

Research Paper

Fred Vultee

Fear and balanced

The world according to the foxnews.com homepage

Abstract: This discourse analysis draws on a database of foxnews.com homepages from 2022-23 to assess the issues, stories, and actors that help form the worldview of the Fox audience. The thematic assessment is complemented by a study of text features that address licensing: Who speaks and how, and under what conditions? Results address a question that has drawn attention for more than two decades: »What is Fox News?« (BAUER et al. 2021).

Keywords: Fox News, right-wing media, news routines, media agenda, discourse analysis

Introduction

A first-time reader of the midcentury *Chicago Tribune*, press critic A. J. Liebling wrote in 1950, encounters »a land of somber horror« in which some actors and events »superficially resemble« their counterparts in the real world, but one can never be sure. After this initial shock,

»The Tribune reader issues from his door walking on the balls of his feet, muscles tense, expecting attacks by sex-mad footpads at the next street corner, forewarned against the smooth talk of strangers with a British accent, and prepared to dive behind the first convenient barrier at the sound of a guided missile approaching -- any minute now -- from the direction of northern Siberia« (LIEBLING 1975: 234-235).

Liebling's fanciful encounter with the *Tribune* reflects the intersection of news judgment and public opinion that underlies the agenda-setting process. An issue like the economy might look familiar but is yet unfamiliar because different attributes – its leading actors and its causal factors – structure its narrative

elements differently, while another issue (British treachery or »go woke, go broke«, which appears in seven unique headlines across the study period) looks to the newcomer as if it came from a different planet. A visit to foxnews.com, the home page of the popular right-wing Fox News Channel, provides a rough equivalent today. A vice presidential meeting with allies during an international crisis is a leading story, but it is presented as a repeat-offense example of political misbehavior: »Harris again laughs when facing difficult question« (»Kamala Harris ripped« 2022). Issues that look fanciful, like a purported campaign to insert equity-oriented legal theories into primary classrooms across the nation, become top stories as they take on familiar hero-villain dramatic structures (»Youngkin’s CRT tip line in Virginia triggering Dems« 2022). This paper applies discourse analysis to a database of foxnews.com home pages to reconstruct a Fox agenda: not just a place where voters and potential voters absorb information about issues and candidates, as in the original agenda-setting study (MCCOMBS/SHAW 1972), but a place where they are reminded that what they knew yesterday is still true today. In James Carey’s terms, this ritualized form of communication is less about the information itself than »the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world« (2009: 15). The vice presidential visit is news not because it adds to a store of knowledge about alliance behavior in crises but because familiar authorities on Twitter are called in to police the behavior of Black women who have stepped out of line.

Theory and practice: »What is Fox News?«

The Fox News phenomenon has been explored under many perspectives: Classic propaganda studies (CONWAY et al. 2007), comparative framing and sourcing practices (ADAY 2010), influences on COVID compliance (SIMONOV et al. 2020) and voting behavior (DELLAVIGNA/KAPLAN 2008), and as an »ideological clearing-house« for stories of the menacing Other (VULTEE 2009). Aday (2007) suggests that even accounting for standard US media biases toward negativity in selection and authority in sourcing, Fox’s partisanship puts it outside the mainstream, but in its time, the conservative America Firstism of the *Tribune* that Liebling remarked was not only mainstream but dominant.

Bauer and colleagues (2021) raised the »What Is Fox News?« question but did not set out to settle it, instead offering a range of perspectives for analyzing partisan news while cautioning scholars not to dismiss it out of hand as mere propaganda. Nor, despite its shrill headlines about episodic deaths, celebrities’ romantic lives and crimes against social order, is Fox simply a latter-day tabloid. In classic tabloid style (KOBRE 1995), the Fox website makes liberal use of composite images as storytelling devices, but it also adheres to established routines

of »objective« practice: displacing opinions through the use of quotation marks or »expert« opinion or adherence to gatekeeping routines that allow even disfavored actors an appearance (TUCHMAN 1972; WHITE 1950). At the top of the Fox homepage, at least, opinion is carefully labeled to distinguish it from news, regardless of the partisan tilt of the news itself. And if Fox's routines of salience, selection and sizing yield a consistent, natural way the world looks to the regular viewer (ENTMAN 1991; 1993), why is that any more propagandistic than a Vietnam-era US press in which journalists were both »ceremonial protectors of consensus values« and guardians of those values against »those who violate or challenge the political consensus« (HALLIN 1984: 21)?

As Entman (1991) suggested, no single story – or headline, quotation or other framing choice – establishes a news outlet firmly on one end of a political spectrum or another. This project seeks to add to the discussion of partisan news with a large-scale analysis of the Fox homepage as a site of gatekeeping and agenda-setting: the processes by which events are guided into the public arena and then placed in a hierarchy reflecting the salience of the issues they represent and the elements – identifying problems and their causes and implying appropriate moral judgments and solutions (ENTMAN 1993) – that place them in context.

It is the second level of agenda-setting – the framing level (KIM et al. 2002) – at which attributes of these issues or the actors that populate them give Fox its distinctive look. McCombs and Shaw (1993) describe the agenda as a metaphor that applies to any number of communication processes in which issues or objects compete for attention. While the salience of rival candidates in a campaign story will generally be carefully balanced, the issues on which they are assessed and the building blocks from which those issues are assembled will reflect different priorities and are likely to have different effects on different parts of the audience. The 1972 agenda-setting study noted that although news outlets do have points of view (and »sometimes extreme biases«), widely shared professional norms about news values underlie the consensus that forms around the salience of macro-level issues (MCCOMBS/SHAW 1972: 184). The numerous places below that level at which the agenda metaphor is applied – the actors and their roles, the nature of the problem and its solutions, and the moral lessons entailed – help account for the different maps that news organizations present to their audiences.

