‘LISTEN TO YOUR GUT’

How Fox News’s populist style changed the American public sphere and journalistic truth in the process

Reece Peck

Fox News’s famous (or infamous, depending on your politics) 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’ (Lieberman 1996). In this interview, Ailes foreshadowed 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’.

Certainty by the mid-1990s, the technological and economic pieces were in place for a conservative-leaning Fox News to emerge (Prior 2007). Yet the question still remained whether it could ever attain enough journalistic legitimacy to avoid being written off as a hack political operation. Indeed, as soon as Fox aired its first broadcast, the New York Times posed the question prevailing among US journalists: ‘Will [Fox News] be a vehicle for expressing Mr. Murdoch’s conservative political opinions?’ (Miffin 1996). 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 wunderkind of Richard Nixon’s 1968 presidential campaign, Ailes had gone on to advise the presidential campaigns of Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. Bush in the 1980s (Swint 2008).

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 programmes during the 1950s and 1960s had purported to offer a non-ideological account of the world, Ailes was able to masterfully exploit in his favour the subjective demarcation between ‘the balanced centre’ and ‘the ideological fringe’. ‘I don’t understand why being balanced is “right of center” unless, the other guys are pretty far left’ (Kurtz 1999). Ailes was also quick to lob back at any journalist accusing Fox of having a right-leaning bias, 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 that of objectivity itself.

But while Ailes was a talented communicator, we should not attribute too much to his genius. This ‘great man’ approach obscures the significant degree to which Fox’s corporate strategy took advantage of the discursive repertoire of the post-war conservative movement.
Books such as Heather Hendershot’s *What’s Fair on the Air?* (2011) and Nicole Hemmer’s *Messengers of the Right* (2016) illustrate how conservative media activists had been waging critiques against ‘liberal media bias’ since the 1950s and 1960s. After decades of conservative criticism of the mainstream press, journalism’s professional ideology and the ‘objectivity regime’ that underpinned it had gradually been chipped away.

The 1970s marked the beginning of a concerted effort by conservatives to create a ‘counter-intelligentsia’ that could take on the ‘philanthropic-government-academic-establishment’ (O’Connor 2007: 75). Such conservative think tanks as the Heritage Foundation, a research institute George Nash has described as ‘the nerve center of the Reagan Revolution’ (1998: 335), experienced unprecedented build-ups. With the popularisation of conservative talk radio in the late 1980s and the rise of Fox News in the late 1990s, such ‘nerve centers’ had become the media weaponry enabling their once-marginal narratives about liberal bias and journalistic elitism to move to the centre of American popular culture.

Having surpassed CNN as the cable ratings leader in 2002, today Fox News dominates US political television and stands as the most profitable asset of Rupert Murdoch’s global media empire. According to a recent Pew study, four in ten Americans say they trust Fox for political news (Gramlich 2020). Academic studies on the network have empirically demonstrated how Fox News has affected everything from American voting patterns (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007) to public knowledge (Cassino 2016) to congressional legislation (Clinton and Enamorado 2014), always in a way that advantages Republicans. More recently, journalistic exposés have revealed the extent to which Fox guides the thinking of President Donald Trump himself (Parker and Costa 2017).

Along with financially profiting from the conservative movement’s decades-long crusade against ‘liberal media bias’, Fox News has also elevated this conservative media criticism tradition to new hegemonic heights, further eroding the public’s faith in journalistic objectivity. Yet in contrast to the failed attempts at creating conservative TV before Fox News, Fox offered more than just ideologically congenial programming. It introduced a populist style of conservative news that could break from the middlebrow sensibility of ‘first-generation’ conservative stars like William F. Buckley (Hemmer 2016) and instead draw talent from such ‘low-prestige’ public affairs genres as tabloid television and talk radio. In developing such ‘anti-anchor’ personas (Ricchiardi 2009) in hosts Bill O’Reilly, Shep Smith, and Sean Hannity, Ailes enabled these hosts to derive authority by performatively embodying the cultural-epistemological disposition of those non-college-educated viewers who comprise the demographic majority of Fox’s audience.

While the decline in public trust for journalists and ‘official sources’ had been underway decades before Fox News (Gallup 2016; Schudson 2003: 112), Fox was one of the first major outlets to innovate interpretive news strategies tailor-made for the ‘post-modern’ media environment of the 1990s, one in which the status of expert authority was weakening (Beck and Giddens 1994), and ‘televisual style’ was on the rise (Caldwell 1995). The ‘Republican Revolution’ of the 1994 midterms further defined the political polarisation of the 1990s. In this hyper-politicised media climate, ‘facts’ were increasingly being evaluated not by the methodological rigour that went in to producing them but rather by the partisan orientation (assumed or actual) of the journalist citing them.

