

Audio Transcript

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with *Mike Blinder*

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[Media Accountability, the FCC, and the Fight Over Fox: A Conversation with Al Sikes and Preston Padden](#)

In this exclusive E&P interview, media veterans former FCC Chairman **Al Sikes** and longtime media executive **Preston Padden** warn that the government is no longer just regulating the press—it's controlling it. As the FCC selectively enforces regulations, shielding Fox from scrutiny while targeting other networks, the fight for press freedom has reached a breaking point. With political pressure mounting and news organizations facing financial and legal threats, the question isn't just about Fox's Philadelphia affiliate—it's about whether the free press can survive at all. If media executives don't take a stand now, Padden cautions, "we risk losing everything the First Amendment was designed to protect."



ANNOUNCER:

This is *E&P Reports*, a podcast from *Editor & Publisher* magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

MIKE BLINDER:

And warm greetings. Once again, I'm Mike Blinder, publisher of *E&P Magazine*. As always, we kick off by urging our audience to follow the podcast on their preferred platform and for those watching on our YouTube channel, please subscribe. Either way, when you do, you'll receive updates every time we upload this weekly podcast series dedicated to news publishing. Today, we're diving into an issue that sits at the crossroads of media accountability, regulatory enforcement, and political influence. To break it all down, we have two industry veterans with us.

Preston Padden and Al Sikes are two of the most influential figures in the history of American broadcasting and telecommunications. Preston Padden is a veteran media executive with decades of experience shaping the television and cable industries. He's held top leadership roles at major companies, including serving as president of ABC Television, a senior executive at News Corp and Fox Broadcasting, and as the head of the Association of Broadcasters' advocacy efforts in Washington. Al Sikes, a former chairman of the FCC, played a pivotal role in shaping modern media policy, overseeing regulatory frameworks that guided the evolution of broadcasting, telecommunications, and cable. With their expertise in both the business and regulatory sides of media, they bring a unique perspective to today's conversation.

Gentlemen, thank you so much for being here.

PRESTON PADDEN:

Thank you.

AL SIKES:

Great to be with you.

MIKE BLINDER:

Both Preston and Al are leaders of the Media and Democracy Project (MAD) and have been at the forefront of urging the FCC to scrutinize Fox's Philadelphia TV affiliate, WTXF, over concerns about its commitment to serving the public interest. As seasoned media executives and policymakers, they argue that Fox's role in spreading misinformation should disqualify it from holding public broadcast licenses. Their advocacy has sparked national debate about media responsibility and FCC oversight in preserving democracy.

Before we dive into that, I have to say the timing of this conversation is remarkable. Just a few days ago, I published a rather provocative editorial, which both of you have had the chance to



read. In it, I call on Lachlan Murdoch to make a defining choice—one that echoes back to the days of William Paley allowing Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly to take on McCarthy.

There are signs that the Murdoch empire is beginning to crack, especially when you look at what's happening at *The Wall Street Journal*. It seems like they're starting to lean into truth-to-power journalism, something we in this industry hold as a core principle. My editorial is a plea for Fox News to stop providing cover for misinformation and instead embrace journalistic integrity. Whether we like it or not, Fox News remains a credible source for a significant portion of the far-right audience. If they were to shift, it could create space for Republican leaders who currently fear political repercussions to finally speak out.

Preston, let me start with you. What did you think of the editorial? Do you see any chance that *The Wall Street Journal's* recent editorial decisions might signal a shift at Fox News? Could this encourage Republican leaders to be less fearful of speaking out?

PRESTON PADDEN:

I'm very sorry to say that I think the odds of that happening are below zero. Lachlan and Rupert Murdoch have already made their choice. If you look at the internal emails revealed in the Dominion Voting Systems lawsuit, it's all right there. Fox News was the first network to accurately predict that Joe Biden would win Arizona. They were right, but as a result, they lost about a third of their audience overnight.

You can see the email exchanges between the Murdochs, Suzanne Scott—the president of Fox News—the on-air talent, and other executives. They were all panicked about losing viewers. And then, in real time, they debated whether they should continue telling the truth or shift back to spreading misinformation to regain their audience and protect their profits. That's the choice they made. They chose profit over integrity.

