

Propaganda, Persuasion, or Journalism?: Fox News' Prime-Time Coverage of Health-Care Reform in 2009 and 2014

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Abstract

The scholarly literature on Fox News has largely focused on the network's ideological disposition, assuming Fox News to be a journalistic operation. However, a handful of scholars have challenged those assumptions. Conway, Grabe, and Grieve found one of the network's prime-time programs to be practicing propaganda, not journalism. This article seeks to further the work of Conway et al. by employing a qualitative textual analysis of Fox News' prime-time coverage of health-care reform in 2009 and 2014 to determine whether the network's programs worked within the traditional values of objective journalism, aside from the network's ideological disposition, or whether the programs' practices were more consistent with propaganda or the rhetorical concept of persuasion. The study finds that in both periods, Fox News' prime-time programs employed multiple themes based on nonfactual premises to oppose health-care reform, which were more in line with propaganda than journalism or persuasion.

Keywords

Fox News, cable news, objectivity, propaganda, journalism practice

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Fox News has been a frequent topic in the social scientific study of mass communication, with works ranging from a book looking at the network's influence in American politics (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008) to studies seeking to determine whether the network exhibits bias (e.g., Aday, 2010; Groeling, 2008). Fox News has also been used as stimulus in experimental research seeking to explain how individuals consume news (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Nearly all of these studies have one thing in common, that is, an assumption that Fox News is a journalistic operation.

Two peer-reviewed articles have questioned this premise. Conway, Grabe, and Grieve (2007) examined the most watched prime-time program on Fox News, "The O'Reilly Factor," finding that the host, Bill O'Reilly, heavily employed seven 1930s propaganda devices in his "Talking Points Memo" segment. Peters (2010) looked at 2 weeks of O'Reilly's programs and found that while O'Reilly adhered to some elements of objective journalism, he nonetheless practiced an emotion-based approach to his topics, "remaking" the news by "lower(ing) the threshold demanded under journalism's traditional rules of truth while simultaneously appealing to his dedicated audience as a 'superior' form of news" (p. 833).

Conway et al. and Peters made valuable contributions to the literature by empirically testing whether O'Reilly operated as a journalist. This study seeks to extend their work by going beyond O'Reilly and asking similar questions about the rest of the Fox News prime-time lineup as well as expanding the range of possibilities in examining the approach of the programs. Employing a qualitative textual analysis of 6 weeks of the Fox News prime-time programs' handling of the issue of health-care reform—3 weeks in 2009 and 3 weeks in 2014—the study seeks to discover whether the shows follow an approach more in line with propaganda, as Conway et al. found of O'Reilly, or whether some values of journalism can be found, as Peters argues are present on "The O'Reilly Factor."

Literature Review

Fox News

With the decline of network news audiences over the last three decades (Guskin & Rosenstiel, 2012), cable news has emerged as an important niche force in news. Of the five primary U.S. cable news channels, Fox News reaches the most viewers by far according to the Nielsen ratings, with the network's audience making up two thirds of all cable news viewers on an average night (Kondolojy, 2012). Conservatives, especially, rely on Fox News, with 47% saying the network is their main source for political news (Pew Research Center, 2014). In fact, 72% of conservatives say Fox News is the only news source they trust (Pew Research Center, 2014). However, Fox News' influence goes beyond its ratings. The channel plays a key role in the dissemination of political information to conservatives, so much so that Jamieson and Cappella (2008) argue that Fox News effectively operates as an organ of the Republican Party.

Examining Fox News' journalistic practices is important because of a central contradiction at the heart of the network's place in the modern media environment. On the one hand, the literature is clear that Fox News provides conservative-leaning content (Aday, 2010; Chalif, 2011; Groeling, 2008; Iksander, 2005; Aday, Livingston, & Hebert, 2005) to a mainly conservative audience (Morris, 2005; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2011). Nevertheless, the network's marketing is built around a claim of being "fair and balanced," with the network's CEO (Boehler, 2012) and leading prime-time on-air personality (O'Reilly, 2009, 2012) both making claims that Fox News journalistically covers both sides of the issues and does not exhibit a conservative bias.

If there is a disconnect between the claims of those in positions of power at Fox News and what research has shown the network does in its programs, that disconnect is worthy of examination, as Conway et al. and Peters have demonstrated.