To bolster their interpretations of social reality, Fox’s top-rated hosts utilised non-empirical epistemic resources such as lived experience, popular memory, and moral narratives that have been recycled in American political culture for centuries. Unlike formal expertise, these populist bases of authority do not need institutional support to be effective. This chapter explains...
how Fox’s populist mode of address has changed the political logic of the US public sphere and its journalistic standards of truth.

**Fox populism versus MSNBC liberalism**

‘There seems to be in the country . . . a media war’, Bill O’Reilly once told his viewers, ‘a war between Fox News and talk radio on one side, The New York Times and the liberal networks on the other side’ (*The O’Reilly Factor*, 18 September 2009). In this narrative, the ‘Washington journalistic establishment’ (*The O’Reilly Factor*, 30 October 2009) and ‘the liberal left-wing elite’ (*The O’Reilly Factor*, 11 June 2009) stood on one side while Fox News and the ‘hardworking people’ of ‘middle America’ (*Hannity & Colmes*, 27 April 2001) stood on the other. This dichotomous construction of the US news field as consisting of two rival media systems – one for the elite and one for the people – remains intact today, as evidenced by Fox host Tucker Carlson’s recent monologues denouncing ‘the ruling class’ who condescend to ‘the rest of us plebes’ (Maza 2019).

Meanwhile, taking cues from Fox News’s commercial success, MSNBC in the mid-2000s started to counter-programme Fox as the liberal alternative. Emulating Fox’s partisan branding strategy and programming formula, MSNBC also prioritised opinion-based shows over ‘straight’ reporting. Yet even while adopting a partisan brand, MSNBC’s conceptualisation of the public sphere still upheld the basic tenets of liberal democratic theory. Their marketing and programming discourse assumed that social tensions and opposing political demands could be managed through reasoned debate and by making politics more informationally sound, receptive, and tolerant.

So while MSNBC’s recent Decision 2020 promo declares ‘There’s power in deciding for ourselves. Even if we don’t agree’ (NewsCastStudio 2020), Fox’s contrasting populist imaginary suggests that the national community will only be whole if and when the elite power bloc that corrupts its body politic is confronted and then excised. Fox News’s anti-establishment posture brings the conservative coalition together by emphasising its members’ common (perceived or real) ‘outsider’ status away from the elite ‘corridors of power’ (*The O’Reilly Factor*, 23 October 2009). The communal tie for MSNBC liberalism, on the other hand, is founded on the equal inclusion of all individuals and minoritarian voices in the national discussion.

Political theorist Ernesto Laclau put forth a set of theoretical tools for distinguishing MSNBC’s liberal-democratic reasoning from Fox’s populist vision, a conceptual divide he describes as one between ‘differential logic’ and ‘equivalential logic’ (2005). MSNBC’s ‘differential logic’ is clear in the aforementioned Decision 2020 ad. The promo begins with an American flag graphic, with the narrator saying, ‘We all want different things. We all dream different dreams’. At this point, the flag’s stripes shoot off in different directions, symbolising the idea that democracy involves a multiplicity of interest groups and demands. ‘But’, the voice-over reassures, this political diversity is what defines America: ‘that’s what makes us us’. Democracy ‘isn’t really about finding common ground’, the ad insists. ‘It is about finding our footing on uncommon ground’ (emphasis added).

The progressive community is thus brought together through their common commitment to the right of all citizens to pursue their separate group interests and to express their distinct individual beliefs. MSNBC values the ‘politics of difference’ above all else, which aligns with the Democratic Party’s signature embrace of multiculturalism. Yet not only does MSNBC avoid building a singular political identity for its audience to rally around; it actually rejects the effort to do so as a positive expression of its liberalism.
In contrast, Fox’s populist representational strategy is designed to find and perhaps even manufacture ‘common ground’. The populist terms Fox uses to address its audience, such as *the folks* and *middle America*, thread and ‘articulate’ the various political issues of the conservative movement – gun rights, pro-life, deregulation – on what Laclau terms a ‘chain of equivalence’ (2005). And this is why such populist signifiers are politically useful. In having an ‘equivential logic’, Fox can symbolically condense the myriad of factions and interest groups that comprise any given political movement into one unitary bloc.

