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Op-Ed: “CNews’ most loyal viewers readily confess their sympathies for the far right”

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SINCE Vincent Bolloré took over in 2016, CNews has been criticized for being a far-right channel, comparable to Fox News in the United States. On February 13, France’s State Council [released a decision](#) urging ARCOM to enforce pluralism on CNews. Its supporters have since argued that no scientific study had demonstrated the channel’s partisanship or found evidence to support comparisons with Fox News.

During her hearing before the parliamentary commission on the allocation of digital terrestrial television (DTT) frequencies, [on February 29](#), CNews presenter Sonia Mabrouk stated: “*Our audience is extremely broad! Our viewers support La France Insoumise as well as Renaissance, [The Republicans], and the [National Rally]. We truly represent 100% of the French!*”

She was right on one point: the profile of the viewers tells us far more than would profiling the channel’s hosts. If the leaders of CNews still refuse to admit having turned it into an opinion channel, their most loyal viewers more readily confess their sympathies for the far right.

[My study, published on January 16](#) in the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, relies on data collected between May 17 and June 13, 2022, by Kantar Media. The survey measures the political preferences, voting, and television habits of a representative sample of the French population. On a left-right scale ranging from 0 to 10, the average French person sits slightly to the right of center, around 5.3. CNews viewers are by far the most right-leaning and the most homogeneous in terms of political preferences, with a score ranging from 6.5 for those who watch the channel at least once a week to 7.5 for those who watch it several times a day.

An Embarrassing Comparison

These figures do not take into account respondents who refuse to place themselves on the left-right scale or whose response echoes the old Front National slogan “*neither right nor left*.” According to my analyses, the latter represented between a fifth and a quarter of Le Pen’s voters in the 2022 presidential election. Omitting them mechanically underestimates the channel’s partisanship.

In comparison, France Télévisions channels, regularly accused of spreading left-wing propaganda, have the most representative audience of the French population, with a score ranging from 5 to 5.2 depending on the frequency of use. As for BFMTV, its viewers position themselves between 5.7 and 6.1 for its most faithful viewers.

These results are corroborated by the voting behavior of viewers in both rounds of the 2022 presidential election. Among the six largest news channels, CNews once again stands out as the most radical channel. In the first round, [47.5% of viewers watching CNews several times a day](#) voted for Marine Le Pen or Eric Zemmour. Adding Nicolas Dupont-Aignan brings this figure to 50.1%. If all French people followed the most avid fans of the channel, Marine Le Pen would have beaten the incumbent president in a landslide, with 67% of the votes in the second round. This score represents a performance 25 points higher than that achieved among all study participants (41.7%).

The comparison with Fox News is profoundly embarrassing for the French channel. The entire panel of Pascal Praud erupted in outrage on February 14, when the Secretary-General of Reporters Without Borders, Christophe Deloire, came to participate in the debate. “*CNews has nothing to do with Fox!*” exclaimed the show host. On the basis of the average left-right scores of their viewers, and their voting behavior, CNews and Fox News are virtually indistinguishable. In fact, the comparison is more unflattering for CNews, since the score Donald Trump obtained among the most avid viewers of Fox News was only 19 points higher (64%) than his score among all US respondents (45%). This overperformance is 6 points below that of candidate Le Pen among CNews’ most loyal viewers (+25 points) compared to her final score among all French respondents (41.7%).

Expanding the Range of Opinions

The data produced in my study is not sufficient to prove the intention of CNews’ leaders to transform the late channel i-Télé into a propaganda channel. However, CNews seems to be following the Fox News blueprint: monetizing the partisanship of its viewers.

One might argue that the business model also relies on viewers’ desire to watch a channel that presents ideas contrary to their own. This is unlikely. For a decade, political psychology has irrefutably demonstrated, through imaging and various physiological metrics, that most of us feel a profound aversion to content that challenges our most deeply held beliefs. An individual who subjects themselves to watching a 24/7 news channel several times a day, although its programs are by definition extremely repetitive, has got to find gratification in the views aired.

French law requires respect for pluralism in the news. This includes the views of [the illiberal right](#). The State Council’s decision is not aimed at censoring any opinion. On the contrary, it is indeed about expanding, rather than reducing the range of opinions presented to citizens on each channel, in compliance with the law and journalistic ethics.

CNews commentators may well be offended by the ‘far right’ label. They may hide behind guests who have a distant relationship with the left. There remains only one problem: as a private channel, their revenues depend on the approval of their viewers; these viewers are also voters. And in their vast majority, these voters vote for the far right.

About the author:

Julien Labarre is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is also the Administrator of the Center for Information Technology & Society. His research focuses on mass media and political information, social media, political behavior, and pathologies of democracy in Europe and in the US.