Much of the scholarly work on Fox News has focused in some way on the network's ideological disposition. For example, Iyengar and Hahn (2009) use Fox News as an example of a conservative news source in their experiment testing ideological selective exposure. Groeling (2008) is concerned with whether Fox News exhibited a partisan bias in reporting on presidential approval. In the same vein, Aday (2010) looked at whether Fox News' coverage of the war in Afghanistan was biased in favor of President George W. Bush's position, and Aday, Livingston, and Hebert (2005) made a similar inquiry regarding the war in Iraq. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) place Fox News at the center of Republican Party politics. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) examine whether the introduction of Fox News as a conservative news source had a measurable impact on voting. In examining the demography of television news outlets, Morris (2005) is primarily concerned with the ideology of Fox News viewers.

An unstated assumption in all of these studies, though, is that Fox News is a journalistic operation. For example, Iyengar and Hahn (2009) offer their experimental subjects articles from Fox News, CNN, and NPR, presenting them as journalistic equivalents. Groeling (2008) and Aday (2010) would only be concerned with bias in coverage if they were viewing Fox News as journalism. Similarly, DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) explicitly study Fox News as a conservative news source.

Despite the assumption of Fox News as a journalistic operation in the literature, some scholars have examined the network through a different lens. Jones (2012) argues that Fox News is a form of entertainment television and that judging the network by journalism standards would be as misguided as judging reality television programs by the standards of documentary film. Peters (2010) specifically examined whether Bill O'Reilly's Fox News program engaged in journalism, finding that while O'Reilly blurs the journalistic expectations of his content, he nevertheless adheres to some traditional tenets of objectivity. Conway et al. (2007) also studied O'Reilly's content, finding that the host employed propaganda techniques that were more severe and less nuanced than those used by Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s.

Further, most Fox News studies focus on Fox News' ideological and/or partisan position. The authors of these studies either assume the conservative nature of Fox

News or test to see whether a Republican and/or conservative bias exists (see, e.g., Chalif, 2011). Why is Fox News' ideology viewed as the end of the discussion? After all, bias is only one aspect of objectivity, and objectivity itself has only been the defining feature of the American press since the 1930s (Schudson, 1978, 2001). There are even many scholars who argue the press's role in providing information to sustain a democracy is not best served by journalism without a point of view (Bennett, 2001; Cunningham, 2003; Hallin, 1992).

In assessing whether Fox News' prime-time programming engages in journalism, propaganda, or something else, it is first necessary to define these terms based on the literature.

What Is Journalism?

One of the concepts regularly pointed to as a fundamental indicator of journalism, at least in the United States, is the presence of objectivity. As Schudson (2001) puts it, "'Objectivity' is the chief occupational value of American journalism and the norm that historically and still today distinguishes U.S. journalism from the dominant model of continental European journalism" (p. 149).

Of course, this statement begs the question: What is objectivity? An examination of the work of the leading journalism scholars who have looked at objectivity quickly reveals that while writers have taken different approaches to the contours and desirability of the concept, there seems to be general agreement on its constituent parts. Three recurring themes happen to be the 3 items pegged by McQuail (1996) as the keys to objectivity:

1. *Neutrality* (no allegiance to any political or ideological position). Neutrality differs from fairness and balance in that it is an assessment of the starting point of journalism (what predisposition a reporter or news operation brings to the job), not of the ending point (what is reported). Neutral journalists, as Ryan (2001) asserts, "refuse to serve or to support any political, social, economic, or cultural interests, even those that appear to some observers as laudatory" (p. 4).
2. *Balance and fairness* (the journalist's honest effort to give a fair airing to all of the legitimate arguments of a controversy). A neutral reporter (one with no allegiance to any political or ideological position) can still be unbalanced (e.g., giving only one side of a legitimate controversy), while a nonneutral journalist (one with an avowed ideology) can still operate in a balanced and fair way (e.g., accurately representing both sides of a legitimate controversy, even if he or she agrees with one of the sides).
3. *A commitment to truth and an allegiance to accuracy and the facts*. Mindich (1998) points out that when the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics dropped the term "objectivity" in 1996, the new version replaced it with words like "truth," "accuracy" and "comprehensiveness" (p. 6).

