

Fox News and the polarization of attitudes in the U.S.



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ABSTRACT: Mass media in the United States have historically evolved through three stages in which the content is aimed at the elites, then the masses, then specialized audiences. This evolution has recently been taking place within the news media, where Fox News is now being aimed at conservative viewers. The effect of the conservative content of Fox News on its viewership was examined. Findings from a survey show that Fox viewers are more polarized than other news consumers on several issues.

Whether they watched Fox News or some other news program, however, the respondents consistently felt that the media were between good and fair in their coverage. Fox News viewers seem to be relatively satisfied with the news content they receive – or at least as satisfied as respondents who get their information from other sources.

KEYWORDS: polarization, political attitudes, Fox News



FOX NEWS AND THE POLARIZATION OF ATTITUDES IN THE U.S.

Mass media in the United States have traditionally gone through three stages. During the early years of the introduction of a new mass medium, the content is geared toward the elite, those individuals who have the money to purchase the medium and the educational level to use the medium. Next, the medium evolves to become geared toward the masses. The content becomes popular for wide audiences. Finally, the medium evolves to become specialized, geared toward specific segments of the masses. The content is narrowly focused to attract individuals who have a specialized interest.

This is clearly seen in television, in which early television content was aimed at those people who could afford to purchase television sets. Then, content became more general in nature to account for the mass audiences watching broadcasts. Now, with cable television, content is specialized, with cable networks devoted to such specific areas as soccer (Fox Soccer Channel), cartoons (the Cartoon Network) and country western music (the Nashville network).

It is no surprise, then, that news channels in the U.S. are beginning to specialize. Thus, the content of Fox News, a cable news channel aimed toward conservative viewers, has emerged as a popular news source.

This paper looks at Fox News viewers and how they differ from individuals who get their news from other sources. Specifically, the analysis examines whether Fox News viewers are more polarized – holding opinions on political issues that are more extreme than other news consumers. Data come from two national surveys conducted in the United States by Princeton Survey Research Associates and sponsored by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The E-P-S model

Merrill and Lowenstein (1971) first proposed a three-stage model of media development in which a new medium introduced into society is first aimed toward an elite audience, then evolves toward a popular audience before finally reaching a specialized stage.

The E-P-S model begins with the initial stage in which a new medium is adopted by an elite social class. In this stage, the medium might only be available to individuals with a certain educational level (for example, ability to read for newspapers) or an income level (for example, ability to purchase a television).

If the medium is successful in the elite stage, it progresses to a stage in which it becomes popular with the masses. Here, the medium gains mass appeal, limited only by poverty or general ignorance. Mass audiences broaden the economic foundation of the medium, making it more profitable (for example, magazines such as *Life* and *Look* in the mid-1900s).

Finally, the medium becomes so popular that its audience splits into sub-groups. Demands from the general population force the medium to narrow its content (for example, magazines devoted to golden retrievers or quilting).

A recent development has been a similar evolution in television news in the U.S. While the main national networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) continue to provide news covering the broad political spectrum, Fox News has taken a more specialized approach, attempting to cater to conservative viewers. Thus, not only is the E-P-S model apparent in the development of broader mass media, but it now appears applicable to content within a medium – in this case, television news.

Foxification of news

When the Fox News Channel debuted in 1996, owner Rupert Murdoch and other executives claimed the 24-hour news channel would provide ‘fair and balanced’ coverage. Roger Ailes, best known for his role as architect of the Willie Horton commercials for the first President George Bush, was Fox’s founder and president. Almost immediately, critics noted widespread differences in the reporting patterns of Fox and other newscasts.

The media watchdog group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, for instance, compared two cable news programs: Fox's Special Report and CNN's Wolf Blitzer Reports. FAIR found that 50 of the 56 partisan guests on Special Report were Republicans (89%). Meanwhile, Republicans outnumbered Democrats 38 to 29 (57%) on Wolf Blitzer Reports. Conservatives outnumbered representatives of all other viewpoints on Special Report 65 to 27 (71 to 29%) (Randall, 2001).

