


Questions about the New Yorker's firing of Ryan Lizza

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By Erik Wemple

The New Yorker's offices in New York. (Jesse Dittmar for The Washington Post.)

A lot of prominent media men have lost their jobs in recent weeks, including Mark Halperin (formerly of ABC News and MSNBC), Charlie Rose (CBS News), Michael Oreskes (NPR), Leon Wieseltier (formerly of the New Republic), Hamilton Fish (New Republic), Matt Lauer (NBC News). In each of those cases, there were multiple accusers and at least some detail about the harassing MOs of these individuals. In Halperin's case, for example, there were claims that he'd leaned into women with an erection. Our prevailing memory of Rose won't be asking a thoughtful question on "Charlie Rose," but rather walking around naked in front of a horrified female colleague. That allegedly happened more than once.

Now comes the cryptic story of Ryan Lizza's defenestration as a staff writer at the New Yorker, where he served as Washington correspondent starting in 2007. A statement from the magazine reads like this: "The New Yorker recently learned that Ryan Lizza engaged in what we believe was improper sexual conduct. We have reviewed the matter and, as a result, have severed ties with Lizza. Due to a request for privacy, we are not commenting further."

In contrast to most such instances, the New Yorker's statement didn't ride along with a story detailing just what Lizza had done to trigger the judgment of "improper sexual conduct." Nor did it come packaged with a soul-searching, partially confessional statement from the accused — you know, the I-have-erred-but-dispute-some-of-the-allegations standard. Instead, Lizza rejected his employer's conclusions: "I am dismayed that The New Yorker has decided to characterize a respectful relationship with a woman I dated as somehow inappropriate. The New Yorker was unable to cite any company policy that was violated. I am sorry to my friends, workplace colleagues, and loved ones for any embarrassment this episode may cause. I love The New Yorker, my home for the last decade, and I have the highest regard for the people who work there. But this decision, which was made hastily and without a full investigation of the relevant facts, was a terrible mistake."

After that blast, the firing turned into a tripartite volley of statements. Douglas Wigdor, a lawyer at the forefront of media litigation over sexual harassment, issued this one: "Wigdor LLP represents the victim of Mr. Lizza's misconduct. Although she desires to remain confidential and requests that her privacy be respected, in no way did Mr. Lizza's misconduct constitute a 'respectful relationship' as he has now tried to characterize it. Our client reported Mr. Lizza's actions to ensure that he would be held accountable and in the hope that by coming forward she would help other potential victims."

Successful political reporters these days don't have just one employer. CNN, where Lizza is

a contributor, has announced, “We have just learned of the New Yorker’s decision. Ryan Lizza will not appear on CNN while we look into this matter.” And Georgetown University, where Lizza has worked as an adjunct professor, has also taken action:

Statement from Georgetown spokesperson: Georgetown recently learned of the New Yorker's actions. Classes have concluded for the fall semester at the University. Mr. Lizza will not be teaching any classes next semester.

— Jason Schwartz (@JasonSchwartz) [December 11, 2017](#)

Thus stops the career of a leading Beltway political reporter. Over his decade at the New Yorker, Lizza has filed stories on prominent political figures ranging from [Barack Obama](#) to [John McCain](#) to [Rahm Emmanuel](#). [Though his profiles for the New Yorker](#) doubtless stemmed from hundreds, if not thousands, of interviews, it was his summertime chat with short-lived White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci that cemented Lizza’s spot in Washington politics. In a combative and profanity-filled talk, Scaramucci essentially disqualified himself from service in the Trump White House, proving that for this administration, merely recording a conversation with an official counts as investigative journalism.

Already social media is filling up with the discussion of “due process” that’s owed to Lizza. Yet as The Post’s [Christine Emba](#) and commentator [Ana Marie Cox](#) have explained, due process is a legal term that doesn’t apply to employment decisions. “Some men in public life have been accused of different levels of predation,” writes Cox. “They’ve suffered varying levels of employment loss as a result. And we have no idea what their long-term ‘sentences’ look like, or if there will be any further consequences at all.”

The New Yorker is a magazine that occupies an exalted position in the public trust. It publishes stories on matters of tremendous consequence, and Lizza has been a big part of that mission. If the New Yorker botches any of those stories, it owes the public a full explanation with appropriate corrections and so on. If, on the other hand, it determines that a particular personnel action is appropriate after an internal investigation, it owes the public very little — which is precisely what it has given us.

The tournament of statements in this case fuels a curiosity for details on what, precisely, prompted the New Yorker’s dismissal of Lizza. There are only so many people who could possibly come forth with them, and Wigdor’s statement makes it clear that it won’t come from the woman in this case. The Erik Wemple Blog has requested an interview with Lizza but we haven’t heard back from him.

Maybe the next development in this case will come from CNN, which is now looking into the particulars. Consider the possibility that the network determines that he’s in good standing, placing it at odds with the New Yorker. That would be an appropriately awkward outcome in a wild year.

