

Fox Populism

Fox Populism offers fresh insights into why the Fox News Channel has been both commercially successful and politically effective. The book traces the historical development of Fox's counter-elite news brand and reveals how its iconoclastic news style was crafted by fusing two class-based traditions of American public culture: one native to the politics in populism and one native to the news field in tabloid journalism. After investigating the origins of Fox News' populist journalistic style, the book goes on to illustrate how it is deployed as a political tool for framing news events, using the network's coverage of the economic crisis of the late 2000s as the book's principal case study. Through close analysis of Fox News's top-rated programs, this study shows how Fox hails its audience as "the real Americans" and effectively re-presents narrow, conservative political demands as popular and universal.

REECE PECK is Assistant Professor of Media Culture at College of Staten Island, City University of New York (CUNY). He provides commentary on media and politics to news organizations, including *New York* magazine and the AFP.

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Fox Populism

Branding Conservatism as Working Class

REECE PECK

College of Staten Island, CUNY



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Preface

Being raised in Utah, one of the most conservative states in the country, I felt like I knew everything I needed to know about Fox News. It pervaded my landscape just like Mormonism and “Jazz” basketball. Most of my family watched Fox News simply because they were Republican. “What else is there to know?” I thought. In retrospect, my sense of “knowing” Fox News was largely unfounded. I had never actually watched its programs in full or with any regularity. What I had seen of Fox was mostly in passing or based on brief, edited clips presented on YouTube or by other news sources.

The economic crisis of the late 2000s changed my passing interest in Fox News into a long-term active one. The 2008 financial collapse and the Great Recession that followed had caused profound devastation, inflicting financial pain across both the US population and globally. Some even felt that this Great Recession could pose the gravest threat to capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Ever since the early 1990s, Democrats had been shouting, “It’s the economy, stupid!” However, in the political climate of the Great Recession, they didn’t have to shout anymore. The “Culture War” issues that had so frustrated the left (e.g., God, guns, and gays) during the George W. Bush era would no longer be the central topics of national debate. All eyes were now glued to the economy, finally giving Democrats the homefield advantage they had always longed for. With the social and political conditions of the Great Recession presenting such an intriguing case study, I wanted to know how the number one news source for conservative Americans would respond to such a clear crisis of legitimacy for the free-market economic tenets it so passionately endorsed (e.g., deregulation,

privatization, and tax cuts for the wealthy). The crisis indeed proved to be a true test of strength for Fox News' rhetorical skills.

In early 2009, I committed myself to watching Fox News closely and systematically. I analyzed over 800 broadcast transcripts and used UCLA's cable television archive to watch hours upon hours of Fox News programming, particularly the network's three top-rated shows at the time: *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Hannity*, and *Glenn Beck*. I did this for roughly two years. The programming range I analyzed and coded ranged from September 2008 – or the beginning of the financial collapse – to the midterm elections at the end of 2010. It was during this period that Fox News would experience one of the highest ratings surges in its twenty-two-year history and would galvanize a street protest movement in the Tea Party.

The benefit of my becoming so engrossed in the textual world of Fox News is that it allowed me to become intimately familiar with the network's special vocabularies and catchphrases. From such sustained viewing, I began to see how layered the political language of conservative media could be; how its recurrent code words such as “job creators,” “the liberal elite,” and “the forgotten man” could also carry “residual” (Williams, 1991) meanings from the political past that predated and ran deeper than the partisan alignments and divisions they currently expressed. Indeed, I discovered that this historical embeddedness is the secret to their power.

In 2000, Bill O'Reilly famously said his program was the only television show that presents news “from a working-class point of view.”¹ Fox's ability to advance conservative political narratives during the late-2000s economic crisis – a moment when the issue of class inequality stood at the fore of the nation's collective consciousness – convinced me that this claim needed to be taken seriously. Yet all too often the populist rhetoric of Fox's top pundits has been dismissed as a naked form of charlatanism and a simpleminded gimmick. *Fox Populism* seeks to show how the contrary is true. Not only does Fox's populist journalistic style make for clever marketing and dramatic entertainment, it also stands as one of the most sophisticated and culturally astute forms of political communication in recent American history.

