

# Viewing news media through a critical lens: the oreilly factor and the perception...

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Media is often perceived by the general public as an impartial source of information, but in reality, media in America is highly biased. Because American media is so heavily focused on partisan politics, it is fundamentally important to understand the background and the lens through which the news is being portrayed. Certain news media groups tend to lean more liberally, while others are more conservative in their reporting; while it is journalistically unethical to report factually untrue news, it sometimes happens regardless. It may happen because a story is breaking and not all the facts are available at the present moment, or it may be intentional spin on a story, created to favor a certain viewpoint.

FOX News is one of the most highly contentious news stations in the United States. Owned by Rupert Murdoch, FOX News is known for its conservative viewpoints and tendency to support the Republican Party (Jamieson and Cappella). FOX News often presents itself-- and its very conservative talk show hosts-- as lone voices of reason amidst a sea of liberal voices in modern American media. However, Jamieson and Cappella note that overall, there is little bias within American media one way or another; according to Jamieson and Cappella, “ A meta-analysis of 59 studies found no bias in newspapers and measurable but insignificant biases in magazines and television” (Jamieson and Cappella). This means that despite the FOX News talking points emphasizing the rise of the liberal media, there is very little overall bias in media towards liberal or conservative ideology.

This does not mean that individual shows are not biased, but rather that as a whole, news reports tend towards impartiality. Shows like The O'Reilly Factor are heavily biased, in The Factor's case towards conservative ideology. In

Orwell Rolls in His Grave, director Pappas explores the ways in which the American media is controlled by powerful men with political agendas. Rupert Murdoch, the man who owns FOX News and all the associated companies, is heavily conservative, and thus, the news that FOX expresses tends to be heavily biased towards the conservative side of American politics (Jamieson and Cappella).

FOX News, and more specifically, The O'Reilly Factor, never purports to be anything but a conservative talk show; this is the positive aspect of the show. O'Reilly himself is a proud conservative, author of several books, and open about his political viewpoints (Jamieson and Cappella). The problem with The O'Reilly Factor arises when O'Reilly himself invites guests onto the show and proceeds to bully them incessantly, talking over them when they begin to answer his questions in ways he does not approve of or in a manner that calls some of his statements into question (FOX News, Bill O'Reilly Blows Up At Laura Ingraham in Epic Segment Over His 'Thump The Bible' Comments). In one segment, O'Reilly invites a woman on his show, and she takes him to task for an insult he threw at her over her new show-- it should be noted that Laura Ingraham and O'Reilly share similar ideological beliefs-- and he begins to yell over her, stating that she cannot finish her sentence, and that he does not want to be challenged (FOX News, Bill O'Reilly Blows Up At Laura Ingraham in Epic Segment Over His 'Thump The Bible' Comments). This is problematic, particularly in the light of the opinions expressed in the Orwell documentary. Orwell's famous novel, 1984, portrayed a civilization that was told what and how to think, with un-truths and misinformation spread throughout the population by force. The problem with The O'Reilly

Factor is not the conservative ideology that the host professes, but the bullying manner in which he presents his case. Bullying, in all its forms, takes away from the ability for people of different ideologies to have a rational discussion about their beliefs (Jamieson and Cappella). It also nearly negates the possibility of meeting on any kind of middle ground, because emotions run too high and people become too upset. When O'Reilly refuses to enter into any kind of calm, rational discussion, he encourages this type of behavior from those who watch his show and subscribe to his ideology.

In addition to being overtly aggressive about his talking points, O'Reilly also falls victim to one of the common problems in American media: the problem of oversimplification of complex issues. This becomes a problem frequently, regardless of the type or ideological system of the media, because of its reliance on sound bites (Orwell Rolls in His Grave). Gilens notes:

Over the past decades, the black urban poor have come to dominate public images of poverty. Surveys show that the American public dramatically exaggerates the proportion of African Americans among the poor and that such misperceptions are associated with greater opposition to welfare network TV news and weekly newsmagazines portray the poor as substantially more black than is really the case. the most sympathetic subgroups of the poor, such as the elderly and the working poor, are underrepresented, while the least sympathetic group—unemployed working-age adults—is overrepresented. Finally, these discrepancies between magazine portrayals of the poor and the true nature of poverty are greater for African Americans than for others. Thus the unflattering (and distorted) portrait of the poor presented in these newsmagazines is even more

unflattering (and more distorted) for poor African Americans. (Gilens)

The distortion of the news media is due in part, as previously stated, to the reliance on sound bites that has come into fashion in recent years. Because there is so much competition and variety within the news media today, media sources like television shows must be able to condense what is most interesting about their shows into short sound bites. For this reason, The O'Reilly Factor functions very well in television; O'Reilly's confrontational, exciting and simplistic approach to media is excellent for reducing to sound bites. Indeed, O'Reilly even has "talking points" that he discusses on his show, which are simplified versions of true conservative arguments for or against certain policy issues (FOX News, Bill O'Reilly Challenges Obama & Black Caucus to Address Race Problem).

"Talking Points" in the context of O'Reilly's show are problematic for a number of different reasons. First, they are simplistic and ignore a wide range of possibilities and points for discussion that exist within a policy issue. These talking points narrow the discussion, providing guests with a limited number of things to say in rebuttal, most of which O'Reilly refutes by speaking over them (FOX News, Bill O'Reilly Challenges Obama & Black Caucus to Address Race Problem). They also provide sensational and unrealistic situations that may never happen in reality, leaving guests who have been brought on the show ostensibly to refute and discuss issues without any logical recourse (FOX News, Bill O'Reilly Challenges Obama & Black Caucus to Address Race Problem). O'Reilly's show is disturbing because its primary function seems to be to drive a wedge between conservatives and liberals in American politics, attempting to separate them

and prevent them from finding any plausible middle ground on issues.

Causing divisive rifts between liberals and conservatives is a difficult task, because most people do not fall to the extremes of the political spectrum-- most people in the United States are socially and economically moderate (Hendershot). O'Reilly uses his bullying and extreme simplification of issues to drive people further into the conservative ideology, and simultaneously lambasts liberal ideology for being poorly thought-out, illogical, and silly (FOX News, Bill O'Reilly Challenges Obama & Black Caucus to Address Race Problem). In addition to this, O'Reilly is guilty of racism, sexism, and homophobia, thus normalizing behaviors and beliefs that should not be normalized within society (FOX News, Bill O'Reilly Challenges Obama & Black Caucus to Address Race Problem).

Large corporations and their ability to buy up and control media in the United States have created this competing culture of sensationalism and sound-bites. It has led to a breakdown in true journalism, and an increase in "news shows" that focus less on facts and more on imparting ideologies into their viewers. When government is controlled by corporations-- and those same corporations control information flow-- there is a fundamental conflict of interest. Although facts and unbiased information are available on the Internet, many people are unwilling to go out of their way to look for the truth. The American complacency with half-truths is leading to a breakdown in political savvy and knowledge.

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