

SLY FOX: THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF ONE NETWORK

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Television has evolved into one of the most powerful mediums of information: it is a venue that allows viewers to gain maximum exposure to popular culture, but more importantly, it also acts as a gateway into the elite echelon of the American, and foreign, intelligentsia. However, despite its ability to transcend popular and elite programming, television networks commonly choose to inundate the market with shows that amuse the audience rather than inform them. Major networks are not entirely to blame because our society has an insatiable need for outrageous television content. Viewers are often bombarded with disturbing news and therefore use fiction to whitewash the perils of reality. This sort of escapism is in accordance with the times; political awareness becomes obsolete in the face of entertainment. Viewers inadvertently allow networks to successfully broadcast marginal political coverage by accepting the proposed low standards of political sophistication. Politics do not excite the average American; low voter turnouts are one of many examples that are indicative of the general malaise Americans have towards politics. Consequently, the television news networks have created a winning formula to promulgate the charade of political awareness in this country. Politics has evolved into a diversion tactic rather than a proprietor of realism in America. Political talk shows once held the responsibility of tackling issues within the social gamut; however, it is apparent that the media inadequately fulfills the role of social watchdog and satirist. The Fox Broadcast Network serves as an interesting example of this social quandary because it is the home of the ultra-conservative *Fox News* and the relentlessly satiric show *The Simpsons*. That a cartoon show presents a serious commentary on American life and politics and a news network generates right-wing propaganda is a sign that America's social and political climates are drastically changing. The attenuation of serious political content in the media and the subsequent popularity of *Fox News* marks a new era in American culture. It is yet to be determined as to whether or not *The Simpsons* successfully undertakes the role of political commentator that should have been fulfilled by its network sibling, *Fox News*. John Fiske's theory of cultural commodification explains how entertainment plays an integral role in Fox Network's economic and public success.

Culturally significant institutions are typically evaluated on their relevance and value within a given society. In other words, the worth of a particular cultural institution is based on what and how much it contributes to society. The media is a very powerful and influential institution in our country because it is aligned with the ebbs and flows of popular culture; however, it is the concept of popularity that jeopardizes the integrity of the American media. The business sector and the audience serve as a duality within pop culture. The average American deems something “culturally valuable” when he or she finds a program worthwhile, entertaining, or significant. Businessman Rupert Murdoch, owner of Fox, will categorize a show as popular when it generates money. Hence the concept of cultural value and economic value become intertwined. Anything that has an economic value can be categorized as a commodity. Since *Fox News* is in constant competition with other networks for ratings and higher revenue, it along with all broadcast media is considered to be a product. John Fiske theorizes that America’s mass culture produces cultural texts simply for the sake of maximum profit:

Mass culture produces cultural commodities, high culture produces artworks or texts. The cultural commodities of mass culture—films, TV shows, CDs, etc—are produced and distributed by an industrialized system whose aim is to maximize profit for the producers and distributors by appealing to as many consumers as possible. (Fiske 55)

Fiske observes that high culture encompasses art and literature, which can be considered “high culture” because they aim to educate their audiences rather than to generate profit. Yet *The Simpsons* cannot be celebrated as a elite culture because its producers seek to gain profit. The show is a part of a collective identity that is in an infinite cycle of competition with other opponents. There would not be a merchandise franchise or television syndication if *The Simpsons* did not want to gain profit; however, it is much closer to achieving high culture status than *Fox News* because it does not jettison its urbane content that appeals to an erudite audience. The term “culturally significant” would be a better way of describing the cartoon. Conversely, *Fox News* strives to instill a false notion of political elitism within mass culture, creating a standardized and myopic vision for its audience whilst eliminating any competition that might threaten its popularity, and as a result is not culturally significant. The specificities of Fiske’s idea of “high culture” are more apparent when

applied to the Fox Network. Television broadcasting is a business, and therefore its association with profit excludes all programs from high culture.