While this study relies on literary-critical textual methods, in the course of my research I sought to confirm my interpretations of Fox

¹ Farhi, P. (2000, December 13). The Life of O'Reilly. *Washington Post*.

News programming by investigating other important sites for the production of conservative political discourse. From 2009 through 2011, I conducted interviews with political activists and media industry figures and conducted participant observations at various Tea Party-affiliated events in Southern California and Nevada. The media training workshops I attended at various RightOnline conferences in Las Vegas, Nevada in 2010 and in San Diego, California, in 2011 were particularly elucidating. RightOnline is the conservative counterpoint to the liberal Netroots Nation conference. Like Netroots, the conference is dedicated to teaching activists how to use the Internet and digital platforms as political tools. It is hosted by the conservative political advocacy organization Americans for Prosperity, which gains most of its funding from Charles and David Koch of Koch Industries, better known as “the Koch Brothers.”

Attending these conferences was useful because many of the discussion panels were small, intimate settings directed by prominent talk radio hosts, Internet publishers, TV personalities and politicians. These included figures such as Judge Napolitano (a Fox News pundit), Herman Cain (conservative talk radio host and former Republican presidential candidate), Representative Michelle Bachman, current Vice-President Mike Pence, and Andrew Breitbart – the late founder of Breitbart News. Observing these figures in person informed and textured my evaluations of their media performances on Fox and elsewhere.

Panels such as “Basic Investigative Reporting Skills” (July 23, 2010) and “Old Media, New Media and The Role of Citizen Journalism” (July 23, 2010) taught activists how to use journalistic practices to investigate political corruption and wasteful spending. They also trained attendees in how to cultivate a compelling mode of address for podcasting, online publishing, and public speaking in general. In a panel entitled, “Speaking Right: Communicating the Message Effectively,” I listened to conservative media pioneer Richard Viguerie stress the need to maintain the conservative movement’s central themes, which he analogized to a “four legged stool.” The first two legs are the Old Right’s emphasis on strong national defense and anticommunism and other two legs are founded on the Religious Right’s social issues and the Tea Party’s anti-government, free-market message.

At the San Diego RightOnline conference, panels such as “Effective Online Radio and Podcasting” and “Using Humor for Effective Content” outlined key presentational priorities of conservative talk media that informed my interpretive framework for studying Fox News. These

included “being authentic” and “being likable,” establishing a clear media persona and story about oneself, having liberal guests on to create confrontation for entertainment value, and more. In these workshops, I found strong parallels between the verbal rhetoric of conference attendees and Fox News programming discourse. In one panel at the Las Vegas, Nevada conference entitled “Prosperity 101: Citizen Economic Education,” panelists Herman Cain, AFP executive director Linda Hansen, and *The Wall Street Journal*’s John Fund gave presentations and passed out DVDs and literature on how to teach friends, employees, and coworkers about the moral virtues of capitalism. Their political literature and verbal discourse were patently identical to the “producerist” rhetorical framing that Fox News utilized in its framing of the Great Recession (see Chapter 4).

“Cultural populist” (see Chapter 3) discourses were pervasive as well in these conferences, especially in the workshops devoted to citizen journalism and amateur news production practices. Audience members were repeatedly told by the panelists running the workshops that most mainstream journalists “look down on ordinary Americans” and question their ability to produce intelligent commentary. In essence, the speakers running these workshops framed the audience of grassroots activists as monadic versions of Fox News. As individuals wielding the tools of social media, the narrative they were told about their political and cultural role mirrored one of Fox News’ central institutional narratives about challenging the cultural elitism of the mainstream media.