MIKE BLINDER:

Just as an aside, we had Chris Stirewalt on this program, and he echoed—if not outright parroted—everything you just said. Al, do you concur with Preston's assessment?

AL SIKES:

I do. I don't have the long history with Fox that Preston does, so I'm not as deep a student of their internal operations. That said, I do believe there are credible journalists working at Fox News. I think the *Bret Baier Show* is a reasonably credible news program. But beyond that, I certainly wouldn't disagree with what Preston has outlined.

More broadly, it feels like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*—where down is up and up is down. When you get into the later-night programming on Fox, which I don't generally watch, it's like entering a different reality altogether.

MIKE BLINDER:

Thank you both for that insight. Given everything that's happening in the Murdoch empire and the shifting dynamics within media regulation, I couldn't resist getting your thoughts on the



record. But now, let's get to the bigger discussion. We're going to dive into the FCC's latest controversial actions and what they mean for the future of media regulation, Murdoch's influence, and political power in broadcasting. We'll tackle all of that right after this message.

ANNOUNCER:

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MIKE BLINDER:

Alright, gentlemen, we're at a critical moment for both media regulation and journalistic integrity. The FCC, under Chairman Brendan Carr, has revived complaints against ABC, CBS, and NBC while ignoring a similar challenge against a Fox-owned station. Many see this as selective enforcement, reinforcing concerns about the weaponization of the FCC.

Let's start here. What is your reaction to the selective reinstatement of cases? What does it tell us about the current state of media regulation?

Al, let's start with you since you're a former FCC chair.

AL SIKES:

Well, you might have noticed my phone just rang. Apologies for that, but if you're wondering, it was *Take Five* by Dave Brubeck.

MIKE BLINDER:

By the way, I played alto sax in my younger years. That piece was written by Paul Desmond.

AL SIKES:

That's right—Desmond was an extraordinary musician. But back to the point, my general take is that we have entered a moment where the censor is in the White House, and the operational arm is at the FCC. That's a perilous moment—one that should not exist.

I've heard from many former FCC chairs who prefer not to speak out publicly, but privately, they've told me they're grateful that I have. Historically, free speech protections at the FCC were bipartisan. It didn't matter who appointed you—Republican or Democrat—you defended free expression. Unfortunately, Chairman Carr seems to be acting as a political operative rather than an independent regulator.

MIKE BLINDER:

Preston, you've been deeply involved in challenging Fox's license renewal based on its character fitness. Yet Chairman Carr dismissed the Media and Democracy Project's petition, claiming that Fox's challenge involves cable content, while the other cases involve spectrum broadcasting.

Essentially, his argument is that what happens on cable falls outside the FCC's jurisdiction, while what happens over broadcast airwaves does. Yet, in today's world, where most people stream content and get news across multiple platforms, does that distinction even make sense?

PRESTON PADDEN:

I believe Chairman Carr is bending precedent to protect Murdoch under orders from President Trump. The Communications Act clearly states that the FCC must evaluate the character of any applicant for a broadcast license. There are numerous past FCC cases where, in making that evaluation, the commission has looked at not only the applicant's character and activity at the specific TV or radio station in question but also in other aspects of their business and public life.

So what we have here is an applicant for a broadcast license—Fox's Philadelphia TV station—whose parent company was recently found guilty in a court of law of knowingly, intentionally, and repeatedly lying to the American people about a presidential election. If that does not trigger an FCC hearing under the character requirement, then I don't know what would.

MIKE BLINDER:

So it doesn't matter. Okay, go ahead, Al. You were about to chime in.

AL SIKES:

I'm just going to reinforce what Preston said. It's not just the fact that Fox was caught lying—it's that they were lying at a critical moment in American democracy. This wasn't about misrepresenting a minor policy issue or an editing decision on an interview. This was about the transfer of power under our constitutional framework. The consequences of those lies were profound.

During my time as FCC chairman, commissioners didn't always agree. There was pushback, and there was debate. We didn't wake up every morning singing in harmony. The idea that Chairman Carr can operate as if he's a unitary decision-maker, without affecting the broader regulatory framework of the FCC, is just nonsense.

MIKE BLINDER:

Alright, on another note, Al, you've been quoted as saying that the First Amendment should be fundamental not only to the Constitution but also to the FCC's actions. You see them as going hand in hand. Do you believe Chairman Carr's actions are in direct conflict with First Amendment principles?