Those distinctions were not new to the 1968 election examined by McCombs and Shaw (1972). In March 1941, nearly a decade before Liebling sketched the world of the *Chicago Tribune* reader, the issue of providing aid to Britain against Nazi Germany – despite official US neutrality – was salient across the country, but the program known to its advocates as Lend-Lease was the »dictator bill« in the *Tribune*. Those are the moving parts that, in securitization theory (BUZAN et al. 1998; VULTEE 2022b), allow the threats of a culture war to act like those of

a »war on terror,« or like the domino theory in 1968, or a looming world war in 1941. They are identified in the texts and practices that make up news discourse.

Methods

Discourse analysis is best conceptualized as a set of methods used, among other things, to identify »ideological and political dimensions of media messages« (VAN DIJK 1993: 109). It can encompass qualitative and quantitative approaches, draws meaning from both grammar and word choice in news presentations, and can even address meanings created from the words that are not spoken (e.g., CAMERON 1998). This project draws on a database of captures of the foxnews.com homepage from 2022 and the first two months of 2023: 3,064 pages for a total of 15,320 stories, though it also uses other Fox stories not catalogued in the database.

The Fox homepage in this period presents a consistent hierarchy: five main stories are displayed, with the top story twice the width of the others and four stories reflecting the »reading diagonal« of 20th-century journalism textbooks, before a list of secondary stories begins. (The design was changed at the beginning of March 2023, with seven main stories displayed before promotions and sponsored content.) Pages were captured six to eight times a day, allowing for analysis of consistent themes as well as »stickiness«: the persistence of unique stories among the top five from one screen capture to the next. (A story is considered »unique« if the text remains the same, even if the headline and illustration are changed, allowing a more precise measure of how many stories an event might generate in a day or week.) Each story has a main headline – often used to represent the mood or moral lesson of the story – inset in its illustration and a subhead that explains or suggests the elements of the story. Variables recorded for the stories included time and date, position on the page (1-5), image, source of the story, headline and subhead, and whether the story appeared to violate the theatrical »fourth wall« and tell the audience how to interpret the story: for example, a main headline reading »Empty promises« on an article about border-control measures announced by the Biden administration. Because a »sticky« story might appear on the page from afternoon through early morning, multiple occurrences of a phrase with the same story are often collapsed into one unique case.

Provalis WordStat software was used to extract initial issue themes through topic modeling and for keyword-in-context searches that identified key actors, propositional structures and syntactic elements of licensing: which actors are allowed to blast or slam, for example, and which must be passively ripped or mocked.

Stories and actors at foxnews.com

Topic extraction with a limit of 20 themes, based on main headlines and sub-heads, produced sets of keywords that clustered into issues, all with eigenvalues higher than 2. This list was not a measure of topics' frequency but of their coherence. The most coherent topic comprised just five keywords related to the federal search for classified documents at former president Donald Trump's Florida estate: ›Lago‹, ›Mar‹, ›raid‹, ›Trump‹ and ›FBI‹. A similar but less coherent theme about Democratic President Joe Biden included ›classified‹, ›scandal‹ and ›documents‹ but ranged as far as the president's son, Hunter, and the White House press secretary. Two other Biden-related themes emerged, one concentrating on a plan to relieve student loan debt (28 unique stories across the study period use ›student loan handout‹ in a headline) and one on economic issues (including ›prices‹, ›gas‹, ›inflation‹, ›oil‹, ›record‹, ›Americans‹, and the general term ›admin‹; ›Biden admin‹, indeed, is the third most frequent phrase in the data set, with 224 occurrences in headlines and subheads).

Other topics reflect issues McCombs and Shaw (1972) identified, such as foreign affairs and ›law and order‹. The second most coherent topic is the Russia-Ukraine war, followed by a topic that incorporates mass killings (dominated by the knife murder of four students at the University of Idaho, it also includes keywords like ›shooting‹ and ›school‹) and another law-and-order issue with a distinctive Fox flavor: It includes not only ›crime‹, but ›mayor‹, ›Dem‹ and ›city‹ – and, reflecting a trend of conservative southern states sending migrants by bus to northern cities, the keywords ›illegal‹, ›immigrants‹, ›border‹ and bus. ›Dem-run‹ and ›Dem-run city‹ are the 10th and 13th most frequent headline phrases in the dataset.

