

Cognitive Authorities



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- Cognitive Authorities
- Mass Media as Cognitive Authorities
- *New York Times* versus *Fox News*
- Persistence of *Fox News*
- Psychological Factors, Cognitive Bias, Trump Supporters
- Nature of *Fox News's* Cognitive Authority
- Unbalanced Analysis?

Cognitive Authorities

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- What is a cognitive authority?
- When one lacks experience, education, or knowledge, or does not have the time or inclination to acquire such, a cognitive authority is a person, organization, media source, group, or leader whose information one takes as second-hand knowledge based on that entity's credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability. One can be mistaken about whether the authority is sound or not.
- As we grow up and as we live, we cannot experience everything and so some of what we know is taken from individuals (e.g. father, mother, friends, leader), groups (e.g., classmates), or institutions (e.g., schools, books).
- For this lecture, the focus is on news sources including social media, political leaders, political parties, and religious leaders).

Cognitive Authorities

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- Cognitive authority is related to credibility, competence, and trustworthiness.
- Cognitive authority exists on a continuum, exists in relation to a sphere of interest, and involves at least two people.
- Cognitive authorities can be friends, colleagues, peers, news media, Internet blogs, Twitter feeds, news channels, social media sites, etc.
- Examples of cognitive authorities are news sites representing different points of a political spectrum: e.g., *Fox News* or *MSNBC*.
- For news sites, the measure of their credibility or trustworthiness is related to consumer loyalty, which is determined by news seekers habits and preferences (what media, what frequency, what credibility, etc. - See Pew Research on the "Modern News Consumer": <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/07/07/>. This observation is true for both authentic and false cognitive authorities.

Credibility

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Credibility is not a simple judgment, though it is claimed to be “intuitive.” According to Rieh (2010)

- “Most credibility researchers agree that credibility assessment results from simultaneously evaluating multiple dimensions.
- “Among these, two key dimensions are identified: *trustworthiness and expertise*.
- “Trustworthiness is a core dimension in credibility assessment that captures *the perceived goodness and morality of the source*.
- “The perception that a source is fair, unbiased, and truthful contributes to the trustworthiness of information. Trustworthiness is, however, not a synonym for credibility because *people also must recognize expertise* in order to deem information credible.” (Rieh, 2010, 1337).
- It is a key point that trustworthiness is not equivalent to credibility because expertise is also required.

Credibility

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- “Expertise reflects perceived knowledge, skill, and experience of the source.
- “Expertise is likewise an important factor given its close relationship to people’s perceptions of a source’s ability to provide information that is *both accurate and valid*.”(Rieh, 2010, 1137-1138).
- Before the era of fake news, trustworthiness and expertise had clear positive conceptualizations.
- But we see that instances of doxing and fake news pose interesting distortions of these words.
- Many listeners of Fox News believe that it is trustworthy and even that expertise resides in the assertions of its political commentators, which are often inconsistent over time and which are often lies or reflect partisan beliefs, without evidence.

Source Loyalty, Cognitive Authority

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- News media in whatever format can be considered cognitive authorities based on the degree of source loyalty of the consumer.
- Both right and left news sources believe that their sources are credible, trustworthy and have expertise.
- To provide a focus we will compare *Fox News* and *New York Times*. Although they are different in the way the news is presented, they are good examples of different political views and exercise a great deal of influence on their constituencies. *Fox News* is dominant of cable television and the *New York Times* is a major voice in online and print media. Both of them have streaming services (e.g., alerts) and have a social media presence, though the influence of *Fox News* in social media is stronger.

What Readers/Viewers *Believe*

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New York Times	Fox News
Center-left bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com) Because they have a bias does not mean that their reporting is not grounded in facts.	Strongly right bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com) Because they have a bias does not mean that their reporting is not grounded in facts.
Trustworthy “captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).	Trustworthy “captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).
Possesses expertise: they claim that they provide information that is accurate and valid	Possesses expertise; they claim that provide information that is accurate and valid
Real News	Real News (others are Fake News)

New York Times: Actuality

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New York Times	Basis for their Authority
Center-left bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com)	Having a political leaning does not invalidate the content, particularly because opinion pieces are published as opinion
Trustworthy “captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).	Long history (1851) as a respected publication. Articles are well-researched and verified. Opinion is identified as opinion (editorials).
Possesses expertise: they provide information that is accurate and valid	Produces (1) second-hand knowledge, (2) well-informed opinion (with which other may disagree: e.g., Trickle-down economics is not successful), and (3) preferences (best movies to watch)
	Has a cadre of respected and experienced experts. When they become aware of false or problematic statements or reporting, they issue retractions or updates
	Believe in fact-finding and verification by multiple sources