While several studies have found that Fox News falls short on the first tenet of objectivity, as it presents content with a conservative and/or Republican bias, the examination of Fox News' programming should not end there. Despite the network's bias, it would be useful to examine whether the prime-time programs nevertheless present issues in a fair and balanced way (as Fox News' marketing promises) and with an allegiance to accuracy and the facts.

What Is Propaganda?

Conway et al. (2007) focused on a narrow definition of propaganda, relying on the elements identified by one organization in the 1930s. Many propaganda scholars have suggested a broader definition of propaganda. Like with objectivity, while there are debates about the value of propaganda, the definitions all draw on similar concepts and elements. A look at some of the leading propaganda scholars reveals agreement that propaganda is a method by which the user elicits an intended action on the part of recipients through the manipulation of the recipient's individual and societal beliefs by using a combination of facts and lies, along with an attempt to shield the recipient from opposing facts and points of view (see, e.g., Bryant, 1953; Ellul, 1965; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012; Lasswell, 1934/1995; Pratkanis & Aronson, 2002).

Persuasion and Propaganda

While propaganda is based on manipulation, the traditional rhetorical concept of persuasion is based in reason with the proponent seeking to use logic and argument to persuade the listener without coercion. Based on a review of the literature, four factors distinguish persuasion from propaganda:

1. *Volition.* In persuasion, the persuader seeks a voluntary change on the part of the recipient of the message. As Jowett and O'Donnell (2012) put it, the persuader has a genuine desire for the recipient to say, "I never saw it that way before" (p. 32).
2. *Transparency of intent.* A persuader makes no attempt to camouflage his or her intentions, while a propagandist often hides the true intent of his or her message (see, e.g., Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012; Lippmann, 1925/1995; Pratkanis & Aronson, 2002).
3. *Manipulation.* While a persuader seeks to engage a person's logic and reason (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2002), "the propagandist exploits an audience's beliefs or values or group norms in such a way as to fan the fires of prejudice or self-interest" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012, p. 39).
4. *Shielding listeners from opposing facts.* While a persuader seeks to address evidence and arguments counter to his or her position, a propagandist works to ensure that the audience never hears those facts or arguments (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012).

Research Questions

Conway et al. (2007) and Peters (2010) made important advancements in the literature when they set out to empirically test whether a Fox News prime-time program engaged in propaganda rather than journalism. While their studies and analyses are quite effective in moving the focus on Fox News from journalism to propaganda, it would be useful to widen the lens of assessment to examine all of Fox News' prime-time programs and look at Fox News' content to see whether it conforms to the scholarly definitions of objectivity, propaganda, and/or persuasion.

So with the definitions of these concepts in mind, this study asks:

Research Question 1: Do Fox News' prime-time programs demonstrate adherence to the traditional objective journalistic values of balance and fairness and an allegiance to accuracy and the facts beyond the network's ideological disposition?

Research Question 2: Do Fox News' prime-time programs work more closely with the traditional elements of propaganda?

Research Question 3: Do Fox News' prime-time programs seek to transparently use logic and argument to persuade the viewer without coercion?

Method

August 2009

To do a comprehensive study of an extended period of Fox News' prime-time programming required finding an instance where the network covered a single issue on a regular basis over a substantial period of time. Efforts to reform health care in the United States in 2009 provided that opportunity. During this period, Fox News faced the first major initiative of a Democratic president after 8 years of a Republican president whose policies were closer to those supported by a majority of the network's hosts and guests. How the network responded to health-care reform in 2009 set into motion how the network would handle the rest of the Obama presidency. In addition, the sheer volume of coverage on one issue over a period of weeks was substantial. As such, the August 2009 health-care debate presents a unique and valuable opportunity to study how the prime-time programs handled one issue, every single weekday for 3 weeks.

The timing (but not necessarily the content) of the study is built around former Alaska Governor and Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's assertion that health-care reform legislation contained a "death panel" that would decide which Americans would receive care (Palin, 2009). Palin's claim provided a much publicized and high-profile moment from which to ground the choice of programs to examine. No less than four *New York Times* news and opinion pieces ran on August 8, 2009, addressing Palin's post (Dowd, 2009; Egan, 2009; Lorber, 2009; Seelye,

2009). The death panel issue quickly became a symbol of alleged misstatements about health-care reform. In fact, the death panel claims earned PolitiFact's 2009 "Lie of the Year" (Drobnic Holan, 2009). Studies have found a correlation between watching Fox News and believing the death panel claims (Lawrence & Schafer, 2012; Meirick, 2013). As such, Palin's statement seemed to be an important landmark around which to organize the study.

