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NO-SPIN ZONES
The rise of the American cable news magazine and Bill O’Reilly

Chris Peters

Over the past decade a new breed of television journalism, what I term the cable news magazine, has risen to become the highest-rated programming on the cable news networks. Despite their popular appeal, and arguable status as the definitive genre of cable news, such broadcasts receive scant academic attention. This paper analyses the most prominent of these cable magazines, The O’Reilly Factor, on Fox News. I argue that through performing belief, The Factor “re-makes the news” in a manner that lowers the threshold demanded under journalism’s traditional rules of truth. Yet surprisingly, the show also adheres to, or at least lauds, many traditional tenets of the objectivity regime. What is novel, and what possibly accounts for its popularity, is the wilful intertwining of belief, journalistic involvement, and truth-claims in a brazen fashion; a dramatic departure from the cool style which epitomised twentieth-century journalism.

KEYWORDS belief; cable news; objectivity; The O’Reilly Factor; rules of truth; trust

Introduction

I don’t have to be a culture warrior. I could make millions doing straight anchor work or just writing books. But I’m on a mission, one that I’m going to define for you throughout this book, and the mission is important. At this point, all the conflict has been worth it. The Factor has changed many things in America and put a horde of bad guys on the defensive and some out of business. Of course, some Americans see me as the bad guy. They are entitled to their opinion. But after ten years of unprecedented success, millions of you understand that my programs are trying to fight the good fight. You know the culture war is serious and needs to be fought honestly and effectively. We do that on The Factor. And we do it with no fear. (Bill O’Reilly, 2006—explaining the rationale behind his aggressive posture on cable news’ most popular program)

Belief is a concept often misconstrued as faith. Both may be associated with religion, yet faith implies the absence of any possibility of proof. Belief, meanwhile, implies a disputable position based on the accumulation of “fact”. Harnessing belief—as opposed to professing faith—is the staple of opinion and editorialising in journalism; hypotheses, convictions, and suppositions weaved in with rhetoric and fact. And by and large, objective journalistic regimes traditionally seek to delineate belief from fact, and op-ed from reportage (Hackett and Zhao, 1998; Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1978; Ward, 2005).

However, there have always been areas of journalism where such divisions are blurred and broken. The coverage of sports, for instance, while separating itself from faith-based displays of fandom, routinely goes beyond the box score to state beliefs about performance. Style, arts, and travel sections are similarly unencumbered by the need to keep opinion at
arm’s length from fact. While these spheres willingly mesh fact with opinion, so-called “hard” news generally tries to maintain “objective” boundaries. However, a new breed of television journalism, what I term the cable news magazine, sees hosts who appear quite comfortable sauntering between the roles of reporter or source, journalist or pundit, often appearing to wear all these hats at the same time.

The aim of this paper is briefly to explore the popularisation of these magazines, which have become ubiquitous on primetime cable news, before analysing the most successful of these shows, The O'Reilly Factor, on Fox News. I argue that through performing belief (much as Jon Stewart performs irony), Bill O'Reilly’s cable magazine “re-makes the news” in a manner that lowers the threshold demanded under journalism’s traditional rules of truth while simultaneously appealing to his dedicated audience as a “superior” form of news. To understand how this occurs, I compare The O'Reilly Factor’s similarities with, and divergences from, conventional network news. Surprisingly, many of the traditional tenets of the objectivity regime are adhered to, or at least lauded, on The Factor. This enables the programme to appear almost Janus-faced: claiming to uphold and respect journalism’s hallowed conventions (seen with Fox’s omnipresent “fair and balanced” slogan) while simultaneously claiming to be forward-looking and redefining the profession.

Explicating how emergent forms of journalism marshal their “rules of truth” through a consciously crafted “experience of involvement” can provide for an understanding of how novel forms craft a product that, while evidently deviating from traditional journalism, is nonetheless considered by many as “news” (Peters, forthcoming). Some may bristle at this suggestion, for it is fair to say that the journalistic value of programmes such as The O'Reilly Factor has not been widely espoused by academics and journalists. Indeed, despite being the most watched show on cable news, The O'Reilly Factor has been the focus of only one peer-reviewed article (Conway et al., 2007). Nonetheless, this programme sits atop the cable news rankings and has since 2000 (Ariens, 2009). Six of the top 10 programmes on US cable news are similar magazines, and these programmes generated an average combined viewership of 13 million viewers per evening during the first quarter of 2009 (Shea, 2009). Ignoring such programmes, which unequivocally declare themselves to be first-rate news products, is misguided and ill-advised.

It is instructive to consider that a 2005 Annenberg poll found that 40 per cent of Americans identified Bill O'Reilly as a journalist, versus 30 per cent for Watergate journalist Bob Woodward (Lester, 2005). This despite his more contentious standing in the field; a similar poll found only 11 per cent of journalists identified O'Reilly as “somewhat close” to being a journalist while 93 per cent said Bob Woodward was “somewhat close or very close” (Lester, 2005). In recent years, it seems a self-proclaimed “fake” news anchor in Jon Stewart and a former tabloid news anchor in Bill O'Reilly have become the media darlings of the US left and right. These programmes mimic (though do not usurp) many of the traditional functions of national broadcast news, interviewing prominent political figures, covering the major national issues of the day, and so forth. Accordingly, while I am not sure whether one should call such programmes journalism, in the traditional sense, an association is difficult to deny as such programmes epitomise the increasingly grey area between “news” and “entertainment” (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001).

For many academics, the exaggeration, vitriol, and “journalism of assertion” associated with cable news (see Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999) may make it easy to dismiss and difficult to “take seriously” (cf. Zelizer, 2004). The 2009 coverage of health care reform on Fox News and its apparent association with uniformed hyperbole undoubtedly makes this
an easy position to adopt. Nonetheless, this is exactly what I advocate we should not do. Instead, by trying to understand the elements of emerging news forms that seem to provide legitimacy, rather than following what seems a more frequently trod, though less productive, avenue—briefly pointing out their flaws in broad strokes, or simply discounting them as alternatives altogether—we can advance research that interrogates the pedagogical and cultural impacts of twenty-first-century “journalisms”.