›Elon Musk‹ and ›Supreme Court‹ are the fourth and fifth most frequent headline phrases, and Musk's off-again, on-again purchase of Twitter and the US Supreme Court's decision to overturn a fundamental abortion-rights precedent also emerged as strongly coherent topics (›Supreme‹ by itself is a frequent headline signal: ›Supreme battle‹, ›Supreme slapdown‹, ›Supreme shockwave‹, ›Supreme protests‹, ›Supreme anticipation‹ all identify stories about the court). The 2022 election is also a coherent topic, though no frequent phrases are associated with it. Several coherent themes represent episodic tabloid fodder: the Johnny Depp-Amber Heard lawsuit and the professional and romantic travails of the American football star Tom Brady. In other themes, though, Fox's ideological orientation stands out more clearly, particularly in the culture wars (including COVID mask requirements, the ›war on parents‹ and lingering resentment from the 2016 election). The death of Elizabeth II and the transition in the British royal family was a story everywhere, but at Fox it is a separate and less coherent topic than the doings of Prince Harry and his American wife, the actor Meghan Markle

(»Prince Harry« and »Meghan Markle« are the 28th and 29th most frequent phrases). Musk's purchase of Twitter is part of a larger theme also drawing on the »Twitter files« (the 30th most common headline phrase), portrayed at Fox as evidence of the Biden camp's collusion with private industry to censor and suppress Fox's heroes. Gender identity also emerges as a coherent topic, with its keywords pointing to a culture-war theme that was already emerging in the third Trump campaign in 2023: »trans,« »swimmer,« »athletes,« »sports,« »women,« and »school.«

»Foreign policy« was salient for all three presidential tickets in the 1968 campaign, and it too outlines a distinct Fox agenda. A China topic comprising »spy,« »balloon,« »China,« »Pelosi,« »Taiwan,« and »missile« suggests what sort of China event does not become a story. A joint press conference March 13, 2023, by Biden and the UK and Australian prime ministers of details on the AUKUS treaty, aimed at countering Chinese influence by (among other things) providing Australia with US nuclear submarines, appears briefly as a »Watch live« video clip whose headline mentions the Chinese »threat« but not the countermeasure. (The homepage on March 13 and 14 did carry two stories about UFOs and one about a truck driver photographing a »ghost-like figure« on the roadside.) A presidential election in France, a nuclear-armed NATO ally, did not appear among the top five stories on pages captured between April 9 and 24 (the election was April 10, with a runoff April 24), though it did reach the No. 4 position on April 25, when the victor was out celebrating: »Biden's call to Macron goes unanswered on election night.« Among the stories that did find a place in the top five during that period were two stories about Hunter Biden (the seventh most frequent headline phrase) and two about his wife, four stories about Biden not going to Ukraine, and stories about COVID hypocrisy, media meltdowns, and textbook restrictions in Florida, along with 10 unique stories about Elon Musk and 19 about the Depp-Heard libel trial. Scholars of international politics have lamented that the US press is a »realism-free zone« (WALT 2008) when it ventures overseas; it is hard not to conclude that national interest is less salient to Fox's news determinations than whether an event might make its political enemies look good or bad.

Some news, of course, is simply news. Fox's early coverage of the invasion of Ukraine looks like US coverage of an international conflict. It is heavily personalized, but the news presentation suggests a clear delineation between aggressor and victim, in contrast to some of Fox's commentary (for example, CARLSON 2022). But Ukraine's decline in salience across the study period is dramatic. Only three unique stories (one about a Twitter poll by Musk) with »Ukraine« in the headline appear in October 2022, with two in November, four in December (the month Ukrainian President Zelenskyy visited Washington) and eight in February 2023, the month Biden visited Ukraine. There was at least one Ukraine story among the top five every day of March 2022.

Attribution and aspects: How events become stories

As Liebling noted of the *Tribune*, an issue can look familiar even though the actors seem to be doing radically different things for radically different reasons than at a competing outlet. The COVID pandemic, identified in a mid-2022 assessment of the data as part of a »culture war« topic that included education and Florida's battle with Disney World, reflects that pattern. A distinctively valenced attribute of COVID is hypocrisy, which is exclusively a property of Fox's villains. The phrase »rules for thee,« or its longer version »rules for thee, not for me,« shows up in nine unique headlines across the study period. Anthony Fauci, then director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, is a frequent actor in COVID stories, but mostly as a foil for right-thinking critics in appearances at the Senate, as an arrogant flip-flopper who ignores the science (»Fauci wants everyone to follow the science even though he doesn't«), and as an overpaid civil servant whose power needs curbing. He appears in 60 unique stories across the study period, sometimes identified as »Dr. Flip-Flop« or »Spin doctor« (which appears in four headlines). Headlines mentioning COVID itself often rely on failed strategies, changes of mind, or misrepresentations of data by the Biden administration or by liberal leaders in cities or states, or the supposed misdeeds of the media. Given the consensus professional norm of holding the powerful to account, none of these cases individually are surprising, but their centrality as aspects of events that drive stories is indicative. The attributes of education as an issue – the stories that are told, the characters who animate those stories and the moral tales that are told – also form a novel world: a »war on parents« in which arrogant school boards refuse to allow debate, tales of adult sex habits, or »critical race theory« are forced into the elementary school classroom, and the federal government pursues parents as if they were terrorists.

Not all law-and-order stories are ideologically valenced. The University of Idaho murders, occurring in a heavily Republican state, were a dominant topic at the end of 2022, appearing among the top five stories at least once a day from Nov. 14 through Dec. 18 (as the lead story at least once on 29 of those days), but partisanship is not mentioned in those headlines. The attribution of leading issues to the failings of political leadership is clear elsewhere in the crime issue. Of 63 unique headlines mentioning »Dem-run« or states, 39 dealt with crime, six with homelessness, and six with migration.

