

“Maybe You Are Fake News”: Donald Trump, Fox News, and Right-wing Criticism of Right-wing Media

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Following the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, Donald Trump became critical of the right-wing cable network Fox News. Rather than an example of bitter infighting on the right, however, his attacks are part of a tradition of criticism of right-wing media. Focusing on President Trump’s communications on the social media platform Twitter, I compare his post-election criticism with his previous criticism of right-wing media and the news media in general. Trump demanded loyalty from Fox News and singled out critical voices for insults, intimidation, and accusations of bias while extolling complimentary voices and promoting competitors. Thus, I argue that the study of Trump’s criticism of Fox News furthers our understanding of right-wing criticism of the news media in general.

Introduction

Late on election night of November 3, 2020, something unexpected happened on Fox News. The state of Arizona turned blue. “Why is Arizona blue?” asked a surprised Bill Hemmer on air. As the first network to call the state for Joe Biden, Fox News faced immediate condemnation from the White House (Peters 2020). Donald Trump was furious. In a report from Washington, the

network's Chief White House correspondent John Roberts described the feelings within the campaign as "livid" (Klein 2020).

Campaign spokespeople and allies of the President condemned the decision in public (Karni and Haberman 2020). Behind the scenes in the White House, the President ordered aides and allies to fight the call on Fox News. Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law, called on the powers that be at Fox News, including the conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch, in a desperate attempt to overturn the decision (Martin and Burns 2022, 214–15).

Both Chris Stirewalt and Arnon Mishkin, responsible for the decision desk at the network, were asked to defend the call on the air. News anchor Bret Baier acknowledged the pressure, "we're getting a lot of incoming here" (Ellison 2020). In private, Baier was reported to have been fuming (Baker and Glasser 2022). "I'm sorry, we're not wrong in this particular case," Mishkin told the anchors on air when pressed, prompting an embarrassed Bret Baier to note, "you don't have to apologize" (Ellison 2020). For the President, however, the outlet described by historians as "closer to state television than anything the United States has ever known" had failed him (Hemmer 2019). What Trump wanted from Fox News was not a right-wing perspective in the news environment, it was loyalty.

Fox News is a potent force in United States politics. Political journalists increasingly scrutinize the close and interdependent relationship between Fox News and the political right (Brock et al. 2012; Sherman 2017; Mayer 2019; Stelter 2020; Gertz 2021). While cable news generally command only a modest audience, as on any given night more than 99% of the population is *not* watching Fox News (Socolow 2019), the viewers include political elites and party activists. "The key to their influence," Ezra Klein (2020, 162) observes, "is that they have the right audiences." Indeed, Fox News enjoys an unrivaled dominance among the political right (Klein 2020, 235).

Acknowledging the considerable political influence of the cable news network, Matthew Yglesias (2018, 683) recently called for "more detailed, more comprehensive, and more rigorous scholarly analysis of the 800-pound [sic] gorilla of the partisan media world." Still, even as Yglesias (2018, 683) describes Fox News as "well-known but poorly understood," there is considerable research in a number of disciplines on the behemoth of right-wing media.[\[1\]](#)

The problem, Anthony Nadler and A. J. Bauer (2020b, 232–33) suggest, is a lack of continuity and interdisciplinarity in the research.

Social scientists have long recognized the peculiar institution of Fox News in modern political life. In a pioneering study, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella (2010) explored the ways in which right-wing media provides cover for conservatives and creates counter-narratives while decrying “liberal bias” in the media. In the last decade, political science research on right-wing media has continued to analyze the influence of the network and the ways the stars of Fox News shape right-wing politics (Cassino 2016; Young 2019.) By reinforcing policy preferences among audiences, the cable network is contributing to the ideological transformation of the Republican Party (Hoewe et al. 2020; Hoewe, Brownell, and Wiemer 2020; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Jamieson and Cappella 2010). Indeed, today Fox News constitutes a key power broker within it, intertwined with both party activists and elites, being a crucial partner in electoral campaigns (Grossman and Hopkins 2018).

