

Mike McCarthy on the future of CNN, Trump, social media and fake news

As executive vice president and general manager of CNN International, Mike McCarthy is responsible for the global network's entire output, including schedule development, editorial production, personnel and programming at CNN's production centres in Atlanta, London, Hong Kong, New York and Abu Dhabi as well as international news gathering. He shares insights on the future of CNN, Trump, social media and fake news.



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■ ***CNN recently took the top spot in cable news viewership - what are the factors behind the success (or failure by your rivals)? Did you have a strategy towards this goal?***

2020 was the most watched year in CNN's history, and some of the recent numbers are quite extraordinary. Since the day after the 2020 US Elections, CNN has been the number one network in all of cable, which is the network's longest streak in 21 years. The day of the Capitol insurrection was our most watched day ever, with our coverage reaching 113 million people globally across our platforms.

This was certainly no accident, I think people turn to us time and again when there are major stories, and this past year has seen a confluence of those. From the pandemic, through to issues around social justice, the political drama in the United States, and then subjects like the environment, we have made sure our reporting is factual, distinctive, and comprehensive. We've also worked hard to build and maintain audiences across multiple platforms. People turn to us because they trust us, and that trust has been built over four decades.

■ ***Trump, we were told by major news outlets, was a boon to ratings and subscriptions. Do you expect a downturn for the traditional media in the Biden administration? Or will the growing political and social polarization keep the flame going?***

Clearly the Trump presidency was an administration like no other, and people around the world were highly engaged in that story. But there's also evidence to suggest that a major reason why people turned to places like CNN, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in greater numbers was a simple desire for professional, fact-based, impartial journalism.

This is not just about the White House, and that is underlined by some of the stories we know our audiences have flocked to watch and read. The Covid-19 pandemic and the amount of disinformation that has accompanied it have driven people to trusted news sources like CNN to get news and information they know they can rely on. Likewise, you have stories like the Black Lives Matter movement, the rise of anti-Semitism and white supremacists, international political stories like Brexit, or natural disasters and the impact of climate change. All of these have brought audiences to places like CNN.

I think that the news industry can feel optimistic about the future because the attraction of good reporting and analysis is demonstrably clear. These are unprecedented times, regardless of who is in the White House. What is important is that we continue to provide news that audiences can trust.

■ ***The Twitter and Facebook ban on Trump and others is quite controversial. What is your take on it, and how do you see the regulatory battle unfolding in the coming months and years? How does it affect the traditional media?***

Social media platforms have existed in a grey area for a long time; because they haven't been regulated in the same way as publishers, their role in spreading disinformation has been unchecked. The true impact of this has been brought into sharp relief around the pandemic, with the QAnon movement, and of course the wild disinformation following the presidential election, which threatened to spiral out of control and may yet have caused permanent damage to American politics.

The recent bans on some accounts, including that of Donald Trump, have come after clear and persistent violations of Twitter and Facebook's policies. Some argue that these bans should have come about sooner. This is extremely serious stuff, with real-life consequences, as we've seen recently with the Capitol insurrection and the kind of dangerous lies that have spread around Covid-19. It's no exaggeration to say that this kind of disinformation has cost lives.

Again, I think the role of traditional media is to rise above that and make sure people can turn to us to get the facts. It's often been said in the social media age that people first hear about something on social platforms and then turn on CNN to see if it's true. It is vital that we and other professional news organisations continue to play that role in society.

■ ***Do you expect a major crackdown on fake news by regulator and platforms? Do you think the public will turn against it (as is well documented, fake stories are more popular on social media than true stories)?***

I think that the social platforms are trying hard to head off regulation by taking more strident measures to self-police, and many would argue that is long overdue. There are protections afforded by the First Amendment in the United States that come into play here, but there is no question that spread of false and deliberately misleading information on social media is front and centre of the political discourse now.

Whether regulators can really do much about it remains to be seen, but I think the platforms themselves are aware that the environment has changed and that they can't simply sit back and let this kind of thing go on unchecked. It is impossible to argue that some activity on social platforms hasn't played a destructive role in politics and society in recent years. Perhaps more people are waking up to this now, which can only be a good thing.

■ ***Fox has made an about face regarding Trump; do you see it as genuine soul searching or opportunism?***

It's interesting that Fox's Arizona call on election night seems to have worked against it with a section of its viewers. It looks as though many of them were simply not interested in an impartial stance, and Fox only has itself to blame for that.

