
2022

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Recommended Citation

McGuirk, Matthew (2022) Art as Politics? How Fox News Manufactures its Hosts' Performances to Acquire Cable Prestige. *The Graduate Review*, 7, 40-58.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/grad_rev/vol7/iss1/8

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Art as Politics? How Fox News Manufactures its Hosts’ Performances to Acquire Cable Prestige

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Introduction

It is no secret that Fox News has a firm grasp over millions of Americans, particularly members of the conservative right. Republicans trust Fox more than any other outlet (Gramlich), and ninety-three percent of them cite the network as their main source of news (Grieco). This popularity is so widespread that it has also made Fox the most-watched cable network in general (Flood). And although there has been an expansion of conservative media with the rise of Newsmax and One America News Network, there is no denying the powerful role that Fox has in our divided political climate — despite (or, indeed, because of) its documented position as a hyper-partisan network that

boasts a high variance in reliability (“Interactive Media Bias Chart”).

This is what constantly brings me back to Fox’s role in our society and media landscape. Fox has no issue keeping viewers glued to the screen, especially in primetime, where it draws numbers in the millions (Joyella). Despite its variance in reliability, the viewers continue watching, and studies have even documented how effective Fox is at influencing its viewers’ opinions and actions (Ash et al.; Hoewe et al.). This unique relationship between Fox and its audience is what I seek to explore in this paper, and to do this, I will employ concepts from Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin to construct a discussion of Fox’s role in modern political discourse. Specifically, I use Marx’s theory of a commodity fetish and Benjamin’s commentary on art in the age of mechanical reproduction to demonstrate how Fox recognizes its strong hold over viewers in its everyday news production. Ultimately, my paper argues that Fox manufactures its hosts’ on-air performances because it fetishizes the commodity of cable prestige. To maintain a timely and relevant topic, my paper analyzes the network’s coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic with a specific focus on vaccine mandates. The exact methodologies will be addressed later in this paper, because I must first unpack Marx’s and Benjamin’s theories as they relate to my argument while also bringing in more contemporary scholarship to supplement the conversation.

Unpacking the Theories

Fox viewers arguably believe themselves as having a strong relationship with the network’s on-air talent, even though there is nothing physically link-

ing them together. Instead, there exists a *social relationship* between the viewers and hosts, one that is manifested via the clear, and underappreciated, link between Fox's commentary itself and the ratings that drive capital; combining these two factors is what establishes the network's presence as a cable television powerhouse. This is the kind of social relationship that fits much of what Marx discusses when presenting his concept of a *commodity fetish*. Marx examines the social relations between things that combine for a commodity, writing that a fetishism "attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities" (777). Here Marx emphasizes that commodities become the priority within these relationships. In turn, the producers, then, such as Fox, have a two-fold character (777-778), as they must "satisfy a definite social want" on one hand and "satisfy the manifold wants of the individual producer" on the other (778). As I will demonstrate in this paper, Fox's news production satisfies both a social want for its conservative audience, as well as its own wants, which are capital, popularity, and control. In this regard, "cable prestige" is essentially Fox's most important commodity.

This is where Benjamin's work comes in handy, for his insight will help us better situate our understanding of a performance as it relates to the satisfaction of these social and individual desires. More specifically, I engage Benjamin's discussion of film actors' experiences while facing the camera because it strikes a close similarity to that of news anchors and opinion hosts, who mediate Fox's commodity. Moreover, the performances aired by Fox also become necessary for

the continuation of this social relationship.

Benjamin writes that because an actor's performance is presented by a camera, their image is separable and transportable as it is disseminated to the public (1177). This is a fact that is always known to the actor, as Benjamin elaborates further:

While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This market, where he offers not only his labor but his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach. During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the "personality" outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality," the phony spell of a commodity. (1177)

There is much to dissect from this quote. Like actors, news hosts know they are addressing an audience through the camera, an audience that becomes the consumers who make up their market. It is this market where news hosts devote their whole self, even if it is technically beyond their reach during the interaction (remember, television news is largely a linear model of communication). As their image is broadcast onto the public, its original aura is lost; the image gets reproduced, widely disseminated to fit a particular narrative. Here I place an emphasis on what Benjamin writes in the last two sentences of this quote: the "shriveling of the aura" is countered by "an artificial build-up of the 'personality' outside the studio," while the cult of the

actor preserves the personality, which, in the end, is the “phony spell of a commodity” (1177). Although an actor’s aura is lost through innumerable reproductions, their personalities are still elevated, prompting Benjamin to suggest that these personalities are insincere. Regardless, the actor’s cult misguidedly protects and maintains this personality.

