-time colleagues Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham, frequently landed the network in hot water, particularly with advertisers.

Mr. Carlson sometimes trafficked in what critics—including some higher-ups within Fox—felt was thinly veiled racism on his show, such as when he recently suggested a Tennessee lawmaker got into a good college only because of his skin color, some of the people said.

Mr. Carlson declined to comment on his departure.

PHOTOS: [Tucker Carlson Out at Fox News: A Look at His Career](#)

In recent years, battles between Mr. Carlson and Fox management got so bad that former Trump aide Raj Shah was appointed to be his internal advocate and an intermediary between Mr. Carlson and Fox's communications department, according to people familiar with the arrangement and filings in the Dominion case.

Mr. Carlson was livid that Fox News didn't do more to protect him from the negative press coverage around the Dominion case that he was expected to testify in, given that the primary actors responsible for the false election-fraud claims at the heart of the suit were other Fox hosts and commentators, according to people familiar with the matter.

In the messages released in the legal proceedings, Mr. Carlson voiced skepticism about Sidney Powell, the primary purveyor of the conspiracy theory that Dominion's technology helped steal the election from Mr. Trump. Given that, Mr. Carlson felt the narrative in press coverage should have been different, and let Fox executives know of his displeasure, the people said.

The Dominion court filings are filled with examples of him disparaging colleagues, from calling for the firing of Fox News reporter Jacqui Heinrich for fact-checking Mr. Trump's false claims about the 2020 election to complaining about the network's news coverage, including the decision to call Arizona for Mr. Biden on election night.

Inside Fox News, there has been a growing sense that Mr. Carlson couldn't be managed, and viewed himself as untouchable, people familiar with the company said. Legal documents also revealed Mr. Carlson was unafraid to run roughshod over those whose views or actions he opposed.

Although Mr. Carlson has spent much of the Covid-19 era doing his show out of his Maine home—joking recently in a Heritage Foundation speech that he “hadn't been in an elevator for three years”—his presence still loomed large inside and outside the network's New York headquarters.

Protesters frequently gather in front of the building carrying cardboard cutouts of his head, sometimes with an “X” over it, adorned with the most incendiary quotes from the Dominion case discovery.

Mr. Carlson’s fall from grace in the eyes of the Murdochs was swift. Just a few weeks ago, Rupert Murdoch invited Mr. Carlson to his Bel Air, Calif., home to dine with his then-fiancée, Ann Lesley Smith, according to people familiar with the gathering.

Ms. Smith couldn’t be reached for comment.

Mr. Carlson had bonded somewhat with Fox Corp. Executive Chair Lachlan Murdoch, Rupert Murdoch’s son, with whom he shared a love of the outdoors and conservative politics, according to people familiar with the matter. But it was Lachlan Murdoch, in consultation with Fox News Chief Executive Suzanne Scott, who made the decision to oust Mr. Carlson, the Journal reported Monday.

Mr. Carlson is a defendant in a lawsuit filed last month by Abby Grossberg, a former producer for Mr. Carlson and Fox Business host Maria Bartiromo. The suit, which also names Fox and other individuals, said, “Mr. Carlson’s derogatory comments towards women, and his disdain for those who dare to object to such misogyny, is well known on the set” of his show. Fox News fired Ms. Grossberg shortly afterward, saying she filed her complaint without taking steps to protect “portions containing Fox’s privileged information.” Ms. Grossberg’s lawyers described her firing as retaliatory.

In a statement Monday following news of Mr. Carlson’s ouster, Ms. Grossberg’s lawyers said: “Tucker Carlson’s departure from Fox News is, in part, an admission of the systemic lying, bullying, and conspiracy-mongering claimed by our client.”

Mr. Carlson had no comment on the lawsuit. Fox at the time said it hired independent outside counsel to investigate the concerns raised by Ms. Grossberg.

A San Francisco native, Mr. Carlson, 53, joined Fox News as a contributor in 2009. He rose to get his own show in 2016 and eventually landed the 8 p.m. time slot. His past career had included tours at both CNN and MSNBC, as well as an [entrepreneurial stint as the co-founder of the Daily Caller](#), the conservative web publication that aimed to inject a dose of original reporting into the commentary-heavy center-right media ecosystem.

