

Fox News: The inside story

A former Fox producer describes the ways—both subtle and blunt—that top executives impose a right-wing ideology on the newsroom.

By Tim Grieve

When veteran television journalist Chris Wallace announced this week that he was leaving ABC for Fox News, reporters asked him whether he was concerned about trading in his objectivity for Fox's rightward slant. "I had the same conception a lot of people did about Fox News, that they have a right-wing agenda," Wallace told *The Washington Post*. But after watching Fox closely, Wallace said, he had decided that the network suffered from an "unfair rap," and that its reporting is, in fact, "serious, thoughtful and even-handed."

It was all too much for Charlie Reina to take. Reina, 55, spent six years at Fox as a producer, copy editor and writer, working both on hard news stories and on feature programs like "News Watch" and "After Hours." He quit in April, he says, in a fit of frustration over salary, job assignments and respect. Since that time, he has watched the debate over whether Fox is really "fair and balanced." He held his fire, bit his tongue. But then he heard Chris Wallace—an outsider to Fox, for now—proclaim the network fair. Reina couldn't remain silent any longer, and so he fired off a long post to Jim Romenesko's message board at the Poynter Institute. In his view, he was setting the Fox record straight.

"The fact is," Reina wrote, "daily life at FNC is all about management politics." Reina said that Fox's daily news coverage—and its daily news bias—is driven by an "editorial note" sent to the newsroom every morning by John Moody, a Fox senior vice president. The editorial note—a memo posted on Fox's computer system—tells the staff which correspondents are working on which stories. But frequently, Reina says, it also contains hints, suggestions and directives on how to slant the day's news—invariably, he says, in a way that's consistent with the politics and desires of the Bush administration.

Before starting work at Fox in 1997, Reina had a long career in broadcast journalism. He worked on the broadcast wire at the Associated Press, wrote copy for CBS radio news and worked on ABC's "Good Morning America." Along the way, he says, no one ever told him how to slant a story—until he started working at Fox. At the "fair and balanced" network, Reina says, he and his colleagues were frequently told—sometimes directly, usually more subtly—to toe the Republican Party line.

Reina is out of journalism for the moment—he's running his own woodworking business in suburban New York—and he realizes that going public about his experience at Fox won't improve his career prospects. He says he doesn't care.

Fox did not respond to calls or a faxed letter from Salon seeking comment on Reina's tenure at the network or his comments about news values there. But Reina has plainly hit a nerve. Late Thursday, Romenesko posted a response to Reina's note that appeared to be from Sharri Berg, a vice president for news operations at Fox. The response called Reina a "disgruntled employee" with "an ax to grind." And Berg included comments she attributed to an unnamed Fox staffer who described Reina as one "any number of clueless feature producers" who made inane calls to the news desk, "the kind of calls where after you hung up you say to the phone, 'go f*ck yourself.'" Berg quoted the newsroom employee as saying, "[I]t's not editorial policy that pisses off newsroom grunts—it's people like Charlie."

Reina said he wouldn't dignify Berg's note with a response. He spoke with Salon by phone from his home in New York.

Q: Is there an ideological agenda at work in the newsroom at Fox?

All I can say is, everybody there knows what the politics of the bosses are. You feel it every day, and in good part because of this daily editorial note that comes out. I suppose there are similar things [at other networks] which say who's stationed where that day, where the correspondents are, what we'll be covering and so on. But [in the Fox memo], oftentimes when there are issues that involve political controversy and debate or what have you, there are also these admonitions, these subtle things like, "There is something utterly incomprehensible about Kofi Annan's remarks in which he allows that his thoughts are 'with the Iraqi people.' One could ask where those thoughts were during the 23 years Saddam Hussein was brutalizing those same Iraqis. Food for thought."

That's something you just don't see in a traditional newsroom. You see a news budget going around, but they'd be a lot like an AP budget—here's this story, here's this story, this person is writing this. It makes sense to have something like that—something that says here's where everybody is and so forth. But now, for the first time with the advent of the memo, you're actually getting little bits of guidance here and there.

Q: Would it have been unusual at AP or CBS or ABC to hear that management wanted a story tweaked in a certain ideological direction?

You didn't use to have the direct involvement of the big bosses. But at Fox, it's an everyday thing, a presence in the newsroom. You know, if you make a joke, and it's politically slanted and it's not toward the Republican side, somebody will say to you, "Watch it." It doesn't mean that you would get in trouble, that Roger [Ailes] would be there or something, but there's just that fear at all times.

Q: Are the employees at Fox ideologically aligned with Ailes?

I don't think that's the case. There are probably more people there who tend to be conservative or Republican than I have encountered at other places. And I have to say that they're right when they say that people in journalism tend to be liberal or Democrat. Again, I haven't found that that had much of an effect on the news. But it certainly does at Fox. There are many people who work at Fox, as there are elsewhere, that are much more liberal and Democrat-leaning than management is.

