

Changing the Channel: Analyzing the Rhetoric of the Fox News Effect



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According to recent studies by Fairleigh Dickinson University, exclusive Fox News viewers possess less accurate knowledge of current events than people who obtain their news exclusively through Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" and even people who do not consume any news at all.¹ These and other studies controlled for political orientation, educational level, and demographics, thus indicating a causal relationship between viewing Fox News and poor news knowledge.² In response, Fox News shot back at the professors who conducted the research, "Considering FDU's undergraduate school is ranked as one of the worst in the country, we suggest the school invest in improving its weak academic program instead of spending money on frivolous polling – their student body does not deserve to be so ill-informed."³

Fox News' flawed 2012 election predictions validated these studies and also showed they apply to the network's strongest supporters and even its own commentators. Most (in)famously, Dick Morris visited *The O'Reilly Factor* just days before the election and predicted a Romney "landslide," and Karl Rove clashed with anchors Bret Baier, Megyn Kelly, and the entire Fox News network over whether to call Ohio for Obama. Outside Fox News' broadcasts, conservatives George Will, Michael Barone, Joe Scarborough, and Peggy Noonan all insisted that Romney would win easily. Noonan even asserted that "those predicting an Obama victory were ignoring the world around them."⁴

The logo for the Romney-Ryan presidential ticket. It features the word "ROMNEY" in a large, blue, serif font with a red underline. Below it, the word "RYAN" is written in a smaller, blue, serif font.

Since Fox News' election forecasting was so mistaken, a multitude of critics have voiced concerns about Fox News misinforming and even outright misleading its viewers due to its biased reporting. Political consultant Joe Householder quips, "Republican voters nationwide know ... to get the news they can use the only place to go is Fox."⁵ Lincoln Mitchell questions whether Fox News has "outlived its value" to the GOP: "while Fox helps the Republican Party when it slants its news coverage to the right, it damages the Party when its news coverage becomes too shoddy." The network's election reporting was undeniably "shoddy,"⁶ casting doubt on its consistent support for the Romney and Ryan ticket as well as its never-ending criticism of the Obama administration.

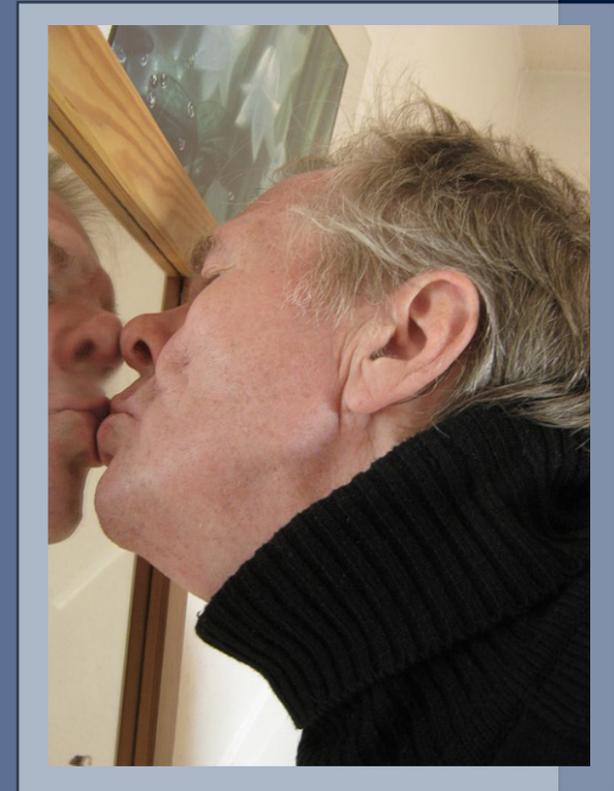
Some even argue that conservative commentators like Morris and Rove mislead themselves, having closed themselves inside "a conservative echo chamber."⁷ Jon Stewart criticizes the GOP's cognitive dissonance, saying "There is a President Obama only Republicans can see," a Muslim socialist foreigner "bent on our wholesale destruction."⁸ Allison Benedikt argues in *Slate* that conservative pundits "reinforce each other's divorce from reality,"⁹ and Mitchell accuses Fox in particular of indulging "partisan rantings" instead of reporting serious news and views.¹⁰ Considering how Fox News abruptly ended its interview with Tom Ricks when he charged Fox with



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politicizing and exaggerating the significance of the Benghazi embassy attack¹¹, it is rather difficult to characterize all of this criticism as liberal attacks.

In fact, some of the fiercest criticism has come from conservatives. Even before the election, conservative columnist and former George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum accused conservatives of taking a “flight from reality and responsibility” and then blamed “the thought leaders on talk radio and Fox” and the conservative book-publishing industry for building “a whole alternative knowledge system, with its own facts, its own history, its own laws of economics.”¹² Post-election, Joe Scarborough (a former Republican Congressman) agreed wholeheartedly when Frum said conservatives had been “fleeced and exploited, and lied to by the conservative entertainment complex.”¹³ GOP strategist and blogger John Feehery described conservative media as a “talk-show culture,” and Ben Domenech, co-founder of RedState.com, said the conservative media did not invest itself in “the critical and hard work of investigation.” Even *The Blaze*, a very conservative news website owned by former Fox News host Glenn Beck, questioned whether Republicans should change their relationship to the conservative media.¹⁴



The day after the election, Richard Noyes of the conservative-leaning *Media Research Center* published an Op-Ed for *FoxNews.com* that perfectly illustrates the criticisms above, especially the cognitive dissonance of the “flight from reality.” Noyes argues the mainstream media “unfairly jumped on inconsequential mistakes” like Romney’s overseas trip and his 47% comments. He quotes Charles Krauthammer’s (a conservative columnist and Fox News contributor) description of the trip as “a major substantive success” obscured by the mainstream media.¹⁵ No objective observer could characterize Romney’s overseas trip as “a major substantive success” after he insulted England’s Olympics preparation, attributed Palestinians’ poverty to their culture, and his aide Rick Gorka told Polish reporters to “Kiss my ass. *This is a holy site*” (emphasis added).¹⁶ Moreover, no rational person can attach the label “inconsequential” to comments that explicitly insulted almost half the country.

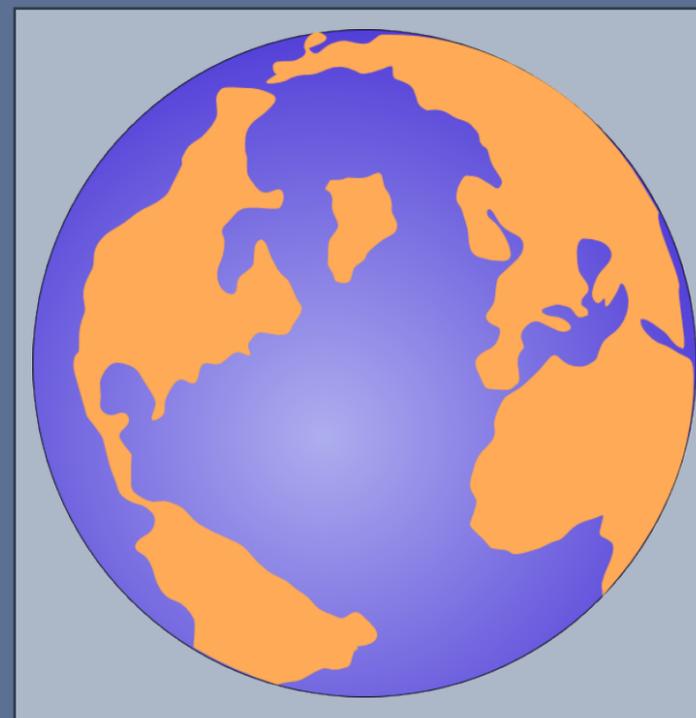


To understand how conservative media misleads its viewers, I conducted a rhetorical analysis of popular Fox News broadcasts. I viewed roughly eight hours of Fox News coverage across September 18, 19, and 20, including *Fox & Friends*, two broadcasts of *Special Report with Bret Baier*, two partial viewings of *Studio B with Sheppard Smith*, and two episodes each of *The O’Reilly Factor* and *Hannity*. I chose these programs because they broadcast at prime news-viewing times; *Fox & Friends* is the network’s Monday-Friday morning news program while Bret Baier, Sheppard Smith, Bill O’Reilly, and Sean Hannity air consecutively from 6:00 pm to 10:00 pm EST, Monday-Friday.

