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## **Fox News. An Analysis of the News Channel's Political Bias**

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**TRUST NO FOX?  
AN ANALYSIS OF FOX NEWS' POLITICAL BIAS**

Eingereicht von: Annegret Bieber

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## PREFACE

Never has information been so abundant, profuse and easily accessible as in our age of mass media and globalization. Yet, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain reliable information, to know which sources are trustworthy. One of the most important premises for a functioning democracy, however, is a well-informed public with the ability to take the decisions that best serve its ends. In modern democratic states it is the role of the media, particularly the news media, to provide the citizens with the kind of secure knowledge of reality that forms the basis of democratic processes. It is due to this supervisory function as a political watchdog that the media is often referred to as “the fourth branch” of government.

With the amalgamation of politics and economy and the rise of huge corporations controlling essential parts of the media market, the face of the news has changed visibly over the last decades. More interested in the profits that can be made from entertaining and pleasing consumers than in providing objective information for an informed citizenry, many media outlets offer distinct foci, perspectives and versions of the news, sometimes to the point of contradicting each other. The public, unable to verify most of the information for themselves, face the dilemma of deciding whom to believe.

Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News Channel has been accused innumerable times of violating journalistic values and presenting a very conservative perspective of the news. The following statements are only a few examples of such accusations made by prominent public figures and organizations: CNN founder Ted Turner, for example, called Fox News a “propaganda voice”<sup>1</sup> for the Bush administration; former *New York Times* executive editor Howell Raines observes that “[f]or the first time since the yellow journalism of a century ago, the United States has a major news organization devoted to the promotion of one political party”<sup>2</sup>; Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy concluded that “[a]fter all, Fox News is nothing more than a 24/7 political ad for the GOP,” the media watchdog organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) states that “[w]ith the ascendance of Fox News Channel, we now have a national conservative TV network in addition to the established centrist outlets,”<sup>3</sup> and even conservative columnist and Fox News contributor Jonah Goldberg

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<sup>1</sup> “Fox News ‘Propaganda’ Says Mogul.” *BBC News*. BBC, 27 Jan. 2005. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Raines, Howell. “Why Don’t Honest Journalists Take on Roger Ailes and Fox News?” *Washington Post*. Washington Post, 14 March 2010. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Ackerman, Seth. “The Most Biased Name in News: Fox News Channel’s Extraordinary Right-Wing Tilt.” *Extra!* July-Aug. 2001: n. pag. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

admits that “[Fox News] does lean to the right, primarily in its opinion programming but also in its story selection [. . .] and elsewhere.”<sup>4</sup> To many people it seems common knowledge that Fox is not the fair and balanced network it purports to be.

As today’s most watched news network in the United States, Fox News has got a considerable potential to shape public opinion. The fact that it is at the same time one of the most controversial news outlets in the country makes it a subject well worthy of investigation. It is therefore the aim of this thesis to take a closer look at the particularities of Fox News and to examine the nature of its political bias. In particular, I will address the questions if and how Fox News succeeds in influencing its viewers and whether those who accuse the network of fabricating propaganda have a point.

The first part, while providing the reader with an overview of extant literature and studies on the subject, examines some general features of Fox News’ political bias. It sheds light on the people standing behind the Fox News Corporation, its modus operandi, and the effects of its biased reporting. The second chapter introduces the theory and method on which the subsequent analysis is based: The heuristic-systematic model of persuasion explains how people’s attitudes and behavior can be influenced via communication, and it is fit to give information about the persuasive potential of Fox’s bias. Relying on the criteria specified in the heuristic-systematic model of persuasion, I will examine, in chapter three, examples of biased news reporting to find out whether and how Fox News makes use of persuasive cues in order to affect its viewers’ judgment. Subsequently, there will be a critical evaluation of Fox’s bias, in which I contrast the concepts of media bias and propaganda to answer the question which category Fox News belongs to. The paper concludes with a brief summary and an outlook on the current situation.

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<sup>4</sup> Goldberg, Jonah. “Fox, John Edwards and the Two Americas.” *RealClearPolitics*. RealClearPolitics, 16 Mar. 2007. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

# 1 EVIDENCE OF POLITICAL BIAS IN FOX NEWS

According to the *Encyclopedia of Media and Politics*, “[m]edia bias occurs when coverage lacks fairness or accuracy because it favors a particular political perspective.”<sup>5</sup> Accuracy, fairness and balance lie at the core of the concept of objectivity. Media bias thus concerns situations in which the media deviate from these journalistic standards and, as a consequence, objectivity is compromised.<sup>6</sup> A standard journalistic process can be described as follows:

- 1) Determine whether a topic is worthy of exploration.
- 2) Seek out reliable sources of information.
- 3) Corroborate the information gained by finding other sources to substantiate it.
- 4) Find contradicting information from other sources to provide balance.
- 5) Write or produce the news piece.
- 6) Submit to an editor for evaluation and editing.
- 7) Re-write the story for publication.

This process involves reaching out and seeking information in order to inform the public. It includes much research and verification of facts, and often includes opposing points of view.

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As I will show, Fox News all too often disregards this procedure and does not appear to even strive for objectivity.

This chapter shall introduce some basic information about the Fox News Channel and summarize the results of the most important literature on the subject of its political bias. A huge amount of material can be found in this field:<sup>8</sup> a few research papers, polls and documentaries, numerous books, newspaper articles, comments, blogs, websites, critical segments and parodies on MSNBC and liberal TV-shows like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, and thousands of personal videos – especially on internet platforms like YouTube, where some users<sup>9</sup> dedicate entire channels to observing, commenting and analyzing media bias. These sources differ widely in matters of objectivity, style and approach, and while many of them find skillful ways to demonstrate and expose the network’s bias, merely a few fulfill the standards of scientific research. Only the latter kind is taken into account here.

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<sup>5</sup> Niven, David. “Media Bias.” *Encyclopedia of Media and Politics*. Ed. Todd M. Schaefer and Thomas A. Birkland. Washington: CQ, 2007. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Dicken-García, Hazel. “Objectivity in Reporting.” *Encyclopedia of American Journalism*. Ed. Stephen L. Vaughn. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print; Lawrence, Regina G. “Objectivity.” *Encyclopedia of Media and Politics*. Ed. Todd M. Schaefer and Thomas A. Birkland. Washington: CQ, 2007. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace, Peter G. “Public Relations and Journalism.” *Encyclopedia of American Journalism*. Ed. Stephen L. Vaughn. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Some numbers: a Google-search for the term “Fox News bias” produces over 1,060,000 hits whereas identical searches for other big news channels like CNN or NBC come up with less than 20,000.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. LiberalViewer (<http://www.youtube.com/user/LiberalViewer>), BraveNewFilms (<http://www.youtube.com/user/bravenewfilms>), TheYoungTurks (<http://www.youtube.com/user/TheYoungTurks>).

I will examine bias in three different areas: the personal and corporate sphere, the institutional sphere concerning the internal organization and professional realization of the news-making, and media effects.

## 1.1 Ownership and Affiliations

The owner of Fox News, its leadership and its staff are closely affiliated with political organizations. The connection exists on many levels and reveals itself in the form of memberships, personal ties, financial and logistic support or public endorsement.

The Fox News Channel was launched on 7 October 1996 as part of the Fox Entertainment Group, a subsidiary of News Corporation. News Corporation, or News Corp., which controls newspapers, magazines, books, broadcasting, direct-broadcast satellite television, cable networks, a movie studio, home video and Internet websites all over the planet, is the world's third-largest media conglomerate. It was founded by its current chairman and chief executive officer Rupert Murdoch. The Australian-born media magnate looks back on a long history of political involvements and stands for a very conservative point of view. "He is unabashedly an archconservative and a great admirer of Ronald Reagan"<sup>10</sup>; "he's foremost a politician and he will use his immense media power to shape the content and especially the news that furthers his interest and those of his allies, including the conservative Republican community."<sup>11</sup> In June 2010, News Corp. made a \$1 million donation to the Republican Governors Association. Some years before, Murdoch had given the same sum to the California Republican Party.<sup>12</sup>

President and founding CEO of Fox News Roger Ailes, who began his career as a television producer, worked as a political consultant for many Republican candidates, among them Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. With his background in media production and campaigning, Ailes disposes of the necessary expertise and PR skills that helped the channel to such quick success. He even wrote some articles and books about personal and professional communication: *You Are the Message: Secrets of the Master*

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<sup>10</sup> Welch, Bryant. *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*. New York: St. Martin's, 2008. Print. 147.

<sup>11</sup> *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*. Dir. Robert Greenwald. The Disinformation Company, 2004. DVD. 01:05:49.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Kurtz, Howard. "News Corp. defends \$1 million donation to Republican Governors Association." *Washington Post*. Washington Post, 18 Aug. 2010. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

*Communicators* (in co-authorship with Jon Kraushar), “Campaign Strategy,” “How to Make a Good Impression,” “How to Make an Audience Love You,” “The Importance of Being Likeable.”

Fox is also reproached with selecting its employees according to their political views.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, many of Fox News’ most prominent on-air personalities are deeply involved in political affairs and make no secret of their attitudes. Glenn Beck for example, in addition to publishing a number of books and openly supporting Tea Party protests, founded an ultra-conservative political group called the 9.12 Project, which focuses on religion, Americanism and small government.<sup>14</sup> He also organized the Restoring Honor rally, a political event which took place on 28 August 2010 and concentrated on similar issues with a distinct note of Christian fundamentalism and right-wing ideology full of warped historic allusions and connotations.<sup>15</sup> This rally was directly promoted by Fox News and the Tea Party movement, and it featured prominent speakers such as former vice president candidate Sarah Palin. While Glenn Beck is probably the most extreme of the show hosts, his colleagues do not try to hide their disrespect and contempt for the Democratic Party either. David Brock, President and CEO of Media Matters for America, writes:

The most visible on-air FOX News personalities were political and ideological partisans of a character rarely seen in professional news organizations. David Asman, a daytime anchor, had come from the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and the Manhattan Institute. Brit Hume of ABC News, anchor of an evening newscast, moonlighted as a freelance writer for the Far Right *American Spectator* and the neoconservative *Weekly Standard*. Tony Snow, a sometime anchor and until recently host of FOX’s Sunday morning show, was a former editorial page editor of the *Washington Times*, a White House speechwriter for George H. W. Bush, and a substitute host for Rush Limbaugh. [. . .] Catherine Crier, who has since left the network, had been an elected Republican judge in Texas.

[. . .] Ailes assembled a senior management team that, with a few exceptions such as Brit Hume, had no national network news experience. He surrounded himself with a tight clique of loyalists [. . .].<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Fox’s list of regular guests and contributors almost reads like a who-is-who of the Republican and right wing pundit scene: with Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich, Mike Huckabee, Liz Cheney and such notoriously populist figures as Laura Ingraham and Ann

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<sup>13</sup> Ackerman.

<sup>14</sup> Website: [www.the912project.com](http://www.the912project.com)

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Rosenbaum, Ron. “Don’t Ignore the Tea Party’s Toxic Take on History.” *Slate*. Washington Post, 22 Apr. 2010. Web. 16 Dec. 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Brock, David. *The Republican Noise Machine: Right-Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy*. New York: Crown, 2004. Print. 317-18.

Coulter, the political right is very well represented whereas one cannot find a single Democrat of the same standing or influence.<sup>17</sup> Not only do those people get paid to be on the programs, they are at the same time given the advantage of free airtime for promoting their political cause; a task in which they can count on their colleagues' support: Media Matters drily observed that, touting the 2012 presidential prospects of Fox News employees, "Cameron found time to offer flattering descriptions of each of these 'top Republicans,' [but] he neglected to mention that 75% of them are current Fox News employees."<sup>18</sup> The organization claims that alone during the election cycle in 2010 "more than 30 Fox News personalities endorsed, raised money, or campaigned for Republican candidates or organizations in more than 600 instances. The Republican support was given to more than 300 different races or party organizations in at least 47 states."<sup>19</sup>

During the Bush era, Fox was often called out for its uncritical support of government policies and its close cooperation with the White House. Media critic Eric Alterman stated that "[t]he type of coverage that Fox offers [. . .] is completely consistent with [. . .] the strategy of the Bush Administration,"<sup>20</sup> and former White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan admitted that Fox was frequently given Talking Points by the White House, especially on high-profile issues, which they passed on to the viewers with the "desired results."<sup>21</sup> An analysis of 2005 Iraq and Afghanistan war coverage on NBC and FNC concluded that "Fox News was much more sympathetic to the administration [. . .], suggesting that scholars should consider Fox as alternative, rather than mainstream, media."<sup>22</sup> The channel may even have played a decisive role in the close 2000 presidential race, when George W. Bush's first cousin John Ellis, who worked on Fox News' decision team, prematurely – and incorrectly – called the state of Florida for the Republican candidate. *How to Steal an Election: The Inside Story of how George Bush's Brother and Fox Network Miscalled the 2000 Election and Changed the Course of History* gives a very detailed account of the happenings within and outside of the FNC's headquarters that night and explains under which dubious circumstances Ellis, guided by his other cousin,

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. also *Outfoxed* 00:19:34-00:20:50.

<sup>18</sup> Dimiero, Ben. "Synergy: Fox News Touts the 2012 Presidential Prospects of Fox News Employees." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 19 July 2010. Web. 16 Dec. 2010.

<sup>19</sup> "Off the Rails: The Year in Fox News Misinformation." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 21 Dec. 2010. Web. 1 Jan. 2011.

<sup>20</sup> *Outfoxed* 00:44:30.

<sup>21</sup> Corley, Matt. "McClellan: Fox News Commentators Use the 'Talking Points' That The White House Sends Them." *ThinkProgress*. Center for American Progress Action Fund, 26 July 2008. Web. 10 Dec. 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Aday, Sean. "Chasing the Bad News: An Analysis of 2005 Iraq and Afghanistan War Coverage on NBC and Fox News Channel." *Journal of Communication* 60.1 (2010): 144-64. PDF file. 144.

George's brother and at that time Governor of Florida Jeb Bush, was able to make such a misleading prediction.

The partiality at Fox is, however, not restricted to the personal ties and political affiliations of its leadership and staff. The channel is also very particular when it comes to internal organization, news production and its effect on the audience.

## 1.2 Organization and News Production

The documentary film *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* gives very comprehensive information about the mode of operation that can be found at Fox. Former employees describe the working environment as one of constant monitoring, repression, intimidation and control.<sup>23</sup> The agenda-setting and news framing is dictated right from the top; the orders often came in the form of memos circulated by former Senior Vice President John Moody. These internal memoranda still exist. They serve to determine the message of the day as well as the presentation of certain events and the phrasing that is to be used when talking about them. Just the other day, a new Fox memo, in which current Vice President Bill Sammon gives instructions on how to address the subject of the health care reform, was leaked to the press:

From: Sammon, Bill  
Sent: Tuesday, October 27, 2009 8:23 AM  
To: 054 -FNSunday; 169 -SPECIAL REPORT; 069 -Politics; 030 -Root (FoxNews.Com); 036 -FOX.WHU; 050 -Senior Producers; 051 -Producers  
Subject: friendly reminder: let's not slip back into calling it the "public option"

- 1) Please use the term "government-run health insurance" or, when brevity is a concern, "government option," whenever possible.
- 2) When it is necessary to use the term "public option" (which is, after all, firmly ensconced in the nation's lexicon), use the qualifier "so-called," as in "the so-called public option."
- 3) Here's another way to phrase it: "The public option, which is the government-run plan." [ . . ]<sup>24</sup>

Earlier memoranda concerned, for example, judicial nominations, the 9/11 commission investigating the circumstances of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the coverage

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Outfoxed* 00:06:30-00:08:44.

<sup>24</sup> Stoeffel, Kat. "Leaked Fox News Memo: Don't Call It the 'Public Option.'" *New York Observer*. New York Observer, 9 Dec. 2010. 9 Dec. 2010.

of Kerry's speeches and military record, or the Abu Graib prison incident.<sup>25</sup> There is nothing subtle about the way the orders are given:

[T]he pictures from Abu Graeb [sic] prison are disturbing. Today we have a picture [. . .] of an American hostage [. . .] Who's outraged on his behalf? [. . .] (5/5/04)

[. . .] Ribbons or medals? Which did John Kerry throw away after he returned from Vietnam. [sic] [. . .] His perceived disrespect for the military could be more damaging to the candidate than questions about his actions in uniform (4/26/04).

[. . .] The so-called 9/11 commission has already been meeting. [. . .][B]ut this is not 'what did [Bush] know and when did he know it' stuff. Don't turn this into Watergate. [. . .] (3/23/04)<sup>26</sup>

Conforming to these directions, the handling of news values and news framing is accordingly biased: Neither the story selection nor its presentation meet the requirements of objectivity. Concerning the agenda setting and story selection, there are cases of pure and simple self-censorship and a clear unbalance in partisan representation and the line-up of guests. For example, Fox News kept silent about the \$1 million donation by its parent company News Corporation to the Republican Governors Association prior to the midterm elections in 2010.<sup>27</sup> There was also a lack of coverage for the 2009 gay rights march in Washington D.C. while other, significantly smaller and less important marches received disproportionately more attention on Fox.<sup>28</sup> Dissenting guests as well are often censored by the hosts, who will interrupt them, not let them speak, tell them to "shut up" or put a premature end to the conversation under the pretext of time running out.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, a major FAIR report in the organization's monthly magazine *Extra!* pointed out the unequally higher ratio of conservative guests on Fox's signature political news show *Special Report with Brit Hume* where 89 per cent of all guests with a party affiliation were Republicans.<sup>30</sup> Another FAIR study stated that "there are entire blocks of the network's programming schedule that are set aside for conservative stories."<sup>31</sup> The Project for Excellence

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Outfoxed* 00:08:44-00:11:03, 00:57:41, 01:00:19, 01:01:19, 01:04:11.

<sup>26</sup> "Thirty-Three Internal FOX Editorial Memos Reviewed by MMFA Reveal FOX News Channel's Inner Workings." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 14 July 2004. Web. 10 Dec. 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Pitney, Nico. "Fox News Doesn't Mention News Corp's \$1 Million Donation To Republican Committee." *Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 18 Aug. 2010. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Terkel, Amanda. "Jon Stewart Hits Fox for Ignoring Gay Rights March After Aggressively Promoting 9/12 March." *ThinkProgress*. Center for American Progress Action Fund, 14 Oct. 2009. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Outfoxed* 00:12:08-00:13:06; "Hannity Denies Association With White Supremacist." Cheldemedo. *YouTube*. YouTube, 20 Mar. 2008. Web. 10 Dec. 2010. 03:30, 04:40, 06:40.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Rendall, Steve. "Fox's Slanted Sources: Conservatives, Republican Far Outnumber Others." *Extra!* July-Aug. 2001: n. pag. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Ackerman.

in Journalism, which analyzed the covering of the General Election in 2008, attested Fox a clear bias for John McCain and against Barack Obama.<sup>32</sup>

Fox completely blurs the line between news and opinion as, in addition to lacking impartiality, most of the on-air staff distinguish themselves by an even greater lack of professionalism, taking firm stands on almost every issue and not shying away from defaming, attacking and insulting opponents on a personal level; in some cases they even went so far as to speak out threats against dissenting voices.<sup>33</sup> Sometimes, the anchors try to mask their intention and use hedging phrases such as “some people say,” or express their ideas in the form of rhetorical questions when they want to insert their proper opinion.<sup>34</sup> A study conducted in 2002 on the content of the three cable networks CNN, MSNBC and Fox News Channel by ADT Research, an independent non-partisan news monitoring organization, comes to the conclusion that:

FNC was primarily an opinion network. It:  
Staged most interviews in a confrontational format  
Asked questions in an opinionated and combative style  
Selected interview guests with partisan, forensic and military backgrounds  
Relied on a panel of in-house analysts for interpretation

[. . .] FNC has a breezy, irreverent, opinionated, combative style that serves as a megaphone to exaggerate underlying ideological differences. [. . .] At each turn — Brit Hume’s panel of in-house analysts, Shepard Smith’s disdain for politically correct speak, Bill O’Reilly’s opinionated abandonment of the codes of journalistic objectivity, Sean Hannity’s aggressiveness compared with his partner — this distinctive style exaggerated a right-of-center tilt compared with CNN.<sup>35</sup>

In response to these criticisms, Fox News put forward a distinction between its “opinion” segments and its “straight news” in October 2009, in which it claimed that its news hours – from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. – are objective. Notwithstanding this delineation, the news hours have been found to echo the subjectivity of its opinion shows.<sup>36</sup>

But the unprofessionalism does not stop there: deceitful editing, distorting, and even lying are no rarity. Fox News reported, for example, of an environmental agreement which, they said, was signed by President Clinton in 1992, and even showed footage of Clinton signing

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. “The Color of News: How Different Media Have Covered the General Election.” *Journalism.org*. Project for Excellence in Journalism, 29 Oct. 2008. Web. 15 Dec. 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Brock 320f, 331, 336, 339-345; *Outfoxed* 00:36:36-00:42:18, 00:46:00.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Outfoxed* 00:17:56-00:19:24.

<sup>35</sup> ADT Research. “Study on the Content of the Three All-News Cable Networks.” *OnlineNewsHour*. MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, Mar. 2002. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. “Fox News’ Programs Echo Its ‘Opinion’ Shows: Smears, Doctored Videos, GOP Talking Points.” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 13 Oct. 2009. Web. 4 Jan. 2011.

an official document.<sup>37</sup> The agreement in question, however, was not signed by him but by Bush the elder, who was president at that time. On another instance, O'Reilly told his producers to edit out a snippet in which Commission Chairman Tom Keane stated that there was no evidence of a link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda. In front of the camera, the anchor then claimed that Keane had, in fact, confirmed such a link.<sup>38</sup> Bill O'Reilly is so famous for being a pathological liar that an entire book, *The Oh Really? Factor* by FAIR's Peter Hart, is dedicated to uncovering his prevarications.

Furthermore, Fox admitted to manipulating video and photo material and to using false footage. On 2 July 2002, Fox News digitally altered the photos of the two *New York Times* journalists Jacques Steinberg and Steven Reddicliffe in order to make them look worse: A direct comparison of the original pictures and the version Fox presented shows that the men's features had been distorted, their teeth yellowed, and their eyes darkened; Reddicliffe's hairline was moved further back on his head, and Steinberg's nose and ears were exaggerated. Fox News showed these altered photos without any indication of the changes.<sup>39</sup> And Sean Hannity, while discussing an anti-healthcare reform rally, used footage from Glenn Beck's much bigger 9-12 March to support his claim of a grossly overstated crowd size.<sup>40</sup> Fox also frequently and wrongfully claims to be the only news outlet showing certain material and giving a voice to people who, according to them, are ignored by the mainstream media.<sup>41</sup> Statements are taken out of context to alter their original meaning on a regular basis.<sup>42</sup> For example, Sean Hannity showed a clip of Obama saying that "taxes are scheduled to go up substantially next year – for everybody" and sarcastically commented that "the president had a rare moment of honesty" and that of course "the anointed one will make sure that that happens." The same clip in context reveals that Barack Obama was speaking not of his own plans but of those envisioned by the Bush administration: "Under the tax plan passed by the last administration, taxes are scheduled to go up substantially [. . .]."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ackerman.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Exoo, Calvin F. *The Pen and the Sword: Press, War and Terror in the 21st Century*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2010. Print. 195.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. "Hannity Video Switch-up Is Only the Tip of Fox News' Video-Doctored Iceberg." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 11 Nov. 2009. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. "Daily Show: Sean Hannity Uses Glenn Beck's Protest Footage." Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 10 Nov. 2009. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Brock 323-24; "Daily Show: Glenn Beck Airs Israeli Raid Footage." Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 3 June 2010. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>42</sup> For many more well-documented examples see e.g. [www.youtube.com/user/LiberalViewer](http://www.youtube.com/user/LiberalViewer) (Playlist: "Fox News Bias in Its Video Editing")

<sup>43</sup> "Hannity Speech Out of Context, Fox News Out of Control." Johnny5k. *YouTube*. YouTube, 12 Sept. 2010. Web. 10 Dec. 2010.