New York Times: Actuality

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New York Times	Basis for their Authority
Adhere to the Principles of Good Journalism (https://americanpressassociation.com/principles-of-journalism/)	The obligation to present the truth (or the best representation thereof, by providing evidence and upgrading narrative as facts and errors emerge)
NY Times follow these principles	Its first loyalty is to citizens, not to partisan politics
For a measured assessment, see: https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/new-york-times/	Practitioners must maintain an independence of those they cover – when covering anything connected to the NY Times, they note it
	Serve as an independent monitor of power
	Must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise
	Must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant
	Must keep the news interesting and proportional. This means that one does not sensationalize certain events and ignore others, stereotyping or being overly negative – all affected communities and perspectives must be taken in account.
	Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

Fox News: Actuality

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Fox News	Basis for their Authority
<p>Strong right bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com). For a measured assessment see: https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/fox-news/</p>	<p>Having a political leaning does not invalidate the content, particularly because opinion pieces are published as opinion</p>
<p>They claim that they are trustworthy implying that they stand for “the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).</p>	<p>It has a long history associated with right and conservative causes, a history which has been often shaky and scandalous, with commentators leaving (e.g., Bill O’Reilly) for various reasons, often sexual harassment. (Stelter, 2020; Smith, 2019). Many of their sources are conspiracy theories from alt-right web sites, or examples of paltering – selecting only portions of a true story</p>
<p>Possesses expertise: they purport to provide information that is accurate and valid</p>	<p>They have various pundits, Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Jeanine Pirro, Neil Cavuto, et al., who claim to be experts, but they are mostly apologists for ring-wing viewpoints. Its second-hand knowledge on political matters, is often at best opinion or opinion based on alternative “facts” or misconstrued data. Example of Lou Dobbs and “Noble” Prize</p>

Fox News: Actuality

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Principles of Good Journalism

Basis for their Authority

The obligation to present the truth (or the best representation thereof, by providing evidence and upgrading narrative as facts and errors emerge)

For four straight months, they pushed misinformation every single day (Sullivan, 2019). Trump's failure or incompetence in dealing with the coronavirus epidemic was never mentioned, and in fact he was praised for his superior leadership.

Its first loyalty is to citizens

Their loyalty is toward its partisan viewers, not to all citizens, though they hope to convert them.

Practitioners must maintain an independence of those they cover

The most obvious case is that of Donald Trump. They never criticize his speech or behavior and claim the he was the best president that the US has ever had. While they briefly had to admit that Biden won the last election (because of a lawsuit), they now continue to push the lie that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump.

Serve as an independent monitor of power

See the above; most commentary and commentators support right-wing causes: unfettered capitalism, oligarchy, pro-business, anti-labor agenda, etc. They have become voice of the Republican party and the ultra-right agenda, often ignoring previous principles of conservatism (e.g., anti-communism, fiscal responsibility).

Fox News: Actuality

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Principles of Good Journalism

Basis for their Authority

Must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise

They rarely invite speakers, politicians or commentators from the Democrats or the left. They also refuse to run advertisements that were critical of Trump or the right-wing agenda

Must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant

They are committed to reporting or making narratives that support the biases of their viewers, a right-wing or “conservative” viewpoint (which has been muddled).

Must keep the news interesting and proportional. This means that one does not sensationalize certain events and ignoring others, stereotyping or being overly negative – all affected communities and perspectives must be taken in account.

They are often committed to sensationalism, such as fear of migrants, fear of communism and socialism, fear of vaccines, etc. For an overview of a variety of issues see:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fox_News_controversies

Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

When reporting, one should include their viewpoint reflecting their own moral conscience. Certainly, many of Fox News pundits do so: Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Jeanine Pirro, Neil Cavuto, et al. take that view, but there are serious questions that about telling their viewers to oppose loudly vaccine and mask mandates in the community and business, while failing to mention that Fox News itself demands the use of masks and vaccination (or daily testing) throughout its facility. A personal conscience that urges child separation from parents, urges the old to sacrifice themselves to the economy, twists pro-life to mean only pro-birth, etc.