In this vein, this paper looks at The O’Reilly Factor, and O’Reilly in particular, to consider his opinion on the journalistic craft and his place within it. To examine his claims more closely, and personal hypotheses generated during a casual, though regular viewing of The Factor which began in 2005, a closer study was conducted on episodes recorded from 7 to 18 May 2007, a period falling during the Nielsen ratings’ May sweeps.

What is significant about the development of cable news magazines is not that “belief” has crept into reporting. Nor is it necessarily that being open with one’s beliefs is any greater of an impediment to “truth” than attempting to bury them below the surface. What is novel, however, is the wilful intertwining of the two in such a brazen fashion, a dramatic departure from the “cool” style which epitomised twentieth-century journalism (cf. Stearns, 1994). For viewers, rather than having to engage in a minimal level of contextualisation, such cable magazines often “pre-digest” the facts, to impute stance and significance. Sources are no longer the only ones offering interpretation, with the anchor intervening on the audience’s behalf to leave little doubt over the definitive word. No longer just the expert mediator between sources and facts, the belief-driven journalist becomes a personality. They become news in their own right.

Feeding the Beast—The Rise of Cable News

They’re worried about their ratings; I’m worried about the number of voters that are going to vote for my guy . . . They’re trying to make their newscast the most exciting and visual and the least wordy and thoughtful. If they can do that they may get the highest ratings. There’s nothing wrong with that, just admit it . . . The thing that I object to is these journalists running around saying that Roger Ailes is doing something different from what they’re doing. (Roger Ailes, Chairman and C.E.O. of Fox News, in his pre-Fox days, explaining the congruence between his job as a political advisor and the goals of journalism; Hamilton, 2004, p. 173)

Cable news, which first came to prominence in North America when CNN launched in 1980, now includes Fox News, MSNBC, and BBC World among others. While the first ten years of this innovation met with limited success, the 1990s ushered in a new era with CNN’s ongoing coverage of both the OJ Simpson trial and the first Gulf War leading to a rapid increase in viewership. Previous to this, events such as the protests in Tiananmen Square or the fall of the Berlin Wall gave a sense of the potential impact of a continuous, real-time, broadcast news outlet. These events in the late 80s and early 90s, which established CNN as a significant and unexpectedly lucrative player in an increasingly globalised mediascape, inspired other networks to launch all-news options to compete. (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999)

The staple of cable news is threefold: “news on demand”, up-to-the-minute coverage of the latest headlines and breaking news; “crisis coverage”, uninterrupted coverage, continually updated and on the scene, ranging from the significant (Hurricane Katrina) to the trivial (the death of Anna Nicole Smith); and the primetime cable magazines, programmes...
that rely heavily upon personalities and conflict and serve as the “appointment” programming for these networks (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). The most prominent of these shows, *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity's America* on Fox, and *Anderson Cooper 360°* on CNN, competes directly against the entertainment-based primetime schedule of the national networks and represent the highest viewership for cable news outside crisis coverage, when audience numbers spike dramatically.Originally envisaged as a continuous update of the news, the image of cable news has increasingly become these hour-long shows. The posture of most flies in the face of accepted journalistic wisdom, well summarised by the Associated Press which notes: “By definition, the act of informing the members of such a society is the act of separating fact from opinion. People want to make up their own minds, and a reporter who seems to be trying to do it for them quickly loses credibility” (Kalbfeld, 2001, p. 27). Mistakenly, one might therefore conclude that all principles of professional journalism are discarded in the cable news magazine. However, a more accurate assessment is that many “objective” tenets are maintained, while objectivity’s most visible mandate—distance—is rejected (cf. Lichtenberg, 1991). The President of CNN, Jonathan Klein, notes that the inclusion of personality serves, “the passions of our journalists show up on television rather than being left on the newsroom floor” (Swarns, 2006). The C.E.O. of Fox News, Roger Ailes, remarks, “Cable is an edge business . . . Brian Williams [anchor of the NBC Nightly News] has no edge, so he sits there and mumbles in his nice shirts and can’t get through” (Auletta, 2003). These perspectives challenge fundamental assumptions about how journalists should make the news—and it seems to have met with success.

What Factors In?—Bill O’Reilly’s Cable Ascendency

No longer is the American public a captive audience, and no longer will the folks settle for an expressionless recitation of the news. With the advent of the Internet and round-the-clock cable news, the audience quickly knows the basic facts of a story . . . They want to know how the journalists they trust feel about things that are important to their lives. The news consumer is almost desperate for someone to define the truth of the matter. Thus, the good old days when the Brinkleys, the Cronkites and even Tom, Dan and Peter could simply introduce stories in measured tones are coming to an end. The audience for dispassionate TV news is shrinking; the demand for passionate reporting and analysis is on the rise. (Bill O’Reilly, 2003—upon the death of David Brinkley, detailing the need for “involved” anchors)

As Fox News reminds its viewers throughout the day, *The O'Reilly Factor* is “The #1 Show That Dominates Cable News”. It’s no wonder they do this, according to Roger Ailes, *The Factor* accounts for over one-tenth of the Fox News Channel’s revenue (Kitman, 2007). This dominance is not constrained to cable news; O'Reilly has penned four non-fiction books that reached the top of the *New York Times* bestsellers list and co-authored a non-fiction children’s book in 2005 that was a top seller. His *Radio Factor* was a top 10-rated programme until he stopped in 2009, and in 2006 he was placed on the Forbes 100 list of the most influential celebrities with earnings estimated around $9 million per year. In short, the influence of O'Reilly stretches far beyond what one would expect from a show drawing between 2.5 and 3.5 million viewers per evening. His feuds with others in the media, the relentless promotion of *The O'Reilly Factor* on Fox News, and the nightly parody of him in *The Colbert Report*, prompted *The New Yorker* to declare that “O'Reilly dominates cable news as
much as Walter Cronkite dominated network news during his heyday, if not more so’’ (Lemann, 2006).12