A more recent poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes found that individuals whose primary news source is Fox News had more misperceptions about Iraq than viewers of other news programs (see Strange, 2004). The poll found, for example, that two-third of Fox viewers wrongly believed that a link had been found between al-Qaida and Iraq, compared to just 16% of PBS/NPR news consumers and 40% of newspaper readers. The poll also found that 33% of Fox viewers believed that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq. Just 11% of PBS/NPR users and 19% of ABC News viewers held the same wrong belief.

The Foxification of news is not limited to the 24-hour Fox cable news channel. As Grabe (1999) notes, even Fox affiliate newscasts have been criticized because of their over-reliance on gimmick production techniques, such as slow motion, sound effects, and the eyewitness camera technique. Other media critics (Grossman, 1997; Stark, 1997) are concerned because of overly dramatic and fast-paced packaging of local news. And as Snyder (1997) notes, television news critics are worried that the increased competition among 24-hour newscasts on cable television is leading to the over emphasis of sensational news stories among other competing networks.

Angwin (2004), however, notes that Fox's popularity is not impressing advertisers. Media buyers generally pay Fox News Channel ad rates that are 75 to 80% of what they pay CNN – even though CNN has only about half the audience of Fox News. Some advertisers have the impression that Fox shows such as 'The O'Reilly Factor' and 'Hannity & Colmes' are sometimes too sensational and partisan to be considered true journalism. She quotes one media buyer as saying: 'The Fox News Channel is not perceived as pure news, because it really is no different than talk radio.'

Attitudes

The present study assumes that Fox News viewers will have attitudes different from other individuals.

Attitudes have been defined as 'relatively enduring orientations toward objects' (Hennessy, 1972, p. 27), and as 'our evaluations of objects, our "likes and dislikes"' (Raven, Rubin, 1983, p. 129). The role of the mass media in influencing attitude formation, however, is unclear. Overall, some researchers argue that the news media have a powerful impact on attitudinal development (Herman, Chomsky, 1988), while others suggest that the impact is negligible (Curran et al., 1982). Snyder (1993), for example, found no relationship between mass media use and support for

the Gulf War. Gunter and Wober (1993), however, found a positive relationship between media use and support for the Gulf War. Fan (1993), moreover, reported that public opinion about the Gulf War appeared to follow media content of the conflict.

Poll results examining attitudes about the media, on the other hand, have been consistent across time. Traditionally, conservatives believe that journalists holding strong liberal biases dominate the news media. For instance, 42% of Republicans in a January 2004 Pew Center poll said that 2004 campaign coverage was biased in favor of the Democrats. The same survey, meanwhile, found that 29% of Democrats said political news was slanted to the right. Andrew Kohut, the Pew Center's director, said that the growing number of Democrats believing a conservative slant in the media could be due to 'the emergence of Fox as a news outlet with a more conservative point of view' (Jurkowitz, 2004).

Indeed, previous research has found that Fox News viewers tend to be more conservative and more supportive of President Bush. Beaudoin, Antecol and Thorson (2004), for example, found that Fox viewers were more likely to support the Iraqi war than non-Fox viewers. In addition, the more individuals watched Fox News, the more they supported the war, suggesting that both exposure to Fox News and the amount of exposure play roles in viewers' attitude formation.

Media critics have suggested several reasons for the influence of Fox News. Stanley (2003) points to its reliance on stronger language and visual images. Anchors have reported on U.S. troops 'shellacking' Iraqi troops. Kirkpatrick (2003) claims that Fox has been a strong supporter of the war and that reporters have displayed overt patriotism.

Polarization of attitudes

If Fox News viewers have attitudes that differ from other individuals, and if their attitudes are reinforced by the content of Fox News, these viewers then may also have attitudes that are more polarized than other individuals.

