

# Journalists in West Virginia under political siege

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Numerous prominent investigative journalists have been fired from media outlets in West Virginia in the past few months.

On December 20, West Virginia Public Radio correspondent Amelia Ferrell Knisely was fired for reporting on allegations of abuse of people with disabilities in the care of the state foster and psychiatric care facilities.

Knisely's termination was the latest in a string of politically motivated firings at West Virginia media organizations, including three investigative journalists at the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* newspaper who criticized the editorial decision to publish a flattering profile of convicted former Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship.

The firings expose the sordid, incestuous political dealings among the coal barrens and dominant media outlets in the state. They also pared back an already insufficient pool of press in the capital ahead of the legislative session that began January 11.

Knisely was told to halt her investigation of abuse in state care facilities after leaders of the state's Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) "threatened to discredit" the public radio station. Her part-time position was eliminated shortly thereafter.

On November 3, West Virginia Public Broadcasting (WVPB) published an article by Knisely titled "Reports Show People With Disabilities Are Abused In State Care." The piece focused on a letter from Senate President Craig Blair to Governor Justice seeking an investigation into allegations of physical and verbal abuse and neglect of patients at the Weston psychiatric hospital.

On November 10, DHHR Secretary Bill Crouch wrote a six-page letter to WVPB demanding a "complete retraction." On December 6, Knisely was

told she would no longer be allowed to cover the state legislature's committee hearings on health where Crouch was called to testify. After Knisely filed an internal complaint about DHHR's political interference into her reporting on December 15, WVPB told state officials that the reporter's legislative press credentials were revoked. Five days later, her door key and email were deactivated.

At the end of the year, DHHR Secretary Crouch resigned.

In a statement on Twitter on December 28, Knisely stated, "I am deeply concerned about the state of WV media. It is our job as reporters to watch & report on decision makers. In our state, one of the poorest, not everyone can drive to the Capitol where decisions are being made. Not everyone has internet access to stream meetings."

The Associated Press reported that the order came from WVPB Executive Director Butch Antolini, a former communications director for Republican Governor Jim Justice. Antolini was installed at the public radio network after the governor ousted its existing governing board, the Educational Broadcasting Authority.

Since coming into office in January 2017, Justice, a billionaire coal operator, has repeatedly attempted to gut funding for public broadcasting in the state. National NPR correspondent Howard Berkes regularly reported on violations and accidents at Justice's mines, including exposés of Justice's ongoing tax delinquencies. The reports ran on local West Virginia and Kentucky NPR affiliates.

Almost immediately after inauguration, Justice moved to cut all public funding for WVPB. "After a significant public outcry," NPR reported February 13, "Justice relented. Yet state legislators still cut West



Virginia Public Broadcasting's state funding by nearly a quarter, roughly \$1 million."

That sum represented a tenth of the broadcaster's entire operating budget, triggering layoffs. According to NPR, station managers Eddie Isom and Marilyn DiVita pressured newsroom reporters and editors to axe coverage of Justice's businesses.

In the years since, Justice has stacked the Educational Broadcasting Authority with his personal friends and other right-wing operatives. Justice is himself a member of the 11-person board. In August 2021, Justice appointed Greg Thomas, a former campaign organizer for the failed US Senate run of Don Blankenship, to the board. Among other business and political insiders, the governor installed Danielle Waltz, a lobbyist for the state's Chamber of Commerce who has decried public news funding as "wasteful."

Knisely's exposé focused on the deep crisis of care in the DHHR, responsible for a population crippled by the opioid crisis and long-term economic distress. Thousands of foster children are crowded into state homes, psychiatric homes are overwhelmed with patients, and social and public sector workers are paid poverty wages. The agency has been starved of funds while coal and other big business interests have written the tax code to provide government handouts to the wealthiest West Virginians—including Governor Justice, who is the richest individual in the state and the largest landowner east of the Mississippi River.

On December 13, three prominent reporters from the *Gazette-Mail*, the newspaper of record in the state, were fired after criticizing a video interview conducted by Doug Skaff, the president of the newspaper's parent company HD Media, with Don Blankenship, former head of Massey Energy.

In addition to controlling the largest newspapers in the state, Skaff is a Democratic delegate and House minority leader in the state legislature.

In the interview, Skaff allowed Blankenship to blather on unchallenged about the coal industry and characterize climate change as "an absolute hoax."

The disgraced coal baron was convicted in 2015 for conspiracy to violate mine safety laws in relation to the Upper Big Branch mine explosion that killed 29 miners. Since his slap-on-the-wrist one-year prison term, Blankenship has pitched himself as a "Trumpier than Trump" politician and pushed extreme

nationalism, anti-China xenophobia, and the dismantling of health, safety, and environmental protections.

The interview served as a platform for Blankenship to promote his 2020 book about the mine disaster in which he insisted on his innocence. At the conclusion of the segment, Skaff told Blankenship, "Thanks for what you did for the community down there. I know your heart's in the right place."

After commenting on Twitter about the interview, reporters Caity Coyne, Lacie Pierson, and Ryan Quinn said they were unceremoniously locked out of a staff meeting and fired one by one in an upstairs conference room. "The person who fired me said it was because I had publicly hurt the company on social media," Quinn told the Associated Press. Pierson said it was described as "insubordination."

Coyne, the paper's health reporter, said of the interview, "I don't have the words for how screwed up this is. I've met families whose loved ones died in UBB. I've watched them cry as they remember their relatives and their fight for answers after the disaster. Who cares where Blankenship's heart lies? What a slap in the face to them."

Skaff's HD Media acquired the *Gazette-Mail* in a bankruptcy auction in 2018, and quickly laid off investigative reporters and newsroom staff. Editor Rob Byers was fired in 2018. In early 2020, Greg Moore, the paper's executive editor, was abruptly laid off after HD Media eliminated his position.

Others followed in a matter of weeks, including Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Eric Eyre, a statehouse reporter who wrote an exposé on the opioid crisis, and Ken Ward Jr., the long-time journalist covering the coal industry, particularly the criminality of Blankenship and other coal executives.



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