But what's also true is that it's such a young staff of workers. Many of the people who write news copy, for instance, had no experience writing before they started. So there's no background in writing, and as a result they're very easy to mold.

The memo sort of gives you hints. If they [Fox executives] are worried that what we write or what the anchors say might make the wrong point, it will show up in the memo . . . [The line producers] are mostly eager young people. They've got a grueling job hour-to-hour. It's just too much trouble for them to try to buck the system. They've got so much to do that they just don't want to have to explain [why they didn't comply with the direction in the memo]. So everything gets done pretty much the way management wants it.

Q: Can you remember a specific instance in which one of your superiors told you to approach a story with a particular ideological slant?

It was, I would say, about three years ago. I was assigned to do a special on the environment, some issue involving pollution. When my boss and I talked as to what this thing was all about, what they were looking for, he said to me: "You understand, you know, it's not going to come out the pro-environmental side." And I said, "It will come out however it comes out." And he said, "You can obviously give both sides, but just make sure that the pro-environmentalists don't get the last word."

Q: Fair and balanced?

Yeah. I thought about it and thought about it and I went to him the next morning and I said, "I can't do this, I've never started out a project with an idea of what the outcome

should be—and certainly to be told that. And I’m not going to do it.” Fortunately, he was wise enough to know that what he had done was wrong, and he left it alone.

Part of what Fox’s message is, and I have to say that to a certain extent I agree with it, is that political correctness is a terrible thing. There are a lot of assumptions that are simply made and not questioned, and a lot of that, liberals like me have perpetrated. And I have to agree that there’s too much of that.

Q: But isn’t there also a political orthodoxy on the right that Fox enforces?

Yeah, I was going to get to that . . .

I’ll give you another example from that memo. When the Palestinian suicide bombings started last year, shortly after they started, one of the memos came down and suggested, “Wouldn’t it be better if we used ‘homicide bombing’ because the word ‘suicide’ puts the focus on and memorializes the perpetrator rather than the victims?” OK, never mind the fact that any bombing that kills is a homicide bombing. What would you call a suicide bombing where the perpetrator isn’t killed? An intended suicidal homicide bombing? It got ridiculous.

Q: It may be ridiculous, but if you watch Fox now, you’ll frequently hear suicide bombings described as “homicide bombings,” right?

I’ll tell you, it’s interesting. On that same day [that Fox management distributed a memo suggesting suicide bombings be called “homicide bombings”], the White House had made the same suggestion—well, the Bush administration, whether it was the White House or the Pentagon or whatever. That’s the background to it.

By the next day, enough people [at Fox] were saying, “What about this?” So the next day’s memo kind of reluctantly said, “Well, you could use either one.” But by then, everyone—and again, we’re talking about young people who don’t have any perspective on this; all they know is that you do what they’re told—they know what management’s feeling about this is. So . . . it’s “homicide bombings.” And that’s the beginnings of a new P.C.

Q: So people at Fox know what management’s political views are—and they know that management wants to see those views reflected on their television screens?

Yes, but it’s not because the people on the second floor—Roger Ailes and so forth—come down and say, “This is what we want.” It kind of filters down. And very often, the people overreact and take it upon themselves and do things that even management wouldn’t expect them to do.

In the case of the California judge who ruled unconstitutional [the words] “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, I was sitting there watching our anchor report the story. He was reading the teleprompter, and he was saying, “Because we want you to have as much information [as possible] about this important story, we want you to be able to go right to the source. We’re giving you the address and phone number of the judge.”

Everybody knew that was a call to harass this guy. Even the poor anchor sees this. I mean, this is the way I saw it because I know the guy. But the point of it is, the guy running the newsroom, he had the control room type up this graphic with the guy’s address and phone number on it. And I’m told . . . that when the people on the second floor saw this they said, “Oh, jeez, we can’t do that.” And they had it taken off. It was this guy down here kind of freelancing, sucking up, thinking he knew what management wanted. And they stopped it.

When [United Nations weapons inspector] Hans Blix was giving his report to the Security Council on what they had uncovered or not uncovered [in Iraq], he began by saying, “We have not found any weapons of mass destruction.” He continued to say: “But we think they’re hiding them, we want them to be more open and show us, and blah blah blah.” Well, you know how it’s done on the screen: They’ll say Blix: “the first

sentence,” and then Blix: “the second sentence,” and so on. It was going to run through the whole thing.

When [the Fox supervisor running the newsroom] saw this—”We have not found weapons of mass destruction”—I’m told by people in the control room that he went in there and said, “We can’t, we’re not going to put that on the air like that.” But it was too late, it was already in the system, and it went on. And again, it was not because management told him not to, and I don’t think they would have said don’t put it up. They’re smarter than that. But this guy—he still runs the newsroom. Maybe they think, well, he was trying to please them, so he gets to stay there.