The first image viewers are treated to each evening is O’Reilly looking straight into the camera, leaning forward to project himself outwards to his audience as he intones, “The O’Reilly Factor is on. Tonight . . .”. At this point a graphic of the show’s title appears, sweeping away to reveal short video packages that serve as teasers. Having teased us with three or four items, we return to O’Reilly, who sweeps his arm around, a serious expression on his face, as he points at the camera to declare, “Caution! You are about to enter, [raises eyebrows, intonation] the no-spin zone”.13 At this point, O’Reilly smiles before continuing, “The Factor begins; Right now”. O’Reilly’s posture in this “no-spin zone”, as McChesney notes, is that

all the B.S. and hot air that politicians and hustlers try to spew before the American people to mask their naked self-interest will be exposed for the tripe it is. O’Reilly claims to slice through the crap and reveal the truth to the masses. As one watches this lover of truth slay his victims on a nightly basis, one is to be reminded of the plain-talking, straight-shooting classic American hero. (2003, p. 7)

And right from the outset, one has a pretty good idea where O’Reilly is going to focus his sights.

The warmth and confidence of O’Reilly’s welcome stands in stark contrast to the mood crafted in the opening teasers, which evoke threat and injustice. On 7 May for instance, the first teaser informed of a “Far-Left Frenzy”. As O’Reilly went on to explain, “The far left continuing to run wild and a shocking new poll to prove it” (The O’Reilly Factor, 2007a). The next teaser, “Paris to Prison”, showed an image of the heiress Paris Hilton as O’Reilly asked frustratedly, “will young people finally get the message?” At this point, a computerised graphic of prison bars slammed across her photo. On 14 May, the first teaser promised a “Vermont Confrontation”, another in a series of ongoing segments over “Jessica’s Law”, with a Factor producer confronting a Vermont congressperson with the question, “Why aren’t you protecting the children against child rapists, instead you’re passing bills that protect transsexual rights” (The O’Reilly Factor, 2007e). This juxtaposition of threatening information with a confident host is also subtly reflected in the videos that accompany each package. While each video is bordered by a capital “O” shape, at times the “O” thickens and lines are added, the effect of which is a target focused upon the images being displayed (see Figure 1).

The opening title sequence following these teasers is quite short, lasting only about 15 seconds; a fast-paced, visually stimulating, red, white and blue creation of swooping stripes and a rotating capital letter “O”. During this progression, background music plays which is reminiscent of the theme for the 1980s police drama, Miami Vice, remixed in a style evocative of network news theme music. As it builds to a crescendo, the mood which is set is almost a meld of the news and police crime genres—excitement, seriousness, and law and order (cf. Bull, 2001). The tempo of this music increases throughout the introduction, giving a sense of mounting importance before we return to O’Reilly in studio. At this point, he smiles and delivers a pleasant, “Hi I’m Bill O’Reilly. Thank you for watching tonight”.

The segment which follows these pleasantries is always the “Talking Points Memo”, a commentary on a social issue or recent event. Appearing in split screen (see Figure 2), O’Reilly’s remarks in this segment are definitive of the “No Spin Zone” posture which acts as both tag line of The Factor and carriage of O’Reilly. Conway et al. (2007) use this segment to generate their empirical data, undertaking a content analysis that starts from the analytic
point of departure that the programme uses techniques associated with propaganda. While these conclusions seem somewhat accurate, unfortunately this line of inquiry neglects to consider the mannerisms, broader themes, presentational style, or role of this segment in relation to the other portions of the hour-long broadcast. As such, their conclusions tread the common path of counting failings rather than considering elements that resonate with audiences. One obvious example is the frequency with which O’Reilly goes beyond observations in this segment to embark on “crusades” (Hart, 2003), giving instructions and imploring action from his audience. The irony is that while this segment is the one which most clearly replicates op-ed journalism, O’Reilly is far more circumspect with his use of personal pronouns in this section than in other segments. Specifically, he reifies “Talking Points”, speaking in the third-person, as in “Talking Points disagrees” or “Talking Points is concerned”. He is also at his most calm and “professional” during this segment. These 90-seconds often segue into the next segment, “Top Story”, which is the portion of the show most likely to dovetail with the lead stories on network newscasts. However, as with the “Memo”, “Top Story” may cover the latest development in one of O’Reilly’s ongoing social concerns, the most prominent being child sexual predators, left-wing media, or the “culture war”. The difference is that “Top
Story” sees Fox News analysts and personalities interact with O’Reilly, often engaging in a non-confrontational debate (The O’Reilly Factor, 2007e, 2007i).

The remainder of the show maintains a steady format. The “Impact Segment,” which follows the first commercial sees O’Reilly bring on guests to look at issues that have a bearing upon US citizens.16 Following this, the show transitions to an interchangeable set of middle segments, including “Unresolved Problem,” which considers issues O’Reilly perceives are not receiving adequate media attention; “Personal Story,” where a person in the news recounts their experience, and “Factor Follow Up,” which operates as the title implies.

During this middle portion, The Factor also intersperses recurring segments featuring correspondents who engage in supposedly confrontational debate, although the tone is often closer to a pleasant disagreement between friends (see Figure 3). “Mondays with Kirsten and Michelle” sees Michelle Malkin, a right-wing pundit, and Kirsten Powers, her left-wing counterpart, debate an issue; “Fridays with Geraldo” sees Fox News host Geraldo Rivera discuss issues with O’Reilly; “Miller Time” allows former Saturday Night Live “Weekend Update” host Dennis Miller to provide comedic commentary; while “Weekdays with Bernie and Jane” witnesses Bernie Goldberg (right-leaning) and Jane Hall (left-leaning) engage in media criticism.