This same idea clearly applies to the relationship between news hosts and their viewers. News hosts talk into cameras like actors, but the different genres result in different performances. News programs are developed and organized around a central figure — the host — who is essential to the program’s unfolding action, pace, and thematic decisions, and their on-air personality is a “crucial aspect” of the program’s televisual identity (Langer 353). In fact, the news genre itself is very “personality centered” because any given program, column, or blog “is defined by a dominant, charismatic voice” (Berry and Sobieraj 7). Although many programs include the voices of others in their content, such as guests and commentators, these voices “take a backseat to the host, whose charm, emotional sensibilities, and worldview define the content” (Berry and Sobieraj 7). Because the hosts themselves are so prioritized within the television genre, it is unsurprising then that they are also the kinds of television performers who have the capacity to become role partners or companions for viewers (Koenig and Lessan 264).

This is where Benjamin’s decision to invoke the idea of a “commodity” toward the end of this statement becomes interesting, since it draws a connection with Marx’s concept. As we know, the social relationship here exists between news coverage (essentially, the performance for the camera), and the audience,

not in terms of individuals but in terms of *numbers*. While the viewers arguably serve as the products of a network’s labor, they are not seen as such; they are merely the commodities that earn capital. So, although an actor, or in this case, a host, displays a phony personality, like Benjamin suggests, it is preserved by the viewers, who are nothing more than contributing factors to an increase in popularity; they remain mesmerized by the personality each host portrays. Why, though? What makes a viewer so inclined to preserve what Benjamin sees as a deceptive outcome of a commodity? Not only is this question of why open to many interpretations — interpretations that I will not try to address in this paper — but it also becomes even more important to address when considering the *messaging* within these host performances. This brings me to an important section of literature I must discuss, and that is media framing.

Media Framing and its Impact on Society

To develop a general understanding of media framing and its role in society means I must extend beyond the scope of what Marx and Benjamin address in their respective works. I do this for one main reason: while their theories set the foundation for how I will approach Fox in this paper, they do not specifically address the process of media coverage. Using insight from communication and political science scholars will allow me to not just provide important context regarding framing in news coverage, but it will also permit me to briefly summarize its impact(s) on society.

Framing is used by largely all media organizations because it is, for the most part, an unavoidable phenomenon. To put it simply, framing refers to the

ways information is organized and packaged (Simon and Xenos 366), and it occurs when certain aspects of a perceived reality are selected and communicated in ways that promote salience (Entman, "Towards Clarification" 52). To achieve salience, a frame must be noticeable, meaningful, and memorable to audiences, and information can be made salient by placement or repetition (53). Clearly, these definitions call attention to the content within a frame; specifically, they emphasize how the structure and order of a news story foregrounds the perceived importance of a given issue.

Framing also has significant implications when it comes to public opinion and how the media can affect and shape it, which John Zaller sheds light on in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Because news hosts are technically journalists, Zaller categorizes them as "political elites" who devote themselves to politics or public affairs (6). The public relies heavily on these elites, and people tend to side with an elite's position when they "uphold a clear picture of what should be done" (8). However, this is where framing in the media becomes highly problematic: the "information that reaches the public is never a full record of important events and developments" and is instead "highly selective and stereotyped" (7). Although Zaller's piece was written during a different media environment, the idea that news frames do not always offer a complete picture remains applicable, and indeed many factors go into an organization's decision to frame a story in a particular way. Frames can be strategically built to ensure that a certain message contains some associations and not others (Simon and Xenos 367), but they can also be impacted by individual or organizational biases (Entman, "Campaign 2008" 394).

While individual ideologies are a real issue, external pressures from spin managers and consumers also affect journalistic decisions (394). In fact, pressure from consumers is arguably one of the most important factors driving media organizations to deliver the content they do. As Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien write, the purpose of media coverage is to draw an audience, meaning organizations "will most often focus on the information that the audience finds most important" (31). In this regard it is really no surprise then that outlets will produce programming that matches their viewers' wants. However, Soroka and Wleizen note that this also means outlets will stick to general accounts rather than delve into the complexities of certain stories (31). Despite the exact focus of their book being public policy in the news, this perspective nonetheless echoes Zaller's more general claim that news frames are selective and limited, and one need not be a well-versed media scholar to understand why this is troublesome. When frames are produced to attract (and later maintain) an audience, this capitalistic approach may impact and even sway the electorate using limited material and information.

This concept becomes even more alarming when we consider how subjective our media landscape has become in an increasingly fragmented industry, especially in our primetime cable news environment, where opinionated programming dominates the airwaves. Jennifer Kavanagh et al. establish this context, documenting not just the evolution of primetime cable news since 2000 but also its stark contrast to broadcast news. Whereas broadcast news in the post-2000 climate is focused on storytelling and luring in the audience through emotional appeals, primetime cable

news is more directive and built on opinion and argumentation (81-83). It includes extemporaneous speech and often comes from more of a personal perspective, leading to subjective segments that involve less reporting of facts and more agreement and confirmation of opinions (84). Kavanagh et al. thus posit that “prime-time cable programming is characterized by more-argumentative language, more-personal and subjective exposition of topics, more use of opinion and personal interaction, and more-dogmatic positions for and against certain positions” (84-85). There is no denying that this format is a draw for viewers, but the reduction in the reporting of facts is a cause for concern, particularly as it relates to relevant and important issues in society. For instance, Lauren Feldman finds that audiences of opinionated news programs will adopt the position or attitude of those programs, which increases the likelihood that the public will hold opinions based on mis- or disinformation (178); the former refers to information that is false or misleading, while the latter refers to false information that is purposely spread to deceive people (Lazer et al. 1094).