Furthermore, Widmer, Galletta, and Ash (2020) have shown that Fox News polarizes the media environment, driving newspapers to move toward the right-wing perspective of the cable network. Communications scholars have also studied how the cable network shapes United States politics (White 2018). By promoting a right-wing style of politics which emphasizes a populist discourse, the cable network enforces the messaging and branding of the Republican Party and party factions (Peck 2019).

Key to the position of Fox News, paradoxically, is a deep distrust of the media. In fact, as Klein (2020, 237) notes, the former motto of the cable network, “Fair and Balanced,” is in itself “an insinuation that the rest of the media is unfair and biased.” Over the last five decades, the Republican Party has embraced attacks on the news media and the free press as part of the party identity (Ladd 2011). Concomitant with right-wing criticism of the media, wealthy conservatives funded the development of a considerable right-wing media ecosystem as a part of the development of the modern conservative movement (Hemmer 2016).

Conservative media, historians have illustrated, laid the foundation for the conservative ascendancy in modern politics (Hemmer 2016; Hendershot 2016; Rosenwald 2019; Brownell 2017). The launch of Fox News in 1996 was the culmination of decades of media activism by Republican operatives and conservative ideologues (Hoewe, Brownell, and Wiemer 2020, 369–72). Today, Nicole Hemmer argues (2016, xiii), the “habit of conservative media consumption [is] part of what it now means be a conservative in America.” Understanding this political and historical context is critical to appreciating the role of Fox News within the right-wing coalition today.

The purpose of this article is to explore Trump's post-election criticism of Fox News to better understand the phenomenon of right-wing criticism of the news media. Trump's assault on Fox News, I argue, was part of the broader right-wing war on the media rather than an aberration or a sign of bitter infighting on the right. Thus, the right-wing criticism of right-wing media provides insight into right-wing criticism of the media writ large. How should Donald Trump's criticism of right-wing media be understood, how does it compare to his attacks on non-right-wing media, and what can his charges tell us about the relationship between right-wing media and right-wing politics? To explore these research questions, I analyze patterns and themes in Donald Trump's communications on the social media platform Twitter, comparing his post-election criticism with earlier criticism of both right-wing media and the news media in general.

Twitter as Source Material

Described as the "first Twitter president," Trump preferred communicating through the popular social media platform both on the campaign trail and in the White House (Cook 2019). Furthermore, political reporters and pundits amplified his communications on and beyond the platform. "Twitter was always Trump's favorite child," media critic Jack Shafer (2021) observed, "and reporters picked up on that, forever citing his Twitter feed." Trump's tweets garnered considerable attention and, according to political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson (2020, 5–6), served as a distraction in political life. "[Trump] uses Twitter as a means of exerting power," media scholars have recognized, "over the media, the executive branch, the legislature, or opponents (Benkler et al. 2018, 19)." Often described as Trump's "favorite" medium, the political significance of the forum is clear (Stevens 2017; Conger and Isaac 2020; Conger and Alba 2020; Wakabayashi 2021).

In the aftermath of the deadly insurrection of January 6, 2021, following Trump's support of the insurrectionists on Twitter, the social media platform announced the permanent suspension of his account "due to the risk of further incitement of violence" (Twitter 2021). With this, all activity (including tweets, retweets, and likes) of the @realdonaldtrump account was deleted and is no longer available on Twitter. The information is not lost, however. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), in collaboration with Twitter, maintains archives of communications from official accounts by members of both the Obama and Trump administration, but the suspension of Trump's account makes this difficult; NARA is still working on creating an

official online archive (Forgey 2021). In the meantime, researchers must rely on other databases. Launched in September 2016, the Trump Twitter Archive, a site recording every tweet from the @realdonaldtrump account into a searchable database, constitutes a valuable resource in this regard (Trump Twitter Archive). Thus, I rely on it for this article.