Admittedly, this is a small sample. However, I found that eight hours of viewing was more than sufficient to identify several consistently-used rhetorical strategies, and I doubt that watching more broadcasts would reveal significant variations in them. Fox News has used these strategies to reach and maintain its #1 ranking among cable news stations.¹⁷ Why would the network and its most successful shows change their approach if it garners consistently high ratings? I determined, therefore, that viewing more broadcasts could possibly expand upon this analysis but was not necessary for conducting it.

According to my analysis, the “Fox News effect” and “alternate reality” described above may result from the consistent use of the following rhetorical strategies: 1) the rhetoric of polarization; 2) presenting a unified point-of-view with little to no debate; 3) rapid redirection to different topics; 4) rapid delivery of information; 5) frequently repeating key claims and evidence; and 6) decontextualizing claims and evidence.

Combining these rhetorical strategies in service of partisan news reporting has serious implications for our nation’s political discourse. They have exacerbated our existing political polarization, dividing Americans along party lines and making it exceptionally difficult for our elected representatives to effectively govern, as shown by recent political battles over the debt ceiling, the Fiscal Cliff, and previously bipartisan policies. The more dysfunctional our government, the more volatile our economy. Therefore, we must understand the rhetoric of the Fox News effect and then use this knowledge to advocate for more critical media consumption.



The Rhetoric of Polarization

Monica Brasted explains how polarizing rhetoric – establishing common ground, a “we/they” attitude, and opposition to a threatening enemy¹⁸ – can affirm one group’s collective identity while also subverting a competing group’s ethos.¹⁹ Citing Raum and Measell²⁰, she says these tactics require three environmental factors: existing polarization, a charged emotional atmosphere, and “an agent that views the world as a battle of opposites and presents themselves as the only redeemer.” As the following analysis shows, Fox News utilizes polarizing rhetoric to create a collective identity and a common enemy. Its regular viewers, therefore, gain polarized perspectives and knowledge.

Fox News hosts, commentators, and guests establish common ground by presenting themselves and their network as protectors, or redeemers, of the viewers and also as a collective “we” opposing a dangerous “they” in a “battle of opposites.” Through its criticism of the Obama administration and the liberal mainstream media, Fox News also subverts the ethos of the threatening “they” and further charges the country’s emotional atmosphere and existing polarization. I admit this description sounds melodramatic. However, in only eight hours of viewing, I observed ample supporting evidence for it.



Bret Baier, for instance, signs off with the catch-phrase, “fair, balanced, and unafraid,” a riff on the network’s “Fair and Balanced” motto. In response to a viewer’s email asking why he has not endorsed Mitt Romney, Bill O’Reilly says it is his job to watch politicians, not endorse them. He adds, “We’re watchdogs who bite anyone who tries to hurt you.” After debating Ted Koppel about the merits of Fox News, O’Reilly concludes, “I still think I’m doing something noble.” These are just a few notable examples of anchors’ efforts to build a common “we.”

As for criticizing the dangerous “they,” Sean Hannity describes the rest of the media as “the extension of Obama’s press office” and frequently attaches the labels, “mainstream,” “liberal,” “biased,” “sell-out,” “leftist,” “left-wing,” “lap dog,” “suck up,” and “ignorant.” During the Sept. 18 broadcast, for example, Bret Baier leads into a commercial with the statement, “The President and a liberal website team up against the free press.” He returns with, “If you want to read something negative about this station, there’s a one-stop shop.” The ensuing story describes how Attorney General Eric Holder’s advisors allegedly worked with *Media Matters* to attack Fox News’ coverage of the Fast and Furious scandal. Baier concludes that *Media Matters*’ mission is to “destroy Fox News.”

Later that evening, Bill O’Reilly brings on conservative commentator Tucker Carlson to discuss the “leftist non-profits” “assassinating” or “smearing” people on the right, with assistance from Attorney General Eric Holder. O’Reilly and Carlson discuss the fact that Tracy Schmalzer, a Justice Department spokesperson, has “an inappropriate relationship” with *Media Matters*, a “tax-exempt left-wing organization,” because she’s “orchestrating” news coverage and generating “propaganda” with them. In the most damning email, according to Carlson, Schmalzer suggests running a rebuttal to a Fox News story, and then “lo and behold” there’s a story criticizing Fox News’ coverage of Fast and Furious.

Sean Hannity introduces his show’s *Media Matters* segment – during which the graphic “The Ignorant Media” floats in the lower right-hand corner – with this statement: “The mainstream media is busy salivating over Romney’s [47%] statements. But where are the questions about Obama’s promise to cut the deficit or about Obama failing to heed warnings of the Benghazi attacks or Obama’s unrepentant ties to terrorist Bill Ayers? Those never cross the media’s mind.” Two days later, during his Sept. 20 broadcast, Hannity says the mainstream media is covering up for Obama by focusing on Romney’s 47% comments. Later, he promises to show clips of “the most liberal [media] bias.” As promised, toward the show’s end he addresses “the sell-out media’s” inequitable coverage: Tuesday evening through Thursday morning, ABC, NBC, and CBS had done thirty-four stories (1 hour 7 minutes) on Romney’s 47% comments compared to only eight stories (6 minutes 28 seconds) on Obama’s



income redistribution comments from a 1998 speech at Loyola University. Then he shows a montage of network news anchors introducing coverage of the 47% comment and asks, “Does the sell-out liberal media owe the American people an apology?”

Conservative David Frum and an unrelated Gallup poll also support my analysis. Frum explains, “The business model of the conservative media is built on two elements: provoking the audience into a fever of indignation (to keep them watching) and fomenting mistrust of all other information sources (so that they never change the channel).”²¹ The Gallup poll reveals how much Fox News and other conservative media have impacted their viewers’ perceptions of the media. It found that only 40% of the country, *including only 26% of Republicans*, trusts the mass media to fairly and accurately report information.²²

Considering all of this evidence, it no longer seems so melodramatic to say that Fox News casts itself as a protector or redeemer of its viewers in a “battle of opposites.” Clearly, Fox News creates a powerful perception of a collective “us” versus a dangerous and threatening “them,” the latter being the biased liberal media countered only by Fox News’ “fair and balanced” news coverage. The network deliberately traps its audience inside an echo chamber.