While I reached into scholarly areas beyond those of Marxist roots to explain framing, it is interesting that even Benjamin himself points out the risks inherent in film’s capabilities; within my focus, the power of opinionated news shows that Benjamin may have been onto something with his talk of the “cult”: an elite’s messaging can be true or false or even phony, yet the viewers stay devoted (1177). Therefore, it really does not matter if a news host loses their “aura” through mass reproductions, because it is purposely created, framed, and disseminated to fit the narrative of a performance that captures the attention of viewers

and consumers.

Framing is certainly a technique that grants a lot of power to news organizations, especially if the frames are constructed to appeal to an audience. This is where understanding Fox’s framing strategies becomes essential for my argument, meaning I must now transition into my next section of literature before getting into my textual analysis.

Fox, Framing, and COVID-19

Framing news through performance is something Fox does very well. In fact, one could spend an entire paper examining Fox’s numerous framing strategies in our never-ending news cycle. Due to the time-and-space limitations of this current paper, though, I will focus only on Fox’s framing of the COVID-19 pandemic in this section.

The coronavirus pandemic has been a monumental moment in our history. It is the worst disease to have reached the pandemic stage since the 1918 flu (“Past Pandemics”), and the news media’s role grew more crucial: it had to keep us informed during a time when there were arguably more people consuming the news than ever before. Some networks and outlets understood the task at hand, but as I will show throughout the rest of this paper, Fox adopted a different role, thus warranting a deeper, extended look into its framing of the situation.

Early on, in 2020, Fox spent all sorts of time downplaying the severity of the virus while criticizing the preventative measures set up around the country, referring to the virus as a “normal flu” and a “political weapon,” the latter of which was used by former president Donald Trump when addressing the disease

(Ash et al. 4). Media Matters, an aggressive watchdog group that analyzes conservative media, has also addressed Fox's COVID-19 coverage in several studies. For example, Matt Gertz and Zachary Pleat, in separate pieces, detail how the network undermined masking and promoted the premature reopening of America, respectively. Pleat's piece is particularly poignant, considering it was written at a time when more than one thousand Americans were dying daily.

Although Fox's messaging contradicted the consensus among health experts regarding the severity of the disease, the network's repetitive downplaying of the situation caused a large majority of its viewers to believe the media were greatly exaggerating the risk of the pandemic (Jurkowitz and Mitchell). Fox also routinely supported President Trump's position on all things related to the coronavirus, framing that viewers effectively internalized; a Pew Research poll from March 2020 reported that sixty-three percent of individuals whose main source was Fox described Trump's response to the outbreak as "excellent" (Gramlich). These Pew reports highlight Fox's persuasive prowess as much as they underscore another piece of Benjamin's position: the capacity for the film industry to motivate the masses. To Benjamin, films work to "spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations" (1178). Of course, my paper focuses on the news industry and Fox, but much of Benjamin's theory fits my argument, and this example is no different. While it was clear in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic that the virus was serious and highly contagious, Fox presented the polar opposite — and it worked.

Fox did not cease this coverage in 2021, the

pandemic's second year, and took a highly aggressive approach to its commentary on the COVID-19 vaccines. From April through September, Fox aired at least one claim undermining the vaccines in all but two days during this six-month span (Monroe et al.). From Inauguration Day through the end of November, Tucker Carlson, the network's most popular host, undermined vaccines at least once on his show in ninety-nine percent of the episodes that covered them (Ray et al.). Just as Fox's coverage during year one impacted viewers' perceptions of the pandemic, the network's skepticism toward the vaccines also led to higher vaccine hesitancy in areas with higher exposure to the coverage, particularly among citizens with lower health risks (Pinna et al.). However, Pinna et al. also argue that Fox "does not contribute to anti-vaccination sentiment and that the effect on COVID-19 vaccines is due to a COVID-specific narrative". This COVID-specific narrative will become clearer by the end of my paper.

In fall 2021, vaccine mandates became a staple of Fox's coverage, and while my findings reveal in-depth the ways Fox produced this coverage, this paragraph is a brief look at the network's positioning. In October, Fox began directing most of its vaccine-related hostility toward the vaccine mandates being implemented in workplaces throughout the country. These mandates, some of which were imposed by the Biden Administration, contributed to job loss because people declined to be vaccinated and either left their jobs or were fired. Since this also occurred at a time when the U.S. economy was in a bad spot, it caused Fox to argue that mandates were a governmental overreach, and the network regularly painted the picture of an ominous future with significant societal changes and a lack of a workforce.