Still, populist signifiers have no meaning by themselves; their coalescing function only works within an ‘us-versus-them’ framework. This conflict model is apparent in an *O’Reilly Factor* episode about the conservative Tea Party movement. ‘The American media will never embrace the Tea Party. Why? [T]hey look down on the folks. They think you are dumb’ (8 February 2010).

While part of Fox’s strategy is to bombard the audience on a nightly basis with a consistent set of associations between different conservative factions (e.g. libertarian men, religious women, blue-collar workers, wealthy business owners), the central way Fox’s programming fuses these constituencies together is by positioning them against a common enemy. Conservatives are one because they are all looked down on by the liberal elite (i.e. ‘they think you are dumb’).

It is fair to question if, and to what extent, conservatives actually face the kind of marginalisation they claim they do. Indisputable, however, is how this resentment about liberal intellectual condescension has been effectively used to mobilise conservative activists and compel conservative audiences. Working in tandem with a white ‘producerist’ antagonism against the non-white, ‘parasitic’ factions below (Peck 2019: Chapter 4), this opposition to the educated elites above is one of the master programming themes of Fox News and of the conservative talk industry writ large. Consequently, this discourse warrants scholarly interrogation and, as A.J. Bauer has stressed, needs to be understood on its own conservative terms (2018: 25).

**Cultural populism and the morally ‘invested’ news style**

Like almost all populist speakers, Fox News pundits often deny the fact that they – as wealthy TV personalities – occupy a whole other social stratum than that of their average viewer: ‘I’m a regular schlub’ (*Glenn Beck*, 20 January 2009). In turn, these personalities frequently assume the ‘people’s voice’ during on-air political debates: (‘I think I speak for most Americans’, *Hannity & Colmes*, 11 December 2008). In my book *Fox Populism* (2019), I illustrate how Fox programmes have appropriated the discourse of cultural populism, a sub-strain of the broader populist rhetorical tradition. I define cultural populism as a political discourse that ‘champions the common wisdom, taste, and intellectual capacities of everyday people, and denounces justifications for power based on credentials and elite cultural knowledge’ (127). Whereas the left understands class as mostly an economic position, Fox pundits use cultural populism to advance ‘an informal theory of class as a cultural identity’ (126).

Fox’s cultural populist strategy has two main legs. It involves pundits making taste-based appeals to ‘lowbrow’ cultural forms (e.g. NASCAR), lifestyle practices (e.g. shopping at Walmart), and aesthetics (e.g. hyper-patriotic graphics, bleach-blond anchors). Secondly, it involves performing an affinity with lay epistemic culture: that is, a non-professional style of truth-telling. ‘I am not an expert’, Glenn Beck often said on his Fox show. ‘I’m an American with an opinion, period. . . . When will we start listening to our own guts, and to common sense?’ (4 November 2010). In an episode of *Hannity*, one guest implied that too much education actually hinders a leader’s judgment. ‘[W]ith all the . . . education that President Barack Obama has had, he seems to have trouble making decisions. . . . I think that sometimes it doesn’t take a Harvard education to make a good choice’ (19 November 2009).
The educated elite has long served as the central class enemy in the conservative movement’s populist imaginary. In the 1950s and 1960s, conservative politicians like Joseph McCarthy and George Wallace railed against what they respectively called ‘twisted intellectuals’ and ‘pseudo-intellectuals’. Richard Nixon’s 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns appropriated and refined these themes, pitting the noble, country music–loving ‘silent majority’ against a ‘new class’ of knowledge workers, media professionals, and professors.

The conservative animus towards educated elites is as strong today as it was then. According to a 2017 Pew study, 58 percent of Republicans believe higher education is doing more harm than good to American society (Fingerhut 2017). In tune with the Republican base, conservative media figures like Newt Gingrich describe the liberal media as the ‘intellectual–yet-idiot’ class and, conservative talk radio giant Rush Limbaugh called the expert witnesses at Trump’s 2019 impeachment hearing ‘professional nerds’. Fox’s current top-rated show, Tucker Carlson Tonight, features a Campus Craziness segment, in which host Tucker Carlson takes on liberal professors and student activists to expose ‘the radical left’s’ takeover of America’s universities. This starts where Carlson’s scandalised 8:00 pm predecessor left off. One content study of The O’Reilly Factor coded ‘academics’ as one of Bill O’Reilly’s most frequently listed ‘villain’ groups (Conway et al. 2007).