Presenting a Unified Front

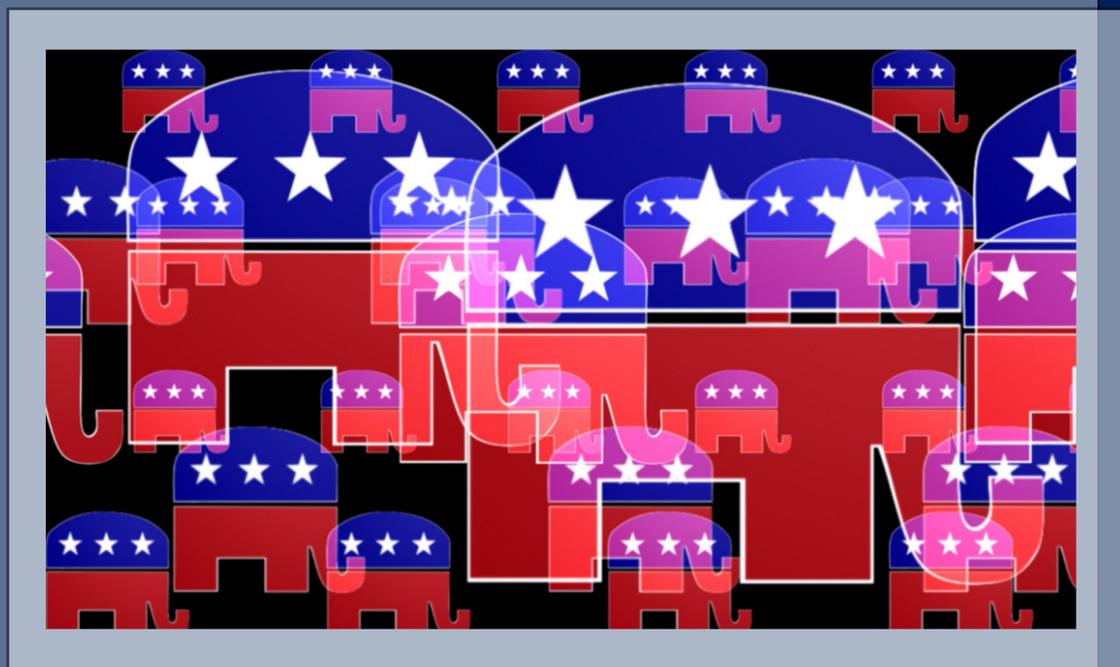
As Conor Friedersdorf says, “It is easy to close oneself inside a conservative echo chamber.”²³ To begin with, Fox News has a heavy imbalance among conservative and non-conservative points-of-view. As early as 2001, the media watchdog *Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting* (FAIR) described the prevalence of conservative views among Fox News’ anchors and contributors.²⁴ In another 2001 report, FAIR categorized the political leanings of *Special Report* guests over a nineteen-week period. Fifty-six guests belonged to a political party. Fifty were Republicans. Of the Ninety-two guests who did not claim a political party, sixty-five explicitly avowed a conservative worldview. Moreover, most non-conservatives were centrist or center-right.²⁵ Overall, Fox’s “liberal” commentators often assume quite conservative positions.²⁶

One might reasonably protest that audiences can also enter “liberal echo chambers,” especially with the prevalent leftist bias of the mainstream media. However, FAIR anticipated and refuted this position by comparing *Special Reports*’ partisan balance with CNN’s *Wolf Blitzer Reports*. During the same 19-week period in 2001 – and thus the same news stories – Wolf Blitzer featured twenty-nine Democrats and *thirty-eight* Republicans. Thirty-five of 109 other guests were avowed conservatives while the rest ranged from center-right to left,²⁷ meaning each band of the political continuum (left, center, right) was represented roughly equally.

As recently as 2010, Terry McDermott also observed Fox News's partisan imbalance compared to CNN. During the same news cycle, CNN offered "by far the most diverse array of commentators" whereas MSNBC and Fox News were unified in their praise and condemnation of President Obama, respectively. Moreover, "other than short video clips of news conferences or other public appearances, Fox didn't put a single Democrat on the air except as a foil for Republican or Fox commentators." As a result, CNN appeared to be "on all sides of the issue at once" whereas MSNBC and Fox were unified in their news coverage.²⁸

According to my analysis, Fox News' partisan imbalance has not changed. In roughly eight hours of viewing, I counted twenty-two commentators with explicitly conservative affiliations and views and only eight commentators with moderate or liberal views, a nearly three to one ratio. Except for *Studio B* anchor Shepard Smith, who comments ironically but is otherwise fairly neutral, Fox News hosts are uniformly and staunchly conservative.

I also observed that the conservative arguments put forth by the anchors, commentators, and guests were rarely challenged by other participants on the program. It is as if conservatism encompasses such a narrow range of thinking that everyone cannot help but agree wholeheartedly on everything. When someone does express an opposing view, the host and/or other commentators usually change topics, dismiss the comments, or even interrupt and/or talk over that person. Consequently, a viewer will receive one dominant set of ideas and impressions from a Fox News program.



Special Report with Bret Baier, for instance, features an "All-Star Panel" usually composed of conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer, the *Washington Post's* Charles Lane, and *The Weekly Standard's* Steve Hayes. With two-thirds of the commentators coming from staunchly-conservative magazines, the segment offers a very singular perspective on the day's news. During the Sept. 18 airing, for example, the panel debates the fallout from Romney's "47% comments," and basically concludes that Romney's comments were mostly correct, if indelicately stated. Next, Steve Hayes stresses Obama's belief in wealth redistribution based on a 1998 speech in which he stated, "I believe in income redistribution, at least to an extent, so that everyone has a fair shot." No discussion occurs. Then Krauthammer affirms Romney's remarks on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. No one comments on his claim.

Bill O'Reilly's opening "Talking Points" also uphold the accuracy of Romney's 47% remarks, particularly the point that our entitlement culture is destroying America and threatening its future. Then Krauthammer arrives to reiterate his support for Romney's critique of the country's entitlement culture as well as his distaste for including social security recipients among its ranks. O'Reilly counters that Romney did not mean social security recipients

when he critiqued the 47%, but besides this disagreement, O'Reilly concurs on the existence and negative effects of our entitlement culture.

After O'Reilly, *Hannity* adds its support for Romney's 47% comments, describing them as "100% accurate." (On Oct. 4, Mitt Romney appeared on *Hannity* and said: "In this case, I said something that was just completely wrong.") Then the show features three segments that especially exemplify Fox News' unified point-of-view. Conservative David Limbaugh's statements are supported or left alone by *Hannity* while Democratic strategist Joe Trippi's arguments are critiqued by both Limbaugh and *Hannity*. Fox News anchor Tamara Holder also dissents from her colleague Angela McGloughlin and *Hannity*, and she is similarly rebutted. Andrew McCarthy, a *National Review* writer, claims that Obama's policies in Libya have "empowered jihadists and are the reason for [the Benghazi embassy attack]," and, since 2009, Obama has tried to bring Muslim sharia law into U.S. law. *Hannity* does not comment before switching topics to the Muslim Brotherhood. McCarthy describes it as anti-American and then asserts, "Obama has to explain how he has been empowering America's enemies, which he has done since he took office." *Hannity* transitions into a commercial without further comment.

