

MSNBC Beats Fox News in Overall Viewers; Panic Time?



Last week, MSNBC took first place in the cable-news ratings war for the first time since the network debuted 21 years ago. They not only defeated Fox News in the key 25-54 demographic, but also in total viewers. In fact, FNC didn't even come in second in prime-time. They finished third behind CNN – something that hadn't happened since the year 2000.

The primary reason for the newfound success of NBC News's decidedly progressive cable-news branch was described by Bernie Goldberg in a recent piece. Bashing President Trump over his often embarrassing and controversial antics is good for business.

Trump's crassness and almost daily displays of dishonesty throughout the election convinced much of the American public that he simply can't be trusted, and that it is especially

important to hold him accountable, now that he is our president. Thus, troublesome allegations against him (even baseless ones) are immediately entertained and exploited. And there is no one more enthusiastic (and often less responsible) about doing it than far-left members of the mainstream media.

Fox News has obviously gone a different route, largely establishing itself as a pro-Trump outfit (at least on its editorial shows). The movement in that direction began about two years ago, when several of Trump's personal friends (including Sean Hannity, Eric Bolling, and Laura Ingraham) used their FNC platforms to effectively promote his candidacy. When the novelty and outlandishness of the Trump campaign turned into television gold, and Fox's obsessive (and increasingly positive) coverage of it acted as a ratings sugar-rush for the network, more on-air personalities fell in line.

Over time, a re-branding effort of sorts softened the network's emphasis on conservatism. Instead, Trump-normalization became the central theme. Even Bill "No Spin" O'Reilly was firmly on board, carrying water for his buddy, Trump, to the point of absurdity.

For a while, Fox's new direction proved to be quite profitable. In fact, 2016 was the network's most-watched year to date. Even the first quarter of 2017 still had the Fox on top (though steadily losing ground). But with Trump (now as president) continuing to feed his critics ammunition to pummel him with, the network's tone evolved again. The shift was noticeable even before Fox unexpectedly dropped O'Reilly, a longtime ratings juggernaut.

Rather than pro-Trump commentators devoting all of their time to defending the indefensible (an exhaustive practice with this president), *political deflection* became the new theme. Taking a page out of Trump's campaign playbook, hosts began using the "counter-punch" strategy as the basis for their

analysis. Tucker Carlson (who took over O'Reilly's time-slot) has led the charge, focusing his nightly efforts almost exclusively on examples of liberals acting horribly or hypocritically. This includes a nightly segment where he mercilessly wails away on a liberal guest who doesn't seem to understand why they were asked onto the show in the first place.

Sean Hannity has taken things a few steps further, expanding his show beyond Trump sycophantism, and into the realm of hair-on-fire conspiracy theories. In fact, for the past several weeks, Hannity has been trying to convince his audience that the unsolved murder of DNC staffer, Seth Rich, was carried out by Democrats trying to silence Rich from leaking information to Wikileaks. This theory was debunked soon after it began, but Hannity has continued on with it, much to the dismay of Rich's family who has been pleading with him to stop politicizing their deep loss.

On *The Five*, any criticism of something Trump did is immediately answered by one or two of the hosts with an example of a liberal doing something similar in the past. The shtick has gotten quite stale.

With the notable exceptions of *Special Report* and *Fox News Sunday* (which remain two of the best news programs on television), Fox News shows have become more about going after Trump's detractors than they have about analyzing the Trump presidency and world events. This may be perfectly fine with our president's base, and also with a good chunk of conservatives, but it doesn't draw in (or enlighten) a broader audience.

That's not to say that the Left's hypocrisy and clear media biases aren't legitimate issues worth exploring and exposing. They are indeed. But they shouldn't be the primary focus of a serious news network. If you're negligent in actually covering the news, people are going to go looking for it in other

places (even if they're not entirely happy with the alternative product).

Can Fox News recover? Absolutely. In fact, the network's ratings are still historically quite strong. And being that they lost three of their top stars over the past several months (Bill O'Reilly, Megyn Kelly, and Greta Van Susteren), one would think they'd be in much worse shape. But executives at the network can't ignore the rising success of their competitors. Fox News is losing the appeal it once had with viewers who aren't deeply partisan, and they're losing that appeal quickly.

The tribal sugar-rush has about run out. It's time to start thinking about a long-term plan for renewing interest and trust among viewers whose appetite for red meat isn't their primary motivation for turning on the news.

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