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Why Fox News is a Good Thing

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Posted by [Toby Miller / University of California, Riverside](#) on December 17th, 2004 [11](#)
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Fox News Channel

For many liberals, centrists, and leftists, the Fox News Network is a whipping boy, a monstrous example of what happens when deeply politicized, fiercely partisan media mavens rule the roost. And in many ways, this is an accurate diagnosis. Fox News operatives described the Taliban as 'rats,' 'terror goons,' and 'psycho Arabs' during the 2001 conflict, for instance, and the network accompanied 2003 anti-Iraq war protests in Manhattan with a ticker-news crawl taunting the demonstrators. When *The Simpsons*, a program on its network cousin, mocked this with 'Do Democrats cause cancer? Find out at foxnews.com,' Fox News threatened the creator with legal action. As the noted CNN foreign correspondent, Christiane Amanpour, told CNBC after the war: 'television and, perhaps, to a certain extent, my station was intimidated by the administration and its foot soldiers at Fox News. And it did, in fact, put a climate of fear and self-censorship, in my view, in terms of the kind of broadcast work we did.' She was immediately derided by Fox as 'a spokeswoman for Al Quaeda.'

It can be no accident that Fox News Channel, which employs few journalists and staffs only four foreign bureaux, has the most pundits on its payroll of any US network — over fifty in 2003. There has also been a malign Fox-effect on other networks. Despite Fox's claim that it is less liberal than CNN, each delivers pro-Bush positions on foreign policy as if they were organs of the Pentagon. During the invasion of Iraq, both MSNBC and Fox adopted the Pentagon's

cliché ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ as the title of their coverage. Viacom, CNN, Fox, and Comedy Central all declined to feature paid billboards and commercials against the invasion. Fox News Managing Editor Brit Hume said that civilian casualties may not belong on television, as they are ‘historically, by definition, a part of war.’ But CNN instructed presenters to mention September 11 each time Afghan suffering was mentioned, and Walter Isaacson, the network’s President, worried aloud that it was ‘perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship.’

So what is the difference? CNN and Fox market themselves differently — the former to urban, highly educated viewers, the latter to rural, less-educated viewers. One functions like a broadsheet, the other like a tabloid, with CNN punditry coming mostly from outsiders, and Fox punditry as much from presenters as guests. CNN costs more to produce and attracts fewer routine viewers (but many more occasional ones). It brings in much higher advertising revenue because of the composition of its audience, and because its fawning and trite business coverage addresses high-profile investors and corporations in ways that Fox’s down-market populism does not.

Does all of this amount to Fox being a disgrace? Let us rather say that it is breaking the boundaries in its routine denunciation of the other media as ‘elitist,’ and its rabid partisanship — but that it is effectively no less tied to the Washington line than are its competitors. Perhaps something good can even come of the Fox-effect. Imagine a scenario in which, as applies in virtually every wealthy, highly-educated democratic nation, the media declare themselves politically (think of the *Guardian* versus the *Daily Telegraph* in Britain) and then go out and do actual reporting — not chasing tornadoes or screaming opinions, but compiling stories about the conduct of governments and corporations. It would surely be better than endless, tired fights over objectivity that inevitably lead to more and more punditry and less and less research, more mavens and fewer journalists.

Let’s take the sting away from Fox by acknowledging that it is correct — there is a consensus in television news; it is mildly liberal, but wholeheartedly endorses the Bush Administration; and Fox is more wholehearted in its endorsement of the Administration than its competitors. Then let network news and the cable “specialists” actually go forward and find stuff out, rather than throwing punditry at the viewers, night after night, day after day. That would be journalism worthy of the name, and it could come from competing for stories rather than competing for noise.

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- **Andrew Schroeder (Author) said:**



FOX effects

Toby,I agree in general, but I'd frame it in a slightly different way. While I doubt that the Fox effect will result in increasing competition for well-researched "hard news" stories I do tend to think that it MAY lead to a greater emphasis on "niche" marketing among the pundits. The turn towards "niche" commentary, while casting one version of the universal liberal public sphere and its attendant emphasis on rational objectivity into the ash-heap, also raises the possibility of re-activating another version: a kind of polymorphous public sphere marked by intensified ideological conflict, of the sort that appeared, say, among the array of conflicting NYC newspapers during the penny-press period. At this point, sharpening the ideological lines, if only for the sake of carving out SOME kind of space for actual conflict and critique, not just the Crossfire simulacrum, can only aid the Left.