Besides his nightly presence on Fox News, Mr. Carlson was also prominent on Fox Nation, the news channel’s direct-to-streaming service, on which his content was essentially an unplugged version of his daily show. In November, he aired a three-part special called “Patriot Purge” that inaccurately suggested the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol was a plot of extreme left-wing groups and that even the FBI played a part.

That program set the stage for a March broadcast on his Fox News show, suggesting—using video provided to him by House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R., Calif.)—that the [attack wasn’t nearly as violent](#) as the media had suggested. It was heavily criticized by lawmakers on both sides of the aisle.

While Mr. Carlson's "Tucker Carlson Tonight" was popular, it was also repellent to blue-chip advertisers. Top-tier marketers tend to steer clear of content they deem too controversial, and the show was sometimes the target of advertiser boycotts. As advertisers have fled prime time, some have shifted to airing commercials on Fox at other times.

Mr. Carlson's show has filled the void mostly with ads from direct-response advertisers and MyPillow Inc. The pillow manufacturer's commercials star CEO Mike Lindell, who has also appeared as a guest on "Tucker Carlson Tonight" and was one of the most prominent people spreading the false election-fraud narrative. Direct-response advertisers typically are smaller businesses whose ads encourage people to take actions such as calling a toll-free number.

The lack of advertiser demand meant the commercials in many cases weren't being sold at a premium or at a rate commensurate with its audience size, which meant it wasn't providing a financial windfall to the network, people familiar with the network's operations said.

As of late, Mr. Carlson's ratings popularity on the network were surpassed by the afternoon panel show "The Five."

The popularity of Mr. Carlson's show along with other Fox News programs continued to give the network leverage when negotiating distribution deals with cable and satellite operators to carry the channel. Fox News costs those providers about \$2 a month for a subscriber, according to industry estimates. Over the next two years, Fox News will be renegotiating deals with most major distributors.

The Dominion court filings were hardly the first time that the commentator's take on other personalities at the network was on display.

In 2019, Mr. Carlson attacked then-Fox News anchor Shepard Smith on-air for a show Mr. Smith had done in which Fox News contributor Judge Andrew Napolitano said Mr. Trump had been guilty of criminal behavior. Mr. Carlson and Mr. Smith traded barbs at each other on their respective shows, with Mr. Smith calling Mr. Carlson's criticisms of Mr. Napolitano repugnant.

Mr. Smith [left Fox News](#) soon after the tiff with Mr. Carlson.

Mr. Smith didn't respond to a request for comment.

Fox News founding Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes—who was forced out in 2016 after numerous allegations of sexual harassment that he denied—was known for being able to manage the larger-than-life personalities of some of the on-air talent. Mr. Ailes, who died in 2017, made sure that there was "no shooting inside the tent," people who worked under him have said.

In Mr. Ailes's absence, longtime Fox News insiders lament that the talent often seem to get their way and that producers and executives who oversee their shows are reluctant to challenge them or use a heavy hand to rein them in.

Fox News could suffer some rating declines should some of Mr. Carlson's audience leave with him or if his replacement isn't as big of a draw. On Monday night, with morning-show anchor

Brian Kilmeade filling in, the show drew 2.6 million viewers, according to Nielsen. That beat rival news channels but is smaller than Mr. Carlson's usual audience.

Other big-name Fox anchors including Bill O'Reilly, Megyn Kelly and Glenn Beck have left [without harming Fox News ratings](#).

Some of them have gone on to achieve financial success with new media ventures. Mr. O'Reilly makes nearly \$30 million a year and Ms. Kelly makes well into the eight figures, people familiar with their finances said.

Inside the network, the mantra among executives is that no one personality is bigger than the brand.

"History would show that the talent needs Fox more than Fox needs any particular talent," said Jonathan Klein, a former CNN president.

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Appeared in the April 26, 2023, print edition as 'Slur by Carlson Helped Seal Fate'.

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