In the first half of this paper, I introduced and dissected the dense theories of Marx and Benjamin and how their concepts play into my analysis of Fox, reviewed important literature on media framing and its effect on society, and established Fox's prior coronavirus coverage. This brings me to the second half of this paper, where I will address my methodology, reveal the results of my textual analysis, and finally conclude the paper.

Method

To closely examine Fox's coverage of the COVID-19 vaccine mandates, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis of the following primetime programs: *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, *Hannity*, and *The Ingraham Angle*. My analysis examines transcripts of these programs from a three-day span in October 2021: Wednesday, October 20; Thursday, October 21; and Friday, October 22. It was important to review the programs' content on the same day to maintain continuity and hold conditions as constant as possible. Focusing on the same days allows me to more confidently argue that variations in framing come from each anchor's editorial decisions rather than simple differences in the news of the day. These transcripts were accessed via Fox's website, and I worked with a total of eight transcripts: three for Sean Hannity's program, three for Laura Ingraham's program, and two for Carlson's program (as of May 2022, the network has not uploaded a transcript for Carlson's show on Friday, October 22). While I do have one less transcript of Carlson's program, I do not believe this will impact my conclusions. I selected these programs based off their popularity and reach and also because of their

positions in Fox's primetime television slots. Carlson, Hannity, and Ingraham all run their shows at 8 p.m., 9 p.m., and 10 p.m., respectively, and they are very much positioned as Fox's "big three" during television's primetime hours. Each transcript was read closely, and any mention of the coronavirus pandemic was marked for deeper analysis. Any segment that included talk of coronavirus vaccine mandates is included in the following section.

Analysis

In this section my findings from each program are presented, following the same order of their airing on weekday evenings.

Tucker Carlson Tonight

The host of Fox's most popular primetime program (Joyella), Carlson, who also brands his show as the "sworn enemy of lying, pomposity, smugness, and groupthink," takes an aggressive approach to his coverage of COVID-19 vaccine mandates in these two episodes, calling it "one of the greatest tragedies of our time" that "thousands of otherwise law-abiding decent Americans" are losing their jobs because of Biden's policy ("Biden Open Border"). In the first transcript I analyzed, from October 20th, Carlson approaches the story by speaking mainly of the emergency services workers who were let go by their organizations, drumming up a hypothetical scenario in which none of these people work anymore:

You can walk into pretty much any government in this country whether it's the Federal government, state government, big city government, and lose half the people who work there and

probably not even notice because they're useless. But if you start to lose the people who actually keep the society functioning, then you're in trouble and that of course would be firemen, cops, ambulance drivers, paramedics. If you make them leave, things really fall apart and that's exactly what the Biden administration has just done. ("Biden Open Border")

This directs Carlson to a video of a Seattle firefighter who was relieved from his duties over the vaccine requirement, and Carlson questions what wrongdoing this person committed to receive this kind of treatment. Carlson says, "The vaccinated spread COVID just like the unvaccinated. There's no difference actually. Look at the science He hurt nobody and they are crushing him, and they're crushing a lot of people just like that all around the country, and particularly in Seattle" ("Biden Open Border"). This leads Carlson to an interview with Jason Rantz, a conservative radio host based in Seattle, where Rantz discusses the firings of police officers throughout the city, claiming that over a hundred officers have been taken off the job.

From here, Carlson moves to an interview with James Craig, a gubernatorial candidate in Michigan, who formerly served as the police chief in Detroit. Carlson brings him on the show to get "a reaction to these mandates and the effect they are having on public safety" ("Biden Open Border"). Craig refers to the firings of police officers as "irresponsible" and "reckless," and claims that recent events in Chicago and Seattle suggest that this is a way of defunding the police ("Biden Open Border"). Carlson agrees with Craig's opinion that these decisions are wrong and then tells his interviewee that "[i]f you take all the police away

and the murder rate spikes, maybe you should stop taking police away" ("Biden Open Border"). In this first transcript, Carlson positions himself as a sort of mouthpiece for all the individuals he perceives as the victims in this situation: the people being fired *and* the regular citizens who may possibly be affected. He accomplishes this by presenting this scenario and then interviewing people whose insight — selective or not — will support his narrative.

In the second transcript, from October 21st, Carlson takes a different angle in his coverage. Instead of airing another segment focusing on the deterioration of emergency services, Carlson interviews one U.S. politician fighting back against Biden's vaccine policy: Florida Governor Ron DeSantis ("Bizarre"). Carlson introduces this segment with the following:

Well, pretty much since the day Joe Biden got inaugurated, you've been hearing in the media every day that the State of Florida is a COVID hot spot . . . but you're not hearing that anymore. Why is that? Well, because the numbers are too stark to deny. In the last seven days, Florida has averaged fewer COVID cases per capita than virtually any other state in the United States . . . Ron DeSantis has announced a special legislative session to ban COVID-19 related vaccine mandates, not just by the state, but by businesses throughout the State of Florida. ("Bizarre")

