

#MeToo, Charlie Rose and Newsroom Practices¹

“I really am still reeling... I got an hour and 42 minutes of sleep last night... None of us ever thought that we would be sitting here at this table in particular telling this story,” said Gayle King, co-anchor of “CBS This Morning,” on Nov. 21, 2017, in stunned disbelief.²

What was the story? Charlie Rose, King’s co-anchor at “CBS This Morning,” had been suspended overnight by CBS pending an investigation of charges of sexual harassment by eight women. The story had been reported by The Washington Post the previous day.³ Seven of the women had either worked for Rose or aspired to work for him between 1990 and 2011, and the eighth woman was working for Rose at the time. Five of the women spoke as anonymous sources “out of fear of Rose’s stature in the industry, his power over their careers or what they described as his volatile temper.”⁴ Further investigation by The Washington Post revealed that Rose’s inappropriate behavior reached further back and was more prolific than initially had been reported.⁵ In total, 27 women alleged they had been sexually harassed by Rose as early as 1976 and as recently as April 2017 in multiple news organizations, including CBS.⁶

Representatives of the news media organizations where Rose had worked — CBS, PBS and Bloomberg — said they had no records of complaints against him, suggesting the initial Post article was the first anyone in leadership had heard about Rose’s behavior.⁷ Yet Rose’s victims said they had told managers at CBS and Charlie Rose Inc. about Rose’s behavior, but their reports of sexual harassment had not been taken seriously.⁸

Though Rose denied the allegations, his distinguished career as a journalist came to an immediate halt. He was fired by CBS, and the show bearing his name, “Charlie Rose,” which had been on PBS and Bloomberg News, was canceled.⁹

A single question continued to plague people who, like King, had been stunned to learn of Rose’s behavior: How could persistent sexual harassment by a distinguished journalist like Rose be permitted to continue for decades in multiple news organizations?

Background

Rose, who was 75 years old when the Post story broke, had been considered one of the most respected journalists in the industry.¹⁰ His big break came in 1984 when he became anchor of “CBS News Nightwatch,” CBS’s first late night news show, and he worked in that position until 1990.¹¹ In 1991, he began hosting “Charlie Rose,” which ran for 26 years. Rose also worked as a correspondent for “60 Minutes II” from its inception in 1998 until its cancellation in 2005.¹² In 2008, he became a correspondent for “60 Minutes.”¹³ In 2012, “CBS This Morning” hired Rose as a co-anchor to revamp the show and revive its lagging ratings, which he did.¹⁴ In addition to his media positions, Rose often was invited to moderate different public and private events for the wealthy and powerful in the United States and abroad.¹⁵ As further testament to his storied career, Rose had received many awards and honors including induction into the North Carolina Journalism Hall of Fame.¹⁶

Rose was best known for the long-form interview, which was the hallmark of the show bearing his name. He conducted in-depth interviews with influential politicians, heads of industry, newsmakers and celebrities,¹⁷ and he was able to secure these interviews because he was seen as a power player in journalism and politics. He had interviewed five U.S. presidents, including Barack Obama 11 times. His interview of Syria’s president for “60 Minutes” in 2013 won Emmy and Peabody awards.¹⁸

“Charlie Rose” was an independent show produced by Charlie Rose Inc., filmed at Bloomberg studios in New York and distributed by PBS and Bloomberg LP.¹⁹ Mike Bloomberg, the media mogul and former New York mayor, was a friend of Rose and had given him an entire studio to use to produce his show.

The organizational structure of Charlie Rose Inc. could best be described as hierarchical and siloed. That is, Rose was at the top of the hierarchy with complete control over “Charlie Rose,” its staff and supporting operations.²⁰ Second in command was his longtime and trusted producer, Yvette Vega, who had worked with the show since its beginning in 1991.²¹ The organizational

structure was siloed in that “Charlie Rose” was separate from PBS’s other entities and filmed in its own studio, which was off-site from regular PBS productions. As such, Rose and his staff had little interaction with other units and little to no oversight from PBS or Bloomberg LP.