The study begins with Fox News' weekday prime-time programming the week before Palin's August 7, 2009, death panel claim, so the study could capture the discussion on the network leading up to Palin's statement, and continues 2 weeks after the claim, so the fallout of the claim and what followed could be examined. All of the segments of weekday prime-time programming, from August 3, 2009, through August 21, 2009, that discussed health-care reform were examined through reading transcripts of the shows obtained from LexisNexis.

The study employed a qualitative, inductive approach to a textual analysis of the network's coverage of health-care reform, as assessing the nature of the programs needed a nuanced method that allowed for greater analysis of context (Kracauer, 1953). The specific method is guided by the qualitative portion of Papacharissi and Oliveira's (2008) study identifying frames, in which the authors built classifications on a predetermined set of attributes. Specifically, the present analysis consisted of reading the show transcripts and tracking the arguments of the hosts and guests on health-care reform. Each time an argument was made on the issue, it was noted, along with the show, speaker, and context. A second read through the transcripts grouped together the same or similar reoccurring arguments (across days and/or programs) as "themes." The instances in each theme were then examined to determine the veracity of the facts underlying the claims, using primary texts when possible (e.g., claims about what an individual said in a media statement or speech) and reliable news outlets and fact-checking organizations when necessary. Once the veracity of the underlying themes were assessed, each theme was again analyzed to determine to what extent the prime-time programs' approach on the issues conformed most closely to the traditional values of journalism, propaganda, and/or persuasion, as defined above, by analyzing how the arguments were made, whether they were based on truthful assertions, and whether they employed a balanced and fair approach to the issue, among other factors. By keeping the study grounded in objective questions (e.g., Does this statement state a position on health-care reform? and Is the underlying claim of the statement factual?), the resulting findings can as best as possible avoid being tainted by the biases of the examiner, an issue facing news consumers (Coe et al., 2008).

The study covered Fox News' three prime-time shows—"The O'Reilly Factor," "Hannity," and "On the Record with Greta Van Susteren"—as these were not only the highest rated programs on the network at the time, drawing 2.5 million to 4 million viewers each night (Boedeker, 2009), but were placed by the network into the high-profile time slots of prime time where they would get the most attention. In addition, choosing the prime-time programs allowed the study to avoid Glenn Beck's show. Given Beck's problems with Fox News (Stelter, 2009) and eventual dismissal from

the network (Stelter, 2011), it is likely Fox News did not view Beck as most representative of the network's desired self-presentation.

March to April 2014

One weakness of studying the August 2009 coverage of health-care reform is the question of whether the actions of the Fox News prime-time hosts and guests represented how the network operated years later. While no health care-related issue arose in 2014 that matched the pervasiveness of coverage elicited by the original push for reform, one of the enrollment milestones surrounding the implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), on April 1, 2014, generated increased coverage on the Fox News prime-time programs. To determine whether the 2009 findings held up 5 years later, a parallel study of Fox News' prime-time coverage in 2014 examined 3 weeks of programming in the same manner, this time built around the April 1 announcement of the number of individuals who had enrolled in health-care plans through the ACA exchanges.

To ensure a parallel analysis, the 2014 study again looked at the programs hosted by O'Reilly, Hannity, and Van Susteren, even though a 2013 schedule change moved Hannity to 10 p.m. and Van Susteren to 7 p.m. The 2014 study began with the programs of Monday, March 24, 2014, and ran through to Friday, April 11, 2014.

Findings

In both the 2009 and 2014 periods studied, the Fox News prime-time programs did not consistently work within the journalistic values of fairness and accuracy, instead prioritizing their goals in making arguments opposing health care, and the programs did so in a way more consistent with propaganda than persuasion. Before moving to the specific results, it should be noted that the prime-time Fox News programs are not presented strictly as newscasts but rather borrow from the traditions of newscasts (all three hosts sit at a desk and, at times, directly address the viewers), Sunday morning news analysis programs (like "Meet the Press," as the hosts interview guests and preside over debates), and even television news commentaries (when the hosts offer their opinions). Due to the nature of these programs, the vast majority of the statements by the hosts and their guests highlighted below come in the course of discussions of issues between the hosts and guests, although occasionally the comments come when the host addresses the camera often in the context of the introduction of a new segment. It should also be noted that the host controls the discussion of a program (Vraga et al., 2012). When a guest makes a statement and the host agrees or allows the statement to pass unchallenged, the host is essentially endorsing the message being sent to the audience. Also, during the periods of study, guests frequently appeared multiple times on multiple programs, leaving the host familiar with the guests. As such, the comments of the guests are essential elements of the programs, firmly within the control of the hosts.