When asking DeSantis to explain the decision, the Florida governor states that his reasoning comes down to three factors: one, vaccination is an individual choice and someone's "livelihood should not be dependent on" getting the shot ("Bizarre"); two, Biden's policy is

“unconstitutional” and Florida has a “responsibility as a state to fight back against Federal overreach” (“Bizarre”); and three, the economy will suffer. Carlson then points out how the White House made vaccine mandates the “centerpiece of their domestic agenda” (“Bizarre”), to which he asks DeSantis if Florida expects the Biden Administration to hit back. DeSantis expresses his belief that Biden will likely do anything he can, and it leads to the following interaction:

DESANTIS: . . . do you want to protect people’s jobs or do you not? . . . I’m going to be on the side of protecting people’s jobs and if Joe Biden wants to be on the side of causing people to lose their job[s], well then, we’ll let him do that and we’ll fight the good fight.

CARLSON: Yes, because he knows more about [m]edicine than nurses and doctors. This is lunacy. (“Bizarre”)

This final interaction encapsulates the narrative Carlson is keen on promoting, and that he uses a popular Republican governor to help his case is unsurprising: although DeSantis’ decision-making during the pandemic was both lackadaisical (Cillizza; Glenza) and perplexing for medical experts (Lemon); his appearance on a Fox program, and especially Carlson’s, assists the network in pushing their narrative just a little bit further.

It is very clear that in these two episodes, Carlson is eager to attack the vaccine mandates for their role in forcing individuals off the job. He establishes a narrative which implies that public safety is being undermined because emergency services workers are being released from their duties, and he also positions his framing to verbally blast those in charge of imple-

menting these mandates.

Hannity

Although Hannity was at one time Fox’s primetime power, he has fallen behind Carlson over the years, currently averaging an audience of 2.7 million (Joyella). In these three episodes, his coverage of the COVID-19 vaccine mandates comes largely from the perspective of the current economic crisis (at the time): rising prices and supply chain issues as well as a labor shortage and unemployment issues. In the first transcript, Hannity argues that Biden’s requirement is simply exacerbating these economic woes (“Crises”). Hannity does encourage his viewers to take the virus seriously and consult with doctors — even declaring his own belief in the science of vaccinations at one point — but he undercuts this statement with the caveat that he is not a doctor and is not telling anyone what to do. On top of that, while Hannity himself states his belief in vaccines, he also states his belief in freedom, liberty, and medical privacy, supporting the assertion that mandates are some sort of violation. Minds are ultimately not going to be changed, Hannity says, so much so that “millions” of Americans are prepared to abandon their careers in protest:

Teachers are not going to get it and we’re going to have a shortage of teachers and cops and military and firefighters and first responders and all those nurses and health care workers that went into work in the middle of the worst of COVID and risked their lives to save other people’s lives, many that got COVID themselves. They dove on one COVID grenade you know a minute after another. They worked in

a covered Petri dish. Now we're going to fire them? . . . Now, ask yourself if that really is making America a better or safer place. Of course not. ("Crises")

Consequently, Hannity suggests that instead of vilifying half of America and worsening the labor shortage, Biden should educate the country on breakthrough cases and monoclonal antibodies, a treatment the Fox host was keen on advocating for, citing its success in Florida under DeSantis. Hannity also proposes an option for individuals who oppose the vaccine to be tested every day, so we can accommodate them and respect their differing point of view.

Hannity continues this approach in the second episode, from October 21st. This time, though, he uses the same issues from the previous night's episode to go after Democrats and their positioning on the mandates ("Agenda"). Hannity says that Biden is "about to fire thousands" of workers for their refusal to comply with an order that Biden and Democrats themselves reversed on, playing prior clips of Biden, infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci, and then White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki opposing the idea of a mandate ("Agenda"). Hannity suggests that Democrats do not care about the many Americans who are willing to walk away from their careers, their benefits, and their retirements and says that vilifying Americans whose minds are already made up will not end COVID-19 and stop the spread. Again, Hannity pushes for testing unvaccinated employees and the monoclonal antibody treatment so people are not forced to be inoculated.

The labor shortage is what again sets up Hannity's segment on vaccine mandates in the third episode, from October 22nd ("Town Hall"). Hannity says that

if "you think the economy is bad now, it will go down precipitously right into the sewer" when Biden's policy kicks in ("Town Hall"). Hannity again charges Democrats with creating this vaccine hesitancy because of their constant reversals and states that it is the people's choice to remain unvaccinated because of our free society. In fact, he claims that because people are willing to abandon their careers means "they must believe pretty strongly in their position" ("Town Hall"). Interestingly, this is also where Hannity's discussion relates to Carlson's because he points out that the "thousands of cops, firefighters, nurses, first responders, [and] soldiers walking off the job" will have a "devastating impact on our economy" and will not make our country "more safe and secure" ("Town Hall").

