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14 Propaganda Techniques Fox "News" Uses to Brainwash Americans

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There is nothing more sacred to the maintenance of democracy than a free press. Access to comprehensive, accurate and quality information is essential to the manifestation of Socratic citizenship - the society characterized by a civically engaged, well-informed and socially invested populace. Thus, to the degree that access to quality information is willfully or unintentionally obstructed, democracy itself is degraded.

It is ironic that in the era of 24-hour cable news networks and "reality" programming, the news-to-fluff ratio and overall veracity of information has declined precipitously. Take the fact Americans now spend on average about 50 hours a week using various forms of media, while at the same time cultural literacy levels hover just above the gutter. Not only does mainstream media now tolerate gross misrepresentations of fact and history by public figures (highlighted most recently by Sarah Palin's ludicrous depiction of Paul Revere's ride), but many media actually legitimize these displays. Pause for a moment and ask yourself what it means that the world's largest, most profitable and most popular news channel passes off as fact every whim, impulse and outrageously incompetent analysis of its so-called reporters. How did we get here? Take the enormous amount of misinformation that is taken for truth by Fox audiences: the belief that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and that he was in on 9/11, the belief that climate change isn't real and/or man-made, the belief that Barack Obama is Muslim and wasn't born in the United States, the insistence that all Arabs are Muslim and all

Muslims are terrorists, the inexplicable perceptions that immigrants are both too lazy to work and are about to steal your job. All of these claims are demonstrably false, yet Fox News viewers will maintain their veracity with incredible zeal. Why? Is it simply that we have lost our respect for knowledge?

My curiosity about this question compelled me to sit down and document the most oft-used methods by which willful ignorance has been turned into dogma by Fox News and other propagandists disguised as media. The techniques I identify here also help to explain the simultaneously powerful identification the Fox media audience has with the network, as well as their ardent, reflexive defenses of it.

The good news is that the more conscious you are of these techniques, the less likely they are to work on you. The bad news is that those reading this article are probably the least in need in of it.

1. Panic Mongering. This goes one step beyond simple fear mongering. With panic mongering, there is never a break from the fear. The idea is to terrify and terrorize the audience during every waking moment. From Muslims to swine flu to recession to homosexuals to immigrants to the rapture itself, the belief over at Fox seems to be that if your fight-or-flight reflexes aren't activated, you aren't alive. This of course raises the question: why terrorize your own audience? Because it is the fastest way to bypasses the rational brain. In other words, when people are afraid, they don't think rationally. And when they can't think rationally, they'll believe anything.

2. Character Assassination/Ad Hominem. Fox does not like to waste time debating the idea. Instead, they prefer a quicker route to dispensing with their opponents: go after the person's credibility, motives, intelligence, character, or, if necessary, sanity. No category of character assassination is off the table and no offense is beneath them. Fox and like-minded media figures also use ad hominem attacks not just against individuals, but entire categories of people in an effort to discredit the ideas of every person who is seen to fall into that category, e.g. "liberals," "hippies," "progressives" etc. This form of argument - if it can be called that - leaves

no room for genuine debate over ideas, so by definition, it is undemocratic. Not to mention just plain crass.

3. Projection/Flipping. This one is frustrating for the viewer who is trying to actually follow the argument. It involves taking whatever underhanded tactic you're using and then accusing your opponent of doing it to you first. We see this frequently in the immigration discussion, where anti-racists are accused of racism, or in the climate change debate, where those who argue for human causes of the phenomenon are accused of not having science or facts on their side. It's often called upon when the media host finds themselves on the ropes in the debate.

4. Rewriting History. This is another way of saying that propagandists make the facts fit their worldview. The Downing Street Memos on the Iraq war were a classic example of this on a massive scale, but it happens daily and over smaller issues as well. A recent case in point is Palin's mangling of the Paul Revere ride, which Fox reporters have bent over backward to validate. Why lie about the historical facts, even when they can be demonstrated to be false? Well, because dogmatic minds actually find it easier to reject reality than to update their viewpoints. They will literally rewrite history if it serves their interests. And they'll often speak with such authority that the casual viewer will be tempted to question what they knew as fact.

5. Scapegoating/Othering. This works best when people feel insecure or scared. It's technically a form of both fear mongering and diversion, but it is so pervasive that it deserves its own category. The simple idea is that if you can find a group to blame for social or economic problems, you can then go on to a) justify violence/dehumanization of them, and b) subvert responsibility for any harm that may befall them as a result.

6. Conflating Violence With Power and Opposition to Violence With Weakness. This is more of what I'd call a "meta-frame" (a deeply held belief) than a media technique, but it is manifested in the ways news is reported constantly. For example, terms like "show of strength" are often used to describe acts of repression, such as those by the Iranian regime against the protesters in the summer of 2009. There are several concerning consequences of this form of conflation.

First, it has the potential to make people feel falsely emboldened by shows of force - it can turn wars into sporting events. Secondly, especially in the context of American politics, displays of violence - whether manifested in war or debates about the Second Amendment - are seen as noble and (in an especially surreal irony) moral. Violence become synonymous with power, patriotism and piety.