August 2009

The study of the August 2009 period found that the prime-time programs employed 12 themes to oppose health-care reform—across multiple shows—that were based on a misstatement, distortion, or manipulation of facts: (1) the claim of the existence of death panels, (2) the distortion of statements by Democrats about health-care reform protesters, (3) an inaccurate portrayal of a White House website posting looking for false information on health-care reform, (4) the mischaracterization of an op-ed piece by the CEO of Whole Foods and a subsequent boycott of the chain, (5) claims that health-care reform would cover abortions and undocumented immigrants, (6) claims about the affect of proposed legislation on deficits and taxes, (7) distortions of how health-care reform would affect Medicare, (8) the president's purported refusal to work with Republicans, (9) the influence of the group ACORN, (10) the length and complexity of the legislation, (11) the use of reconciliation to bypass a filibuster, and (12) health-care reform being a form of socialism.

In these 12 cases, the programs' hosts and their guests, across multiple shows, repeated these claims, and research found the underlying claims to be less than fully accurate. Also, in presenting these claims, the programs' hosts did not present fair and balanced assessments of the issues under discussion. Instead, the hosts and guests (with the active or tacit approval of the hosts) sought to incite their audiences to oppose health-care reform by tapping into the values and fears of their conservative audience, using a combination of facts, misstatements, and manipulations, all while shielding the audience from opposing facts and points of view and by discrediting opposing claims and the individuals making them.

While the network's interaction with Palin's death panel claim is well-documented (Lawrence & Schafer, 2012), the prime-time hosts handled several other claims in a similar way, fabricating or distorting the existence of an underlying purported fact relating to health-care reform. For example, in moving to defend against claims that protests against health-care reform were not spontaneous expressions of populist sentiment but were "Astroturfed"—that is, heavily influenced by corporate lobbyists (Buchwalter & Gloudeman, 2009; Herszenhorn & Stolberg, 2009; Krugman, 2009)—the Fox News prime-time hosts and their guests adopted the theme that the Democratic proponents of health care were "attacking" the protesters and, by extension, the American people. One method by which they furthered the argument was to mischaracterize this quote by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi about protests against health-care reform: "I think they are Astroturf. You be the judge . . . carrying swastikas and symbols like that to a town meeting on health care" (FactCheck.org, 2009). The Fox News prime-time hosts took Pelosi's statement and turned it into the blanket statement that she had called all of the protesters Nazis and/or swastika carriers, a claim that the hosts and/or their guests made 42 times over the course of 17 different programs, covering 12 of the 13 days under study.

For example, Sean Hannity alone made reference to the claim that Pelosi had called the protesters Nazis and/or swastika carriers 11 times over a 2-day period

(August 10–11), including statements like the protesters are “being attacked and called Nazis by people that are supposed to be public servants” and “we’ve had hard working Americans called Nazis” by Pelosi (“Hannity,” August 11). Bill O’Reilly (e.g., “What Nancy Pelosi said: crazy, fanatical, swastika-wearing,” “The O’Reilly Factor,” August 5) and Greta Van Susteren (e.g., uncritically showing a clip of Rush Limbaugh saying, “Nancy Pelosi first calls you Nazis by saying that you’re running around with swastika signs,” “On the Record With Greta Van Susteren,” August 10) also featured statements on their programs that Pelosi called the protesters Nazis and/or swastika carriers.

Similarly, the prime-time programs misstated the text of a *USA Today* op-ed piece cowritten by Pelosi, turning her claim, “Drowning out opposing views is simply un-American” (p. 7A), into a charge that protesting health-care reform in and of itself was un-American. Both Hannity and Van Susteren began their August 10 shows with teases mischaracterizing the Pelosi op-ed. Hannity: “Tonight, Nancy Pelosi calls town hall protesters un-American.” Van Susteren: “Tonight: ‘Un-American.’ Does that mean you? . . . Are these people on your screen un-American for protesting the health-care plan? House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and majority leader Steny Hoyer say ‘yes.’” Fox News prime-time hosts and their guests repeated the claim that Pelosi called health-care reform protesters un-American more than 10 times across all three programs for the remainder of the period of study.

