

TMZ's Newsroom Is A Hotbed For Racism, Misogyny, And Verbal Abuse, Ex-Employees Say

 buzzfeednews.com/article/krystieyandoli/tmz-employees-allegations

Since its debut in 2005, TMZ has built its brand on not only breaking celebrity news, but also a brash tone that former employees say is consistent with a toxic workplace where the staff regularly endures verbal abuse, misogyny, racism, and other inappropriate behavior.

BuzzFeed News spoke to one current and 23 former TMZ employees who came forward after an ex-colleague filed a lawsuit against the news site's parent companies Warner Bros. Entertainment and EHM Productions, alleging gender discrimination and retaliation. A TMZ spokesperson called the claims a "blatant attempt to use negative publicity and inaccurate claims to force" a monetary settlement.

One current employee told BuzzFeed News that the culture of TMZ is that of "unchecked abuse of power," starting with the men in charge. They also said there are hardly any women in senior roles at TMZ and that the company hires people of color "because they know that they need to, as opposed to appreciating and valuing them."

"If you're talking about the rights of Black people, if you're talking about misogyny, if you're talking about equality amongst everyone, it's never reflected in the workplace," the employee said. "We're reporting on all of that stuff, but we're not doing it ourselves."

But the new group of ex-employees, most of whom asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution, said that despite TMZ's reputation, the same kind of reckoning that has taken place at other media outlets has yet to hit the website's newsroom.

"How they treat women in a demeaning manner transcends to how they represent women on their site. The two go hand in hand," a former Warner Bros. employee said.

Harvey Levin created the tabloid news site under the Telepictures Productions umbrella, which is owned by Warner Bros, in 2005 along with Jim Paratore, who died in 2012. TMZ's brand has since expanded beyond its website with *TMZ on TV*, *TMZ Live*, *TMZ Sports*, and the TMZ Celebrity Tour.

Former employees said Levin and other executive producers screamed and cursed at them on a regular basis. Former employees also said Levin called people "retarded" and "morons," and made comments like "Talking to you guys is like talking to a room full of special ed kids" and "My dog takes better direction than you."

One former employee said they felt physically threatened by executives at TMZ, and that they called them a "fucking retard," "fucking piece of shit," and "fucking dummy."

“You don’t get an apology or anything like that,” one former employee said. “They just pretend it never happened until the next thing that pisses them off happens, and then you get another angry outburst from them.”

One former employee, Ryan Naumann, filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in 2014 after Levin allegedly outed him as being gay to the rest of his colleagues, according to records obtained by BuzzFeed News. Another former Warner Bros. employee who worked closely with TMZ said she filed an HR complaint against executive producer alleging gender discrimination. The employee said she was frustrated when the company later told her the investigation had found no merit to her allegations.

Six other former employees also said they made HR complaints with Warner Bros. about their experiences at TMZ. Others said they avoided making complaints because they feared retaliation.

Warner Bros. and Levin did not immediately respond to multiple requests for comment, but a second current employee told BuzzFeed News “the word retard has never and would never be used within TMZ by anybody in authority,” and that “it’s not true that our hiring or firing practices are based on race and gender.”

“TMZ goes to great lengths to ensure that it has diverse hiring practices and brings people in of all backgrounds,” the employee said.

But complaints against managers date back years. In August, former employee Bernie Zilio filed a complaint with the EEOC against TMZ, Warner Bros. Entertainment, and EHM Productions alleging gender discrimination and retaliation.

In 2014, another former employee, Taryn Hillin, also filed a lawsuit against Warner Bros., EHM Productions, TMZ Productions, and executive producer Evan Rosenblum alleging gender discrimination and wrongful termination.

Hillin called TMZ a “boys club” that fosters a hostile work environment for women, and said Rosenblum “routinely yelled at and humiliated” her, making comments like “don’t be a girl.” According to court documents, the lawsuit went into private arbitration and was later dropped after mediation.

“It is racist, it is incredibly misogynistic, and there’s no change there,” the current TMZ employee said. “But that’s what you’re hoping for, that changes come from somewhere higher.”

Former employees said they’re unhappy with the lack of change at TMZ given all the formal complaints and lawsuits.

“It’s one thing to work for a salacious brand but one that actually respects its female employees, but this is not the case. This is a case of men in power and in control who like to represent women a certain way and who just don’t have respect for female colleagues,” a former Warner Bros. employee said. “When is that going to change? When are they going to shift their mindset for how they treat women who work for the brand?”