The same kind of careless or intentional neglect for correctness concerns the selection of sources and verification of information. *The Daily Show* alone exposed numerous incidents involving, among other things, false claims about the nuclear arms treaty with Russia leaving America completely defenseless,<sup>44</sup> lies about the origins of the Nuclear Security Summit logo Fox assumed to be the Muslim crescent moon,<sup>45</sup> and the disproportionately overstated costs of Obama's trip to India, which Fox estimated up to two billion dollars, relying solely on one single quote by an alleged Indian official.<sup>46</sup>

Bias and sloppy research is also noticeable in Fox's polls and surveys. Questions have been raised about the impartiality of Fox News' favorite pollster Rasmussen,<sup>47</sup> moreover Fox's subjects, phrasing and evaluation of their own polls are often unobjective, suggestive, or simply incorrect.<sup>48</sup> One question asked, for example, whether respondents believed that President Obama "wants the financial crisis to continue so government can take over more businesses and grow the federal government."<sup>49</sup> Another poll referred to the stimulus bill as "the economic stimulus and spending plan," and "falsely [said] the bill 'includes spending nearly \$800 billion dollars of taxpayer money,' omitting the fact that the bill's price tag includes \$350 billion in tax cuts."<sup>50</sup> In one case, the overall percentage of respondents added up to 120.<sup>51</sup>

As can be seen, all of the criteria and steps of an objective journalistic procedure as outlined at the beginning of this chapter have at some point been disregarded at Fox News. Some authors try to find and describe a larger strategy which underlies the systematic concurrence of these instances of bias. In his book *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*, Bryant Welch identifies symbols, manufactured feeling states, repetition, and associational reasoning as the four primary tools of Fox News: "They have put Fox News on the cutting edge of transforming the news into a massive system of

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. "Daily Show: The Big Bang Treaty." Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 8 Apr. 2010. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. "Daily Show: A Farewell to Arms." Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 14 Apr. 2010. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. "Daily Show: Mandvi – Doubtsourced." Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 8 Nov. 2010. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>47</sup> "Rasmussen: A Pollster Made for Fox News." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 5 Nov. 2010. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Brock 320f; Wilson, David C. "Fox News Poll: What Does Bad Question Wording Say About Their Polling Data?" *Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 21 Sept. 2010. Web. 13 Dec. 2010; Blumenthal, Mark. "Order Effects in the Fox News Poll?" *Pollster.com*. Pollster.com, 4 Apr. 2007. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Corley, Matt. "Fox News Poll Asks If Increasing Taxes for the Wealthy Means 'Nobody Gets to Be Rich.'" *ThinkProgress*. Center for American Progress Action Fund, 2 Apr. 2009. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Kleefeld, Eric. "Fox News Poll Asks Phony Questions About 'Stimulus and Spending Bill.'" *Talking Points Memo*. TPM Media, 19 Feb. 2009. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Wing, Nick. "Fox News' Fuzzy Math Claims 120% of Americans Have an Opinion on 'Climategate'" *Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 8 Dec. 2009. Web. 13 Dec. 2010.

subliminal communications that are very much at odds with what their listeners understand to be taking place as they listen to their nightly news. It's gaslighting, pure and simple."<sup>52</sup>

Other authors concentrate on how the ensemble of the conservative media establishment – a great part of which belongs to Murdoch's News Corp. – works together to form some kind of an echo chamber by consistently repeating the exact same information, which then resonates in this environment. The most comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon is provided in Kathleen Jamieson and Joseph Cappella's book of the same name, *Echo Chamber*.

### 1.3 The Fox Effect

The *Fox effect* refers to both the effect Fox News has got on its viewers and the influence its style has got on the other news networks. This chapter takes into consideration only the first meaning.

Quite a number of studies assessed Fox's impact on its audience. Several of them analyzed the population's political knowledge and found that viewers of Fox News are significantly more likely to have misperceptions about certain facts. In 2003, a PIPA/Knowledge Network poll examined the interviewees' beliefs about central issues regarding the war in Iraq:

In the run-up to the war with Iraq and in the postwar period, a significant portion of the American public has held a number of misperceptions that have played a key role in generating and maintaining approval for the decision to go to war. Significant portions of the public have believed that Iraq was directly involved in the September 11 attacks and that evidence of links between Iraq and al-Qaeda have been found, that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq after the war and that Iraq actually used weapons of mass destruction during the war, and that world public opinion has approved of the US going to war with Iraq.<sup>53</sup>

The poll discovered a high correlation of people's holding these misperceptions, their political position, and their primary source of news. The following table shows the percentage of viewers for each news source who had at least one of the three misperceptions about the links between Iraq and al-Qaeda, the discovery of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and positive

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<sup>52</sup> Welch 135.

<sup>53</sup> PIPA and Knowledge Networks. *Misperceptions the Media, and the Iraq War*. N.p.: PIPA/Knowledge Networks, 2 Oct. 2003. PDF file.

world public opinion of the United States' course of action; the inferior line lists the percentage of viewers who held none of these misperceptions.<sup>54</sup>

Source	FOX	CBS	ABC	NBC	CNN	Print	NPR/PBS
1 or more	80	71	61	55	55	47	23
None	20	30	39	45	45	53	77

As can be seen, people watching Fox News are immensely more likely to be misinformed on these issues: Merely 20% of the network's regular audience was familiar with the correct answers. The investigators dismissed the effect of demographic variations in audience as an explanation for these numbers. An examination of variations in misperception within demographic groups, based on aspects like political position or education, confirmed the results: Within the group of Republicans for example, the average rate for all three key misperceptions was 43%, for NPR/PBS it was at 32%, and for Republican Fox viewers it was 54%.<sup>55</sup> The study also found that, overall, those misperceptions are not derived from a failure to pay attention to the news, and that those who primarily watch Fox were even more likely to have these misperceptions the more attention they paid.<sup>56</sup>

A similar study by Worldpublicopinion.org focused on the misperceptions about issues related to the 2010 elections. It examined both voters' perceptions of misinformation and their actual level of misinformation concerning, for example, the stimulus legislation, the healthcare reform law, the government bailout, the state of the economy, climate change, campaign contributions by the US Chamber of Commerce, and President Obama's place of birth. Examining the correlation of misinformation and exposure to news sources, the study states that, in general, those with a greater exposure to news sources were better informed. Those, however, who regularly watched Fox News were significantly more likely to hold certain misconceptions including most of the ones mentioned above.<sup>57</sup> For example, the percentage of Fox viewers believing that scientist do not agree that climate change is occurring is thirty points higher than that of those who never watch Fox. Combining this information with the knowledge that, only recently, another Fox memo<sup>58</sup> showed up, reminding the anchors not to speak about climate change without immediately calling it into question, I think it is fair to say that, at least

<sup>54</sup> Data taken from PIPA and Knowledge Networks 13.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. PIPA and Knowledge Networks 15-16.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. PIPA and Knowledge Networks 16.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Ramsay, Clay, Steven Kull, and Evan Lewis. *Misinformation and the 2010 Election: A Study of the US Electorate*. N.p.: WorldPublicOpinion.org, 10 Dec. 2010. PDF file. 19-21.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Dimiero, Ben. "Foxleaks: Fox Boss Ordered Staff to Cast Doubt on Climate Science." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 15 Dec. 2010. Web. 16 Dec. 2010.

in this case, the misinformation and the resulting misconceptions were obviously intended and strategically prepared from high up.

A smaller study conducted by the Ohio State University found that Fox News contributed to spreading false rumors about the proposed building of a mosque in the vicinity of Ground Zero in New York City.<sup>59</sup>

In 2006, Stefano Della Vigna of Berkeley and Ethan Kaplan of the Stockholm University analyzed the effect of media bias on voting behavior. They exploited the natural experiment of Fox News' introduction to the cable market between 1996 and 2000. In those towns where Fox was newly available, Republicans gained 0.4 to 0.7 percentage points in the 2000 Presidential elections compared to those of 1996. The investigators estimate that Fox News convinced three to eight percent of its viewers to vote Republican – an impact that is deemed to have been potentially decisive in the close race between George W. Bush and Al Gore.<sup>60</sup> Due to Fox's effect on vote share in Senate elections that were not covered by the network, the researchers presume a general influence on the audience's political beliefs. They offer three possible explanations for their findings: endogeneity bias, rational learning, and persuasion. The first possibility is dismissed on the basis of statistical data, the rational learning hypothesis is challenged by the fact that the Fox effect persists or even increases over the 2000-2004 period, by which time people should have become aware of Fox's bias and consequently have adjusted to filter out this partiality. All in all, the authors think the last possibility the most convincing:

The model [of persuasion] provides an alternative, behavioral interpretation of the results. Viewers do not fully take into account the bias of the media source and therefore are subject to persuasion upon exposure. If voters suffer from persuasion, the effect of Fox News on voting may well be permanent, consistent with the empirical findings.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, they remark that,

[w]hether the effect is rational or not, it would be interesting to know the exact mechanism by which Fox News affected voting. The Senate results suggest that the effect is not due only to candidate-specific coverage, but rather to a general ideological shift. Beyond this, we cannot tell if the effect is due to conservative slant of the news or to the choice of topics like National Security that favor Republicans, as implied by the agenda setting theory [. . .].<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Nisbet, Erik, and Kelly Garrett. "Fox News Contributes to Spread of Rumors About Proposed NYC Mosque." Study Ohio State U, 2010. PDF file.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Della Vigna, Stefano, and Ethan Kaplan. *The Fox News effect: Media bias and voting*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006. Print. 32.

<sup>61</sup> Della Vigna and Kaplan 31.

<sup>62</sup> Della Vigna and Kaplan 32.

Considering the information exposed in the previous subchapter, a combination of those two factors seems likely.

We have now seen the strategies Fox employs to establish its conservative bias and the effect it has on viewers. In the next chapters, I will show that there is indeed a pattern to Fox's unprofessionalism: it systematically serves the superior goal of persuasion.

## 2 THE HEURISTIC-SYSTEMATIC MODEL OF PERSUASION

There are many approaches to the subject of persuasion as it is part of various related fields of study. One can look at it from an angle of linguistics, sociology, political science, communication science, journalism, marketing, public relations or psychology to name just a few perspectives. Due to this overlap, the terminology in this field is far from homogenous: The terms *persuasive communication*, *persuasion*, *attitude change*, *propaganda*, *public relations*, *advertising*, and *marketing* are all used to describe more or less the same phenomenon in slightly different contexts.

The first large-scale empirical studies in persuasion took place in the 1950ies. The Yale Communication and Attitude Change Program under Carl I. Hovland was a continuation of Hovland's work for the Research Branch of the Army's Information and Education Division, whose main task it was to explore the psychological conditions underlying the formation of highly motivated soldiers. Relying on the principles of classic rhetoric and Lasswell's maxim, which describes communication as a mechanistic process of "who says what to whom in what channel with what effect," the Yale Studies looked for variables in sender, message and receiver that would affect the process of persuasion. While they produced many still valid empirical results, they lack a theoretical background apt to provide a systematic framework to explain the individual findings.<sup>63</sup>

Today, the most commonly used models of persuasion are the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), the heuristic-systematic model (HSM), and the unimodel. Their origins lie in social psychology but the models found wide use in many related fields, especially in marketing strategies and advertising. The desire for accuracy is postulated as the receivers' primary goal during message processing, although the HSM also accounts for people's desire to project a positive impression to others and to protect their values and self-concept.

Like the elaboration likelihood model, the heuristic-systematic model of persuasion is a dual-process model, that is, it distinguishes two different modes of information processing depending on the effort the receiver puts into the elaboration of the message. Where the ELM proposes a central and a peripheral route for high and low message elaboration accordingly,

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Bussemer, Thymian. *Propaganda: Konzepte und Theorien*. 2nd ed. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008. Print. 310-15; Burkard, Roland. *Kommunikationswissenschaft*. 4th ed. Wien: Böhlau, 2002. Print. 198-204; Kunczik, Michael, and Astrid Zipfel. *Publizistik*. 2nd ed. Köln: Böhlau 2005. Print. 294.

the HSM speaks of systematic and heuristic processing. The unimodel, which posits a single route, has the disadvantage of being relatively more complex and less researched.<sup>64</sup>

The HSM explains how attitude change in response to persuasive communication can be the result of only minimal information processing:

According to the [heuristic] model, people exert little cognitive effort in judging the validity of a persuasive message and, instead, may base their agreement with a message on a rather superficial assessment of a variety of extrinsic persuasion cues such as surface or structural characteristics of the message itself (e.g., its length or number of arguments), communicator characteristics (e.g., expertise, likability, physical attractiveness), and audience characteristics (e.g., positive or negative audience reactions to the message).<sup>65</sup>

While the ELM and the HSM bear great similarity in many respects, the latter is better suited for the present purpose as it tends to be less receiver-oriented than the ELM: Although both models regard receiver motivation and ability as determining factors for the choice of the processing mode, the HSM also recognizes the importance of cue salience and vividness in inducing heuristic processing.<sup>66</sup>

## 2.1 Information Processing Modes

Following Fiske and Taylor, people are seen as cognitive misers, that is to say, they are economy-minded beings who will only invest cognitive effort in a task if they are both able and motivated to do so.<sup>67</sup> Departing from this assumption, the HSM specifies two qualitatively different routes to changing a person's attitude: systematic processing and heuristic processing.

Systematic processing refers to the extensive processing of persuasion arguments: People engage in analytical thinking with regard to message relevant information, and their judgment rests unaffected by extrinsic cues like source attractiveness or mood. They reflect upon the message content and put cognitive effort in trying to understand the line of reasoning.

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Johnson, Blair T., Gregory R. Maio, and Aaron Smith-McLallen. "Communication and Attitude Change: Causes, Processes, and Effects." *The Handbook of Attitudes*. Ed. Dolores Albarracín, Blair T. Johnson, and Mark P. Zanna. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005. 617-70. Print. 624-29; Maio, Gregory R., and Geoffrey Haddock. "Attitude Change." *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles*. 2nd ed. Ed. Arie W. Kruglanski and E. Tory Higgins. New York: Guilford, 2007. 565-86. Print.

<sup>65</sup> Chaiken, Shelly. "The Heuristic Model of Persuasion." *Social Influence: The Ontario Symposium*. Vol. 5. Ed. Mark P. Zanna, James M. Olson and C. Peter Herman. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1987. 3-40. Print. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Chaiken 21-22.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Todorov, Alexander, Shelly Chaiken, and Marlene D. Henderson. "The Heuristic-Systematic Model of Social Information Processing." *The Persuasion Handbook: Developments in Theory and Practice*. Ed. James P. Dillard and Michael Pfau. Thousand Oaks: Sage 2002. 195-211. Print. 196.

The pieces of information are put together and the argument is then critically evaluated according to its intrinsic quality:

Systematic processing is a comprehensive analytic orientation to information processing. In a systematic mode, people scrutinize available persuasion information for its relevance to their task. They evaluate the validity of the advocated position by scrutinizing the persuasive information and relating this information to their previous knowledge of the persuasion issue. Persuasion in a systematic mode is mediated by the person's understanding and cognitive elaboration of the persuasion message.<sup>68</sup>

This route requires a lot of effort and is therefore limited to situations in which the addressee is both motivated and able to carefully follow the argumentation. For the sake of a more precise terminology, this process should be referred to as “convincing” rather than “persuading.”

As for heuristic processing, Shelly Chaiken states that “[u]nlike systematic processing, which is effortful and may generally be avoided in the interest of cognitive economy [. . .], heuristic processing is relatively effortless and thus may predominate in many persuasion settings [. . .].”<sup>69</sup> If the receiver does not dispose of the necessary cognitive capacities due to internal or situational factors like a lack of knowledge or intelligence, fatigue, or distraction, he or she is likely to make use of mental shortcuts in order to reach a judgment. These mental shortcuts or heuristics are simple if-then rules to decision making which are based on the receiver's experience. They are learned schemata applicable to the persuasion setting.

In this kind of superficial processing, people no longer differentiate between strong and weak arguments. They instead let themselves be guided by peripheral cues irrelevant to the message content, such as the speaker's status or appearance, or the number of arguments contained the message. If, for instance, somebody has made the experience that experts are usually more knowledgeable in their field than most other people, they might be inclined to follow the rule “experts possess accurate information,” and, in a context in which systematic processing seems difficult or impossible, accept the message content without further elaboration. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson explain:

Heuristic processing is a nonanalytic orientation to information processing. In a heuristic mode, people focus on that subset of information that enables them to use simple decision rules or heuristics (cf. Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) to form a judgment. Persuasion effects are mediated by simple rules, schemata, or heuristics that associate heuristic cues with a probability that the advocated position is valid. Such heuristics are derived from experience and have some empirical validity.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 197.

<sup>69</sup> Chaiken 8.

<sup>70</sup> Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 197.

The authors also remark that people are often unaware of their heuristic processing and may even deny the influence of message-irrelevant peripheral informational cues on their decision.<sup>71</sup>

The two modes that have been described must, however, not be seen as two mutually exclusive routes to persuasion; systematic and heuristic processing can also occur simultaneously. Depending on the implications of the heuristic and systematic processing and the ambiguity of the message, they can interact in three different ways, leading to reinforcement, attenuation or bias.<sup>72</sup>

According to the additivity hypothesis, the modes can have independent and additive effects on persuasion when the information derived from them is consistent. Somebody who is looking for a high-quality product, for example, will be all the more convinced when he finds his systematic product evaluation confirmed by the “brand name” heuristic.

In a persuasion setting in which heuristic and systematic cues conflict with each other, the results of systematic elaboration can lessen the impact of the heuristics. If a message delivered by an expert source consists of weak arguments, the attenuation hypothesis predicts that this inconsistency will affect the impact of the “experts can be trusted” heuristic in a negative way.

Whereas the messages we have dealt with so far were unambiguous, that is, the arguments were either consistently strong or consistently weak, the bias hypothesis applies to cases of ambiguous persuasion messages that feature both weak and strong arguments. In such circumstances, people are inclined to rely on heuristics even when the conditions for systematic processing are given.

The bias hypothesis has also received considerable support outside the field of persuasion research. For example, Trope and Gaunt (1999) showed that contextual cues can affect person perception when information about the person is ambiguous. More important, this research has demonstrated that the effect of contextual cues on perception is implicit. That is, people are not aware of the biasing effect of context, believing that their perceptions are a veridical reading of reality.<sup>73</sup>

The processing is thus biased by heuristic cues even when people are highly motivated to be accurate. This hypothesis is of great importance as a lot of real-life persuasive messages, unlike those used in persuasion experiments, are not unequivocal.

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 198.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 199-200.

<sup>73</sup> Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 200.

## 2.2 Variables Influencing Information Processing

There are three main variables determining the choice of processing mode: motivation, ability and the availability of heuristic cues. This chapter discusses these variables and some of the internal and external factors which influence them.

As has been mentioned above, it is not always possible to engage in systematic message processing. Two main conditions are identified for systematic use: sufficient motivation and sufficient cognitive resources. Personal relevance of the message, the need for cognition, task importance, accountability for one's attitudes and exposure to unexpected message content are some of the motivational variables that affect the processing mode.<sup>74</sup> The heuristic-systematic model measures motivation in three dimensions: accuracy motivation, defense motivation and impression motivation. People who are accuracy-motivated strive to attain correct information and valid attitudes consistent with reality. Accuracy motivation induces an open-minded form of processing aiming at objectivity, which does not necessarily mean, however, that it is immune to biasing cues.<sup>75</sup>

Defense-motivated people are interested in preserving their self-definitional attitudes and beliefs and seek to refute conflictive or nonpreferred positions. The processing can thus be characterized as rather close-minded and susceptible to bias. The HSM posits that people will make use of the same heuristics whether they are defense-motivated or look for accuracy, but in the former case, heuristics are used selectively: A person is likely to consider only those heuristics which are congruent with his or her worldview and self-concept. The same is true of the informational content: arguments reinforcing the receiver's attitudinal positions will receive more attention and be interpreted more favorably than those contradicting them, which have a higher chance of being disregarded. Factors that play a role in defense motivation are for example position involvement, self-evaluation maintenance, value-relevant involvement, and motivated reasoning; Stroebe adds the need for consistency and fixation on a certain attitude.<sup>76</sup>

A third type of motivation recognized by the HSM is that of impression motivation, which is related to concepts such as social influence, impression relevant involvement,

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 197.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 201-202.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 202-03; Stroebe, Wolfgang. "Strategien zur Einstellungs- und Verhaltensänderung." *Sozialpsychologie*. 5th ed. Trans. Matthias Reis and Carmen Leberz. Ed. Klaus Jonas, Wolfgang Stroebe and Miles Hewstone. Heidelberg: Springer Medizin, 2007. 225-64. Print. 246-47.

impression management, and response involvement. The goal of impression-motivated people is to achieve a socially accepted attitude. According to Chaiken et al., they are mainly concerned with the interpersonal consequences of expressing a certain attitude.<sup>77</sup> Impression motivation therefore chiefly plays a role in interactive settings that encourage or require interpersonal communication and opinion sharing. It is thus less relevant for the case of our Fox News viewers, who are at the receiving end of a one-sided kind of communication. Yet, we must consider the possibility that, to a certain extent, they might get their ideas of what is socially acceptable from Fox.<sup>78</sup>

Beside these qualitative assumptions about motivation, the HSM makes an important quantitative assumption: The sufficiency principle suggests that people strive for sufficiently valid attitudes. As cognitive misers, we are only inclined to engage in systematic processing if our actual confidence about holding the right attitude is lower than our desired confidence in this regard; the principle of least effort is weighed against the importance of being accurate. Thus the discrepancy between actual and desired confidence equals the degree of motivation.

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In addition to the factors named so far, some authors suggest the existence of a personality trait affecting the motivation to process systematically, sort of a general persuasibility. A person's overall preference for heuristic or systematic processing is closely linked to his or her need for cognition. The Need for Cognition (NFC) scale measures "chronic individual differences in people's tendencies to 'engage in and enjoy thinking.'"<sup>80</sup> According to the researchers, this scale can also serve as an index for the probability with which a person will choose a certain processing mode. Individuals with a high need for cognition are more likely to strive for systematic processing whereas low-NFC individuals, who are assumed to dislike complex thinking, may opt for the heuristic mode.<sup>81</sup> Other individual differences such as age, sex, self-esteem, prior attitudes, and cultural background also play a role in persuasion.<sup>82</sup> These internal variables are, however, of little interest for this analysis as they cannot be subject to manipulation and an audience analysis regarding natural receiver characteristics would be decidedly too complex and, besides, probably not very fruitful.

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<sup>77</sup> Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 203.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 203; Stroebe 247.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 200f; Stroebe 243.

<sup>80</sup> Chaiken 16.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Chaiken 16-17; Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLallen 644; Smith, Eliot R., and Diane M. Mackie. *Social Psychology*. 3rd ed. New York: Psychology Press, 2007. Print. 254.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLallen 640-645; O'Keefe, Daniel J. *Persuasion: Theory and Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002. Print. 242-246; Werth, Lioba, and Jennifer Mayer. *Sozialpsychologie*. Berlin: Spektrum Akademischer Verlag, 2008. Print. 244.

Next to motivation, ability is an important factor for the processing mode. The receivers' cognitive resources determine their general or momentary ability to process a certain piece of information systematically. They can be limited by internal factors like a lack of knowledge or intelligence, or by external conditions such as distraction, message repetition, time pressure or communication modality.<sup>83</sup> Children, for example, or individuals lacking the necessary command of a foreign language or the necessary knowledge in a certain field may prove incapable of systematically processing a linguistically challenging document with arguments framed in technical jargon and complex grammar. And in situations of decreased concentration or impaired ability, the effectiveness of weak messages may increase due to non-systematic processing.

While internal factors can hardly be manipulated, some of the external ability variables can be influenced by the persuasion setting in order to enhance or reduce people's capacity to process systematically. The communication medium, for example, plays an important role in this regard. Video- or audiotaped messages, as compared to written presentation, have been shown to be more difficult to process systematically; at the same time, they accentuate source characteristics.<sup>84</sup> This means that, due to its transmission modality, television as an audiovisual medium generally provides a more favorable environment for heuristic processing than, for instance, newspapers do.

Mood and emotions as well play a role in superficial and systematic processing. Their effects are twofold: On the one hand, they can act as heuristics; on the other hand, they directly influence the conditions for systematic processing. Many studies suggest that people who are in a good mood are easier to persuade.<sup>85</sup> Smith and Mackie explain how positive emotions may affect both the ability and the motivation to process systematically:

When people feel good, they may see no need to process carefully. A good mood makes people feel confident (E. J. Johnson & Tversky, 1983), tells them that the situation holds no danger for them and that they are doing a fine job processing just the way they are (Bless and others, 1996; Schwaz, Bless and Bohner, 1991). [ . . . ]

These motivational consequences of feeling good make people in good moods less likely than people who feel neutral or sad to process the content of persuasive appeals systematically. [ . . . ]

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 197.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Chaiken 13; O'Keefe 255-56.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Smith and Mackie 239-41, 256; Werth and Mayer 248-50; Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLallen 644-45.

Positive mood may also have capacity implications. [. . .] Some research suggests that a good mood might reduce systematic processing because people's minds are full of other thoughts.<sup>86</sup>

The motivational consequences of positive emotion can be explained by the sufficiency principle: The increased level of confidence reduces the gap between actual and desired confidence and thus people's motivation to put effort into systematic processing.

Negative emotion has got an even stronger impact on the processing mode. Especially anxiety and fear are feeling states that severely impede systematic processing, but guilt or pride can work the same way.<sup>87</sup> Although a few authors claim that fear only works "in the right dosage and in the right combination,"<sup>88</sup> that is, in a motivating context, this theory is today disproved.<sup>89</sup> Chaiken describes a direct proportionality for the relation of fear and the tendency for heuristic processing.<sup>90</sup> Messages conveying a threat are less likely to be processed systematically the more the receivers feel they are concerned by the danger. In other words: the greater the perceived danger, the greater the chances of heuristic processing – contrary to what one might expect considering the simultaneous rise of personal relevance, which would predict an increase in systematic thinking. The researcher explains this phenomenon with the receivers' level of anxiety: Fear, and actually any kind of stress or arousal, is known to inhibit information processing and task performance. A high level of anxiety is thus assumed to exercise a negative influence on systematic processing while it might encourage people to instinctively trust in heuristics. This information also explains the great efficacy of fear appeals and appeals to emotion, which are very frequently used in persuasive communication. Typically, the communicator shows his receivers the negative consequences of a certain attitude and at the same time offers a coping strategy by giving them advice on how to avoid these negative implications.