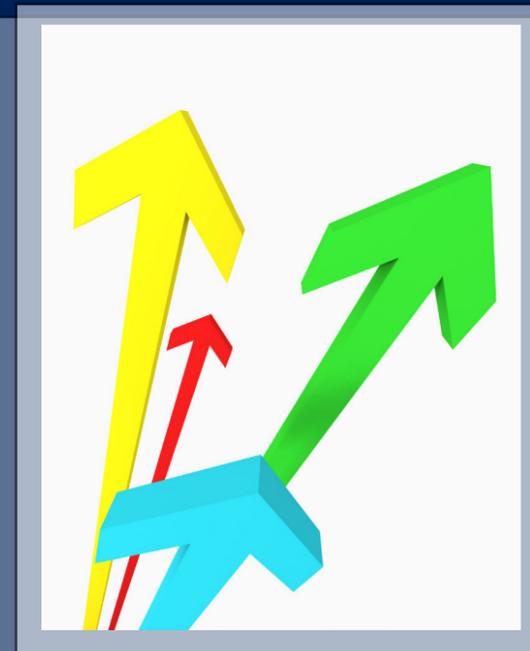


Clearly, these are all perfect examples of indulging "partisan rantings" while neglecting serious debate.²⁹ No conservative was asked to support his or her claims, no matter how groundless they might be, whereas liberals like Joe Trippi and Tamara Holder could hardly finish a sentence. Even discussion panels composed of conservatives featured little actual discussion. Hosts rarely questioned or probed a commentator's claims unless they deviated from the consensus or their personal viewpoint. Then, dissent was usually talked and yelled over rather than engaged. Each program essentially reinforced what the previous program had already said about the day's news, creating an air-tight echo chamber.

Rapid Redirection

As both the previous and following examples demonstrate, dissension on Fox News is both rare and rarely engaged. When someone expresses disagreement, it is often brushed aside as the program progresses quickly to another topic, dismissed as inaccurate or misguided, or simply talked and shouted over. Fox News anchors (especially Sean Hannity) present information and ask questions very rapidly as part of their redirection. Consequently, the dissenting voices fade to the background for the viewers, preserving the network's unified perspective.

The following exchanges from *Special Report with Bret Baier* exemplify “brushing aside” dissenting voices. After Steve Hayes criticizes the Obama administration for giving more exposure to the controversial video that sparked recent riots and attacks on U.S. embassies, Charles Lane gently points out that the administration believes the video will be used by extremists to stir more violence unless it is debunked. The conversation abruptly drops, and Baier changes topics rather than prompting further discussion. When the All-Star Panel discusses Romney’s 47% comments, Lane asserts that Romney basically said, “I don’t care about half the American people.” Baier mentions that he “cleaned that up” earlier in the day on Neil Cavuto’s Fox News program and then brings up Obama’s income redistribution comment.



Whereas Baier simply changes subjects, Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, and their guests also dismiss or talk over dissenting opinions. When Krauthammer criticizes Romney for punditry, O’Reilly interjects that the 47% comment “doesn’t mean anything” because he was simply catering to a friendly audience. Krauthammer questions the fairness of including social security recipients among the entitled. O’Reilly replies, “I don’t think he included them. I didn’t take that from it,” and quickly changes the subject. Later, the avowed liberal Alan Colmes cannot respond to O’Reilly’s argument that the Democratic party’s base earns little income and thus depends upon the government “giving them stuff” because O’Reilly peppers him with questions. Monica Crowley, a Fox News analyst, attempts to talk over both of them at this juncture even though O’Reilly had already let her explain, without interruption, the Democratic party’s efforts to put as many Americans on welfare as possible and thus create a permanent voting bloc.

In stark contrast, Hannity replies with exasperation, “That’s not what we’re talking about,” to Democrat Joe Trippi’s point that Romney’s 47% comment conflates “takers and makers,” the latter including, for example, military veterans on federal disability. When Trippi tries to continue, conservative David Limbaugh interrupts (yelling), “You’re the one making it about takers and makers, Obama is the one engaging in class warfare.” At the segment’s end, Trippi attempts to rebut Limbaugh, but his point remains unintelligible under Hannity and Limbaugh’s shouted rejoinders. Near the broadcast’s end, a former economic advisor to Obama comes on to discuss the economy. He cannot elaborate on any of his answers before Hannity asks another question. Indeed, Hannity speaks over the guest’s answers.

All of the Fox News programs I viewed employ some rapid redirection, such as Baier’s efforts to steer away from dissension and O’Reilly and Hannity’s interruptions. Redirection minimizes the time and attention that dissenting voices receive, thus minimizing their impact on the viewers and preserving Fox News’ unified point-of-view.

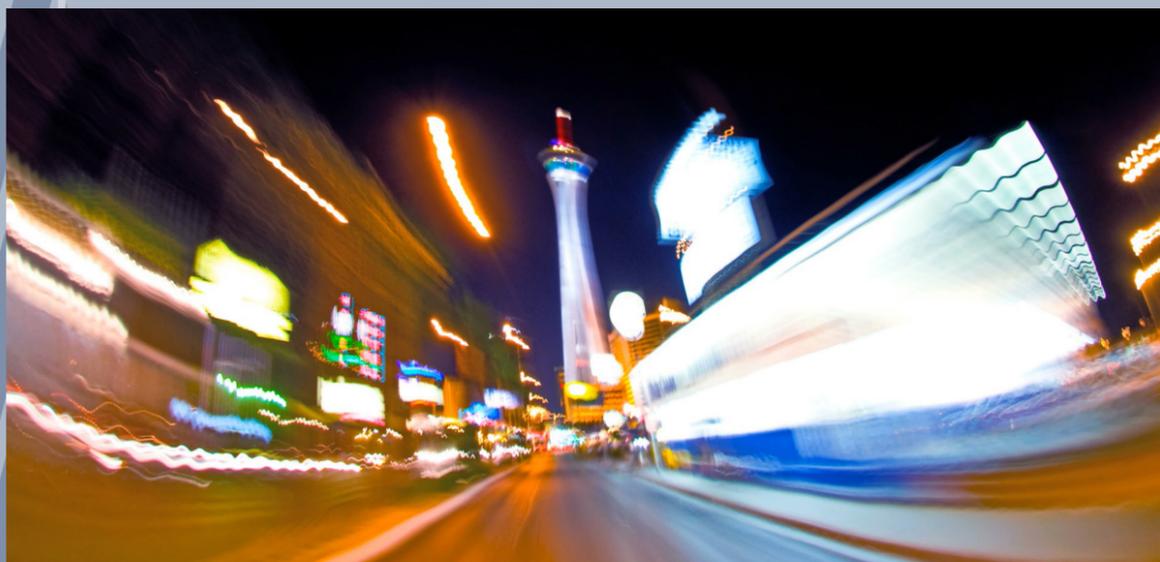


Rapid Delivery of Information

In addition to rapid redirection, some Fox News anchors deliver information very quickly. Bret Baier and Sheppard Smith maintain an even, manageable pace, but Bill O'Reilly and (especially) Sean Hannity speak so quickly it is hard to process any statement before the next one arrives. As a result, it is difficult to think critically about any of their claims.

One must actually watch *Hannity* to fully appreciate his rapid delivery. But consider the following preamble to his segment on *Media Matters'* alleged collusion with a Justice Department spokesperson, spoken in approximately fifteen to twenty seconds:

We have the Benghazi attack. With three days warning, they did nothing. They had no beefed up security on 9/11. We have a president, including the Libyan president, lying about whether this was premeditated. Six trillion in debt, fewer jobs. What does the media want to talk about?" [He then lists several attacks on Romney's 47% comments, putting them in the context of the entitlement culture.] Does that sound like objective media to you?