Another consideration in how events reach the top of the homepage is how Fox learns about them. Overall, about half the stories that appear among the top five during the study period are coded as staff-generated (the default when no outside source is indicated or if material from other media complements original reporting). The second-largest category, about 26%, was sourced to other media outlets, including the traditional prestige media, prominent and obscure new media

outlets (some of them recalling the far-right »vermin press« of the pre-wwii era), and local news organizations – particularly local Fox stations, from which episodic local crime coverage is frequently sourced. Separate coding categories are used for stories with a Fox byline that credit a news agency like Reuters or AP in a note at the end (about 5%) and stories from other sources that Fox »confirms« or »can confirm« (about 2%). The third most frequent source, around 11%, is social media, which can include celebrity confessions, the doings of »influencers« or – more commonly – social media reactions to events or actors (Twitter »erupts« or »explodes« in 15 headlines across the study period.) Around 4% of stories are sourced to Fox programs, primarily talk shows, and about 1% are commentaries, almost always clearly labeled as »opinion.« There are only fractional differences between stories that appear once and stories that appear more than once.

Staff-generated stories make up nearly two-thirds of stories in the lead position, followed by stories sourced to other media (about 16%) and social media (around 9%), and stories with a news agency contribution noted (around 5%). Fourteen lead stories, for example, are sourced to the website *Politico* across the study period, and Fox regularly draws on the traditional media outlets it derides. Articles from all sources frequently move up or down the page as the day wears on. In November 2022 alone, 25 articles in the lead position are attributed to social media. Those articles reflect a range of favorite Fox topics, including liberal media misbehavior, the »student loan handout,« Hunter Biden, and especially Elon Musk, who appears in seven. In some of these, »Twitter users« join in to echo Musk (a Google site search indicates that »conservatives on Twitter« was used for attribution in 12 stories that month); in others, a single Musk tweet – even just a single emoji – is enough for a story. Local news reports that month also helped populate the cast of characters that make up the continuing drama at Fox: not just heroes and villains (»Armed men targeted wrong woman in Chicago and now one may not survive«) but victims of the culture wars as well (»Catholic archdiocese under fire for religious beliefs on gender.«).

Repeat appearances, not just by experts (the same Russia expert appears in 21 stories in March 2022) but by the »real people« who add authentic voices to stories, also help strengthen topics like crime, schools, and homelessness. An 83-year-old Vietnam veteran felt safer in the streets of Saigon than in Portland, Oregon, four times between February and May 2023; the same drug counselor appears in 10 stories about homelessness in Seattle from January to March 2023; the same advocate for parents discusses school misdeeds in 13 stories from April 2021 through March 2023.

›Villains, victims, and the virtuous‹

Examining the cast of characters in »Talking Points Memo« editorials by then-Fox commentator Bill O’Reilly in 2005, Conway and colleagues used the framework of pre-wwII propaganda studies to categorize the players in the »the battle between good and evil« (2007: 197). That drama and its cast of »villains, victims and the virtuous« continue today. Terrorism is much less salient than in 2005, and the justice system – particularly »Soros-funded prosecutors« or the federal agencies that investigate Donald Trump – is counted more often among villains, but the military and first responders in general are still virtuous (»Family thanks firefighters for rescuing American flag from devastating inferno«). In some cases, such as the »war on cops« or the battle to keep wokeness out of the military ranks, they qualify as victims. Ordinary Americans can rank among the virtuous too (»Thieves in Dem-led city ransack bands van, fans come to rescue«), particularly when they speak up at school board meetings or when the »good guy with a gun« foils an assault or a robbery. Fox also renders individual Americans as villains, though, singling out individual professors, K-12 teachers, or physicians who transgress culture-war boundaries: speaking about systemic racism or advocating so-called »gender ideology« in schools.

In its dispute with Florida, Disney World provides an example of a nongovernment institutional villain: enjoying supposedly unfair tax advantages, disappointing parents with its wokeness, spreading sexualized messages for children and suppressing its conservative employees. The national salience of the dramas in which Disney found itself was clear between March 30 and April 5, when Disney was among the stop stories every day but one – indeed, producing three unique lead stories on April 1 alone.

Media actors are also frequent institutional or individual villains. *The View*, a daytime talk show on the ABC network, was mentioned in 51 unique headlines/subheads across the study period (»Dim ›View,‹« »Radical ›View,‹« »Violent ›View,‹« »Bad ›View‹«). It is a regular target of conservative slamming, blasting or roasting, and villainous liberal behaviors (panicking, being flustered, descending into chaos) are attributed to its hosts. Similar behaviors are attributed to rival cable network CNN (panicking, being triggered, spiraling into chaos). One of its former hosts, Don Lemon, appears in 26 unique headlines, often as »sour« (5 cases), »bitter« (2 cases) or »seedy.« Developments or doings at CNN, including transgressions like criticizing the virtuous Ron DeSantis, provide five unique stories across the study period, but CNN’s reporting or interviews are used for the lead story 15 times. *The New York Times* appears in 27 unique headlines, sometimes for what its opinion writers say or for causing Twitter or the »left-wing media« to »melt down«; the *Times*’ reporting is used in 10 Fox lead stories across the study period.

Performers, athletes, and other celebrities can fill multiple roles in top Fox stories. Athletes are villainous when they decline to stand for the national anthem; women athletes are victims of a »gender ideology« that forces them to compete against trans opponents but virtuous when they speak out about their complaints. Actors can be victims when »blacklisted« for their religious beliefs or »silenced for their values«; when they leave Hollywood for a »simpler« or »Christian« life or battle the »parenting police« (six stories across the study period).