7. Bullying. This is a favorite technique of several Fox commentators. That it continues to be employed demonstrates that it seems to have some efficacy. Bullying and yelling works best on people who come to the conversation with a lack of confidence, either in themselves or their grasp of the subject being discussed. The bully exploits this lack of confidence by berating the guest into submission or compliance. Often, less self-possessed people will feel shame and anxiety when being berated and the quickest way to end the immediate discomfort is to cede authority to the bully. The bully is then able to interpret that as a "win."

8. Confusion. As with the preceding technique, this one works best on an audience that is less confident and self-possessed. The idea is to deliberately confuse the argument, but insist that the logic is airtight and imply that anyone who disagrees is either too dumb or too fanatical to follow along. Less independent minds will interpret the confusion technique as a form of sophisticated thinking, thereby giving the user's claims veracity in the viewer's mind.

9. Populism. This is especially popular in election years. The speakers identifies themselves as one of "the people" and the target of their ire as an enemy of the people. The opponent is always "elitist" or a "bureaucrat" or a "government insider" or some other category that is not the people. The idea is to make the opponent harder to relate to and harder to empathize with. It often goes hand in hand with scapegoating. A common logical fallacy with populism bias when used by the right is that accused "elitists" are almost always liberals - a category of political actors who, by definition, advocate for non-elite groups.

10. Invoking the Christian God. This is similar to othering and populism. With morality politics, the idea is to declare yourself and your allies as patriots, Christians and "real Americans" (those

are inseparable categories in this line of thinking) and anyone who challenges them as not. Basically, God loves Fox and Republicans and America. And hates taxes and anyone who doesn't love those other three things. Because the speaker has been benedicted by God to speak on behalf of all Americans, any challenge is perceived as immoral. It's a cheap and easy technique used by all totalitarian entities from states to cults.

11. Saturation. There are three components to effective saturation: being repetitive, being ubiquitous and being consistent. The message must be repeated over and over, it must be everywhere and it must be shared across commentators: e.g. "Saddam has WMD." Veracity and hard data have no relationship to the efficacy of saturation. There is a psychological effect of being exposed to the same message over and over, regardless of whether it's true or if it even makes sense, e.g., "Barack Obama wasn't born in the United States." If something is said enough times, by enough people, many will come to accept it as truth. Another example is Fox's own slogan of "Fair and Balanced."

12. Disparaging Education. There is an emerging and disturbing lack of reverence for education and intellectualism in many mainstream media discourses. In fact, in some circles (e.g. Fox), higher education is often disparaged as elitist. Having a university credential is perceived by these folks as not a sign of credibility, but of a lack of it. In fact, among some commentators, evidence of intellectual prowess is treated snidely and as anti-American. The disdain for education and other evidence of being trained in critical thinking are direct threats to a hive-mind mentality, which is why they are so viscerally demeaned.

13. Guilt by Association. This is a favorite of Glenn Beck and Andrew Breitbart, both of whom have used it to decimate the careers and lives of many good people. Here's how it works: if your cousin's college roommate's uncle's ex-wife attended a dinner party back in 1984 with Gorbachev's niece's ex-boyfriend's sister, then you, by extension are a communist set on destroying America. Period.

14. Diversion. This is where, when on the ropes, the media commentator suddenly takes the debate in a weird but predictable direction to avoid accountability. This is the point in the discussion where most Fox anchors start comparing the opponent to Saul Alinsky or invoking ACORN or Media Matters, in a desperate attempt to win through guilt by association. Or they'll talk about wanting to focus on "moving forward," as though by analyzing the current state of things or God forbid, how we got to this state of things, you have no regard for the future. Any attempt to bring the discussion back to the issue at hand will likely be called deflection, an ironic use of the technique of projection/flipping.

In debating some of these tactics with colleagues and friends, I have also noticed that the Fox viewership seems to be marked by a sort of collective personality disorder whereby the viewer feels almost as though they've been let into a secret society. Something about their affiliation with the network makes them feel privileged and this affinity is likely what drives the viewers to defend the network so vehemently. They seem to identify with it at a core level, because it tells them they are special and privy to something the rest of us don't have. It's akin to the loyalty one feels by being let into a private club or a gang. That effect is also likely to make the propaganda more powerful, because it goes mostly unquestioned.

In considering these tactics and their possible effects on American public discourse, it is important to note that historically, those who've genuinely accessed truth have never berated those who did not. You don't get honored by history when you beat up your opponent: look at Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln. These men did not find the need to engage in othering, ad hominem attacks, guilt by association or bullying. This is because when a person has accessed a truth, they are not threatened by the opposing views of others. This reality reveals the righteous indignation of people like Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity as a symptom of untruth. These individuals are hostile and angry precisely because they don't feel confident in their own veracity. And in general, the more someone is losing their temper in a debate and the more intolerant they are of listening to others, the more you can be certain they do not know what they're talking about.

One final observation. Fox audiences, birthers and Tea Partiers often defend their arguments by pointing to the fact that a lot of people share the same perceptions. This is a reasonable point to the extent that Murdoch's News Corporation reaches a far larger audience than any other single media outlet. But, the fact that a lot of people believe something is not necessarily a sign that it's true; it's just a sign that it's been effectively marketed.

As honest, fair and truly intellectual debate degrades before the eyes of the global media audience, the quality of American democracy degrades along with it.