The Persistence of Fox News

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A study Pew undertook in the fall of 2019 gives a more up-to-date understanding of Fox News viewers. It concluded:

1. Around four-in-ten Americans trust Fox News. Nearly the same share distrust it.
2. Republicans [(2/3) and Republican-leaning independents (65%)] trust Fox News more than any other outlet. Democrats distrust it more than any other outlet.
3. On an ideological scale, the average Fox News consumer is to the right of the average U.S. adult, but not as far to the right as the audiences of some other outlets [Such as Rush Limbaugh and Alex Jones.]
4. People who cite Fox News as their main source of political news are older and more likely to be white than U.S. adults overall.
 1. Americans ages 65 and older account for around four-in-ten of those who say their main source is Fox News (37%), compared with 21% of all adults.
 2. Around nine-in-ten who turn to Fox News (87%) identify their race and ethnicity as non-Hispanic white, compared with 65% of all adults. (Gramlich, 2020)

The Persistence of Fox News

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5. Those who name Fox News as their main source of political news stand out from the general public in their views on key issues and people, including President Donald Trump. (Gramlich, 2020)

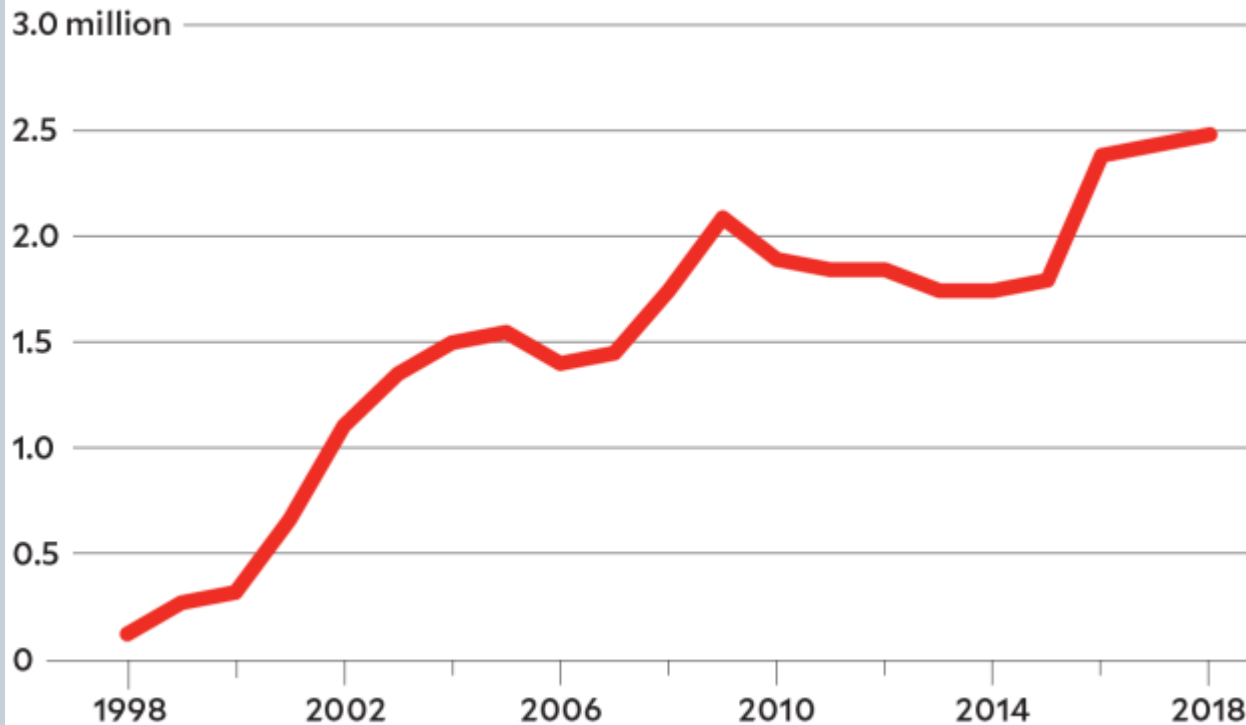
- People who get their news from outlets other than Fox generally said, even as early as March 2020, that Trump was not responding to the COVID-19 pandemic well, but 63% of Fox News viewers said that Trump was doing an “excellent job” responding to the outbreak (Gramlich, 2020).
- Fox News viewership was more predictive than party affiliation; as Pew noted, “Fox News regulars were considerably more likely than Republicans overall to describe Trump’s handling of the outbreak as excellent (63% vs. 47%) (Gramlich, 2020).
- These observations serve to show the extent of the power of Fox News to influence its consumers.
- According to Eric Wemple, the influence of Fox News cannot be underestimated:
There’s simply no outlet that dominates any other part of the political spectrum in the way Fox News dominates the right. With that dominance, Fox News has done great damage. It’s not as if Fox News’s influence extends to only however many millions may be viewing in prime time. There’s what experts call a “media ecosystem” out there, where people take nonsense uttered on Fox News, then share it on Twitter, on Facebook, with their neighbor. Nonsense has a high pass around rate (Wemple, 2019).

These observations serve to show the extent of the power of Fox News to influence its consumers.