I think over the past few years Fox has painted itself into a corner by failing to push back on some of the falsehoods that the Trump administration was peddling. It has strayed a long way from being a genuine news network and that has not only undermined its credibility as a news organization, but also helped foster some of the corrosive elements that have taken root in American society. I would hope that they see that too, but I can't really comment on their position. Time will tell.

■ ***What is the right mix for the future, in your opinion, between text, video, social forms, maybe podcasts? Do you foresee a new, innovative form coming in the decade ahead?***

None of these media is mutually exclusive, in fact they are complementary. If I think about my own media consumption, so much of it depends on what I'm doing with my day and what kind of story I'm following.

On the day of the Capitol protests I was watching TV, following our correspondents on social media, and tracking our live blog at the same time. Different media help fill out stories in different ways. Some stories are better suited to one medium than another, but our digital platforms are critical for providing the in-depth context, commentary, analysis and opinion that allows us to dive deeper into not just the news of the day but also other stories that have piqued the curiosity of our audiences.

Live TV may be more linear, but in an evolving news environment it can still be enormously powerful and compelling, and audience numbers bear this out.

Ultimately, we must follow the audience and be available on all platforms at all times, which is something CNN has done very successfully. Likewise, we must keep up with new innovations and stay with the audience as their habits evolve, which our early investment in digital technology has helped us to do.

■ ***How does the US demography play in the future of CNN and liberal media? There are younger generations, more liberal and more diverse, coming of age and developing a social and political conscious – will they influence the political landscape as well?***

I just don't agree with the notion of CNN as 'liberal media'. In spite of what some would have you believe, we don't have a political position; we are interested in facts and holding power to account. I think the dilemma of the Trump presidency, as Jeff Zucker has said many times, is that to be pro-truth could come across as being anti-Trump, and that was a difficulty for us and other news organisations.

We were faced with a White House that was actively hostile towards us, and that inevitably made some people consider us partisan, but all we ever wanted to do was get to the facts.

I do agree that the audience in the United States is changing as the population changes, but equally I think it would be a mistake to think that will automatically mean a political shift.

Don't forget, more than 70 million people voted for Donald Trump at the last election, and there are similar political divisions between left and right in many countries around the world.

I believe understanding that and continuing to tread a path that is focused on fact-based journalism is the only way we can push ahead. I think that is what audiences want from us and that will stand us in good stead going forward.

■ ***What are the plans for CNN International? What are the biggest foreign potential markets? Where is CNN the most popular? In light of the current success, do you plan an expansion overseas?***

International reporting is absolutely core to CNN's DNA, and it will continue to be so. In spite of the fact that the eyes of the world have been on Washington of late, the pandemic has also reminded us that the world is still incredibly interconnected, and CNN is perfectly placed to tell that global story.

We have made substantial investments in our new London bureau, including a big, new state of the art studio, and once we are through the pandemic you will be seeing that more on our air; we are also investing in our Middle East hub in the UAE, we have strengthened our reporting line up in Asia Pacific too, and recently introduced brand new Africa-focused feature programming.

We also have new branded partnerships such as CNN Brasil, which is approaching its first anniversary after an outstanding first year.

All of this strengthens us internationally and benefits our audiences around the world. Right now, we have reporters working on stories on every continent, and that is the power of CNN.

The media landscape is changing, and we need to make sure that we change with it; ultimately that means looking closely at new more measurable distribution models internationally. But we know that audiences are engaged with the CNN brand, they are coming to us in record numbers, and we have a product that people want. It's an exciting time to be working for CNN.

■ ***Does CNN have something to learn from social media phenomenon such as TikTok, adopt and adapt the influencer culture? Or do you prefer to stick to the more traditional news reporting style?***

CNN has an extremely strong presence on social media, through the likes of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, and many of our correspondents and anchors have a highly engaged following across a range of media, including TikTok. If you aren't already following Max Foster I urge you to do so, because he is terrific there.

But I think that, again, the style of these platforms and so-called traditional media aren't mutually exclusive. You can get something different from each, and that's fine. I think reporting styles evolve too, but the fundamentals of journalism – the “who, where, when, what, why?” – are not up for debate. That is what CNN will always be about.