But direct diatribes against academics and intellectuals is only the most obvious way Fox programming seeks to align conservative policy positions with working-class ‘common sense’. What is more interesting and harder to grasp is the way Fox News pundits attempt to embody a lay form of intellectualism I term the ‘popular intellect’ (Peck 2019: 146–151). Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has developed a set concepts such as the ‘popular gaze’ and ‘invested disposition’ to understand the underlying social logic of working-class culture. These concepts are useful for elucidating how Fox News hosts ventriloquise what they imagine to be a working-class mode of news analysis. According to Bourdieu, the ‘popular gaze’ of the working class is more utilitarian, evaluating a cultural object or media image in ‘reference to the function it fulfils for the person who looks at it or which [such a person] thinks it could fulfil for other classes of beholders’ (1984: 42) and, with reference to this invested viewer, the assumed ‘interest [behind] the information it conveys’ (43).

Mimicking this analytical posture, Fox News hosts purport to cut through the flowery language of the politician and see past the pundit’s honorific title, getting to the heart of the matter by exposing who stands to gain or lose in each piece of news information. From this vantage point, providing specific evidence proving political corruption is not always necessary. It can be enough for hosts to simply suggest connections between political and media figures and express what they intuitively ‘know’ about their intentions. In the end, Chris Peters writes, ‘proof is held in [the Fox host’s] belief’ (2010: 842).

Yet only focusing on the evidentiary inadequacies of Fox’s style misses what makes this ‘invested’ mode of news framing effective. 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 or, worse, purposely deceptive. In such a context, the moral agnosticism of the formerly detached professional is less effective than the overtly ‘ethical’ (Bourdieu 1984: 44–50), emotional performance of the current Fox anchor who fights against ‘the powerful’ to ‘protect the folks’ and other innocent groups like ‘the kids and the elderly’ (The O’Reilly Factor, 10 July 2008). ‘Within Fox’s populist public sphere model, the choice being offered is no longer between disinterested and interested journalism, but between different types of interested analysis’ (Peck 2019: 148). As a result, Fox’s top opinion hosts strive to demonstrate how ‘their news analyses are indeed biased – precisely because they are invested in the interests of “the folks”’ (151, emphasis in original).
While many liberals view Fox’s style as hokey, melodramatic, or just plain dumb, from a political communication standpoint, Fox’s populist analytical mode can be shrewdly effective. As cognitive linguist George Lakoff has long argued, within the workings of the political mind, moral reasoning trumps fact-based logic (2004). Moreover, all forms of journalism – partisan and non-partisan alike – rely on narrative structures that themselves carry embedded moral assumptions. It is the inner moral logic of the story form that gives the journalist using it ‘cultural authority’ (Edy 2006).

Fox producers have demonstrated an acute knowledge of which stories in American culture resonate and which do not, perceiving that US citizens tend to view class and race through non-empirical, normative schemas of social categorisation (Lamont 2000). Hence, Fox News pundits tend to devote more interpretive energy to performing their concern (or outrage) as opposed to their expertise. This allows them to dictate how the policy event will be morally framed as opposed to empirically supported.

During the Nixon era, the conservative movement used populist moral logics to racially stigmatise welfare and to repackage business-class-friendly policies as pro-worker. Fox has shifted the appeal yet again via the ‘American populist rhetorical tradition’ (Kazin 1998), in which one of the deepest reservoirs of moral themes about politics, wealth, and cultural status is used to re-present Republican partisans as ‘the real Americans’. Thus does Fox achieve what Antonio Gramsci long understood: that a ‘corporative’ political faction can actually be discursively transformed into a commanding ‘hegemonic’ one (1996).

**COVID-19 and the false hope of empirical deliverance**

The coronavirus emerged from China’s Wuhan province in late December of 2019. A month later the United States would report its first positive case of COVID-19 on 20 January 2020. It took the disease only three months to turn American society upside down. With unprecedented speed, the stay-at-home directives would bring the US economy to a halt, destroying millions of jobs and shuttering thousands of small businesses. From 1 March to 31 March, COVID-19 cases jumped from fewer than a hundred to hundreds of thousands. By 28 April, the virus had claimed over 58,365 American lives, more than were killed in the Vietnam War (Welna 2020).

Yet through the pivotal month of February and well into March, the Trump administration and the president’s favourite channel, Fox News, downplayed the severity of the virus, repeatedly suggesting it was no more dangerous than the ‘standard flu’. On the 27 February 2020 episode of *Hannity*, Fox’s number one show, 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 would like you to think’ (Wemple 2020).