Between announcing his candidacy for the presidency on June 16, 2015, and the suspension of his account on January 8, 2021, Donald Trump sent over 34,000 tweets from his @realdonaldtrump account, making an average of approximately 17 tweets daily. To manage such an overwhelming amount of source material requires that strict limits be set on the scope of the study. To understand the President's post-election criticism of Fox News requires juxtaposing it with years of attacks on right-wing media and the news media in general.

For this comparative analysis, I selected tweets in which Trump expresses or shares opinions critical of either Fox News (or any employees or representatives of Fox News) or the media and journalism in general (or any individual journalists or representatives of media outlets) in three separate timeframes: January 2016, February 2019, and November 3, 2020–January 8, 2021. In January 2016, candidate Trump engaged in an open and bitter feud with Fox News over campaign coverage, as the cable network was set to host a presidential primary debate. During the same period, he also condemned the right-wing publication *National Review* for its criticism of his lack of conservative bona fides. In February 2019, Trump launched blistering attacks on the media over unfavorable investigative reporting, especially on the connections between his campaign and Russian interests. Following the presidential election in November 2020, Trump spent weeks condemning the media and Fox News.

The selection is not intended to be representative of Trump's term in office, as the analysis is qualitative, not quantitative. For comparative purposes, the selection offers different forms of media criticism communicated by Donald Trump. Even the material in the limited timeframes, however, is considerable: the first period consists of 473 tweets, the second 243 tweets, and the third a total of 1,552 tweets. While my overall analysis focuses on media criticism in the material, in the first period I am exclusively interested in criticism of right-wing media, in the second criticism of other media, and in the third all media criticism. For the purpose of this article, criticism is defined as any negative remark.

January 2016: Insults, Bias, and Ratings

Before Donald Trump received a single vote in the presidential primaries of the Republican Party, he lambasted prominent party members and powerful institutions. The most powerful right-wing institution that the candidate targeted with his vitriol was Fox News. Together with talk radio, Fox News was the kingmaker on the right. It was on Fox News that Donald Trump remade himself, under the direction of Roger Ailes, as a political figure during the Obama years (Mayer 2019). As James Poniewozik (2019, 169) observed, “It was the perfect symbiosis.” But while Ailes created the candidate, Rupert Murdoch viewed him as an embarrassment.

Before the first presidential primary debate in August 2015, Murdoch ordered Ailes to have the debate moderators—Bret Baier, Megyn Kelly, and Chris Wallace—put pressure on the unexpected frontrunner (Sherman 2017, 405–6). “How could you do this?” an angry Trump blasted Ailes in private following the debate. In public, he unleashed a stream of malicious and misogynistic ad hominem attacks on Kelly (Sherman 2017, 406). Ezra Klein (2015) concluded, “Now Trump and Fox News are at war.” But Ailes, who recognized the power of his own creation, did not want to escalate the conflict, and Trump, who recognized the cable network as the key to the Republican base, focused his attacks primarily on the star anchor (Golshan 2016).

By January 2016, Trump—the favorite in opinion polls with the Iowa caucus just around the corner—again escalated his feud with Fox News and other right-wing media. Set to host another presidential primary debate, the cable network intended for Kelly to again serve as a moderator, to Trump’s chagrin. With Trump as the recognized frontrunner, he was increasingly facing criticism from conservatives who were convinced that he did not represent them and would doom the party. The cover of *National Review* in January read “Against Trump,” with the issue featuring a no-holds-barred attack on the candidate. “Donald Trump is a menace to American conservatism,” the editorial board declared (*National Review* 2016). Among the contributors was the right-wing firebrand and conspiracist Glenn Beck. In print and on television, Beck denounced Trump: “If Donald Trump wins, it’s going to be a snowball to hell” (Flegenheimer 2016). These three—Fox News, the *National Review*, and Glenn Beck—emerged as the primary targets in Donald Trump’s Twitter criticism of right-wing media.