The final third of the programme returns to a consistent format. “Back of the Book” is a feel-good segment that sees a less intense, more gregarious O’Reilly, reminiscent of the kicker run at the end of some newscasts (see Figure 4). For instance, its recurring “Great American Culture Quiz” pits two Fox personalities against each other with questions that hearken back to an image of a white-picket fenced, neighbourhood BBQ, America (The O’Reilly Factor, 2007i). The penultimate “Most Ridiculous Item of the Day” looks at an issue O’Reilly finds absurd, while “Viewer Mail,” ends each broadcast. Before flogging memorabilia that can be bought on his website, O’Reilly ends the show with a pleasantry, often self-deprecating.

For those who have not viewed The O’Reilly Factor on a regular basis, clips of his famed outbursts probably first come to mind (Kitman, 2007). Yet his performance is a lot more subtle and nuanced than such clips incline one to believe. As others assert (see Auletta, 2003; Kitman, 2007; Lemann, 2006), of all the new breed of cable magazine hosts, O’Reilly is the most polished in terms of his performance. A constant mannerism is unwavering confidence, but O’Reilly hits a host of levels, from quiet introspection, to inquisitive questioning, deferential debate, and light-hearted banter. This performance relies heavily on

FIGURE 3
Genial debate on The O’Reilly Factor
body language and facial expressions. As Ailes noted when he hired him, even with the sound off, O’Reilly makes for compelling viewing (Auletta, 2003).

Seemingly Fair and Balanced—Similarities to Traditional Broadcast News

Perhaps it is because he is the face of a dedicated news network, or perhaps it is because his influence is grudgingly acknowledged, but it is telling that when Bill O’Reilly is critiqued, for all his evident divergences from “hard” news, many still place on him expectations of conduct in terms of accuracy and accountability that reflect the twentieth-century ideal of journalistic objectivity. Journalism can be viewed as a profession where overtly expressive presentation has consistently been distrusted, and is actively discouraged among those entering the craft (Peters, forthcoming). In seeming contrast to this, O’Reilly is confrontational and aggressive. Yet this aggression is couched in what Clayman (2002) refers to as the “Tribune-of-the-People” stance—legitimised aggressive questioning which invokes the fourth-estate notion of the public—which plays upon the fact that journalists have always been granted a degree of leniency in their hostility towards evasive sources. Yet this has limits, to which even O’Reilly is subject; an unspoken line that when crossed, slips into “gotcha” journalism, is considered unprofessional, and demands public contrition (Frank, 2003).17

Similarly, other tenets of the objectivity regime further meld The Factor to traditional journalism. Despite being evidently opinion-based, the elementary claim of cable magazines is that they are conduits of fact. When O’Reilly makes a factual misstep, it is well-documented (see Hart, 2003), and although it is unclear whether O’Reilly simply misspeaks, knowingly manipulates, or consciously lies, there is an assumption that, in the words of the Associated Press, O’Reilly (like all “quality” journalism), should have his “facts straight” (cf. Kalbfeld, 2001, p. 68).18 Unlike sports reporting of potential football transfers or basketball trades, where gossip is unabashedly parroted, the sphere of legitimate critique for cable magazines is much closer to that placed on traditional “objective” journalism, a standard of proof assumed to go beyond assertion to verifiability.

Consequently, it should come as no surprise that O’Reilly relies on many time-honoured journalistic techniques to generate an appearance of reality, factuality, and fairness (cf. Tuchman, 1978; cf. Schlesinger, 1987). For instance, political balance is sacrosanct, for when there are discussions on social issues, be it “Mondays with Kristen
and Michelle” or “Weekdays with Bernie and Jane”, The Factor includes guests which give the appearance of fair representation from both sides of the established American political spectrum. In conjunction with O’Reilly’s oft-sung claims that he lacks political affiliation and will critique both sides, as implausible as it may seem, O’Reilly maintains that he is ideologically unclassifiable, something long-held in journalism ethics. To say this is absurd neglects the impact of his performative ability (Lemann, 2006). By unambiguously asserting to his audience how he safeguards traditional journalistic values, O’Reilly does more than just pay lip service—he generates trust and the appearance of truth. He also seems beholden to the tenet of the objectivity regime that lauds (certain) experts (cf. Schudson, 2001). The credentials of guests on The Factor, from retired military commanders who analyse wars to economists for financial crises, provide further legitimacy and comprise an overwhelming proportion of its sources.

Lastly, it is important to note that the semiotic layout of the cable magazines replicates the now culturally familiar form of broadcast news (cf. Barthes, 1957; Cooke, 2005). Be it ABC’s World News Tonight or The O’Reilly Factor, the predictable scene is an anchor at a large desk, backgrounded by video screens, with over-the-shoulder graphics introducing each story. In this regard, an accurate description of the influence of the professional practices on The Factor is that, while damaged along the journey, many tenets, techniques, and visual cues have been transported over to the cable news magazine.

“Involv[ed]” News Anchors—Divergences from Network News

There is a basic energy that traditionally came out of journalism that is pretty much lacking in American journalism today. Whether you agree with me or not, whether you like my style or not, you can’t deny that what we’re trying to do here is not only report the truth, but hold people accountable for their behavior. (Bill O’Reilly in Kitman, 2007, p. 249—explaining how advocacy underlies the rise of his programme)

The cable news magazine can be viewed as a primetime assemblage of sorts: covering national and global issues without matching the budgetary depth and contextual meticulousness of the network newscasts; personalising presentation despite lacking the immediacy of local news; and embracing dramatic presentation while stopping short of the pure entertainment function of sitcoms, dramas, and reality shows. As such, the traditional news cycle is not the primary determinant of each broadcast. Instead, these programmes play on consistent themes and scripts to generate much of their content. In this respect, the cable magazines rarely, if ever, experience the “slow news day” (cf. Boorstin, 1961). As Lemann (2006) notes, “Every journalistic medium produces a characteristic set of forms and attitudes; network news is— even now—about authority, and cable news, increasingly, is about itself”. And when it comes to Fox News’ top-rated programme, content is driven much like its title suggests—O’Reilly determines what the viewer needs to factor in.

