

ABC settles defamation lawsuit as media moves to accommodate Trump

Patrick Martin
17 December 2024

The decision by ABC News to pay \$16 million to settle a defamation lawsuit brought by fascist president-elect Donald Trump is a major political signal.

The corporate media, dominated by billionaires and giant corporations like Disney, the owner of ABC, is dropping any pretense of a critical, let alone adversarial, relationship to the incoming administration. It is throwing in the towel even as Trump has made clear he intends to rule as a dictator from “day one.”

The factual issues involved in Trump’s lawsuit against ABC News must be summarized briefly: ABC’s “This Week” anchorman George Stephanopoulos, in an interview last March 10 with Representative Nancy Mace (R-South Carolina), asked her how she could continue to support Trump after the civil lawsuit judgment against him for denying a sexual assault on E. Jean Carroll and subsequently defaming Carroll as a liar.

Mace had disclosed that she herself had been raped as a young woman, and Stephanopoulos raised the Trump case in that context, stating multiple times that Trump had been found liable for rape by a civil jury. As a legal matter, the jury found Trump responsible for “sexual abuse” rather than rape, since a New York state law—since amended—defined rape only as vaginal penetration by the penis. All other forms of sexual assault were classified as “sexual abuse.”

Judge Lewis Kaplan, who presided over the civil trial, wrote subsequently, “The finding that Ms. Carroll failed to prove that she was ‘raped’ within the meaning of the New York Penal Law does not mean that she failed to prove that Mr. Trump ‘raped’ her as many people commonly understand the word ‘rape.’” He concluded: “Indeed, as the evidence at trial recounted below makes clear, the jury found that Mr. Trump in fact did exactly that.”

Stephanopoulos paraphrased Kaplan’s comments, without mentioning the judge, and without referring to the distinction between the state law definition and the common understanding of rape. This was part of the campaign by the pro-Democratic wing of the corporate media to discredit Trump without actually addressing his fascist politics.

ABC News initially fought the lawsuit on two well-established grounds: that the reference to “rape” was substantially true, even if technically deficient; and Trump’s lawsuit could only prevail if he could prove “actual malice” by the network and Stephanopoulos. However, in July 2024, Federal District Judge Cecilia Altonaga ruled against a motion to dismiss and ordered Trump and ABC to move forward with the civil suit, including exchanging documents and obtaining further evidence.

Legal commentators noted that it was highly unusual for a defendant like ABC News to settle before deposition testimony had been taken, and before making a motion for summary judgment, which would frequently be granted in the case of a defamation lawsuit against the news media, particularly by a plaintiff like Trump who has been convicted of multiple felonies.

It is particularly noteworthy that ABC News agreed to settle only hours after a federal magistrate had ordered Trump and Stephanopoulos to sit next week for four-hour depositions on the case. A delegation of ABC and Disney executives visited Mar-a-Lago last Monday for talks with Trump’s transition team, which no doubt included both his threats to limit the network’s access to the White House, and the broader crackdown on the media.

According to the *New York Times*, Debra O’Connell, the Disney executive who oversees ABC News, had

dinner with Trump's chief of staff, Susie Wiles. It is apparent that the network executives hoped that a surrender that preempted a Trump deposition would curry favor with the incoming president.

The result of this visit was the settlement of the suit on terms favorable to Trump, including a public expression of "regret" from ABC and Stephanopoulos, appended as a footnote on the network's website, but immediately publicized in a press release by Trump's lawyers, leading to widespread media coverage. ABC will donate \$15 million to Trump's presidential library, which so far only exists as an online destination, and pay \$1 million to Trump's legal team, thus effectively paying for the privilege of being sued.

The capitulation by ABC News comes in the context of a series of moves by the giant corporations and billionaires who control the media to grovel obsequiously before the would-be American Fuhrer.

An article posted in *Politico* on Monday was headlined with the comment, "From big tech to the media, the rush to kiss Trump's ring is on." It noted, "Tech titans are pouring millions of dollars into his inauguration and parading through West Palm Beach for meetings with the president-elect. Foreign leaders are seeking to curry his favor through phone calls and photo-ops. Liberal newscasters are rushing to Mar-a-Lago to mend fences with the man who painted them as 'enemies of the people.'"

Even before the election, billionaire Jeff Bezos overturned the decision of the *Washington Post* editorial board to endorse Democrat Kamala Harris, decreeing that the newspaper he owns should remain "neutral." The billionaire owner of the *Los Angeles Times* took similar action.

In the wake of Trump's victory, Comcast, the corporate owner of NBC/Universal, announced it would sell off its MSNBC cable news subsidiary, the most vocal critic of Trump in the corporate media. This followed the much-publicized visit to Mar-a-Lago by Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski, co-hosts of MSNBC's "Morning Joe" program, where they met with Trump personally and agreed to reestablish friendly relations.

CBS is fighting a \$10 billion lawsuit Trump filed over its editing of a "60 Minutes" interview with Harris. (Trump claims the interview was doctored to flatter Harris, but he had already refused to sit for his

own interview with the program). Trump has threatened to revoke the broadcast license of ABC, and his nominee for chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which regulates the broadcast media, has attacked CBS and NBC over what he claimed was too favorable coverage of Harris, while declaring that "broadcast licenses are not sacred cows."

These threats have been accompanied by suggestions that social media giants like Facebook and Google could be subjected to regulatory actions because of their alleged censorship of ultra-right and fascist pro-Trump postings. This is under conditions where the main target of social media censorship has been left-wing and socialist commentary, particularly the *World Socialist Web Site*, and more recently, all criticism of Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The response of the corporate bosses has been to line up and salute their new "commander-in-chief." Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and Tim Cook are making million-dollar contributions to Trump's inaugural celebration as a way of flattering the returning fascist president.

In the ultimate form of sycophancy, *Time* magazine chose last week to name Trump its "Person of the Year," hailing his electoral triumph as a stunning and historic achievement, and never mentioning the right-wing dictatorial and fascistic character of the regime he intends to install.

Nothing else could be expected of the oligarchs who control the corporate media, which has long abandoned any independent, let alone critical, approach to the administration in power. Under conditions where the Trump administration is committed to a massive assault on democratic rights, beginning with the mass roundup of millions of immigrants, the opposition will come only from below, from the mass mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact