

Statement of

Reece Peck

Associate Professor of Communication

College of Staten Island, CUNY

to the

United States House of Representatives Select

Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol

“Assessing Fox News’s connection to the January 6th Capitol riot”

Submitted on April 5, 2022

In this testimony, I do not purport to offer some sort of forensic, smoking gun-type of analysis that directly links Fox News to the January 6, 2021, Capitol riot. In the first place, mass media does not affect political behavior in a one-to-one, cause-and-effect manner. Moreover, reporting from the *Washington Post*¹ and Media Matters² has already documented the various instances of Fox News pundits repeating Trump’s erroneous claim that the 2020 election was rigged. Of course, it was this claim that was the main reason for the “Stop the Steal” march that devolved into a full-blown siege of the Capitol building.

However, as a scholar who has spent over a decade studying Fox News’s institutional history and programming content, what I can provide is a historical analysis that explains how the populist-partisan style Fox introduced in 1996 fundamentally changed the way news is marketed and presented in the United States. The conservative network’s breakout commercial success demonstrated its domino effect since it encouraged other news outlets, namely MSNBC, to also take up a partisan news approach — this one aimed at liberal Democrats — which would lead to a programming model that favors a politically charged, opinion-based news format over the dispassionate, “straight” newscast of the past. These chain reactions polarized the national news market along ideological lines and politicized public information in the process, setting conditions, at the macro level, for something like January 6 to occur.

Yet, it would be simplistic to lay all the blame for our divisive political climate at Fox News’s feet. After all, the resurgence of partisan identification in America was already underway as far back as the Nixon era, and would particularly intensify in the early-to-mid 1990s, *just before* Fox’s 1996 launch. This calendar tracking lends support to a “weak media effects” perspective on Fox News, meaning that advocates of this perspective will argue that Fox did not create today’s partisan media culture: it merely exploited existing political divisions for its own commercial purposes.

However, there is also a significant body of research that challenges this notion by showing the various ways in which Fox News has indeed *driven*, and not simply mirrored, political trends. Economists Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan’s groundbreaking 2005 study entitled “The Fox News Effect” demonstrated how the appearance of Fox programming in a select group of cable television markets had altered the voting patterns in those geographic areas in favor of Republicans. The insight sparked a whole branch of effects research that would measure Fox’s impact on a range of things from voting behavior,³ audience attitudes,⁴ public knowledge,⁵ and congressional legislation.⁶ While this chicken-or-the-egg debate remains unsettled, I, like many other communication scholars, see the relationship between partisan media and partisan audiences as being dynamic and reciprocal. Journalism scholar C.W. Anderson nicely captures the circular relationship between the two, writing that “partisan media feed polarization in the electorate, which increases demand for partisan media and so on...”⁷

In this testimony, I want to offer a nuanced, academic view of how Fox shapes American news and politics in these four sections:

- 1. Fox News’s influence and political role**
- 2. The 1996 ‘Fair and Balanced’ campaign and its afterlife**
- 3. How cable TV economics fueled polarization**
- 4. The limits of fact-checking and tech-centered solutions**

Portions of this testimony draw from my previous writing and scholarship.⁸ Regarding my professional background, I was trained as an interdisciplinary Communication scholar at UC San Diego, where I earned my Ph.D. in 2012. I am currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Media Culture at the College of Staten Island at the City University of New York. My research expertise lies in populist rhetorical styles, partisan media branding and the history of the postwar conservative movement.

Executive Summary

The **First Section** establishes Fox News's unmatched reach of influence as the central node of the conservative media ecosystem and then explains the activist role Fox has played in key moments of our recent political history. This section particularly highlights the network's promotion of the national Tea Party protest event on April 15, 2009. Many journalists criticized Fox's open advocacy of this anti-government stimulus, anti-Obamacare movement because this supportive posture had broken with traditional journalism's impartiality standard. But setting aside how one may feel about advocacy forms of journalism, the Fox News/Tea Party mobilization was nevertheless a fully *legitimate* form of civic action from a strictly democratic perspective. Distinguishing the Tea Party from the "Stop the Steal" march of January 6 can thus be a useful way to mark the tipping point when partisan media activism goes too far and becomes dangerous and anti-democratic.

The **Second Section** traces the origins of today's hyper-partisan media culture back to the 1990s and 2000s. Long before Silicon Valley was devising algorithmic schemes to increase "user engagement," the cable television industry was incentivizing media companies to create emotionally compelling content that encouraged "intense" viewing and "loyal" fandom. What made Fox News's populist-conservative brand so forceful was its ability—perspicacious or not—to anticipate how cable technology had changed the economic calculus of the television industry, something CNN and MSNBC were slow to grasp.