A similar pattern played out on several other issues. The prime-time hosts and their guests turned a White House website posting asking for misinformation about health-care reform (so correct information could be provided) into a nefarious search for health-care reform opponents, so they could be punished by the government. These claims aired on 13 different segments across all three shows during the period of study, including on five of the six programs in the 2 days after the Web posting.

For example, Van Susteren opened her August 5 show with this line: “Tonight: ‘Fishy’? Is there something ‘fishy’ about you? If so, the White House says we should report you to them immediately.” She took the White House post’s focus on the information (“If you get an *email* or see *something* on the web about health insurance reform that seems fishy, send *it* to flag@whitehouse.gov,” emphasis added) and turned it into an attempt to identify individuals (“Is there something ‘fishy’ about *you*? If so, the White House says we should report *you* to them immediately,” emphasis added). Hannity twisted the post in the same manner on his show that night: “You get an email, you see something on the Web about health insurance that seems fishy, write to the White House. I mean it almost sounds like a secret police, you know, reporting—citizens now report on each other, doesn’t it?” While O’Reilly initially says on his August 6 show that he doesn’t think the White House was looking for names, by the end of the program, O’Reilly unabashedly portrayed the post as if the White House had done something wrong: “I agree with you that it sends the wrong message, but I don’t think there’s one person watching me tonight, not one, who’s not going to give their opinion on health care because of that dopey website.”

While less overtly nonfactual, Van Susteren distorted a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by the CEO of Whole Foods and the resulting boycott by some supporters of health-care reform. She portrayed the op-ed as the independent thoughts of a charitable business executive without noting that the suggestions in his op-ed mirrored the policy points on health-care reform that numerous Republican guests had presented on her show. She also misstated the reasons for the boycott, saying it was because the CEO disagreed with the president.

In addition to the death panel issue, the hosts and guests made other incorrect claims about the content of the proposed health-care reform litigation. Hosts and guests repeatedly falsely claimed the proposed legislation would cover undocumented immigrants and abortion, and charges of undue influence by the group ACORN were equally unsupported. The effect of health-care reform legislation on Medicare coverage was repeatedly misstated, as were the findings of independent bodies like the Congressional Budget Office on the proposed legislation's impact on taxes and deficits.

March to April 2014

The examination of Fox News' prime-time coverage of health-care reform in March and April 2014 found that the network continued to engage in three of the themes from 2009: the president's failure to work with Republicans, the length of the law, and health-care reform as socialized medicine, while also making claims about the Republican version of health-care reform that mirrors the issue at the heart of the 2009 theme surrounding the op-ed piece by the CEO of Whole Foods. In addition, the network offered nine new themes based on misstatements and exaggerations that were not consistent with the traditional values of objectivity or persuasion: (1) misstating the impact of the ACA on patient relationships with doctors, (2) misstating the ease of getting an enrollment extension, (3) misstating that the people enrolling in health insurance plans in the exchanges were not paying, not young and/or were already insured, (4) exaggerating the delays and functionality of the online exchanges, (5) misstating the impact of health-care reform on jobs, (6) misstating the increase of the cost of insurance in the exchanges, (7) misstating the number of remaining uninsured Americans and the goals for the first year, (8) unsupported claims about the amount and veracity of the data released by the White House on enrollments in the exchanges, and (9) exaggerations in the number of insurance policies canceled as a result of the implementation of the ACA.

Once again, accuracy and balance took a back seat to furthering the argument against health-care reform. Nearly all of the coverage of the April 1 deadline for enrollments under the ACA was negative. Before the deadline, the discussion was primarily about how the administration would not meet its stated goal for enrollments or how the administration might be dishonest about the data. After the deadline, the issue was downplayed and, when addressed, focused on attacks on the claim the enrollment goal had actually been reached, why it did not matter or the ACA itself.