Charlie Rose’s Newsroom Practices

Throughout many years, working for Rose in any capacity, from producer to intern, was considered one of the preeminent jobs in journalism. Working for Rose meant being in rooms with some of the most influential people of the time. For Kyle Godfrey-Ryan, the last stage of her interview to become his assistant included a trip to Washington to watch him interview Condoleezza Rice.²² She said she was enamored with the exciting possibilities of the job. Moreover, Rose had the power to greatly advance the careers of the young journalists and support staff who served him well and whom he favored. One woman Rose sexually harassed said: “There are so few jobs. You know if you don’t behave a certain way, there is someone else behind you.”²³

A number of the women accusing Rose of sexual harassment had worked directly for him at Charlie Rose Inc.²⁴ The staff consisted of approximately 15 people. To conduct the long-form interviews, Rose crisscrossed the country and the globe accompanied by a rotating set of staff members who worked with him in cars, hotel suites and private planes.²⁵ Staff members also often worked with Rose in his two New York City residences and his homes on Long Island and in North Carolina.²⁶ Not surprisingly, the newsroom style was described as informal. There was little to no training for newly hired assistants, interns and other staffers. For example, Godfrey-Ryan described her first day on the job.²⁷ Rose had interviewed and hired her and apparently had not let anyone else on his staff know. No one had known she was coming, and she said she sat for a long time with nothing to do at a computer she could not use because no one had set up a workstation for her. Charlie Rose Inc. operated like an island, isolated and disconnected from any formal structures of PBS.

The newsroom that produced “Charlie Rose” was not one of civility and respect for others.²⁸ It was quite the opposite. Bullying was common. Godfrey-Ryan told

about producers who were allowed to bully her because she was basically at the bottom, power-wise.²⁹ Lower-level employees’ complaints about Rose’s inappropriate behavior were not taken seriously, and often, they were completely dismissed by senior members of the staff.³⁰ And yet, Rose’s behavior was discussed openly among staff on the show.³¹ It was not even an “open secret”; it was the source of constant conversation with requests to those who were the target of Rose’s behavior to recount “what happened while you were working with Charlie yesterday.”³² Verbal abuse by Rose was common, and his behavior set the tone of the workspace. Public shaming of others, verbal abuse and a state of fear were pervasive in the “Charlie Rose” workspace.³³ Note that the staff worked for Charlie Rose Inc. and not for PBS or Bloomberg LP. Neither PBS nor Bloomberg provided human resources support for “Charlie Rose.”³⁴

Rose was described by employees at Charlie Rose Inc. as extremely volatile. Employees described his wrath as “swift and often fiercely personal.”³⁵ If something did not go his way, he would often get upset and blame others — especially lower-level employees — even when they had done nothing wrong.³⁶ The staff catered to his ego, and everyone’s job was to make sure things got done without upsetting or challenging him. Staff members felt compelled to make Rose look good in all situations. For example, if Rose was late for an interview, everyone would entertain his guests until he finally arrived. As another example, Godfrey-Ryan described a time when she was told by a senior level employee to go and “distract and trick Charlie” into having his foot looked at because he had fallen and hurt himself, but he didn’t want to go to the hospital for fear it would make him look bad.³⁷ She then had to care for him as he recovered. Staff members were encouraged to keep their heads down, do their jobs and keep Rose happy at all costs. As the “star” of the show, he needed to be appeased. After all, it was his success and brilliance that was making it possible for all these people to have jobs. Everyone’s livelihood and future career aspirations were dependent on him and his success.

Rose routinely and repeatedly made unwanted sexual advances toward his staff, and The Washington Post reported that there were “striking commonalities in the accounts of the women” describing their experiences with him.³⁸ For example, Reah Bravo, an intern and an

associate producer for “Charlie Rose” starting in 2007, recounted instances in which she fought off sexual advances from Rose.³⁹ Rose’s sexual harassment and bullying were so routine that initially she had not even recognized them as the illegal behaviors that they were. “It has taken 10 years and a fierce moment of cultural reckoning for me to understand these moments for what they were,” she told *The Washington Post*. “He was a sexual predator, and I was his victim.”⁴⁰ Former assistant Godfrey-Ryan, one of the first to come forward with allegations against Rose, said that Rose’s harassment was out in the open and that “it was a culture within that newsroom where harassment and beratement — not just of me but other co-workers — and consistent sexual harassment were just part of the workplace.”⁴¹ She often had to work with Rose in one of his residences, and she recalled at least a dozen times when he walked in front of her nude while she was working with him.⁴² She also gave accounts of times when Rose would call her on the phone early in the morning or late at night to describe his sexual fantasies about her.⁴³ For a long time, she said, she put up with the sexual harassment and bullying because she felt extremely fortunate — perhaps even unqualified — to be employed at the PBS show.⁴⁴ When Godfrey-Ryan finally told Vega, the executive producer, about Rose’s inappropriate behavior, Vega shrugged and said, “That’s just Charlie being Charlie.”⁴⁵ Godfrey-Ryan was ultimately fired by Rose in retribution when she told a friend about the harassment and then refused to retract what she had said about him.⁴⁶