The **Third Section** chronicles Fox's 1996 "Fair and Balanced" campaign and explains how the introduction of the network's populist-journalistic style altered the "rules of truth"⁹ and public knowledge standards. Here, I acknowledge some positive aspects of Fox's broadcasting model, but I also point to cases when it has had grave consequences as with the network's early Covid-19 coverage and with its propagation of Trump's "Big Lie" about the 2020 election results.

The **Conclusion** explains why I think many of the most popular reform proposals to combat partisan media polarization are likely to be ineffective and instead provide a few alternative policy ideas.

Fox News's influence and political role

Since surpassing CNN as the ratings leader in 2002, Fox News has continuously dominated the cable news arena. In the course of this twenty-year winning spree, the conservative network has not only beaten its more liberal competitors CNN and MSNBC but has consistently garnered higher ratings than both these networks *combined*. Today, Fox earns a jaw-dropping two and half billion dollars annually,¹⁰ making it the most profitable asset of Rupert Murdoch's global media empire. And these commercial milestones say nothing of the network's broader political and cultural impact. As sociologist Arlie Hochschild has written, "next to industry, state government, church, and the regular media," Fox News stands, "as an extra pillar of political culture all its own."¹¹

Yet even considering all of this, some critics still downplay Fox News's significance. They point out that the cable news audience makes up only a small slice of the national television audience (roughly 3.4 million nightly for Fox) and an even smaller slice of the voting population.¹² But attempts to correlate Fox's audience size to its political effects miss one critical thing. They assume Fox's influence ends at the borders of its audience's living room. Cable news outlets capture an "outsized portion" of the national "mindshare" because journalists, as a group, are avid news consumers who are highly "self-reflective" (McDermott, 2010: 8).¹³ Journalists heavily influence other journalists, and what they say in particularly dominant national news outlets sways the editorial decisions of smaller, local news organizations — a process scholars have called "inter-media agenda setting." Several content studies on Fox News support

this idea showing how, on different occasions, the network, on its own, could drive the agenda of the national press. By the late-1990s, Fox News would begin to demonstrate both its inclination and, more importantly, its ability to help conservatives gain conceptual control over key national issues such as the Lewinsky-Clinton scandal, Clinton's impeachment, the 2000 presidential election, and the 2003 Iraq invasion.¹⁴

Fox News's political role was especially apparent during the Great Recession years of 2009 and 2010. In this period, Fox would experience one of the highest ratings surges in its twenty-five-year history and would galvanize a street protest movement in the Tea Party. In anticipation of the first nationally coordinated Tea Party protest on Tax Day, April 15, 2009, Fox went into full advocacy mode, going from merely reporting Tea Party events to actively promoting them. The network even sent several of its popular hosts such as Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, and Neil Cavuto to broadcast their programs live at various protest locations across the country. "This is the moment," Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson write in one of the most definitive books on the Tea Party, "that many people we interviewed got involved [in the movement] for the first time."¹⁵ On this day, Fox News fans morphed into activists and activists became marketing vehicles for Fox News. This stood as one of the fullest expressions of a decades long trend toward an increasingly partisan news industry, the perfect marriage between a media corporation's branding strategy and a political movement's media strategy.

While the Fox News/Tea Party partnership went against the neutrality principle of professional journalism, this media-political alliance fit squarely within the bounds of representative democracy. The Tea Party, with Fox's publicity assistance, mobilized millions of ordinary citizens to join their anti-tax, small government cause. I personally met and interviewed dozens of these protestors as part of my doctoral research. I witnessed firsthand how Tea Party activists organized meetings, set up email lists and websites, and recruited their own candidates, a significant number of whom ousted incumbent Republican politicians. In so doing, the Tea Party movement pushed the Republican Party to be more aligned with their conservative social and economic values. This is how our political system is supposed to work.

Moreover, the entwinement of media brands and political movements is by no means a phenomenon that is unique to Fox News and the conservative media sector. In 2011, MSNBC host Ed Schultz broadcasted live shows at Occupy Wall Street and Wisconsin Labor rights protest events. More recently, the popular progressive YouTube channel, the Young Turks (TYT), helped found the Justice Democrats in 2017, the organization that recruited Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other "Squad" members. Looking beyond the US context, we find that in almost every major Western democracy media corporations are usurping the traditional duties of political parties, a process scholars call "mediatization."

The redeeming quality of advocacy styles of journalism is that they tend to be more effective at getting entertainment-seeking Americans to care about politics in the first place and can even inspire citizens to get involved in local politics. But these democratic benefits are contingent on whether *all* political media players, across the ideological spectrum, accept and abide by a common set of rules for democratic action. It is one thing for a news organization to pick a side and insert itself in the political process. It is quite another to undercut the foundation of the democratic system itself by casting doubt on the integrity of elections. This is something Fox News pundits, along with numerous high-profile Republican congressmen and women, did frequently in the months leading up to Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally. January 6 should forever stand as a redline example that illustrates how spreading falsehoods just to appease political leaders and their devoted fans can create a pretext for authoritarian power plays and political violence.