As someone who has studied Fox’s opinion shows for over a decade, I cannot say I was surprised by this response (though *Tucker Carlson Tonight* did, to its credit, take a different tack). From the beginning, the editorial agenda of Fox’s primetime shows has been devoted as much to how other outlets cover the news as to the news itself, something Ronald Jacob and Eleanor Townsley term ‘media metacommentary’ (2011). Fox’s opinion hosts have long depicted journalists as a ‘villainous’ social group (Conway et al. 2007), 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 journalistic interpretations with the capability of determining the nation’s destiny (Jamieson and Cappella 2008: 51), a media power so menacing that Fox hosts deemed countering the negative press Trump was receiving for his handling of the crisis more important than the physical threat of the outbreak itself.
It is unclear how this will finally affect Trump’s political future, but one can safely predict that the COVID-19 crisis will not end the science wars anytime soon. And yet American liberals continue to hold this hope that the empirical conditions of national crises, if severe enough, will pierce through the ‘epistemic closure’ of the right-wing media bubble. Rather than challenging the right by advancing an alternative populist narrative or by building a news channel that could surpass Fox in popular appeal and cultural relevance, liberals tend to prefer a more passive-aggressive approach to defeating the conservative opposition.

The liberal strategy seeks to fix the US media’s informational culture by reasserting the tenets and practices of professional journalism. This way political disputes can be, once more, decided by facts and third-party experts. In such an ideal media environment, liberal journalists would not need to directly take on the right-wing media ecosystem; it would die off on its own accord as the public comes to view its reporting as erroneous and untrustworthy. By this logic, Fox News, and Sean Hannity in particular, would have to pay a steep reputational price for the misinformation they spread in the critical early stages of the COVID-19 crisis. But, if recent history is any judge, I doubt they will.

Just days before the financial collapse on September 15, 2008, Hannity criticised doomsayer economists and claimed that the fundamentals of the Bush economy were strong (Khanna 2008). Not only did he not face any repercussions for this epically bad take; in April 2009 Hannity and fellow Fox host Glenn Beck helped galvanise the Tea Party movement and successfully redirected public anger away from Wall Street greed towards taxation and ‘government tyranny’. The Tea Party’s electoral gains in the 2010 midterm elections effectively killed President Obama’s progressive economic agenda and skyrocketed Fox’s ratings and profits to record levels.

Like the Great Recession, the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the fragility of America’s public infrastructure and laid bare the nation’s race and class inequalities. While this contemporary crisis should be presenting yet another opportunity for the Democratic left to assert the need for New Deal–style policies and government programmes such as guaranteed health care, unemployment, and living wages. Yet, I do not see many liberals meeting NAACP leader Reverend Barber’s call for progressives to forge a ‘fusion coalition’ around ‘a deeper moral language to name the crisis’ (Barber 2017, January 30). Instead, as I write this in late April of 2020, we are witnessing a Tea Party–affiliated ‘liberty movement’ actively trying to drive the political narrative of the COVID-19 crisis (Vogel et al. 2020). These pro-Trump ‘liberty’ groups are protesting the stay-at-home measures public health officials have instituted to contain the virus, thus baiting leftists to devote their political focus to defending medical expertise as opposed to highlighting and addressing the plight of front-line ‘essential workers’.

This layout of rhetorical political positions plays into Fox News’s hands in several ways. It assists the network’s long-term hegemonic strategy of naturalising the link between political conservatism and working-class counter-knowledge. It also leads the liberal analysts to adopt a limited, informational understanding of Fox’s political communication strategies. By only focusing on how Fox deceives its audience with ‘bad science’ and misinformation, the analyst is distracted from seeing how the network actually derives its cultural authority.

To move the discussion on populism and conservative media forwards, communication and journalism scholars must be able not only to address questions of epistemology and bias but also to think beyond them. More consideration should be given to the persuasive power of moral framing and to the political-identitarian pull of aesthetic style. Otherwise, we risk getting trapped in an endless Ailesian loop wherein a media partisan like Hannity defends his coronavirus coverage by simply counter-charging that it is his academic critics, not him, who live in a world where ‘politics trumps truth’ (Bond 2020).
References

Barber, W.J. (2017, January 30) These times require a new language and a fusion coalition: The moral crisis we face demands a political pentecost in America today. Think Progress. Available at: https://thinkprogress.org/rev-barber-these-times-require-a-new-language-and-a-new-fusion-coalition-c741b9eb1b47/.


Glenn Beck. (2010, November 4) Fox News Channel.


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


*The O’Reilly Factor*. (2009, October 23) Fox News Channel.


*The O’Reilly Factor*. (2010, February 8) Fox News Channel.