The entry of the cable magazine seems to have either ignored or outright rejected the industry dictates that for the past century have acknowledged a key element of being professional is to control one’s degree of personal engagement with a story. This thinking has evident roots in Enlightenment perceptions surrounding the proper exercise of reason and emotion. Whereas discourses around reason locate it in the mind, emotions are located discursively in the body, the historical site of passions, lust, drives, and desire. A distrust of emotion can accordingly be seen to stem from this misgiving (Barbalet, 1998; Dixon, 2003; Elias, 1982). As such, like other endeavours that follow an “objective” method, the craft of
journalism has historically shied away from displaying a sense of involvement (Peters, forthcoming). While the subject matter of journalism can be emotional, the trusted journalist (like the scientist, judge, or doctor) is encouraged to distance themselves.

The cable magazines implicitly reject this logic, or at least the manifestation of such thinking in terms of performative and stylistic mandates. Anchors like O'Reilly, and from what they state, their audience, are persuaded to a greater extent when passion and involvement are evidently displayed (O'Reilly, 2003, 2006). On many of these programmes, the distance one sees in traditional newscasts is transformed from a mandate to a modicum. Involvement in the cable magazine is not seen as an impediment to truth; on the contrary, utilising one's beliefs often appears to be the point of departure.

This becomes evident when one examines the mission statement for The O'Reilly Factor, which embraces an overriding theme of serving the ignored parts of America. Frames such as standing up for the folks, refusing to accept political spin and so forth reflect this and help generate more or less standardised news scripts (cf. Knight, 2001). Fox News' online description notes that,

“The O'Reilly Factor” also features issues from local markets that do not find the national spotlight on other newscasts. According to O'Reilly, “Just because a story originates from somewhere the networks typically avoid, doesn’t mean it contains less challenging issues, or compelling ideas”. (Fox News, 2007)

The Factor thus, quite wilfully, flips multiple elements of journalism on their head. Coverage shifts from events to issues, the assumed audience shifts from the general citizen to the personal viewer, authority shifts from the expert to the anchor, and personal involvement is embraced rather than eschewed.

This practice is reflected in the three tag lines that accompany advertisements (see Figure 5) for The Factor: “No Spin”, “No Free Pass”, and “Looking Out for You”. It is also quite evident in the interaction between the anchor and his guests (The O'Reilly Factor, 2007a–j). O'Reilly measures responses to interviewees based on whether or not what they are saying “makes sense”, rather than on the accuracy of their information or credentials. Put otherwise, lay knowledge (in the form of the anchor acting on behalf of the audience) comes to be embraced at the same time that expert knowledge (in the form of sources acting on behalf of official institutions) is questioned (cf. Wynne, 1996). This is a worrisome development. If the time constraints of news make it very difficult to express a counter-

![Figure 5](image-url)

**FIGURE 5**

Advertisement for The O'Reilly Factor
vailing viewpoint, especially a radical one (see Herman and Chomsky, 1988), a common-
sense approach compounds this by insisting responses to highly complex issues be put in
“plain” English—this focus on so-called straight talk claiming to cut through political
posturing to get more effectively at the truth. This is part of a broader trend across “most
forms of public discourse [which] now work hard to avoid the formality and distance that
were once important markers of its identity as ‘public’” (Cameron, 2004, p. 124).

This anti-elitist approach simplifies vastly complicated and nuanced affairs into
understandable generalisations. While a common critique is that dwindling attention spans,
proliferation of media options, and focus on style over substance has turned American
politics into a sound-bite driven form of news, cable networks take this one step further by
discouraging explanations that do not jibe with everyday understandings (Cameron, 2004;
Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999). Take the following exchange O’Reilly had with a Democratic
strategist in response to a 2007 report that 35 per cent of registered Democrats believed that
President Bush had knowledge of the 9/11 attacks before they occurred.

O’Reilly: Why do you think they believe this?
Roginsky: Like I said, I think it’s primarily because they’ve been lied to time-and-time again.
[Camera cuts back to O’Reilly, eyes closed, looking down while he shakes his
head.]
Whether it’s “Mission Accomplished” or whether it’s “We’ll be greeted as
liberators” or—
O’Reilly: That doesn’t make any sense.
Roginsky: Well it does make sense to me—
O’Reilly: It just doesn’t make any sense. Because you can’t make that quantum leap from
a disagreement in policies—and there are no lies, we had George Tenet in last
week—
[adopts dismissive tone, makes slashing hand movement]
and there are no lies. (The O’Reilly Factor, 2007a)

While O’Reilly’s premise for having the guest on is that he wants to understand how
such a large percentage of Americans could believe what he refers to as “madness”, all
potential explanations are interrupted and rejected out of hand as not making sense.

The broader implication of this is twofold—first, that events/issues that do not
conform to commonsense are aberrations; and second, that proof is held in belief. For
example, O’Reilly explains that the Iranian government is not speaking on behalf of its
citizens because, “I know Iranians” (The O’Reilly Factor, 2007e); and Katie Couric’s poor
ratings on CBS are explained as “a woman thing”, which he defends by saying, “of course I
can prove it . . . It’s an authority position, most Middle Americans who watch news feel
comfortable with a man in that position. That’s what’s going on” (The O’Reilly Factor, 2007f).
In the world of the cable magazine, the beliefs of the host are both the starting point for
debate and evidential proof for assertions, a process that defies the traditional process of
“truth-making” adopted under the objectivity regime. Rather than assess political rhetoric
against expertise, O’Reilly counters with commonsense.

This is reflective of the highly personalised orientation of cable magazines. O’Reilly
admits that the types of stories he selects need to be able to draw in an audience quickly and
sustain its interest (Kitman, 2007). Language selection reflects this sort of “in crowd”
mentality. The Factor viewers are familiar with O’Reilly-speak, shorthand such as “S-P jihad”
(secular-progressives and their associated agenda) that are immediately recognisable to the
devoted viewer. This is a parsed example of a broader logic whereby cable magazines display great control not only in terms of terminology and sources, but in terms of which events warrant coverage. Put otherwise, these hosts often are their own news cycle.

