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Will Roger Ailes's departure after sexual harrasment allegations hobble Fox News? Don't count on it

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Onward! Johnny Silvercloud via Flickr, CC BY-SA

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Just as the US media struggled – along with everyone else – to make sense of Donald Trump's **nomination** at the Republican convention in Cleveland, Ohio, one of its biggest pillars was shaken to the core. The **resignation** of the chairman and chief executive of Fox News, Roger Ailes, sent shock waves through a media industry already exhausted by reacting to seismic events on an almost daily basis.

Events began on to take shape on July 6 when Gretchen Carlson, a former Fox newscaster, filed a lawsuit accusing Ailes of sexual harassment. She is the highest-profile of several women to come

forward with **allegations of sexual harassment** against him; some of the accusations that have been levelled reportedly date back to the 1960s, decades before Fox News was even founded. Carlson's allegation triggered an internal investigation by Fox News that led to the resignation of its CEO.

At this stage, of course, the allegations against Ailes are just that: allegations. And in his resignation letter to boss Rupert Murdoch (shared with right-wing bastion the **Drudge Report**), he was at pains to claim personal credit for elevating women's position in American journalism. He wrote:

I take particular pride in the role that I have played advancing the careers of the many women I have promoted to executive and on-air positions. Many of these talented journalists have deservedly become household names known for their intelligence and strength, whether reporting the news, fair and balanced, and offering exciting opinions on our opinion programs.

Ailes suggested that he was leaving his position so as not to become a distraction and said he would be remaining at Fox News's parent company as an adviser. The particulars of the departure are still a little obscure but the New York Times reports that Ailes departed with around a US\$40m settlement agreement.

The 76-year-old Ailes has enjoyed decades of remarkable influence in US cultural and political life. As a former advisor to Richard Nixon and George H. W Bush, he reputedly **had the power** to make or break presidential campaigns. He is credited with building Fox News into America's most watched cable news channel with unquantifiable value to the Republican party. His resignation is nothing short of the end of an era.

So where next for the beleaguered network?

Righting the ship

It's fair to say that the US news media in general, and not just Fox News, is heavily gendered in favour of men. In 2015, a **Women's Media Center** report into the status of women in the industry revealed that media on all platforms were failing women. The report found that women in news media were assigned to report stories at a substantially lower rate than men, and in evening broadcast news women were on camera 32% of the time. Looking at the 2012 presidential election, it found that on network TV, 77% of political news show guests and experts were men.

But according to the millions-strong progressive campaign group **CREDO**, Fox News specifically has an ingrained internal culture of sexism and misogyny, which it will need to address.

And then there's a separate HR problem. **David Bauder** writes that heavyweight hosts Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity (**no strangers to controversy themselves**) have close ties to Ailes and reportedly have contract stipulations which allow them to leave should their boss do so. On the face of it, though, this seems unlikely – but that's where Fox's fractious relationship with Trump comes in.



Out with the old: Roger Ailes. EPA/Justin Lane

Though former presidential candidate **Ted Cruz** accused Ailes of turning Fox News into the Donald Trump network, 24/7 Trump himself has on a number of occasions spurned the network with **open contempt** – which means that for once, the network is not an indispensable part of a Republican nominee’s election strategy.

But then again, as **Roger Yu** observed, a Hillary Clinton presidency – on balance, the most likely outcome – could greatly invigorate Fox, which would undoubtedly go after her in the same venomous way it has gone after Obama.

And in other good news for Fox News, the **Pew Research Center** reports that its finances are in remarkably rude health. Its business model is commercially admired and ratings are at an all-time high, with profits of more than US\$1billion a year. Notwithstanding the Ailes controversy,

which saw the network’s share prices **fall by 3%** in a week, Fox is well-placed to face the challenges of adapting a 24-hour-news channel to the volatile digital age.

And then there’s the return of Murdoch, executive chairman of the channel’s parent company, 21st Century Fox. Ailes’ resignation letter began with the words “Dear Rupert”, and on July 22, Murdoch visited Fox News studios in Manhattan. There he announced, to an understandably shocked workforce, that he himself would be taking over from Ailes for the foreseeable future.

But at 85, the old man is slowing down, and he’s probably just clearing the ground for his sons Lachlan and James, who are currently 21st Century Fox’s executive co-chairman and chief executive officer. The pair are known to have **had their differences** with Ailes, whose combative style and political rigidity they found jarring and outdated.

But even though public allegations of sexual harassment may have rocked the company, and even with Trump still going his own unpredictable way, Fox News clearly has what it takes to last a long time yet.

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