-December 17th, 2004 at 2:02 pm

- **Kayaneh M Tasian (Author) said:**



One of the interesting questions Miller raises deals with the rest of television news (i.e. not Fox). Why is the so-called 'liberal media' so seemingly willing to fall into line with many of the conservative preferences or patterns of both the government and the conservative media? Much like our politicians, the mainstream news writers who cover them are arguing more about who is covering the news and how rather than actually finding noteworthy or in-depth stories for their viewers. Also, where does this type of coverage leave the average viewer? Is the kind of punditry on Fox or any other network helpful or informative to the undecided or middle-of-the-road viewer or does it merely create flashy infotainment to have clashing arguments on the latest issue (or non-issue)?

-December 17th, 2004 at 2:03 pm

- ***Elliot (Author) said:***



Exclusivity in viewership and ideology

If we accepted ideological bias as inevitable in news media, maybe there would be less arguing about who is covering the news and how. Any such arguing assumes that the middle-of-the-road viewer choose one source and sticks with it, which is in the interest of each channel's parent corp. Perhaps if a corporation holds both liberal and conservative news outlets, then they'll have less to lose by tacitly encouraging us to vary our news diets. That is: if Fox News and CNN were owned by the same company, they could just give their differing versions of how things are and not demand the viewer's exclusive allegiance by claiming to be "objective". For this reason, I can't imagine that a corporation that ties itself to one side of the conservative/liberal debate would stand much of a chance against one that provided content for both sides.

-December 17th, 2004 at 2:04 pm

- ***Jason Mittell (Author) said:***



Framing & Branding

I agree completely with Toby's optimistic endorsement of more open acknowledgement of political "bias" or positionality of TV news. But that can only be accompanied with a demolition of Fox's "fair & balanced" claims, which although the majority of viewers scoff at, dedicated Fox viewers defend. This results in a pre-framed debate as to whether Fox is balanced, which places the "not-Fox" in opposition: either Fox is balanced and everyone else is liberal, or Fox is conservative and everyone else is objective. The option of "no one is objective" is not on the table.

A good comparison is opinion-driven news magazines - neither The Nation nor National Review claim to be "objective," but no one believes that their level of politicization is the end of journalism! Since TV news has operated in such an oligopolistic and copycat form from the beginning, Fox's exceptionalism is seen by many as the problem itself, rather than a flawed but potentially positive step toward a solution.

-December 19th, 2004 at 2:04 pm

- ***Jacob Sloman (Author) said:***



Political Bias

The news is a difficult issue to cover. No matter who is viewing it, it is always a subjective enterprise, being interpreted by one person and then relayed to many other people who will in turn have their own viewpoint and way of interpreting what they hear. It is not an

exact science. The media is an entity that has crept further and further toward the right while at the same time hoping to maintain a seemingly balanced exterior. As Fox News says: "A Fair and Balanced View." But it is anything but one. At the same time, CNN is constantly being accused of being a liberal mouthpiece. Television cannot and will not ever be a purely fact-based enterprise. As long as reporters are there to videotape an act and someone is there to read what they have been fed, it will always be an entity that has been thread through so many different mechanisms that it will not retain its first shape. Although I believe this to be the case, I also believe that there is something to be said for programs that make some attempt to stay as close to the center and fact based as possible. I believe that CNN shares some of the guilt, but I do not believe a blind eye should be turned toward Fox News. On a television channel that clearly disregards issues and view points that can be seen as left-leaning. The news is a difficult thing to cover, and kudos to anyone who can report it as accurately as possible. Until then, I will try to cut Fox a bit of slack and try to look on CNN with a bit more of a critical eye—although my tendency is to do otherwise.

-May 2nd, 2005 at 2:05 pm

- ***Jackie Pena said:***



Trying to give a story is difficult because you have to try not to be on any side of the parties involved, but you know what fox news doesn't obey that rule because they give there Republican view and that is one of many reasons I can't watch it. They really bothered me when they were giving the story of Plan parenthood in Aurora, IL. They were just taking stories of people that were just really against the idea of it opening, Fox news even went as far as put scary movie music in the background of the report. Well it also doesn't help the owners of Fox are full blooded republicans, but that doesn't bother me as much as them always picking a side in there stories and for news that should be illegal.

-November 10th, 2007 at 8:48 pm