In this sense, the cable magazine, while certainly claiming to be journalism, performs the illusion of existing outside the mainstream. This stance is achieved by commenting on traditional outlets—be it the *New York Times* or *CBS Evening News*—as part of a nearly undifferentiated mass. The implication by O'Reilly is that he is "above" the pitfalls that befall traditional news. This bears affinity to the characterisation that Western society is experiencing a period of reflexive modernity, one characteristic of which is a continual re-examination of the knowledges, practices, risks, institutions, and so forth that modernity created. One element of this trend is people turning away from expertise—to lay knowledge, home remedies, religious edicts, and community groups—to find solutions (Beck, 1994). "Trust" is no longer simply bestowed by expertise but must be won over and actively sustained. Giddens (1994, p. 187) notes that institutions now utilise "a process of mutual narrative and emotional disclosure", in order to gain and sustain the trust of their public. It may be that cable magazines break down the lay-expert divide, simultaneously critiquing traditional news outlets, in an effort to win over the trust of audiences that are increasingly turning away from network news to embrace other alternatives.

In what is an unexpected echo of the left-leaning propaganda model (see Herman and Chomsky, 1988), the assertion by O'Reilly is that traditional journalistic outlets are floundering because they fall prey to special-interest groups and politicians. As he is fond of proclaiming before he reports, "You won't see this anywhere else" (Gross, 2005). O'Reilly hence gives an impression, at times bordering on the paranoid, that his steadfast tackling of issues is noble and heroic.

Yes, I do truly despise the ideological fanatics, the media vermin who couldn't care less about truth or justice . . . My goal is to expose and defeat people who have the power to do you great harm. My weapons will be facts and superior analysis based on those facts. It is absolutely fair and vital to democracy to confront people in the arena of ideas. I'll leave the smears to the yapping character assassins. They will destroy themselves. (2006, p. 5)

He supports such rhetoric by giving example after example on *The Factor* of the "far-left" attacks he continually faces (Kitman, 2007). And this assertion is a rare example of a win-win-win situation. If O'Reilly's spotlighting of an issue is followed by similar mainstream coverage, it is offered as "proof" that he is in front of the curve. If coverage follows that takes a different perspective to him, it is "proof" of a left-wing perspective pervading the media. If no coverage is offered, it is "proof" that the far-left controls the media by suppressing coverage. One imagines the effect of such indictments is powerful for his committed audience. Watching O'Reilly for his devoted followers is akin to following an activist—someone prepared to risk it all to tackle the establishment. Although one might think O'Reilly takes his cue from grassroots populism, his posture is actually more one of alerting the populace to issues of concern. In this regard, elected officials are less frequent guests on *The Factor* than on other cable magazines.  

When one considers the cumulative narrative effect of his newscast, *The Radio Factor*, and non-fiction books, O'Reilly's theme is that he protects a threatened American way of life. His approach to stay the disastrous consequences of what he views as America's "culture war" is through aggressive journalism that "demands energy and commitment, courage and persistence" (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 205). This is couched in a language that posits him as a
defender against patriotic iconoclasts who attack the de facto eminence of America. He notes that it is vital to “Stand up for your country! You can’t be part of the traditional force unless you truly believe the United States is a noble nation” (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 199). This belief, repeated ad infinitum on The Factor, reinforced by graphical representation, puts one in mind of Soviet agitprop, something which if considered would add depth and further support to Conway et al.’s (2007) analysis of O’Reilly. The fear and prejudice that O’Reilly’s words and graphics potentially invoke, the flag-waving palette, his use of repetition and slogans, and the association with “hard working” “decent folks”, bears a striking similarity with techniques used to convey propaganda. While propaganda is often misconstrued with falsity, a more accurate description is fact infused with partiality and an eye to persuasion. Put otherwise, propaganda is about spreading belief, something embraced on The O’Reilly Factor while shied away from in traditional newscasts.

As O’Reilly noted of his style in 2000, when the show achieved its status as the top programme on cable news, “I provide a solution, and then [the guests and I] debate that rather than the problem” (Larson, 2000, p. 49). Yet despite such simplicity, his use of “generic, decontextualized, and anonymized images”, along with sweeping rhetoric and generalised frames, goes beyond simply crafting his particular vision of the world; these types of report “iconize and legitimize” these depictions as discursively familiar and phenomenologically “real” (cf. Machin and Jaworski, 2006, p. 363). The role of belief in The O’Reilly Factor, similar to other cable magazines, amplifies the posture of certainty and incontestability of the information imparted. The “newsiness” of such programmes comes from interweaving the claim to fact, evidenced in network news, with relaxed rules of truth afforded by the certainty of belief. This, however, is part of their appeal; by employing a charismatic type of leadership (cf. Weber, 1946), such hosts appear to break the stoic façade of the serious journalist. The fact that the anchor’s name always appear as part of the programme title—The O’Reilly Factor, Lou Dobbs Tonight, Anderson Cooper 360°, Hannity’s America, Glenn Beck, Countdown with Keith Olbermann, On the Record with Greta—is accordingly no mere coincidence. While NBC Nightly News, ABC’s World News Tonight, and the CBS Evening News foray into the events of the day with trusted anchors, and 60 Minutes, Dateline, and 20/20 take longer looks at current issues with dedicated correspondents, the personality-driven cable magazine provides time with involved anchors where content is secondary.