U.S. political observers have noted the recent trend of a polarization among the public. A July 2004 article in *Newsweek*, for instance, argued that in a typical election year, 66% of the voters can be won over. In 2004, swing voters were down to just 17%. Even political leaders in the U.S. are showing signs of attitude polarization, highlighted by Vice-President Cheney's use of obscenities aimed at Sen. Patrick Leahy.

Polarization occurs when an individual holds strong, or even extreme, attitudes about an issue or an individual. Polarization can be especially apparent in group settings, when 'an initial tendency of individual group members toward a given direction is enhanced following group discussion' (Isenberg, 1986, p. 1141). Isenberg's (1986) meta-analysis of 21 studies examined both social comparison, which

focuses on ‘who or what is the source of the norms that form the basis for social comparison (p. 1150),’ and persuasive argumentation which focuses on message characteristics and content. Isenberg found that both processes can occur at the same time.

It follows, then, that both the source of information – in the case here, Fox News – and the characteristics of the message – the information contained in the newscast – can polarize attitudes held by Fox News viewers.

Research also has examined the influence of ‘narrowcast’ news media on opinions. Mendelsohn and Nadeau (1996) explored whether the largely homogeneous messages of broadcast media ‘mainstreamed’ public opinion by discouraging individuals from considering issues from particular group perspectives. Their findings indicate that, indeed, increased exposure to mass media ‘encouraged opinion convergence across groups’ (p. 383). However, this convergence did not occur when the media outlet was conscious of a salient sociodemographic component of its audience. Rather ‘where the segmented audience had a distinct point of view and the creators of media messages were aware of this point of view, opinion polarization was the result’ (p. 383).

Following on Mendelsohn and Nadeau’s lead, Jones (2002) examined talk radio, one of the most overtly partisan news sources. His findings suggest that regular attention to talk radio ‘is associated with an ideological shift to the right over time’ (p. 171), even when exposure to other, traditional media is accounted for. As Davis and Owen (1998) note, ‘the political content of news media reflects the political orientations of those who attend regularly to a particular format’ (p. 184). Talk radio, of course, features conservative banter for a conservative audience.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study compares Fox News viewers with non-viewers of Fox news on several different variables. The comparisons aim to answer the following research questions:

R1: Do the attitudes toward politics held by Fox News viewers differ from other individuals?

R2: Do the attitudes toward the news media held by Fox News viewers differ from other individuals?

R3: Are Fox News viewers more polarized than other individuals?

The above research questions are based on the assumption that Fox News coverage is inherently different from coverage in other newscasts. Because of its reliance on sensational news and conservative viewpoints, Fox News could: affect how viewers view politics (R1); influence viewers’ attitudes toward the news media (R2); and polarize its viewers on issue stances by giving them a narrow picture of news coverage (R4).

METHOD

Data come from two national telephone surveys conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates and sponsored by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. The first was conducted June 19 to July 2, 2003, and involved a national sample of 1,201. The second was conducted from July 14 to August 5, 2003, and involved a national sample of 2,528 adults.

Both surveys interviewed respondents living in the continental United States. The interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. The telephone sample was drawn through standard 'list-assisted random digit dialing.' The area code, exchange and first two digits of the phone number were randomly selected from active phone directories. The final two digits of the phone number were randomly generated, ensuring that all working numbers could be included in the sample, regardless of whether the number was listed in a directory, purposely unlisted or too new to be listed.

The response rate, the proportion of contacted numbers where a consent for interview was at least initially obtained versus those refused, was 45%.

The two surveys contained an identical question regarding news media use. This question asked respondents: 'Do you get most of your news about national and international issues from...' followed by a list of news media, including Fox Cable News. The responses were recoded so that Fox News was 1, and all other responses were 0.

Attitudes toward government were based on responses to the following: 'Now I am going to read you a series of statements that will help us understand how you feel about a number of things. For each statement, please tell me if you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it or completely disagree with it.' The items are listed in Table 1.

To examine attitudes toward the news media, respondents were asked: 'In general, how would you rate the job the press has done in covering...' The issues are listed in Table 2.

