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--“Media Watch: the Truth” by Michael Niman. The Humanist (May-June 2009). Critical thinking the essential path to distinguishing lies from truth, and thereby analyzing the views of reality portrayed by the mainstream media.

“I4 Propaganda Techniques Fox "News" Uses to Brainwash Americans”
Saturday 2 July 2011
by: Dr. Cynthia Boaz, Truthout | News Analysis
(Image: Lance Page / truthout; Adapted: Alan Turkus, ariog, Eddi van W.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. **Conflating Violence With Power and Opposition to Violence With Weakness.** This is more of what I'd call a "meta-frame" (a deeply held belief) than a media technique, but it is manifested in the
ways news is reported constantly. For example, terms like "show of strength" are often used to describe acts of repression, such as those by the Iranian regime against the protesters in the summer of 2009. There are several concerning consequences of this form of conflation. First, it has the potential to make people feel falsely emboldened by shows of force - it can turn wars into sporting events. Secondly, especially in the context of American politics, displays of violence - whether manifested in war or debates about the Second Amendment - are seen as noble and (in an especially surreal irony) moral. Violence become synonymous with power, patriotism and piety.

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

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

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

10. Invoking the Christian God. This is similar to othering and populism. With morality politics, the idea is to declare yourself and your allies as patriots, Christians and "real Americans" (those are inseparable categories in this line of thinking) and anyone who challenges them as not. Basically, God loves Fox and Republicans and America. And hates taxes and anyone who doesn't love those other three things. Because the speaker has been benedicted by God to speak on behalf of all Americans, any challenge is perceived as immoral. It's a cheap and easy technique used by all totalitarian entities from states to cults.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BLACK AND WHITE THINKING

After Osama bin Laden's Death, an End to 'Bad Guys'

Christopher Hayes  May 4, 2011  |  This article appeared in the May 23, 2011 edition of The Nation.
A major victory has been scored by the good guys against the baddest of the bad guys.” — Geraldo Rivera on Fox News, announcing Osama bin Laden’s death

Christopher Hayes

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In the wake of 9/11, the phrase “bad guys” infiltrated our national conversation, and its continued prevalence serves as a testament to the ways the trauma has warped our national character. In the days after the attack, Dick Cheney warned the world that “people have to choose between the US and the bad guys.” Tom Friedman’s columns from that fall repeatedly invoke the term. “From here forward,” he wrote on September 28, 2001, “it’s the bad guys who need to be afraid every waking moment. The more frightened our enemies are today, the fewer we will have to fight tomorrow.”

But the term outlived the immediate aftermath. As Iraq descended into insurgency and civil war, Newt Gingrich said that the “key to defeating the bad guys is having enough good guys who are Iraqis.” Everyone from Madeleine Albright to John Kerry to Joe Biden adopted the term as well. In a 2009 appearance on Face the Nation Defense Secretary Gates talked of choking off “potential recruits for the bad guys.” And last summer General Petraeus told a Congressional hearing that “you have to have contact with bad guys to get intelligence on bad guys.”

When President Obama announced the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” he quoted a Special Forces soldier, who described a fellow soldier this way: “He’s big. He’s mean. He kills lots of bad guys. No one cared that he was gay.” Understandably, the line got lots of laughs. The source of the humor was the confounding of stereotypes, but it was the invocation of “bad guys,” with its blunt simplicity, that made the joke work.
The phrase is self-consciously playful but also insidious. An adult who invokes it is expressing a layered set of propositions. What “bad guys” says, roughly, is this: “I’m an adult who has considered the nature of the moral universe we live in and concluded that it really is black and white. I’ve decided that my earliest, most childlike conception of heroes and villains is indeed the accurate one, which only later came to be occluded by nuance and wishy-washy, bleeding-heart self-doubt. I reject that more complicated, mature conception as false. I embrace the child’s vision of the world.”

“Bad guys” was a phrase that channeled our rawest emotions in the wake of 9/11, emotions that we collectively mythologize. We recall the profound solidarity we felt after 9/11 as noble and righteous, something to gaze back on with nostalgia. That was the idea behind Glenn Beck’s so-called 9/12 Project, and the theme of the president himself at a bipartisan dinner for members of Congress at the White House the day after bin Laden was killed. “Last night,” he said, “as Americans learned that the United States had carried out an operation that resulted in the capture and death of Osama bin Laden…we experienced the same sense of unity that prevailed on 9/11. We were reminded again that there is a pride in what this nation stands for, and what we can achieve, that runs far deeper than party, far deeper than politics.”

I remember vividly the pull of that emotion in those autumn days ten years ago, the desire to feel something uncomplicated: pure rage or simple thirst for justice. To sing the national anthem, to put your hand on your heart, to fly the flag from your window, felt right and comforting, as if we could find collective refuge in this new and terrifying but refreshingly simple world we had suddenly come to inhabit—a world in which we were attacked, a world in which we must defend ourselves, a world in which bad guys were out there and wanted to do us harm. A place where, on the night bin Laden was finally killed, you could bask in fellowship
with the guy on the adjoining bar stool and say, “They got the bastard” and feel like you shared something profound: that you were, for that brief moment, not strangers but countrymen.