Former employees say the culture starts with Levin and is enabled by other men in charge of the newsroom and TMZ’s TV show: Stuart Alpert, executive producer and general manager; head of legal affairs Jason Beckerman; Rosenblum, executive producer at TMZ and TMZ Sports; and co-executive producer Charles Latibeaudiere.

Alpert, Beckerman, Rosenblum, and Latibeaudiere did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Veronica Barriga told BuzzFeed News she worked as a guide on the TMZ Celebrity Tour starting in 2018 and appeared on *TMZ on TV* as a contributor over the course of her employment until 2020. But when she asked to take on a full-time role in the TMZ newsroom, she said she was told she didn’t have enough experience.

“I was told I did not have the experience to be an associate producer, so I called them out and I said, ‘You just hired a male associate producer who had significantly less experience than I do who’s straight out of school, how do you explain that?’” Barriga said. “And they chalked it up to nepotism.”

Barriga said when she was in the newsroom during filming for *TMZ on TV*, she felt like her and her women colleagues’ opinions weren’t valued or taken as seriously as their male counterparts.

“What we had to say was never valued and the men were always leading the conversation, even if it was about women’s reproductive rights,” Barriga told BuzzFeed News. “Being in that room, I’ve never felt so small. I’ve never felt like my voice didn’t matter. I just felt like if you wanted to have success as a woman at that company, you had to work three times as hard as your male colleagues.”

Former male employees said other senior-level TMZ executives made sexually explicit comments to them about women in the office. One ex-employee said a colleague would show them porn on his desk computer.

“It’s just a toxic environment of extreme measures of blaming, scapegoating, bullying, harassing people to get what they want, and being biased against women,” a former Warner Bros. employee said.

The former employee, as well as other sources close to the situation, also said it was well known at the senior levels of Warner Bros. and Telepictures that “Harvey Levin is a problem” and that TMZ has “a long-running history of having problems with women.” But the sources said it’s not a coincidence he’s still there.

“Are you surprised that the person who has made a career off of getting everyone’s dirt, are you surprised when that guy is not being cast out?” one former TMZ employee said.

One former employee said they took medical health leave due to the stress of their job, but that the environment was so hostile and toxic, they ultimately quit.

“I got screamed at so often I felt like a scared dog,” the former employee said. “Nothing was rational. The things that [Levin] would decide that he liked were based on his feelings that day. It wasn’t based on a formulaic structure, so there’s no way that you could anticipate what he was going to like and what he doesn’t like. It was insane.”

A Black woman who worked at TMZ said she felt “ostracized” and “disposable,” and that she was just employed “to be there as a filler.”

The former employee said after a holiday break, she never returned to TMZ.

“I was the only [Black female employee] at that entire time and I really felt like they were harsh to me, just at different turns.”

Another Black woman who worked at TMZ said Levin confused her with another Black woman who worked there even though they looked nothing alike. Levin also did not respond to requests for comment on the woman’s allegation.

Another former employee said she complained to HR about a fellow personal assistant who “was a known creep” and made her uncomfortable because he compiled a list at his desk ranking his sexual partners. She also said another male colleague made her uncomfortable when he confronted her for not being more friendly when he said hello, but was disappointed when her boss brushed off the complaint.

“She said, ‘He probably just likes you and wants you to talk to him,’” the former employee told BuzzFeed News.

Former employees also pointed out that the TMZ office is located about 25 miles from the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank, which for years made it especially difficult to report their concerns to HR in person.

A former Warner Bros. employee said there’s a “lack of involvement” from the parent company when it comes to addressing HR complaints. They noted that both TMZ and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, which was recently investigated by a third party after BuzzFeed

News' reports of a toxic workplace, fall under the management and purview of Telepictures and Warner Bros., and "there doesn't seem to be HR oversight over what happens" behind the scenes.

"HR is just not very good at policing and regulating some of these shows," the former employee said. "And the common thread is Warner Bros."

Former employees are also frustrated that reports of a toxic work environment have been an open secret in the entertainment industry for so long without any changes being made.

"Even in this post-#MeToo era, people don't really care," a former longtime TMZ employee told BuzzFeed News. "They don't care about TMZ and the people who work there because they're seen as 'less than.' Even though other entertainment companies and other studios in Hollywood are held to a higher standard, it's almost like people think if you choose to work at TMZ, then you're choosing to be in a toxic environment."