“I refuse to call Megyn Kelly a bimbo, because that would not be politically correct,” Trump (2016a) taunted the anchor, “Instead I will only call her a lightweight reporter!” The ad hominem insult illustrates how the candidate reveled in misogynist insinuation and deliberate provocation. Of course, Trump also bartered insults for attention (Winberg 2017). The candidate hurled insults

at outspoken critic Glenn Beck, calling him “very dumb and failing” and “irrelevant” (Trump 2016l; 2016m). Quantitative studies of Trump’s tweets confirm that during the campaign he often targeted individual journalists with insults and intimidation (Sugars 2019). Trump’s vitriol was dangerous. In her book on the campaign, NBC correspondent Katy Tur (2018, 274) claims, “his comments put us in danger.” When Trump attacked Megyn Kelly, she lost the support of the leadership at Fox News and was harassed by viewers, even receiving death threats (Sherman 2017, 406). Research shows that Trump’s attacks on the media garnered considerable attention and engagement (Meeks 2019). Thus, the insults actively served as a tool of intimidation.

Furthermore, Trump equated unfavorable coverage with bias. Several times, Trump either accused right-wing media personalities of bias or retweeted accusations of it (Trump 2016b; 2016c; 2016d). Never, however, was bias defined or examples provided. When Trump accused Kelly of having a “conflict of interest and bias” and suggested she should not be allowed to serve as debate moderator, he seemed to assume the alleged bias was self-evident (Trump 2016e). Trump alluded to months of *him* publicly bullying Kelly, to suggest *she* could not possibly be fair (Golshan 2016). With the slogan “Fair and Balanced,” the brand of Fox News was built around the suggestion that other media is unfair and biased. Yet, as Nicole Hemmer (2016, 270) has shown, the suggestion was also an implicit argument that Fox News “should be trusted because it was right, and because it was right-wing.” Thus, when directed at right-wing media by right-wing candidates, the accusation of bias should be understood as an accusation of not being right-wing enough. For while Trump was fast to decry bias when faced with criticism, he praised the right-wing media stars who disregarded objectivity to extoll him. “Rush Limbaugh is great,” Trump announced, saying he “tells it as he sees it” (Trump 2016f). Similarly, he retweeted a supporter hailing Sean Hannity of Fox News for being “for Trump” (Trump 2016g). While he was in an open war of words with Fox News, he simultaneously relied on friendly faces at the cable network to promote himself and his campaign; these included Hannity, Bill O’Reilly, and Jeanine Pirro (Mayer 2019).

Beyond ad hominem insults and charges of bias, the most pronounced pattern in Trump’s criticism of right-wing media in January 2016 was a focus on ratings, sales, and revenue as measurements of success. Success, by extension, came to suggest journalistic standards. When launching a series of assaults against the *National Review*, Trump focused on what he claimed was low circulation: “National Review is a failing publication” (Trump 2016h). In another tweet, the candidate asserted, “Very few people read the National Review” (Trump 2016i). He also took to calling the magazine

“failing” or “dying” (Trump 2016j; 2016k). When going after Glenn Beck to dismiss his criticism, Trump also pointed to ratings: “Very few listeners – sad” (Trump 2016m).

The same pattern was evident in Trump’s attacks on Fox News: “Without me they’d have no ratings” (Trump 2016n). With a background in television entertainment, Trump was obsessed about this metric (Poniewozik 2017). When Trump called the upcoming debate “a total disaster,” he relied on ratings and revenue—not journalistic or news values—to make his case: “low ratings with advertisers and advertising rates dropping like a rock” (Trump 2016o). Following reports of low ratings after the debate, the candidate gloated and bragged of his power to attract attention, claiming his presence on the debate stage would have resulted in “12 million more [viewers] [and] would have broken the all time record” (Trump 2016p). The focus on profits suggested a keen understanding of right-wing media. Certainly, earlier generations of right-wing media activists, including William A. Rusher, Clarence Manion, and William F. Buckley, prioritized ideological victories over profits and depended on conservative philanthropy (Hemmer 2016). Yet, for talk radio hosts, online outlets, and Fox News, as Brian Rosenwald (2019, 256) has argued, “Any ideological or political agenda was secondary.” Profit was everything (Stelter 2020, 19–22, 284).