Incredibly, Hannity covers multiple aspects of three distinct major news stories in less time than an average television commercial. This rapid delivery presents a significant amount of information very efficiently, but it also short-changes elaboration, in-depth understanding, and the viewer's critical thinking. A viewer will have difficulty contemplating any of these claims while also keeping up with and remembering all of them. As stated earlier, even Hannity's guests cannot always answer one question before he asks the next.

Repetition

Combined with rapid redirection and delivery, repetition reinforces the dominant impression of Fox News' unified viewpoint. Though the programs change, they tend to repeat certain points throughout each of their broadcasts and even from day-to-day. The dedicated Fox News viewer will certainly remember the oft-repeated claims, statistics, and quotes. Since it appears that everyone agrees on these key points, they gradually attain the status of widely-accepted fact even though they may not have valid supporting evidence or may be obviously out-of-context. Moreover, some reports begin to seem very important despite lacking any obvious news-worthiness.

Between Bret Baier and Sean Hannity's Sept. 18 and 20 broadcasts – about three and a half hours of programming – President Obama's attendance at a fundraiser with Jay-Z and Beyoncé was mentioned at least seven times. His 1998 comments on income redistribution receive eight references, plus coverage on *Studio B* and an extended discussion on *The O'Reilly Factor*. As described above, the Sept. 18 broadcasts of *Special Report*, *The*

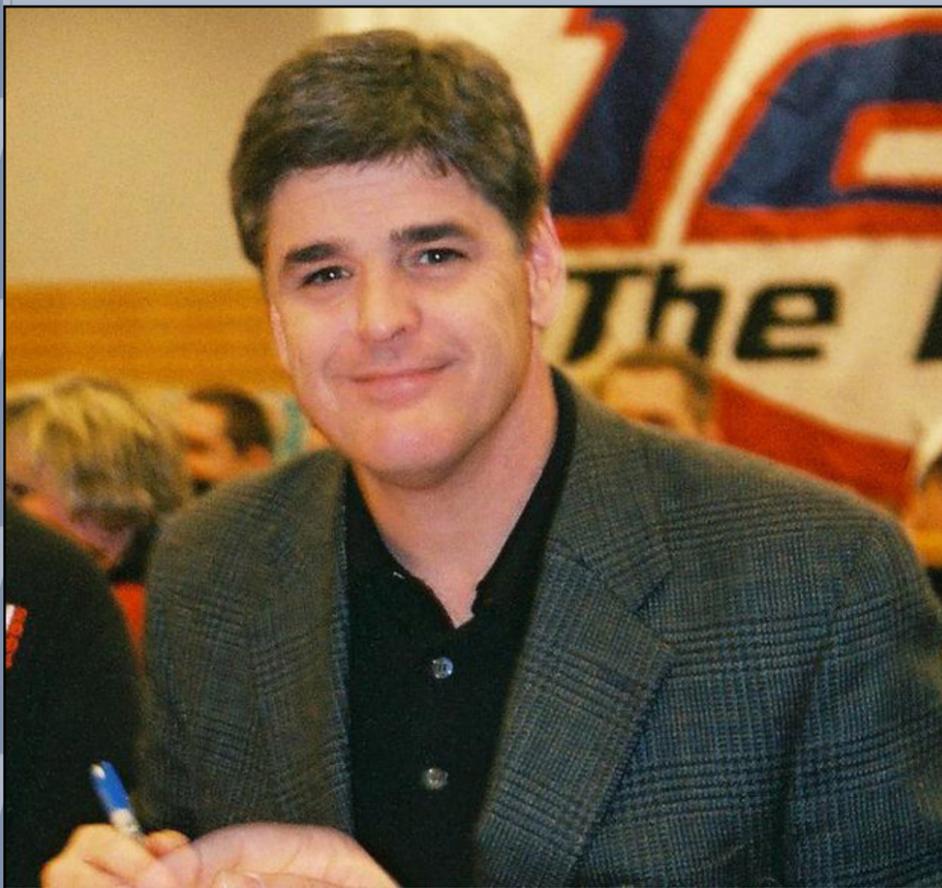
O'Reilly Factor, and *Hannity* each present the same general opinion of Romney's 47% comments: though indelicately stated, his remarks were truthful and accurate. Indeed, *Hannity* says, "everything Romney says [in this clip] is factually accurate." On the 20th, O'Reilly and *Hannity* trumpet many of the same economic and entitlement statistics, and *Hannity* also critiques Obama's American flag t-shirt in two different extended segments, a "story" that ran previously on *Special Report*.

For a more extended example, consider the early coverage of the Benghazi embassy attack. On Sept. 18, Baier suggests the White House may be culpable for "dropping the ball" on securing embassies and other US personnel on 9/11. That evening, *Hannity* claims the administration had a full three days' warning. On the 19th, *Fox & Friends* briefly indicates the Obama administration had advance warning of the attacks. Throughout the 20th, *Special Report* covers the administration's "flip-flop" from characterizing it as spontaneous to admitting it was premeditated; *Studio B with Sheppard Smith* describes the White House's change of position as "mixed messages;" and *Hannity* opens with "mixed messages from the Obama administration" that are now "resembling outright lies." As *Hannity* puts it, "This president is refusing to come clean about what happened and who is to blame" for the Benghazi attacks.

Hannity especially exemplifies the strategy of repetition (and rapid delivery). On his Sept. 18 episode, he refers to record unemployment, debt, and food stamp recipients during no fewer than four separate portions of the show: in his opening monologue, in (non)response to a Joe Trippi question, before discussing the economy, and during a segment on *Media Matters* critiquing Fox News' coverage of the *Fast and Furious* scandal. During each segment, *Hannity* manages to recite "six trillion in debt" and "twenty-five million unemployed" multiple times. *Hannity* also addresses Obama's "class warfare" and "income redistribution" comments at least seven separate times throughout the program, showing the audio clip during two different segments, each with a "Class Warfare" graphic in the lower right-hand corner.

One might reasonably question the validity of conclusions based on only eight hours of viewing. However, Terry McDermott observed the same repetition and unified point-of-view during a news cycle in 2010: "On Fox's array of hosted opinion shows – O'Reilly, Beck, Cavuto, *Hannity*, and Van Susteren, [Obama's Nobel acceptance] speech rode the down escalator." Guests Steve Hayes and John Bolton, Bush's U.N. Ambassador, separately criticized the "rhetorical flourishes" and "high school level" analysis of the speech.³⁰ After observing a March 2012 news cycle, television critic Marvin

Kitman also observed that every Fox News show "featured the same big story" regardless of anchor, format, or other news events.³¹





By the end of an evening of Fox News, viewers will certainly remember certain topics, statistics, and statements. These topics assume greater importance for the viewers due to their repetition,³² such as Obama attending celebrity fundraisers. Even highly questionable statements gain more credence when often repeated,³³ like the “All-Star Panel” attacking Obama’s foreign policy a couple hours before Andrew McCarthy’s baseless accusation of empowering jihadists. Fox News’ repetition may also “prime” its viewers; researchers have observed that people express a preference for *Tide* detergent after being “primed” with words like “moon” and “ocean.”³⁴