But the decade of unceasing war and bloodshed since 9/11 has made me deeply suspicious of that impulse. As right and as exhilarating as that moment at the bar might feel, it also contains something very dark, like a drop of ink in a glass of water. It is the same darkness that converted our national mood of grief and patriotism into ten years of war, that bloomed on the streets of Washington and New York among the crowds who cheered the news of bin Laden’s demise.

It is an irony too often overlooked that the war that grinds on most bloodily isn’t the “dumb war” Bush started in Iraq but the “good war” in Afghanistan, authorized in 2001 by a vote of 98–0 in the Senate, 420–1 in the House and supported by 88 percent of Americans at that time. The war was born of our pure and shared desire for justice. To speak out against bombing and invading Afghanistan, in those days, seemed truly radical, almost an insult to the dead. But in retrospect, maybe it was also right.

I am blessed to have been spared personal loss during 9/11, and it would be callous to begrudge survivors, or anyone, their emotions: people will feel what they will feel. But in the realm of public life we should resist the tug of “bad-guyism.” (It’s no surprise that Friedman couldn’t resist the urge, using the phrase yet again in his first column after bin Laden’s killing.)

We can use the occasion of bin Laden’s death to grasp back for the moment when the world seemed simple, or we can turn away from that impulse. We can say that with his death, we return to the world as our adult eyes see it, shot through with suffering and complexity. We can feel compassion for the thousands of innocents who died by bin Laden’s hand as well as
our own, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time in places like Bagram and Baghdad. We can remember that just because there is evil in the world that we are fighting—and bin Laden was a mass murderer and war criminal—that does not mean we are purely righteous. We can reject relativism and still embrace nuance. We can have the courage to speak and act like adults, to put away childish things, to once and for all banish the bad guys from our nightmares.

Christopher Hayes

LABELING
JP Sottile, “America: Divided, Conquered”
Reader Supported News
Intro: "Someone very smart once said, 'Your labels are your handles.' And we've got handles. Left and Right. Liberal and Conservative. Democrat and Republican. In these war-weary years of our financial discontent, we are clinging harder than ever to those labels. Or, perhaps, the labels are clinging harder than ever to us. Either way, this increasingly embattled form of identity politics only makes our handles easier to grab. And the country easier to steer."
READ MORE http://www.readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/5769-america-divided-conquered

HISTORICAL ANALOGIES
David Kirkpatrick, “This War Is Not Like the Others—or Is It?” NYT (8-26-07). Problems with using historical analogies to make foreign policy.

DEMONIZATION
Worldwide WAMM, the newsletter of Women Against Military Madness (June 2007) contains an article about the propaganda technique of demonizing. It gives a quick history of how US leaders have demonized the leader of each of the countries our leaders were planning to invade, and then spends the remainder of the essay showing how the Bush Admin. and its mainstream media had demonized the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

How Anti-Intellectualism Is Destroying America
By Terrence McNally, AlterNetPosted on August 15, 2008, Printed on August 16, 2008 http://www.alternet.org/story/95109/  "Most of the greatest evils that man has inflicted upon man have come through people feeling quite certain about something which, in fact, was false." Bertrand Russell ]
GLOBAL WARMING
Four articles in Skeptical Inquirer (March/April 2010), here are 2:
Massimo Pigliucci, “Climate Denialism.”
Every book that offers a science-based explanation of the facts of warming is an example of critical thinking; there are thousands now; and the public is grasping the concepts and evidence, if not the remedies.

BOOKS

AL GORE, THE ASSAULT ON REASON
Demonization is just one technique in the repertoire of irrationality examined by in The Assault on Reason, one of a number of subtitles for which might be "Antidote to Demagogues." In his introduction and throughout the book, Gore affirms his commitment to constitutional government of, by, and for the people through full and vigorous debate, the marketplace of ideas, and freely flowing ideas. But much of the book exposes the manifold enemies of reason and democracy who would manufacture consent. Chapters 1 through 5 describe the fear, superstition, ideology, deception, intolerance, and secrecy that control information and prevent an informed citizenry from developing. Chapter 1 focuses on fear; two on those who exploit fear; and so on. Chapters 6 through 8 assess the damage already done by the substitution of power and corruption for reason. And Chapter 9 presents a road map for recovery of the deliberative process necessary to government of, by, and for the people.

--Jennifer Hecht. Doubt: A History. When Darrel went to "The Amazing Meeting 8" last summer, along with 1,300 other skeptics, he was most impressed with a presentation by Dr. Jennifer Michael Hecht. She took the audience on a journey through history and showed how doubt has been the intellectual driving force throughout the development of civilization. She gave an overview of her book: Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson.
--Koonce, Coralie. Trilogy: Models, Myths, and Muddles (2008); Swimming in a Sea of Ideology
(2009); Thinking Toward Survival (2010).


END OF CRITICAL THINKING NEWSLETTER #1 July 3, 2011