

FOX NEWS NORTH A RANCID IDEA

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✘ Heather Mallick, Star Columnist, [The Toronto Star](#), 9 September 2010

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Of course I may have to have all of it, given that their business plan is said by many to include the Harper government pressuring the CRTC to give Sun TV News a "mandatory" cable deal, which is an almost unheard-of status, particularly for a new specialty channel in the digital age. It means that it must be included in at least one tier, or cable package, that you're probably buying for other reasons. It's the kind of deal other corporations, fighting for every viewer and every dollar, would bleed themselves with leeches to win. Quebecor, which owns the Sun, says if it doesn't get this special CRTC-granted status, the channel will collapse.

Everyone has assumed that if CRTC chair Konrad von Finckenstein does the legal, ethical thing and tells Sun TV News to run the same gauntlet as every other channel, he will have his fragile head crushed between leathery Conservative fingertips. Von Finckenstein has publicly said he has not been approached and that the standard public hearings will be held this fall. He thinks he won't be targeted.

He is naïve, which is odd for a former judge and public servant of such experience. Konrad, if I can place us on a first-name basis, watch out.

The argument that Fox News North will be fair and balanced, a hard-right antidote to the allegedly liberal CBC, is nonsense. A privately owned propaganda channel is not the equivalent of an underfunded non-profit public broadcaster stuck with the legal requirement to inform a huge fractured country on a factually immaculate basis. The CBC's disastrous recent effort to make itself young, populist and silly notwithstanding, it really does try hard. But its new style of hard-hitting investigative reporting—that down market coffee shops are crusted with dirt or that people should avoid fire and flood—is the equivalent of the ponderous Washington Post's absurd offshoot, Slate.com, which has a male reporter on the uterine beat and runs articles headlined "A history of quicksand in the movies."

Canadians may not be familiar with Fox News except as a running gag on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, run late at night on CTV's The Comedy Network (brilliant shows that

you must PVR right now. Go on, do it. I'll wait.)

Fox celebrates ignorance and fosters hate, it's your weasel heart, that chunk of you that spurts endorphins when a hated rival crashes his car on Ambien or is caught with a gerbil where a gerbil shouldn't be. It's a poison tree. Weirdly transfixing as Glenn Beck is, when you eat the Fox apple, it eats away at you.

And it's a news cartoon. When real journalists make a mistake, we feel a sickness in our soul. It's humiliating, it should, and will be, publicly corrected and so-workers avert their eyes. Fox isn't like that. They seemingly make up numbers, flying unburdened through their fenced-in no-fact zone.

I know Fox because, kindly liberal caricature that I am, I went on Bill O'Reilly's show in 2004. I didn't see why Fox viewers should be deprived of an alternative view though I bet they'd never seen a Canadian before. (I remember once being told by the New York Times Syndication Service that Canada couldn't possibly have two left-wing women commentators, and getting a grovelling apology from the editor after Naomi Klein called him and, well, crushed his little head.)

The O'Reilly appearance was a disaster. Trying to be kind and rational, I kept sending wide-eyed moral reproaches into the black monitor of a Toronto TV studio while O'Reilly invented wildly incorrect stats from non-existent publications about the alleged U.S. boycott of France for not trotting off obediently to Iraq. Readers later joyously sent me "Paris Business Review" coffee mugs with "beillions of dollairs" over a photo of a baguette (O'Reilly's sex scandal involved an intern and phallic bread and yes, I laughed).

The fallout was more troubling, hundreds of emails from enraged men who wanted me dismembered. Fox, I contend and an apparently large contingent of its viewers - actively dislike women (and blacks, Muslims, Mexicans, people who get more sex than they do, i.e. everyone, latte, cranberry bogs, cities, passports, chicken living outdoors etc.). It hates Canada. It eggs on its women-hating fanbase which is, like the subsequent SwiftBoaters and TeaBaggers, a malign force bubbling with rage.

Weirdly, I worked for the Toronto Sunday Sun, both before and after it was sold to Quebecor. The Sun fancied itself much as I imagine the Fox News North people do now, iconoclasts speaking up for regular people (or "folks," the patronizing word George W. Bush popularized), non-unionized and crushed by government. But Quebecor did the crushing. Now the paper is thin and tubercular, its staff sparse and ghostly pale.

An editor there, a kind man I liked, used to rail against the "elites." This is the centrepiece of Pierre Karl Péladeau's Sun News TV strategy. (Péladeau, an erratic heir to wealth, has always seemed perfectly Parisian. His political outlook is puzzling.) Which was fine, but this editor pronounced it "elights." I am a slave to my natural courtesy and when someone mispronounces a word, the only decent thing is to go along with it. Yes, "Frood" was wrong, psychoanalysis so silly.

But I could never bring myself to say "elights." Everyone has a line they won't cross, and I was unwilling to mock what Harper has always resented since some ancient slight: the wine-sipping book-reading types who snubbed him when he first came to Ottawa. I grew up in small northern towns, with the allegedly stupid people who allegedly vote for Harper, and books were my ticket to what Harper calls élitism, which is plain old city living and he's wrong to fear it.