Growing Fox News Viewership

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FOX NEWS PRIMETIME VIEWERSHIP



Source: Grossmann and Hopkins, "From Fox News to Viral Views"

Mother Jones

A Disinformation Ecology

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- It is not simply a matter of increasing viewership, but how their views are echoed throughout a disinformation system, what Benkler et al. (2019) calls “a closed propaganda feedback loop.”
- First of all, it is disinformation system or ecology, composed of leaders, communities of associates, members and authorities (media, religious, political authorities, etc.) who post misinformation and/or inflammatory rhetoric. It works because of saturation and repetition:
 - Saturation: many different channels or sources in the disinformation ecology interpret an action or event in the same or similar ways throughout the system: e.g., most all of the Fox News political pundits, many religious authorities, many social media authorities
 - Repetition – by repeating the same (mis)information makes it seem more believable.
 - Even prior to the current disinformation campaigns and the election of Trump, Republicans had discipline of message – the same message would be said and repeated by Republican politicians, by elected Republicans, by Republican and conservative media, etc.: e.g., universal healthcare is a socialist plot and too costly; giving the rich tax breaks will produce more American jobs (trickle-down economics).
- Those that live in this disinformation ecology achieve a “patriotic” solidarity by self-deception, social self-deception and collective self-deception in a kind of self-reinforcing brotherhood of those who have the “real truth.” Each reassertion of misinformation or disinformation confirms the self-deceptive belief in oneself while confirming it to and in like-minded others.
- These authorities *appear to be* genuine authorities, because their recipients *want to believe* that that they are reliable, trustworthy and have expertise.
- The system is closed because members of the alt-right are specifically trained to reject all other authorities than their own – that anything that does not support their filter bubble is fake news.

Fox News and Truth

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- Many of Trump's supporters and most Republicans see *Fox News* as their authority in political matters. PunditFact, a project of the Poynter Institute's *Tampa Bay Times* published on Politifact, analyzed a set of statements by Fox, Fox News, and Fox Business personalities and their pundits over a period of time (period of time not stated) with the following results: 10% of the statements were true, 12% were mostly true, 18% were half-true, 21% were mostly false, 30% were false, and 9% were what Politifact calls "pants-on-fire" false (*FOX's File*, n.d.). – only 22% of the statements were in the true range.
- Sullivan (2020) reports that the news side of *Fox News* pushed misinformation every day for four months straight.
- Some claim that *Fox News* is the Republican Party and is the source of the false narratives to support Republicans to enact laws for voter-suppression and Republican controlled election officials or to oppose any of the Democratic agenda in Washington (e.g., refusing to expand the debt or to pass infrastructure bills). (Mitrovica, 2021). It seems to provide marching orders for all Trump-loving Republicans. There are clearly some Republicans who detest this agenda, but their voices of expression are few and most of the others are complicit with their silence.

The Persistence of Fox News

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- At this point, we can begin to see what psychological factors that come into play that make Fox a major news source for many on the right.
- There is the issue of information avoidance (of sources other than *Fox News* or like-minded media).
- There is gullibility in the uncritical acceptance of their interpretation of events.
- Selecting sources that only confirm their views or confirm their interpretations.
- Fox News invokes and manipulates various cognitive biases in their viewers: (1) the availability heuristic, (2) attentional bias, (3) illusory truth, (4) affect bias, (5) negativity bias, (6) anchoring, (7) confirmation bias, (8) the bandwagon effect, (9) stereotyping, (10) ingroup bias, (11) projection bias, (12) the Dunning-Kruger effect, and (13) the self-serving bias. (Cf. Froehlich, 2020). Probably two critical ones are the confirmation bias (only accept or seek information that supports your political views) and disconfirmation bias (when threatened with discordant information, spending an inordinate amount of time and energy refuting that source). Granted this is happening to some degree on the right and middle as well, but not with such overwhelming success with so many. Many people come to understand and compensate for their biases through cultivated self-awareness.
- Many, if not most, of Fox News viewers share the characteristics of Trump supporters: (1) tolerance for authoritarianism, (2) a preference for associating with socially dominant groups (social dominance orientation, SDO), (3) prejudice, (4) low intergroup contact (i.e., little familiarity with groups other than themselves), and (5) relative deprivation (i.e., feeling that others are much better off than they are, and that life has cheated them). (Pettigrew, 2017)