Finally, to measure respondents' level of attitude polarization, a set of questions was employed. Respondents were asked: 'I'd like to read you a list of some programs and proposals that are being discussed in this country today. For each one, please tell me whether you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose it.' The programs and responses for Fox viewers and other news consumers are listed in Table 3. These questions were then recoded. Here, no opinion or no response was scored a 0. Favor and oppose were coded 1. Strongly favor and strongly oppose were coded 2. Thus, the more extreme the response that a respondent gave to an item, the higher the score that respondent received on this polarization measure. The items are listed in Table 4.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that the results were mixed on the tests involving attitudes toward government. Fox viewers were more likely to agree that voting gives people like me

some say about how government runs things and that most elected officials care what people like me think. The third item – elected officials in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly – did not produce significant results, though Fox viewers tended to agree with the statement more than other news consumers.

Table 1. Differences in attitudes toward the politics between Fox News viewers and other news consumers

| | Fox | Other | F |
|---|------|-------|-----------|
| Elected officials in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly | 2.08 | 2.16 | 2.439 |
| Most elected officials care what people like me think | 2.80 | 2.90 | 5.701* |
| Voting gives people like me some say about how government runs things | 2.02 | 2.32 | 46.733*** |

Note: 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = disagree; 4 = strongly disagree. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

According to the results in Table 2, Fox viewers and other news viewers did not differ on any of the items regarding attitudes toward the news media. In general, all respondents rated news coverage near the mid-point between good (2) and only fair (3).

Table 2. Differences in attitudes toward the news media between Fox News viewers and other news consumers

| | Fox | Other | F |
|--|------|-------|-------|
| How would you rate the job the press has done in covering the controversy over not finding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq so far? | 2.56 | 2.57 | 0.002 |
| How would you rate the job the press has done in covering the news about the current situation in Iraq? | 2.29 | 2.19 | 0.533 |
| How would you rate the job the press has done in covering continued violence in the Middle East between the Palestinians and the Israelis? | 2.43 | 2.44 | 0.008 |
| How would you rate the job the press has done in covering the murder of Laci Peterson? | 2.74 | 2.37 | 2.179 |
| How would you rate the job the press has done in covering the publication of Hillary Clinton's book about her life? | 2.86 | 2.83 | 0.003 |

Note: 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = disagree; 4 = strongly disagree. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Responses to the items dealing with issue stances appear in Table 3. Fox viewers strongly differed from other news consumers on all four issues. In fact, three of the four items were statistically different at the $p < .001$ level, with the fourth significant

at the $p < .01$ level. In other words, on issues dealing with abortion, affirmative action, health insurance and legal rights, Fox viewers held views that were more conservative than other respondents.

Table 3. Differences in issue opinions between Fox News viewers and other news consumers

| | Fox | Other | <i>F</i> |
|--|------|-------|-----------|
| The government's policy of holding American citizens without formal charges or trial in cases of suspected terrorism | 2.47 | 2.84 | 35.882*** |
| Changing the laws to make it more difficult for a woman to get an abortion | 2.80 | 3.19 | 46.428*** |
| Affirmative action programs designed to help blacks, women and other minorities get better jobs and education | 2.76 | 2.42 | 44.604*** |
| The U.S. government guaranteeing health insurance for all citizens, even if it means repealing most of the recent tax cuts | 2.73 | 2.49 | 8.915** |

Note: 1 = strongly favor; 2 = favor; 3 = oppose; 4 = strongly oppose. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Differences in levels of polarization of attitudes between Fox News viewers and other news consumers

| | Fox | Other | <i>F</i> |
|--|------|-------|-----------|
| The government's policy of holding American citizens without formal charges or trial in cases of suspected terrorism | 1.35 | 1.26 | 22.943*** |
| Changing the laws to make it more difficult for a woman to get an abortion | 1.46 | 1.39 | 11.259** |
| Affirmative action programs designed to help blacks, women and other minorities get better jobs and education | 1.28 | 1.27 | 0.819 |
| The U.S. government guaranteeing health insurance for all citizens, Even if it means repealing most of the recent tax cuts | 1.35 | 1.28 | 8.393** |