How cable TV economics fueled polarization

How did our news environment become so polarized? Penn State political scientists Kevin Munger and Joseph Phillips offer a technological explanation, but it's one that does not involve the internet. They write, "The rollout of cable television and the development of partisan television media was the most politically important development in communication technology in the second half of the 20th century. The primary reason is that there were *more channels* and thus *more partisan news* consumed in the aggregate." These scholars assert that any serious analysis of political content on social media should take cable news as its historical starting point.¹⁶ In line with this prescription, this section recounts the story of how Fox News was able to topple CNN and outcompete MSNBC and illuminates why its populist-conservative branding strategy was perfectly suited for the hyper-competitive, niche-driven landscape of post-network television.

In the 1970s, Americans had access to only five or six television channels. By 1981, the early spread of cable television had catapulted the number of available channels to thirty-four. The number was nearly doubled by 1987 and, with the advent of digital cable in the early-1990s, channel options expanded into the hundreds. As evident by channels like the Food Network, MTV, the History Channel and ESPN, cable television's subscription model allowed for specialized content and encouraged *narrowcasting* over *broadcasting*. The revolutionary growth of channel options in these decades created a "high-choice" media environment, which fundamentally altered the economic incentives of the television industry.¹⁷ Suddenly television producers were no longer beholden to the financial imperative to reach a universal audience. As cable, satellite, and, later, internet, platforms began to fracture the national audience into smaller market segments, sheer audience size was no longer the only economic measuring stick to consider. New audience characteristics pertaining to social differences and viewing behavior were becoming ever more important to television economics.

In this new scattered media sphere, *passionate* audiences with distinct cultural identities were especially prized as they offered something that was now, in a multichannel world, in scarce supply: a dependable target. The new financial structure of cable television enabled media companies to be profitable without having to attract large audiences with generic, centrist content. This was a pivotal turn because it made the idea of an opinionated, partisan television network a commercial practicality for the first time.

From a business perspective, partisanship was the perfect solution to the unprecedented marketing crisis that the television industry was just beginning to grapple with in the 1990s and 2000s. Unlike the reliable audience of the network era, the post-network audience was splintered and evasive. How would media companies and advertisers confidently target and maintain viewers who enjoy so much variety—viewers who can, with a flip of the remote, "zap" to the next channel if a program does not immediately catch their interests? The answer was to devise media brands that could forge "intensive relationships with their viewers, connections that will encourage routine and repeated viewing" (Jones, 2012: 180).¹⁸

Few things in American public life are more emotionally charged than partisan politics and the 1990s was a particularly opportune moment to exploit this source of emotion for branding purposes. This was evident not only because new communication technologies were making niche partisan news markets a technical possibility, but also because the 1990s was a decade of partisan revival in America.¹⁹ Political polarization spiked among the general voting public at this time and reached unprecedented levels among congressional elites, activists, and interest groups as well. This polarization was found on both sides of the aisle, but with the historic 1994 midterm congressional victories ("the Republican Revolution"), conservatives in this era were becoming successful at pushing the political system and culture further to the right. The combination of intensified partisanship in the political sphere with the increased

competitiveness in the television industry made efforts to create a television niche based on political conservatism an obvious move.

While the appearance of cable news stretches back to 1980 with the launch of Ted Turner's CNN, cable adoption rates did not reach a majority threshold in America until the mid-1990s, precisely the moment when Fox News and MSNBC entered the scene. Fox executives Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes recognized how television networks were transitioning from "content companies to audience companies"²⁰ or, as media scholar Michael Curtin described it, Fox went "beyond the utility branding of a news network...into a new phase of TV branding based on identity."²¹ This stands in contrast to CNN and MSNBC's promotional strategies. Though CNN had been vaunting the unmatched international scope of its reporting and its ability to be the first on the scene, and MSNBC had been promising to bring cutting edge technology and big-name network anchors to cable news, neither of these networks was actually offering a coherent and compelling identity for its audience to rally around and emotionally invest in.

