

A Month Before the Midterm: The State of Television and Media Practices in the Political Landscape

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In June, Rupert Murdoch's "News" Corp donated a million dollars to the Republican Governor's Association. I learned about this by watching the rival to Murdoch's Fox News, MSNBC. Now it would be easy to complain that Fox News is a front for the GOP, but I'm not some bourgeois liberal who sips cappuccino while reading the New York Times and listening to NPR. In fact, I'm more of a socialist than even Obama. This is why, after the Citizen's United Supreme Court decision in which campaign finance laws were struck down in favor of "free speech" for corporations, I think we have to consider the changing structures of capitalism when discussing the role of the media in the current political landscape.

Today we witness a populist uprising known as the Tea Party movement. Their impact on the coming election has already been seen in primary successes. While members claim that it's a grassroots movement, support from Fox News personalities like Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity and Sarah Palin has fueled its growth. As an outsider movement, the Tea Parties have some interesting leaders. For example, former Republican congressman Dick Armey recently published a "Tea Party Manifesto" and has been doing the talk show circuit promoting the Tea Parties as "people just like you." What is interesting about his leadership of the Tea Parties is that he was one of the architects of the "Republican Revolution" of 1994, which provides a historical parallel that we can use to better understand the role of media in today's situation.

In 1994 Democrat Bill Clinton was in the second year of his presidency after 12 years of Republican rule. Fueled by fears of liberal decadence, Republicans drafted a "Contract with America" in which they promoted "family values," limited social spending and lower taxes. This helped the Republicans take both houses of congress, a majority they kept until losing to the Democrats in the backlash against the Bush administration in 2006. While this took place during the rise of conservative talk radio, at the time the Internet was in its infancy and it was two years before the launch of Fox News. So the Republican revolution was just that: official party business.

Today, things are a little more complicated. After eight years of the Bush administration and the triumph of Barack Obama in the 2008 election, the Republican Party is in crisis. Their policies brought us two prolonged wars, and economic collapse and rising national debt. So how can they gain ascendancy again? Fox News provides a forum for conservative pundits to promote their talking points to a mass audience, often with a one-two punch. In the morning on *Fox and Friends*, hosts Steve Doocy, Gretchen Carlson and Brian Kilmeade discuss their readings of the morning's conservative blogs. Then, in the afternoon and evening, commentators host segments

in which they say “people are talking” about things like Obama’s birth certificate, his religious beliefs or the secret death panels in his health care plan.

At the same time, under the continued threat of terrorism and within conditions of economic instability, many Americans are uncertain about the future. Some critics have accused the Tea Parties of being a racist response to the election of the first black president, but I think this is too simplistic. Yes, the panic over the recent Arizona immigration law and Islamic community center in Manhattan seem to support this conclusion, but xenophobia has always accompanied crises in American history. This is because both our political and media systems are founded on the liberal logic of representation. That is, Arney’s appeal to join the Tea Parties because “they’re just like you” uses narcissistic identification as the basis for ethics. This is combined with paranoid projection of all our evils onto scapegoats like Mexicans, Muslims or Obama to divide us into media-centered tribes, affiliated by a common aesthetic; what is called “common sense” is discursively constituted, and the antagonism between communities within the public sphere is largely centered on psychotic fixation on symbolic forces. Social media provide a means of connecting these communities beyond the barriers of geography.

So I propose discussing the media’s impact on political discourse in terms of virtual publics. That is, the existence of Fox News, CNN and MSNBC with their distinct audiences coincides with the development of social media that connect people into new forms of community united around aesthetics. This is a result of material conditions: if there is no outside to capitalism, then the diversification of audiences provides new markets within the existing regime for its expansion. Cable news produces affective labor and sign value that is consumed within markets articulated according to new forms of sociality, which has political impact precisely because what is being produced are beliefs.