Note: 0 = no opinion, no response; 1 = agree and disagree; 2 = strongly agree and strongly disagree. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Finally, Table 4 shows the results of the tests examining polarization of attitudes. Three of the four items showed statistically significant differences between Fox News viewers and other news consumers. Fox viewers held more extreme views on the items asking respondents about their level of support for the government's policy of holding American citizens without formal charges or trial in cases of suspected terrorism, changing laws to make it more difficult for a woman to get an abortion, and the U.S. government guaranteeing health insurance for all citizens even if it means repealing most of the recent tax cuts. The fourth item – affirmative action programs designed to help blacks, women and other minorities get better jobs and education – was not statistically significant. Mean scores on this fourth

polarization measure were nearly identical: 1.28 for Fox viewers and 1.27 for other respondents.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined differences between Fox News viewers and viewers of other news programs. Fox News has been criticized for being overly sensational in its news coverage patterns, as well as for covering news with a decidedly conservative slant.

Broadly, the findings here note that Fox viewers are different from other news consumers. Fox viewers tend to be less critical of politics (Table 1). Fox viewers tend to have levels of concern with issues that differ from those of other individuals (Table 3). Finally, Fox viewers tend to hold views that are more polarized on certain issues than do other news consumers (Table 4).

The lone area that Fox viewers and other news viewers did not differ was in their attitudes toward the news media (Table 2). Whether they watched Fox News or some other news program, the respondents here were consistent in their attitudes toward media. They felt that the media were between good and fair in their coverage of news stories such as the search for weapons of mass destruction, the current situation in Iraq, the violence in the Middle East, the murder of Laci Peterson, and the publication of Hillary Clinton's book. This consistency could be due to the wide variety of media channels now devoted to news. Fox News viewers seem to be relatively satisfied with the news content they receive – or at least as satisfied as respondents who get their information from other sources.

Critics claim Fox News has a pro-government slant. This certainly could be the reason behind the findings on research question 1, dealing with attitudes toward government. Fox viewers held attitudes toward the government that were more positive than those held by other respondents.

The differences in the issue concerns were mostly in the direction that one would expect. Fox News viewers were more likely to support conservative issues and less likely to support liberal issues than other respondents were. Other news viewers were more likely to support abortion rights, affirmative action and universal health care, for example.

Finally, Fox viewers demonstrated attitudes that were more extreme than those held by other news consumers. Several political analysts have noted the polarization of the American public. While world events are likely one plausible reason for this polarization – the Iraqi war, the record budget deficit, the tax cuts all have strong proponents and opponents – it also appears that Fox News is playing a role. Fox News viewers held attitudes on issues such as abortion and health insurance that were more extreme than others.

On the surface, this finding appears logical. If Fox News viewers have more conservative attitudes than other individuals, their attitudes could be reinforced by

the conservative slant of Fox. The findings here, however, suggest that other newscasts, which have traditionally been criticized for having a liberal bias, are not creating attitudes that are more extreme on certain issues. Thus, Fox News could be providing content that its viewers want to hear – with a conservative viewpoint that supports their previously held conservative attitudes. These attitudes then are reinforced through the viewing of the Fox News content, leading to more strongly held beliefs by viewers.

The results here show that Fox viewers differ from other news consumers. However, the causal direction of these differences cannot be determined. In other words, individuals who are more polarized may select to view Fox News rather than other newscasts. Whether this is the case, or whether Fox News exposure influences individuals' attitudes, would be a fruitful area of research. Future research also should examine whether the amount of exposure to Fox News matters, as Beaudoin et al. (2004) found. Heavy viewers of Fox News may show stronger polarization than light viewers of Fox.

Overall, the Foxification of news appears to be a phenomenon worthy of attention from researchers.

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