In the new post-network era, advertisers valued "loyalty" and viewer "intensity" above all else, something Fox's conservative political brand and confrontational style was designed to elicit. In his biography of Fox's founding CEO, Gabriel Sherman noted that, "the passion of Roger Ailes' audience was something that had never before existed in TV news, a consequence of Fox's hybrid of politics and entertainment. Fox News did not have viewers. It had fans." Sherman writes later, "Some viewers kept [Fox] on for so long that the static Fox News logo displayed on the lower left corner of their TVs burned the pixels."²² This striking anecdote was borne out by the numbers. According to one ratings report, the average Fox News viewer watched 30% longer than CNN's audience,²³ hence, entitling Fox to charge higher ad rates than CNN. From 1998 to 2001, Fox grew its ratings in the 25–54 demographic by an astounding 430%.²⁴ The following year, Fox would overtake CNN as the cable news king and never look back.

But Fox News's rise to cable news dominance is not just a story about technological transformations and shifting market dynamics. It was also enabled by deregulatory communication policies that were enacted by the Reagan and Clinton administrations who repealed federal mandates for media to "serve the public interest," and to air both political sides (e.g., the Fairness Doctrine). Such policies had meant to force news owners to consider the broader societal consequences of the news they produce and distribute. Lifting anti-monopoly, cross-media ownership restrictions led, quite predictably, to the historic "mega-mergers" of the 1990s. In a relatively short period of time, the concentration of media ownership in America (and the world) went from being spread across hundreds of companies to being controlled by six massive, multinational conglomerates: Viacom, Disney, Sony, Bertelsmann, Time Warner and Murdoch's News Corporation. In this new, purely ratings-driven, corporate culture, TV news started to be treated like any other entertainment product.

The Reagan-Clinton regulatory regime was appealing to Murdoch and Ailes for both economic and ideological reasons as it matched their own conservative free market philosophy of news. "News is what people are interested in," Ailes would tell the *New York Times* in 2001, reflecting a libertine perspective Murdoch has long espoused as well.²⁵ And this market-minded sensibility can have its upsides, as some liberals are hesitant to admit. It is what attuned Ailes and Murdoch to see how the middlebrow tone of mainstream news had long been out of step with the tastes of ordinary Americans. With Fox they devised a programming style that would be edgier and more opinionated, recruiting anchors like Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity who seemed more authentic and less robotic. In addition, the style led them to innovate presentational features such as the stock ticker at the bottom of the screen, the breaking news "alerts," playing music and voiceovers in the segment breaks, and using vibrantly colored set designs and backgrounds — all things CNN and MSNBC originally mocked as tabloid and then proceeded to copy.

Still, while I acknowledge and appreciate the democratic benefits of making news more interesting and entertaining, I nevertheless believe that media should NOT be treated as just another commodity, the way Reagan's FCC Chairman Mark Fowler famously proposed when he called television "a toaster with

pictures.” This is because media plays a unique role in the American democratic system; it is why the Founders gave the media industrial sector special protections under the US Constitution (i.e., the First Amendment). If Fox Corporation was just selling sneakers or iPhones, its market influence would not be an issue. But with four in ten Americans saying they trust Fox as a *news source* (Pew, 2020),²⁶ it is appropriate to scrutinize Fox’s civic impact, especially considering how much this private company intervenes in US political life and informs the public’s view of elections and their outcomes.

The 1996 ‘Fair and Balanced’ campaign and its afterlife

Fox News’s famous slogan ‘Fair & Balanced’ had already been previewed in the weeks leading up to the network’s launch on October 7, 1996. CEO Roger Ailes had told *USA Today*, “America needs one fair and balanced news channel and we’re going to provide it. The American people believe television is biased to the left...and that it’s boring.”²⁷ In this interview, Ailes foreshadows themes that would define the Fox News brand for decades to come: *the mainstream media is liberal and elitist*, and *Fox News represents “the people.”*

Certainly, by the mid-1990s, the technological and economic pieces had been in place for a conservative-leaning Fox News to emerge. Yet the question still remained whether it could ever attain enough journalistic legitimacy to avoid being written off as a political operation. Indeed, as soon as Fox aired its first broadcast, the *New York Times* had already posed the question prevailing among US journalists: “Will [Fox News] be a vehicle for expressing Mr. Murdoch’s conservative political opinions?”²⁸ Confirming these suspicions would be News Corp. owner Rupert Murdoch himself, who had appointed go-to Republican communications specialist Roger Ailes as Fox’s CEO. First making his name as the media prodigy of Richard Nixon’s 1968 presidential campaign, Ailes had gone on to advise the campaigns of Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. Bush in the 1980s.

Unsurprisingly, Ailes held a deeply political view of journalism, a perspective that attuned him to the contradictions of self-styled professional news outlets. While the dispassionate, “neutral” approach of network news programs during the 1940s through the 1980s had purported to offer a non-ideological account of the world, Ailes was able to masterfully highlight the subjective demarcation between “the balanced center” and “the ideological fringe.” “I don’t understand why being balanced is “right of center,” he told the *Washington Post* in 1999, “unless, the other guys are pretty far left.”²⁹ Ailes was also quick to lob back at any journalist accusing Fox of having a right-leaning slant, always baiting Fox’s competitors into a never-ending contest of bias finger-pointing. The effect would ultimately drain not only the meaning of bias but of objectivity itself.