Now that the conditions for systematic processing have been illustrated, one question remains:

What happens if people are sufficiently motivated but lack the ability or resources to engage in systematic processing? The HSM predicts that in such conditions, people should scrutinize the persuasion setting for relevant heuristic cues (Chaiken et al., 1989). That is, this enhancement hypothesis states that motivational variables such as personal relevance should increase heuristic processing under conditions of limited cognitive resources.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Smith and Mackie 256.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Chaiken 19-20; O'Keefe 224-29; Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLallen 644-45; Smith and Mackie 256-58.

<sup>88</sup> Smith and Mackie 258.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 224-229; Chaiken 19-21.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Chaiken 19-21.

<sup>91</sup> Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 201.

But heuristic processing does not just automatically follow from a lack of motivation and ability; it is tied to some conditions of its own. For a heuristic to be used, three general premises have to be fulfilled: it has to be available, accessible, and applicable.<sup>92</sup>

Availability means that, first of all, the heuristic or schema has to be present in the person's memory. Consequently, prior learning is a primordial premise for the use of a heuristic: As any knowledge structure, it can only be available if it has once been established and stored in memory. It is important to note here that even though heuristics are, of course, individual knowledge representations, many people make similar experiences – especially if they live in similar environments. It is therefore plausible to assume that many heuristics are socially shared.<sup>93</sup> Just like with other schemata such as prejudices or stereotypes, greater congruency can probably be expected within a culture area.

A second premise is accessibility: A person can only resort to the use of heuristics if they are activated or accessible in memory. Activation can be achieved through priming or cue salience, or heuristics can be chronically accessible if they are frequently used.<sup>94</sup> As cue salience increases attention to peripheral persuasion cues, it facilitates the activation of the respective heuristics and their retrieval from memory. This activating effect of vivid or salient cues thus enhances accessibility and the triggering of heuristic processing.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, the presence of heuristic cues in the persuasion setting is an important factor. The heuristic needs to be applicable to the informational task:

[A]n obvious factor that influences recipients' tendencies to utilize the simple decision rules specified by the heuristic model is whether the persuasion setting contains cues that *can* be processed heuristically. When no such cues are available for processing in persuasion settings, recipients, even when highly motivated, may engage in at least some message- and issue-relevant thinking [ . . . ].<sup>96</sup>

In concluding this chapter, I emphasize the importance of heuristic cues within the persuasion setting. Even in circumstances that would favor heuristic processing, the presence of such cues is a necessary condition. Furthermore, the triggering of heuristic processing should not be limited to the nonfulfillment of the conditions for systematic use; it can be induced actively and independently by salient or vivid peripheral persuasion cues.<sup>97</sup> Last but not least, it should be noted that ability and motivation are susceptible to manipulation only to a certain

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 198; Chaiken 31-32.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. also Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 198.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Chaiken 24ff, 31f; Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 198.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Chaiken 22.

<sup>96</sup> Chaiken 32.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Chaiken 21-23.

extent: Namely, some of the external influencing factors can be manipulated; internal variables, if known, can be exploited but not changed.

## 2.3 Heuristic Cues

This chapter introduces the most important heuristic cues that play a role in persuasive communication. Almost all of these variables have long been the focus of scientific research. Classic experiments like those of the Yale Studies already identified most of them more than half a century ago. The heuristic-systematic model of persuasion, however, by shedding light on the psychological background of these characteristics, provides a framework that is apt to explain their operating.<sup>98</sup>

Causes for communication-induced attitude change are traditionally categorized – in accordance with the elements of the communication process – into communicator, message and recipient variables. As the latter, which rather concern the receivers' internal structures, dispositions and states, have already been discussed extensively in the previous chapter, I follow a slightly modified classification here distinguishing peripheral cues which lie in the nature of the communicator, cues regarding the message itself, and situational cues.

Many aspects of communicator personality can serve as heuristic cues: expertise, trustworthiness, credibility, likeability, attractiveness, resemblance, humor and numeracy. Although they are presented as individual categories in most of the literature, they are quite interdependent and it is therefore reasonable to distinguish two broad categories: credibility, which contains the dimensions of expertise and trustworthiness, and likeability, encompassing attractiveness, humor and resemblance. Source numeracy is here treated within the “consensus implies correctness” heuristic.

Credibility refers to a receiver's judgment about a communicator's believability. Expertise and trustworthiness are the main factors adding to a communicator's credibility in the eyes of his or her audience. Expertise is seen as a reliable indicator for knowledge:

The expertise dimension (sometimes called “competence,” “expertness,” “authoritativeness,” or “qualification”) is commonly represented by scales such as experienced-inexperienced, informed-uninformed, trained-untrained, qualified-unqualified, skilled-unskilled, intelligent-

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<sup>98</sup> Cf. e.g. Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLallen 637.

unintelligent and expert-not expert. These items all seem directed at the assessment of (roughly) whether the communicator is in a position to *know* the truth, to know what is right or correct.<sup>99</sup>

Trustworthiness designates the speaker's willingness to tell the truth:

The trustworthiness dimension (sometimes called "character," "safety," or "personal integrity") is commonly represented by scales such as honest-dishonest, trustworthy-untrustworthy, open-minded-closed-minded, just-unjust, fair-unfair, and unselfish-selfish. These items all appear to be related to the assessment of (roughly) whether the communicator will likely be inclined to *tell* the truth as he or she sees it.<sup>100</sup>

Messages are only credible if their source is both competent and trustworthy. A well-informed but misleading communicator is just as unreliable a source as an honest but uninformed communicator. Maybe this is one of the reasons why those two dimensions are seldom manipulated separately in scientific studies. Stated in an exaggerated fashion, one could say that researchers usually use sources that are either trustworthy experts or untrustworthy laymen. O'Keefe remarks that, while the high-credibility sources approximate the former extreme, the low-credibility sources "are probably accurately described as no better than moderate in credibility."<sup>101</sup> The joined consideration of expert status and trustworthiness is reflected in the most common formulation of the credibility heuristic "experts can be trusted."<sup>102</sup> Only Maio and Haddock show more precision in this regard: "[I]f a communicator is an expert, then he or she is likely to be correct."<sup>103</sup>

In order to manipulate credibility judgments, the description of the communicator's education, occupation and experience plays a crucial role.<sup>104</sup> In most cases, it is indeed a good idea to trust more experienced, well-trained and recognized, accredited or licensed people. If, for example, a student made it a rule to mistrust everything his teachers tell him, it would sooner or later put him at a serious disadvantage.

Other factors that may influence a speaker's credibility are prosodic features of speech, citation of evidence sources, and the advocated position. Although some researchers think that fast-speaking communicators are more persuasive, the studies on this subject are too ambiguous to make a reliable statement about the influence of speaking rate.<sup>105</sup> Studies examining fluency of speech found that frequent nonfluencies such as vocalized pauses, unnecessary repetitions, slips of the tongue or articulation difficulties affect the judgment of

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<sup>99</sup> O'Keefe 182-83.

<sup>100</sup> O'Keefe 183.

<sup>101</sup> O'Keefe 191-92.

<sup>102</sup> E.g. Chaiken 4; Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 197; Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLellan 633.

<sup>103</sup> Maio and Haddock 573.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 184-85.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 185-86.

the speaker's expertise, not, however, his perceived trustworthiness.<sup>106</sup> The citation of high-credibility evidence sources generally increases the communicator's credibility; the question whether statistical or narrative, exemplary evidence is more effective remains disputed.<sup>107</sup> Although, theoretically, statistics should be more persuasive due to the higher number of people represented, this does not always seem to be the case. There is no controversy concerning the advocated position: Communicators who plead for a cause opposing their self-interest are more credible than sources who argue in favor of their own position or advantage. O'Keefe explains the effects of expectancy disconfirmation on perceived credibility:

[w]hen a communicator advocates a position that violates an expectancy based on knowledge or reporting bias, the receiver faces the task of explaining why the communicator is defending the advocated position [ . . . ]. The most plausible explanation at least sometimes will be that the facts of the matter were so compelling that the communicator was led to override those personal or situational pressures (that had generated the receiver's expectations) and thus defend the advocated position.<sup>108</sup>

Finally, liking for the communicator may also influence judgments of his or her trustworthiness. This evidence is derived from factor-analytic investigations of credibility judgments, which found a correlation between attributes indicating liking and trustworthiness: for example friendliness, honesty, and fairness.<sup>109</sup> Chaiken explains the liking-agreement heuristic somewhat less correctly, relating the agreement to perceived expertness rather than trustworthiness: "[P]eople I like usually have correct opinions on issues."<sup>110</sup>

This leads us to the subject of likeability, the other important characteristic influencing a source's persuasiveness. Interestingly, one social psychology book cites Roger Ailes in their explanation of the likeability heuristic:

If surrounding an attitude object with positive associations makes it seem more positive, no wonder advertisements often pair an attitude object with a popular or attractive figure. These communicators make no claim to expertise, so why does someone who turns our head also change our minds? Evaluative priming tells us that associating someone we like with the attitude object makes us think that it too is likable. No wonder that Roger Ailes (1988), adviser to both the Reagan and Bush U.S. presidential campaigns, calls likability a persuasive "magic bullet": "If you could master one element of personal communication that is more powerful than anything, it is the quality of being likable. If your audience likes you, they'll forgive just about everything else" (p. 81).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 185; Werth and Mayer 240-41.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 229.

<sup>108</sup> O'Keefe 188.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 190.

<sup>110</sup> Chaiken 4.

<sup>111</sup> Smith and Mackie 242.

The impact of attractiveness on persuasion is unanimously ascribed to its positive effect on likeability.<sup>112</sup> Physically attractive people are more likeable and the audience's liking for them makes them more successful communicators. The use of an appropriate amount of humor works in the same way.<sup>113</sup>

Resemblance as well is effective via its influence on liking. However, O'Keefe points out, the subject is often treated in an imprecise manner because authors do not adequately distinguish the many dimensions of resemblance.<sup>114</sup> Similarities in age, occupation, attitudes, physique, income, education, speech dialect, personality, ethnicity, political affiliation, style or clothing, for example, may have quite different effects on persuasion. He adverts that the effect of similarity on likeability has only been satisfactorily researched for attitudinal similarity, but he admits that other dimensions are indirectly effective through their influence on inferred attitudinal similarity:

A receiver may come to perceive attitudinal similarities through various routes, of course. The communicator might directly express attitudes similar to the attitudes of the audience, or a third party might indicate the presence of attitudinal similarities. But one basis on which a receiver might infer attitudinal similarities is the presence of other types of observed similarities (such as similarities in background, personality, occupation, and the like); these other similarities may indirectly influence the receiver's liking for a communicator.<sup>115</sup>

Liking, as we have seen, shows a weak correlation with trustworthiness and thus credibility. The same is then true of attractiveness, humor and similarity. Moreover, similarity can directly affect perceived expertise: Namely, a similarity in education, experience or other components of expertise might lead receivers to not value the communicator's judgment as much as that of someone superior to them in this respect.<sup>116</sup>

There are two important phenomena which are closely related to source characteristics: the sleeper effect and inoculation. The sleeper effect denominates delayed persuasion due to the decreasing impact of negative cues over time. It occurs when receivers hear a compelling argument that they initially reject because of a discounting cue – usually low communicator credibility – but then forget about this caveat while the message is retained and accepted.<sup>117</sup>

Inoculation is a technique used to establish resistance against persuasion by supplying people with supportive information and counterarguments.<sup>118</sup> Forewarning against persuasive

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<sup>112</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 205-07; Smith and Mackie 242; Werth and Mayer 241.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 190-91.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 200.

<sup>115</sup> O'Keefe 201.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 202-03.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 259-60; Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLallen 635.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 246-250; Smith and Mackie 260-62.

intents operates as a negative communicator cue.<sup>119</sup> Opponents discredit a source by casting doubt on its trustworthiness, which in turn stimulates oppositional arguing in the audience. A source accused for example of dissimulation, deception, ignorance, corruption, bias or hidden agendas will lose credibility and encounter great difficulties to persuade thusly cautioned people. By the same token, propagating unpleasant details about someone's personal life – for example the politician who cheats on his wife, smoked marijuana in college or showed other sorts of objectionable behavior – will affect the public's liking for them. Undermining an opponent's credibility or likeability is an effective way to reduce his or her persuasiveness – a common strategy which is typically exploited in negative campaigning.

Next to these cues concerning the source of a message, there are some extrinsic message features, that is, cues unrelated to the intrinsic quality of a message itself, which can play a role in its evaluation by the receiver. Within the message structure, this concerns the order of arguments, stating or omitting the conclusion, and recommendation specificity.

The arrangement of the arguments in the message is connected to primacy and recency effects: An anticlimax order, which places the most important arguments first, is effective via primacy effects, that is, the information encoded first is transferred into the long-term memory more easily; a climax order, producing the most important arguments at the end, makes use of recency effects, that is, the information encoded last is less likely to be overwritten by new information and has thus greater chances of being retained by the receiver.<sup>120</sup> Which one of these two effects is more powerful depends on the situation. According to O'Keefe and Werth and Mayer, the primacy effect prevails in situations of high relevance whereas the recency effect is stronger in low-involvement situations.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, the time elapsed between the delivery of the arguments plays a role, and so does the audience's expectancy of where to find the strongest arguments. O'Keefe states that, in any case, the immediate influence of argument order on persuasion is marginal if not negligible. Instead, he points out its importance for the particulars of persuasive circumstances, which might not always permit to save the best for last due to time limitations or premature interruptions.<sup>122</sup>

The studies conducted on conclusion omission clearly show persuasive messages which explicitly state a conclusion to be more effective than messages which leave the conclusion implicit.<sup>123</sup> Earlier speculations about a dependency on receiver variables such as intelligence

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 250-51; Smith and Mackie 259-60; Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLallen 638.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Werth and Mayer 241-42.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 253-54; Werth and Mayer 242.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 216.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 216-18.

and education have been disproved. Moreover, a stated conclusion containing a recommendation of some sort increases in effectiveness the more specific it is in its advice. Recommendation specificity is thus beneficial to persuasion.<sup>124</sup>

While the quality of the message content is most significant in systematic processing, secondary content dimensions such as length, argument quantity, sidedness, and familiarity can serve as heuristic cues.

Length equals strength: When receivers are unmotivated or unable to process systematically, they seem to be more impressed by long messages and generally find them more convincing.<sup>125</sup> The same holds for argument quantity. Chaiken speaks of the “more arguments are better arguments” heuristic.<sup>126</sup>

Granted that they not only name but also refute counter-arguments, two-sided messages are significantly more persuasive than one-sided messages. The consideration of opposing arguments enhances communicator credibility, reduces the chance of independent refutational reflections and can generate inoculation effects.<sup>127</sup>

The *mere exposure effect* refers to the phenomenon that people prefer objects to which they have frequently been exposed; in other words they prefer familiar stimuli. According to Smith and Mackie, familiarity can serve as a persuasive cue:

People agree more with the views of others they have seen before than with sources they are seeing for the first time [ . . . ]. People judge sentences that they have heard before (even in the context of a different task) to be more credible and valid (Arkes, Hackett, & Boehme, 1989). They misremember familiar statements as coming from credible sources (Fragale & Heath, 2004). They are more persuaded by a weak message that has been recently repeated than by one they are hearing for the first time (Garcia-Marques & Mackie, 2001; Claypool, Mackie, Garcia-Marques, McIntosh, & Udal, 2004). Even framing arguments in terms of familiar idioms and metaphors makes arguments more convincing than phrases conveying the same information in more literal form. [ . . . ]

The persuasive effects of familiarity can create some unexpected outcomes. When you tell someone that something isn't true, familiarity effects might make them more likely to think it is true if they later hear it again.<sup>128</sup>

So the mere repetition of information augments its chances of being accepted as true. Even the propagation of rumors or false messages the veracity of which is contested right away might contribute to persuasion of the contrary due to exposure effects.

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<sup>124</sup> Cf. O'Keefe 218-19.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Smith and Mackie 244-45; Chaiken 4.

<sup>126</sup> Chaiken 4.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Werth and Mayer 242; O'Keefe 219-21.

<sup>128</sup> Smith and Mackie 241.

Other message factors influence persuasion via their impact on systematic and heuristic processing and do not count among heuristic cues: Complex arguments are harder to process systematically, rhetorical questions enhance profound elaboration, and framing messages with a loss focus is more persuasive than using gain frames.<sup>129</sup> The latter effect might be related to the mechanisms of fear appeals as explained in the previous chapter.

Situational characteristics of persuasion first and foremost influence the conditions which determine the processing mode: They can enhance or impede motivation and ability and may or may not contain cues that provide a basis for heuristic processing. Nonetheless, there are some circumstances which may themselves act as heuristic cues. The other side of the aforementioned double effect that mood has on persuasion consists in its serving as a cue for the “how do I feel about it?” heuristic. People tend to go by the credo “if I feel good, I must like it.”<sup>130</sup> This attitude is quite valid if the positive – or negative – feelings are actually elicited by the item in question, but often our emotions have causes which bear no relation to the attitude object. A person may react more negatively to a persuasive intent after a quarrel or a sad event whereas somebody who just got a raise or received a compliment may be more responsive to persuasion. Persuaders take advantage of this knowledge in trying to put people in a good mood. This tactic works especially well with attitude objects that primarily appeal to emotions, but it can be employed universally: “The happily splashing baby can sell faucets as well as baby powder. Political candidates can reminisce about their childhoods to promote policy changes. And classical music can become theme songs for wines, airlines, and long-lasting batteries.”<sup>131</sup> The effect at work is the association of a positive emotion with the attitude object. It is achieved through repeated co-occurrence, or conditioning.

Another situational cue can be provided by favorable audience reactions. The heuristic that is activated in this case is the “consensus implies correctness” heuristic.<sup>132</sup> By the same token, source numeracy can serve as a heuristic cue: If a plurality or a majority of people take up a certain position, receivers tend to agree with that point of view. This form of social influence comprises both informational and normative influence; this is to say, people behave that way because a) they actually believe the majority’s opinion to be correct, or b) they want to demonstrate conformity with the majority of a group – a distinction which can be traced

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<sup>129</sup> Cf. Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLallen 640.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Smith and Mackie 240-41.

<sup>131</sup> Smith and Mackie 239.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson 197.

back to the different types of motivation underlying this behavior, namely accuracy motivation and impression motivation.<sup>133</sup>

Summarizing those insights of the heuristic-systematic model which are most important for the subsequent analysis, we can retain that attitudes obtained by means of systematic information processing are more rational whereas information obtained through heuristic processing is susceptible to manipulation by means of heuristic cues. Persuaders have several options to induce or enhance heuristic processing: They can try to provide for insufficient motivation and ability, and strategically place – preferably salient – heuristic cues within their persuasion setting to trigger the use of heuristic judgments in favor or the desired attitude change.

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<sup>133</sup> Cf. Johnson, Maio and Smith-McLallen 635-36.

### 3 FALLING FOR THE FOX: PERSUASIVE CUES IN FOX NEWS REPORTING

The aim of the following analysis is to find out which of the two processing modes specified by the HSM is favored by Fox News' biased way of presenting the news. Whenever Fox takes sides, does it present the biased information in a neutral way and try to convince the viewers of its conservative point of view by addressing their intellect and inducing systematic processing, or is it indeed aimed at persuading the audience by emphasizing external cues rather than the message content?

Of the three main conditions which influence the choice of the processing mode, two are rather difficult to manipulate via the medium of television: Motivation is hard to grasp due to its individual and complex character, especially in a collective. Moreover, an attempt of demotivation in hope of inducing heuristic processing might backfire and instead induce people to turn off their TVs. Ability as well is to a large extent determined by internal variables and factors lying outside the sphere of influence of a televised communicator, with two important exceptions: Distraction and the appeal to emotion both are practicable means to impair systematic processing by manipulating ability. Yet, as distraction is often the result of highly salient cues within the persuasion setting, it will not be discussed separately; the effect of emotion, and particularly of fear appeals, will be addressed in the chapter on emotional cues. While the audiovisual medium might not be best suited to influence the receivers' motivation and cognitive resources, it is an ideal environment for arranging heuristic cues. As we have seen, their presence alone can be sufficient to persuade viewers or at least bias their judgment. I therefore concentrate my investigation on the most influential and indisputable of the heuristic cues presented in the previous chapter: communicator credibility, communicator likeability, audience reactions and numeracy, familiarity, and emotion.

My goal is not to analyze Fox's reporting style in general but only its bias. I thus specifically selected examples of biased reporting, that is, examples in which Fox News clearly deviates from professional journalistic standards. This of course means that these examples are exceptional cases in terms of "normal" news reporting; they are not, however, exceptional of Fox's biased reporting. This does not mean that Fox News is *always* biased; it only means that those examples are typical cases of instances in which Fox *is* biased. In addition to this mostly exemplary proceeding, I will elaborate on several rather general features of Fox's graphics and setup, and include quantitative evidence whenever possible. Moreover, some of the statistics

and analyses presented in the first chapter should be considered to support the typicality and representativeness of the selected examples.

### 3.1 The Credibility Heuristic: “Experts (and Fox) Can Be Trusted”

As suggested by the title, expertise and trustworthiness are the two main factors contributing to the activation of the credibility heuristic, which Fox News quite ostentatiously exploits: The anchors use it in reference to themselves and the entire network, but also in introductions and background information of guests and contributors. Particularly, Fox often seeks to undermine the credibility of disagreeing or disliked sources.

The way in which Fox News advertises itself as a respectable news organization is downright exaggerated. It literally tries to make *Fox News* a byword for good journalism. This becomes clear looking at some of their most famous slogans, all of which announce objectivity and fairness and emphasize Fox’s trustworthiness in a way no professional news organization should deem necessary: “Fox News – Fair and Balanced”; “Fox News – We Report, You Decide”; “Fox News – The Network America Trusts.” It seems as if Fox wants to compensate for its lack of objectivity with this exaggerated façade of fair and balanced journalism. And the strategy works: The name *Fox News* is today inseparably linked to the words *fair and balanced* – and a great number of people seem to take this claim at face value, in which case it operates as a strong cue for the credibility heuristic. Bryant Welch observed that many Americans who watch Fox News “will say verbatim the reason they choose Fox is because Fox is ‘fair and balanced.’ Not that Fox is less ‘biased’ or more ‘objective’ or other words of similar meaning. They will use the exact words, ‘fair and balanced.’”<sup>134</sup> According to Chaiken, this kind of yielding to a message’s overall conclusion rather than to some sort of argumentation is typical of heuristic processing.<sup>135</sup>

Fox’s self-proclaimed objectivity also extends to its anchors. These are some of the slogans used to describe their shows on the Fox News homepage:

- America Live: Smart, tough & trusted! Megyn Kelly delivers fair & balanced coverage of today’s top issues!
- FOX Report w/ Shepard Smith (cc): No pundits, no discussion; just the news. “FOX Report” rips through the day’s top stories at the “speed of live!”

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<sup>134</sup> Welch 156.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. Chaiken 5.

- The O'Reilly Factor (cc): Hard-hitting, and in your face! Bill breaks down the day's big stories in the "No Spin Zone!"
- Hannity: Candid, controversial, and completely unleashed, Sean brings you political news of the day!
- On the Record w/ Greta (cc): Greta and her expert team take you inside Washington and the stories making headlines! <sup>136</sup>

Communicators described as "candid," "smart, tough and trusted," or as an "expert team" allude to both expertise and trustworthiness. Speaking of a "no spin zone," "no pundits," and "just the news" denies any political bias while at the same time opposing these shows to other supposedly biased shows working with spin, pundits, and more than "just the news"; what comes to mind are Fox's own "opinion shows," but clearly this is not what they are referring to. *The O'Reilly Factor*, for example, is one of these opinion shows; so the innuendo is directed against other news outlets. As we will see in the following, Fox's claim to fairness and balance is an exclusive one: What they say is that you will find real objectivity nowhere *but* on Fox News.

There is at least one person at Fox who sets up not only verbal but also visual cues for credibility: Glenn Beck tries to give himself an air of sophistication and scholarliness by making his studio resemble a classroom with himself acting as the teacher. He usually works with various books and symbols or pictures printed on little cards, which he then holds up emphatically for the viewers to see. A large screen the host uses for showing video material, and several big blackboards, on which he writes and draws to visualize how things are "connected," as well as an old-fashioned wooden pointer are inherent parts of Beck's inventory. And although he doesn't usually wear glasses, he regularly puts them on during his self-proclaimed "educational" show on Fox News, maybe in the hope that it will make him look more educated or intelligent as glasses are a stereotypical accessory of intellectual people. Whenever he wants to emphasize the gravity of his words, he meaningfully takes off his glasses, speaking no longer as the teacher, but as the concerned citizen Beck. He uses these exterior cues and visual aids, as well as a precisely calculated body language, to play the role of the lone, visionary autodidact who stumbles upon the inconvenient and frightening truth as he seeks to further educate himself about the state of the country. <sup>137</sup> In a spot-on impression of Glenn Beck's stagecraft, comedian Jon Stuart dismantles the techniques Beck uses to add

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<sup>136</sup> "FNC TV." *FoxNews.com*. Fox News Network, n.d. Web. 4 Jan. 2011.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. e.g. "Progressivism Is Cancer! Glenn Beck Irradiates It's [sic] Nazis and Commies From 1939 to Marxist Obama!!" CrimeIncObama. *YouTube*. YouTube, 15 May 2010. Web. 17 Sept. 2010; "Beck Says Progressives Are the Descendants [sic] of Slave Owners." thinkprogress1. *YouTube*. YouTube, 20 Oct. 2009. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.

credibility and importance to his character.<sup>138</sup> The intro to *Glenn Beck* is designed to support this patriotic and scholarly image: The camera zooms in on the phrase *we the people*, then a blueprint of the letters *BECK* appears next to a turning gear, the head of a microphone, and several geometric shapes. Moving lines and arrows keep dividing the screen into different sections showing images of the founding fathers and of Beck in front of his blackboard filled with numbers and rectangles. Finally the blueprint theme morphs into the colored, red, white and blue logo of the show.<sup>139</sup> Although Beck's diatribes and conspiracy theories are in no way connected to mathematics or science, he uses these symbols to give the illusion of conforming to scientific standards and to support the notion of his show being a fact-based "lesson" for the American people.