The behavior of athletes or fans is sometimes more relevant than the game itself. Players and fans can be enraged or outraged by a referee's call (as consecutive headlines on the same page noted in January 2023), even if neither story mentions the outcome of the game. Similarly, a »basketball brouhaha« (a fight in which two players were ejected during the third quarter) can make the top five without needing to mention the final score. Neither Fox nor the readers who left comments on the article needed to specify the players' ethnicity:

»Can we just throw them some peanuts«

»Why do they need a full month for their history? A minute is more than sufficient« [The game was played during Black History Month.]

»NBA. NOTHING BUT ANIMALS«

Lexical choices can also make it easier to identify regular actors. Twenty unique stories have »gaffe« in the headline; 11 of the gaffes belong to Biden (with two by his wife, Jill Biden) and four to Vice President Harris, with two of the remaining ones from organized labor and a TV program. »Word salad« in headlines is uniquely attributed to Harris. Developments are »bombshells« in the headlines of 80 stories. The largest single proportion of these represent crime or court proceedings; counting the Depp-Heard civil trial, 25 % of cases concern crime and courts. Other instances track with salient issues even as they illuminate the characters: Hillary Clinton and the investigation of Trump's often-proclaimed »Russia hoax« produced nine bombshells; Musk/Twitter and celebrities in general, eight each; the Biden administration, seven (10 if Hunter Biden bombshells are included); the UK royal family, six; and the Supreme Court, five.

Blasting, slamming, roasting: How participation is licensed

The villain-victim-virtuous distinction also explains how actors are licensed to enter the conversation in stories at the Fox homepage. Grammar – the ways in which sentences are assembled, not the prescriptive howls of the journalism textbook – helps fill out that explanation further. Verb voice suggests who can speak and under which conditions: who is allowed to slam or blast a political actor or policy, and which actors and policies must passively submit to being mocked or roasted. Broadly, victims and the virtuous do the bulk of the slamming and

blasting, while villains – the media, the Biden administration, liberal prosecutors – are the recipients. The main distinction between 2022 and similar findings from 2021 is the large presence of an international actor, Russia, as a slam target. Because blasting and slamming are among the beloved »action verbs« of news textbooks and style manuals (e.g. MENCHER 1993), they are common across professional media, but the license to blast is an indicator of the partisan leanings underlying a news outlet’s agenda: the degree to which all bureaucratic practices are slammed, rather than just those of one party or inclination. Discounting literal uses (storms slamming the coast or blasts ringing out), slamming and blasting are used broadly passive, with mocking and roasting much more so.

The primary targets of active slamming are liberal or Democratic political figures or institutions and the media; those are also the most frequent targets of passive slamming, though the relative positions can change across time. Active slamming is predominantly the role of virtuous actors. These can be political elites (members of Congress, former governors, a »GOP Senate hopeful«) or officials or organizations representing public safety or perspectives or the general »virtuous« position of Fox News favorites (police departments or unions, prosecutors, the National Rifle Association, »pro-life« groups), but occasionally ad hoc social groups (Canadian »freedom convoys«). From the supposedly liberal perspective, active slamming is most often licensed in cases of apostasy: a writer for *The Atlantic* can slam CNN for how it quotes the president, a »progressive journo« can slam Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (a frequent target of blasting, slamming, and mockery) for attending the Met Gala, a supposedly liberal *New York Times* columnist can slam »crazies« advocating sex education, and the ubiquitous liberal commentator Bill Maher can slam cancel culture and hypocrisy. The White House and more liberal Democrats can slam each other at will. In a rare exception in this data set, pro-choice activists were allowed to slam the leaked Supreme Court decision to abolish *Roe v. Wade* in one headline. An unusual exception created by the war in Europe is the licensing of disfavored actors to slam. Biden, for example, can slam Vladimir Putin, and the US and NATO can slam Russian disinformation.

Active and passive blasting follow similar conventions but with different exceptions. Professional sports organizations are usually among the virtuous, but when they turn against their supporters (NASCAR rescinding approval of a sponsorship by a cryptocurrency website that had repeated an anti-Biden slur), they can be passively blasted. Villainous actors can be targeted actively and passively (»Candace Owens blasts AOC for bratty response« and »AOC blasted for bulls--- answer«), and active blasting is open to a wider range of nonelites: for example, a lone dad can »blast CRT in scathing speech« as he takes on a school board, or an individual restaurateur can blast a »high-profile Dem« who ignores COVID rules.

Mockery follows similar rules. The conservative ranks can be policed in a process that resembles blasting. Like the police, the military is usually unassailable as a revered institution, but when (under Democratic leadership) it considers »diversity, equity and inclusion« to be »necessities,« it too can be mocked.

Though this analysis generally excludes subordinated forms of mockery (in which the mocking takes place in a subordinate or relative clause), some of those cases are relevant: »Doctor tears into hosts after they mock easing of COVID-19 rules« and »Kamala’s off-script moment becomes social media field day for mocking her« both suggest that mocking follows similar rules even when it is not the motive force of the main clause.

Speech acts: Speaking out and breaking silence

A »Disney employee« appears to be an apostate in headlines from March 31 and April 1: »Disney employee’s surprising message on what workers really think of Florida’s parental rights law«; »Disney employee breaks silence on how workers really feel about FL law«; and »Disney employee’s dire warning about economic fallout from ›leftward lurch‹.« The reader who clicks through from the homepage to the story would learn that the employee is also seeking the Republican nomination for a Florida congressional seat. That observation points to another practice that is common to the environment of interactive journalism but contributes to – or cannot be ruled out as a factor in – the agenda of attributes at the Fox homepage.