The Nature of Fox's Cognitive Authority

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- Despite the problematic quality of *Fox News* (and other alt-right media, but *Fox* is the most influential), or because of it, how do they get so many Americans addicted to it?
- It instills, enhances or maintains instills a maelstrom of grievances, resentments, anger or a sense of invisibility or a lack of importance of its viewers, where the wider culture often challenges many of their core values (keeping things as they are, white dominance in society).
- *Fox News* then tells those viewers what they want to hear, consciously or unconsciously, with claims that support and fulfill their cognitive biases and real, instilled or professed ideology. For example, they may think of themselves as conservatives, without having much depth about its meaning, except maintaining things as they were (e.g., male white dominance in society, proving the government is the problem, rejecting all liberal ideas). It will then shape and enlarge that image with anti-liberal, anti-labor, pro-business, pro-average-joe narratives.
- These messages are myths, tropes, and narratives, often detailed through the shows of their various pundits. They include persistent myths about antifa conspiracies, fast fixes or lies about the coronavirus epidemic, tropes about Christian persecution (an anti gay-marriage Christian baker being forced to make a wedding cake for a gay couple is equivalent than being thrown into jail or executed because of one's religion), job losses are due to immigrants and foreign countries, etc.

Fox News Alchemy

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- *Fox News* is referred to as a moral outrage machine, which has been a long-standing tradition of alt-right media (Rush Limbaugh (1984), Alex Jones, Geraldo Riviera), but Fox News now dominates. The outrage is moral only in the sense that it pretends to maintain the customs (mores) of an idealized past, but it is not ethical or moral to spread misinformation.
- It engages a special alchemy whereby any emotion, positive or negative, is coaxed into a sense of indignity and finally rage. That is the nature of its alchemy: transforming fears and resentments into stoked anger. It has turned the Age of Information into the Age of Inflamed Grievances.
- One of the tricks of this alchemy is to take a complex problem and reduce it to simple, naïve solutions to suit the Dunning Kruger bias: convince people that there are no problems in their limited understanding of complex issues and there are no alternatives to the views that they have. They are told to think in terms of absolutes and poles. Any subtlety in thought is a ploy of the liberals to confuse the core of an issue. Their authorities also supply *definite* answers making it easy to understand and accept.
- Examples of the alchemy
 - Patriotism is turned into simplistic interpretations of American history (there is no racism, slavery was an opportunity for black people to get out of poverty, white people were the only creators and inventors of the great wealth and prosperity)
 - Respect for the police and military is turned into rejection of any accountability for its treatment of the poor or minorities or its corruption.
 - Belief in capitalism is seen as a method for maintaining one's privileges and turning a blind eye to its failures: great economic disparity between the rich and the poor, great disparity in economic opportunity, unequal access to healthcare
 - Resentment for one's failures in life are turned into narratives of victimization: others who got education or training did not deserve it.

The Results of the Alchemy

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- What are the results of this alchemy?
- Turn voters into single issue voters (abortion, guns rights, lack of police accountability)
- “What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening” (Trump).
 - Trump did an excellent job in managing the pandemic despite evidence for gross incompetence and mismanagement.
 - Trump saved millions of Americans from dying despite the fact that the misinformation from Fox News (and aligned sources) caused the death of 100,000s of Americans based on lies about vaccination and lack of evidence for alternative “cures.”
 - The January 6th insurrection was a peaceful visit to the Capitol of patriotic Americans, rather a violent plot to overthrow the validated results of an election.
 - Scientific knowledge is only accepted if it fits a political agenda, otherwise it is rejected as a threat to individual rights or a government plot to control people.
 - Freedom of speech is to be heralded except when it suggest flaws in American history (Critical Race Theory) or rejects alt-right propaganda.
 - Reported deaths from the coronavirus are a fiction by the government and liberal media to force people to undergo vaccination, which is a hidden form of government control
 - Privacy and individual rights and freedom from government intrusion are absolute rights except when it comes to sexual identity and fertilization.
 - Any government control is to be abhorred, except when information is being supplied that distorts the accepted version of history (critical race theory) or valid elections do not suit the minority.
 - All intellectual work is to be regarded as suspect except intellectual work that exploits labor and the planet
 - ✦ The hourly and daily efforts of Fox News to turn all news into failures of the opposition and brilliance for its side. Their “news” to further polarize American society and to promote a single party and single view rule of America
 - ✦ Of turning vice into virtue (rigorously approving of the rich and for corporations not paying taxes, placing support for the infrastructure on the low and middle class and its consumers).