AL SIKES:

Yes, absolutely. His actions have led to censorship becoming a part of this administration's playbook. So, yes, in direct answer to your question, I believe his actions violate fundamental First Amendment principles.

MIKE BLINDER:

Preston, given the FCC's role in ensuring media fairness and public trust, what is the risk of the commission becoming a tool for political enforcement rather than an objective regulator? What happens to that incredible document, the Constitution, that was written more than 200 years ago by imperfect but visionary men? If you follow the trajectory of our democracy, where does this lead?

PRESTON PADDEN:

I think we're past the point of it being a risk. We're already there. Trump has ordered Carr to investigate taking away ABC's broadcast licenses simply because Trump didn't like the questions ABC anchors asked him during a presidential debate. That has never happened in our country before.

So, to be clear, we're not talking about something that *might* happen in the future. We are living it right now.

MIKE BLINDER:

Not to mention the growing number of lawsuits targeting media organizations, one after another, to the point where outlets like *The Des Moines Register* are being forced to choose between going into costly litigation or backing off and letting the Trump administration dictate editorial content. That's my editorializing here, but it's where we're at, isn't it?

AL SIKES:

Exactly. This is a two-person game—Trump complains, and Carr responds by opening an investigation. Then Trump sues, and Carr opens another investigation. It's an ongoing cycle, all while legacy media is already struggling economically.

Newspapers, radio, television—all of these industries are facing financial challenges. Media organizations don't have surplus cash lying around to hire expensive lawyers and fight these battles. That makes it even easier for government forces to pressure and intimidate them into submission.

And when you consider the consolidation going on in media, it's even worse. Look at Paramount, which is trying to sell to Skydance. That deal has to go through a regulatory framework. So now, companies are forced to think about whether standing up for journalistic integrity will jeopardize their very existence. It's a perilous time for the media, and the White House is making it far worse.

MIKE BLINDER:



Alright, we're going to have to wrap this up—not because I want to, but because our audience tends to prefer 20-minute bites. That means I need both of you to shift gears now and act as both prognosticators and advocates.

We have thousands of news media executives listening. What should they do? What steps should be taken—not just by you and the Media and Democracy Project—but by the media industry as a whole to enforce fairness and protect the press?

Preston, let's start with you. Give us that elevator pitch.

PRESTON PADDEN:

If I were a journalist, editor, or reporter, I would be advocating as strongly as possible to my management *not* to cave to Trump and Carr. Fight the good fight—even if it costs money—because if we don't stand up now, we will lose.

Our Founding Fathers created a free press as a check on government power. Trump and Carr are trying to flip that on its head—where the government is now a check on the power of a free press. That's a complete perversion of what this country stands for.

MIKE BLINDER:

Al, same question. What can media organizations do today to ensure fairness and resist political manipulation?

AL SIKES:

Well, I'm not sure how the audience speaks directly to the publisher in this case, or to the broadcaster, the newscaster, or whoever is making these decisions. That's more complicated. Although social media does provide an avenue for them to do that, the insistence—both by the media itself and, preferably, by the audience—should be to stand your ground. Yes, stand your ground.

I would also suggest that the United States Senate, specifically Senator Thune, take action. Carr did not have to go through a confirmation hearing because he was already on the commission. I can recall my own confirmation hearing, and I can recall the scrutiny from Congress, with John Dingell and Fritz Hollings, who chaired the two Commerce Committees, keeping me accountable all the time. There is a congressional responsibility here, and the first step that should be taken is for Senator Thune to tell the chair of the Senate Commerce Committee to conduct a hearing, with Carr sitting on the other side of the table, answering for his actions.

MIKE BLINDER:

To our listeners and viewers, if you want to stay on top of this ongoing debate about media responsibility, FCC oversight, and the future of broadcast journalism, please stay with us. This is not the end of this dialogue—it's just the beginning of what promises to be a very interesting time for the current administration.



Preston Padden, former senior executive at Fox and longtime advocate for media accountability, and Al Sikes, former FCC Chairman under President George H.W. Bush, thank you both for your time and insights today. This conversation, as I said, is far from over, and we appreciate you devoting your time to our audience.

PRESTON PADDEN:

Thank you.

AL SIKES:

Thanks very much.