But where Hannity ends his discussion of the vaccine mandates during this episode brings us back to the same idea of freedom which he invoked two days earlier. Hannity blasts Biden for his mocking of vaccine-hesitant Americans during a CNN town hall, defending them from the president because they have "decided to stand on their principles" ("Town Hall"). Following this, he brings on former Republican Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown and Fox contributor Leo Terrell. Before transitioning to his guests, Hannity repeats his belief in the science of vaccination, but still prioritizes his ideas for making unvaccinated American workers less vilified. On this note, Brown suggests that the federal government does not want to do this because it "is obviously playing more and more of a role in our lives, interfering with our personal liberties and freedoms," and this has him "scared" for the first time in his sixty-two years of life ("Town Hall"). Hannity then restates that while he believes in vacci-

nation, his belief in freedom and medical privacy carries more weight: “I don’t believe in one-size-fits-all medicine either and what I don’t understand is there’s got to be a way . . . to think out of the box and find a way to have a safe working environment” (“Town Hall”). This prompts Terrell to state that mandates are all about power and control before Hannity closes out the interview.

Like Carlson, Hannity presents an unfavorable future, while offering support to those being affected by the requirement, suggesting alternative options for them to maintain their jobs and careers. However, Hannity — and his guests — spend considerable time on the idea of freedom, and how mandates violate our freedoms because they take away a personal choice.

The Ingraham Angle

Even though Ingraham’s program ranks third in primetime and fifth overall on Fox with an average audience of 2.2 million, the *Angle* still sits higher than any program on CNN or MSNBC (Joyella). And much like her primetime companions in Carlson and Hannity, Ingraham also takes her shots at the COVID-19 vaccine mandates during these three episodes. In the first episode, from October 20th, the only mention of them comes as she runs through a list of thirteen reasons why Biden and the Democrats must go (“War on Energy”). At number eleven, Ingraham says, “Vaccine mandates are forcing first responders, healthcare workers, even airline pilots off the job, all based on twisted anti-science logic” (“War on Energy”). She follows this with a clip of Biden saying that vaccinated workers must be protected from unvaccinated workers, to which she ponders: “Wait a second. I thought they’re vaccinated,

why do they need to be [protected]?” (“War on Energy”). Ingraham, while adding to the conversation of mandates forcing people out of work, seems to also question the scientific efficacy of the vaccines here, as evident in her use of the words “twisted” and “anti-science” (“War on Energy”).

On October 21st, Ingraham begins her show with a “can’t miss analysis of Biden’s train wreck of a town hall on CNN” and criticizes Biden for not backing off from his “divisive and anti-science vax mandate” (“Biden’s Town Hall”). This marks a brief continuation of her questioning the efficacy of the vaccines, but the majority of her mandate-related coverage comes toward the end of this episode when she interviews Artur Pawlowski, a Canadian pastor who was arrested for resisting what Ingraham describes as “Canada’s insane COVID edicts” (“Biden’s Town Hall”), and who was later arrested in early 2022 for his principal involvement in anti-mandate protests in Alberta (Tran). Here Ingraham expands the freedom angle that Hannity uses to also include Canada. She describes one of the requirements of Pawlowski’s sentence, which is that any time he publicly contradicts a health official, he must repeat aloud the expert consensus on masks, vaccines, and social distancing (“Biden’s Town Hall”). Ingraham points out that a lot of people believe in the science of vaccines but takes issue with these requirements: “[T]his does seem almost like a hostage tape situation. You’re forced to say these words kind of like under a Maoist regime China. How is this a free country?” (“Biden’s Town Hall”). Following an explanation from Pawlowski in which he describes his labeling of Canada as “China-da” for its “mix of communism and fascism” (“Biden’s Town Hall”), Ingraham turns the

discussion against Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's push for vaccine mandates for kids, and it leads to this interaction, where again, the government's decision-making is questioned:

INGRAHAM: Pfizer just pushed . . . the five through eleven vaccinations, asking the Canadian government to approve vaccinations for younger children. Then a poll comes out magically the same night saying, well, half of Canadians plan to get five to 11-year-olds vaccinated. It all seems almost coordinated, Pastor. PAWLOWSKI: And that is exactly what it is. The whole thing is a sham. It's a lie. And I would never comply with an order like this . . . I refuse to comply. This is still Canada. I'm not living in China and I'm not living in North Korea . . . I refused to bow before the tyrannical orders like that. ("Biden's Town Hall")

Whereas Hannity's use of the freedom angle sits more along the lines of vaccine compliance being a personal decision that governments and businesses should not dictate, Ingraham advances this narrative by foregrounding one person's story: not only is Ingraham able to push anti-vaccination sentiments through Pawlowski, but she also uses his experience to push an anti-government notion in relation to COVID-19, framing which extends the notion that mandates are a violation of freedom.