Results of the Alchemy

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- The US is a Christian nation and should be (for some “Christians” Islamic shariah law is to be rejected by Christian shariah law, based on Biblical precepts (Stewart (2018) remarks that Christian nationalists reject democracy)). God rewards those he loves with wealth, except when it comes to immigrants, non-Christian religions (or absence thereof), the poor, the disenfranchised, non-whites or any tenets that the alt-right version of “Christianity.”
- Christianity allows one to mock the immigrants and the poor because the US is a Christian nation, and immigrants will displace white domination.
- The “expertise” of two “scientific” experts (regarded as outliers by the scientific community) are more believable than thousands of researchers who have devoted their lives to studying science
- One has the solemn right to reject vaccination or the use of masks, trumping any responsibility for public health or the common good (their threats to the trained healthcare officials, leaders and workers are driving the out of the profession).
- The beliefs that one has are the result of their independent evaluation, using certain information sources, that reflect, create, sustain, justify or inflame one’s beliefs. Their second-hand knowledge is trustworthy and reliable.
 - Where did one get the idea that all Democrats hate America, that they are all socialists or that you can hate and mock persons whose views are different than yours?
 - Where did one get the idea that there is only a single interpretation of what America is about? Did you have these same ideas 10 years ago? Where did one get the idea to threaten people and scream at them based on “your” ideas, that violence is the solution to the conflict?
 - Where did one get the idea that the true American government is rule of a single party or ideology and any other views are treason?
 - Where did one get the idea that cruelty and disparagement of one’s enemies is not only justified but praiseworthy and to be encouraged?
- Failures or missteps in the scientific process or its reporting or health recommendations does not show that science is unreliable and simply an alternative opinion.
- Respect for the flag is shown in its being used in fashion, draping it around oneself, changing its color (to presumably show respect for police, but functionally protecting them from accountability), giving reverence to its symbol but a profound distortion for what it is supposed to mean: e.g., equality of opportunity for all, equality of justice for all, including the native, the naturalized, the foreigner, the immigrant, etc.
- In sum, the more extreme the distortion is of the truth and facts, the more likely it is to be accepted.

The chicanery of *Fox News*

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- Memes and tropes become flash points for anger. They are constructed on a hourly basis on *Fox News* and aligned media to keep their base addicted and inflamed.
- Ivermectin, bleach, hydroxychloroquine, monoclonal antibodies (100s times the cost of a vaccination) and now Flonase are cures the government does not want you to know about
- It does not really matter what the narrative, meme or trope is – its point is to keep one angry, to feed one’s self-righteousness in rejecting the “libs.”
- Tune into *Fox News* on any day and they will turn any event, act or speech into some form of outrage, as their alchemy demands.
- To be sure, *Fox News* viewers are not simply victims, but they are willing participants.

The truth is, our Republican and right-leaning relatives are active parties in their own transformations. They chose to drink from the well of misinformation and hate on a regular basis. They decided to shut out critical discussion. They carried viewpoints to the polls. They made our world a worse place. And we have a responsibility to take them to task for it (Price, 2019).

Addiction to Fox News

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- Tobin Smith, a former Fox News commentator, argues that Fox News programming fosters an addictive process based on resentment, resentment and anger to:
 - “Understand the elderly white conservative viewer’s pre-tribal mindset, which is a compilation of their resentments, indignations, cultural values, religious values, political values, racial perspectives, regional outlooks, and worldviews.
 - Scare or outrage the crap out of viewers by boring down on a recently exposed tribal nerve like a psychic dentist with a drill, presenting a heresy or an innately scary image of non-white/ non-Christian foreigners, immigrants, or terrorists doing horrible things.
 - Produce each seven-minute rigged outcome opinion-debate segment around the carefully selected partisan heresy such that the “fair and balanced” debate is massively rigged for the conservative pundits on the program to . . .
 - Deliver the climactic and righteous rhetorical victory for the partisan right-wing viewer to trigger the jolt of dopamine and serotonin that the addict anticipated and knew was coming.” (Smith, 2019, pp. 474-475)
- Ten years ago, one might regard this characterization as radical and unrealistic, but given Trump supporters and Fox News now not only reject any other views on a particular political issue, but actively and openly mock and threaten and commit violence on those who oppose their view (e.g., yelling at and threatening pro-vaccination doctors or pro-masking school boards).
- He calls it an addiction to “tribal partisan pornography” (Smith, 2019, pp. 460-465).

Addiction to Fox News

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- The point is: those living in a closed propaganda feedback loop are not rational and no amount of information, media or digital literacy will have them leave their delusions.
- The level of their induced rage and anger and the self-assurance of the rightness of their cause are measures of the success of the alt-right in polarizing Americans and in manipulating their “free will” for support of scientific and political nonsense, which in turn is destroying democracy and turning America into an authoritarian state.
- There is no doubt or humility in what they know: Alt-right’s media proclamations (second-hand “knowledge”) are THE truth – any contrary information is not only rationalized away but also demonized as false. Their righteousness is marched into and deliberately disrupts the public sphere.
- Ironically, rather than the “truth” setting them free, it binds them to the greater enslavement. But they are willing pawns of their oppressors. The lunatics are running the asylum and the oppressed unwittingly love their oppressors, often because the complexity of issues is beyond their capacity to grasp or assess (information overload). While they are rightfully concerned about the gatekeepers of knowledge (because capitalism is interested in exploiting them), they fail to understand that *their* gatekeepers (alt-right media) are also exploiting them in a new society and a new government that has little or no concern for them.