To »break silence« describes an action and assumes a prior silence. While this often is not borne out in the text – the »silence« can be a matter of hours – the implication is that a corner has been turned. Similar verbs include speaking out, sounding the alarm, and getting brutally honest (most often applied to Democratic figures).

Silence-breaking is repeatable as well as accessible to multiple actors. Consider the case in which the actor Will Smith slapped presenter Chris Rock during the March 2022 Academy Awards ceremony. Although Smith had apologized to his colleagues while accepting an award later in the ceremony, and addressed the matter after his resignation from the academy, he again broke his silence on July 29. Rock broke his own »silence« in the lead article shortly after midnight on March 31; three of the top five stories in this capture addressed the slapping incident.

Other reactions to that event highlight the villains/virtuous distinction. »Woke media« blamed »White supremacy« for the outrage that followed the slap, and a CNN anchor was »mocked for who she blames,« but a favored actor – commentator Maher (whose comments made the top 5 stories 32 times during the study period) – »destroys Hollywood libs« for their response.

Silence can also remain unbroken, and this is a convenient way of policing disfavored actors: the Black basketball player LeBron James and the Disney corporation can both be criticized for not speaking out on China. But a Black performer who speaks about »cancel culture,« like Dave Chappelle, remains on the side of the virtuous. Similarly, matters of news practice that might be invisible to the naked eye can contain suggestions about how the value of news is determined.

Markers of practice

The investment of staff time (a zero-sum commodity) and the perceived value that a news organization can add above what the audience could get from any other news outlet are among the indicators of news value hierarchies at Fox. Thirty years ago, this might have looked like the local newspaper that subscribed to a supplemental news service (from the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, or *Washington Post*), giving it a product that set it apart from competitors relying solely on a general service like the AP.

A news organization's own survey research represents a substantial investment of time and effort, yet Fox's own monthly polling on presidential approval does not provide headlines for the top five stories. That is not to suggest that presidential approval is not a salient issue. A January headline, for example, contended that »Joe's poll numbers are getting so bad, McEnany had to >double-check< them,« reflecting a Quinnipiac survey in which 35% of respondents approved of the president's job performance; Fox's poll that month had the approval figure at 47%.

»Biden's approval dives into uncharted territory for the first time in his presidency« was a February headline reporting the Real Clear Politics »average« at 39% approval; Fox's survey showed 43% approval. Similarly, in March, »Biden approval rating sinks to new low as Americans doubt his ability to handle Russian invasion« (NBC poll with approval at 39%; Fox's March poll, 44%; in May, »Joe's new low: Biden's abysmal approval rating plummets again in new poll« (Associated Press poll with 39% approval; Fox's May poll, 45%); in June, »Joe's woes: Biden's approval rating plunges as doubts fester among Democrats« (USA Today/Suffolk poll with 39% approval; Fox's June poll, 43%).

Many news organizations do a poor job interpreting public opinion surveys. Fox's reporting on its own polling (as opposed to interpreting others' work) stands out for its caution; for example, it applies a »margin of error« to both points in a sample when discussing whether a candidate or issue »leads« in a poll. A quality national survey is expensive; the congruence of a poll's findings with the institutional agenda, even if approval plummets or plunges to the

same point month after month, clearly outweighs the value of promoting that investment.

The role of public opinion is also reflected in another development that, if not unique to Fox, plays out distinctively there. »Digital Originals,« an update on the old »man in the street« or »inquiring photographer« format of the *Tribune's* glory days, touches on two key matters: how opinion is represented, and what sort of sample is allowed to represent it. »Digital Originals« appear in 73 unique stories across the study period; here are some example headlines, subheads, and data:

»Free fall: Americans asked to grade Biden as president's poll numbers plummet« (Jan. 19; 6 people identified by first names, one with no names)

»Do your job: Southern voters get very blunt about what they want from their president« (Feb. 22; five interviewees identified by first name only, one as »the Atlanta woman«)

»A bunch of bull: Frustrated Americans getting crushed at the pump aren't buying Biden's response« (March 10; four people identified by first name only)

»He's killing this economy: Americans sound off on inflation struggles after Biden claims his administration is changing lives« (June 18; seven grocery shoppers in New York and Virginia, all identified by first name only)

»Marching in place: Americans get brutally honest when asked about state of the country« (March 24; five people in Washington, DC, all first names only)

»A lot of people struggling: Americans get bluntly honest about Biden as inflation surges to record highs« (April 15; six people in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, all first names only)

The quotations, usually on camera, are easy to verify and reflect a familiar practice of objectivity; just as a story reporting on a random-sample survey, they usually reflect a balance of viewpoints. But the »brutally honest« story they tell is shaped by the headlines.

Conjunctive propositions

Van Dijk (1993) refers to the proposition as »the conceptual meaning structure of a clause«; Huddleston and Pullum (2002) suggest that the proposition is the abstract element that carries a truth value and thus allows a clause to assert a claim about truth. This abstract-seeming excursion into the grammatical side of discourse analysis becomes more concrete when considering a standard practice of connecting ideas in headlines. Because headlines need to be both wide-reaching and concise, it is common to join two propositions that express similar truth values: »Red Sox win as Yankees lose on the road,« for example. The sleight of hand arises when the conjunction joins propositions of unequal weight, such as a measurable event and a surmise: »Educator speaks out as community explodes over critical race theory,« for example, connects an event with a surmise: A way

things should be, even if not a way things are. This process allows statements about how the way things ought to be – gasoline prices should still be soaring, and the president’s approval rating should still be plummeting – to reinforce the attributes contained in the statement of how things are.