As another example, in 1986, a 22-year-old news clerk at CBS, Annmarie Parr, reported comments to her boss about Rose’s lewd behavior toward her.⁴⁷ Rose asked her: “Annmarie, do you like sex? Do you enjoy it? How often do you like to have sex?”⁴⁸ Parr then asked her boss not to put her in situations in which she would be alone with Rose. Parr remembered her boss laughing and saying, “Fine, you don’t have to be alone with him anymore.”⁴⁹ Decades later, 20-year-old intern Corrina Collins described a similar sequence of events.⁵⁰ While on a business trip, Rose pawed at her on a flight and then squeezed her breast during the car ride from the airport. Rose insisted they work in his hotel room. “It felt predatory,” she said. “I had already said no, but he was going to persist.”⁵¹ She shared her concern with Vega, but Vega replied that Rose was harmless.⁵² Multiple

women shared similar stories.⁵³

In response to the accusations in the initial *Post* article, Rose said in a statement, “I have behaved insensitively at times, and I accept responsibility for that, though I do not believe that all of these allegations are accurate. I always felt that I was pursuing shared feelings, even though I now realize I was mistaken.”⁵⁴ In response to the allegations in the second *Post* article, Rose’s response was a one-sentence email: “Your story is unfair and inaccurate.”⁵⁵

In a statement to the *Post*, Vega said: “I should have stood up for (Rose’s victims). I failed. It is crushing. I deeply regret not helping them.”⁵⁶

Sexual Harassment and News Industry Demographics

The Rose case was not an isolated incident in the news industry. A year earlier, Roger Ailes, CEO of Fox News, resigned after former anchor Gretchen Carlson filed a lawsuit citing retribution for complaining about sexual harassment from Ailes and her “Fox & Friends” co-host Steve Doocy.⁵⁷ Many other women came forward claiming unwanted sexual advances from Ailes, including Megyn Kelly.⁵⁸ Fox settled the lawsuit with Carlson for \$20 million.⁵⁹ A month after the initial accusations against Rose, NBC anchor Matt Lauer was accused of sexual harassment by female colleagues and fired by the “Today” show.⁶⁰ Many women told *Variety* that they had complained to executives about Lauer’s behavior. He would prey on female colleagues because of his position of power, and his actions were reportedly not a secret among the other employees. During this time period, at least a dozen women accused MSNBC political journalist Mark Halperin of sexual harassment in an earlier job at ABC News.⁶¹ NBC News and MSNBC terminated Halperin’s contract.⁶² Unlike Rose and Lauer, Halperin has made an attempt to come back but received pushback in the news industry.⁶³ In 2018, CBS chairman Les Moonves stepped down following several allegations of sexual harassment.⁶⁴

A recent study revealed that two-thirds of female journalists have been harassed, but most do not report it.⁶⁵ The epidemic of sexual harassment in newsrooms has likely been influenced by newsroom demographics. During the past half century, the statistical profile of

the U.S. journalist has remained largely the same: a white, married man.⁶⁶ From the early 1980s until 2013, the percentage of full-time female journalists working in mainstream media in the U.S. hovered around 35%, substantially lower than the percentage of women in the U.S. civilian work force (47%).⁶⁷ Recently, newsrooms have achieved more gender balance: 41.7% of employees and 41.8% of newsroom managers are women.⁶⁸ Yet, only 28% of news organization leaders are women.⁶⁹ In contrast, two-thirds of journalism students are women.⁷⁰ Unequal pay and poor retention have been persistent problems for female journalists.⁷¹ As a result, women drop off at every level in the pipeline to leadership because they are harassed, paid less, face inequality at home and are denied opportunities for advancement or prestigious assignments.⁷² These trends are even more pronounced for female journalists of color.⁷³ In contrast, strong male networks in newsrooms provide men social capital that results in better assignments, more promotions and greater decision-making power.⁷⁴