The executives at *Fox News* probably do not care that it is excluded from the elite culture because it has been readily adopted by popular culture. Although the standards of political information are slowly decreasing, the concept of information is extremely important. Entertainment is often disguised when it is presented in the form of a newscast. This is noteworthy because entertainment is the symbolic currency of the media and information is simply a guise in which amusement is dispensed. David Broder describes the complexities embedded within the dynamics of the media and mass culture relations by discussing his role as a news reporter:

The commodity in which I deal as a reporter – the kind of thing that represents power to me – is information, and not just random information, but relevant information about events of some significance in the area in which I’m working. The old saying – and it sums it all up – is that a reporter is no better than his sources. What is important to me is being able to have access to men who are knowledgeable about a situation at a time when that situation is in the public eye...They’re interested in me for what I can give to them – channel to the public for the goals in which they are interested. (64)

This passage is significant because it inadvertently describes the main problem festering within political reporting. First and foremost, Broder labels information as a commodity, which according to Fiske, demotes the status of the news to mass culture. Broder is considered valuable within the cultural economy through his contributions to prestigious newspapers and magazines. Exemplifying how information functions as a commodity, the information he supplies for his audience and editors serves as a source of revenue for himself and his employer. He would not be employed if his articles did not generate sales for these particular magazines. Furthermore, his relations with news sources reveal that there is an economic undertone in the media. “Situations in the public eye” are considered lucrative because they are issues embedded within popular culture – people are interested in these situations. Broder’s statement confirms the idea that he promotes a particular agenda to reciprocate the favor from a particular news source. Broder’s theory is applicable to the success of *Fox News*: the network airs stories that will win the “hearts and minds” of the American people. When more Americans watch a channel

for particular segments, more advertisers will want to air commercials on the station. In a sense, all parties involved are happy: the politicians who gain recognition on *Fox*, the advertisers, the network, and, of course, the viewer.

Broder acts as a broker of information when he chooses to commodify his craft. In turn, there is a disproportionate relationship between the importance of the news and his role as a reporter. Broder is actually more valuable than the news itself because he has the power to determine what is important by selecting what to print and what to edit out. He essentially creates the public consciousness. Fiske's incorporation of Marxist critique of American capitalism is applicable to this case:

In their view, the industrialization of culture and the development of the mass media had destroyed all traces of authentic popular or folk culture and was rapidly eroding high culture. . .[cultural industries] commodified people by erasing their consciousness of all needs or desires except those that could be satisfied by commodities, and they produced one dimensional people who were incapable of criticizing capitalism because they had no experience of anything outside it. (53)

What we can deduce from Fiske's theories is that commodification is a natural occurrence within a capitalistic market; the result, though, may not be a positive one. Someone like David Broder may believe that he presents the news in an unbiased fashion. The reality is that he works for a major corporation he consequently must succumb to the pressure of his superiors. The "authenticity" that is lost in our culture is the ability to satirize and challenge the information we hear because the repeated exposure to unilateral information creates a "one dimensional" audience.

The concept of control underlies the media. Reporters and the networks are acutely aware of their premier position within society; rivalries grow stronger during the pursuit to influence the average American. As Robert Mason concludes in his study on American journalism, quality of reporting is sacrificed in the networks' competition for ratings. Mason states that there is a "limited demand" for first rate journalism, which implies that the public sector is responsible for its ignorance. One could say that the media is following an elementary macroeconomic model, carefully supplying news to equal the amount of public demand without overwhelming people with too much information. Terms such as "limited demand" are demonstrative of Fiske's theories on commodification and capitalism. A one-dimensional market can also prove to be extremely powerful, as Fiske mentions that the public has been

exposed to only one school of thought. News channels are able to focus on the Clinton Scandal and bombard the American people with repetition as opposed to acting as a forum for diverse opinions: “many observers believe that, as competition has increased, serious content of these broadcasts has decreased” (Mason 83). This is a business of giving people what they want to see and hear. The truth does not “sell” when it comes to the media and politics. The public would rather be entertained than disillusioned. Ailes once told Ken Auletta that he would “not let the war [on Iraq] be a win for CNN,” making the media more like a playing field than a profession. Sadly, many of the networks exploit current events in order to boost their ratings. Rupert Murdoch would not invest in a network if he were not going to receive any profit (there is a reason why he is a billionaire). Both Auletta and Mason agree that a network’s affiliation with politicians and financiers diminish its integrity, and that the media loses its ability to remain a public watchdog when commercial success is at stake (Mason 84).