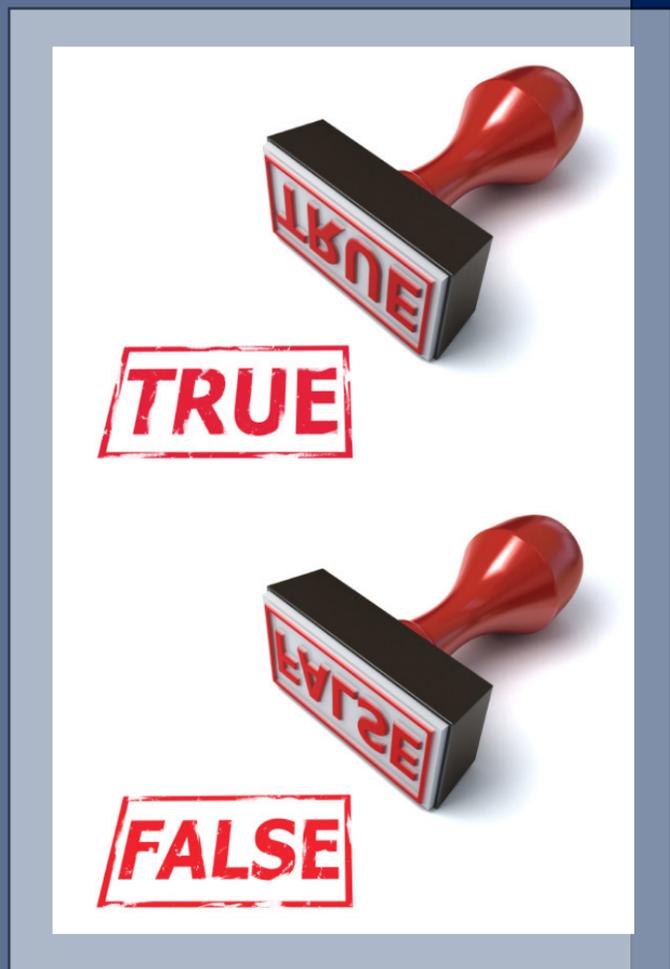
So when anchors repeatedly cite unemployment or welfare statistics, they not only emphasize a point; they also prime the audience’s reactions to other news.

Decontextualizing Claims

Along with repetition, Fox News personalities also decontextualize their claims. That is, they assert truths and quote statistics or statements without clearly explaining the rationale, evidence, or context behind them. Hence, Fox News viewers may come to view certain programs, policies, or statements negatively when they might feel very differently if they knew the full context. Arguably, this misinformed – or misled – position is exactly what David Frum laments when he charges the conservative media with “immers[ing] their audience in a total environment of pseudo-facts and pretend information.”³⁵

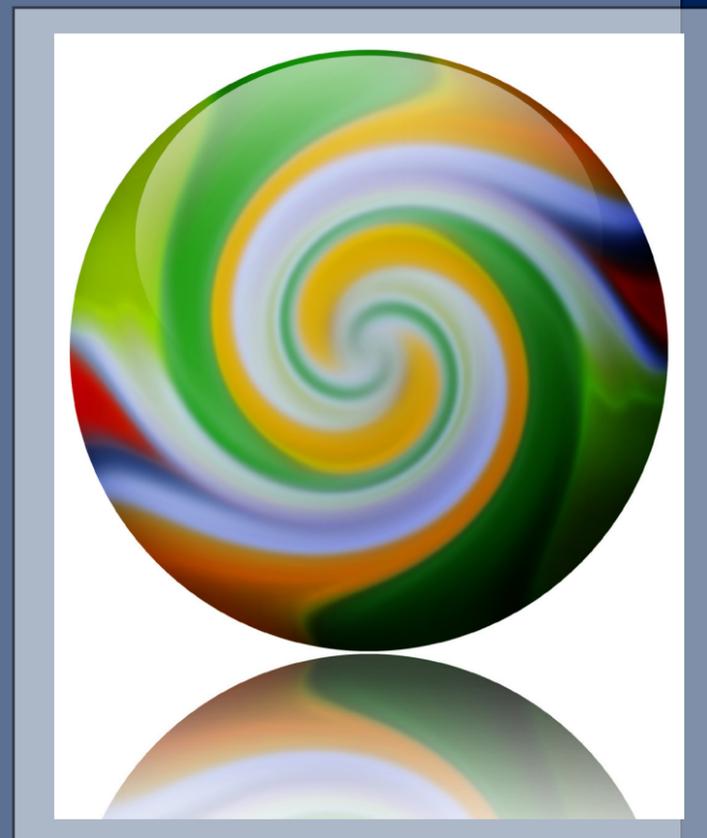
To decontextualize, the commentators often leave the details behind their arguments unstated. When Steve Hayes says, “We are paying the price for weakness” in Obama’s foreign policy, he does not specify which policies have been too weak or why. Krauthammer asserts but does not explain “the collapse of Obama’s policy in the Middle East.” Hannity claims Obama has divided the campaign along age, wealth, race, and gender, but his video montage of Obama’s various “redistribution” comments do not clearly stratify age, race, or gender along with wealth. Andrew McCarthy says that Obama’s policies in Libya have “empowered jihadists and are the reason for [the Benghazi attack],” but he does not specify the policies or their causal link to jihad or the embassy attack. He also says Obama has tried to implement Sha’ria law into U.S. law since 2009, yet he does not inform the viewers which Sha’ria laws have been promoted. Lastly, he claims Obama’s policies have “empowered America’s enemies,” but he does not specify which policies have achieved this or how they have done so.

Similarly, Fox News anchors and commentators often use statistics without explaining their context. Consider O’Reilly and Hannity’s support for Romney’s 47% comments and their criticism of U.S. entitlement spending, debt, and unemployment. O’Reilly supports Romney’s statement based on a Gallup poll in which 40% of respondents said government should do more. He does not explain what the poll or its respondents may have meant by “more.” He simply quips, “If you want the government to do more social engineering than the Obama



administration, then you want a nanny state. And you're probably not going to vote for Romney." Next, he reads statistics on the record number of Americans on food stamps, federal disability, or some other assistance and assumes Romney wants to "stop the madness." After railing against the Federal Reserve for inflating the dollar, he concludes, "If you're on the dole, then someone else has to pay your way, and there aren't enough other people to do that. That's why we're broke." At no point does O'Reilly consider exactly who is "on the dole" or why.

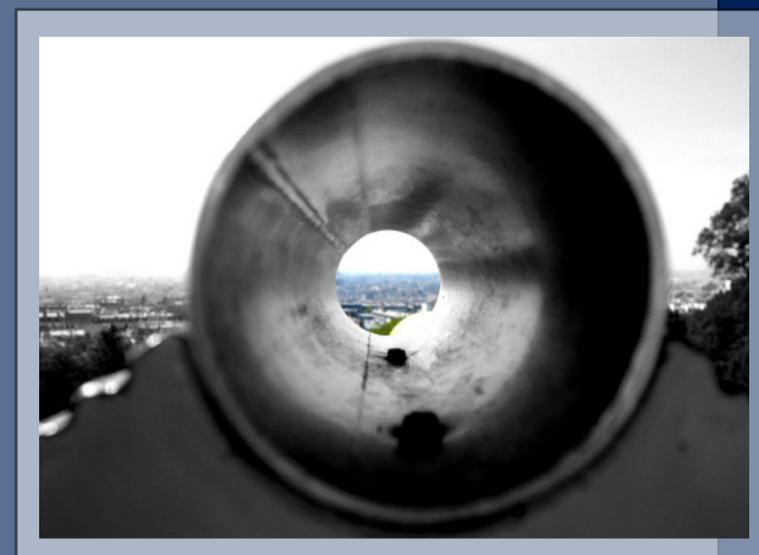
After this O'Reilly broadcast, Hannity praises "Romney's sharpest critique yet of the President and our entitlement culture." He then says the "Leftist media" is trying to "spin" this into a "major gaffe." However, "everything [Romney said] is 100% accurate," as shown by a Gallup poll in which 47% express support for Obama. "Wouldn't you know it?" Hannity asks, and that rhetorical question suffices to equate Gallup's 47% who support Obama with Romney's entitled 47%. Furthermore, Hannity says, 49% of people in 2011 lived in a household in which one person "received a government handout," welfare recipients have tripled in the last decade, and "entitlement spending" has increased 5500% since 1970. Yet 47% of Americans don't pay any income tax: "So don't buy this Left-wing media hype." Similar to O'Reilly, Hannity does not specify what he means by "government handout," consider why entitlement spending has increased exponentially, or explain why welfare recipients have increased in recent years.