For example, O'Reilly's programs prior to the April 1 ACA enrollment announcement featured the issue prominently in the lead or second segment, but once the goals had been met, on the April 1 show, O'Reilly moved the issue to the less high-profile third segment. Similarly, O'Reilly switched from putting importance on the enrollment goal before April 1 (by covering it so prominently) to arguing on April 1 that it didn't matter, calling it "kind of bogus." This kind of approach was evident on all three prime-time programs and was more consistent with a coordinated, deceptive attempt at propaganda than efforts to engage in persuasion or objective journalism.

Similarly, the coverage of the ACA across the three prime-time programs was nearly uniformly negative, with little discussion of the positive aspects of the law. In 21 segments across all three programs during the period of study, a host or guest made a claim that the ACA exchanges were not functioning or that the entire system was not working. While there were, in fact, problems, the shows exaggerated the problems and ignored the positives, providing an unbalanced and distorted view of health-care reform. Similarly, on 14 different segments across all three programs, the hosts and their guests made unsubstantiated claims that the enrollment numbers produced by the White House were fabricated (or "cooked," as conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh said in a clip played by Van Susteren on her April 1 program). No subsequent study has validated these claims.

The pursuit of the nine new themes did not exhibit an allegiance to accuracy. For example, the prime-time hosts and their guests claimed repeatedly that the majority of those signing up for care under the ACA were already insured, older, and/or not paying for coverage. These claims were made 15 times during the period of study, occurring on all three programs. However, the claims were false (Greenberg, 2014; Kessler, 2014). Similarly, Hannity and Van Susteren and their guests made false claims 13 times during the period of study on increases in health-care premiums under the ACA (FactCheck.org, 2014; Greenberg, 2013). On 11 segments across all three shows, a host or guest made claims about patients losing doctors that were not accurate (Hiltzik, 2014). On eight occasions, across all three programs, charges were made about the ease with which an individual could avoid enrolling under the ACA, including becoming exempt from the law's personal mandate, which PolitiFact found to be "mostly false" (Sanders, 2014). Hannity also misstated figures on job losses at the Cleveland Clinic (Hansen, 2013).

Discussion

Conway et al. (2007) and Peters (2010) challenged the assumption in the literature that Fox News should automatically be judged as a journalistic operation. Conway et al. found that Bill O'Reilly's "Talking Points Memo" segment made use of 1930s-style propaganda, while Peters argued that O'Reilly's program, while following some traditional tenets of objectivity, was largely an emotion-driven enterprise that allowed the audience to embrace a lower standard by which journalism should be judged. The current study expands the work of these two scholars, finding that in both 2009 and

2014, the Fox News prime-time programs did not, as Research Question 1 asks, exhibit the objective journalistic values of fairness and accuracy, nor did they, as Research Question 3 asks, seek to transparently engage in logical persuasion. Instead, as Research Question 2 asks, the hosts acted most consistently with the traditional values of persuasion.

Journalism

The prime-time programs often did not abide by the traditional journalistic value of accuracy and an allegiance to the facts. The network's themes were based on premises that were not accurate. Pelosi didn't say that all protesters were Nazis (FactCheck.org, 2009), nor did she claim protesting health-care reform was un-American, saying only that "[d]rowning out opposing views is simply un-American" (Pelosi & Hoyer, 2009, p. 7A). Van Susteren may have opened her August 5, 2009, show with: "Tonight: 'Fishy?' Is there something 'fishy' about you? If so, the White House says we should report you to them immediately," with Hannity and, indirectly, O'Reilly joining in, but the White House post in question didn't ask for people who were "fishy"; it sought to correct disinformation, asking people who "get an email or see something on the web about health insurance reform that seems fishy" to "send it" so factual information could be dispensed (Phillips, 2009). Of course, health-care reform legislation contained no death panels, did not ration care, and had no provisions to keep 99-year-old fathers from receiving care, as former presidential adviser Dick Morris claimed ("Hannity," August 3), or to provide care to undocumented immigrants or women seeking abortions.