The danger of this congruence between anchor and audience is that such “customized media materials…take this lifestyle segregation further. It will allow, even encourage, individuals to live in their own personally constructed worlds, separated from people and issues that they don’t care about or don’t want to be bothered with” (Turow, 1997, p. 7). Yet this is seemingly inconsequential to many hosts. As I have mentioned elsewhere (Peters, 2009, p. 179), one common technique which reflects this is “pat-on-the-back” viewer polls, which often end with laughable results on issues indicating a 90 per cent plus level of accord amongst the respondents—which is then posited by hosts to be representative of the greater American public. The 10 August 2009 “Talking Points Memo” was entitled “Fox News Explodes While the Liberal Media Burns” (The O’Reilly Factor, 2009). Championing his ratings, which saw his 6 August broadcasts draw an audience of 5.4 million, higher than the average July viewership of 5.368 million for the CBS Evening News, O’Reilly noted,

Fair-minded Americans know our reporting is honest…Fox News is now the most powerful voice in the media despite unrelenting attacks from all other press
organizations . . . Fox News is designed to be provocative, truthful, and look out for the regular folks. That’s why our ratings are so dominant. (*The O'Reilly Factor*, 2009)

The effect is a broadcast that far more explicitly works to involve and praise its audience than traditional network news. Cable news anchors actively engage with each and every story they tell, relating notions of fear, anger, and anxiety with their core viewership. This heightens the sensory experience from consuming such cable magazine texts (Howes, 2006).

Ailes attributes the success of *The Factor* to the authenticity of O'Reilly’s presentation, the appearance that he is not merely putting on an act but is aggressive and temperamental even off the air (Kitman, 2007). According to staffers from the *show*, curiosity about O'Reilly’s mood at the start of the day is somewhat pointless, for “everyone knows that O'Reilly is always pissed off, aggrieved, spoiling for a fight” (Colapinto, 2004). In this sense, the charges of fabrication (usually accompanied by charges of ratings-focus) which accompany his performance seem misguided. As Hochschild (1983, p. 35) perceptively notes, unless there is an inner acceptance of the rules of performance, jobs which involve an interaction that conveys feeling will come across as staged. As she notes, surface acting, the “body language, the put-on sneer, the posed shrug, the controlled sigh” will eventually come across as inauthentic if it is not developed into deep acting where the “display is a natural result of working on feeling; the actor does not try to seem happy or sad but rather expresses spontaneously, as the Russian director Constantin Stanislavski urged, a real feeling that has been self-induced”. So whether what O'Reilly *thinks* is consistent, it is less important for the consistency of his performance than the fact that he *believes* it to be true. Thus rather than control being ingrained in performance, something characteristic in the traditional network anchor, belief comes to be the performative quality that must be deeply acted.

In this regard, O'Reilly concedes that the famed slogan of Fox News, “We report. You decide”, might more accurately be described as “We report. We decide” (Auletta, 2003). In this sense, what one witnesses in the cable magazines is op-ed journalism that presents itself as no-less valid than “objective” news. Whereas in traditional network news, editorialising is something that demands special notification to the audience, lest it be misconstrued as factual reportage, the cable magazine makes no such distinction. The certainty of facts becomes wed with the conviction of beliefs.

Conclusion—The Truthiness of Cable News Magazines

The rise of the cable magazines is far more multifaceted than simple charges of sensationalism often suggest. Programmes such as *The O'Reilly Factor* contain similarities with network broadcasts, from stylistic resemblances and the extensive use of experts, to shared declarations of unimpeachable independence and accuracy. Additionally, the position of O'Reilly as the top broadcast on a news network carries a trustworthy status, a position which parallels the cultural role of the network anchor. In short, cable magazines are comparable to traditional newscasts in the ways that they attempt to evoke journalistic authority and authenticity.

While legitimacy may derive from such similarities, success seems more likely attributable to divergences. *The O'Reilly Factor* has established a firm foothold as news among a certain audience partially by finding a form of broadcast that does more than just tweak the traditional frames within the field. As if recognising conventional news sources are finding the balance between informing and entertaining ever-more challenging, O'Reilly
unapologetically rejects well-established journalistic conventions as outmoded in the modern era. This rejection of objective distance generates an appearance of caring about issues, blurring the expectation that ties neutrality and passivity to reasoned argument. Reflecting this, it is not that opinion is embraced that seems to displease many critics of such shows—indeed Edward R. Murrow and Bill Moyers are examples of editorial voices recognised as illustrious members of the journalism community—it is that the specific style of a Bill O'Reilly “type” is often doused with hyperbole, intolerance, arrogance, and dismissal of alternative voices.

This is common across many cable magazines; indeed, one programme quickly gaining in popularity, Glenn Beck on Fox, employs the tagline “Bold. Brash. Beck!” Borrowing from Giroux (2000), perhaps we should view the cable news magazines, with their enthusiastic embrace of involvement, as a site not only of political discourse, but of public pedagogy—irrespective of whether or not one agrees with the lessons being taught. The cultural terrain of journalism has always been a pedagogical enterprise; what O'Reilly and other cable magazine hosts reject, albeit in a less evident way than Rush Limbaugh and the news/talk radio hosts, is detached depoliticisation. Cable magazines are highly effusive in offering their audience continual praise, both implicitly and explicitly, for selecting the “right” brand of news. In this sense, such shows can be seen to be part of a Madison Avenue culture that increasingly brands a product not only on its function but on the values it represents (Machin, 2004).

Just as network anchors perform a solemn role, and weatherpeople are expected to be cheerful types, the cable magazine anchor has come to be expected to practise the craft of journalism with a level of involvement far beyond the network anchor, without compromising a sense of importance. The sense one gets from cable magazines is accordingly not only that passivity and a cool demeanour are uninteresting; the ancillary implication is that related techniques are ineffectual avenues to the truth. Satirist Stephen Colbert’s notion of truthiness quips that such shows attempt to “feel the news, at you”. However, I think it is possible to go slightly further. By pre-digesting the news to feel it with you, the cable magazines contain all the qualities of being newsy, yet simultaneously eradicate the requirements of neutrality, detachment, and independence traditionally associated with quality news.