Absent any context for these statements, Fox News viewers will likely agree that tens of millions of Americans live off the government, and President Obama wants to buy votes by increasing that trend, deficit be damned. They will probably stop supporting government entitlements without realizing they now oppose Social Security, Medicare, Pell Grants, Federal Disability, unemployment insurance, and veterans benefits. Besides failing to mention this context, Baier, O'Reilly, Hannity, and all of their guests seem to be equally ignorant of several other possible causes of record entitlement spending that are largely beyond anyone's control: retiring baby-boomers receiving Social Security, Medicare costs rising along with healthcare, monetary inflation, and the bad economy increasing unemployment and welfare applications. In short, Fox News viewers are misinformed and misled by consistent decontextualization.

Discussion

Fox News' major rhetorical strategies are undeniable based on the preceding evidence. The hosts and commentators engage in polarizing rhetoric by marketing themselves as "fair and balanced" in opposition to a liberal mainstream media. Lacking debate or discussion helps maintain an already unified point-of-view. Rapid redirection and delivery minimizes any dissension, further bolstering the network's unity. Repetition within and between programs ingrains key claims in the viewer's memory; gives subjective opinions, interpretations, and guess-work the weight of accepted fact; and influences viewer's reactions to other news. By decontextualizing,



Fox News personalities assert claims without providing supporting evidence or explanation. In only eight hours of viewing, I identified numerous examples of these strategies. In fact, I did not have sufficient room in this essay for all of my observations.

Much like the network's flawed election forecasting, there are many glaring inaccuracies in the Fox News broadcasts described in this analysis. Entitlements provide the best example. With all of the unified, repetitive, decontextualized, "us" vs. "them" criticism of entitlements, viewers will almost certainly come to view entitlements as wasteful spending and an unjust redistribution of income. If not for Joe Trippi, they would never know that Romney's 47% includes disabled military veterans. If not for Charles Krauthammer, Fox News would never tell its viewers that 60% of the "entitled" 47% actually work for a living and thus pay Social Security and Medicare taxes (that millionaire investors avoid paying), that many of the rest receive Social Security, or that Ronald Reagan – not President Obama – enabled the 47% to avoid Federal income taxes through the Earned Income Tax Credit.



But the dissenting voices of Fox News too often find themselves drowned out by the network's unified, repetitive rhetoric of polarization and decontextualization. Consider Sean Hannity's response to Joe Trippi: "This isn't about veterans. This isn't about people who get their Social Security check. This is about redistribution." Evidently, current retirees receiving payments funded by current workers does not constitute income redistribution for Hannity. Consider Bill O'Reilly telling Krauthammer that Romney did not include Social Security (and Medicare) recipients

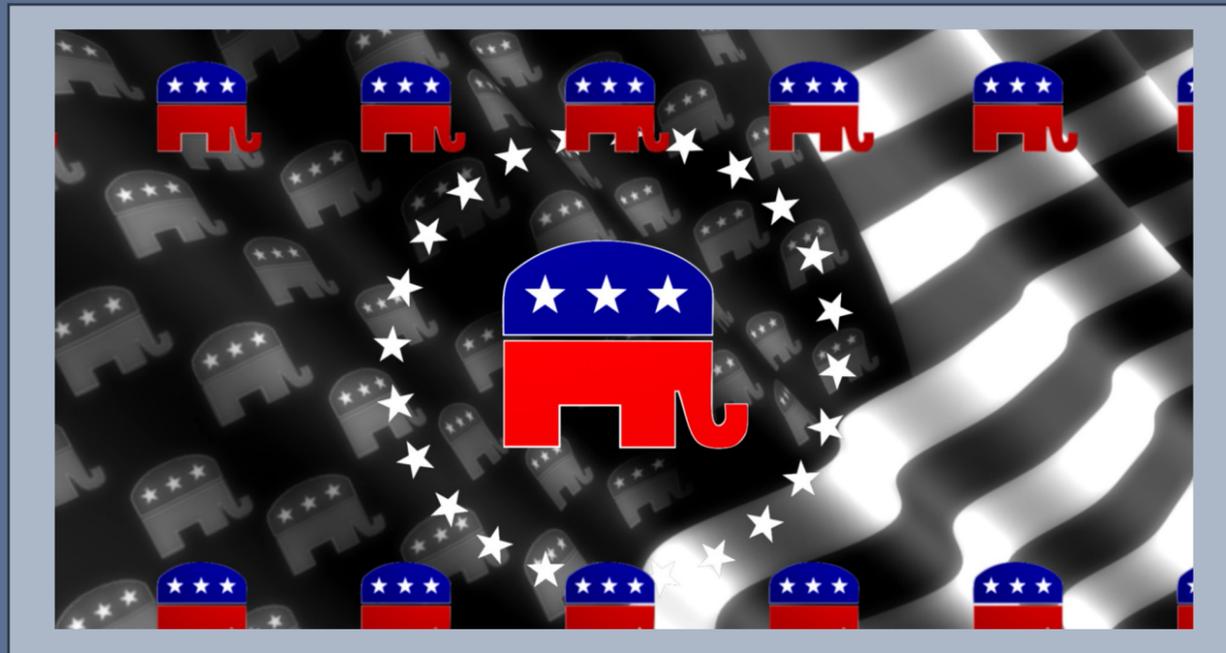
among the 47% of Americans who believe they are entitled to "healthcare, housing, food, you name it." Consider Bret Baier steering discussions away from dissension, O'Reilly interrupting and redirecting it, or Hannity and his like-minded guests yelling over it. Consider the frequent repetition of debt, unemployment, and entitlement spending statistics. Then consider Baier, O'Reilly, and Hannity allowing guests like Crowley and McCarthy to assert unsubstantiated and illogical claims without question, debate, or calls for evidence.

Consider the impact of this misleading rhetoric on viewers' knowledge and partisanship. In recent conversations with devoted Fox News viewers, I have been shocked to hear that Social Security and Medicare are not entitlements; that 47% of Americans pay "no taxes at all;" that Obama has "radical views and associations;" that Obama spent millions of taxpayer dollars to hide his academic transcripts; that Obama "has the media on his side" and thus "they will not show you who he really is;" that Obama "does not love this country, nor do the people he associates with, and therefore he is working to diminish our country;" and that "Obama is the worst thing to happen to America since 9-11." People may view Obama negatively for any number of legitimate reasons, of course. But when people hold such inaccurate beliefs, they simply cannot be characterized as well-informed. Rather, they reside within the "alternate reality" of the conservative echo chamber.