A headline like »Heroic firefighters praised as cause of deadly high-rise inferno revealed« looks perfectly normal because it is. Both propositions – the praise and the revelation – can be connected to concrete, measurable events. The modifier »heroic« breaks the fourth wall in favor of the virtuous (first responders are presumptively heroes in Fox articles), but that sort of evaluation is also routine in news stories. »Biden walks on eggshells as approval sinks, far-left loses confidence« (under the main headline »How low can you go«), on the other hand, relies on the fact of sinking approval, which is not borne out in the data: Biden’s approval, at 43% in one survey that was in the field when the headline appeared, had been consistent between 40% and 44% in the two weeks preceding.

A similar pattern can be observed in headlines about crime (»Legally armed drivers in liberal city take action as carjackings surge across US«), international issues (»World holds its breath as »weak« Joe contemplates deploying troops, shifting restrained NATO stance«), and relations with the conservative press (»Raging Biden curses out Fox News’ Peter Doocy as he takes his bitterness towards press to a new level«).

This situation can also occur when both propositions are hypothetical, as a subordinated clause creates the truth of the independent clause. In »New Harris staffer already on defensive as old tweet comes back to haunt him,« the old tweet’s function is still a supposition, but it establishes the correctness under which »on the defensive« operates. (Liberals, again, are the primary targets when the past »comes back to haunt« someone.)

Discussion

Fox News’s website is a distinctive product, much like the *Tribune* that landed on Liebling’s breakfast tray: idiosyncratic, party-aligned, and in no doubt about who its enemies – and its heroes – are. Whether or how those characteristics distinguish either Fox or the *Tribune* from partisan journalism, or even from journalism as a whole, is the core of the »What is Fox News?« question raised by Bauer et al. (2021). Their call is for a »richer vocabulary« through which these gradations can be made clearer and for more attention to the different meanings that a news presentation can make for different audiences: lay, professional or scholarly. This paper has tried to identify the themes and actors that make the day’s news into such different plays on different stages.

Any single moment of partisan or post-partisan news is hard to distinguish from »regular« news because, in isolation, hostility toward official actors or suspicion about their actions is impossible to distinguish from a professional consensus on the press's »watchdog« role. Sourcing practices that devalue the news organization's investments of time and effort – ignoring in-house surveys in favor of external surveys that support a broader issue of presidential failure and weakness – might in isolation appear to be no more than careful surveillance of the media environment to bring audiences the latest in relevant news. Any day's Ukraine news might call for an in-house expert to assess Vladimir Putin's psychological state, rather than the effect of NATO munitions on Russian resupply lines.

Only in context do these cases form attributes that veer from the professional ideologies that painted such a congruent picture for McCombs and Shaw's Chapel Hill audience. Narratives in which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention change its COVID guidance because »the science,« or a recognition that science is inseparable from cultural concerns in risk communication (DOUGLAS 1992), has changed never become part of the discourse. There are no cases in which Twitter explodes in favor of a policy aimed at reducing carbon emissions. The vice president is never a figure of policy, only a figure of ridicule; presidential approval is forever plummeting, even when it is rising. As Carey (2009:16) put it, the Fox agenda presents »a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed.« Rather than being a right-wing fabrication that functions to separate the angry from their money (WALLACE-WELLS 2021), the supposed insertion of critical race theory into primary schools becomes a threat to the future of society itself: »the sustainability [...] of traditional patterns of language, culture and religious and national identity and custom« (BUZAN et al. 1998: 119). Again, though, step forward the news organization that did not make space for *Saturday Night Live's* re-creation of the bed-fouling tale from the Depp-Heard trial or otherwise presented a »dramatic action in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as an observer at a play« (CAREY 2009: 16-17). Fox is eager to speak truth to power, as long as it does not have to speak truth to its own allies in the process.

The repetition of these narratives and their seeming urgency – critical race theory looms over the opening of a new school year, presidential fecklessness is moving China closer to world dominance by the day, cities will collapse under the self-induced burdens of crime and homelessness – support the suggestions of securitization theory (BUZAN et al. 1998) that cultural security calls for immediate corrective action because otherwise the possibility of action is lost forever. A challenge with the Fox news diet is that it contains no servings smaller than extra-large; whichever side is winning, there is no respite from the ultimate battle of good and evil.