The next night, on October 22nd, Ingraham furthers this conversation by targeting the "new normal" our government has created ("Live from Mississippi"). Speaking in front of a live audience at the University of Mississippi, Ingraham rallies against what she perceives to be the real tragedy of this pandemic:

[W]e told you a year and a half ago that the tragedy of this pandemic wasn't just going to be measured in the number of lives lost, but in how much of our culture and our traditions we lose in the process. We warned you that a lot of powerful people will try to use the temporary COVID crisis to create a new normal. Come on. They still have people masked up in blue state America and under areas of federal control. And with few exemptions allowed, they'll exclude you, they'll fire you. They'll even shame you for not complying with vaccine mandates. ("Live from Mississippi")

This leads Ingraham to a discussion of how Biden's vaccine policy forced people out of work, and she plays a clip of the president claiming the statistics of people losing their jobs were overblown; she wants Biden to "[t]ell that to the 1900 state employees in Washington State now out of work" as well as the "34,000 health care workers in New York" who have all been fired "for refusing to get the jab" ("Live from Mississippi"). From here, Ingraham turns this into an opportunity to push back against the vaccine policy (and other COVID-related preventative measures), while promoting the same Fox narrative that freedom was not a price to pay for COVID-19 measures:

Now, most hardening since the early days of the pandemic is how red state America did not reflexively bow down. Patriotic, hardworking Americans fought to preserve their pre-pandemic lives. Now, this willingness to fight for our freedoms, to maintain our traditions, to defy the so-called experts who weren't elected by the way to anything, to make decisions for

ourselves, all this the left detests. And Biden, he just doesn't understand. ("Live from Mississippi")

Again, Ingraham takes the idea of freedom and constructs it to ensure it fits within the angle of this frame. She criticizes the "new normal" because it ostracizes vaccine-hesitant individuals and forces them out of work, but also because it attacks "our freedoms" ("Live from Mississippi"). This is what makes *The Ingraham Angle* stand out within this sample size — Ingraham does focus a bit on the job loss resulting from these mandates, like Carlson and Hannity, but the left's so-called attack on freedom through this "new normal" is what she rallies against the most ("Live from Mississippi").

Discussion and Conclusion

This textual analysis allows us to generate an understanding of how Fox purposely builds its coverage to reach a prestigious position atop the cable news landscape. Fox does this by playing into its conservative base, since seventy-nine percent of Republicans oppose federal vaccine mandates ("Dashboard"), while seventy-two percent do not want their employer to require vaccination (Hamel et al.). That Fox opposes the mandates is unsurprising from this perspective; the network very clearly understands what drives its profit. With that said, the framing employed by these primetime hosts warrants a deeper discussion about the widespread effect of Fox's network narrative, which is designed to keep its audience at bay on information regarding the vaccine mandates. Specifically, I identify two strategies within this scheme: 1) Fox heavily forecasts an ominous future that is marred with job loss and public safety issues; and 2) Fox positions the on-

going COVID-19 preventative measures, and specifically vaccine mandates, as attacks on freedom. I will not dispute the claims that people are losing their jobs over the mandates — doing so would be both negligent and incorrect — but I do think these two frames in particular spark a cause for concern because they are highly exaggerated and selective. In fact, one may even be able to detect some mis- or disinformation within this coverage using Lazer et al.'s criteria (1094).

Exaggerated or not, what allows Fox to further tap into its viewers' minds within these frames is its directness: all three hosts routinely addressed the audience as "you." Carlson says that if "*you* start to lose the people who actually keep the society functioning, then *you're* in trouble . . ." ("Biden's Open Border"). Hannity says to "*ask yourself*" if firing emergency services workers will make "America a better or safer place" ("Crises"). Ingraham warned her audience of the people in control and how "they'll exclude *you*," "fire *you*," and "even shame *you* for not complying with vaccine mandates" ("Live from Mississippi"). These examples prove that Fox quite literally makes its coverage *about* its audience. In fact, this is quite common in primetime cable television, as Kavanagh et al. note (84). And perhaps it is the repeated use of "you" as well as "our" — the latter of which only Hannity and Ingraham use in this sample size — that convince viewers of an actual relationship between themselves and Fox. I argue, however, that Fox crafts its coverage this way because it knows this is what will resonate with its base on a more social level. It is all part of a cycle.

To explain this cycle, I turn back to Benjamin's theory. Specifically, I look at his insight on the difference

between a film and a painting: “The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested” (Benjamin 1182-1183). This leads Benjamin into a discussion of the masses, where he also incorporates insight from French author Georges Duhamel, whose negative view of movies fits what Benjamin describes as “the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator” (1183). Therefore, a concentrated spectator of a painting has a firm focus, while a distracted mass simply absorbs the work (Benjamin 1183). Generally speaking, Benjamin’s perspective could not be truer: paintings require an attentiveness among spectators for the interpretation of any meaning(s). The same cannot be said for motion pictures, since a deep concentration would encounter interruptions for each change of shot or angle, and when a certain scene is over, it is over. This is at least how Benjamin sees it, and it makes sense considering the time in which he was writing. However, media has proliferated tremendously since his time, and acts of engagement have moved well beyond his idea.