Fox News' prime-time programs also did not act consistent with the journalistic value of balance, in which issues are presented fairly. In both periods, the coverage made no effort at acknowledging or rebutting the arguments favoring health-care reform. In 2009, efforts to provide health-care coverage to the uninsured were portrayed uniformly as nefarious, with those opposing health-care reform painted as patriots standing up for American values (and opposing socialism) who would be subject to retaliatory actions from the White House, while those in favor of reform were portrayed as calling protesters un-American Nazis. Health-care reform was presented as, in the words of Morris, "a device to take medical care from the elderly and give it to largely immigrants" ("Hannity," August 17). Reform would, according to the prime-time hosts and their guests, lead to the rationing of health care (the concept to which many of the hosts and guests translated the death panel claim), with Morris saying his father would "be dead today if Obama's plan passed because they would never approve that treatment for a 99-year-old, and I couldn't pay for it, I wouldn't be allowed to" ("Hannity," August 3).

The 2014 study confirms the findings of the 2009 data. Again, the Fox News prime-time programs developed themes opposing health-care reform based on misstatements of fact (repeating three of the themes from 2009), and again the coverage was

unbalanced, with the focus solely on the negative aspects of the ACA, ignoring any of its successes.

Propaganda and Persuasion

Fox News' prime-time coverage, instead, worked more closely within the traditional elements of propaganda. By seemingly coordinating themes opposing health-care reform while disparaging and dismissing those making opposing arguments, the network was seeking to arouse its conservative audience to oppose health-care reform, tapping into the values of its audience, including the touchstone conservative concerns of socialism, the overreach of government (embodied in its most harrowing incarnation in death panels), and the transfer of wealth from American seniors to undocumented immigrants. By tapping into these conservative concerns to elicit a reaction, the prime-time hosts were not engaging in persuasion.

There was no effort to persuade the listener to say, "I never saw it that way before." The lack of transparency of intent, especially apparent in Van Susteren's portrayal of the Whole Foods CEO's op-ed piece and O'Reilly's claim on his August 10, 2014, shows that he "gives voice to both sides" and his "reporting is honest," further demonstrate that the network's prime-time efforts were more in line with propaganda than persuasion.

The 2014 programs demonstrated the same approach. Again, there was no effort to have the viewer say, "I never saw it that way before," but instead the programming broadcasted inaccurate data on enrollment in the health-care exchanges and the effects on prices, coverage, and doctors that were at the heart of conservative concerns about health-care reform.

Conclusion

As with all qualitative studies, the results of this examination cannot be generalized beyond the case at hand. The study speaks to how Fox News' prime-time programs handled one issue in two periods, 5 years apart. It does not tell us how the network operated in the context of less prominent, less incendiary issues, nor does it speak to the practices of the other news and opinion programs on the network. Future research would be needed to examine Fox News' method of operation on other issues and at other times in the network's schedule.

Further, it should be noted that while a previous study of MSNBC's 2009 treatment of health-care reform found that the prime-time hosts of the liberal-leaning network exhibited greater adherence to the traditional values of journalism and persuasion (Bard, 2014), nevertheless it is impossible to determine whether the results of the present study reflect not just Fox News' practices but also the realities of the deadline-driven, 24-hour-news-cycle nature of cable television news.

Finally, the study cannot answer the question of why Fox News markets itself as an objective source of news despite its approach in prime time more closely adhering to

propaganda. Several writers have sought to explain why Fox News operates as it does, including looking at factors like the network's desire to influence policy (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008) and the marketing value of reaching an unserved audience for news (Bennett, 2001; Hickey, 1998; Sherman, 2014). Also, an earlier study looked at how the styles of the Fox News prime-time hosts worked together to advance the network's policy goals (Bard, 2016). Further research would be necessary to determine why Fox News operates as it does and whether the seeming disconnect between the marketing and practice of the network will affect the success of this approach in the future.

Nevertheless, this study's findings do call into question the implicit assumption of much of the communications research focusing on Fox News that the network's prime-time programming is or should be treated as a journalistic operation. The programs hosted by O'Reilly, Hannity, and Van Susteren did not, in August 2009 and March to April 2014, operate consistently with the traditional elements of objectivity when covering the debate over health-care reform, instead making use of tactics more closely associated with propaganda. As such, researchers would be better served by accounting for these findings when studying Fox News. Scholarship could benefit from an approach to the network that examines it not as a traditional news network but rather as an attempt to use the indicia of traditional television news to advance the conservative position on the issues of the day. Further, if Fox News' approach is substantively different from a journalistic operation, researchers should exercise care in making comparisons to other television news providers, both on cable and on the broadcast networks, on a like-to-like basis, especially when examining how individuals consume content.

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