

New York Times boss sued over alleged ageist, racist and sexist hiring practices

Thursday 28 April 2016

Paper denies 'unjustified' claims that CEO Mark Thompson introduced culture that favors 'young, white' and single staffers to older female and black employees



Mark Thompson also faced charges of age-based discrimination while director-general of the BBC. Photograph: Lucas Jackson/Reuters

Mark Thompson, the chief executive of the [New York Times](#) and former director-general of the BBC, is facing a multimillion-dollar class action lawsuit alleging that he introduced a culture of “deplorable discrimination” based on age, race and gender at the newspaper.

The lawsuit, filed on behalf of two black female employees in their sixties in New York on Thursday, claims that under Thompson's leadership the US paper of record has "become an environment rife with discrimination".

The class action lawsuit, seen by the Guardian, alleges that the Times, which promotes its liberal and inclusive social values, preferentially favours its "ideal staffer (young, white, unencumbered with a family)" at the expense of older female and black employees.

"Unbeknownst to the world at large, not only does the Times have an ideal customer (young, white, wealthy), but also an ideal staffer (young, white, unencumbered with a family) to draw that purported ideal customer," the lawsuit, which the women's lawyer said could be extended to up to 50 similar alleged victims, states. "In furtherance of these discriminatory goals, the Times has created a workplace rife with disparities."

Eileen Murphy, the Times' head of communications, said: "This lawsuit contains a series of recycled, scurrilous and unjustified attacks on both Mark Thompson and Meredith Levien. It also completely distorts the realities of the work environment at the New York Times. We strongly disagree with any claim that The Times, Mr. Thompson or Ms. Levien have discriminated against any individual or group of employees. The suit is entirely without merit and we intend to fight it vigorously in court."

The lawsuit, filed at the US district court of southern New York, claims that since Thompson became CEO of the Times in 2012, after eight years as director-general of the BBC, the paper's advertising staff has been "systematically becoming increasingly younger and whiter".

It is claimed that Thompson, [who was in charge of the BBC during a series of scandals](#) over the way the broadcaster treats older women including newsreader Moira Stewart, Countryfile's Miriam O'Reilly and Strictly Come Dancing's Arlene Phillips, "brought his misogynistic and ageist attitudes across the Atlantic to New York City".

Following an age-discrimination employment tribunal brought, and won, by O'Reilly in 2011, Thompson admitted that there was "an underlying problem,

that – whatever the individual success stories – there are manifestly too few older women broadcasting on the BBC, especially in iconic roles and on iconic topical programmes”. He said the BBC had a duty to “develop and cherish” the “many outstanding women broadcasters” and ensure that they know “age will not be a bar to their future employment” at the broadcaster.

Thompson is said to have hired Meredith Levien, the company’s chief revenue office and a co-defendant, to “carry out his vision of the ideal workforce”. The lawsuit claims that under Thompson, who was paid \$8.7m (£6m) last year, and Levien, who was paid \$1.8m (£1.2m), “age, sex and race discrimination became the modus operandi at the Times”.

In speeches to staff, Levien is said to have made it clear that she wanted a workforce with “fresh faces” populated by “people who look like the people we are selling to”. She is alleged to have told staff that “this isn’t what our sales team should look like”. The advertising staff, many of whom are older, black and female, said Levien’s comments were “shockingly rife with racially charged innuendos”.

[On its website](#) the NYT says it is “committed to an inclusive and diverse workforce that reflects the audience, readers and advertisers we serve” and has “a staff as wide as it is deep, broad in perspective, backgrounds and experiences” so as to “capture the multitude of voices of America and the world, with true fidelity”.

The claimants, Ernestine Grant, 62, and Marjorie Walker, 61, who work in the Times’ advertising department, dispute this. They claim that the company’s advertising directors, who had previously been a mix of races and ages, have become “increasingly younger and whiter”.

“Older advertising directors of color found themselves pushed out through buyouts, or outright terminated, but those vacancies were rapidly filled with younger, white individuals,” the lawsuit said.

They claim they were repeatedly passed over for promotion by younger white employees despite their greater experience. They also claims that “younger white individuals” at the same level as them are paid far more than they are.

In addition, they claim they were “denied the opportunities to earn as much as [their] younger white peers because of her race and/or gender”.

Younger white employees in advertising were also allegedly given “summer Fridays”, afternoons off in the summer, while the perk was not offered to older employees of color.

Douglas Wigdor, a partner at Wigdor LLP who is representing the claimants, said: “It is astonishing that a news organization that regularly promotes liberal social viewpoints could have a double standard when it comes to blatantly discriminating and retaliating against its own hard working and dedicated employees.”

The lawsuit claims that the Times’ “gender inequality is so endemic” that Jill Abramson, the paper’s first female editor, was “unable to turn around the troubling realities of the newsroom” and was fired after she complained that she was paid less than her male peers and predecessors. She was replaced by Dean Baquet, the paper’s first African American editor. Abramson is now a regular contributor to the Guardian.

[A 2014 survey by the Women’s Media Center](#) researchers found that the Times had the least female bylines, proportionally, of the nation’s 10 largest newspapers. The study found that 69% of stories were written by men and 75% of opinion writers being male.