

After the New York Times' critique: Former NBC "Today" show host Matt Lauer takes Ronan Farrow to task

By David Walsh
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In the wake of an article published May 17 in the *New York Times* highly critical of #MeToo proponent Ronan Farrow, former NBC news anchor Matt Lauer has posted a lengthy opinion piece that lambastes the *New Yorker* magazine journalist. Lauer was abruptly fired from the "Today" show in November 2017 following complaints by a female NBC employee, with whom he was having an affair, about his alleged sexual misbehavior.

In his column on Mediaite, "Why Ronan Farrow Is Indeed Too Good to Be True," Lauer argues that Farrow ignored "basic journalistic standards" by including in his book *Catch and Kill* the allegation that the anchor raped the same woman, Brooke Nevils, whose claims led to his firing at NBC. Lauer writes, "This accusation was one of the worst and most consequential things to ever happen in my life, it was devastating for my family, and outrageously it was used to sell books."

He explains that Ben Smith's article in the *Times* on Sunday "prompted me to move forward with my own findings" in regard to Farrow's methods.

While Smith's column was relatively cautious, it would lead any objective reader to the conclusion that Farrow is a self-promoter and fraud. The portrait, appearing in the *Times*, which has spearheaded the sexual misconduct witch hunt, is a "brutal" one, as a commentator suggested.

The response to Smith's piece has been relatively muted, with voices being raised in support of his arguments and also in Farrow's defense. The *New Yorker* claims to be standing behind Farrow, and indeed the magazine has a great deal invested in his sensationalized and dishonest reporting.

Certain elements are clearly ready, if necessary, to throw Farrow under the bus. For CNN's website, Peggy Drexler, assistant professor of psychology at Weill Medical College of Cornell University and a frequent commentator for CNN, Huffington Post and other media outlets, quickly turned out a column, "Ronan Farrow is not a referendum on MeToo."

Drexler attempts to distinguish the #MeToo campaign, with its supposedly meritorious aims, from Farrow, who may or may not be "sloppy" and who perhaps "omits facts and details that

could complicate or make his narrative less dramatic." This is not an easy undertaking, as Drexler herself admits, considering that Farrow is "the journalist best known as a #MeToo champion."

The CNN columnist is reduced to arguing, rather defensively, that as "many observers flock to the debate over Farrow's reporting, it's important to question the impulse to conflate his work with all reporting on these issues—and, in the process, erase the work done by women."

In fact, what makes Farrow's journalism so *inevitably* shoddy and deceitful (and not only his of course, but the *Times*'s own coverage of the sexual harassment issue as well) are the false assumptions and rotten political motives that underlie it.

The #MeToo crusaders, in making their appeal to the affluent middle class in particular, insist that sexual misconduct in Hollywood and the media is one of the great social questions of our time. The aim has been to divert attention from malignant social inequality and the danger of war and dictatorship and channel opposition to Donald Trump along reactionary lines. #MeToo took shape as an extension of the 2016 Hillary Clinton campaign, with its right-wing, identity politics orientation.

The blows to Farrow's stature and standing have an objective significance. They arrive in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, which is bringing out life-and-death class questions in a very sharp form. The foundations of petty bourgeois politics and influence are undoubtedly eroding.

With his article this week, Lauer has attempted to further puncture Farrow's reputation and repair what is left of his own after being "taken down" by the #MeToo momentum two and a half years ago.

Lauer's disappearance from public view, after decades as a prominent media figure, was one of the most rapid and astonishing of all. After receiving a complaint on Monday, November 27 from a female employee—unidentified at the time—about Lauer's alleged sexual misconduct, NBC management made the decision the following day to replace him as the host of "Today," and by Wednesday morning, he was already out the door.

As the WSWS noted at the time: "Lauer, who was earning

\$29 million a year according to media reports and was a prominent public figure, is gone on the basis of one allegation of ‘inappropriate sexual behavior.’ He has effectively been ‘disappeared’ within the course of 36 hours.” We added, “We have no sympathy for Lauer’s conventional and essentially right-wing views, but the precedent that is being set in these cases is threatening and sinister.”