From the very beginning, Fox defined its mission as "restoring objectivity" to the news industry: "We'd like to be premier journalists. We'd like to restore objectivity where we find it lacking [ . . . ]. So we just expect to do fine, balanced journalism."<sup>140</sup> This statement, made by Roger Ailes at the opening press conference for Fox News, contains a charge against the rest of the media: There is a liberal bias in the "mainstream media" which needs to be corrected by a "fair and balanced" news network. Ingeniously, this claim serves the double purpose of asserting Fox's own credibility and simultaneously discrediting the other networks: We're fair and balanced – unlike the mainstream media. Fox does not describe itself as "a network America trusts"; it is "*the* network America trusts for fair and balanced news;" the *only* one.

So the positive communicator cue for Fox News operates as a discounting cue for the other news media. But Fox is unabashedly more explicit in its warnings, accusations and defamations of the other media outlets. These forewarnings directly serve to inoculate the receivers against the messages – and the criticisms – of the "mainstream media," which, according to Fox, "comprises about 75% of the press."<sup>141</sup> *Hannity's* segment "Media Mash" is not a general critique of the media; it is dedicated exclusively to reporting on the liberal bias and malevolent agenda of the mainstream media. In his usual opening line, host Sean Hannity announces that it is now time to "hold the mainstream Obama-mania media accountable for their biased reporting." And faithful to this style, the criticism is one-sided, highly emotional, often unjustified, and always aimed at *generally* undermining the other networks' credibility.

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<sup>138</sup> Cf. "Jon Stewart Rips Glenn Beck." imaginaryuniverse. *YouTube*. YouTube, 20 Mar. 2010. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. "Glenn Beck-08/09/10-A." PhukObama. *YouTube*. YouTube, 9 Aug. 2010. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.. 02:39-02:59.

<sup>140</sup> Qtd. in *Outfoxed* 00:05:50.

<sup>141</sup> "Bill O'Reilly Destroys Media Outlets \*\*Must See\*\*." Teltelamont. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Apr. 2009. 10 Jan. 2011. 01:33.

Here is an example from the 22 April 2010 edition of Hannity's "Media Mash": The anchor speaks of the "outright biased coverage" of the Tea Party movement, claiming that "they've been smeared as Nazis, as mobsters, as un-American," without so much as naming the sources of these alleged smears let alone showing the proof, all the while the subtitle line clearly attributes the harsh statements to the "mainstream media's coverage of tea parties." Directly afterwards Hannity calls out an NBC News reporter for asking an African American if he felt uncomfortable at this tea party event after pointing out that it was a predominantly white gathering: "There aren't a lot of African American men at these events. [The man agrees.] Have you ever felt uncomfortable?" The reasoning of the analysis that follows is full of contradictions: According to Hannity and his contributor Brent Bozell, the reporter's question is a clear evidence of the mainstream media's advancing Democratic talking points by insinuating that the conservative movement is not diverse enough – even though the anchors themselves later acknowledge that the man interviewed by the reporter "completely deflates" her argument by showing solidarity with the demonstrators and responding that he did not feel uncomfortable among them. This really invalidates their whole claim because a biased network would hardly choose to show such a segment confuting their preferred narrative; besides, Bozell had just commented on the fact that the material was not from a live event but specifically selected by NBC. After two similarly hypocritical contributions, Hannity and his contributor conclude the "Media Mash" remarking that this media bias "parallels the radicalism of Obama" and that "[y]ou know what, sometimes media bias is subtle and sometimes it's taking a sledgehammer and hitting you right over the head with it."<sup>142</sup>

The hypocrisy Fox News displays in criticizing its opponents is brazen as well as effective: The network literally accuses its adversaries of its own vulnerabilities. O'Reilly for example, on the *O'Reilly Factor*, accused General Electrics and its subsidiary NBC of instructing CNBC personnel to stop criticizing Obama's economic policies and condemned that sort of interference as "a major breach of journalistic ethics." He went on to state how this was "obviously a major story when a powerful corporation which controls a major part of the American media may be using its power and the airwaves to influence politics [ . . . ]." Only after explaining in detail the abominable corruption in GE's support for the Obama administration does he close with a remark which identifies these accusations as mere

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<sup>142</sup> Cf. "Hannity – Media Mash (4.22.10)." OmniChristianVids2. *YouTube*. YouTube, 22 Apr. 2010. Web. 4 Jan. 2011.

speculations: “We hope that’s not true.”<sup>143</sup> Of course it is not mentioned that Fox News itself kept silent about its own internal memoranda as well as the political ambitions of its parent company News Corporation.

Fox frequently makes more focused use of its claim of a liberal media bias in trying to exploit the “lacking credibility” heuristic to refute unwelcome information or attacks against its own news network. In this, it commits a very common logical fallacy, claiming: What they say is not true because they are biased. Bill O’Reilly, for example, made the following statement in response to CNN’s mentioning a Media Matters article which criticized him for supposedly racist remarks:

Of course this is all nonsense and we usually ignore it – until it is picked up by the so-called mainstream media. Elements at NCB News have made a living off parroting Media Matter’s garbage and now, sadly, CNN has jumped into the swamp. [. . .] The reason CNN did this is because its ratings are abysmal. It is getting hammered by Fox News. So they’re desperate for attention and smearing me is one way to get it. [. . .] This is dishonest and dangerous. If a slime machine like Media Matters can get its far-left propaganda on CNN and NBC News, the nation is in trouble.<sup>144</sup>

Not with a single word does he address the actual remarks which lie at the core of the controversy; instead, he is quick to provide a list of his adversary’s abject motives to want to harm him and points out the national danger emanating from the propagation of such noxious material. The viewers do not even get a chance to reach a judgment based on systematic processing as they are at no point confronted with the facts of the argument: What did O’Reilly say, why do people call it racist, and were his remarks really discriminating? All they get is an overall message conclusion along with sufficient extrinsic cues to reject the statement as it is.

The mainstream media is not the only target of Fox’s smear campaign. Fox News regularly uses ad hominem attacks against sources whose opinions they dislike or whose criticism they want to disarm. Typically, it tries to cast doubt on their expertise, their trustworthiness or their character. Bill O’Reilly, for example, called David Brock “a weasel and a liar” because Brock wrote an article calling him out for a misstatement. Even though O’Reilly acknowledges that what he said was incorrect, he repeats the insults and false accusations against Brock: “So that’s my fault, I should have been clear on this. But I am not a liar, and Brock is – in addition to being a pinhead.”<sup>145</sup> Basically O’Reilly says that Brock

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<sup>143</sup> “Bill O’Reilly Exposes MSNBC and Obama.” AmericanGlob. *YouTube*. YouTube, 23 Apr. 2009. Web. 15 Jan. 2011. 03:35.

<sup>144</sup> “O’Reilly: ‘CNN Goes Over to the Dark Side’; Rick Sanchez Comments.” GstateBALLER925. *YouTube*. YouTube, 2 Sept. 2009. Web. 4 Jan. 2011. 00:32.

<sup>145</sup> “Pinheads and Patriots: 10/10.” TheRiteWing. *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Oct. 2008. Web. 5 Jan. 2011. 00:41.

wrote the truth but he still is a liar – and a pinhead – and that he himself, despite having made this inaccurate statement, is not a liar. With this argumentation, which would obviously not withstand the scrutiny of a systematic evaluation, he wants to restore his credibility simply by setting up a discounting heuristic cue for the source releasing the discrediting information against himself.

When the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) announced in September 2010 that the recession had ended, this was unwelcome news at Fox News. In order to cast doubt on the veracity of the information, Megyn Kelly thus cited the source not as the National Bureau of Economic Research but mockingly spoke of “some economists out in Cambridge, Massachusetts” who had “decided” that the recession was over, drawing out the words “out in Cambridge, Massachusetts” in what can only be interpreted as a poor attempt to imitate a snobby uptown intonation, and putting on an exaggeratedly arrogant facial expression to parody what apparently she wanted to portray as an unworldly group of elitists who had arbitrarily “decided” about the economic state of the country. Afterwards she asked her guest if there wasn’t “some empirical way of determining whether we’re in or out of a recession that’s not subject to partisan chit-chat,” thereby insinuating that the private, non-profit research organization NBER produces non-scientific, non-empirical, non-objective and non-significant information – in short: information the viewers should disregard on grounds of the credibility heuristic.<sup>146</sup>

Solid facts are a primordial condition for systematic processing. How little importance Fox News attaches to the facts becomes clear in this unintentionally revealing quote from Fox’s William La Jeunesse, who is commenting on the fact checking of political candidates:

Tonight as those candidates debate, an army of internet fact checkers will be trying to separate fact from fiction, acting as judge and jury as to which candidate is telling the truth or a tall tale. While most of these sites are non-partisan, timely and useful, like Factcheck.org and Politifact, remember, they are uh...well, their facts are -- no one is checking the fact checkers. And their facts...unlike science...the facts are not irrefutable. And now to Washington.<sup>147</sup>

Instead of appreciating this development and finally addressing the facts, the reporter immediately points his finger at the fact checkers, desperately trying to somehow relativize their findings. Of course if there were no irrefutable facts, systematic processing would be

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<sup>146</sup> Cf. “Daily Show: The Recession Is Over.” Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 22 Sept. 2010. Web. 6 Jan. 2011.

<sup>147</sup> Qtd. in Linkins, Jason. “Fox News: ‘The Facts Are Not Irrefutable.’” *Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 7 Oct. 2008. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

nearly impossible and people would be forced to rely on heuristics – cues for which they are abundantly provided with by their fair and balanced network of choice.

On another occasion, O'Reilly seeks to discredit young Obama supporters. His guests are two students who voted for Barack Obama, and whom he introduces with the following words: "Much of Barack Obama's support comes from younger Americans, many of them in college, but how much do these voters really know?"<sup>148</sup> And indeed, the entire following interview, in which the anchors goes to great lengths to distort, exaggerate and misrepresent his young guests' positions, is meant to reveal their ignorance of Obama's policies, implying that young liberals do not know what they are talking about and that no expert or well-informed person could ever support the president.

But pointing the finger at the author of a statement to influence its reception and evaluation is a technique which can be used not only to dismiss inconvenient information but also to attach more importance to a favored message. People whose opinion Fox appreciates are often presented as especially credible sources – a technique also known as *inverse ad hominem argument* or *appeal to authority*. By the same token, discounting communicator cues such as pundit status, certain affiliations or other discrediting background information are frequently concealed from the viewers.

In August 2008, Fox News brought a story about the legal prosecution of a conservative author for alleged anti-Muslim human rights violations, in which it introduced Paul Fromm, a right-wing extremist, racist and Holocaust denier, as a "free speech activist."<sup>149</sup> Had Fromm, whom Wikipedia describes as "a Canadian neo-Nazi, [. . .] [who] hosts a radio show on the Stormfront web site and has ties to former Ku Klux Klan members [. . .] [and who] has been described by national media as 'one of Canada's most notorious white supremacists,'"<sup>150</sup> been introduced more aptly, most viewers would have dismissed his opinion right away and maybe even taken a reactive stance on the subject. By calling him a "free speech activist," Fox News suppresses those negative communicator cues and replaces them with a rather positive one in order to lead people to accept his message. The same happened just a few months later when anti-Semite Andy Martin, responsible for the rumors of Obama's being a Muslim and

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<sup>148</sup> "Bill O'Reilly Pwns Two Hippie Liberals." liberalshateamerica3. *YouTube*. YouTube, 14 July 2008. Web. 10 Jan. 2011. 00:00.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Beirich, Heidi. "Fox News Calls White Supremacist, Holocaust Denier and Anti-Semite a 'Free Speech Activist.'" *AlterNet.org*. AlterNet, 13 Aug. 2008. Web. 9 Jan. 2011.

<sup>150</sup> "Paul Fromm (activist)." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 3 Jan. 2011. Web. 9 Jan. 2011.

questioning the authenticity of his birth certificate, was presented as an “author and journalist.”<sup>151</sup>

Media Matters commented on Fox’s “credibility gap with its terrorism experts,” asserting that “Fox News has repeatedly discussed terrorism with analysts who have proved themselves not credible to discuss American foreign policy by making false or outrageous statements about foreign policy or terrorism.”<sup>152</sup> It also caught Fox News lying about the source of a survey which stated that more than one third of primary care physicians would consider leaving their profession if the health care reform bill was passed. Although the survey was conducted by a national physician search firm, Fox News attributed its information to a “scientific poll” by *The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*.<sup>153</sup> Clearly, citing the *NEJM*, “a prestigious magazine,” as Bill O’Reilly correctly pointed out, is meant to serve as a persuasive cue supporting people’s acceptance of the message on grounds of the credibility heuristic.

Not only experts but also communicators who argue against their own position are perceived as more convincing by enhancing the use of the credibility heuristic. On 28 April 2010, Sean Hannity promoted “atheist” S.E. Cupp’s book *Losing Our Religion*, in which she speaks out against secularization, and interviewed the author on his TV-show. The host introduces the topic, which the screen text announces as “behind the liberal media’s bias against Christianity,” remarking that “[t]his is the strangest thing in the world: You write a book defending Christianity – and you’re an atheist.”<sup>154</sup> And his self-proclaimed nonreligious guest, who later goes on to criticize the liberals’ “secular agenda” and brings forward further arguments that are irreconcilable with a strictly atheist point of view, confirms this information and emphasizes just how much credibility this position lends to her message: “I am. And doesn’t that make me the perfect candidate? I mean, how objective can I be about this when I don’t have a dog in this fight?”<sup>155</sup>

In just the same way, a liberal commentator criticizing the liberal position benefits from greater credibility. David Brock remarks on the subject of Fox’s liberal contributors:

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<sup>151</sup> Cf. “Sean Hannity, Andy Martin and the Excuses.” vinneyd2. *YouTube*. YouTube, 9 Oct. 2008. Web. 27 Jan. 2011.

<sup>152</sup> “Fox’s Credibility Gap with Its Terrorism Experts.” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 13 Jan. 2010. Web. 9 Jan. 2011.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. “Hours after Fox Corrected the Record, Beck Perpetuates Falsehood about Doctor ‘Survey.’” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 17 Mar. 2010. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.

<sup>154</sup> “Fox: Behind the Liberal Media’s Assault on Christianity.” *AtheistMediaBlog*. *YouTube*. YouTube, 29 Apr. 2010. Web. 15. Jan. 2011. 00:30.

<sup>155</sup> “Fox: Behind the Liberal Media’s Assault on Christianity.” 00:37.

Liberal guests – political consultants, activists, academics, and writers – appear regularly on FOX shows. But FOX’s choice of in-house “liberals” – those on the Murdoch payroll appearing most frequently – are far from reliably liberal. On the contrary, they often seem to be used by FOX to sabotage the liberal position from within.<sup>156</sup>

### 3.2 The Likeability Heuristic: “People I Like Have Correct Opinions”

As has been shown in the first two chapters, Roger Ailes knows about the importance of being likeable, deeming it the most powerful element of personal communication. It is therefore not at all surprising that likeability should be one of Fox’s most prominent cues. Attractiveness, humor, friendliness, and resemblance are the most influential variables contributing to a person’s likeability, which directly enhances the communicator’s persuasiveness. Moreover, a greater liking for the communicator has been shown to go hand in hand with greater perceived trustworthiness true to the motto: “Nice People Can Be Trusted.” Finally, the components humor and friendliness can put people in a good mood and make them more easily persuadable.

Their attractiveness is without doubt one of the Fox News anchors’ most salient features. Even though on-air staff may generally tend to be not too bad-looking, Fox is exceptional in this respect: So notorious is it for its long-legged, short-skirted pretty news ladies that it has all but become a byword for sexy journalism. When David Brock writes that in hiring on-air anchors and reporters, Chet Collier, Ailes’s most influential adviser in the early days, “favored looks over experience,” admitting that he was “not hiring the talent for their brainpower,”<sup>157</sup> this seems to be no exaggeration. Especially the female anchors are so attractive and dressed in such a way that it is virtually impossible not to notice their physical qualities. All of them fulfill the cliché of model-like looking, sexy, self-confident, successful working women. One of them, Gretchen Carlson, can even impress with a former Miss America title. And they are doing their best not to hide their assets: dressed in high heels and often by all standards indecently short skirts, they play on their feminine charms, acting sassy and flirtatious.<sup>158</sup> On YouTube, there are countless videos of the hot “Fox News babes,” who have practically reached a status of sex symbols. It is worth mentioning that Fox’s studios are set up in such a way that the women’s entire bodies are prominently visible most of the time:

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<sup>156</sup> Brock 325.

<sup>157</sup> Brock 318.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. “Fox News Babes.” *foxnewsbabes. YouTube*. YouTube, 20 Jan. 2007. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.

There are no tables or accessories blocking the view on those legs. High tables or massive, bar-like furniture, behind which only the persons' torso is visible, can be found – but mainly on shows without regular female anchors, for example, *Hannity*, *The O'Reilly Factor* or *Glenn Beck*. Fox News is trying to draw its viewers' attention to their anchors' physique in an attempt to make them judge from appearances.

As with other heuristics, Fox doubly exploits attraction and likeability by setting up not only positive cues for its own message but also negative cues for their antagonists' messages. Former Fox News Producer Frank O'Donnell points out that on *Hannity & Colmes*, the conservative Hannity is “a [really] good-looking, kind of clean-cut all-American kind of guy” whereas his liberal counterpart Alan Colmes is “a little squirrely looking.”<sup>159</sup> It is no rarity that those on-air personalities representing the conservative point of view are handsome, charismatic, well-known and convincing figures while liberal commentators or guests lack their self-confidence, captivating charms and sex-appeal. And if Fox thinks its rivals are too good-looking, it does not shy away from giving a helping hand: When they digitally altered the photos of two *New York Times* reporters in July 2008, their goal was not to be funny – as there was not even an indication that the photos had been edited; their goal was simply to make those men look bad – literally. Their features were distorted to make them ugly, unattractive, unlikeable, untrustworthy communicators. Fox disliked their point of view and wanted to provide people with a negative cue for them to reject the reporters' message. The clip “Fox News Airs Altered Photos of News York Times Reporters” shows the segment from the 2 July 2008 *Fox & Friends* show, shortly inserting the unedited photos of the two reporters to juxtapose them to Fox's version.<sup>160</sup> What can be seen is a classic case of shooting the messenger: Not with a single word do the commentators at Fox address the real issue, which remains unclear for the viewers unless they are familiar with the article Fox is so upset about. Instead, they concentrate on smearing the originators of the disliked information:

DOOCY: [. . .] A couple of days ago, when most newspapers in America were doing these positive stories about how Fox News Channel, once again, number one –

KILMEADE: Like the *LA Times*.

DOOCY: – for many, many years. There was a hit piece by somebody in *The New York Times*. The writer was a fellow by the name of Jacques Steinberg, and he's been doing a bunch of attack stories on Fox News Channel. Well, there's some backstory to it, and that is this: His boss, the

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<sup>159</sup> Qtd. in *Outfoxed* 00:25:14.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. “Fox News Airs Altered Photos of *New York Times* Reporters.” mateyboy07. *YouTube*. YouTube, 3 Jul. 2008. Web. 10 Jan. 2011. 00:05.

guy who assigned him to this, is a fellow by the name of Steven Reddicliffe, and Mr. Reddicliffe actually used to work for this company. [. . . ]<sup>161</sup>

They proceed to give some phony reason for Reddicliffe wanting to harm the network out of spite and bitterness, and conclude:

[. . .] and that's why he sends his attack dog Jacques Steinberg out – that fellow right there, the writer for *The New York Times* – to do these hit pieces. So, he essentially is his attack dog. His – his poodle, if you will. [. . . ] I wonder if he's going to show him at Westminster this year.

KILMEADE: I'm not really sure. We know a beagle won last year, and this – he's dressed as a poodle.<sup>162</sup>

At this point they show a picture of a man holding a dog on a leash with the faces of the reporters superimposed on the head of the man and his barking poodle. Their goal is to ridicule the idea of Steinberg as a vicious and potentially harmful attack dog by portraying him as a cute little poodle, potential participant at the Westminster dog show; but *Fox & Friends* is not a comedy show. All they aim at is restoring their image as America's irreproachable number one news network – by making their critics look like ugly, spiteful, pathetic and, apparently, canine losers.

We tend to have a greater liking not only for attractive people but also for people we find friendly, humorous, nice, and who make us feel good. This aspect goes hand in hand with the use of mood as a heuristic cue. While usually the news anchors' character stays in the background of their reporting as they concentrate on the facts, this is different at Fox. The anchors there show a lot more involvement and attitude and also more of their personality. Somebody who watches Fox over a certain period of time really feels he gets to know the anchors; their attitudes and opinions of course, but also their private lives. The viewers are meant to feel familiar and comfortable with those nice, popular and desirable people at Fox.

*Fox & Friends* invites its audience to “[g]et the latest news, plus a lot of great laughs, from your hosts Brian Kilmeade, Gretchen Carlson and Steve Doocy. It's better than coffee!”<sup>163</sup> Who needs coffee when people can start their day in the pleasant company of “their” hosts Brian, Gretchen and Steve, who will gently and humorously break the latest stories, rumors, scandals and catastrophes to them? Of course this combination of “news, plus a lot of great laughs” is problematic and rather grotesque – unless one departs from the assumption that all news is good news, or at least not so bad or serious as not to constitute a cause for either joy or

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<sup>161</sup> “Fox News Airs Altered Photos of *NY Times* Reporters.” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 2 July 2008. Web. 7 Jan. 2011.

<sup>162</sup> “Fox News Airs Altered Photos of *NY Times* Reporters.”

<sup>163</sup> “FNC TV.”

ridicule. But the concern of this advertisement is only to underline the hosts' likeability and set up a positive communicator cue.

Fox frequently grants its viewers insights into its hosts' private lives: They get to see or hear about their spouses, families, friends, and vacations. Megyn Kelly, for instance, once brought her parents on the show, portraying herself as the loving daughter of a happy family – although she almost ends up overdoing that role a little, talking to her mum and stepdad in a rather patronizing way.<sup>164</sup> Besides, it is quite strange that Kelly first mentions a motive for the visit – the 45th reunion of her mother's nursing school – but then not a word is lost on that subject. It also remains unclear why this occasion would prompt Fox to invite both Kelly's mother and her spouse on a newscast. By all standards, Megyn Kelly's parents did not contribute any newsworthy information whatsoever to the show, and their appearance rests inscrutable. All they do is, under the firm guidance of their daughter, reminisce about an evening out and delight the viewers with some anecdotes of that night; just a normal, happy family having a good time. The appearance is simply meant to enhance Kelly's likeability and create a feeling of familiarity.

Megyn Kelly also shares the news of her upcoming wedding with the audience. The night before her wedding, her co-anchor announces that she is about to get married to “Mr. Doug Brunt, who is a fantastic guy by the way,”<sup>165</sup> they show a photo of a smiling Kelly and her handsome husband to be, and Janice Dean, another anchor, comes into the studio with a present, at which point they all get lost in expressing their mutual affection and well-wishes:

KELLY: That is sweet. DEAN: Aw, you're so welcome. KELLY: Thank you so much. DEAN: We'll be thinking about you tomorrow. Best of luck, we love you. We love you. KELLY: We love you, I love you guys, too. DEAN: Yay, look how cute you are! KELLY: Yay. *[laughing]*

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All of this is said extremely emotionally. The female anchors let the audience partake in their excitement about the upcoming event, giggling, clapping their hands and acting like two little girls at a bridal shower. They go on chatting about the event some more and the future bride reminds her viewers to stay faithful to Fox, promising to come back soon with exclusive information and pictures of the wedding and honeymoon:

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<sup>164</sup> Cf. “A Visit from Megyn Kelly's Mom and Dad.” Johnnydollar01. *YouTube*. YouTube, 11 Jun. 2007. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.

<sup>165</sup> “Megyn Kelly Gets a Send-Off to Her Wedding and Honeymoon!” johnnydollar01. *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 Feb. 2008. Web. 8 Jan. 2011. 00:17.

<sup>166</sup> “Megyn Kelly Gets a Send-Off to Her Wedding and Honeymoon!” 00:58.

I'm just so touched, and I appreciate it and I'll be back in, uh, well, a week and a half after the honeymoon. Haha. Stay tuned at Fox News in the meantime. Keep watchin' this program! [. . .] I'll bring the details when I come back along with some photos.<sup>167</sup>

To be continued: Soap operas and reality-TV shows use this concept to keep people watching. The audience wants to participate in the characters' lives and see how their stories continue. In this case people don't want to miss the pictures and stories of Megyn's wedding and her honeymoon.