Recognizing his ability to attract audiences, Trump understood that he could threaten right-wing media with implicit threats to their bottom line. Besides, he did not need to defeat Fox News but merely show “that he could delegitimize Fox to his followers” (Poniewozik 2019, 222). For years, Fox News had told its audience to distrust or dismiss the media, a message that served to lift the cable network to prominence but also, according to media critic James Poniewozik (2019, 221), “left it vulnerable to someone like Trump.” Trump emerged victorious from his first battle with right-wing media. With his success, Rosenwald (2019, 9) remarked, “eventually Fox News recognized their scion in him.” Shifting the power dynamics between Trump and Fox News, the triumph would shape the relationship and set the stage for the confrontation between them following the 2020 election.

February 2019: Enemy of the People

As Jane Mayer (2019) has observed, “Fox’s embrace of Trumpism took some time.” But with Trump now in the White House, the cable network adjusted. Voices critical of Trump were taken off the air, while the screen time of his favorite faces increased (Mayer 2019). Brian Stelter (2020, 284) notes, “The GOP had become Trump’s party, so Fox had become Trump’s network.” For the

President, the network served as both defense and offense: defending him from criticism and negative coverage while at the same time attacking his opponents and the news media. By February 2019, the President and the right-wing cable network were working hand in hand to undermine and assault the news media (Stelter 2020, 2). Indeed, Trump seized on Fox News' disdain of the news media and made it the "cornerstone" of his presidency (Stelter 2020, 95). Two themes dominated Trump's criticism of news media on Twitter: accusations that they did not want to give him due credit or avoided reporting on his successes and that they constituted an opponent or enemy. Both were later adopted to target Fox News itself.

When bragging about high approval ratings among Republicans, the President added that the numbers should be understood as "[p]retty amazing" since "my press is REALLY BAD" (Trump 2019a) or "the most unfair (BAD) press in the history of presidential politics" (Trump 2019b). In an angry rant about the investigations of his 2016 presidential campaign and Russian interests, Trump directed a broadside against the media: "Someday the Fake News Media will turn honest [and] report that Donald J. Trump was actually a GREAT Candidate" (Trump 2019c). Praise of the President was equated with honesty.

Having won, Trump had turned to the term "fake news," meant to describe made-up stories spreading on social media, which he used as "a bludgeon, a diversion, and a punchline" (Stelter 2020, 94). Trump redefined it into any news which he did not want his supporters to believe. Following his election, the slur of "fake news" intended to delegitimize the free press came to dominate Trump's media criticism (Sugars 2019). Condemning the media for not properly crediting the Republican Party, such as for having more "ENERGY" than the left, Trump argued: "The Fake News just doesn't want to report the facts" (Trump 2019d). For Trump, positive reports were not only good but honest and factual, while negative reports were neither.

When angered by reporting on his work schedule, Trump responded that "it should have been reported as a positive, not negative (Trump 2019e)." This tweet captures the meaning of Trump's constant charge of "fake news," namely, as news which he did not approve of. But among many Trump supporters, the term also came to mean "anything that mainstream media says" (Tong et al. 2020, 12). Distrust in the news media was for years consistent with appreciating right-wing media (Ladd 2011, 101–3). Thus, "fake news" captured existing widespread sentiment among the right and added an insinuation of malice. With Trump suggesting that the news media

intentionally denied him credit, he portrayed them as not just biased or untrustworthy but as an opponent or enemy.