Much of the demise in the quality of political reporting is attributed to bipartisan politics. Commercial success is closely associated with a network’s affiliation with a political party. *Fox News* is the quintessential example of how party loyalty can garner public support for a particular network. *Fox News* is known as one of the most popular news networks on cable, and is also the home of *The O’Reilly Factor*, cable’s highest rated television program. Fox has an important advantage over all the other networks because it was created for a certain purpose and has maintained a consistent image since its inception: “In large part because of Ailes, *Fox News*, in its short life – it debuted on October 7, 1996 – has established an unmistakable identity; it is opinionated and conservative, and its news is delivered by people who themselves are often unabashedly opinionated and conservative” (Auletta 2). *Fox News* is the brainchild of the boisterous Roger Ailes and is the answer to the liberally biased CNN. Since Ailes is opinionated and outspoken himself, it is only natural that he would spearhead a network based on his own personal philosophy. Both he and Rupert Murdoch, the investor behind Fox, “shared conservative political viewpoints” and charged that CNN was “too liberal” for their tastes (Auletta 3). According to David Niven, the conception of *Fox News* was inevitable given the circumstances during the 1990’s: “Allegations of liberal bias were amplified in the aftermath of the 1992 election. A survey of Washington journalists found that 89 percent had voted for Democrat Bill Clinton in 1992, 7

percent for Republican George H.W. Bush. . ." (Niven 54). In order to create an opposition, dissidents need to rally against the zenith of popularity and majority. The Clinton Administration signified the height and popularity of liberalism in America. Niven finds this progression only natural since the media was predominantly liberal at the time. The Democrats involved in the media were aware that it was in their and the party's best interest to favorably portray the Clinton Administration. *Fox News* followed the same party affiliation model set up by the Democrats, except they adamantly supported conservative ideology and the Bush Administration.

The growth in the conservative community was not because of a popular candidate; instead it was based on the follies of President Clinton. The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was exactly what *Fox News* needed to tap into the hearts of conservative Americans. The Republican Party needed to rally around a cause that would unite them, and surpass the Democrats' popularity, "There were a certain number of people out there that had given up on network news, because they just couldn't take it . . . What we needed was a story they simply couldn't take their eyes off" (Auletta 6). Fox correspondent, Brit Humes, accurately identifies the origin of the network's success. Auletta believes that the Clinton scandal helped *Fox News* find its political base despite its specific intentions at its conception. *Fox* catered to the individuals who despised Clinton with constant reports on his wrongdoings. Other networks wanted to match, if not supercede *Fox*'s ratings, and they too adopted similar Clinton-bashing campaigns. Fiske makes an interesting observation on popular culture in industrialized societies by saying that, "[Popular culture] does exist, even though it may never be pure and authentic, for it is always made from cultural resources that are opposed to it, it is always contradictory and inscribed with traces of that to which it is opposed" (Fiske 54). Employing Fiske's theory, it can be said that *Fox News* and its principles are a symbol of popular culture and initially started as a small (outspoken) voice against liberal popularity. What was once the minority is now a recognized voice within our culture.

According to Robert Mason, the prospect for a reliable and balanced media looks bleak. Americans will continue to remain politically uniformed due to the fact that they simply do not care. People would rather hear about personal failures than political triumph. As he says:

The survey suggests that there is much evidence in support of the irresponsibility thesis. It also suggests that little is likely to change. The primary reason is commercial. "With limited demand for first-rate journalism, most news organizations cannot afford to supply it," observes Robert Entman, "and because they do not supply it, most Americans have no practical source for information to become politically sophisticated." (Mason 82)

Mason initially attributes all of the public's misinformation on the media. The origin of the title of his article "If You're Disgusted with Us, I Don't Blame You" is actually a quote from Dan Rather in reference to the media's blunders with the 2000 Presidential Election, when the networks reported inaccurate information for the sake of ratings. Mason's sentiments correspond to those of Fiske, that the news is a cultural commodity that generates revenue. The Clinton scandal and its beneficial effects for *Fox News* demonstrate the importance of public popularity. The misinformation begins when the public only wants to hear a certain perspective (in this case, anti-Clinton remarks) and the media delivers exactly what the people want to hear. *Fox News* realized that commercial success lies in the ability to entertain Americans, and created a marketable storyline and characters to intrigue its audience.