But while Ailes was a talented communicator, we should not attribute too much to his genius. This “great man” approach to Fox’s history obscures the significant degree to which Fox’s business strategy took advantage of the long-held political narratives of the post-war conservative movement. Conservative politicians and activists had been waging critiques against “liberal media bias” since the 1950s and 1960s. Along with financially profiting from the conservative movement’s decades long crusade against “liberal bias,” Fox News has also elevated this conservative tradition of media criticism to new heights.

Yet in contrast to the failed attempts at creating conservative TV before Fox News (e.g., National Empowerment Television), Fox offered more than just ideologically congenial programming. It introduced a *populist style* of journalism that could break from the highbrow polish of “first generation” conservative stars like William F. Buckley,³⁰ and instead draw talent from lower prestige media genres such as tabloid television and talk radio. In developing such “anti-anchor” personas in hosts Bill O’Reilly, Shep Smith and Sean Hannity,³¹ Ailes enabled these hosts to gain the audience’s trust by exuding a blue-collar sensibility, a sensibility that matched and spoke to the non-college-educated viewers, which happen to be the demographic majority of the US television audience.

While the decline in public trust for journalists and “official sources” had been underway decades before Fox News,³² Fox was one of the first major outlets to craft messaging strategies tailor-made for the “post-truth” media climate that was fermenting in the 1990s, one where the status of expert authority was weakening³³ and where entertainment-driven news formats were on the rise. The “Republican Revolution” of the 1994 midterms further defined the political polarization of the 1990s. In this hyper-politicized media climate, “facts” were increasingly being evaluated not by the methodological rigor that went in to producing them but rather by the partisan orientation (assumed or actual) of the journalists citing them.

In a media culture deemed minimally objective and maximally political, the traditional anchor’s self-presentation of being uninvolved (i.e., “letting the facts speak for themselves”) comes across as insincere and, at worst, purposely deceptive. In such a context, the neutrality of the detached news professional is less effective than the overtly moralistic, emotional performance of the Fox anchor who *fights* against “the powerful” to “protect the folks,” and other innocent groups like “kids and the elderly.”³⁴ In line with Fox News’s populist view of journalism, the networks top opinion hosts strive to demonstrate how their news analyses are indeed biased — precisely because they are biased toward serving the interests of “the folks” and “the forgotten Americans.”

“There seems to be in the country...a media war,” Bill O’Reilly once told his viewers on September 18, 2009, “a war between Fox News and talk radio on one side, *The New York Times* and the liberal networks on the other side.” In this war narrative, the “Washington journalistic establishment”³⁵ and “the liberal left-wing elite”³⁶ stood on one side, while Fox News and the “hardworking people” of “middle America”³⁷ stood on the other. This black and white depiction of the US news field as consisting of two warring media systems — one for the elite and one for the people — remains intact today, as evidenced by Fox host Tucker Carlson’s more recent monologues denouncing “the ruling class” who look down on “the rest of us plebes.”³⁸

This is not to say that Fox’s populist-partisan approach to news and politics has no praiseworthy qualities. Consumers of conservative media comprise some of the most politically active segments of the US citizenry.³⁹ Communication scholars attribute this, in part, to how the impassioned style of Fox anchors gives the audience a greater sense of urgency and a sense that they have the power to affect public policy. The Fox News audience’s belief in its political agency was on display during the Tea Party protests of 2009, a belief that was largely confirmed by the historic amount of congressional seats Republicans captured in the 2010 midterms. This feeling of empowerment was also enlivened with Trump’s unlikely 2016 presidential victory over the establishment favorite Hillary Clinton. By contrast, the wonkier, middlebrow style of liberal outlets has repeatedly led to morally incoherent messaging, which, in turn, has bred political apathy among Democratic viewers.

With all this said, though, partisan-populist styles of journalism can have disastrous consequences when taken to their extreme. Through the pivotal month of February 2020 and well into March, the Trump administration and Fox News downplayed the severity of the Covid-19 virus, repeatedly suggesting it was no more dangerous than the “standard flu.” On a February 27, 2020 episode of *Hannity*, host Sean Hannity said sarcastically, “I can report the sky is...falling ...We’re all doomed...and it’s all President Trump’s fault...Or at least that’s what the *media mob* [my emphasis] would like you to think.”⁴⁰ From March 1 of 2020 to March 31, Covid-19 cases jumped from less than a hundred to hundreds of thousands. It took the disease only a few months to completely turn American society upside down as government’s stay-at-home directives brought the US economy to a halt, destroying millions of jobs and shuttering thousands of small businesses. As I write this in April of 2022, the Covid-19 death toll in America is approaching the one million mark, an unthinkable grim milestone. Suffice it is to say, Covid-19 was not your “standard flu.”