In mid-February, the President of the United States tweeted: “THE RIGGED AND CORRUPT MEDIA IS THE ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE!” (Trump 2019f). This was not the first time Donald Trump used such vicious language in his attacks on the free press. In fact, he initially used the term “enemy of the people” to describe the news media early on in his presidency, singling out several media outlets: the national paper of record, the *New York Times*; the television networks ABC, CBS, and NBC; and the cable news network CNN (Kalb 2018, 1).

Evoking authoritarian regimes and the efforts of dictators to destroy press freedom, the language signaled—in the words of Marvin Kalb, the *éminence grise* of broadcasting journalism—that “a flashing red light” had been crossed (2018, 2). Yet, the President embraced it and the hosts at Fox News defended him (Stelter 2020, 107). By the second half of 2018 and early 2019, Trump was using the highly inflammatory term regularly.

For example, when the *New York Times* published an investigative article on attempts by the President to undermine and influence investigations into his campaign and his administration, the President directly targeted the paper. “The New York Times reporting is false,” Trump announced, and continued with a full-frontal assault, “They are a true ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE” (Trump 2019g). In response to these charges, the paper’s publisher A. O. Sulzberger denounced the rhetoric coming from the White House: “There are mounting signs that this incendiary rhetoric is encouraging threats and violence against journalists at home and abroad” (Grynbaum and Sullivan 2019). Two days later, however, the President reiterated: “Fake News is so bad for our Country” (Trump 2019h). Appreciating the President’s vicious vilification of the news media and the way Trump, with the support of right-wing media, delegitimized the news media is key to understanding his attacks on Fox News in November 2020.

November 2020: Conspiracies and Right-wing Challengers to Fox News

“I don’t think I’m fake news,” Chris Wallace of Fox News protested in a July 2020 interview with Donald Trump. “Maybe you are,” the President rebutted (Fox News, 2020). During his 2016 campaign and throughout his presidency, Trump alternately loathed and lauded the right-wing cable news outlet. Days before the election, he singled out Wallace for further criticism. “His show,” Trump (2020a) tweeted, “is a total ‘hit job’ on your favorite President, me.” Following his

defeat in the 2020 election, however, the President directed especially blistering criticism toward Fox News.

Beyond the insults and his obsession with ratings, three patterns in Trump's post-election criticism of the media in general and Fox News in particular stand out: conspiracist accusations of illegal or unethical behavior by the news media, encouragements to abandon Fox News for other right-wing media, and concomitant extolling of supportive voices on Fox News.

When it became clear that Joe Biden had won the presidential election, Donald Trump did not concede the election or congratulate his successor. Instead, he declared war on the results themselves, recklessly charging fraud and promoting baseless conspiracies. The news media, according to Trump, were to blame. In fact, only days before the election, the President charged that his Democratic Party challenger was "bought and paid for by Big Tech, Big Media, Big Donors, and powerful special interests" (Trump 2020b). Having spent years accusing the news media of being the enemy, it was natural for Trump to claim that the press was now favoring a Biden win.

Yet, Trump moved beyond the familiar right-wing charges of bias to suggest that the news media "really is tampering with an Election" (Trump 2020c). According to the President, any inaccuracy in polls commissioned by outlets like Fox News, the *Washington Post*, and NBC was an intentional "attempt to suppress" his vote (Trump 2020c). Without any evidence or legal argument, he claimed that it amounted to "a possibly illegal suppression" (Trump 2020d).