Q: Are you aware of times where the reverse happened—that is, where things were happening on the air and someone in management sent a message saying, “I want this to slant more Republican”?

No, I can’t say that I’ve ever known them to do that. But what they have is a middle management that is all too willing to just play ball. They know what they can do, what they should do, what they shouldn’t do and so on.

There’s just an atmosphere of—I don’t want to say “fear,” but for some of the young people there that’s what it is. You know, I’d rail against this. I never made any bones about it. Right in the middle of the newsroom, I’d say, “Did you see what we did?” The typical thing would be for people to say to me, “So we’re not fair and balanced? Like you didn’t know that? What are you getting all upset about?”

Q: What else do you remember from the editorial note?

When the war was just beginning or we were just sending troops over there, one of the daily memos made reference to protesters and said that we’re going to be seeing a lot of protesters—I think they used the word “whining,” yes, whining—about American bombs and American soldiers killing Iraqi citizens. “Whining”—you’ve got your clue, a hint. They’re *whining*. Yeah, tell that to the families of American soldiers that were going to die there.

Q: That was in the memo?

I’m not sure of the exact words, but it was to that effect. So that day I’m down editing lead-ins to tape pieces, and a producer comes down while the editors were putting [one of the reports] together. And the producer says, “No, we can’t run that.” Why? Because somewhere in the middle of it there was a few seconds of footage of some Iraqi children in a hospital. And he said, “Well, we don’t know why they were there.” They could have just cut out that clip, but he said to kill the whole thing. This was a report from a reporter on what went on that day. But simply because of that memo, they just killed the story.

Q: Were there other times when you believed the editorial note had a direct influence on the political slant of Fox’s news coverage?

I came in one morning, and the first thing I saw on the monitor was our anchor doing a story [about reaction to Sen. Trent Lott’s suggestion that America would have been a better place if then-segregationist Sen. Strom Thurmond had been elected president when he ran in 1948]. And it was clear that Fox, through the anchor, was anti-Trent Lott. So I went right to the memo, and sure enough the memo said we should make sure our viewers know that this wasn’t even the first time Lott has made such remarks. And I thought, “Wow, I don’t understand.” So I go to the wires, and sure enough, there it is: Bush has condemned what he had said, and Bush wanted to get rid of Lott as the majority leader.

Q: So it was an unexpected Fox approach to the story—at least until you figured out that it also just happened to be the Bush administration’s approach?

That's right.

Q: Did you complain about the bias you saw at Fox?

I reserved my right to rail against what I saw every day practically, and there were times when I would take an anchor to task in front of other people. And I was wrong in doing that, with people I considered friends. But it was just so, so . . . I had just never seen anything like this.

Very often among many of the anchors there, their idea of "fair and balanced" is you have on liberal or Democrat "A" and conservative or Republican "B." You spend most of your time challenging or dismissing rudely what the liberal has to say and lobbing softball questions to the conservative. You'd be sure to give them equal time or give the liberal a little more time even.

You see it day in and day out. For many of these people, the young people, it's par for the course. This is what they see and they let it go. It's hard for me not to comment on things. I've been sitting here for the last six months watching this debate about who's biased and who isn't and whether Fox is this or that. And when I saw this thing about Chris Wallace, I thought, "This is it. This is the last straw."

Q: Wallace said that Fox has received an unfair "rap" as slanting its coverage in a Republican direction. But lots of people associated with Fox have said that. What was it about Wallace's comments that set you off?

The whole idea of throwing him into this debate. Here's a guy who's presumably going to be paid, what? A seven-figure salary, high six figures? What else is he going to say? That's not the guy you should be talking to. Why don't you talk to the people who have to work in this . . . people who can tell you at least privately at least what really happens? You're not going to get the straight story from the people making a million dollars there, not even off the record.

Q: Are your former colleagues at Fox—both the million-dollar anchors and the people working in the newsroom—conscious and aware that they're slanting coverage to the right?

I think many are. A lot of them [aren't.] That anchor that I argued with, I think he sincerely believes that Fox and his work are "fair and balanced." He would quote from some letters from people who accused him of being liberal. But you've got to understand. When 99 percent of your audience is conservative, you're going to get some raving lunatic conservatives writing in who say you're too liberal.

Even the people who know better . . . well, look, you're working for somebody. I probably should have quit there right away. I stayed on, I had a job, but I reserved my right to yell and scream and not care whether I was considered a malcontent or whatever. And I would not write something that was supposed to be objective that wasn't. You just don't do that.

Q: Well, maybe *you* don't.

Well, you *don't* in journalism. But now, journalism, a lot of it is viewpoint. Salon, I'm sure, it's, you know, "This is what you can expect from there." But at least you know what you can expect. Fox, you know, you can expect a Republican slant. But just admit it, you know?

Q: And the denial is your biggest frustration?

Yes, it is. Hearing the mantra, you know, "Fair and balanced. We report, you decide." I mean, come on. Don't make me laugh.

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