

Dem Lawmakers Say Fox News is Unbalanced

By HANNAH K. STRANGE - United Press International

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Several members of Congress sent a letter Tuesday to Rupert Murdoch, owner of Fox News, to express their opposition to what they say is the network's "unfair and unbalanced" bias towards the Republican Party.

The group, composed of 38 Democrats and Independents from the U.S. House of Representatives, has requested that Murdoch meet with them to discuss their concerns.

"The responsibility of the media is to report the news in an unbiased, impartial and objective manner," the letter reads.

"It seems clear that Fox News network has a deliberate bias in favor of, and often serves as an extension of, the Republican Party's policies and ideology."

Murdoch owns 100 cable channels, 40 television stations, nine satellite networks, one film studio and 175 newspapers, reaching an estimated 4.7 billion people worldwide.

The letter's co-signers include Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, D-Ill., a member of the House Democratic Leadership, Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., ranking member on the House Judiciary Committee, and Rep. Pete Stark, D-Calif., ranking member on the Joint Economic Committee.

A spokesman for Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., said there were legislative avenues that the group could pursue as a secondary measure but declined to speculate on what those might be.

The letter cites recent studies by organizations such as Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting and the Program on International Policy Attitudes.

The FAIR report found that Fox's "Special Report with Brit Hume" overwhelmingly favors conservative and Republican guests over liberals or Democrats at a ratio of 5-1.

"If Fox is the 'fair and balanced' network it claims to be, then the guest list of what Fox calls its

"signature news show" ought to reflect a diverse spectrum of ideas and sources," the report states.

A winter 2003-04 poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes consistently found that members of the public whose primary news source is Fox News had a higher rate of misperceptions about Iraq than viewers of any other news source.

Two-thirds of Fox viewers, for example, wrongly believed that a link between Iraq and al-Qaida had been found, while only 16 percent of PBS/NPR viewers and listeners and 40 percent of print-media readers shared the same misperception.

In addition, 33 percent of Fox viewers believed that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq, in contrast with 11 percent of PBS/NPR viewers and 19 percent of ABC News viewers.

"The report suggests the one-sided, partisan reporting of Fox News has the effect of improving the president's standing with the American people on the basis of not news, but disinformation," said the legislators' letter to Murdoch.

Both polls are featured in the recent documentary "Outfoxed," also referred to in the letter, which delivers a highly critical analysis of Fox's alleged political bias and agenda-pushing techniques. It has been widely dismissed by Fox News.

The documentary, sponsored by the Center for American Progress, a think tank headed by former Clinton Chief of Staff John Podesta, and MoveOn.org, an online advocacy group, has sold 100,000 copies since its DVD release two weeks ago.

The film's rapid success, taking it to the top of Amazon.com's bestseller list, has led to a distribution deal with Cinema Libre Studio, which will soon release the film in theaters in Washington, New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

MoveOn.org and AlterNet.org, part of the Independent Media Institute, have both filed complaints with the Federal Trade Commission over Fox News' use of the "Fair and Balanced" trademark, which they say is deceptive and misleading.

The complaint by MoveOn.org acknowledges the right of any news channel to present news with a political slant under the First Amendment but charges that the slogan misinforms consumers and does not accurately represent Fox's broadcasts, based on the studies it cites and former Fox employees' testimony.

Both the letter and complaint refer to internal Fox memos exposed by the documentary written by John Moody, senior vice president and news editor, and distributed to staff on a daily basis.

The memos appear to direct Fox News staff in their reporting of certain political figures and events. A June 3, 2003, memo cited in the letter instructs reporters to celebrate the president

while he faces opponents on Middle East issues:

"It's a distinctly skeptical crowd that Bush faces," the memo reads. "His political courage and tactical cunning are worth noting throughout the day."

Such instructions, says former CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite in the documentary, are highly irregular. "I've never heard of any other network or any other legitimate news organization doing that."

Fox, he says, has completely "eliminated journalism," a sentiment echoed by several media analysts and former Fox employees featured in the documentary.

Jon Du Pre, former West Coast news anchor for Fox, says, "They made it perfectly clear what they expected from us.

"We weren't so much ... a newsgathering organization as we were a proponent of a point of view," he says.

The co-signers agree. "When Fox News promulgates the White House message of the day through its news programming," the letter reads, "it reveals partisan support for right-wing view points, a partisan preference for the Republican Party and a partisan allegiance to the Republican agenda."

"To be truly 'Fair and Balanced,' Fox News must abandon its role as a proxy for the Republican Party's communications office," the letter concludes.

No one at Fox News was available to comment for this story.