He accused the news media of refusing to cover purported developments in his favor. Charging both Fox News and the rest of the news media with deliberately ignoring or misrepresenting demonstrations in support of his baseless voting fraud claims, Trump (2020e) announced: "we now have SUPPRESSION BY THE PRESS." Using the salient language of "suppression" of voters, the charges echoed generations of claims that a liberal leaning among reporters resulted in a disregard of right-wing perspectives, but they also echoed contemporary accusations of discrimination or silencing of right-wing voices on social media and beyond (Stack 2018). For instance, when repeating his earlier message, the President extended his targets, tweeting: "Big Tech and the Fake News Media have partnered to Suppress" (Trump 2020f). And hoping by means of insults to further mainstream his charges, Trump (2020g) added a new slur: "The Silent Media is the Enemy of the People." Exploiting the currency of anti-media messages among his base, he

recognized that delegitimizing the news media was key to delegitimizing the election results: “The Media is just as corrupt as the Election itself” (Trump 2020h).

Fox News, often excluded from right-wing attacks on the news media, could not both avoid drawing the President’s ire and report the election results. Or not, at least, with Joe Biden emerging victorious. Over the years, Trump had challenged Fox News whenever he considered them out of bounds, and the cable news network had, by and large, conformed to his whims. As Matt Gertz (2021) concluded, “Fox News spent the last four years remaking itself as President Donald Trump’s personal propaganda tool.” However, while Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham, and Jeanine Pirro were eager to promote the conspiracy theories of the President, the news desk had called the election for his Democratic challenger—and Trump felt betrayed.

“Perhaps the biggest difference between 2016 and 2020 is @FoxNews,” the President concluded (Trump 2020i). His implication was clear: if only Fox News had worked harder, the White House would have been his. Fox News was supposed to be his champion (Stelter 2020, 265). Flummoxed and outraged over the way the cable news network refused to follow him in his assault on democracy, Trump went for the jugular—the financial bottom line.

On a Wednesday in mid-November, Trump made no less than 14 retweets criticizing Fox News. Encouraging his supporters to abandon Fox, the President used his position to promote challengers. When criticizing Fox News, Trump included suggestions to “try” or “check out” right-wing competitors like the One America News Network (OAN) and Newsmax (Trump 2020j; 2020k). Neither represented a serious challenge to the dominance of Fox News. According to Brian Stelter (2020, 314), OAN was “tiny and posed no immediate threat to Fox” before the election. Trump sought to change the calculus, however.

Reveling in the declining ratings of Fox News, Trump claimed that they had “completely collapsed” following the election (Trump 2020l). The President understood the decline as a result of the cable news network turning its back on him: “They forgot what made them successful, what got them there. They forgot the Golden Goose” (Trump 2020l). For Trump, the lack of support from Fox News also tampered the quality of the shows. “@FoxNews daytime is virtually unwatchable,” Trump (2020m) concluded. Going even further, Trump (2020n) suggested that Fox News was becoming “almost as bad as watching Fake News @CNN.” While denouncing Fox News and encouraging his followers to abandon the cable news network, Trump repeatedly promoted its

supportive voices, such as Sean Hannity, Jeanine Pirro, Jesse Watters, Greg Gutfeld, and Pete Hegseth. Extolling supporters both at and outside Fox News while denouncing the cable news network itself, Trump again signaled what he demanded from the news media: loyalty.

Conclusions

Fox News is often understood as consisting of both news and opinion. The distinction seems less and less relevant today (Boehlert 2021; Gertz 2021; Sullivan 2021). First of all, viewers are not good at distinguishing between news and opinion (Mitchell et al. 2018). Second, the division at Fox News is not even, with the network being built around the ratings of opinion stars such as Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson (Stelter 2020). Third, the independent voices on the news side, anchors such as Chris Wallace and Shepard Smith, have left the network over the last years, citing an “unsustainable” environment for news, thereby giving even more room to opinion hosts (Grynbaum 2022; Benveniste 2021; Sullivan 2021). “Fox News isn’t a newsgathering organization,” media critic Eric Boehlert (2021) concluded weeks after Trump left the White House.