Showing private photos on-air seems to be common practice at Fox. When Fox News meteorologist Janice Dean, "the Weather Machine," got married, this was also discussed on the news and photos of the wedding were shown, commented by Dean not without some sexual innuendoes.<sup>168</sup> And just like Megyn Kelly, the weather lady kept her promise and presented the pictures of her trip to Europe on the return of her honeymoon, granting the viewers deep insights into her private life. One of the photos shows the anchor in a hotel bathtub in Paris:

SKINNER: Woohoo. DEAN: [*feigning embarrassment*] Uhm, were you supposed to see this picture? Who put this in? SKINNER: Ohhhh. DEAN: This is a little... uhm, yeah. SKINNER: Mr Newman! Wow. Janice! DEAN: This would be the, uh, bathtub shot, and we're not gonna show you that! – I'm just kidding. [. . .] You can tell that I don't travel with a hair and make-up person. There I am in the bathtub. Little French bathtub for ya. The money shot. SKINNER: Mr. Newman must've had a good time in Paris. DEAN: Sh... Jane Skinner! Goodbye. SKINNER: Goodbye Janice.<sup>169</sup>

Inserting private photographs like this adds authenticity to Dean's image and also enhances familiarity. It is supposed to let the audience experience a different side of the anchor: unvarnished, natural, and "stripped" of all public appearance.

The anchors also announce their pregnancies on-air – always a joyous occasion to celebrate with the co-anchors and to share with the viewers.<sup>170</sup> Janice Dean even shows sonogram pictures of her unborn baby on the *Fox Extreme Weather Center* and assures the audience that she "will definitely let [them] know if and when he starts to kick [her] during [her] weather here."<sup>171</sup>

These are only a few examples of how Fox gets its audience to like and "bond with" the anchors. They gradually get to know them as those nice people at Fox, who always have

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<sup>167</sup> "Megyn Kelly Gets a Send-Off to Her Wedding and Honeymoon!"

<sup>168</sup> Cf. "Janice Dean Gets Married!" johnnydollar01. *YouTube*. YouTube, 11 June 2007. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.

<sup>169</sup> "Janice Dean's Honeymoon!" johnnydollar01. *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 June 2007. Web. 8 Jan. 2011. 00:31.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. "Megyn Kelly Is Having a Baby!" Living983. *YouTube*. YouTube, 14 Apr. 2009. Web. 8 Jan. 2011; "Janice Dean Announces Another Son on the Way!" johnnydollar01. *YouTube*. YouTube, 23 Aug. 2010. Web. 9 Jan. 2011.

<sup>171</sup> "Janice Dean the Baby Machine." weathergalz. *YouTube*. YouTube, 19 Sept. 2008. Web. 13 Jan. 2011.

such a good time together and lead such wonderful and happy lives; how can you *not* like them when they are everything you dream to be? And as people get familiar with those individuals, they get more and more attached to them and want to continue seeing them. Besides, the so-established familiarity can later act independently as a positive heuristic cue. Of course the anchors are not always nice and smiling; they can turn into nasty and rude interlocutors in debates with dissenting guests;<sup>172</sup> but the regular audience who believes to know how the anchors *really* are must think that surely they have a good reason to be acting in such a way.

Fox also uses negative likeability cues against its adversaries, which it is eager to present as unfriendly, immoral and unapproachable people. By way of example, here is what Bill O'Reilly has to say about the originators of a political ad which raises questions about Senator McCain's state of health in the context of a potential presidency:

[. . .] perhaps the most vile anti-McCain ad we've ever seen; and it's running on NBC News. Perhaps the most vicious ad of the campaign is running on MSNBC. [. . . .] Now, that ad was put out by two despicable human beings: far-left hatchet man Robert Greenwald is a notorious smear-merchant. The failed Hollywood director has made a career out of doing stuff like this. And James H. Dean, Howard Dean's brother, had a hand in the ad as well. Also the atrocity continues, the pattern of behavior sanctioned by GE, General Electric chief Jeffrey Immelt and NBC News boss, NBC boss, Jeff Zucker. They should be ashamed, but they are anything but.

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Nowhere does O'Reilly address the issue of whether or not these concerns might be justified or at least explain why he finds raising those questions so highly despicable to give his viewers a chance to reach a judgment based on systematic information processing. Instead, he focuses on the authors of the ad and sets up cues like "vile," "vicious," "despicable human beings," "far-left hatchet man," "notorious smear-merchant," "failed," "atrocity," and "they should be ashamed" in order to make them unacceptable communicators on the heuristic basis of likeability and moral competence.

The following paragraphs address Fox's use of the similarity heuristic as a persuasive cue: We tend to agree with people whom we perceive to be similar to ourselves because we sympathize and sense a greater liking for them. Resemblance is especially effective when we think the communicators to be our allies in matters of ideology and attitude. But other shared aspects, such as social class or language, can operate as cues by invoking attitudinal similarity.

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<sup>172</sup> Cf. e.g. "Megyn Kelly Takes Down Kirsten Powers on the Black Panther Case." *breitbarttv*. *YouTube*. YouTube, 13 July 2010. Web. 13 Jan. 2011.

<sup>173</sup> "Bill O'Reilly Literally Destroys Leftists NBC/MSNBC, The Den." *TheRiteWing*. *YouTube*. YouTube, 30 Sept. 2008. Web. 8 Jan. 2011. 01:14.

Fox News paints a black-and-white picture of an America split in half by an insurmountable cultural divide. On the one side, there is Sarah Palin's "real America" full of honest, hard-working patriots embracing Christian values and American ideals such as freedom, democracy and capitalism. This America incorporates the land of the free, the home of the brave, the promised land for the chosen people. But this vision is threatened by America's other half: the un-American, godless, treasonous liberal elite and its army of left-wing, tree-hugging, followers who want to destroy the country and take away people's individual rights and freedoms to establish a socialist dictatorship. Pundits Bill O'Reilly, Glenn Beck, and Fox's latest acquisition Sarah Palin are at the forefront of promoting this Manichaeian vision of America, and all of Fox News follows suit, speaking out on behalf of their fellow citizens the "real Americans." O'Reilly's books *Pinheads and Patriots* and *Culture Warrior*, as well as the homonymous segments on his TV-show *The O'Reilly Factor* are dedicated to identifying those two classes of citizens. His website summarizes the essence of *Culture Warrior*: "Bill O'Reilly sees that America is in the midst of a fierce culture war between those who embrace traditional values and those who want to change America into a 'secular-progressive' country."<sup>174</sup> Glenn Beck takes this point of view several steps further in his myths about the liberal agenda and his fantasies of religious fundamentalism, which will receive more attention in chapter 3.5.

In the light of this understanding of the American society, Fox sends out a message to its audience: We are just like you. By identifying themselves as "one of you guys," they automatically imply common goals and interests and "you guys" quickly becomes synonymous with "we guys." In the ideology they all subscribe to, it acquires the meaning of "the good guys" and suggests moral superiority of all members – including of course Fox News, which, moreover, uses a false dichotomy to implicitly posit that whoever does not fully support their agenda is trying to sabotage it. Whenever Fox says we are "just like you," it is implicated that the latte-sipping, Hollywood-loving, effeminate liberal "elite" is *not* "just like you." Merely by speaking of an "elite," which comprises only a limited number of people and often generates jealousy and resentment due to its exclusiveness, Fox News prevents most of their viewers from relating to that group.

David Brock describes O'Reilly's attempts to appear as somebody his audience can identify with:

O'Reilly, whose monologues seem self-consciously punctuated by "dis" and "dat," rather than "this" and "that," presents himself as a spokesman for "the folks," average Americans,

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<sup>174</sup> "Culture Warrior." *Bill O'Reilly*. BillOReilly.com, n.d. Web. 15 Jan. 2011.

railing against liberal elites, political elites and occasionally corporate elites. The perception that he is an average Joe is central to O'Reilly's claim to be, as the title of his most recent book suggests "looking out for you." [ . . . ]

To burnish his everyman credentials, O'Reilly fetishizes his working-class upbringing, telling interviewers he grew up in Levittown on Long Island, a quintessentially working-class suburb of the postwar period. Yet an article in the December 2000 *Washington Post* quoted O'Reilly's mother as saying he actually grew up in neighboring Westbury, a richer suburb [ . . . ].

Though he makes in the range of \$10 million per year [ . . . ] he says he still lives simply. [ . . . ] When caught by a reporter stepping into a limousine, O'Reilly claimed there had been a "mix-up" with the car. Another time, he caught himself lying: "I have a little Honda. . . well, not really. But I have a sedan, all right, just a small sedan."<sup>175</sup>

Sarah Palin, the Alaska "hockey mum" who is known for her "folksy" language and style is the host of Fox News' *Real American Stories*. The title correctly indicates that this is a program specifically designed to promote Palin's vision of her country. By the way, in order to attract more viewers and to underline the patriotic stance of the show, the promo features interviews with American celebrities, making it look as if they promote the show although in reality those people did not even know Fox was using them to advertise *Real American Stories*.<sup>176</sup>

Glenn Beck as well emphasizes his role as one of the "folks," pointing out similarities with his audience. He speaks about his faith, his personal problems, his social background. On 9 August 2010, he muses about the dreams of his viewers' fathers and the dreams of his own father:

Let me ask you this: What were the dreams of your father? [ . . . ] Maybe he wanted you to go to college, because maybe he didn't even graduate from high school. He definitely wanted something better for you than he had. Maybe he always wanted to start his own business and be his own boss but couldn't. Maybe he just wanted to take your mum to Europe or South America on a dream vacation. I remember my dad just – all he wanted to do was retire and go golfing. He didn't make it 'cause he worked so hard that, by the time he could retire, his back was so bad he couldn't walk around the course.<sup>177</sup>

From this statement it becomes clear that Beck's father pursued some sort of physical labor; Beck thus characterizes himself as coming from a lower class family. The other aspirations he names also refer to a lower or middle class social background. After creating this common

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<sup>175</sup> Brock 337-38.

<sup>176</sup> Cf. "Robert Greenwald Discusses Fox News and Sarah Palin's *Real American Stories* on the Ed Show." bravenewfilms. *YouTube*. YouTube, 1 Apr. 2010. Web. 30 Jan. 2011.

<sup>177</sup> "Glenn Beck-08/09/10-A." 03:38.

basis with his viewers, he goes on to contrast these dreams to a crudely distorted version of the dreams of Barack Obama Senior, discussing the President's autobiography *Dreams from My Father*.

As an American, chances are your father didn't dream of leaving his family and two-year-old toddler behind to continue his education at an Ivy League school so he can take that American government-paid education back to his home country along with a woman he'd picked up in Boston, who had become his third wife, to encourage his nation to drop the newfangled socialism being promoted in favor of old-style Soviet Marxism. [. . .] Those were the dreams of Barack Obama's father.<sup>178</sup>

In this description, he characterizes Obama as the son of an elitist, parasitic Marxist with a disrespect for traditional family values. He then links the president's own goals to this negative image, and to further underline the clash between this attitude and the noble aspirations of his own group, he concludes:

[T]he dreams of his son seem almost, almost like the dreams of the father. And they're not the dreams of my dad. I doubt they're the dreams of yours. The dreams of my father were that we would be able to make our own way in life. I think those are the dreams of Martin Luther King's father as well. The vast majority of Americans share the dreams of our forefathers, not the nightmares [. . .], the dreams responsible for creating the reality of the freest, most prosperous and most generous nation to ever exist on earth.<sup>179</sup>

Being American is another community Fox exploits to strengthen the ties with its viewership. The pundits often appeal to their viewers' national pride, like Glenn Beck did in the above example. But the network's graphics as well are designed to remind the audience of their national identity. David Folkenflik names some characteristics of Fox News' patriotic and "resolutely pro-American" stance since the Iraq War: "Almost every FOX News program includes a flag in the left-hand corner and the use of the Defense Department's name for the war – 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' – as the network's own catchphrase for its coverage. The United States quickly becomes 'our' in reporters' parlance."<sup>180</sup> And the network's colors, red, white, and blue, reflect the colors of the American flag.

Besides similarities in social class, nationality, and political affiliation, Fox uses people's religious beliefs to create a feeling of togetherness: When it comes to religion, Fox often addresses its fellow Christians in an appeal to stick together against non-Christians, whom they seem to regard as a class of inferior beings, amoral by definition as morality, in

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<sup>178</sup> "Glenn Beck-08/09/10-A." 04:45.

<sup>179</sup> "Glenn Beck-08/09/10-B." PhukObama. *YouTube*. YouTube, 9 Aug. 2010. Web. 17 Jan. 2011. 02:53.

<sup>180</sup> Qtd. in Brock 331.

their belief-system, can only come from a God – *their* God of course.<sup>181</sup> On 18 December 2008, for example, Fox News aired an unbelievably hypocritical story intended to fortify their role as ambassadors and defenders of Christian America. Anchor Gretchen Carlson is “enraged” about an atheist group trying to replace one of their signs, which was stolen from a public place, with a sign advocating that “thou shalt not steal.” Her rage, however, is not provoked by the thieves’ disregard of the eighth commandment, but by “all these atheist displays.”<sup>182</sup> In her reply, *Fox & Friends* contributor Michelle Malkin advises “the people of faith who are watching this happening in their towns and cities across the country not to go stealing their signs.” The anchor does not condemn stealing as a sin, but she thinks leaving the signs there is the best strategy to attack the problem: “Let them make fools of themselves in the public square and say a prayer for them.”<sup>183</sup> Carlson immediately disagrees, seeing this “indulgence” lead to the disappearance of Christianity: “Yeah but, Michelle, if you let them do that, then – over time – they will have the control. That’s my point. If you don’t stand up and fight for it, it might just disappear! I’m talking about Christianity!”<sup>184</sup> In a completely nonsensical answer, Malkin agrees but names treating atheists “like trolls” as an alternative approach: “Yeah, yeah, that’s true. But I think that there’s also a, you know, an alternate view, which is you treat these people like trolls [. . .].”<sup>185</sup> Upon reflection she later recommends mockery as the second best solution.<sup>186</sup> Despite the fact that the entire story lacks substance and logic and at least one of the anchors condones stealing, Fox might be able to persuade some people simply by making it look as if they were all in the same boat. Furthermore, characterizing atheists as some kind of “other” magnifies the solidarity effect among believers: The image of abnormal outsiders who do not even deserve a place in human society is used as a foil for Christians.

Fox can be very blatant in its moral classification. On *Hannity and Colmes*, shortly after liberal commentator Alan Colmes is identified as “one of the left” in an interview with a student suspended from school for wearing a shirt saying “Obama – A Terrorist’s Best Friend,” Hannity comes on to speak to the boy: “Hey Daxx, it’s Sean Hannity, it’s the good guy.”<sup>187</sup> This statement is intended to put him in contrast to the only other “guy” there, leaving the role

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<sup>181</sup> Cf. e.g. “Fox News: Atheist Group Putting a New Spin on the ‘War on Christmas.’” *AtheistMediaBlog*. *YouTube*. YouTube, 14 Nov. 2008. Web. 27 Jan. 2011. 03:00.

<sup>182</sup> “Atheists Attacked by Idiot Bigots on Faux News.” *neotropic9*. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Dec. 2008. Web. 15 Jan. 2011. 00:25.

<sup>183</sup> “Atheists Attacked by Idiot Bigots on Faux News.” 01:14.

<sup>184</sup> “Atheists Attacked by Idiot Bigots on Faux News.” 01:28.

<sup>185</sup> “Atheists Attacked by Idiot Bigots on Faux News.” 01:39.

<sup>186</sup> Cf. “Atheists Attacked by Idiot Bigots on Faux News.” 02:22.

<sup>187</sup> “Fox News Racist Sean Hannity Calls Obama Terrorist.” *ThinkNowPeople*. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 Dec. 2008. Web. 15 Jan. 2011. 02:23.

of “the bad guy” for his liberal co-anchor. And siding with the “oppressed,” Hannity promises to supply his likeminded young guest with free anti-Obama shirts and material from his personal website.

### **3.3 The Numeracy Heuristic: “Consensus Implies Correctness”**

People are influenced in their judgment by the opinions and actions of others: Especially in uncertain situations, we tend to conform with what the majority of our group thinks or does. By suggesting that an opinion is held by a great number of people, communicators tempt us to accept the message without further elaboration on grounds of the “consensus implies correctness” heuristic. Similarly, witnessing a bias towards a certain point of view within a group of people might incline us to agree with the group’s majority. In the same way, opinions held only by a minority of group members are less persuasive.

Fox often claims to speak for a large group of people. The network’s emphasis on its representing “America,” or “Americans,” often in combination with a first-person plural personal pronoun, serves not only to create an in-group feeling with the viewers but also to give the impression of vast support or unanimity within the entire nation. Doubtlessly, the opinion of the majority is important in a democracy as it should guide the representatives’ decisions. Only, this is not the line of argumentation Fox usually follows: it uses the majority heuristic not to remind the government of its duty towards the citizens but to imply that there is validity in a statement many people believe to be true.

In a controversy about the number of protesters that showed up at several Tea Party rallies, Bill O’Reilly, made the following statement, at the core of which lies the erroneous idea that the viewership numbers of a network constitute a direct indicator for the veracity of its stories:

Many in the American media are not very interested in reporting the news. Their mission is to report ideology – left-wing ideology – and this network has been accused of the opposite, but our coverage of the tea parties was vastly superior to anything else around. So you make the call. And to help you make the call: Last night *The [O’Reilly] Factor* beat CNN, MSNBC, Headline News and CNBC combined at 8 p. m. – with 50,000 viewers to spare. In the key demo, we beat the haters at NBC by almost a half million viewers.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> “Bill O’Reilly Destroys Media Outlets \*\*Must See\*\*.” 02:38.

On a systematic level, the argument consists of a series of faulty causal connections: First, O'Reilly uses the claim of Fox's superior coverage of the tea party protests to infer that Fox News is a fair and balanced news organization while the other outlets promote left-wing ideology. In a second step, he deduces the superiority of Fox's reporting from the fact that more people watched Fox's coverage of the protests. On a heuristic level, the argument simply uses audience numeracy to get the desired message across: that is, if the receivers do not put a lot of effort in information processing, they are led to assume that most others appreciate Fox for its excellent reporting; ergo its numbers of the protesters must be accurate. And these, according to the other media, vastly overstated numbers in turn represent a heuristic cue in favor of the Tea Party's message.

On other occasions, Fox inserted false footage to support such overestimated crowd sizes and make the persuasive cue even more salient. Reporting on the dimension of the anti-health care reform protest on Capitol Hill, Sean Hannity showed footage of a much bigger crowd from a different rally in order to make the protests he was speaking about seem better attended. The next day, the anchor apologized for his "inadvertent mistake."<sup>189</sup> But it seems that Fox is quite prone to such mistakes: On 18 November 2009, not even two weeks after the first "mix-up," Fox aired videotaped material from a past election campaign during a segment on Sarah Palin's book tour along with the following comment: "Sarah Palin... continuing to draw huge crowds while she's promoting her brand-new book. Take a look at... These are some of the pictures just coming in to us. You can see the, the lines earlier had formed this morning. She's... There's a crowd of folks."<sup>190</sup> And there was indeed a huge crowd of people, which made it look as if Sarah Palin had thousands of fans eagerly awaiting her new book.

Similarly, Fox cites its high ratings as a heuristic cue to support its own and Sarah Palin's message. When the former governor debuted on Fox News, she was described by CNN as "just [. . .] one more ignorant right-winger at Fox News." O'Reilly's rebuttal to this appraisal of Palin and his network consisted in explaining: "Now here's how dumb that comment is: The factor beat CNN at 5:1 at 8 p.m. and we expect that to increase with Sarah Palin on board [. . .]."<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Cf. "Sean Hannity Confesses Using False Footage: 'Jon Stewart Was Right.'" BangTheNews. *YouTube*. YouTube, 12 Nov. 2009. Web. 21 Jan 2011.

<sup>190</sup> "Fox News Apologizes for Airing Incorrect Palin Crowd Footage during Segment on Palin Book Tour." *tpmtv. YouTube*. YouTube, 19 Nov. 2009. Web. 21 Jan. 2011. 00:03.

<sup>191</sup> "Sarah Palin Debut on Fox News – O'Reilly Factor." LandofDaFree. *YouTube*. YouTube, 12 Jan. 2010. Web. 22 Jan. 2011. 00:32.

Fox News even used the majority argument against the Constitution. When it reported about a lawsuit filed in 2010 against the city of Lancaster for opening its city council meetings with a prayer, Fox completely ignored the plaintiffs' core argument, which regards the practice as unconstitutional due to its violation of the separation of church and state. In the *Fox & Friends* interview with the mayor of the city, the hosts stress the fact that 75% of the Lancaster citizens think the meetings should begin with a prayer. Yet they fail to mention that the democratic majority is irrelevant in this case as it is the constitutionality of public prayers in the political sphere which is under scrutiny. Fox host Steve Doocy instead explains the "problem" with the attorney's argument referring to the secularity prescribed by the American Constitution: "Here is the problem with that argument, and that is the fact that the US House of Representatives opens every session with a prayer. So it's not like you guys are doing something nobody else is doing."<sup>192</sup> Of course the fact that others might be doing the same thing does not make it any better or any more constitutional, but this inconsistency might easily escape the receivers' attention as long as they are not processing the information systematically.

Poll numbers and statistics are another device frequently used by Fox News to justify or support their position based on the numeracy heuristic. In chapter 1.2, I showed that these polls are questionable on various levels, concerning the phrasing of the questions, the selection of the interviewees and the interpretation and correctness of the numbers. Whenever polls are used, Fox emphasizes the importance of the numbers if they support its position and downplays them if they contradict its message. In an attempt to refute statistical data comparing drug-use in the Netherlands and the United States, Bill O'Reilly actually claimed that "the way they do the statistics in the Netherlands is different, plus it's a much smaller country."<sup>193</sup> He made the same error when explaining to a Canadian viewer who pointed out that life expectancy under the Canadian health care system is higher than in the United States: "Well, that's to be expected [. . .] because we have ten times as many people as you do. That translates to ten times as many accidents, crimes, down the line [. . .]."<sup>194</sup> In biased polling results, Fox regularly spins the information in such a way as to use the numbers as heuristic cues to its own advantage. Several

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<sup>192</sup> "Fox News: Prayer 'Under Attack' at Lancaster City Council Meetings." *AtheistMediaBlog. YouTube*. YouTube, 14 May 2010. Web. 22 Jan. 2011. 02:01.

<sup>193</sup> "Professor O'Reilly's Amazing Math Skills." *starpad2. YouTube*. YouTube, 10 Aug. 2009. Web. 31 Jan 2011. 00:30.

<sup>194</sup> "Professor O'Reilly's Amazing Math Skills." 00:15.

examples of this can be seen in the video clip “Fox News Speaks for Majority on Health Care Reform?”<sup>195</sup>

One more issue which is, at least indirectly, connected to the numeracy heuristic is the public role of the Fox News pundits. The more famous figures among them can rightfully claim to speak on behalf of many people: Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck, for example, have lots of followers, a large fan community and the support of political organizations like the Tea Party. They cultivate their celebrity status with public appearances, personal websites and on social websites like facebook or Twitter as this public support makes them more powerful communicators because they are perceived to speak not only for themselves but for the entire movement they are associated with.

If what many people agree on is assumed to be correct, this means that opinions held by only a very small number of people are likely to be regarded with skepticism. Thus, people are more likely to dismiss an attitude stigmatized as a deviant or aberrant belief without examining it systematically.

Glenn Beck used the relatively small percentage of atheists in America as a heuristic cue against their position. In an interview with Sarah Palin he stated that “about 3% of [the American] nation is afraid of [God and the role that God plays in our country]. And the rest of us get it.”<sup>196</sup> Now, the expression he uses needs clarification: By “afraid of” God, he does not mean that only 3% fear God in a religious sense; as the rest of the conversation reveals, this is Beck’s interpretation of atheists’ or nonreligious persons’ refusing to acknowledge the existence or authority of a god. Yet, not only is that number, 3%, grossly understated to make the heuristic cue even more salient – various recent studies<sup>197</sup> estimate the percentage to be somewhere between 6 and 15% – but more importantly, it is no proof that the other 97% are correct; not to speak of the fact that within those 97% of religious people there can hardly be unanimity about the subject of God – or gods – and the role religious faith should play in the United States. If people look at this argument only superficially, however, they get the impression of the nation standing virtually united *vis-à-vis* this question; a question, besides, to which there are only two possible answers according to Beck – and one of them is wrong.

By the same token, Fox is at pains not to admit when its preferred attitude is rejected by a lot of people, leaving them in a minority. During the 2008 election campaign, Fox sent its

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<sup>195</sup> Cf. “Fox News Speaks for Majority on Health Care Reform?” LiberalViewer. *YouTube*. YouTube, 18 Mar. 2010. Web. 27 Jan. 2011.

<sup>196</sup> “Beck Asks Palin about God’s Role in Her Life, Country.” AtheistMediaBlog. *YouTube*. YouTube, 13 Jan. 2010. Web. 23 Jan. 2011. 00:34.

