

Sayema Tareq

Prof. Lyra Hilliard

ENGL101 Sect. BL02

April 10, 2013

Paper 2

What Are You Watching?

Former MSNBC and Fox News contributor, Jeff Cohen, defines media as “the nervous system of a democracy” (Outfoxed). In other words, the media ultimately controls democracy because it can shape the beliefs of the people who elect leaders. Most of us will not be attendees at congressional debates or members of the president’s cabinet. The information we receive about issues is often limited to what the media lets us know, and based on that information we develop opinions and reflect them in our voting behavior. Thus, it is critical that the citizens of a democracy are well informed so they can make the best decisions for their nation. However, the media does not always deliver their stories without partisanship.

When it comes to the topic of media bias, 70% of Americans readily agree that it is existent in just about every major news organization in the United States, according to The Pew Research Center (DellaVigna and Kaplan 1). Where this agreement usually ends, however, is in determining which cable news channel harbors the most bias and how influential that bias is. Whereas some are convinced that liberal sources, such as MSNBC, deliver the most unbalanced news, others maintain that Fox News is far worse. One of the best times to look for media bias is during presidential campaigns.

In November of 2012, The Pew Research Center published findings of a study examining the tone of campaign coverage for President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney on

MSNBC and Fox News in 2012. While conservative leaning Fox News presented Obama positively 6% of the time and negatively 46% of the time, the liberal organization, MSNBC, presented Romney positively 3% of the time and negatively 71% of the time (“Winning the Media Campaign 2012”). If you imagine an American who only relied on MSNBC as his source for information, he would probably feel that Mitt Romney was a terrible candidate simply because 71% of the time it seemed like he was. News organizations reporting in such an unbalanced manner strays from basic journalistic values. Further evidence of this imbalance can be found in Christopher Zara’s *International Business Times* article titled “Fox News is More Fair and Balanced than MSNBC?”

In the article, Zara cites The Pew Research Center’s investigation of the balance between news and commentary among the top three cable news channels; CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. Findings indicate that CNN shows consist of 54% news and 46% commentary, Fox News delivers 45% news and 55% commentary, and MSNBC provides 18% news and 82% commentary (Zara 1). In other words, CNN and Fox News balance out their hard facts with nearly equal amounts of individual interpretation while MSNBC’s actual news is overpowered by commentary. Thus, their audience hears more opinion and analysis than actual facts.

One would believe that MSNBC’s audience would have the most skewed perspective of politics and news in general due to these numbers. Perhaps these figures explain why Fox News is the most watched news channel and the most trusted (Broderick and Miller 137). However, in a 2003 study at the University of Maryland, statistics show that Fox News viewers were most likely to believe the following misconceptions: that evidence of links between Al-Qaeda and Iraq were found, that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, and that the world public opinion favored U.S. war with Iraq. 80% of Fox News viewers believed at least one of the

misconceptions, a number 25% higher than CNN and 4 times that of PBS and NPR audiences (Broderick and Miller 139). Although The Pew Research Center finds that MSNBC delivers its news in the most lopsided fashion, the university study reveals that something about Fox News's reporting seems to strongly mislead its viewers, despite its balance of news and commentary. A survey by The Fairleigh-Dickinson University's Public Mind Poll reveals that both MSNBC and Fox News have negative impacts on their viewers ("What You Know"), but investigations prove that Fox News uses various techniques to frame their reports in the most misleading fashion, resulting in a negative correlation between facts and public opinion.

Fox News, widely known as a conservative news channel, uses a number of techniques to frame their news in favor of conservative and Republican principles. One technique involves the experts and guests Fox News invites to their shows. In Robert Greenwald's documentary, *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*, former Fox News producer Clara Frenk recalls her days with Fox. When given a list of Fox News contributors, Frenk remembers recognizing all of the conservatives on the roster, saying they were well-known people of power. However, when looking at the liberal roster, Frenk says she only recognized one name (Outfoxed). This demonstrates Fox News's selectiveness in choosing their contributors so they have a predetermination of what kinds of analyses and opinions their guests will disclose.

Frenk also argues that not only are the liberal guests on Fox News little known, she classifies them as "faux liberals," which--as Frenk defines them--are liberals who have conservative views and agree with the statements Fox anchors make (Outfoxed). Steve Randall, a journalist for the American national media watch group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), concurs with Frenk in his FAIR article, "With Fox News Liberals, Who Needs Conservatives?" By observing numerous Fox liberals, Randall concludes that these liberals, such

as Alan Colmes from the Hannity and Colmes show and Juan Williams, a popular guest on the O'Reilly Factor, are among numerous liberals who tend to agree with conservative viewpoints and do not challenge any remarks made by Fox reporters (Randall para. 1). As National Public Radio reporter Brooke Gladstone considers in her book, *The Influencing Machine*, "Journalists will bend over backward to appear balanced by offering equal time to opposing viewpoints, even when they aren't equal" (Gladstone 69). To make it seem like Fox is fair in considering liberal perspectives, Fox invites liberals to speak on their shows, even though those particular guests do not properly represent the general liberal viewpoint. Although the guests that Fox invites on their shows seem influential, they are not the only factors contributing to the channel's bias. Fox News also attempts to influence what these people say.