The Trump years transformed constructive right-wing media criticism into what Brian Stelter (2020, 120) called “destructive attacks.” Yet, these attacks tell a lot about right-wing criticism of the news media overall. The role of Fox News in United States politics is unique. Indeed, researchers have found “there is no symmetry in the architecture and dynamics of communication within the right-wing media ecosystem and outside of it (Benkler et al. 2018, 14). Perhaps it is no surprise, as Stelter (2020, 23) observes, that even “the average political journalist” does not understand the relationship between Fox News and right-wing leaders like Trump.

Trump’s assaults on Fox News further understandings of the relationship between the right and the news media. Throughout his political career, Trump has had a habit of making implicit right-wing messages explicit. Trump’s attacks on Fox News were not so much a sign of a divide within the right-wing coalition as part of a decades-long right-wing project to delegitimize the news media. This was not a crusade against Fox News; it was a challenge to any criticism by any news media. In the case of Fox News, it worked (Hemmer 2022, 65).

Back in 2015, when Trump launched misogynistic insults toward Megyn Kelly, celebrated voices in political media such as Ezra Klein and Nate Silver concluded that a war against Fox News was not a war Trump would win (Klein 2015; Silver 2015). When condemning Fox News while praising the

stars supportive of him, however, Trump made it clear that he was never at war with the network. In the end, Trump needed not destroy Fox News but merely transform it.

Declining ratings, the result of the sustained assault by Trump, challenges from Newsmax and OAN, and viewers' disappointment with the election of Joe Biden were enough to shake the executives at Fox News (Ellison and Barr 2021; Hemmer 2022, 65). Even after a deadly insurrection, Fox News would double down on its support of Donald Trump. Executives at the network purged the news editors behind the November coverage, including political editor Chris Stirewalt and Washington managing editor and vice president Bill Sammon (Ellison and Barr 2021). The network was "taking steps to increase Fox's reliance on incendiary right-wing propaganda" (Gertz 2021). While Trump's assault on right-wing media failed to win him a second term at the ballot box or overturn the election results in an insurrection, he eventually did win over Fox News and, by extension, the Republican Party. In the process, Trump made clear that right-wing media criticism is not about the media itself but politics and power.

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 Trump 2019e. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 10, 2019, 1:27:03 PM EST
 Trump 2019f. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 11, 2019, 7:41:49 AM EST
 Trump 2019g. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 20, 2019, 8:49:13 AM EST
 Trump 2019h. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 22, 2019, 9:55:25 AM EST
 Trump 2020a. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 1, 2020, 2:20:37 PM EST
 Trump 2020b. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 2, 2020, 2:12:47 PM EST
 Trump 2020c. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 9, 2020, 7:38:59 PM EST
 Trump 2020d. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 11, 2020, 8:35:55 AM EST
 Trump 2020e. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 14, 2020, 4:24:15 PM EST
 Trump 2020f. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 27, 2020, 10:45:35 AM EST
 Trump 2020g. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 14, 2020, 11:51:46 PM EST
 Trump 2020h. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 21, 2020, 6:13:41 PM EST
 Trump 2020i. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, December 16, 2020, 10:06:47 AM EST
 Trump 2020j. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 15, 2020, 7:25:14 AM EST
 Trump 2020k. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, December 6, 2020, 1:49:13 PM EST
 Trump 2020l. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 12, 2020, 11:10:18 AM EST
 Trump 2020m. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 28, 2020, 2:48:23 PM EST
 Trump 2020n. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, December 30, 2020, 4:27:38 PM EST

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Notes

[1] A note on terminology: I favor the term “right-wing media” over the more common “conservative media” in recognition of the contested nature of the term “conservative” in the Trump years. Still, my understanding of right-wing media is similar to the definition provided by Nadler and Bauer (2020a, 6): “forms of media production, circulation, consumption, or identification by institutions and actors who are associated with the extended infrastructure of or discourse produced by the modern conservative movement in the United States.” The definition is wide enough to include both traditional media outlets, such as the *Wall Street Journal* or *National Review*, and alternative outlets (for example, Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio show or the controversial online outlet *Breitbart*).