<sup>197</sup> Cf. “Demographics of Atheism.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Jan. 2011. Web. 23 Jan. 2011.

reporters out to look at the situation on the ground. In a small Pennsylvania diner, Fox News' Brian Wilson asked the guests, which of them would vote for McCain and which for Obama. While not a single guest raised their hand for McCain – as notably only the “neutral” reporter himself did – eight, that is, all of the present people, raised their hands to signal that they would give their vote to Obama. The astonishing conclusion of the reporter in face of this unanimous support for Obama: “See, it’s split.”<sup>198</sup> Admitting that the situation was this clear-cut would have undermined Fox’s message of Pennsylvania being a battleground state in the presidential election.

The numeracy heuristic applies not only to large groups or on a national level. Witnessing other people’s reactions to a message in general influences our own judgment. And as Ken Auletta, a media writer for *The New Yorker*, wrote: “The network proclaims, ‘we report, you decide.’ But, too often, Fox both reports and decides.”<sup>199</sup> If we perceive a majority tendency, even within a small group, to agree or disagree with a statement, this can serve as a heuristic cue in its reception. Whenever Fox gives both sides of a story, this balance goes hand in hand with a subsequent evaluation of the perspectives, which invariably favors the network’s own point of view. Hence, the viewers’ judgment is likely to be biased by the conservative bias within the network, which manifests itself – among other things – in the judgments and reactions of the on-air personalities.

For example, in a discussion with two students from Boulder High in Colorado, a school against which O’Reilly himself was driving a negative campaign because of an alleged “sex and drugs scandal,” the host of the *O’Reilly Factor* loses his argument against Jesse Lange, who defended the school and exposed O’Reilly’s hypocrisy by quoting him on the subject of drug use from his own book *The O’Reilly Factor for Kids*.<sup>200</sup> This does not keep the anchor from condescendingly concluding the interview stating that “we disagree with Jesse but we respect the fact that he comes on and gives us his point of view,” reprovingly adding that the student, whom he had previously called a pinhead, would benefit a lot from reading *The O’Reilly Factor for Kids*.<sup>201</sup> Beside the fact that he tries to belittle his opponent, O’Reilly uses the plural forms *we* and *us* in expressing his disagreement. It is not exactly clear, however, whom he refers to: probably himself and the other student, who spoke out against the school, but he might as well be claiming to speak for all of Fox News or maybe even include his

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<sup>198</sup> Cf. “Fox News Counts Obamas [sic] Votes – Calls It a Split Decision.” R3Nation. *YouTube*. YouTube, 30 Sept. 2008. Web. 23 Jan. 2011.

<sup>199</sup> Qtd. in Brock 324f.

<sup>200</sup> Cf. “Bill O’Reilly Gets Owned by Kid.” crowman88. *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 Sept. 2007. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.

<sup>201</sup> “Bill O’Reilly Gets Owned by Kid.” 04:44.

audience by means of these pronouns. In any case, the television viewers at home are left with the impression of a majority tendency against Lange's perspective, which might incline them to take O'Reilly's side on the subject.

Most of Fox's reporting is either one-sided or overrepresents the conservative position. When advocates of one side outnumber or eclipse the other, the composition of the discussion panels can serve as a heuristic cue for the audience, who witnesses a majority tendency in favor of one side. In the 18 December 2008 *Fox & Friends* segment discussed earlier, for example, both female commentators represent the Christian position.<sup>202</sup> The third commentator seems less involved but tends to agree with them. Not one of the three commentators mentions the other point of view; they unanimously condemn the atheists' public displays. Superficially assuming that consensus implies correctness, viewers would be drawn to agree with their point of view.

The same unbalance can be found in interviews with people in the street or guests who are not on Fox News' pay list. When Megyn Kelly reported on the health care reform on *America Live* on 25 February 2010, she first falsely claimed that more than 70% of the American people opposed the bill.<sup>203</sup> She then interviewed four concerned senior citizens about their thoughts on the subject, all of whom were against it.<sup>204</sup> Consequently, the side of the health care reform supporters was completely ignored. Moreover, the selection of a group of people who fully agree with her view on the matter constitutes a strong heuristic cue in favor of the anchor's position against the health care reform. And when Fox invites people on its shows for discussions, there are often guests only from one side, or both sides are represented but the anchor, by taking sides himself, forms a majority with one of the two parties. In the *Fox & Friends* report about the prayers at the Lancaster city council, for instance, anchor Steve Doocy presents the plaintiff's point of view, but only to attack it. And while Doocy and his guest both advocate the same position, Fox did not invite anybody to defend the other side's argument.

Similarly, follow-up appraisals of discussions on Fox News can act as heuristic cues by privileging one perspective or passing a judgment on the outcome of the conversation. The audience thus perceives not only majority tendencies in favor of the conservative point of view but also consensus regarding the evaluation of two-sided argumentations. This strategy is

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<sup>202</sup> "Atheists Attacked by Idiot Bigots on Faux News."

<sup>203</sup> Cf. "Daily Show: Anchor Management." Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 3 Mar. 2010. Web. 25 Dec. 2011. 04:33.

<sup>204</sup> Cf. "Daily Show: Anchor Management." 04:50-06:15.

related to the topic of conclusion omission: Messages explicitly stating a conclusion are known to be more persuasive than persuasive messages which leave the final step of drawing the conclusion to the receiver. When, for example, liberal commentator Alan Colmes discussed the subject of building a mosque near Ground Zero with the conservative Laura Ingraham, both sides were quite equally represented. Directly afterwards, however, Ingraham's guest, Fox News analyst Ralph Peters, came on the show and as they immediately started talking about the preceding discussion, Peters smeared Colmes to back up Ingraham's position.<sup>205</sup>

### **3.4 The Familiarity Heuristic: “It Must Be True Because I’ve Heard It Before”**

As we have seen in chapter 2.3, familiarity effects can operate on various levels: on a personal level, we tend to believe people who are familiar to us; on a linguistic level, we are more persuaded by messages framed in catchy, common idiomatic phrases or metaphors; and on a more general level, the mere repetition of a statement makes it seem more true to us. The last phenomenon is related to the mere exposure effect and the sleeper effect, which refers to receivers' forgetting discounting cues over time and thus retroactively accepting a message they had at first discarded.

The viewers' gradual familiarity with the Fox News personalities has already been discussed in the segment on liking. By sharing much of their private life with their audience, the Fox anchors allow the viewers to get to know them on a more personal level and establish a greater familiarity. This chapter will thus concentrate on repetitive language and framing, and how Fox proceeds to enhance message familiarity.

Fox News uses a rather familiar style in reporting the news, and it makes the language seem even more familiar by using the exact same phrases, metaphors and formulations over and over again. The effect is all the more extensive when they verbatim repeat conservative talking points as happened during the Bush administration: Fox News then becomes part of a larger echo chamber in which different sources use the same words to repeat the same information, which will consequently seem more familiar to the receivers. The internal memos play an important role in this regard: As they give very precise instructions on how to address

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<sup>205</sup> Cf. “Colmes Smacks Down Ingraham, Gets Smeared by Peters.” cheldemedo. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Aug. 2010. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.

and refer to certain issues, they ensure that the receivers are frequently exposed to near-identical stimuli. Moreover, the memos serve to direct the agenda setting, that is, they determine which topics are going to receive special attention and more air-time, which means that those issues will be repeatedly addressed in the same fashion on all of the shows throughout the day.

For example, Fox decided to take up the catchy expression *flip-flopping*, which the republicans used extensively in conjunction with John Kerry's policy during the 2004 presidential campaign. A Fox News memo suggested that Kerry was "starting to feel the heat for his flip-flop voting record," and thenceforth all of the anchors stuck to that phrase to characterize Kerry as an unreliable, opportunistic "flip-flopper."<sup>206</sup> As most of the other media followed suit, Kerry's name even today still evokes the idea of flip-flopping.

In its opposing the health care reform plan, Fox framed the Democrats' efforts to get the bill passed in terms of the government trying to "jam it down our throats." As this phrase, or slightly altered versions of it, was repeated many times by Republicans and different persons on Fox News, people started to believe it, and of course such an image provokes resentment and rejection in the victims of this violent act.<sup>207</sup> The fact that the citizens themselves start to use this exact expression when speaking about their health care concerns might be an indicator that people were actually persuaded to accept this message and adopt this negative attitude.<sup>208</sup> Furthermore, there is another important fact supporting this theory: Polls show that most citizens favor the component parts of the Democrats' health care reform bill; nonetheless, they oppose the entire reform.<sup>209</sup> This clearly indicates that they have either not understood or not systematically considered the content of the bill, which hints to an attitude acquired as the result of heuristic processing or persuasion.

Even when the information is not repeated word by word, stories are framed in a similar way, focusing, for example, on a potential negative consequence or ascribing to the audience the role of the victims. In stories related to religion and the freedom of religion, Fox always makes it seem as if Christians, that is, a vast majority of its audience and all of its on-air personalities, were under attack. They and their fellow believers are portrayed as the victims of those other, "bad" people, and it is suggested that if they do not vehemently defend their

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<sup>206</sup> Cf. *Outfoxed* 00:59:58-01:01:12.

<sup>207</sup> Cf. "Daily Show: Anchor Management." 06:06-06:44; "'Ram It Through:' Media adopt GOP Characterization of Majority Vote." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 25 Feb. 2010. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.

<sup>208</sup> Cf. "Daily Show: Anchor Management." 05:31, 07:37.

<sup>209</sup> Cf. Klein, Ezra. "Is Health Care Reform Popular?" *Washington Post*. Washington Post, 23 Feb. 2010. Web. 26 Jan. 2011.

rights, America might turn into an anti-religious country devoid of values and morality, incurring the wrath of God. In order to ensure that viewers are frequently exposed to this point of view, Fox makes religion a recurring topic in its stories and regularly uses insignificant or even unrelated events to broach the issue. Fox News' reporting on the "War on Christmas" is a great example for this kind of directed agenda setting: First, fault is found with some minor detail like, for instance, certain people's preference of the words *Happy Holidays* over *Merry Christmas*, or an ad reminding people that goodness is desirable for its own sake. These "stories" are then completely blown out of proportion and declared a "War on Christmas."<sup>210</sup> The "assault" on Christianity is then picked out as a central theme in various shows or segments, and chances are that after hearing it so many times, the receivers are persuaded to adopt this point of view and ultimately they may even react in the way advocated by the Fox anchors: stand up to "defend" their religion, aggress nonbelievers and atheists, and, in this particular case, boycott stores which opted for the greeting *Happy Holidays*.

Bryant Welch goes one step further in his explanation of how this kind of repetitive language and framing on Fox News operates:

Symbols and vague visceral feeling states are integral components of any attempt to build a reality sense. So is repetition. Words create symbols and take on symbolic value *if they are repeated often enough*. [ . . . ]

Repeating over and over does not simply persuade someone that what is being said is true; it actually *makes* it true in the inner workings of the mind. [ . . . ] If a strong and attractive person with an aura of confidence repeats the same message over and over again, and if that message is packaged in content that offers a solution to the perplexity [caused by confusing events], many will succumb to the message and accept uncritically the "reality" that is offered by the messenger.

[ . . . ] Listening to Bill O'Reilly or Sean Hannity is hearing power. Their power, for some, bulldozes reality and dethrones independent thinking. "If you accept my reality, you can resolve your perplexity and bask in the reassurance that comes from my power." For many Americans, that is an offer they cannot refuse.<sup>211</sup>

Fox also serves as a platform for pundits and guests who would have difficulties to promote their ill-founded controversial theories or unsubstantiated claims unchallenged on more respectable news media: its own delusional Glenn Beck, for example, or the abovementioned right-wing extremists Paul Fromm and Andy Martin, but also less infamous

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<sup>210</sup> Cf. "Cenk Uygur: Fox News' False 'War on Christmas' 'Psycho Talk' – 12/23/10." PoliticsNewsNews. *YouTube*. YouTube, 23 Dec. 2010. Web. 27 Jan. 2011; "O'Reilly's 'War' on Christmas." thesloth2001ca. *YouTube*. YouTube, 20 Oct. 2007. Web. 27 Jan. 2011; "Fox News: Atheist Group Putting a New Spin on the 'War on Christmas.'" "

<sup>211</sup> Welch 143-44.

figures. Oftentimes, Fox uses these people to put forward biased or incorrect messages which it then repeats and propagates.

Furthermore, Media Matters for America observes that there is only a fictitious difference between Fox's opinion shows and the straight news:

Last year, the Daily Show mocked Fox News' "vaunted news-opinion equator" and noted that the news shows make stories out of attacks launched "by the guy whose show was on right before you." Today, Fox News' Stuart Varney provided a perfect example.

On *Fox and Friends*, one of Fox News' opinion shows, Varney attacked the \$50 billion infrastructure plan announced by President Obama over the weekend as a "stimulus plan for the unions" and claimed "the president essentially is scrambling" because of bad poll numbers: [. . . .]

A few hours later, on *America's Newsroom* – a show Fox categorizes as straight and objective news – Varney reported on "criticism" that the infrastructure plan is "essentially a pay-off to the unions" and said that "some say" Obama is "scrambling because his polls on the economy are looking very, very bad": [. . . .]

See, the difference between Fox's opinion and news programs is the phrase, "some say." The "criticism" on which Varney reported was his own, from another Fox News segment, three hours prior. On Fox, this cycle is familiar.<sup>212</sup>

Fox News thus creates a little echo chamber of its own in which the same messages – originally its own opinions, which then make it into the news – are repeated over and over. Furthermore, the source of the original message is often omitted, generalized or even numerically enhanced by means of hedging phrases like "some people say" or "many believe." After being exposed to the same information so many times, the receivers will recognize it as a message they have heard before and, reverting to the familiarity heuristic, they are likely to believe it.

A further Media Matters article provides a non-exhaustive list from only a short period of time documenting countless falsehoods which were propagated in this way, among them accusations against Democrats "vot[ing] to protect pedophiles but not veterans," false claims about the 2010 budget, the stimulus bill, the health care reform, and smears against the Obama administration.<sup>213</sup> Fox example, Fox News eagerly welcomed the speculations about Obama's being a Muslim and attending a radical Muslim school, a madrassa. The man credited with starting these rumors is none other than the aforementioned Andy Martin. His false claims were first made public in an unsourced, unsubstantiated magazine article. Notwithstanding their

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<sup>212</sup> Easter, Sean. "The Difference between Fox's Opinion and 'Straight News' Programming." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 7 Sept. 2010. Web. 29 Jan. 2011.

<sup>213</sup> Cf. "Fox News' Programs Echo Its 'Opinion' Shows: Smears, Doctored Videos, GOP Talking Points."

highly untrustworthy origin, the rumors received great attention on Fox News, where they were passed on unchecked.<sup>214</sup> *The New York Times* commented: “To most journalists, the notion of anonymous reporters relying on anonymous sources is a red flag. [. . .] But hosts of morning television programs and an evening commentator on the Fox News Network nevertheless devoted extensive discussion to Insight’s Clinton-Obama article [. . .].”<sup>215</sup> Soon afterwards, the false information circulated the internet and the rumor spread throughout the entire country. Although it was unambiguously debunked, a growing number of people believed it on the basis that it was so widespread and sounded familiar.<sup>216</sup>

MSNBC shows Fox News’ involvement in planting and amplifying false rumors, many of which are then believed by a significant part of the public, for example, the claim that not possessing a health-insurance is punishable by jail under the new bill proposed by Democrats, and some of the misinformation examined by the Worldpublicopinion.org study discussed in chapter 1.3, which also shows a correlation between watching Fox News and accepting these rumors.<sup>217</sup>

The two segments from *Hannity* and *Hannity & Colmes* featured in the video clip “Sean Hannity, Andy Martin and the Excuses” also illustratively exemplify Fox’s involvement in creating a cycle of lies and false allegations.<sup>218</sup> When challenged by Obama’s communications director Robert Gibbs for giving a platform to defamatory messages from extremists like Andy Martin, Hannity justifies Martin’s presence on his show under the guise of diversity and giving a voice to all sides, even the ones he disagrees with: “You see, on Fox, we actually interview people of all points of view whether we agree or disagree. [. . .] I’m a journalist who interviews people that I disagree with all the time [. . .].”<sup>219</sup> His opponent discloses the dishonesty in this argument by pointing out that Hannity, far from disagreeing with his guest, centered his entire show around this man’s accusations against Obama – a fact which is palpably confirmed by the first part of the video clip showing the *Hannity* segment in question. An analysis of the entire segment, which can be found on the Media Matters website, reveals that the host does

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<sup>214</sup> Cf. “CNN Debunks False Obama ‘Madrasa’ Smear.” BarackObamadotcom. *YouTube*. YouTube, 23 Jan. 2008. Web. 30 Jan. 2011; “Daily Show: Obamania.” Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 29 Jan. 2007. Web. 30 Jan. 2011.

<sup>215</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D. “Feeding Frenzy for a Big Story, Even if It’s False.” *New York Times*. New York Times, 27 Jan. 2007. Web. 30 Jan. 2011.

<sup>216</sup> Cf. “Growing Number of Americans Say Obama Is a Muslim.” *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 18 Aug. 2010. Web. 30 Jan. 2011.

<sup>217</sup> Cf. “Fact-Checking Fox News’ Claim that They Never Fabricate, Smear or Lie.” *politicalarticles*. *YouTube*. YouTube, 2 Dec. 2010. Web. 30 Jan. 2011.

<sup>218</sup> Cf. “Sean Hannity, Andy Martin and the Excuses.”

<sup>219</sup> “Sean Hannity, Andy Martin and the Excuses.” 03:32, 04:12.

not once challenge his guest's accusations but, quite on the contrary, fully supports his message.<sup>220</sup> Moreover, throughout the show, a small banner in the bottom right corner of the screen reads "History of Radicalism – Obama and Friends." *The New York Times* spells out Fox News' role in the impact of Martin's calumnies:

The most persistent falsehood about Senator Barack Obama's background first hit in 2004 just two weeks after the Democratic convention speech that helped set him on the path to his presidential candidacy: "Obama is a Muslim who has concealed his religion."

[The press release containing the statement] spread steadily as others elaborated on its claims over the years in e-mail messages, Web sites and books. It continues to drive other false rumors about Mr. Obama's background.

Just last Friday, a woman told Senator John McCain at a town-hall-style meeting, "I have read about him," and "he's an Arab." [. . .]

[A]n appearance in a documentary-style program on the Fox News Channel watched by three million people last week thrust the man [who is widely credited with starting the cyberwhisper campaign], Andy Martin, and his past into the foreground. The program allowed Mr. Martin to assert falsely and without challenge that Mr. Obama had once trained to overthrow the government.<sup>221</sup>

As it is not within the scope of this paper to systematically compare Fox's reporting to that of other news organizations, suffice it to say that CNN's reporting of the rumors looked quite different: The network conducted its own research on the subject and unmistakably exposed the rumors as false accusations.<sup>222</sup>

Repetition and familiarity also play an important role in the formation and confirmation of stereotypes. Fox News supports the emergence and persistence of certain clichés by consistently providing examples that fit in the categories predetermined by its ideology: the good, Christian, pro-American, conservative patriots and their ill-minded counterparts. The typical narratives and recurring topics, promoted by the memoranda and the established thematic foci of some of the show's segments – for example "Culture Warriors" or "Patriots and Pinheads" – ensure that the viewers encounter a steady pattern.

The receivers thus literally "learn" that Democrats are bad people, being confronted exclusively with negative representatives of that category: In Fox News' reality, there are no good Democrats. By the same token, there should not be many bad Republicans; and indeed,

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<sup>220</sup> Cf. "On Fox News, Hannity Hosted Andy Martin – Who Has Called Judge a 'Crooked, Slimy Jew,' Accused African Americans in Public Office of Corruption – in Obama Smear-Fest." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 7 Oct. 2008. Web. 30 Jan. 2011.

<sup>221</sup> Rutenberg, Jim. "The Man behind the Whispers about Obama." *New York Times*. New York Times, 12 Oct. 2008. Web. 30 Jan. 2011.

<sup>222</sup> Cf. "CNN on Andy Martin's Discovery of Obama's Father Being Communist Frank Davis." *obamicom*. *YouTube*. YouTube, 27 Oct. 2008. Web. 30 Jan. 2011; "CNN Debunks False Obama 'Madrassa' Smear."

trying to feed into these stereotypes and to avoid relativizing information, Fox often simply changes the label on people who do not fit into their pattern: Republicans who get bad publicity or are otherwise criticized for their behavior are simply categorized as Democrats. The clip “Fox News Calls Elie Wiesel ‘Holocaust Winner,’ Conveniently Mislabeled Republicans,” taken from *The David Pakman Show*, provides various examples of Fox News’ mislabeling Republicans who appear in negative stories and also classifying some Democrats who are portrayed favorably as Republicans.<sup>223</sup> Pakman comments: “By definition, on Fox, anything a Democrat does is wrong, right? So anything that is wrong must have been done by a Democrat [. . .].”<sup>224</sup> This is the exact kind of reasoning provoked by the dichotomic ideology Fox seeks to advance.

But it goes even further: Political affiliation is, of course, not the only criterion for categorizing a person; gender, age, ethnicity, religion, social class, and occupation are other important reference points, to name just a few. And while, on the one hand, Fox News promotes and shapes certain existing stereotypes about ethnic, religious, social and political groups, it also tries to mingle some of these aspects together to create sort of a “super-stereotype” comprising various categories. This further reduction of differentiation favors the black and white thinking prevalent in Fox’s worldview. To promote the formation of such stereotypes, Fox simply shows case after case fitting into the pattern until the concept seems familiar.

Often, seemingly insignificant details can help to shape such a cliché. For example, Fox and the other right-wing media extensively commented on the President’s ordering a burger with spicy mustard or “Dijon mustard” for the sole purpose of characterizing Democrats and Obama in particular as Francophile elitists, completely out of touch with the people.<sup>225</sup>

But most of the time, the accusations are a lot less subtle and harmless: In the *O’Reilly Factor*’s segment “Culture Warriors,” the hosts cite Amsterdam as the embodiment of liberal lifestyle, claiming that the model disastrously failed in the Dutch capital. In a description faintly reminiscent of Frank Miller’s *Sin City*, they paint a grossly distorted picture of the city, which is characterized as the international metropolis of vice, whose degenerate society, dominated by organized crime, gang warfare, drug addiction and prostitution, is succumbing to the anarchical forces of chaos. Co-anchor Monica Crowley concludes: “Well, in the Netherlands, their experimentation with social tolerance, free love, free drugs clearly has backfired.

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<sup>223</sup> Cf. “Fox News Calls Elie Wiesel ‘Holocaust Winner,’ Conveniently Mislabeled Republicans.” MidweekPolitics *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 Dec. 2010. Web. 8 Jan. 2011. 01:48-04:48.

<sup>224</sup> “Fox News Calls Elie Wiesel ‘Holocaust Winner,’ Conveniently Mislabeled Republicans.” 04:34.

<sup>225</sup> Cf. “Dijon Derangement Syndrome: Conservative Media Attack Obama for Burger Order.” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 7 May 2009. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.

Amsterdam is a zest pool of corruption, crime, everything's out of control. It's anarchy."<sup>226</sup> At the same time, these conditions are presented as the ultimate goal of American liberals:

It's no accident that far-left Americans, secular progressives, are pushing the envelope now that a liberal has been elected President. In the months since Barack Obama won the election, we have seen violence over gay marriage, an atheist attack on Christmas, various attempts to legalize marijuana as well as prostitution. [. . .] The far-leftists [who] embolden the George Soros crew that wants all of this "liberation," uhm, is gonna push the same thing here, but over in Holland it's a disaster.<sup>227</sup>

The anchors go on to link this reprobate situation to the rise of socialism and blasphemy in the United States.<sup>228</sup>

This is not an isolated argument: Media Matters writes that

[i]n the latest instance of decrying the purported "war" on Christmas, Fox News host Bill O'Reilly claimed that "it's all part of the secular progressive agenda ... to get Christianity and spirituality and Judaism out of the public square." He then added: "[B]ecause if you look at what happened in Western Europe and Canada, if you can get religion out, then you can pass secular progressive programs, like legalization of narcotics, euthanasia, abortion at will, gay marriage, because the objection to those things is religious-based, usually." O'Reilly's comments came during a November 18 discussion on his television show, *The O'Reilly Factor*, with guest and fellow Fox News host John Gibson [. . .]. Gibson is the author of *The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday Is Worse Than You Thought* (Sentinel, October 2005).<sup>229</sup>

Similar associations are constantly made on Fox News.<sup>230</sup> Thus Democrats are linked to secularism, atheism, elitism, radicalism, socialism, communism and amorality to counter Fox's positive auto-stereotype in all aspects. Glenn Beck, whom the French newspaper *Le Figaro* calls "[u]ne sorte de pistolet médiatique qui tire à répétition et sans s'embarrasser de nuances,"<sup>231</sup> carries this strategy to absurd extremes: Spurning even the last remaining nuances,

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<sup>226</sup> "Bill O'Reilly Loves Amsterdam." Matanza1977. *YouTube*. YouTube, 1 Jan. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2011. 02:09.

<sup>227</sup> "Bill O'Reilly Loves Amsterdam." 00:03.

<sup>228</sup> Cf. "Bill O'Reilly Loves Amsterdam." 02:30-03:31.