Right-wing media is the source the country's rage

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- A report by Kevin Drum (2021) in *Mother Jones* argues that the real and major source of the rising rage in American Politics is *Fox News*. He argues:
- It is not the result of conspiracy theorists. Polls (Shanahan, 2021) suggest that the number of QAnon members are rare and that belief in QAnon hovers at less than 10% of the public close to other conspiracy theories of the past (e.g., about the assassination of Kennedy).
- It is not primarily driven by social media, sort of. Pew Research indicated only 10% of Republicans said that they liked political posts. However, social media users are locked inside filter bubbles of like-minded partisans. Facebook itself admits that its algorithms push people further into bubbles and that 64% of extremists join a group because of Facebook's recommendation tools. Furthermore, a daily tally of Facebook's top engagements is dominated by Fox News hosts and other far-right commentators.
- It is not the case that things have gotten worse. Economically that is not true, though there are many disparities in American society. However, white respondents believe that there is an increasing anti-white bias. This "reverse racism" is overwhelmingly driven by white Republicans. This trend has been around for a while, but it is growing and increasing visible and active by keeping it in front of white people: e.g., by alt-right media, by harking such memes as replacement theory (e.g., allowing immigrants into America is a plot by the left to replace white Americans and white America).
- While trust in government has declined, right-wing media, primarily *Fox News*, have pushed this narrative to destabilize American democracy and turn America into an autocratic state run for and by Republicans. While the message has varied over time, it is always about what damage liberal politicians are doing to cripple America.
- *Fox News* isn't the only source of conservative anger towards government. There is also talk radio, websites, email newsletters, etc. The conservative media ecosystem includes talk radio, websites, email newsletters, and so forth. But Fox News has had an enduring and broad impact.

No Symmetry Between Right and Left

Is this analysis fair? Are there no cases on the left that replicate what is going on in the right wing media?

In general, the left is not as engaged or manipulated, seduced by such strategies on the right.

Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts published *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, which shows that right and other media differ significantly in dealing with network information. By doing a rigorous analysis of online stories, tweets, and Facebook-shares data points, the authors conclude that “something very different was happening in right-wing media than in centrist, center-left and left-wing media.” (Benkler, et al., 2018, p. 14). They observe that

the behavior of the right-wing media ecosystem represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the American media system. We use the term “radicalization” advisedly in two senses. First, to speak of “polarization” is to assume symmetry. No fact emerges more clearly from our analysis of how four million political stories were linked, tweeted, and shared over a three-year period than that there is no symmetry in the architecture and dynamics of communications within the right-wing media ecosystem and outside of it. Second, throughout this period we have observed repeated public humiliation and vicious disinformation campaigns mounted by the leading sites in this sphere against individuals who were the core pillars of Republican identity a mere decade earlier. (Benkler, et al., 2018, p. 14).

Benkler et al. believe that the research they performed generally indicated that the left were less susceptible to their biases and that the right sought confirmation bias to their preexisting beliefs. They conclude that “the right-wing media ecosystem differs categorically from the rest of the media environment,” and has been much more susceptible to “disinformation, lies and half-truths.” As for Fox News’ role in this, “we found Fox News accrediting and amplifying the excesses of the radical sites.” (Benkler, et al., 2018, p. 14).

Differences between Right and Left

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There are also these differences:

- First of all, the alt-right and conservatives are more prone to click-bait conspiracy theories and right-wing propaganda because the conservatives are more easily seduced with news or clicks that support their confirmation bias. (Ingraham, 2019).
- The behavior of the right-wing media ecosystem represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the American media system. The right and alt-right made polarization a winning strategy, especially for the last several political cycles
- Apart from their need to be a major player in influencing Republican and conservative opinion, another of the major motives for *Fox News's* propaganda machine is making money. *Fox News* makes nearly \$2 billion a year, and they can make high demands for advertising and fees. They enjoy making money from Trump's supporters (Stelter, 2020, p. 20).