The rising power of American conservatism coupled with the plague of a one-dimensional audience leaves little room for a vocal opposition within this country. Newscasters no longer challenge the ills of society, but manipulate and regurgitate the same stories. Rejected by the media, political commentary needs a home, and *The Simpsons* has replaced the media as the cultural watchdog for our country. The cartoons are able to make social commentaries without the castigation of a bureaucracy. Robert Singh prides the show on its ability to "have married a form of communication that is supposedly 'unserious' to a subject matter" (Singh 210). Part of the show's success may be due to its "unserious" image and the ability to attack current social issues. The audience is allowed to remain at ease and entertained while subconsciously accumulating political and social sophistication. Every aspect of our culture is subject to scrutiny on the show. However, American priorities are in serious trouble if *The Simpsons* tackles more controversial topics than the media. "[W]hat is at stake in acceptability," Singh points out, "is not the conventional criticisms but the refusal in American media to confront the theme of failure" (217). News channels are supposed to support First Amendment Rights, but lately it appears

as though *Fox News* has been on a witch hunt to castigate anyone who voices dissatisfaction with government policy. The undercurrent of social paranoia in this country has made people afraid to speak out against America, for fear of being punished and blacklisted. September 11th had a profound effect on the media, and networks became discouraged and afraid to report on anything that was not pro-American: "Coming out of 9/11, something happened that made people feel that if you questioned anything you were liable to be labeled unpatriotic" (Auletta 7). This statement by a CBS executive accurately describes the condition we now live in. The demand for "real" news has been eclipsed by the need to be superficially patriotic. The news should have a more serious purpose than a sitcom. *The Simpsons* is open to individual interpretation whereas the news is supposed to be factual and one-dimensional.

It is acceptable for the Simpson family to grapple with incendiary social issues because of their cartoon status. A recent episode of the show (post-September 11th) demonstrates how the show upholds its commitment to social commentary. The ending of the episode is the most significant, when a huge fight erupts at a Springfield Isotopes baseball game. Ultimately, all of the participants agree to end the donnybrook when they see Marge Simpson crying. At someone's suggestion, everyone convenes in the middle of the field to sing a song of peace. However, the characters opt to sing the Canadian national anthem—as opposed to our own, which has been associated with war and violence. The majority of the viewers were not offended by this ending because the political comment was masked by the silliness of the show.

Unfortunately *The Simpsons* falls into the realm of popular culture and therefore cannot be discounted as mass culture. While it is true that recurring characters on the show like Kent Brockman and Mayor Joe Quimby parody the two largest corruptors of the American psyche, the media and politics, the show's elitist and intellectual implications are diminished by lowbrow central characters like Homer and Bart Simpson. Jon Bonne argues that the show's cultural authenticity has become increasingly lackluster over the years, "hopelessly on track to TV hell, allowing *The Simpsons* to drift toward ever-coarser humor and lowbrow view of the world that bore little resemblance to the subtle work of earlier years" (Bonne 2). A wonderful example is an episode where Springfield is divided into two districts: Springfield and Olde Springfield. News reporter Kent Brockman claims that the

inhabitants of Springfield are inferior to the citizens of the other district. He mocks the Springfieldians by saying they use lowbrow expressions like “C’mere a minute” and immediately Homer and Bart start using the same expression.