With that said, the basic theme still applies to this genre, even if news programs differ slightly from films. Minus commercial breaks, viewers of television news are captivated by a form of continuous communication that is difficult to puncture. They are distracted, like Benjamin suggests, absorbing the dissemination with minimal time to think and interpret. This is where Fox seems to swoop in and capitalize: since news consumers selectively choose their news to conform with

ideologies and partisanship, an action known as selective exposure (Cinelli et al. 2), Fox prioritizes the *draw* of its news production. Stories are framed to appeal to viewers, and it does not matter how slanted or limited the coverage is; the network knows that what it puts forward is working. That is how this cycle works. Of course, the obvious downside is that operating in this way gives viewers no real opportunity to contemplate, nor a chance to think critically about a situation, but this does not appear to be on Fox’s mind, anyway.

On the other hand, what *is* always on Fox’s mind is the power of its brand, a power that the network fully understands. Fox engages in what Benjamin describes as film’s “shock effect,” a concept in which distracted viewers are vulnerable for mobilization (1183-1184). Fox knows its viewers will continually enter its cycle, and this is what permits Fox to mobilize its audience through the fabrication of host performances. This is a form of art in and of itself, but when art is used as politics, it instead becomes a form of fascism, according to Benjamin. In fact, Fox actively represents what Benjamin writes on the matter: “Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves” (1184). This is perhaps best depicted in Fox’s consistent inclination to evoke the fears of its conservative viewers. Because most of its base opposes the vaccine mandates, Fox’s hosts present a dystopian reality, where unemployment dominates society, public safety is in jeopardy, and freedom is attacked. It does not matter how true or untrue the network’s claims are because Fox has succeeded in mobilizing its

mass into a cycle that rewards the network with cable prestige. As Jeffrey P. Jones says, “Fox has successfully shown how TV news need not be *about* politics but can *be* politics instead” (184).

What this cycle really boils down to is brand protection. Amidst an ongoing global pandemic, one would think that as a news organization, Fox would at least consider the possibility of exploring the *positives* of a vaccine mandate? It seems especially reasonable, considering that ninety percent of Fox Corporation staffers are vaccinated, not to mention that unvaccinated Fox employees were subject to daily testing at the time of these programs’ broadcasts (Sadeque). The network, though, appears to have no interest in covering the “other side” of their story. Except for the instances where Hannity shares his own belief in vaccines (“Crisis”; “Agenda”; “Town Hall”), or when Ingraham points out that vulnerable people get relief from severe illness and death from vaccines (“Biden’s Town Hall”) — blips that are quickly devalued and buried, not to forget — Fox’s one-sided framing of the story remains consistent. Promoting vaccines would jeopardize the brand’s power, and Fox is known to avoid addressing things on the air that would do this, not just with vaccines. When Lara Logan compared Dr. Anthony Fauci to Nazi doctor Josef Mengele during a segment for Fox Nation, the comments were reportedly bad enough for Fox to sideline her, but they never confirmed nor denied it (Kleefeld). When reports came out detailing the actions of several Fox personalities during the insurrection at The Capitol on January 6, 2021, three hosts — Hannity, Ingraham, and Brian Kilmeade, a host on *Fox and Friends* — contacted then White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, expressing their con-

cern about the situation, but none of them communicated this during their programs (Windolf and Koblin). Fox refuses to speak up in these situations because doing so would hurt the brand and put a dent in the network-wide narrative. And if the performance is working, why would they change it? Why would they alter the cycle? Fox is simply playing the game at this point. Unfortunately, this game is one that comes via an exploitation of viewers, as Fox’s cycle encourages the kind of distraction through reinforcement that keeps them locked in a Fox-generated reality.

And because Fox understands its power, it remains in a position, where it can prioritize the one thing that accelerates its consistent fetishizing of cable prestige: capital. Maintaining this capital, though, means that Fox must *always* consider the viewers as the products of its labor because, as Marx writes, their “value” is important: The division of a product into a useful thing and a value becomes practically important, only when exchange has acquired such an extension that useful articles are produced for the purpose of being exchanged, and their character as values has therefore to be taken into account, beforehand, during production” (777). As my textual analysis shows, Fox considers its viewers as products when producing its captivating one-sided commentary; it remembers and values them not for who they are but for their devotion to the brand. Without this devotion, Fox receives no capital.

Of course, this idea could be applied to any news or media organization; there are really no reasons why a network should not prioritize highly valued qualities like power and profit. With that said, I have shown in this paper how Fox takes this idea and quite literally runs away with it. The network has a

strategic commitment to maintaining popularity, using meticulously crafted host performances to advance a narrative that keeps viewers attentive. Fox could very well be the most successful cable news network to ever utilize such a strategy, but that is not to say what they are doing includes zero cause for concern, for it is quite the opposite. Fox willingly and knowingly exploits its distracted consumers as it clings to its reputation, effectively using art as its ploy to mobilize a mass. The network's act could not be more obvious, yet the reality it promotes is occupied by many. It is up to Fox and only Fox to determine when to end this alternate reality, a scary thought that underscores the role of this network in our polarized media climate.

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