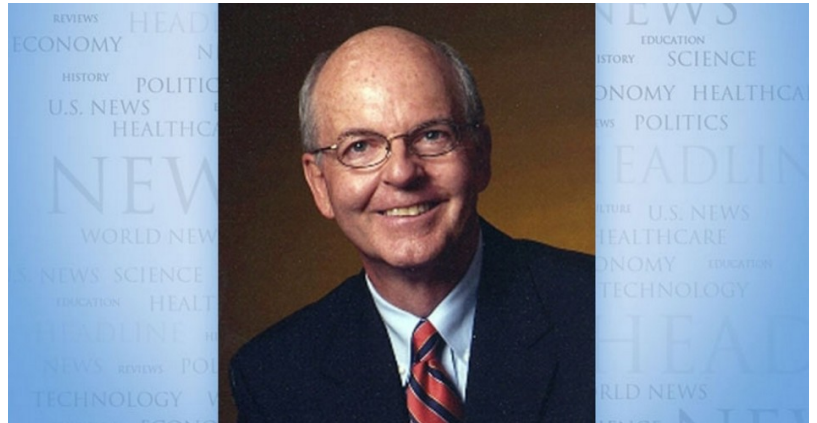




Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on May 15, 2014

## Senior Editor at New York Times Fired on Wednesday

The only people caught by surprise at the [sudden firing](#) of Executive Editor Jill Abramson at the *New York Times* on Wednesday were those not paying attention. Back in January she infuriated the White House with her candid assessment of its restrictions and lack of transparency for reporters from the *Times* trying to vet various articles for the paper. She told Al Jazeera:



I would say it is the most secretive White House that I have ever been involved in covering, and that includes — I spent 22 years of my career in Washington and covered presidents from President Reagan on up through now — and I was Washington bureau chief of the *Times* during George W. Bush’s first term.

I dealt directly with the Bush White House when they had concerns that stories we were about to run put the national security under threat. But, you know, they were not pursuing criminal leak investigations. The Obama administration has had seven criminal leak investigations.

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That is more than twice the number of any previous administration in our history. It’s on a scale never seen before. This is the most secretive White House that, at least as a journalist, I have ever dealt with.

One connecting the dots wouldn’t have been surprised, then, when it was announced last week that Abramson — scheduled to give the commencement address at Barnard College on Tuesday, May 14 — was preempted by the president who shunted her aside in favor of himself.

Nearly all the media coverage of the “sudden firing” focused elsewhere: on her rude management style, on her complaint about being paid less than her predecessor at the *Times*, on her hiring assistants who didn’t work out as planned, on her planning on hiring another assistant without getting permission from top management first, and so on. The *Times* — reporting on the firing itself — said there was “serious tension” in her relationships with Arthur O. Sulzberger, Jr., the publisher, as well as with the *Times’* CEO Mark Thompson. The article complained that Abramson had angered her managing editor, Dean Baquet, for trying to hire an editor from the *Guardian* and install her alongside him without notifying him or getting permission from Sulzberger.

Her management style, according to the *Times*, reporting on itself, was “polarizing” and “mercurial” while others described it as “condescending” and “combative,” which engendered “widespread frustration and anxiety” among those working for her in the newsroom. She was “rarely engaged with the newsroom staff” and “often absent” even during periods of crisis which were frequent as the struggling paper tried to make the transition from print to digital without going broke along the way.

Ken Auletta, a journo at *The New Yorker*, missed the early signs as well, noting after the fact that Sulzberger had already informed Baquet that Adamson was history last week. Noted Auletta:

At the annual City University Journalism School dinner on Monday, Dean Baquet ... was seated with



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Arthur Sulzberger, Jr. At the time I did not give a moment's thought as to why Jill ... was not at their table.

In his investigation, all Auletta could come up with was a disagreement that Adamson had with the publisher over her pay. She learned, after having been at the paper for nearly three years, that she wasn't getting paid as much as the man she replaced. More surprising than this notable lack of concern that just surfaced now was how Adamson handled the matter. Rather than asking Sulzberger directly, she hired an attorney to write Sulzberger about the alleged affront instead. This, according to Auletta in his effort to distract from the real issue — no one at the *Times* should ever directly publicly challenge the White House for being less than forthright — “has an inescapably gendered aspect.” Translation: Adamson was being paid less because she was a woman!

Another potential cause, aside from White House unhappiness, for Adamson's sudden departure began when she asked Sulzberger's son, Arthur Gregg, to head up a “new ideas” task force to help the paper with its transition from print to digital, calling it a “skunk works team, a creative team that will think up and propose new ways to expand our new offering digitally.” After six months, Arthur Gregg and his team suggested, among other things, that Adamson hire a senior editor “focused on audience development” in order to, as Adamson put it, “maximize the full digital potential of our core news reporting.”

Adamson had just the person in mind: Janine Gibson, the head of the *Guardian's* news website and the individual primarily responsible for publishing Edward Snowden's revelations over NSA surveillance of American citizens. But, according to Auletta, she handled that badly, opening discussions with her to work alongside Baquet without telling him about her decision first.

This appears to be complete gloss. When Abramson was promoted to the executive editor position in September, 2011, the company's stock was selling at just over \$5 a share. Over the next three years, through cost-cutting, off-loading losing businesses, installing paywalls and otherwise gearing up for the transition to digital, the stock rose in nearly a straight line to \$17.37 a share as of Wednesday morning. Once the world caught up with Sulzberger's machinations behind the scenes, investors sold the stock which has since lost more than 15 percent of its market value.

During those three years, however, she must have been doing something right. The paper won eight Pulitzer Prizes during her brief reign, along with other acclamations from her competition. To have Auletta suggest that she pulled such a bone-headed move as to bring someone such as Gibson in to help the paper make the jump to light speed without letting her people know stretches the bounds of credulity.

Naturally, Sulzberger was all sugar and spice when he announced Abramson's sudden departure:

I choose to appoint a new leader for our newsroom because I believe that new leadership will improve some aspects of the management of the newsroom....

It is not about the quality of our journalism, which in my mind has never been better. Jill did an outstanding job in preserving and extending the level of excellence of our news report[ing] during her time as executive editor and, before that, as managing editor and Washington bureau chief. She's an accomplished journalist who contributed mightily to our reputation as the world's most important news provider.

Further, this is not about any disagreement over the direction of our digital future or any of the steps we have taken recently to create and launch new digital products and services. Jill and I



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agreed fundamentally about the need to embrace new platforms and new expressions of our journalism. She helped a great deal in moving *The Times* further into our digital future.

Abramson dutifully responded in kind:

I've loved my run at *The Times*. I got to work with the best journalists in the world doing so much [outstanding] journalism.

Nothing was mentioned, of course, about any pressure from the White House to get rid of Abramson for her faux pas in January or her having the gall to invite someone with direct connections to the traitorous Snowden as an assistant. No, it was all about her management style and her unhappiness about getting paid less than she thought she was worth.

The new executive editor, Dean Baquet, who takes over immediately, will likely learn from the Abramson experience not to make waves, not to get sideways with the White House, and to continue to promote the company line: "All the News That's Fit to Print."

*A graduate of Cornell University and a former investment advisor, Bob is a regular contributor to The New American magazine and blogs frequently at [www.LightFromTheRight.com](http://www.LightFromTheRight.com), primarily on economics and politics. He can be reached at [badelman@thenewamerican.com](mailto:badelman@thenewamerican.com).*



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