

How Fox News Outfoxes Americans

To understand how so many average Americans can be duped into embracing right-wing positions that go against their own interests, you must look at how Fox News (and right-wing media outlets) use faux populism and phony outrage as propaganda techniques, a topic explored by Danny Schechter in this guest essay.

By Danny Schechter

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Grrrrrrrr. You can almost hear the growling in the background as the masters of attack politics go into action, virtually every hour on the hour, on the Fox News Channel.

The issues they focus on are carefully selected by top executives and then broken down into highly politicized message points. Their dominant emotion is annoyance as expressed in sarcasm and scowling; contempt is the underlying attitude.

In the Fox view, the other side is usually not just wrong but plain stupid, almost unbelievable in its softheaded naiveté and distance from reality.

A “what do you expect” question invariably tops off the argument which always ends with the Fox host a winner and the Democrat or social critic a loser on every level.

Standing on a podium driven by self-righteous certainty, the finger pointers view the people they talk about, and talk down to, as below the intelligence threshold of people even worth arguing with.

In this universe, hyping the extreme and outrageous seems to attract audiences as Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck have proven. That leads to higher ratings and, the real goal, higher revenues.

Clearly they feel it is their duty to play Paul Revere who warned Colonial America that “The British Are Coming.” They warn their faithful against political deviations that might lead them astray.

What is hard to recognize or often realize is that the topics chosen are calculated as part of a strategy of using emotionally tested wedge issues to politicize by polarizing.

Political scientist Alan Abramowitz argues that polarization is good for America in his new book, *The Disappearing Center*:

“All the indicators we have show that polarization has actually contributed to increased engagement in politics, because people do perceive important differences and they think that there are big stakes in elections.”

He was asked if he thinks this is healthy for a democracy:

“Well, up to a point. I think that a certain degree of polarization is healthy in a democracy. It clarifies the choices people have in elections, and it helps voters to hold the parties accountable for their performance.”

At the same time, other political analysts say, “The more **polarized political** parties are, the less most of us care about the **political** process.”

Survey data shows that people often take polarized positions because they think they are expected to when they identify with a certain party. With the sincerity and beliefs of Democrats mocked and under constant vitriolic attack, who would want to be thought of that way?

If they have questions, they don't raise them. It's easier to parrot the party line.

Recall, it is politicians not “the people” who define those issues. The politicians rely on corporate-style market research and focus groups. They chose slogans and even language that often has a patriotic subtext.

When government programs are likened to socialism, it's not surprising that people who consider themselves conservatives reject those programs even when they don't really know what socialism is.

This is also true of what appears to be populist movements like the Tea Party whose agenda and talking points have been established by professional consultants, guided by political operatives and funded by conservative billionaires.

As one study put it. “In other words, since the parties are now more clearly divided, and on a broader set of issues, it is easier for people to split accordingly, without changing their own views.”

That's the key point – “without changing their own views.” The dirty little secret is the discovery in many studies that the most systematic polarization appears only in mass partisanship: those who are politically active or identify themselves with a party or ideology tend to have more extreme positions than the rest of the population.

But, at the same time, their core political views have changed very little. For example, many on the Right depend on and support Medicare.

What's also not always clear to folks on the Left is that Fox News positions itself as an upholder of what are, at bottom, liberal American values. Hence their motto about Fairness and Balance. (They actually have more opposing views on their programs than channels like MSNBC do.)

The Los Angeles Times understood this when writing, "Fox's real ethos is not Republican but anti-elitist, a major reason it connects with so many Americans and annoys so many coastal elites. 'There's a whole country that elitists will never acknowledge,'" Ailes once observed. 'What people resent deeply out there are those in the "blue states" thinking they're smarter.'

"This anti-elitism shows itself in Fox's pro-U.S. stance in covering the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and its broadcasters' use of terms such as 'terrorist' instead of 'militants.' Another aspect of Fox's anti-elitism: Christians, far from being seen as lunatics or curiosities, as too often is the case in the mainstream media, actually get some respect."

So Fox plays a double game, concealing the most reactionary and partisan of perspectives in the appearance of populism. It is then packaged in the format of news programming and above the fray television driven by hot graphics, pretty blondes, and relentless posturing.

The formula works in attracting audiences while the same time, feeding into a political strategy of promoting partisanship through heightening polarization and political conflict.

No issue is too small to exploit. A week after the targeted killing of Osama bin Laden, Fox had found a new enemy to bash as a target in the nightly culture war behind its political war.

Michelle Obama had invited a rapper named Common to a White House poetry reading. Some of his lyrics, in the parlance of ghetto talk, appeared to suggest he approved of a cop killing. That's all that Fox needed to hear. Program after program went on the attack at this latest example of black racism.

Comedy Central's Jon Stewart used video clips and his own free-style rapping to ridicule the distortions in their characterizations. He blasted Fox for "manufacturing outrage" and pumping a blend of propaganda he calls "foxygen" into the room.

Fox's Bill O'Reilly blasted back inviting Stewart to debate him and insisting that their focus only reflected their outrage over a pro-cop-killing artist being invited to the White House.

(Hip Hop radio personality Davey D reminds his audience that Fox never gets

outraged by police brutality in black communities. He posted a [thoughtful commentary](#) on his Facebook page.)

Any objective person might concede the poet rapper was not calling for a jihad against cops. It didn't matter because Fox viewers tend to believe what their TV heroes tell them. It looked like he was; therefore he was.

Soon, the facts no longer mattered in a cross-cultural battle of metaphor and misinformation. Fox had its new weapon of mass distraction to focus on and use to smear President Obama while ignoring the other big story of the day: the conviction of a billionaire hedge fund schemer accused on insider-trading and conspiracy.

In Fox world, the "free market" is holy even when it's not, and only "big government" (under Democrats, of course) is to blame for our economic woes.

In the end, what we have is a cruel and deceptive game that appears to be informative when it's not, presided over by professional actors and reactors.

And like the old joke asks: "How do you know when they are lying?" The answer: "when their lips are moving."

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Robert Parry, Editor

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 as the Internet's first investigative magazine. He saw it as a way to combine modern technology and old-fashioned journalism to counter the increasing triviality of the mainstream U.S. news media.