About the author

Fred Vultee (*1955), PhD, is Professor of Journalism at Wayne State University, Detroit, USA. His research focuses on news practice, particularly in the construction of national and societal security. He was an editor at US newspapers for 25 years before entering graduate school. Contact: vultee@wayne.edu

References

- ADAY, SEAN (2010): Chasing the bad news: An analysis of 2005 Iraq and Afghanistan war coverage on NBC and Fox News Channel. In: *Journal of Communication*, 60(1), pp. 144-164.
- BAUER, A.J.; NADLER, ANTHONY; NELSON, JACOB L. (2021): What is Fox News? Partisan journalism, misinformation and the problem of classification. In: *Electronic News*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1931243121106042>
- Biden administration to remove 5 terror groups from blacklist (2022). In: *Foxnews.com*, 15 May 2022. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/biden-administration-to-remove-five-terror-groups-blacklist>
- BUZAN, BARRY; WÆVER, OLE; DE WILDE, JAAP (1998): *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- CAMERON, DEBORAH (1998): Is there any ketchup, Vera?: Gender, power and pragmatics. In: *Discourse & Society*, 9, pp. 437-455.
- CAREY, JAMES W. (2009): *Communication as culture, revised edition: Essays on media and society*. Routledge.
- CARLSON, MATT (2018): Confronting measurable journalism. In: *Digital Journalism*, 6, pp. 404-417.
- CARLSON, TUCKER (2022): Tucker Carlson: Biden is using the war in Ukraine to distract from crises at home. In: *Foxnews.com*, 18 April 2022. <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/tucker-carlson-biden-war-ukraine-distract-crises>
- CONWAY, MIKE; GRABE, MARIA ELIZABETH; GRIEVES, KEVIN (2007): Villains, Victims and The Virtuous In Bill O'Reilly's »No-Spin Zone«: Revisiting World War propaganda techniques. In: *Journalism Studies*, 8, pp. 197-223.
- DELLAVIGNA, STEFANO; KAPLAN, ETHAN (2007): The Fox News effect: Media bias and voting. In: *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122, pp. 1187-1234.
- DOUGLAS, MARY (1992): *Risk and culture: Essays in cultural theory*. London: Routledge.
- ENTMAN, ROBERT M. (1993): Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. In: *Journal of Communication*, 43, pp. 51-58.
- FEEZELL, JESSICA T.; GLAZIER, REBECCA A.; BOYDSTUN, AMBER E. (2019): Framing, identity, and responsibility: do episodic vs. thematic framing effects vary by

- target population? In: *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1584751>
- GROSS, KIMBERLY (2008): Framing persuasive appeals: Episodic and thematic framing, emotional response and policy opinion. In: *Political Psychology*, 29, pp. 169-192.
- HALLIN, DANIEL C. (1984): The media, the war in Vietnam, and political support: A critique of the thesis of an oppositional media. In: *The Journal of Politics*, 46(1), pp. 2-24.
- HUDDLESTON, RODNEY; PULLUM, GEOFFREY S. (2002): *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge University Press.
- »Iowans respond to delayed project giving Apple \$200 million in public incentives: ›It's just welfare« (2022). In: *Foxnews.com*, 21 March 2022. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/iowans-respond-to-delayed-project-giving-apple-200-million-in-public-subsidies-its-just-welfare>
- Kamala Harris ripped for looking to Polish president for help on question about Ukrainian refugees (2022). In: *Foxnews.com*, 10 March 2022. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/kamala-harris-ripped-looking-polish-president-help-question-ukrainian-refugees>
- KIM, SEI-HILL; SCHEUFELE, DIETRAM A.; SHANAHAN, JAMES (2002): Think about it this way: Attribute agenda-setting function of the press and the public's evaluation of a local issue. In: *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79, pp. 7-25.
- KOBRÉ, KEN (1995): Positive/Negative: The Long Tradition of Doctoring Photos. In: *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 2(2), pp. 14-15.
- LIEBLING, A. J. (1975): *The press*. Random House.
- MCCOMBS, MAXWELL E.; SHAW, DONALD L. (1972): The agenda-setting function of mass media. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), pp. 176-187.
- MCCOMBS, MAXWELL E.; SHAW, DONALD L. (1993): The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas. In: *Journal of Communication*, 43, pp. 58-67.
- MENCHER, MELVIN (1993): *Basic media writing* (4th edition). Brown & Benchmark.
- SIMONOV, ANDREY; SACHER, SZYMON K.; DUBÉ, JEAN-PIERRE H.; BISWAS, SHIRSHO (2020): *The persuasive effect of fox news: Non-compliance with social distancing during the covid-19 pandemic* (No. w27237). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- VAN DIJK, TEUN A. (1993): The interdisciplinary study of news as discourse. In: KLAUS BRUHN JENSEN; NICHOLAS JANKOWSKI: *A handbook of qualitative methodologies for mass communication research*.
- VULTEE, FRED (2009): Jump back Jack, Mohammed's here: Fox News and the construction of Islamic peril. In: *Journalism Studies*, 10, 623-638.
- VULTEE, FRED (2022): Clickbait. In: BORCHARD, G.A. (ed.): *The Sage Encyclopedia of Journalism*. Sage Publications, pp.338-340.

VULTEE, FRED (2022b): *A Media Framing Approach to Securitization: Storytelling in Conflict, Crisis and Threat*. Taylor & Francis.

WALLACE-WELLS, BENJAMIN (2021): How a Conservative Activist Invented the Conflict Over Critical Race Theory. In: *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-inquiry/how-a-conservative-activist-invented-the-conflict-over-critical-race-theory>

WALT, STEPHEN M. (2008): America needs realists, not William Kristol. In: *Salon*, 16 January 2008. <https://www.salon.com/2008/01/16/realism/>

Youngkin's CRT tip line in Virginia triggering Dems, teachers: >It's scaring people to death< (2022). In: *Foxnews.com*, 30 January 2022. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/youngkins-crt-tip-line-in-virginia-triggering-dems-teachers-its-scaring-people-to-death>