From the beginning, the editorial agenda of Fox’s primetime opinion shows have been devoted as much to how *other* outlets cover the news as to the news itself. Fox’s opinion hosts have long depicted journalists as a “villainous,”⁴¹ “mob”-like social group, using rhetoric that dovetails with Trump’s repeated casting of the press as “the enemy of the American people.” And like Trump, Fox hosts endow news interpretations with the capability to determine the nation’s destiny, a media power so menacing that Fox hosts deemed countering the negative press Trump was receiving for his handling of the Covid crisis more important than the physical threat of the outbreak itself.

The same populist-partisan logic was at play when Fox News hosts parroted Trump’s claim that the 2020 election was stolen. If Fox’s coverage of Covid-19 prioritized short-sighted partisan loyalties over broader public health concerns, the network’s coverage of the November 2020 election results placed fealty to Trump and Trump supporters over the nation’s civic-democratic health. I fear a horrible precedent has been set, whereby every election result going forward will be called into question, leading all Americans—left, right and center—down a spiral of cynicism that strikes at the heart of our democratic culture. This sets the table for something else to fill the vacuum and, if history is any judge, that something else is usually authoritarian in nature. There must be a basic journalistic commitment to what philosopher Hannah Arendt called “factual truth,” otherwise winning and achieving power is all that counts.

The limits of fact-checking and tech-centered solutions

In January of 2019, YouTube redesigned its algorithm to promote “authoritative news” sources over amateur ones. This was in response to a host of academic studies and news articles criticizing the platform for being a breeding ground of hate speech and conspiracy theories. While this YouTube update diminished some of the most extreme far-right content on the platform, it unwittingly jumped conservative America’s main news source, Fox News, to the top of YouTube’s recommendation rankings. After this, views of Fox News videos on YouTube more than doubled. In the summer of 2020, Fox became the most viewed US news channel on the world’s most popular video sharing website.⁴² Such an outcome questions the efficacy of technocratic policy prescriptions that disinformation experts tend to promote.

That many of today’s media analysts gravitate so heavily toward the role that algorithms play may be because such a line of causation suggests a relatively easy fix. If technology created the problem of political extremism, then technical remedies should be able to undo it. But this kind of wishful thinking fails to reckon with the true depth of the problem. The myopic obsession with the computational wizardry of big tech companies have blinded analysts from seeing how the political content that currently performs the best online tends to use a populist-partisan style of commentary that was first innovated by Fox News. Policymakers and media reformers must abandon this fanciful idea that they can avoid or transcend “culture war” political dynamics with technical solutions. The sociocultural lines of partisan affiliation run deeper than any current media trend or technology and will ultimately manifest themselves in our national media ecosystem, regardless of what technological-regulatory configuration it assumes.

The hard truth is the only real way to counter Fox’s influence—be it from the left, center or the right—is to build a news network that matches Fox’s popular appeal and cultural relevance. And to do that, one must adopt a more cleared eyed assessment of why Fox has been successful in the first place. By only focusing on how Fox deceives its audience with “bad science” and misinformation, the analysts is distracted from seeing how the network has actually achieved its wide cultural authority. In many ways, Fox’s success is rooted less in its conservative ideology and more in its populist presentational style. Setting aside my criticism of how Fox has wielded populism, I respect the enormous energy the network

invests in trying to claim the voice of the American working-class as its own, a voice — I would stress, Fox’s liberal competitors have been mostly uninterested in trying to assume themselves.

Instead of looking for ways to censor Fox News and other partisan media outlets, Congress’s energy may be better spent trying to acquire funding to incubate and foster entirely new styles of nonprofit media, ones that are consciously designed to have greater appeal with younger Americans and with non-college-educated citizens. Moreover, nonprofit news organizations do not have to automatically exude a liberal sensibility à la NPR and PBS. According to the veteran conservative activist Richard Viguerie, it was the nonprofit channel C-Span that played a crucial role in spearheading the conservative media revolution of the last three decades.⁴³ Creating an expansive nonprofit media sector, like the ones we see in other major Western democracies, could temper the narrowcasting excesses of the commercial media sector and help *re-normalize* professional news practices and values across the entire US media ecosystem.⁴⁴

But for public/nonprofit news outlets to cover new cultural ground, they cannot maintain the same morally agnostic, info-centric approach of NPR, PBS and C-Span. Recent research has shown how the public’s trust for a given news outlet often has more to do with the style and brand identity of the outlet rather than to its editorial practices and informational soundness.⁴⁵ This helps explain why mainstream centrist outlets that diligently vet the information they report and that bend over backwards to display their neutrality are still perceived as “biased” and, conversely, why openly partisan outlets that have reported false claims and disinformation seldom pay a reputational price for doing so.