<sup>229</sup> "O'Reilly: 'War' on Christmas Part of 'Secular Progressive Agenda' That Includes 'Legalization of Narcotics, Euthanasia, Abortion at Will, Gay Marriage.'" *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 21 Nov. 2005. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. e.g. "On Fox News, Hannity Hosted Andy Martin – Who Has Called Judge a 'Crooked, Slimy Jew,' Accused African Americans in Public Office of Corruption – in Obama Smear-Fest;" "Progressivism Is Cancer! Glenn Beck Irradiates It's [sic] Nazis and Commies From 1939 To Marxist Obama!"; "Glenn Beck a Closer Look at the Progressive Movement." asderathos. *YouTube*. YouTube, 22 Jan. 2009. Web. 8 Jan 2011; or any other *Glenn Beck* show.

<sup>231</sup> Mandeville, Laure. "Fox News, la chaîne qui mène la charge contre Obama." *lefigaro.fr*. Le Figaro, 10 Nov. 2009. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.

he literally turns the competition between the two prevailing ideologies in the USA into the epic battle of good versus evil by overtly equating Obama with Satan.<sup>232</sup>

### 3.5 Emotion as a Heuristic Cue: “How Do I Feel About It?”

This chapter takes a look at Fox News’ use of mood and emotion as a heuristic cues. It examines the contiguity of certain attitude objects with unrelated emotional stimuli, the role of language and association in eliciting emotional reactions, and Fox’s use of fear appeals.

Obviously, those who watch Fox News prefer the experience they have watching Fox than the one they have watching other news channels. Why? Listening to Fox News is quite simply a different emotional experience from listening to traditional newscasts on other networks. Fox News provides stimulation. The sound and visual effects of Fox News are almost carnival-like, with multiple crawlers and a seemingly constant state of news crises created by “Fox News Alerts.” The Fox News visual landscape conjures images of a Salvador Dali painting of a Fellini movie ensconced in American-style pop culture.<sup>233</sup>

As this quotation from David Welch’s *State of Confusion* aptly asserts, Fox News does not embed its messages in an emotionally neutral environment favoring systematic processing. On the contrary, it seems to be at pains to create an emotionally charged atmosphere which it can exploit to its advantage. On television, the main tools in manipulating the viewers’ emotional states independently of the message content are imagery and sound effects. Fox thus couples stories of its enemies with audio-visual material eliciting negative emotions and uses positive emotional cues for issues they want people to feel good about. Moreover, the anchor’s moods can serve as a heuristic cue in evaluating a message.

When Sean Hannity did a special on President Obama’s first 100 days in office, the intro to that show consisted of a compilation of video clips from that period, showing somber pictures often with a black blur closing in on the camera focus from the sides, particularly when the President is seen. These dark images are purely negative, linking Obama to the Muslim world, anti-Christian and un-American sentiments and socialism. The entire three-minute introduction is accompanied by music from Orff’s *Carmina Burana*: The famous “O Fortuna,” sets a dramatic, unsettling, cataclysmic mood with its eerie crescendos culminating in a call for

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<sup>232</sup> Cf. “Glenn Beck Says Obama aspires to be Lucifer (Satan).” lordhighexecutioner. *YouTube*. YouTube, 8 Aug. 2010. Web. 31 Jan. 2011. 01:00-02:25; “Beck Suggests ‘People Who Are Worshipping Satan Are in Office,’ Then Clarifies ‘It’s Just a Guy [Obama] Likes a Lot.’” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 10 May 2010. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.

<sup>233</sup> Welch 150-51.

collective lamentation over the cruel whims of fate “mecum omnes plangite.”<sup>234</sup> It is almost impossible to watch this clip and not be left with a fearful, oppressive feeling. Additionally, the host lets the audience know right at the beginning of the actual show that this is making him “sick to [his] stomach.”<sup>235</sup> These are very strong, salient heuristic cues, and if the receivers rely on their current mood in judging the President’s debut, they will register it as the beginning of a disastrous time for America.

When Fox wanted to gather and uphold public support for the war in Iraq during the Bush era, they used positive stimuli in conjunction with the war. Steadily referring to it as “Operation Iraqi Freedom” and keeping quiet about problems, setbacks and casualties while appealing to American patriotism and national pride is only a part of Fox’s effort to hide the ugly side of the war. The intro used for stories about Iraq brings to mind clichéd teasers for heroic war movies, and the reporting itself fully lives up to this expectation.<sup>236</sup> Greenwald’s documentary film *Outfoxed* features a segment entitled “Happy Iraq,” which shows how Fox News uses positive images from the invaded country in order to make it seem as if the operation was a huge success with the entire Iraqi population indulging in the joys of their newfound liberated lifestyle, pursuing pastime amusements such as athletics, horse-racing or spinning their cars, while their children are being educated for a better future under the safe umbrella of a booming economy.<sup>237</sup> Comedian Jon Stewart pokes fun at the music Fox uses to accompany “some sights and sounds from the past week of Operation Iraqi Freedom,” observing that it “sounded like our troops have liberated a Yanni concert.”<sup>238</sup> So unfitting was the exhilarating, soft music which the greenish night-vision images and sounds of bomb explosions and gunfire from the Battle of Baghdad were set to that the host felt he had to clarify this was the original, unaltered clip from Fox News. Again, the music is used to make the viewers feel good about the war.

The patriotic graphics on Fox’s animations and shows were already mentioned earlier. The Stars and Stripes, the faces of the Founding Fathers, the colors of the American flag,

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<sup>234</sup> Cf. “Hannity on Obama’s First 100 Days.” HotAirPundit. *YouTube*. YouTube, 29 Apr. 2009. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.

<sup>235</sup> “Lively Hannity Panel on Barack Obama’s First 100 Days!” johnnydollar01. *YouTube*. YouTube, 29 Apr. 2009. Web. 8 Jan. 2011. 00:10.

<sup>236</sup> Cf. “Operation Iraqi Freedom Theme – Fox News.” wecemetoparty. *YouTube*. YouTube, 8 Oct. 2007. Web. 1 Feb. 2011; e.g. “The War in Iraq Euphrates Bridge Fight.” deadeyes333. *YouTube*. YouTube, 25 Mar. 2009. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.

<sup>237</sup> Cf. *Outfoxed* 46:46-50:33.

<sup>238</sup> Cf. “Daily Show: Crazy Like Fox.” Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 10 Apr. 2003. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.

important U.S. landmarks and other symbols of America can also serve as visual cues for positive emotion, which is then conferred to the network itself.

Glenn Beck's show outdoes all of the rest of Fox News when it comes to the use of such extrinsic visual cues: the books, drawings and photographs, and other demonstration material, but above all the video clips and animated graphics are used to emotionally guide the audience through the show. For example, in a segment about Obama's ideological roots, Beck ties the President to the devil, and while he never pronounces the word, the letters *Lucifer* appear on the screen behind his head in a sea of red flames.<sup>239</sup> Last but not least, Beck's own feeling states, which he displays with self-indulgent ostentation, are meant to serve as a guideline for the judgment of his messages. Beck gratifies the audience with a disputable histrionic talent, nonetheless allowing him to communicate the whole bandwidth of human emotion: anger, fear, dismay, incredulity, fascination, consternation, joy over victory. On various occasions, Glenn Beck even feigns crying on air, for example when introducing his 9/12 Project:

*[emphatically]* The real power to change America's course still resides with you. You are the secret, you're the answer. *[starts weeping]* I'm sorry. *[voice breaking up]* I just love my country. And I fear for it. *[pretending to wipe away tears]* And it seems *[emotion turning into anger]* like the voices of our leaders had special interests and the media, they're surrounding us. It is, it sounds intimidating *[changing to inspirational, encouraging tone of voice]* but you know what? Pull away the curtain. You'll realize that there ain't anybody there.<sup>240</sup>

Another way of making the receivers more susceptible to one's message is, of course, by telling them what they like to hear by making them feel good about themselves. Again, Glenn Beck serves as an excellent example, but this can be found on all of Fox's programs. Beck tells his audience: "[The left] want[s] you to believe – somehow or another, they wanna convince you – that you are a racist. That your neighbors are racist. That the majority of Americans are bad or evil or somehow or another angry and disgruntled. I told you the opposite: You're the key, [ . . . ] you are the answer."<sup>241</sup> He thus creates the impression of animosity and disregard coming from the left while at the same time giving his viewers the feeling that they are something special. Fox also makes Americans feel special about their country, "the greatest, best country God has ever given man on the face of the earth."<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Cf. "Glenn Beck Says Obama aspires to be Lucifer (Satan)." 02:10.

<sup>240</sup> Cf. "Glenn Beck Weeps on Air." UnslaveMee. *YouTube*. YouTube, 13 Mar. 2009. Web. 4 Feb. 2011. 02:45, and also earlier in the show 00:55.

<sup>241</sup> "Beck: The Left Want[s] You to Believe... That the Majority of Americans Are Bad or Evil." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 31 Aug. 2010. Web. 4 Feb. 2011. 00:37.

<sup>242</sup> "Sean Hannity Loves America." Host Steven Colbert. *Colbert Nation*. Comedy Partners, 19 June 2008. Web. 9 Feb. 2011.

Language plays an important role in eliciting emotions: Labeling or framing a subject in a certain way determines the connotations the receivers will associate with it. Fox News uses negative language to cast an unfavorable light on issues it stands opposed to.

Discussing an Illinois state law on abortion, for instance, Ann Coulter does not just use the anti-abortionists' description of "killing babies"; speaking about the Born Alive Infants Protection Acts on *Hannity & Colmes*, she uses the expressions "infanticide" and "chasing babies through the delivery room," falsely claiming that it is Obama's goal to murder all fetuses surviving an abortion: "[O]f course it's infanticide. Yeah, he's for a woman's right to choose through the fourth trimester. [. . .] They tried to kill it, but somehow the baby made it out alive [. . .]. And Barack Obama wants the doctors, you know, chasing it through the delivery room to make sure it gets killed."<sup>243</sup> Her colleague Bill O'Reilly takes a similar stance, announcing "killing babies" as the subject of his Talking Points Memo about a doctor known for performing late-term abortions. He describes the activity of the man, whom he refers to as "Tiller the Baby Killer," as "executing fetuses" and "slaughter."<sup>244</sup> Speaking of "babies," which carries a much more affective connotation than the correct term "fetuses," and of "executions," carrying a notion of punishment, conflicting with the innocence of unborn life, supports the perspective of something outrageously unfair and cruel happening to a defenseless human being and thus serves as a persuasive cue for O'Reilly's conclusion of Tiller having "blood on his hands."<sup>245</sup>

The health care debate during the Obama administration was strongly affected by misleading language. The political right and Fox News tied the concept to socialism and disrespect for the value of human life. The 27 October 2009 memo mentioned earlier reminded the Fox staff to refrain from using the term "public option" in favor of "government-run health insurance" or "government option" and contributed decisively to spreading the idea of a socialist government takeover of health care. At the same time, Fox advanced rumors about so-called "death panels" deciding about the fate of elderly or disabled people:

In a Facebook posting, former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin claimed that under Democratic health care reform, "Obama's 'death panel'" would "decide" whether her parents or her son Trig, who has Down syndrome, were "worthy of health care." Since then, several Fox News anchors, hosts, and contributors have adopted Palin's "death panel" term or advanced or expressed support for her assertion – which is based on the widely debunked claim that the House health care reform

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<sup>243</sup> "Fox News Falsely Accuses Obama of Wanting Babies Murdered." cheldemedo. *YouTube*. YouTube, 19 Aug. 2008. Web. 5 Feb. 2011. 01:09.

<sup>244</sup> Cf. "Did Bill O'Reilly Condemn a Democrat to Hell?" eyesonfox. *YouTube*. YouTube, 17 June 2007. Web. 5. Feb. 2011. 01:05, 02:15.

<sup>245</sup> "Did Bill O'Reilly Condemn a Democrat to Hell?" 03:57.

bill would require end-of-life counseling – while others have termed it “crazy” or “over the top.”<sup>246</sup>

Furthermore, when Republicans used the adjective *job-killing* as a qualifier for the health care bill in their Repealing the Job-Killing Health Care Law Act, Democrat Robert Weiner came on *Fox & Friends* to discuss why his party finds fault with this description. When Weiner tried to explain how the health care bill creates jobs, not destroys them, *Fox & Friends* host Steve Doocy rudely interrupted him, insisting that they speak not about the content but only the name of the bill: “Mr. Weiner, Mr. Weiner, we’re not talking about the bill, we’re talking about the name of the bill!”<sup>247</sup> It is, of course, absurd to talk about whether or not the description “job-killing” is justified without examining whether or not the bill is actually job-killing. This clearly shows that Fox does not even want people to know what is in the health care bill as long as they can make it sound bad; this kind of presentation positively forces viewers to process heuristically. Fittingly, the banner under the guests’ images reads “Power of Words.”

There are many examples of this kind of inaccurate or emotionally charged labeling on Fox News: In the expressions “Obamacare” and “Obamanomics,” the President’s name is used as a pejorative prefix, Obama’s visit to Europe in April 2009 was called an “apology tour,”<sup>248</sup> the term “Climategate”<sup>249</sup> is meant to invalidate data indicating global warming, a possible truth commission meant to investigate circumstances surrounding the war in Iraq during the Bush years was declared a “witch hunt,”<sup>250</sup> and even a thing as simple as one of the President’s gestures received attention as a potential “terrorist fist jab.”<sup>251</sup>

But Fox works with associations well beyond the connotational linguistic aspect: The network tries to establish essential or causal connections between unrelated issues, often seeking to tie disliked concepts to negative stimuli. Fox News contributor Stuart Varney, for example, ties secularism to paganism and economic decline: After identifying Europeans as “a pack of pagan losers,” Varney suggested that the European economy was hurt by this

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<sup>246</sup> “Fox News Personalities Advance Palin’s ‘Death Panel’ Claim.” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 10 Aug. 2009. Web. 5 Feb. 2011.

<sup>247</sup> “The Daily Show 2011-01-17 Healthcare Repeal Name Discussion.” Fearendon. *YouTube*. YouTube, 18 Jan. 2011. Web. 6 Feb. 2011. 00:30.

<sup>248</sup> Cf. “Fox Hosts Revive Fox Manufactured Obama ‘Apology Tour.’” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 3 June 2009. Web. 6 Feb. 2011.

<sup>249</sup> Cf. “‘Climategate’ Exposed: Conservative Media Distort Stolen Emails in Latest Attack on Global Warming Consensus.” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 1 Dec. 2009. Web. 6 Feb. 2011.

<sup>250</sup> Cf. “Bill O’Reilly Calls Truth Commission a Witch Hunt.” beltwayjunky. *YouTube*. YouTube, 7 Mar. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

<sup>251</sup> Cf. “Fox Anchor Calls Obama Fist Pound a ‘Terrorist Fist Jab.’” *Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 17 June 2008. Web. 6 Feb. 2011.

secularism.<sup>252</sup> Apart from the fact that he seems to be unfamiliar with the meaning of the terms *pagan* and *secular*, the entire assertion is simply not true. He said this at a time when the European economy was doing much better than that of the US; moreover, the economic system in our days is hardly still influenced by religious considerations. Nevertheless, this argument was extensively discussed a little later on Fox Business – with Fox’s Father Jonathan Morris as an “expert” contributor confirming that economy and society cannot prosper without the Christian belief system. Fox contributor Ann Coulter links environmentalism to the desire for the extinction of human life: “The environmentalist nuts, I mean, this is their end goal – not just the ones who pull out their guns – it is the elimination of humans [ . . .].”<sup>253</sup> And over and over again, political opponents are associated with Naziism.<sup>254</sup>

While these relationships are most often established verbally, Glenn Beck materializes them by visually connecting individuals, groups and concepts on his blackboard. In a folly of reverse logic, he then uses his own drawings and enunciations as a proof of his accusations as if reality and the outside world somehow bowed before the works of his mind: “See? It’s all connected!” and “Do you really believe that I could, or anybody here at Fox News could, just make things up and remain on the air?”<sup>255</sup> Media Matters collected Beck’s conspiracy charts, screenshots of which it put on its website, and commented:

[In 2009], Glenn Beck rolled out the first in a long series of increasingly bizarre blackboard scrawls and graphics intended to link President Obama and the progressive movement to extremists and dictators and otherwise illustrate Beck’s conspiratorial worldview. Throughout the year, he has used chalk, markers, and Fox News’ graphics department to bring his theories to life.<sup>256</sup>

Other Fox News shows, while with slightly more subtlety, make similar suggestions.

One more technique which deserves mentioning in this regard is Fox’s use of text banners featuring loaded questions which are used to establish negative associations. These questions contain controversial assumptions or presupposed facts, for example: “Have the Democrats forgotten the lessons of 9/11?” “Why is Russia doing business with nations that

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<sup>252</sup> “Fox Business: European Economy Hurt by Secularism?” AtheistMediaBlog. *YouTube*. YouTube, 14 Apr. 2010. Web. 28 Oct. 2010. 00:00.

<sup>253</sup> “Coulter: Killing Humans Is ‘Direct Extension’ of the Views of ‘Environmentalists.’” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 2 Sept. 2010. Web. 8 Feb. 2011. 00:35.

<sup>254</sup> Cf. “Fox’s Nazi Fetish: Beck, O’Reilly, Others Repeatedly Invoke Nazi Imagery.” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 18 Oct. 2010. Web. 8 Feb. 2011; “Fox’s ‘Nazi’ Rhetoric Also Comes Straight from the Top.” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 18 Nov. 2010. Web. 8 Feb. 2011.

<sup>255</sup> “Beck Begs Fox To Fire Him: ‘Do You Really Believe That I Could . . . Just Make Things Up and Remain on the Air?’” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 29 Nov. 2010. Web. 7 Feb. 2011. 01:06.

<sup>256</sup> “Beck’s Charts by the Numbers.” *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 19 Feb. 2010. Web. 7 Feb. 2011.

hate America?” “Why is America more concerned about economy then [sic] terror?” “Is the liberal media helping to fuel terror?” “The #1 President on Mideast matters: George W. Bush?”<sup>257</sup> In each of these examples, Fox’s enemies are linked to negative ideas such as 9/11, anti-Americanism, trivializing or even fueling terror; Fox’s friend George W. Bush is decorated with a winning title.

Emotion occupies a particular position among heuristic cues as it influences the processing mode in two ways: Not only does it serve as a persuasive cue but it also affects the ability to process information systematically. We have already seen how Fox appeals to its viewers’ pride and self-satisfaction by making them feel special and elect and by promoting American superiority and exceptionalism. Bryant Welch explains the emotional consequences of the artificial social divide encouraged by Fox News’ dichotomic ideology and the purported superiority of its followers:

In addition to the powerful allure of its O’Reillys and Hannitys, Fox News gives its viewers the visceral experience one gets when experiencing righteous indignation – the “harrumph” response. This component to indignation for many is a pick-me-up for flagging self-esteem and an outlet for envious rage masked as contempt and disdain. I am superior to them.

Above all, Fox gives the viewer a huge emotional catharsis through rage. It is difficult to watch Fox News without feeling tremendous animosity about what one hears. From a psychological perspective, this is an emotional feast of epic proportions in comparison to any of the other news networks.<sup>258</sup>

Next to positive emotion and rage, fear is especially effective in impeding systematic message evaluation. The attitude object is linked to negative emotion and the potential danger raises the receivers’ level of anxiety, reducing their processing capacities. *Outfoxed* mentions that “[m]any of the themes that are promoted on the Fox News Channel have to do with generating fear, whether that’s fear of immigration, a fear of sexual difference, a fear of racial difference. [. . .] They really love this sense of fear and danger, even when it’s not there.”<sup>259</sup> Fox’s use of the emotion corresponds to the typical design of fear appeals, which first put people in a state of alarm and then propose a solution on how to avert the danger. Greenwald’s documentary shows how this pattern was used to justify and gather support for the Iraq War:

The motivator is fear, and then the pay-off is, you know, “we’re gonna go out and kill the bad guys.” [. . .] Terrorism has become the all-purpose fear weapon because now everything is converted into terrorism. And, of course, if you have a constant sense of unease then you’re

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<sup>257</sup> “Daily Show: The Question Mark.” Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 13 Sept. 2006. Web. 8 Feb. 2011. 01:14.

<sup>258</sup> Welch 153.

<sup>259</sup> *Outfoxed* 00:42:48.

gonna look to the government to protect you. [ . . . ] There are these enemies out there and it's an ill-defined enemy, but as long as we're fighting them and killing them and [Bush] [i]s looking presidential, then nothing else, again, is discussed. What was interesting is in the climate of the Bush Administration that much of that fear, the emotion was purposefully misdirected by the right-wing into the war in Iraq.<sup>260</sup>

Since the end of the Bush administration and with a Democratic President moving into the White House, some of this fear of outside forces such as terrorism has been replaced by an alleged danger from within. On the one hand, there are existential fears in these times of crisis, where people have to dread unemployment or financial ruin. Although these fears can be channeled in the same way as anxiety about less realistic dangers, they are rational. On the other hand, Fox generates irrational fear about made-up, unrealistic or supernatural threats.

Conspiracy theories about Obama and the progressive movement, for example, predict a "New World Order," brought about by a fascist revolution which will turn America into a communist state doing away with freedom, individualism and religion.<sup>261</sup> Beck's "undeniable parallels"<sup>262</sup> between present-day America and the rise of the dictatorships under Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini are meant to inspire fear and distrust of progressivism and President Obama's Democratic government. In his documentary-style special "Destined to Repeat (?)" and in many of his *Glenn Beck* episodes, Glenn Beck supports his fear appeals with negative imagery, waving about the hammer and sickle and swastika symbols and playing footage of Hitler's speeches and the Nuremberg Rallies while making comparisons to American progressives.<sup>263</sup> On another occasion, he likens himself and Fox News to the victims of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust in order to villainize those criticizing him and inspire fear of government persecution.<sup>264</sup> When an ad boycott was started and many corporate sponsors decided to stop advertising on his program not wanting to be associated with his racial demagoguery, he simply blamed it on the government, exclaiming:

Has there ever been a case in American history [ . . . ] where an American President and Administration tried to destroy the livelihood of a private citizen with whom they disagree? [ . . . ] Where's the media? Do the rest of you in this business think it's gonna stop with me? Really? Once they get me, what happens to you? Is there absolutely no chance whatsoever that you

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<sup>260</sup> *Outfoxed* 00:43:34.

<sup>261</sup> Cf. "Glenn Beck No Stranger to Conspiracy Theories or Incendiary Rhetoric." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 4 Sept. 2009. Web. 9 Feb. 2011; "Beck Warns of Anti-Capitalist, 'New World Order' Aspirations of Leaders Including Obama, Soros, and George H.W. Bush." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 9 Feb. 2011. Web. 9 Feb. 2011.

<sup>262</sup> "Destine to Repeat History 1/2." *theredsters*. *YouTube*. YouTube, 14 Apr. 2009. Web. 8 Jan. 2011. 00:10.

<sup>263</sup> Cf. e.g. "Destine to Repeat History 1/2." 02:10, 02:37, 03:55, 05:50.

<sup>264</sup> Cf. "Beck Continues Long History of Invoking Nazis by Comparing Fox to the Jews during the Holocaust." *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 13 Oct. 2009. Web. 10 Feb. 2011.

might be a target at some point in the future? What's that poem? First they came for the Jews and I stayed silent... Next I'll show you the very latest attacks on me.<sup>265</sup>

Beck uses the same Niemöller poem to compare the stimulus bill to the Holocaust:

Does anybody remember that poem? You know, first they came for the Jews and I didn't stand up because I wasn't a Jew... Do you know that, from Germany? And then at the end... I think this is the problem: First they came for the banks, and I wasn't a banker, I didn't really care. I didn't stand up and say anything. Then they came for the AIG executives, then they came for the car companies, and I didn't say anything – until it gets down to you. Most people don't see: They are coming for you at some point. You're on the list. Everybody's on the list.<sup>266</sup>

Comedian Lewis Black mocks the absurdity of this statement comparing the extermination of millions of Jews to financial aid: “Glenn, get a grip. There's a difference: They came for the Jews to kill them. They came for the banks and the car companies to give them 700 billion dollars. If that's coming for them, then come for me. Hell, for 700 billion, I'll go to you.”<sup>267</sup>

Beck's is not the only show on Fox News using fear tactics to ignite distrust of the government. We have already seen how other opinion shows such as *Hannity* contribute to fear-inducing conspiracy theories, but Fox's “straight news” programs are no exception. On *Fox & Friends*, for example, the hosts speak with right-wing radio show host Rush Limbaugh to discuss his conflict with President Obama, all the while a large text banner is asking: “Hush hush Rush? Dems try to silence him... Are you next?”<sup>268</sup>

On a smaller scale, fear is used to oppose certain legislation, such as the health care bill: The rumors about a “socialist takeover,” “death panels,” and “jail time” announce the horrible consequences of the reform. On an even larger scale, Fox does not shy back at invoking impending punishment from above. Glenn Beck gives weight to his calls for action by predicting “eternal ramifications” for those who do not follow them:

[. . .] I believe that there are gonna be eternal ramifications [. . .] and if you see it and you don't warn others – you're in trouble. [. . .] [R]ights don't come from Congress, they come from God. If we lose those rights, do you believe we'll be held – each individual – if you didn't stand to protect the rights for future generations and protect liberty, do you believe you'll be held eternally responsible?<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> “Glenn Beck ‘First They Came for the Jews...’ (Leave Glenn Beck Alone!!!).” MoxNewsDotCom. *YouTube*. YouTube, 7 Apr. 2010. Web. 10 Feb. 2011. 05:27.