The last sites of conservative discourse that I turned to in order to test and orient my interpretations of Fox News programming were Tea Party political events that I attended between 2009 and 2011. On April 15, 2009, the day the first nationally coordinated anti-tax Tea Party protest occurred, some colleagues and I went down to the San Diego County Regional US Post Office, where the largest Tea Party protest was being held in San Diego County. There we took notes on the protest signs and conducted numerous audio-recorded interviews with activists. The following year, on April 15, 2010, we attended the second nationally coordinated protest in the same location and again conducted audio-recorded interviews with participants and took notes. Notably, the discourses I observed at these protests in the signs, speeches, and in the interviews predominantly dealt with the issue of wealth distribution. Moreover, they closely resembled the “producerist” rhetoric that is centrally featured in this book. For example, at the April 15, 2009 protest, I noted a middle-aged man wearing work boots and jeans holding a sign

that read “spread my work ethic, not my wealth.” Another sign a protestor was carrying read, “socialism: trickle-up poverty,” again and again playing on the themes of unjust wealth distribution.

Throughout 2010 and 2011, I attended other Tea Party events in smaller towns in the broader San Diego area, such as El Cajon and Oceanside. As with the RightOnline conferences, these Tea Party events were promising locations for meeting Fox News viewers, especially ones that through their investment in activism were likely to be opinion leaders in their own interpersonal networks. Thanks to an older couple who sold “patriot t-shirts,” I was introduced to a wide range of rank-and-file participants and had long informal discussions with them about the state of the US news media and particularly about why they preferred Fox News over other news sources. At these events, I met congressional Tea Party candidates and local talk radio hosts who agreed to do extended recorded interviews at later dates.

I do not mention this fieldwork to suggest that it stands as proof of my interpretations of Fox News programming. Rather, I stress how this secondary research functioned as a guiding device and safeguard against allowing my analysis to veer toward idiosyncratic, overly impressionistic interpretations that have no or little recursive connection with other sources and forms of conservative political communication. Because the discourses and representational practices used at these events and mentioned interviews closely and consistently reflected what I observed on Fox News, this secondary research, at every step of the way, renewed my confidence in the core textual arguments of the study.

In addition to this fieldwork, this project relied on audience data from nonprofit research organizations like the Pew Research Center and National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). Beyond publishing quarterly ratings indices that show who is winning and losing in the cable news ratings game, commercial ratings companies like Nielsen tend to guard the more fine-grained data they have on the cable news audience. In most cases, researchers must pay for access to Nielsen audience data. Future studies on Fox News would benefit immensely from having greater access to Nielsen’s audience data and also from more ethnographic research on the Fox News audience, something that is relatively scarce.

By capturing how Fox News programming operates as a complex “cultural system” (Norton, 2011) and by historically contextualizing the key political narratives and performance techniques Fox News hosts utilize to frame and dramatize news events, I believe this study

offers new insights into why Fox News has been both commercially successful and politically effective. Moreover, this book will provide future quantitative studies on Fox News with descriptive tools and analytical categories that more adequately account for the stylistic nuances and particularities of the conservative media sector and political television more broadly.

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This book bears my name but it is the collective product of various communities both within and without the academy. I credit the peculiar city of Salt Lake and the two (very large) extended families that raised me there for giving me an early education in ideology critique. My family was divided along the lines of the religious and nonreligious, like Salt Lake City itself. My cheerier Latter-day Saints (LDS) side attuned me to the power of moral philosophy, while my grittier secular side gave me a healthy dose of skepticism. Both sides taught me how to see the humanity in people, regardless of their politics or religion.

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Producerism,” *Media, Culture & Society* 36, no. 4 (May 2014): 526–35, and (2), Reece Peck, “Usurping the Usable Past: How Fox News Remembered the Great Depression during the Great Recession,” *Journalism* 18, no. 6 (July 2017): 680–699. I articulated a version of Chapter 1’s general argument and historical outline in a short two-page essay entitled, “Is Fox News the Smartest Journalism Ever?: Tabloid Television Is Great at Manipulating America’s Long History of Elitism and Class Conflict” (2014, November 4) at *Zócalo Public Square*.

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