A glimmer of hope might be found in a body of research that demonstrates how moral appeals and rationales can be effective at speaking to audiences across the partisan divide.⁴⁶ More consideration should be given to the persuasive power of moral news-framing and to the emotional pull of aesthetic style. Otherwise, we risk getting trapped in an endless loop whereby media partisans defend their erroneous news coverage by simply counter-charging that it is their critics, not them, who live in a world where politics trumps truth.

-
- ¹ Wemple, E. (2021, January 19). Never forget Fox News's promotion of the big lie. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/01/19/never-forget-fox-newss-promotion-big-lie/>
- ² Simon, C., & Taaffe, G. (2021, November 2). Right-wing media have spent a year trying to discredit the 2020 presidential election in promotion of the Big Lie. *Media Matters for America*. Retrieved from: <https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/right-wing-media-have-spent-year-trying-discredit-2020-presidential-election-promotion-big>.
- ³ DellaVigna, S., & Kaplan, E. (2005, May 10). The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting. Working paper. New York National Bureau of Economic Research; Hopkins, D., & Ladd, J. (2012). The Reinforcing Effects of Fox News. Working paper Georgetown University. Retrieved from: <http://people.iq.harvard.edu/~dhopkins/FoxPersuasion021212.pdf>; Martin G., & Yurukoglu, A. (2017). Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization. *American Economic Review*, 107(9), 2587. Retrieved from: <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/aer.20160812>.
- ⁴ Morris, J. S. (2005). The Fox News Factor. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 10(3), 56–79; Cappella, J., & Jamieson, K. (2008). *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Levendusky, M. (2013). *How Partisan Media Polarize America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Broockman, D., & Kalla, J. (2022, April 1). The manifold effects of partisan media on viewers' beliefs and attitudes: A field experiment with Fox News viewers. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/jrw26>.
- ⁵ Cassino, D. (2016). *Fox News and American Politics: How One Channel Shapes American Politics and Society*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- ⁶ Clinton, J., & Enamorado, T. (2014). The National News Media's Effect on Congress: How Fox News Affected Elites in Congress. *The Journal of Politics*, 76(04), 928–943; Bartlett, B. (2015, May 11). How Fox News Changed American Media and Political Dynamics.
- ⁷ Anderson, C.W., Downie, L., & Schudson, M. (2016). *The News Media: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 162.
- ⁸ Peck, R. (2021). “Listen to your gut’: How Fox News’s populist style changed the American public sphere and journalistic truth in the process.” In Waisbord, S., & Tumber, H. (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*. New York: Routledge; Peck, R. (2019). *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁹ Peters, C. (2010). No-Spin Zones: The rise of the American cable news magazine and Bill O'Reilly. *Journalism Studies*, 11(6), 833.
- ¹⁰ Steinberg, B. (2020, November 3). “Fox Corp. Q1 profit rises, buoyed by Disney payment and Fox News.” *Variety*. Retrieved from: <https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/fox-corporation-earnings-q1-fox-news-disney-1234822228/#>
- ¹¹ Hoshchild, A. (2016). *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press: 126.
- ¹² Arseneaux K., & Johnson, M. (2013). *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?: Partisan News in the Age of Choice*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- ¹³ McDermott, T. (2010). Dumb like a Fox. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 48(6), 8.
- ¹⁴ For the Iraq War, see Schechter, D. (2003). *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception: How the Media Failed to Cover the War on Iraq*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books; Calabrese, A. (2005). U.S. Media and the Justification of the Iraq War. *Television & New Media*, 8(9), 153–175. For the Swift Boat campaign, see Shaw, D. (2006). *The Race to 270*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Cappella & Jamieson, 2008: 143, 211–212. For the ACORN controversy, see Dreier, P., & Martin, C. R. (2010). How ACORN Was Framed: Political Controversy and Media Agenda Setting. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(3), 761–792. For the 2009 controversy over President Obama's “green jobs czar” Van Jones, see Levendusky, 2013.
- ¹⁵ Skocpol, T., & Williamson, V. (2012). *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 8.
- ¹⁶ Munger, K., & Phillips, J. (2019). A Supply and Demand Framework for YouTube Politics. OSF: 3–4. Retrieved from: <https://osf.io/73jys/?show=view>.
- ¹⁷ Prior, M. (2007). *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ¹⁸ Jones, J. (2012). Fox News and the Performance of Ideology. *Cinema Journal*. 51(4), 180.
- ¹⁹ Bartles, L. (2000). Partisanship and Voting behavior. *American Journal of Political Science*, 44, 35–50; Hetherington, M. J. (2010). Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization. In R. G. Niemi,

H. F. Weisberg, & D. C. Kimball (eds.), *Controversies in Voting Behavior*. Washington, DC: CQ Press.

²⁰ Jones, 2012: 81.

