

**THE BLOG**

# Soros or Murdoch

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By Marty Kaplan

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Get ready for a new Fox-wide onslaught on George Soros. The man Bill O'Reilly calls "the single most dangerous individual in the United States," and to whose name O'Reilly attaches the Homeric epithet "radical-left activist billionaire" as regularly as *Spy* magazine used "thick-fingered vulgarian" as a prefix for Donald Trump's name, is backing a new effort to unmask political propaganda, and Rupert Murdoch's minions can be counted on to denounce it in an orgy of hilariously self-incriminating projection.

The 60th anniversary of George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" will be the occasion in a couple of weeks for a daylong conference at the New York Public Library subtitled "Orwell Comes to America," as well as the publication of a book called "What Orwell Didn't Know: Propaganda and the New Face of American Politics." Anyone who hasn't drunk the Murdoch/Cheney Kool-Aid will instantly recognize the legitimacy of the topic: American discourse has been hijacked by right-wing demagogues who win by smear, reign by fear, demonize dissent, treasonize reason, and accuse any public utterance which reveals their lies or intent as "liberal media bias."

(I know, Orwell would scowl at linguistic inelegance like "treasonize," but I'm weak, ok? And as long as I'm being parenthetical, I wrote a chapter in the Orwell book, but I'm saying so not as full disclosure; it's just old-fashioned self-promotion.)

The tragedy of modern mainstream journalism is that it is epistemologically incapable of revealing the heirs of Father Coughlin and Joseph Goebbels as what they are. Newspapers and networks have been so effectively mau-maued by reactionary talking-heads and politicians that they have largely abandoned the effort to separate true from false, and instead — waving the cowardly white flag of "balance" — they content themselves with juxtaposing warring contentions, as though this putative open-mindedness were no different from empty-headedness. The right has co-opted to its own advantage the very moral relativism it claims to denounce, conning the media into postmodern nihilism. Every story becomes he-said/she-said. Every debate is framed as two-sided; the sin of falling into the fallacy of moral equivalence, said to be so damaging in our war against the Other, is somehow supposed to be benign when it gives a podium to right-wing hit men and the women who love them.

The name of George Soros's foundation, the Open Society Institute, comes from a phrase popularized by a hero of his, the British philosopher Karl Popper. His two-volume work, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, was an attack on a philosophical tradition from Plato to Hegel, and on the modern tyrannies, from communism to Nazism, which Popper

saw as its consequence. Reading it in graduate school was, for me, one of those intellectually life-changing experiences. The difference between a closed and an open society, says Popper, is not that an open society says yes to all propositions. If it were, then the modern media — where propagandists and nutjobs are cloaked in the same plausibility afforded to, say, legitimate investigative reporters and scientists — would be the bedrock of a civic utopia. Openness doesn't mean "anything goes"; it doesn't mean "pick your poison." It means that there is a broadly agreed-upon process for a society to test and refute, or test and accept-for-now, the contentions and conjectures on the table.

Fox News isn't an open society, because there is *in principle* no way to convince its foamers that they are wrong. Rupertland, and its allied kingdoms in print and radio, are closed societies, no less so than the authoritarian states on left and right that Orwell and Popper took pains to lay bare. There is simply no way to persuade O'Reilly or the other bullies that they're wrong. No conceivable kind of evidence can be adduced which might bring them to modify or abandon their position. No fact can penetrate their bubble; anything inconsistent with their totalitarian mindsets is dismissed as left-wing spin and propaganda. The test of an open society is whether an argument, whether an empirical finding, has — at least in theory — the ability to lead that society to change its mind. By that test, the Fox narrative of America is as impenetrable to fact or reason as any Soviet or jihadist fairy tale.

But an open society isn't one that just welcomes all comers. That's the right's parody of liberalism — multi-culti pomo spinelessness, the moronic "we'll have to leave it there" anchor babble that ends virtually every contentious segment on non-Fox news. No, the job of an open society is to figure out ways to rule in some ideas, and rule out others. How loud you yell is not such a way. Nor is whether you claim to represent a group, or how entertaining you are, or how successfully you stir up controversy, or how relentlessly you complain to bookers, producers, reporters and editors that your "point of view" is not being adequately represented.

The task of an open society is to create a system that separates fact from falsehood, a system that doesn't start from the proposition that accuracy is just in the eye of the beholder, that doesn't abandon the notion of objectivity as hopelessly and inherently political. In the public arena, these systems used to be called "education," "science," and "journalism." I can't wait to watch O'Reilly bang his spoon on his highchair and call the Open Society Institute's Orwell exploration propaganda. Any middle-schooler will know what to reply: "I'm rubber, you're glue." Or is it "He who smelt it, dealt it"?

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