Sexual Harassment Law

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is the primary U.S. law prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace.⁷⁵ It makes not just sexual harassment but any discrimination in employment based on “race, color, religion, sex, and national origin” illegal. Title VII does not mention sexual harassment explicitly; however, soon after the Civil Rights Act was passed, victims of sexual harassment began arguing that sexual harassment at work constituted discrimination under Title VII.⁷⁶ In 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the federal agency charged with interpreting Title VII, issued guidelines affirming that sexual harassment violated Title VII, which influenced judicial and organizational decision-making.⁷⁷ In 1986, the Supreme Court determined that sexual harassment is a form of discrimination prohibited by Title VII and set binding precedent in a landmark case, *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*. In addition, many state laws also prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace.⁷⁸

Sexual harassment encompasses any type of harassment on the basis of gender. The Supreme Court explained, “The critical issue ... is whether members of one sex are exposed to disadvantageous terms or

conditions of employment to which members of the other sex are not exposed.”⁷⁹ In short, the courts ask whether harassment occurred “because of ... sex.”⁸⁰ It is important to note that claims of sexual harassment do not have to involve allegations of unwanted sexual advances.⁸¹ It encompasses any type of harassment based on gender. In addition, it is gender neutral. That is, women may accuse men, men may accuse women, or accusations may be between members of the same sex.

The EEOC and the courts have drawn distinctions between two types of sexual harassment: 1) quid pro quo harassment and 2) hostile work environment harassment.⁸² Quid pro quo harassment involves a proposed exchange of a job-related benefit for sexual favors. Examples would be, “Have sex with me, and I’ll promote you to news anchor,” or “Have sex with me, or I’ll fire you.” The person making the demand typically has power or authority over the person who makes the claim. If an individual suffers tangible job disadvantages, she or he can claim quid pro quo sexual harassment. One incident can be enough for a legal claim. In contrast, hostile work environment harassment often involves more than one incident. It is behavior that “has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.”⁸³ The behavior must be severe or pervasive to the point that the victim’s job performance is impaired or the working environment becomes so intimidating, offensive or hostile that it constitutes a change in the conditions and terms of employment.⁸⁴ Such conduct often involves an ongoing pattern of behavior (repeated sexual advances, off-color jokes, offensive behavior directed at one gender) or the physical aspects of the workplace (office walls with nude calendars or lewd graffiti). The Hollywood Commission provides a helpful resource on sexual harassment.

Freedom from harassment in the workplace is a basic employee right and essential to creating a safe and fair workplace.

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⁷Brittain & Carmon, "Charlie Rose's Misconduct Was Widespread."

⁸Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

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¹⁴Brittain & Carmon, "Charlie Rose's Misconduct Was Widespread."

¹⁵Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

¹⁶Dave DeWitt, "Charlie Rose to Stay in NC Journalism Hall of Fame," North Carolina Public Radio, Dec. 22, 2017, <https://www.wunc.org/news/2017-12-22/charlie-rose-to-stay-in-nc-journalism-hall-of-fame>.

¹⁷Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

¹⁸Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

¹⁹Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

²⁰Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

²¹Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

²²Kyle Godfrey-Ryan, personal interview, July 16, 2020.

²³Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

²⁴Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

²⁵Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

²⁶Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

²⁷Kyle Godfrey-Ryan, personal interview, July 16, 2020.

²⁸Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

²⁹Kyle Godfrey-Ryan, personal interview, July 16, 2020.

³⁰Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

³¹Kyle Godfrey-Ryan, personal interview, July 16, 2020.

³²Kyle Godfrey-Ryan, personal interview, July 16, 2020.

³³Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

³⁴Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

³⁵Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

³⁶Kyle Godfrey-Ryan, personal interview, July 16, 2020.

³⁷Kyle Godfrey-Ryan, personal interview, July 16, 2020.

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⁴⁰Carmon & Brittain, "Eight Women Say Charlie Rose Sexually Harassed Them."

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⁴⁷Brittain & Carmon, "Charlie Rose's Misconduct Was Widespread."

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⁵⁰Brittain & Carmon, "Charlie Rose's Misconduct Was Widespread."

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⁸²Payne & Adamson, “Note on the Law of Sexual Harassment.”

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