<sup>266</sup> “Glenn Beck: The ‘Civilest of Wars’ 10th Amendment P1 of 4.” APFN. *YouTube*. YouTube, 15 May 2009. Web. 10 Feb. 2011. 09:15.

<sup>267</sup> “Black on Beck.” GlenBeckUnAmerican. *YouTube*. YouTube, 27 July 2010. Web. 10 Feb. 2011. 04:10.

<sup>268</sup> “Rush on Fox & Friends: Obama vs. Rush Limbaugh.” LandOfDaFree. *YouTube*. YouTube, 29 Jan. 2009. Web. 10 Feb. 2011. 00:49.

<sup>269</sup> “Beck Asks Palin about God's Role in Her Life, Country.” 03:47.

Hannity's "atheist" guest, commenting on the decline of Christianity, sees the United States "going to Armageddon."<sup>270</sup> And *America's Newsroom* wonders if Air America might be provoking divine rage by engaging in a "War on God."<sup>271</sup> O'Reilly remarked on the activities of an abortion doctor and the Senator "protecting" him that he "wouldn't wanna be these people if there is a Judgment Day."<sup>272</sup> All of those fear appeals and appeals to emotion are strong heuristic cues for Fox's position. At the same time, they reduce the receivers' ability to process systematically.

We have seen in these chapters that Fox News strategically uses persuasive heuristic cues to support the acceptance of its message. In many cases, those cues were specifically used to bring across a biased message or false information which would not withstand the scrutiny of analytic thought and systematic processing.

It is worth mentioning at this point that certain aspects I considered here might also apply to regular news organizations. It is not like the other networks select, for example, extremely unattractive people to present the news or never joke on-air. But first of all, this only concerns a few aspects such as attractiveness or humor, and it is usually confined to a very limited extent. More importantly, if we were to find such cues in unbiased reporting and it were to have an effect on viewers, the communication would only be "persuasive," if you want, of the truth. On Fox News, on the other hand, we have seen that those cues are abundantly used and usually in combination with a very biased message. Fox thus persuades its viewers of a reality which stands at odds with an objective truth.

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<sup>270</sup> "Fox: Behind the Liberal Media's Assault on Christianity." 04:50.

<sup>271</sup> "Fox News Asks: Is Air America Engaged in a 'War on God?'" *Media Matters for America*. Media Matters for America, 10 Oct. 2007. Web. 10 Feb. 2011.

<sup>272</sup> "Did Bill O'Reilly Condemn a Democrat to Hell?" 04:00.

## 4 FOX NEWS: BIAS OR PROPAGANDA?

In the preface I mentioned that many people accuse Fox News of fabricating propaganda for the Republicans and the Tea Party. Former Democratic National Committee chairman Howard Dean for example and the Director of the Earth Institute Jeffrey Sachs called the network a “propaganda machine,”<sup>273</sup> and other important public figures and media outlets agree.<sup>274</sup> The German newspaper *Der Spiegel* and the German national radio station Deutschlandfunk, for instance, accuse Murdoch of using his media as instruments of propaganda, citing Fox News as an example.<sup>275</sup>

In order to assess whether those allegations are justified, this chapter takes a look at the relationship between bias, persuasion and propaganda: How can the concepts of media bias and propaganda be defined today, where do they overlap and how can they be delimited? What role does persuasion play in each case? After addressing these questions, I will examine where Fox News can be situated.

### 4.1 Definitions

The term *bias* is used in different fields and, accordingly, its meaning varies depending on whether we talk about media or press bias, political bias, cognitive bias, or bias in statistics. The following paragraphs refer to the term *media bias*. Media bias is commonly measured by way of indicators such as information selection and prioritization, news framing or the language and images used.<sup>276</sup>

In the beginning of the first chapter, I gave a working definition of media bias, describing it as a lack of fairness or accuracy favoring a certain political point of view which can be detected by a deviation from journalistic standards meant to ensure objectivity. Much like the *Encyclopedia of Media and Politics*, whose definition I used, most authors depart from

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<sup>273</sup> Cf. “Fox News Channel Controversies.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Feb. 2011. Web. 20 Feb. 2011; “Sachs Defends Pachauri against Murdoch Propaganda.” *OneWorld.net*. One World UK, 5 Feb. 2011. Web. 20 Feb. 2011.

<sup>274</sup> Cf. “Fox News ‘Propaganda’ Says Mogul.”

<sup>275</sup> Cf. Bölsche, Jochen. “Propaganda-Feldzug: Die PR-Maschine der Bush-Krieger.” *Spiegel Online*. Spiegel Online, 12 Mar. 2003. Web. 20 Feb. 2011; Schön, Gerti. “Fox News sendet Murdoch-Propaganda.” *Deutschlandfunk*. Deutschlandradio, 12 Jan. 2008. Web. 20 Feb. 2011.

<sup>276</sup> Cf. Schmidt, Siegfried J., and Guido Zurstiege. *Kommunikationswissenschaft: Systematik und Ziele*. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2007. Print. 154-55.

positive journalistic ethics such as objectivity, accuracy and fairness to define bias as a lack or the absence thereof. The *Encyclopedia of American Journalism* does not have a separate entry for *bias* but refers its readers to the article on *objectivity in reporting*, which mentions avoidance of bias as a core meaning of journalistic objectivity.<sup>277</sup> Other authors add the aspects of duration and consistency to this core definition, speaking of a systematic partiality towards a political actor occurring over a period of time. Schmidt and Zurstiege state: “Unausgewogenheit wird [...] definiert als die im Zeitverlauf beobachtbare systematische Andersbehandlung eines Kandidaten, einer Partei oder einer politischen Position in der Berichterstattung der Medien.”<sup>278</sup> John Hartley offers a broader definition, describing bias as “[a] common sense term for the presumed distortions in media representations that result from (i) deliberate prejudice against or (ii) unwitting neglect of an aspect of a story or a party to a dispute.”<sup>279</sup>

No matter which definition we look at, there is one central idea one cannot avoid when trying to define media bias: The idea of journalistic objectivity and of objectivity in general, which is a highly problematic concept. If we understand by *objectivity* the representation of reality *as it is*, it is an unattainable goal.<sup>280</sup> We can only perceive reality through the prism of our senses and the filter of our mental structures. Thus every version of reality we render, every representation of it, is, by definition, subjective – *biased*. Hartley therefore criticizes the notion of bias altogether:

[I]t is not in fact a very useful metaphor for the way media representations work. It assumes that these representations simply ‘reflect’ a pre-given, ‘real’ (‘natural’) world; and it assumes that this world is endowed with an essential truth that can be rendered without bias. Neither of these assumptions stands up to close inspection. Events are very different from representations of events, so these cannot simply ‘reflect’ events; and the idea that there is just one truth inherent in an event or a representation is usually a sure sign of special pleading – where one’s own point of view is imputed to the event itself.<sup>281</sup>

There is, however, a difference between trying to produce what one *thinks* is an objective and accurate representation of reality – although it is probable that we are unintentionally influenced by our own point of view – and knowingly and willfully rendering one’s own subjective version or interpretation of an event. For our purpose it would thus be sufficient to

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<sup>277</sup> Cf. Dicken-García.

<sup>278</sup> Schmidt and Zurstiege 156.

<sup>279</sup> Hartley, John. “Bias.” *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*. 2nd ed. Ed. Tim O’Sullivan et al. London: Routledge, 1994. Print. 29.

<sup>280</sup> Cf. Kunczik and Zipfel 276.

<sup>281</sup> Hartley 29.

demand that journalists strive for objectivity. *Media bias* would consequently refer to a deliberate bias. Although it is impossible to know with certainty if somebody is conscious of his or her partiality, there are certain cases in which we can confidently assume that they are: particularly when a professional journalist systematically neglects certain journalistic values or standards he was trained to abide by in order to favor one perspective.

A minimal definition might thus reduce bias to a lack of objectivity without specifying the reason for the partiality and without including the aspect of deliberation. For a narrower definition of the term, we can precise that it is a deliberate and systematic partiality which is of a political nature.

The concept of propaganda is a lot harder to grasp, mainly because the definitions vary so widely. O'Shaughnessy puts the impossibility of a universal definition into words:

It is inevitable that there will be no collective agreement about the definition of propaganda in the sense that we might have accord on the meaning of many other words. [. . .] To attempt to define propaganda is to tread lightly upon a conceptual minefield. How we define propaganda is in fact the expression of the theories we hold about propaganda. For Franklin (1998) there are no agreed, mutual uncontentious criteria which allow the separation of propaganda from information. Schumpeter (1966) said that the contemporary usage of the term 'propaganda' refers to any statement 'emanating from a source that we do not like', while Jones (Singh 1989) affected to see no difference between propaganda and the institution-bound transmission of information. What in marketing is 'selling', in school is 'teaching', in the church is 'proselytising', in politics is 'propagandising', in the military is 'indoctrinating'.<sup>282</sup>

There is thus disagreement not only concerning the nature but also the scope of the term *propaganda*. We need to find a way to distinguish the term from other forms of communication such as persuasion, information, or teaching. Furthermore, we need to limit its extension if we want to exclude related concepts like advertising, marketing or public relations.

Clearly, Schumpeter's definition, which simply makes propaganda a point of view, and Jones' definition, including all forms of institution-bound communication, are not very helpful in most contexts. To narrow down the meaning of *propaganda*, it is thus useful to consider some other definitions. Webster calls it an "[e]ffort directed systematically toward the gaining of public support for an opinion or course of action,"<sup>283</sup> the *Encyclopedia Britannica* speaks of the "manipulation of information to influence public opinion,"<sup>284</sup> and the *Encyclopedia of Media and Politics* describes it as "the deliberate and systematic dissemination of a philosophy

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<sup>282</sup> O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas J. *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2004. Print. 13-14.

<sup>283</sup> "Propaganda." Entry 1. Def. 2. *Webster Comprehensive Dictionary*. Encyclopedic Edition. 2002. Print.

<sup>284</sup> "Propaganda." *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 16 Feb. 2011.

or perspective intended to influence opinion and behavior.”<sup>285</sup> Lasswell defines propaganda as “[t]he technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations” and specifies that “[t]hese representation may take spoken, written, pictorial or musical form.”<sup>286</sup> Smith calls “any conscious and open attempt to influence the beliefs of an individual or group, guided by a predetermined end and characterized by the systematic use of irrational and often unethical techniques”<sup>287</sup> propaganda. Bussemer stresses the communicational perspective:

Kommunikationstheoretisch bildet Propaganda eine besondere Form der systematisch geplanten Massenkommunikation, die nicht informieren oder argumentieren, sondern überreden oder überzeugen möchte. Dazu bedient sie sich in der Regel einer symbolisch aufgeladenen und ideologiegeprägten (Bild)Sprache, welche die Wirklichkeit verzerrt, da sie entweder Informationen falsch vermittelt oder ganz unterschlägt. Ziel der Propagandakommunikation ist es, bei den Empfängern eine bestimmte Wahrnehmung von Ereignissen oder Meinungen auszulösen, nach der neue Informationen und Sachverhalte in den Kontext einer ideologieladenen Weltsicht eingebettet werden.<sup>288</sup>

Combining the elements mentioned so far, a narrow definition of propaganda should thus include the following aspects: propaganda is a type of mass communication intended to influence attitude and behavior on a non-rational basis, it uses manipulated information, it promotes a certain political perspective or agenda, and it is used deliberately and systematically. Often a distinction is made between black, grey and white propaganda. Black propaganda operates covertly and conceals its real sources and goals whereas the activity of propagandists who operate in the open is called *white propaganda*; *grey propaganda* refers to the cases in between.<sup>289</sup>

## 4.2 Delimitation

In order to find out where to place Fox News, it is helpful to start with a general delimitation of biased mass communication – because this is what we are talking about in the case of media bias – and propaganda. In trying to delimit those terms, it is useful to depart from very narrow definitions as we have seen that the wider meanings are so extensive and vague that they can

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<sup>285</sup> Otopalik, Cameron M. “Propaganda.” *Encyclopedia of Media and Politics*. Ed. Todd M. Schaefer and Thomas A. Birkland. Washington: CQ, 2007. Print. 231.

<sup>286</sup> Qtd. in Bonfadelli, Heinz. *Medienwirkungsforschung II: Anwendungen in Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur*. Konstanz: UVK, 2000. Print. 73.

<sup>287</sup> Qtd. in Bonfadelli 73.

<sup>288</sup> Bussemer 13.

<sup>289</sup> Cf. Bonfadelli 74; Bussemer 36.

be used almost synonymously. As both phenomena are specific types of communication, I will proceed by first taking a look at the communication process in general and then applying the schema to our definitions of the terms *media bias* and *propaganda* to see where they differ.

Out of the many communication models, the sender-receiver model is one of the most basic ones. It is a mechanistic model which describes communication as the transmission of information from a sender to a receiver. This includes even such cases as unintended communication, in which the information is passed on unwittingly by a source, for example, when somebody overhears a conversation. Mass communication can then be described as the transmission of a message to many receivers, in which the sender usually relays the information through mass media. According to a narrow definition of media bias, biased mass communication is the deliberate and systematic transmission of unobjective information favoring a political perspective to many receivers. Propaganda, in this model, would then be the deliberate and systematic transmission of manipulated information favoring a political perspective to many receivers in order to influence their attitudes and behavior.

According to this classification, media bias and propaganda thus share the following aspects: Both refer to specific cases of mass communication and the transmitted information is deliberately and systematically slanted in a certain political direction. In this sense, bias includes the concept of propaganda, which can therefore be understood as a special case of media bias.

There are then two distinctive features separating biased mass communication from propaganda: 1) the quality of the transmitted information and 2) the communicator's aiming to influence the receivers' attitudes and behavior. As for the information quality, bias refers to unobjective information. This can be understood as subjective information in the sense that it emphasizes, deemphasizes or omits certain parts of the information. Propaganda does the same, but it also works with manipulated information. Manipulated information can be interpreted as any kind of information that has been manipulated, that is, information which has been changed in some way. We are thus talking about misinformation, or, to put it bluntly, lies. The difference thus lies in the amount of truth contained within the message: While biased information may be incomplete or distorted, it is not necessarily false. It can best be described as some kind of half-truth. Propaganda, on the other hand, willfully misinforms; it thus includes cases of entirely untrue, made-up information.

As for the second aspect, media bias is not primarily directed at eliciting a specific effect on the receivers. Propaganda on the other hand has one clear-defined objective: It is aimed at influencing the receivers. The influencing of a person's attitude and behavior through

communication is called persuasion.<sup>290</sup> Propaganda thus constitutes a special kind of persuasive communication. In order to do justice to an even narrower definition of the term, stating that the persuaders use non-rational means rather than convincing the receivers by addressing their intellect, and also keeping in mind the distinction proposed by the heuristic-systematic model of persuasion, we can specify that this kind of persuasion would correspond to the heuristic model.

Considering the many heterogeneous definitions of the terms, this delimitation can, of course, not purport an ultimate solution. It should, however, constitute a pragmatic and useful approach taking into account the most essential features of both concepts.

### **4.3 The Case of Fox News**

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I presented the evidence that Fox News is a biased network. It fulfills all of the criteria named in the above definitions of bias: Fox News deliberately and systematically transmits unobjective information favoring a conservative perspective. To answer the question whether the allegations claiming that Fox News is not only biased but actual propaganda are justified, we can therefore concentrate on the two factors which distinguish biased mass media from propaganda outlets. If it should turn out that 1) Fox News is not only subjective but purposefully misinforms its viewers and 2) it tries to influence the audience via non-rational persuasion, we can conclude that Fox News is an instrument of propaganda.

As for the first aspect, we have seen throughout this thesis many examples in which Fox News presented its viewers false information. It lied about such things as the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq long after it was clear that they did not exist, the health care reform's including "jail time" and "death panels," Obama's education, the progressive agenda, numbers and statistics, and last but not least their own *modus operandi* – to name just a few examples. Fox also manipulated visual information, altering images and showing false video footage. Those examples are clear cases of misinformation. Considering the frequency with which this happens at Fox News, it is also fair to say that they are no isolated cases.

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<sup>290</sup> Cf. e.g. "Persuasion." *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 19 Feb. 2011; Saunders, Danny. "Persuasion." *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*. 2nd ed. Ed. Tim O'Sullivan et al. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Furthermore, this evidence is supported by the results of the studies presented in chapter 1.3, which clearly demonstrate the network's contribution to voter misinformation.

As for the second condition, I have shown in the main part of my analysis how Fox News strategically places persuasive cues throughout its shows in order to influence its audience to make them accept its message on the basis of heuristic processing. The second chapter explained how this kind of superficial processing deemphasizes rational, analytic thinking and the systematic evaluation of information. It is thus also fair to say that Fox News seeks to influence its viewers via non-rational persuasion. Again, the abovementioned studies support this evidence as they not only show that Fox misinformed but that it did so successfully, which means that its misinformation influenced the viewers' attitudes; in other words, it indicates that they were persuaded. Moreover, Roger Ailes' political and professional background suggests that he may have been hired to organize the persuasion campaign with his PR skills. After all, we mustn't forget that this is the man who wrote books and essays such as *You Are the Message: Secrets of the Master Communicators*, "Campaign Strategy," "How to Make an Audience Love You," or "The Importance of Being Likeable." Although this is not in the strict sense proof of Fox News' intending to persuade its audience, with such a man in the position of president and chief executive officer, we must assume that it is no coincidence when it does. In other words: Considering the role of Roger Ailes at Fox News and the way the network operates, his presence is a strong hint towards a concerted effort to persuade the viewers. Finally, there is at least one documented instance in which Rupert Murdoch himself admits to using his media as a means to exercise influence on public opinion: At the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2007, when asked if he was trying to shape a certain agenda, he gave the following response:

[. . .] Obviously, if you're in media and you're concerned with what's going on in the world, you'd like to make a difference by putting forward your opinions. But you're not gonna change the world completely. I think we can change elections. I think good, strong news organizations can, by disclosing things, can help shape the agenda, but only in a limited way. [. . .] We tried [to shape the perception of the Iraq War and how it is viewed]. [. . .] We basically supported [. . .] the Bush policy.<sup>291</sup>

In addition to these defining features, Fox also possesses some rather typical features of propaganda. Although propaganda techniques are not strictly included in most definitions, they may sometimes prove a convenient tool to recognize propaganda. Depending on the

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<sup>291</sup> Cf. "Murdoch of Fox News Admits Manipulating the News for Agenda." rayzer42. *YouTube*. YouTube, 15 Jan. 2008. Web. 21 Feb. 2011.

authors, there are great differences in what is listed as propaganda techniques. There is, however, consensus on some general tools propagandists avail themselves of, particularly the use of rhetoric, emotion, symbolism, myth, deceit, and polarization.<sup>292</sup> All of these elements are applicable to Fox News. And just for fun, we can also take a quick look at several of the most popular propaganda techniques in particular, for example the “seven devices of propaganda analysis” as identified by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1937:<sup>293</sup>

- *Name calling*. Giving an idea a bad label, and therefore rejecting and condemning it without examining the evidence.
- *Glittering Generality*. Associating something with a ‘virtue word’ and creating acceptance and approval without examination of the evidence.
- *Transfer*. Carries the respect and authority of something respected to something else to make the latter accepted. Also works with something that is disrespected to make the latter rejected.
- *Testimonial*. Consists in having some respected or hated person say that a given idea or program or product or person is good or bad.
- *Plain Folks*. The method by which a speaker attempts to convince the audience that he or she and his or her ideas are good because they are ‘of the people,’ the ‘plain folks.’
- *Card Stacking*. Involves the selection and use of facts or falsehoods, illustrations or distractions, and logical or illogical statements in order to give the best or the worst possible case for an idea, program, person, or product.
- *Band Wagon*. Has as its theme ‘everybody – at least all of use – is doing it!’ and thereby tries to convince the members of a group that their peers are accepting the program, and that we should all jump on the band wagon rather than be left out.<sup>294</sup>

Other lists include more techniques such as *assertion*, *lesser of two evils*, *pinpointing the enemy*, *oversimplification* or *stereotyping*, *red herring*, *ad hominem*, *ad nauseam* or *repetition*, *appeal to fear* and *appeal to emotion*. We have seen illustrative examples for each one of these techniques on Fox News. Not surprisingly, many of them are closely connected to the heuristic cues specified by the heuristic-systematic model of persuasion. All in all, this is overwhelming evidence that Fox News is indeed operating as a propaganda outlet.

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<sup>292</sup> Cf. Bonfadelli 74; O’Shaughnessy 4-7.

<sup>293</sup> Although the IPA no longer exists, and its research alone is today regarded as insufficient for propaganda analysis, those techniques are still among the most cited, common and typical techniques associated with propaganda. Cf. Bussemer 342.

<sup>294</sup> Qtd. in Bussemer 343.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The analysis has shown that Fox News is an extremely biased network promoting a conservative perspective. We have also seen that it has a persuasive effect on its audience, and I used the heuristic-systematic model of persuasion to find out how Fox News succeeds in influencing its viewers. Its persuasive intent and the fact that Fox deliberately misinforms the public characterize the network as a propaganda outlet.

In light of these findings and Fox's growing popularity, there are some questions which need to be asked: What are the social and political implications of this development? What exactly is the ideology Fox News promotes and what would be the consequences of its political realization? What more can be done to counter negative media effects of news organizations such as Fox News?

Fox's success has already started to affect the way the other news media work. On the one hand, the other media are influenced by Fox News' agenda-setting: Once a topic has started to attract a certain attention – an attention Fox News now has the power to give to it – it is hard to simply ignore it; even rumors have to be addressed at some point, be it only to debunk them. The other media thus involuntarily become part of an even larger echo chamber in which conservatives and Fox News dictate the agenda. On the other hand, the traditional news networks have started to adopt Fox's entertaining, polarizing and subjective style Jon Stewart aptly termed “opinutainment”<sup>295</sup> in order to compete with Fox News. The sender MSNBC has by now turned into a similarly subjective left-wing media outlet in reaction to Fox' right-wing bias. And as Bryant Welch points out, Fox News is engaged in an unfair competition with serious news media:

Fox News, in its battle with traditional television news media, fights on a very uneven playing field, not unlike the one that parents confront each evening in fighting with their children over whether to do their homework or play video games. The video games are more stimulating and have the joy of an escapist fantasy. Homework is, well, homework, and it is decidedly less stimulating. It is not surprising that Fox News has gained market share in media news.<sup>296</sup>

If Fox News' really is the winning model on the media market, the long-term consequences for the American media landscape and public opinion could be disastrous. Welch outlines some of the social and political consequences the rise of this kind of news media could entail:

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<sup>295</sup> “Daily Show: For Fox Sake!” Host Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Partners, 29 Oct. 2009. Web. 22 Feb. 2011. 03:25.

<sup>296</sup> Welch 149.

In a pluralistic society, a central task of a news organization is to bring troubling facts of the day to the public awareness so that the people, operating through their other political institutions, can assimilate and address those problems. In today's world, addressing those problems is mentally taxing, indeed. [. . .] [People] hear and see wave after wave of problematic information – much of which is negative, threatening, and complex – and have to integrate it into their reality sense.

[. . .] One can avoid that burden if he or she shoots the messenger and, instead, listens to a newscast that offers simple, psychologically reassuring, and/or cathartic political solutions. Doing so [. . .] effectively means Americans are flying blind, devoid of real facts necessary to make informed and competent decisions.<sup>297</sup>

As for the ideology promoted by Fox News, it is similarly problematic and potentially dangerous. Only recently, a public debate was sparked about the increasingly violent and hateful political discourse in the United States by the attack on Democratic congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson. Many blamed the aggressive rhetoric and ideology of the ultra-conservative movement Fox News endorses; some have even singled out Murdoch's news channel to ascribe it a partial responsibility for creating an environment of anger and hate that favors political violence. In an article entitled "Fox News: Die wütende Stimme Amerikas" the online edition of the newspaper *Die Zeit* writes: "Der Sender Fox News hat den Ton in den USA verändert. Er gilt als mitverantwortlich für ein radikales politisches Klima, das Attentate wie in Arizona fördert."<sup>298</sup> The political movement Fox News is part of bears traits of religious fundamentalism, nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism, and their ideology is in some important ways reminiscent of neo-Naziism. To examine those parallels and take a closer look at the nature of this particular worldview as well as the consequences of its political realization would be an interesting topic for further research. It would, in this context, also be interesting to find out to which extent the manipulative techniques used by this right-wing movement are connected to the value-system of this ideology. That is to say: If there is an intrinsic connection between a certain ideology, the goals it has and the means it uses to realize those goals, what can the means this political group uses tell us about its objectives and the ideology it subscribes to?

A lot is already being done to counter Fox News' negative effect and to educate the public. Many websites, media watchdogs, and an army of bloggers critically observe the activity of Fox News. And public organizations and politicians warn of the general tendencies in the American political media culture. But as long as the news are subject to the rules of the

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<sup>297</sup> Welch 155.

<sup>298</sup> Buchter, Heike. "Fox News: Die wütende Stimme Amerikas." *Zeit Online*. Zeit Online, 12 Jan. 2011. Web. 22 Feb. 2011.

free market and the legislation allows them to play fast and loose with the truth, there will not be an easy solution to this problem. If the demand is such that news organizations are engaged in a competition which requires them to be popular rather than accurate, this is necessarily the direction the news organizations will take – unless they can influence the demand, that is, people's expectancies of the news, or they find a way to outfox the mechanisms of the free market.

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