NOTES

1. The novelty of such programmes is evidenced by the fact that there does not appear to be an established term to describe them. My terminology, “cable magazine”, suggests an affinity with news magazines such as 60 Minutes which have been around for decades; quasi-investigative journalism, typically an hour in length, that consider events in greater detail than the network newscasts. These shows also have a semblance of Sunday-morning talk shows, like Meet the Press, with prominent political interviewees and roundtable discussions. A hint of the traditional newscast is found in these broadcasts with reports that are virtually indiscernible from stories that would be filed on the CBS Evening News. Political debate shows like Crossfire lend their embrace of conflict and volume. There is an occasional flavour of tabloid news magazines such as A Current Affair; salacious stories of sex, celebrity, and crime. A more accurate description might be “cable political talk-show news magazines”, but this noun-train is an awkward construction. As such, I have conceptualised them quite literally as the print news magazine adapted by
the cable networks: short news briefs, longer social stories, interviews, and opinion pieces brought together in a consistent format.

2. A recently released, independent poll indicates that Fox News is now the most trusted news channel in the United States. Approximately 50 per cent of the 1151 respondents said that they trust Fox, ahead of CNN (39 per cent), NBC (35 per cent), CBS (32 per cent), and ABC (31 per cent) (Pilkington, 2010). According to the Nielsen ratings, Fox was also the highest rated of all cable networks in prime time during the Haitian earthquake, averaging 3.2 million viewers. CNN was the next highest-rated cable news network, in 22nd place (Pilkington, 2010).

3. Verified with an EBSCOhost search, August 2009. The O'Reilly Factor also figures as part of the data set for one article on political disengagement (Lee, 2005) and a dissertation on opinionated news and political attitudes (Feldman, 2009).

4. According to mediabistro.com, which tracks TV ratings, The Factor was the top-rated programme on cable news in the third quarter of 2009, a position it has held for 106 consecutive months.

5. Ironically, satirical newscasts (though declaring themselves to be faux news) have received more academic attention than cable news magazines, which make no such claim.

6. There are a number of historical precedents to O'Reilly, from an echo of nineteenth-century print journalism, when partisanship reigned and “objectivity” was not yet the preferred mode of address for the news (see Schudson, 1990), to radio broadcasts in the mid-twentieth century by journalism stalwarts such as Edward R. Murrow or right-wing provocateurs such as Father Coughlin, where the entwinement of news, opinion, and analysis were commonplace.

7. Principal sources include O'Reilly's book Culture Warrior (2006), and a biography, The Man Who Would Not Shut Up: The Rise of Bill O'Reilly (Kitman, 2007), which was authorised until just before publication, when O'Reilly pulled his support because details of a sexual harassment lawsuit were included.

8. May sweeps ran from 26 April 2007 to 23 May 2007, and is one of four periods each year that help determine advertising rates; hence “branding” is likely evident.

9. MSNBC's flagship shows (Hardball with Chris Matthews and Countdown with Keith Olbermann) have never achieved the same audiences as their CNN or Fox News counterparts. Between 2004 and 2008, eight of the top 10-rated cable news shows aired on Fox (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007, 2008). Since the 2008 elections, MSNBC has seen its numbers increase with a rebranding some liken to becoming the Fox News of the left.

10. The O'Reilly Factor draws an average between 2.5 and 3.5 million viewers per night for its 8.00 pm telecast and between 1 and 2 million on its 11.00 pm rerun.

11. The journalists on the list were Katie Couric (No. 62), O'Reilly (No. 76), and Dianne Sawyer (No. 78).

12. O'Reilly was a reporter for over 20 years before his role with Fox. During previous employment with CBS and ABC News, he picked up two Emmy awards for local reporting. However, it is his role as host of the tabloid magazine Inside Edition, from 1989 to 1995, which is prescient of his current incarnation as cable news' most (in)famous personality (Lemann, 2006).

13. Originally, O'Reilly informed his audience that they were about to enter, “a no-spin zone”. One suspects, as a greater number of “tell-it-like-it-is” cable anchors have appeared on
the scene, O’Reilly decided to switch to this definite article to emphasise his top-rated status.

14. This may be true of much op-ed journalism, not just O’Reilly.

15. Some of these include: declaring boycotts (on French products upon France’s refusal to enter the Iraq War); avoiding certain media organisations (the *New York Times* and NBC News are frequent targets), or giving the contact details of politicians he feels need reprimanding.

16. For instance, 7 May focused on the “Twister Tragedy” in Kansas, while 16 May considered the political fallout from Michael Moore’s trip to Cuba (*The O’Reilly Factor*, 2007a, 2007h).

17. The most renowned instance was a 2003 encounter with Jeremy Glick, an anti-war protester whose father was killed on 9/11, who was continually told by O’Reilly to shut up.

18. An example is a 2004 exchange with Canadian journalist, Heather Mallick. O’Reilly threatened to initiate a boycott on Canadian goods, claiming it would wreak havoc on the Canadian economy as it had on France. When Mallick protested that his French boycott was having little effect (something US import figures support), O’Reilly interrupted and bellowed “they’ve lost billions of dollars in France according to *The Paris Business Review*!” As Colapinto (2004) notes of the exchange, “In short, amazing TV—the modern media equivalent of witnessing a Christian torn apart by lions, with a touch of opera buffo thrown in”. However, no such publication, or similarly named journal, exists.

19. Other successful cable magazines also have thematic overtones. *Anderson Cooper 360* boasts, “The show’s hallmark is its ‘Keeping them Honest’ franchise—demanding answers and finding the truth” (CNN, 2007). In comparison, network newscasts offer a description—“provides reports and analysis of the day’s most newsworthy national and international events” (NBC, 2007)—that puts one in mind of traditional fourth-estate discourse.

20. Ailes notes it is difficult to book high-profile politicians on *The Factor*. “Do you want to be lectured by some eight-foot guy telling you you’re an idiot, and you don’t give a shit about the country, and he gives you the last word, then he interrupts you and goes to commercial? I don’t know, I wouldn’t” (Kitman, 2007, p. 198).

21. The claim to represent the “average” American resonates with a vast proportion of the populace who, despite economic or social standing to the contrary, view themselves as typical (Chinni, 2005).

22. This was satirised in a 17 August 2009 *Daily Show* segment, “Poll Bearers”.

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