The father-son duo embodies the demise of intellectualism in this country. The satiric nature of the show permeates the characters because if Bart and Homer were real, they would not inspire the viewer to identify nor understand the social implications within the show. The brilliance of the show is that each family member functions of a parody of something in American life. For example, Bart and Homer satirize the epidemic of ignorance in this country while Lisa is a parody of leftist politics. Bonne claims that guest stars such as Michael Moore and the show’s references to American scandals like Enron and the Clinton Impeachment are “incongruous” with the nature of the show. His statement is only accurate, however, when applied to the people like the Homers and the Barts who watch the show. Those who are not politically conscious would find these social references inconsistent with the show’s format; however, audience members who think of themselves as knowledgeable would certainly appreciate the many facets of the show. It is true that the mass appeal of *The Simpsons* prohibits the show from achieving the echelon of “high culture”; however, I believe that it should also not be demoted to the pits of popular culture. The show is a successful satire because it not only mocks state institutions, but the viewers as well. People may not watch the show to “inform” themselves, yet the writers and producers of the show stealthily incorporate parody into the show, “Other characters were no longer mere props for Homer’s gags. Sly social satire was seamlessly woven in” (Bonne 3). Bonne pinpoints how mass culture can successfully educate a one-dimensional audience, with satire woven in “seamlessly,” so well disguised that the average “Homer” cannot detect it.

Subtlety is what makes *The Simpsons* a part of elite culture. The intellectual and comedic nuances are so beautifully crafted, they are almost undetectable to the Barts and Homers of this world. The writers of this show are able to tackle some of our country’s most complex issues with wit and delicacy. The Clinton Impeachment was an event that most Americans will never forget. “Sunday, Cruddy Sunday” aired on January 21, 1999, during the sensational height of the Impeachment. The episode is actually about the Super Bowl; however, the writers cleverly make reference to the Clintons’ predicament:

Homer: It's a deal! Hey, Moe, you wanna come with me and Wally

to the Super Bowl?

Moe: Oh, absolutely! My favorite team's in it! The . . . [*he brings a beer mug up to his mouth, obscuring the exact motion of his lips*] Atlanta Falcons. Yeah, ever since I was a boy, I've always loved the . . . [*again, with the mug*] Atlanta Falcons.

Homer: Yeah, they're good, but I wouldn't count out the . . . [*gestures for the mug, and also does the mug bit*] Denver Broncos.

Wally: Yeah, I hear that President . . . [*mug*] Clinton is gonna to be watching with his wife [*mug*] Hillary. (Meyer 24)

Although this transcript does not do justice to the joke, one can see the satiric nature of Homer and Moe's interaction. In the cartoon, the mug is used to cover the characters' mouths, so one cannot read their lips. The device was used for the Broncos and the Falcons because the show aired a week before the Super Bowl; the writers only speculated who would be the final two teams. The same gesture was applied to the President and First Lady, implying that it was uncertain who would be in office by the time the show aired. Clever indeed.

Kent Brockman is a recurring character on *The Simpsons* who symbolizes the flawed American media. In this example, Bart seeks Kent's advice when the Simpson siblings collaborate on a news show called "Kidz News." Bart realizes that he is not as smart as his sister Lisa, but he knows that he has something that she does not have—charisma. Kent teaches Bart some tricks of the trade that will win the viewers over and allow him to triumph over Lisa:

Bart decides to visit Kent Brockman's house for help. Kent answers the door holding a drink and wearing a pink jogging suit.

Bart: Mr. Brockman, I need your help. I've got to become a great anchor so I can show up my sister.

Brockman: Sister, huh? Heh, I've got a sister. Miss Big-Shot CNN-Washington correspondent. Pfft. Well, she's not the boss of me! Come in!

Led through the "Trophy Route" to the den, Bart gets a chance to see Kent's various awards, lining the lengthy hall with gleaming metal. Kent decides to let Bart in on his secret.

Kent turns on a tape of an old newscast, in which he stands in front of a carousel. We watch.

Hear that? It's the sound of children's laughter. . . silenced. That's because tomorrow, this old carousel, which has delighted young Americans for lo these past six years, will be torn down, to make way for the future: a store that sells designer mouse pads. *He gets closer to the carousel, and stands next to a blue-colored horse. Kent decides to go for one last ride. The song "Turn, Turn" begins to play, and the carousel comes to life. Kent rides the horse around, coming in and out of view as he bids us farewell. Back in the present, at Brockman's house, Kent smiles at Bart, who understands now what he has to do.* (Doyle 19)

What Bart has to do is appeal to his audience's emotions. It does not matter how inane the story is, or even if the story is newsworthy or not. As long as the people want to watch it, Brockman and Bart will keep giving it to them. The battle in the cartoon world and in the real world is between "fluff" and substance. Although Kent is not a first rate newscaster, he certainly has the awards to prove it. The most ironic element in this transcript is the mention of CNN. Once the benchmark of journalistic integrity, CNN is now involved in a brutal ratings battle with the rest of the networks.