Lauer begins his May 19 piece by explaining that he was fired from “the *Today* show after admitting to having a consensual, yet inappropriate relationship with a fellow employee in the workplace. NBC said it was a violation of company policy, and it ended my 25-year career at the network.”

On October 2, 2019, as part of the promotion for Farrow’s *Catch and Kill*, Brooke Nevils accused Lauer of rape. The latter points out that at no time did Nevils “ever use the words ‘assault’ or ‘rape’ in regards to any accusation against me while filing her complaint with NBC in November of 2017. That has been confirmed publicly. NBC never suggested I was being accused of such an offense when I met with their attorney on Nov. 28 of that same year. They have also confirmed that publicly.”

Lauer observes that he was “shaken, but not surprised” that so few in the media were willing to challenge Nevils’ accusation. “The rush to judgment,” he writes, “was swift. In fact, on the morning I was falsely accused of rape, and before I could even issue a statement, some journalists were already calling my accuser ‘brave’ and ‘courageous.’ While the presumption of innocence is only guaranteed in a court of law, I felt journalists should have, at the very least, recognized and considered it.”

The former news anchor points to Farrow’s nearly unassailable standing in the media over the past several years and laments that his “overall reporting [has] faced so little scrutiny. Until this week’s critical reporting by *The New York Times*, many in the media perceived his work as inherently beyond basic questioning.”

Lauer indicates that what he found himself accused of in *Catch and Kill* was “frankly shocking,” but that Farrow knew his book “would receive little in the way of scrutiny” by the media. He also believes Farrow included “salacious, and deeply flawed material” because “some of Ronan’s sources felt they could make outrageous claims to him, knowing he (and thus their stories) would not be doubted.”

The *Mediaite* column suggests that there were four principal ways in which Farrow “betrayed the truth in writing his book: **1.** He consistently failed to confirm stories told to him by his main sources. **2.** He failed to provide evidence of important communications he alleges took place between accusers and me. In most cases, Ronan doesn’t even claim to have personally seen evidence of those communications. **3.** He used misleading language to manipulate readers into believing things that could easily be false, or were at least un-provable.

In some cases he undeniably withheld information from the reader that would call the credibility of sources into question. **4.** He routinely presented stories in a way that would suit his activist goals, as opposed to any kind of journalistic standards.”

Lauer provides a detailed accounting of his objections to Farrow’s claims about his own conduct and the rape allegation in particular, based in part on conversations with four witnesses and subjects. *Mediaite* editors note that they “independently fact checked the accounts” of those individuals. “All confirmed in early February that Lauer’s account of their conversations was accurate.”

The reader can judge for him or herself. Certainly, Lauer deserves his “day in court.” What’s important here, however, is not the fate of one television news anchor, but the extent to which the entire American media has allowed itself, without the slightest hesitation or reservation, indeed eagerly, to be caught up in a witch hunt that displays contempt for elementary facts and for basic democratic principles such as the presumption of innocence.

As we wrote in November 2017: “On the basis of unproven, quasi-anonymous allegations, figures are simply vanishing from the political and cultural landscape, with no apparent recourse, no protests and no end to the process in sight. If this is how the powers that be settle scores with one of their own, one of the most highly paid individuals in the American media, what will they be prepared to do in the case of genuine political opponents, of socialists?”

Lauer seems to be on especially firm ground in this week’s column when he draws a bleak picture of the difficulties faced by those who come under attack by the #MeToo campaign in organizing a defense. In writing *Catch and Kill*, Farrow—Lauer suggests—“understood that some people he referenced even indirectly in his book, who might completely contradict his version of events, would be too intimidated to step forward and correct the record. Ronan knows, as well as anyone, that there is a great deal of fear surrounding this subject, and it would take an act of selfless bravery (some might say foolishness) for anyone to challenge him, or the story of an alleged victim of sexual assault.”

The exposure of this scoundrel and all his accomplices in the media, we trust, will continue.

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