The rhetoric that produces the "Fox News effect" would not be so disconcerting if the organization were a nondescript presence on the blogosphere. But it has been the number one cable news network for ten years³⁶, and Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan have

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correlated the introduction of Fox News programming with electorate swings toward conservative candidates.³⁷ Fox News influences people's beliefs and decisions, arguably, for the worse. As Alison Benedikt quips, "Misinformed viewers become misinformed voters."³⁸



Through swaying voters, Fox News also influences our elected officials, especially Republicans. Political strategist Joe Householder claims, "Republican politicians know that if Fox hosts take a stand on something the only smart thing to do is agree with them."³⁹ Thus Republicans have reversed positions on policies they formerly praised or championed,⁴⁰ and moderates like Romney and Jon Huntsman assumed more extreme conservative positions during the primaries. Terry McDermott concurs that Fox News seems to influence the GOP more than vice-versa, as shown by Republican opposition to ideas they originally proposed.⁴¹

Consequently, Fox News has been a driving force in paralyzing the political climate. As David Frum argues,

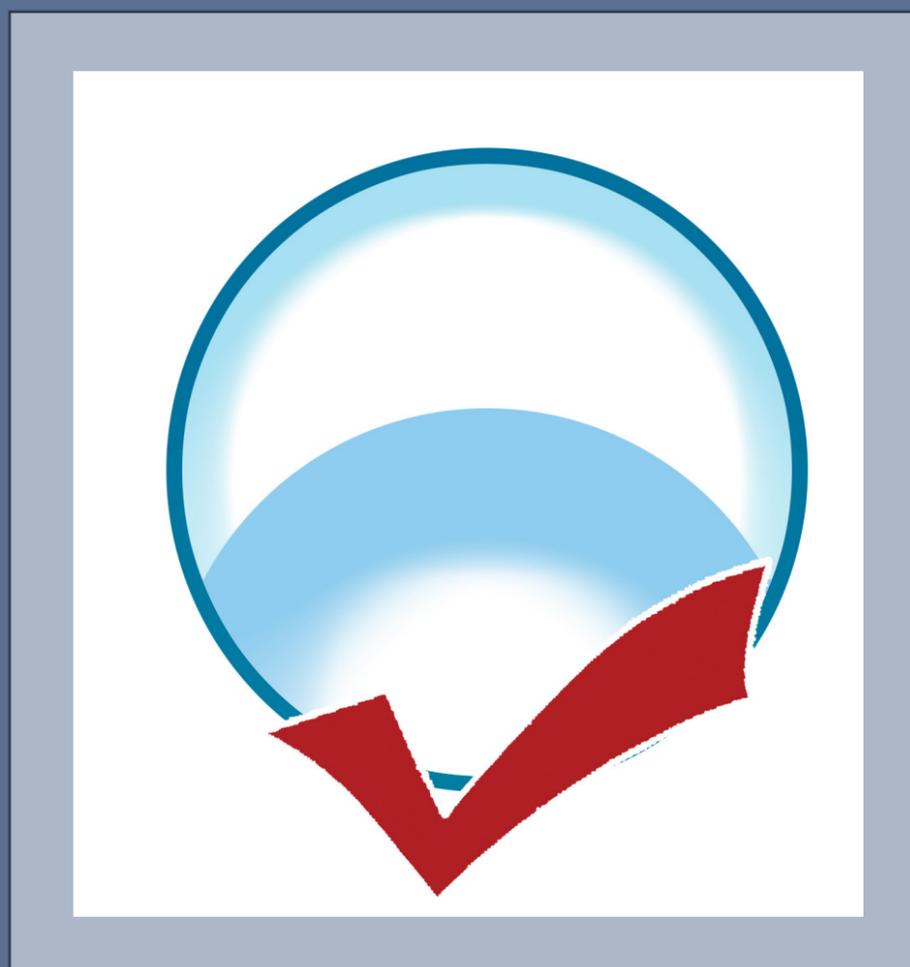
The conservative shift to ever more extreme, ever more fantasy-based ideology has ominous real-world consequences for American society. The American system of government can't work if the two sides wage all-out war upon each other. House, Senate, president, each has the power to thwart the others. ... what seems beyond argument is that the U.S. political system becomes more polarized and dysfunctional every cycle, at greater and greater human cost.

Ted Koppel put it best when he appeared on *The O'Reilly Factor*: "I think ideological coverage of the news, be it on the right or be it on the left, has created a political environment that is bad for America. It has made it nearly impossible for decent men and women in Congress to reach across the aisle and find compromise."

Conclusion

Later in his interview with Koppel, O'Reilly offers him the last word. Koppel says that relatively few people watch Fox News throughout the workday, but "millions of people are watching you [and your] particular point-of-view." Unable to truly cede the last word, O'Reilly replies, "That's the free marketplace." With that statement, Bill O'Reilly of all people gives me some hope for positive change in Fox News and the media in general.

As Americans begin to recognize the rhetoric of partisan news for what it is, I hope they will become more critical media consumers and thus will stop viewing Fox News, MSNBC, or any other “ideological coverage of the news.” Perhaps then the ideological media will drop the polarizing rhetoric, allow more points-of-view and more sustained dialogue, and demand supporting context, evidence, and elaboration from its commentators. I doubt any news network will change its rhetoric as long as its ratings remain strong. But if viewers change the channel, eventually, they might change the channel.



End Notes

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- ⁸ Joe Klein. "The Imaginary Campaign." *Time Magazine*, Oct. 1, 2012. <http://www.time.com/>.
- ⁹ Allison Benedikt. "Republicans: Don't Trust Fox News!" *Slate*, Nov. 7, 2012. <http://www.slate.com/>. ¹⁰ John A. Nejedly, "Statement," House Committee on Ways and Means, *Temporary Unemployment Compensation and Aid to Dependent Children of Unemployed Parents*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 279.
- ¹¹ Erik Wemple. "Ricks: Fox Doesn't Care about Story behind Benghazi Story." *The Washington Post*, Nov. 27, 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>.
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- ¹⁸ George Cheney, "The Rhetoric of Identification and The Study of Organizational Communication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983): 143-158.
- ¹⁹ Andrew King and Floyd Anderson, "Nixon, Agnew and the 'Silent Majority': A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Polarization," *Western Speech*, 35 (1971): 243-255.
- ²⁰ Richard Raum and James Measell. "Wallace and His Ways: A Study in the Rhetoric of Polarization," *Central States Speech Journal*, 25 (1974): 28-35
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- ²² Michael Scherer. "Blue Truths, Red Truths." *Time Magazine*, October 15, 2012, 26-30.
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- ²⁴ Seth Ackerman. "The Most Biased Name in News: Fox News Channel's Extraordinary Right-Wing Tilt." *Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting*, July 1, 2001. <http://fair.org/>.
- ²⁵ Steve Rendall. "Fox's Slanted Sources: Conservatives, Republicans Far Outnumber Others." *Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting*, July 1, 2001. <http://fair.org/>.
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Verbal Behavior, 16 (1977): 107-112. The authors exposed their subjects to true and false statements on three occasions. After the third, the subjects were more likely to rate the false statements as true.

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⁴⁰ David Frum.

⁴¹ Terry McDermott.