As *The Simpsons* have taken over social commentary and satire, conversely, political talk shows have taken on a more "low brow" character, where Homer-like citizens are able to say or do anything on national television. The zany behavior on shows such as *The Simpsons* is now being duplicated on *Fox News*. Ken Auletta claims that, "no one piles up higher ratings than—or outshouts—Bill O'Reilly, who announces that his program is a no-spin zone" (Auletta 8). *The O'Reilly Factor* is more like a three-ring circus than a conservative talk show. Indeed, a great deal of shouting and arguing occurs between Bill and his guests, but the predominant conservative theme rules the show. O'Reilly never speaks out against the conventions of American politics and society, instead he verbally assaults those that come on his show and try to challenge him. Ailes hails his network, specifically O'Reilly's show, as being "stimulating" and "entertaining." Note that he never uses words like "controversial," "ground-breaking" or "accurate." *Fox News* is not competing with social satires like *The Simpsons* to promulgate culturally and intellectually valuable content; Ailes and his network want high ratings and mass entertainment appeal. Bill O'Reilly and others like him are vital to the network's

success because they are outrageous and amusing. Auletta says that Fox sounds like “urgency-crashing noise” sometimes followed by “interesting debate,” and so long as Fox continues to create a three-ring-circus, they will continue to remain at the top of their game. Bill O’Reilly is a network’s marketing dream because he generates curiosity from his viewers; whether you love the man or hate him, you cannot help but watch his “grown-ups” version of *Romper Room*. In a recent December issue of the *New Jersey Star Ledger*, Alan Sepinwall and Matt Seitz surmise that O’Reilly has morphed from a political talk show host into a cartoon character. He has become the Hulk of cable news networks as opposed to the political pundit he should be: “Bill O’Reilly [has turned] into the self-aggrandizing cartoon character his enemies always accused him of being, and [has] repeatedly [allowed] many of those same enemies to get free publicity by provoking him” (Seitz 2). There is no problem in giving O’Reilly a televised soapbox to stand on; the problem occurs when Americans mistakenly use his show to educate themselves on current affairs and the political system. Political talk shows are no longer informative; instead, news reporters have reverted back to the good old days of muckraking.

The conundrum we face now is deciding who is to blame for the downward spiral of the news. It is easy to blame the powers-that-be, Murdoch, Ailes and the rest, because they control what the public does and does not see. Yet, there are nights when the public would rather hear about the Kobe Bryant case than suicide bombings in Iraq. Seitz indicts “[c]able news channels, for openly drooling over big trials and celebrity scandals. . . while downplaying the fighting in Iraq whenever they could get away with it. By the way, if you only get your news from CNN, MSNBC and Fox News Channel, you might forget that Americans and their allies are still risking life and limb in Afghanistan” (1). These cable news networks are now a form of escapism that the public uses to forget about the daily perils that plague our society. Cases like the Kobe Bryant trial enable the public to establish a moral code; we are able to judge the rich and powerful, and for one brief second, we forget that they are the ones subliminally creating the moral code that radiates from our television screens. One may wonder why someone like Bill O’Reilly has the number one rated show on cable news. It is because we want to watch him, just as if we cannot take our eyes off a train wreck. The networks realize this and they constantly compete with each other to introduce the next O’Reilly, and to be the network that enraptures America.

It is interesting that the Fox Corporation owns the rights to *The Simpsons* because the show acts a paradox—it is both the symbol and antithesis of mass culture in America. The general appeal of the show is unsurpassed in history, yet it satirizes everything about our very existence, identifying the show as elite culture. The popularity of the show ensures the intellectually elite that their “messages” are transmitting to the masses; however, once the rest of America watches the show it is up to the individual to dissect and separate the seamless union between entertainment and satire. If the majority of the audience fails to distinguish the two, we can safely say that *The Simpsons* will soon go the way of the American media, and sooner or later, we will have to start searching for new venues that will properly discuss, evaluate and critique the machinations within popular culture.

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