Goodness, we have travelled far. Let's get back to Sun TV News, owned by Péladeau, still only a concept, to be run by the young permanently enraged Kory Teneycke (a thin Beck) and modelled after Fox News. Fox, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., is a malevolent presence in American life. Packed with lies and a racism that would shame Jesse Helms, it has turned the U.S. into a contest between the horrified sane and the furious hyperventilators.

Although there is no corporate connection between Fox and Sun, there is a visceral one. In March 2009, CP has reported, Prime Minister Stephen Harper lunched in New York City with Murdoch, accompanied by Fox news president Roger Ailes and then- Harper communications director Tenycke.

The great British TV dramatist Dennis Potter said it best when he excoriated Murdoch's effect on British life in a BBC TV interview in 1994. Potter was dying of pancreatic cancer—he had a bottle of liquid morphine by his side during the program—and he named his cancer "Rupert."

"I would shoot the bugger if I could," Potter said on-air. "There is no one person more responsible for the pollution of what was already a fairly polluted press, and the pollution of the British press is an important part of the pollution of British political life, and it's an important part of the cynicism, and misperception of our own realities, that is destroying so much of our political discourse."

Murdoch, who admittedly rescued the British press by destroying hidebound printers unions in Wapping in the 1980s, started Fox News in 1985. He was exporting "evil," as Sen. Al Franken put it, long before Potter reviled him.

The weird thing is that Fox has an influence far beyond its actual reach in fragmented U.S. TVland. (On Friday of last week, for example, it had only 1.7 million viewers in prime time, reports TVbythenumbers.com.) I know this to my cost.

When Sarah Palin appeared at the Republican convention in 2008, I wrote about her honestly, an online CBC.ca column that would have disappeared into the ether as usual, except Fox News found out about it. I said Palin was a dangerous idiot. It made me the target of the worst Americans and Canadians, men with a violent hatred of (see list above). The attack was organized, as all Internet attacks are. And online anonymous hate is like a poison gas.

It was the same as my previous experience with Fox, but hotter and filthier. I'm happy to be called a pig by Greta Van Susteren, whatever. But this time people, really were hunting not just me, but friends, which made me frantic with guilt and fear. They were trying to find out where I lived. I'm only

writing this now because I'm in a building with security guards. Here's a typical email from a Fox viewer...minus the x-rated words I've beeped out.

"So you don't like Sarah Palin you ugly slut? Beep you, you liberal piece of shit. I'll bet your beep smells like rotten meat. You are one ugly beep. I'd love to punch you right in your chops and knock every tooth out of your head. Come see me beep! I have something for you. Something all liberal pieces of shit need. Beep off and die you beeping beep!"

Being the target of Internet swarming is paranoia-producing and lonely-making. I got no sympathy from girlfriends—they eat for comfort like normal people—for my subsequent weight loss. I spent the winter not eating and thinking gloomy thoughts. My favourite TV show was a Brit comedy called Human Remains. I lost so much weight that my feet and fingers shrank. I asked my doctor if I was underweight, and he said grimly, pointing to my breasts, "Not if those are real," (they are), which I still think is a funny line. I laughed, unwillingly, and went out to buy a smaller wedding ring and new shoes plus insoles for my pumps.

Fox targets women. And racial groups. But most worryingly, it targets individuals in the same way the Harper government does. Tom Flanagan, who has helped guide Harper since he met him in 1990 at the University of Calgary, laid out his game plan for the conservative takeover in his book Harper's Team. What matters is the cleansing of alleged liberals from the actual governance of the country. Once you get elected, Flanagan wrote, "you choose judges, appoint the senior civil service, fund or de-fund advocacy groups." This is the Fox agenda and certainly the Harper agenda we see now.

And you are free to approve of the Harper agenda but it is very wrong to trash the telecommunications regulation process—which regards the airwaves as precious to Canadians—to bring in a northern version of what has turned the U.S. into a nation where fact-based people are scorned and tormented by screamers. Fox did this.

Here's the thing. Fox won't succeed here. It is only viable, as Globe TV critic John Doyle has written, "if it is shoved down our throats" by Péladeau seeking mandatory access. Now viewers are happy to see new channels, but they notoriously hate to pay for them. You wouldn't be able to avoid buying Fox without giving up huge TV slices. I buy Rogers' fancy package just so I can get Mad Men. But I chose that. The money isn't extracted from me with forceps.

I can't even see Sun News TV succeeding here, mainly because Canada has never even been able to sustain an evening talk show, much less 24 hours of political ranting. When it comes to interesting people, we have a shallow talent pool, partly because our star performers move to the States and partly because we are civilized and decent, which doesn't set an interview alight. When someone says something godawful dumb, we wince but we don't say, "I hate you and I'm going to crush your head."

We say, "You may have a point there."

A nation that thinks Corner Gas is funny because it is us is a nation that won't go for full-bore mean stupidity. We like underdogs because Canada is an underdog. I adore Corner Gas.

Fox/Sun will be boring. But it's still wrong.