Larry Johnson, a former Fox News contributor, informed the *Outfoxed* documentary's producers that the Fox News staff was given a memo every morning of what they should and should not talk about (Outfoxed). Furthermore, contributors were told to use certain words and keep away from using others. For example, when speaking of the Iraq War and Al-Qaeda, Johnson was told to refer to suicide bombings as homicide bombings, making the already dreadful action seem even worse. Johnson did not comply and he also spoke against conservatives during that interview. Although he had eight more weeks left on his contract with Fox News, he was never invited back on the show after that incident (Outfoxed). Being a news organization, Fox should have refrained from influencing other people's commentary because their job is simply to inform. The leaders of Fox News are regular people who make mistakes and host opinions, but since they so heavily advertise their slogan, "fair and balanced" (Broderick and Miller 137), they should pay close attention to making sure they are not partisan in their reporting. In their book *Consider the Source*, authors James F. Broderick and Darren W.

Miller contend that “although a place certainly exists within American journalism for opinion and commentary, by disguising its broadcasts as objective rather than disclosing its coverage as ideologically driven, Fox News is a detriment to the overall health of the news media” (Broderick and Miller 137). Fox is not wrong in reporting the way they do because many other organizations do so as well. However, since they advertise being fair and balanced, they should act as such so as not to mislead viewers. Fox’s lack of balance is reflected in their staffing as well.

Conservatives dominate the Fox News staff (Broderick and Miller 140), which naturally seems to influence the way news stories are framed. For example, Jon Du Pre, a former Fox News reporter in the West Coast Bureau, recalls that on many occasions, he was encouraged to “embarrass and discredit” certain liberals (Outfoxed). Although conservatives are not out to disrepute liberals, there are extremists and outliers in all political groups, and it seems to be a problem if those extremists manage major news organizations. A former Fox News producer who chose to remain anonymous submitted a piece on the struggles immigrants go through prior to and while coming to America. The submission was greeted by yelling and criticism from the managing editor, who believed immigrants were “trying to free-ride” in America. The story was not permitted to air (Outfoxed). Evidently, Fox News management leaders have a strong influence on the way news stories are presented on their shows and which stories are presented. It is difficult to deliver pure news with so many influential factors standing in the way.

One might wonder why it is important to highlight Fox News’s bias since numerous news organizations are guilty of the same thing. First of all, studies have shown that media bias can strongly effect voting, as exemplified by a 2007 study by *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*. From 1996 to 2000, 20% of U.S. towns were introduced to the Fox News Channel. The study

attempted to answer the question of whether or not the introduction of Fox News helped Republicans gain votes in those towns. Results show that in towns that acquired the Fox News Channel, Republicans gained 0.4 to 0.7 percentage points (DellaVigna and Kaplan 32). Although this number seems minuscule, it is “likely to have been decisive in the 2000 elections” (DellaVigna and Kaplan 32). Clearly Fox News has a strong influence on its audience.

In the Fairleigh Dickinson University survey previously mentioned, Fox News viewers were less likely to answer questions of domestic and international issues correctly than those who did not watch any news shows (“What You Know”). This statement cannot be made for any of Fox’s competitors. Although Fox News is commended on challenging orthodoxy and going in-depth with their stories--something their competitors fail to do (Broderick and Miller 56)--Fox fails to uphold its own slogan of “fair and balanced” and leaves their viewers misinformed.

In the controversial issue of bias in Fox News, many people believe that the news corporation provides the most in-depth, reliable news. Many others believe the Fox News Corporation is misleading and heavily promotes right wing ideology. This conversation does not end here, however. People may not agree on how much bias exists in Fox News reports but most people can agree that there is some sort of bias in all news media. Ultimately, this raises the issue of how much the media affects Americans and the democratic system as a whole. If Americans absorb skewed information, their opinions will probably be skewed and their voting habits will reflect those beliefs. In order to be a successful and informed democracy, Americans cannot rely on Fox News as their sole source of information. As a matter of fact, no one should rely on just one news outlet for all of his or her information. In order to be properly informed on issues, we should consider a variety of sources, both conservative and liberal, to make sure we get the full story before making decisions and developing opinions.

Works Cited

- Brock, David, Ari Rabin-Havt and Media Matters for America. *The Fox Effect: How Roger Ailes Turned a Network into a Propaganda Machine*. New York: Anchor Books, 2012. Print.
- Broderick, James F., and Darren W. Miller. *Consider the Source: A Critical Guide to 100 Prominent News and Information Sites on the Web*. Medford: Information Today, Inc., 2007. Print.
- DellaVigna, Stefano and Ethan Kaplan. "The Fox News Effect: Media Bias and Voting." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122 (2007): 1187-234. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.nber.org/papers/w12169.pdf>>.
- Gladstone, Brooke. *The Influencing Machine*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011. Print.
- Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism. Dir. Robert Greenwald. Brave New Films, 2004. DVD.
- Randall, Steve. "With Fox News Liberals, Who Needs Conservatives?" *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*. N.p., 1 Mar. 2012. Web. 25 Mar. 2013.
- "What You Know Depends on What You Watch: Current Events Knowledge Across Popular News Sources." *The Public Mind Poll*. The Fairleigh-Dickinson University, 3 May 2012. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <<http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2012/confirmed/final.pdf>>.
- "Winning the Media Campaign 2012." *Journalism.org*. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2 Nov. 2012. Web. 29 Mar. 2013. <http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/winning_media_campaign_2012>.

Zara, Christopher. "Fox News is More Fair and Balanced than MSNBC?" *International Business Times*. IBT Media Inc., 18 Mar. 2013. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. <www.ibtimes.com/fox-news-more-fair-balanced-msnbc-1134477>.