While the role and engagements of right-wing media overshadow the left-wing, there are left-wing authoritarians as well

- Left-wing authoritarians (LWA) resemble (right-wing-authoritarians (RWA) in being characterized by high levels of dogmatism, punitive attitudes toward dissenters, and desire for strong authority figures.
- What distinguishes LWA from RWA is the content of their dogmatically defended values: pro-environment and anti-racist and anti-sexist beliefs, and rejection of traditional Christian moral restrictions.
- Both RWA and LWA were significantly positively associated with endorsement of would report to police, need threat of punishment, certificate of immunity, mandatory tracking app, restrict right to protest, ban nonessential items, government-run economy, restrict right to trial by jury, restrictions by executive decree, emergency-enhanced punishment, and mandatory COVID-19 testing. (Manson, 2020)

Cancel Culture

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- Cancel culture originally emerged as a tactic on the left. It is the practice of removing support for public figures in reaction to offensive behavior or opinions such as refusing right-wing speakers the right to offer public forums on a university campus. Bill Crosby's convictions of sexual assault forced restricting access to his comedy shows.
- One of the more troubling recent examples is a professor at the University of Michigan who was forced away from teaching a class on music composition (adapting Shakespeare to opera) when students complained that he had shown a video of Lawrence Olivier playing Othello in blackface. This rejection of unpleasant history compares to the right's attack on critical race theory (CRT).
- To strike back against this form of intolerance, Harper's Magazine published "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate." (A Letter ..., 2020), signed by a stream of authors, writers and scholars, who decried the level of intolerance for unpopular opinions by the left or the rejection of public debate in national discourse or in university life.
- The right now has appropriated this tactic where any problematic opinions that the left promotes are attacked as a form of cancel culture. Right-wing media have attacked the removal of some Dr. Seuss books from the available purchase, claiming that it is an instance of cancel culture. In actuality, the left had nothing to do with reducing the number of Dr. Seuss books made available. The publisher did so as to remove images and ideas that could be conceived to be racist or ethnically problematic.
- *Fox News* is more than an attention merchant: it is an anger merchant. It is a drug-pusher, of smug self-righteous "knowledge." Unfortunately, the drug-pushers (Alt-right media, Trump-loving Republicans, especially those in government) appear to escape responsibility for the results of their disinformation campaigns and the low-level implementers (e.g., the insurrectionists) are taking the hit (sent to jail).

Summary

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So in the Age of Disinformation, we have two kinds of cognitive authorities

(1) Legitimate cognitive authorities, which may favor a particular bias, but whose work is grounded in verifiable evidence and facts (and corrective strategies when a story is wrong). They are truly trustworthy, have expertise, are consistent over time, and make it clear what they are doing is opinion or factual.

(2) Pseudo-cognitive authorities who have the trappings of trustworthiness and expertise, but are not grounded in verifiable evidence or facts, and where there is a muddling of opinion and supposed evidence, that is often selective or manufactured or chosen to suit their narratives. They are successful not only because they feed the biases of their viewers but also enflame those biases that make them addicted to a “propaganda feedback loop.”

(3) Alt-right media unifies the fringe but influential elements of American authorities: white racists (e.g. proud boys), biblical fundamentalists (e.g., white evangelicals, religious leaders like Robert Jeffries, Jack Van Impe, Jerry Falwell – those whose trump card is damnation to hell according to their (correct!) version of God’s will), anti-abortionists (e.g., fundamentalist Catholics), absolute guns rights activists (e.g., the leadership of the NRA), capitalism fundamentalists (e.g. ALEC, American Legislative Exchange Council). By appealing to each of these fringe elements, they collectively aim to destabilize American democracy and replace it for a single vision for America, despite the fact that the visions may be different. But cultivated dissent breeds authoritarianism. The surprise will be to some authoritarians when it is not *their* preferred form of authoritarianism.

Summary

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(4) It is certainly true that there is a lot to grieve about or resent in America. The sad, magic thing is that the alt-right has taken the voice of aggrieved and make it the voice for the oppressor.

- The economy is lousy not because immigrants have taken the jobs, but because American companies have moved their jobs abroad in any way they can to improve the profit margin and stock margin. They make obscene profits, pay no taxes, rely on the infrastructure but are unwilling to pay for it and they pay their low-level employees with bad wages and poor, if any, benefits. They prevent unions and attack and diminish workers benefits: pensions, health insurance, etc.
- The restaurant industry, such as fast-food chains, do not pay their workers a living wage and no benefits, while raking in enormous profits.
- There is a lot of inequities in American society, but it is due to the rich and powerful.
- American is not corrupt because people now no longer follow God or biblical principles, but many “Christian” leaders and their congregations no longer follow Christ, make his teachings fit the comfort level of the congregation, and turned them into money-making businesses serving capitalism and capitalist ideology (e.g., God rewards those who “work” hard (e.g., intellectually find ways to manipulate laws and processes to exploit people, businesses and the environment – to make profits).
- They should be mad about a healthcare system that only works for the rich and powerful, robs the American people for their underwriting of medical products development (through taxes) and then patents the product and charges consumers an exorbitant amount to get them.
- The people committed to the right need to ask themselves what or who is the real source of their anger?