

News as selling mythologies

I'm reading *Hate Inc.: Why Today's Media Makes Us Despise One Another* by [Matthew Taibbi](#), a contributing editor for Rolling Stone who has covered political campaigns. If you're not familiar with Taibbi I'll note that he would never be accused of being a right-winger! In reading his essays and his book it's clear Taibbi despises Fox News and Donald Trump. However, unlike many of his new media brethren who have jettisoned objectivity to push their politics, Taibbi seems to value being objective even when it leads him to uncomfortable conclusions. While he excoriates Fox and Trump he also turns his guns (although with markedly less harshness) on CNN and MSNBC.

In the chapter titled *How Reading The News Is Like Smoking*, Taibbi says the following.

The main difference between Fox and MSNBC is their audiences are choosing different personal mythologies. Again: this is a consumer choice. It's not the truth, but a truth *product*.

People who watch Fox tend to be older, white, and scared. They're tuning in to be told they're the last holdouts in a disintegrating empire, Romans besieged by vandals.

...

People who watch MSNBC, meanwhile, are tuning in to receive mega-doses of the world's thinnest compliment, i.e. that they're morally superior to Donald Trump. The network lately has become a one-note morality play with endless segments about Michael Flynn, Michael Cohen, and Paul Manafort.

...

The coverage formula on both channels is to scare the crap out of audiences, then offer them micro-doses of safety and solidarity, which come when they see people onscreen sharing their fears.

I've written before about Arnold Kling's book *The Three Languages of Politics* in which he identifies three primary languages in American politics. Liberals tend to talk in terms of oppressors and the oppressed. Conservatives fret about civilization succumbing to barbarism. And libertarians see things in terms of individual freedom from coercion. Based on listening carefully how liberals, conservatives and libertarians talk I think Kling's model is valid.

Taibbi's description of Fox's primary audience identifies conservative's fear of leftist barbarians undercutting the traditional foundations of civilization, which reflects Kling's language modal. While Taibbi doesn't discuss the views of MSNBC (or the other major news outlets) in the same terms as Kling, I assume Taibbi would agree with many of the Trump haters I've met who claim that Trump is a racist, misogynist and didn't earn his wealth but who obtained it by taking advantage of people. A common theme underlies these charges: that Trump (and therefore his supporters) favor oppressing people because of their race, gender or economic status.

Later Taibbi says:

I've run into trouble with friends for suggesting Fox is *not* a pack of lies. Sure, the network has an iffy relationship with the truth, but much of its content is factually correct. It's just highly, highly selective – and predictable with respect to which facts it chooses to present.

Here I'd say the same thing could be said about CNN, MSNBC, ABC, CBS, NBC and NPR. Taibbi gives them a pass, as if they don't do exactly the same thing he attributes to Fox. On the other hand, the first appendix in *Hate Inc.*, "Why Rachel Maddow Is On The Cover Of This Book," explains why Taibbi put Maddow's photo on the cover with Sean Hannity. He concludes the appendix with this comment about Maddow.

What she reads each night is not the news. It's *Stars and Stripes* for a demographic, the same job that made Sean Hannity a star. Only she does it for a different audience, [Lonesome Rhodes](#) for the smart set. Even she must realize it can't end well.

[Lonesome Rhodes was a character in a 1957 movie titled *A Face in the Crowd*. Here is the Wikipedia summary of the plot: "The story centers on a drifter named Larry 'Lonesome' Rhodes who is discovered by the producer ... of a small-market radio program in rural northeast Arkansas. Rhodes ultimately rises to great fame and influence on national television."]

While I'm only halfway through *Hate Inc.* I've read enough to be comfortable with recommending it to people on the left or the right. As Taibbi says, the news organizations "keep people away from the complexities of these issues, by creating distinct audiences of party zealots who drink in more and more intense legends about one another. We started to turn the ongoing narrative of the news into something like a religious contract, in which, in which the idea was not just to make you mad, but to keep you mad, whipped up in a state of devotional anger. Even in what conservatives would call the 'liberal' media, we used blunt

signals to create audience solidarity. We started to employ anti-intellectualism on a scale I'd never seen before, and it ran through much of the available content."

The only thing I'd add is that this anti-intellectualism springs from shedding objectivity.