²¹ Curtin, M., & Shattuc, J. (2009). *The American Television Industry*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 157.

²² Sherman, G. (2016). *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News—and Divided a Country*, New York: Random House: 237, 291.

²³ Battaglio, S. (2003, September 16). New CNN Team Seeks a Long Run. *Daily News*.

²⁴ Sella, M. (2001, June 24). The Red-State Network. *New York Times*.

²⁵ In a 1989 interview, Murdoch said, “Anybody who, within the law of the land, provides a service which the public wants at a price it can afford is providing a public service.” See Folkenflik, D. (2013). *Murdoch’s World: The Last of the Old Media Empires*. New York: PublicAffairs: 28–29.

²⁶ Gramlich, J. (2020, April 8). Five facts about Fox News. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/08/five-facts-about-fox-news/>.

²⁷ Lieberman, D. (1996, September 23). Ailes tackles toughest assignment cable channel battles budget, clock, rivals. *USA Today*.

²⁸ Miffin, L. (1996, October 7). At the new Fox News Channel, the buzzword is fairness, separating news from bias. *New York Times*.

²⁹ Kurtz, H. (1999, March 26). Crazy like a Fox: Question his news judgment, perhaps, but never underestimate Roger Ailes. *Washington Post*.

³⁰ Hemmer, N. (2016). *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

³¹ Ricchiardi, S. (2009) The anti-anchor. *American Journalism Review*, 31(5), 14–22.

³² Gallup. (2016). Media Use and Evaluation: Historical Trends. Retrieved from: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1663/media-use-evaluation.aspx>.

³³ Beck, U., & Giddens, A. (1994). *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

³⁴ *The O’Reilly Factor*. (2008) Fox News Channel, 10 July 2008.

³⁵ *The O’Reilly Factor*. (2009) Fox News Channel, 30 October 2009.

³⁶ *The O’Reilly Factor*. (2009) Fox News Channel, 11 June 2009.

³⁷ *Hannity & Colmes*. (2001) Fox News Channel, 27 April 2001.

³⁸ Maza, C. (2019, April 3). Why Tucker Carlson pretends to hate elites. *Vox*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.vox.com/videos/2019/4/3/18294392/tucker-carlson-pretends-hate-elites-populism-false-consciousness>.

³⁹ Cappella & Jamieson, 2008; Levendusky, 2013.

⁴⁰ Wemple, E. (2020, March 30). Hannity must go. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/30/hannity-must-go/?outputType=amp>.

⁴¹ Conway et al. (2007). Villains, Victims, and the Virtuous in Bill O’Reilly’s ‘No-Spin Zone.’ *Journalism Studies*, 8(2): 197–223.

⁴² Bergen, M., & Tribbitt, M. (2020). Fox News got a big boost on YouTube from an algorithm change. *Bloomberg*, July 10. Retrieved from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-10/fox-news-youtube-channel-got-a-big-boost-from-algorithm-change>.

⁴³ In his 2004 book *America’s Right Turn*, Viguerie makes a seldom heard claim that C-Span was the start of the conservative media renaissance. As a tame, public service channel dedicated to providing “gavel-to-gavel” coverage of congressional sessions and governmental proceedings, the network was, Viguerie acknowledges, “an unlikely vehicle for political revolution” (214). But this all changed when a host of conservative Republicans in the House recognized how C-Span could be a messaging vehicle for “those with an ideological mission” (215). In the 1980s, Georgia congressman Newt Gingrich started to take advantage of the television stage that C-Span’s cameras afforded him. During evening viewing hours, Gingrich started giving “Special Orders” speeches after legislative sessions to attack Democrats and to articulate conservative policy arguments. Gingrich believed that C-Span and new communication technologies like cable were the deciding factor in tipping the congressional balance of power toward Republicans in the 1994 midterm, an election that elevated him to Speaker of the House. “Without C-SPAN, without talk radio shows, without all the alternative media,” Gingrich alleged, “I don’t think we’d have won. The classic elite media would have distorted our message.”

⁴⁴ Neff, T., & Pickard, V. (2021). Funding Democracy: Public Media and Democratic Health in 33 Countries. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 19401612211060255.

⁴⁵ Toff et al. (2021). Listening to What Trust in News Means to Users: Qualitative Evidence from Four Countries. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved from:

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/listening-what-trust-news-means-users-qualitative-evidence-four->

