The new film "Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism," which attempts to undermine the Fox News Channel with its own words, pictures and memos, is neither fair, balanced nor especially effective.

It is, like most of what FNC presents, an advocacy piece that tries to attach some hard facts to the standing criticism of the cable-news popularity leader. That criticism: Despite its "fair and balanced" and "we report, you decide" slogans, the channel approaches Republicans on bended knee, Democrats with a snarl and a lash.

Producer-director Robert Greenwald ("Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War") wants to show Murdoch's upstart channel as a Republican echo chamber, unprofessional in its news principles, biased in its guest bookings and vindictive against those who disagree.

All of that seems true enough, given the evidence presented in the film. But it's also a little like making a movie touting the discovery that McDonald's food makes you fat. A potential viewer who has been paying any attention already knew this, and a Fox News aficionado will write it off as more liberal carping.

Satisfying to some

Still, "Outfoxed," with its quick pace and abundance of detail, will satisfy many Fox News detractors. Even the most ardent, though, should have reservations.

The film often fails to distinguish between programs Fox bills as news and those it calls commentary, and it employs rapid-fire editing that tends to blur together everything said on Fox News, whether it's by a news anchor, a reporter, an opinion host such as Bill O'Reilly or a guest. Sometimes you don't know who is speaking at all, which makes for snappy viewing but offers no kind of proof.

All of that diminishes its power as propaganda, the best examples of which preach to the choir but also get the congregation thinking.

The work is strongest when it uses ex-Fox News workers, especially former anchor Jon Du Pre, charging that a pro-conservative corporate-think was encouraged and rewarded from the top. Du Pre says he was suspended once for failing to find a sufficiently celebratory tone in reports on Ronald Reagan's birthday.

And Larry Johnson, a former paid Fox News military expert, says his on-air appearances ceased immediately after he disagreed with the Fox pro-war slant, arguing, on air, that splitting U.S. military attention between Afghanistan and Iraq was a bad strategy.

But a series of anonymous ex-Fox employees Greenwald uses offer more drama than telling information that would justify including them.

The film's limited availability is another potential barrier to its effectiveness.

It "opened" last week in New York, but the main distribution plan is to show it through house parties.

Some 18 of them, with nearly all of about 360 slots filled, were scheduled in the Chicago area this past weekend, according to the Web site of the liberal political group MoveOn.org (MoveOn, along with the Center for American Progress, provided financial backing for the film.) The DVD was also the top seller on Amazon.com at midafternoon Monday.

Put together with the box office success of Michael Moore's anti-President Bush polemic "Fahrenheit 9/11," this suggests that there is a strong market for media with a liberal theme, contrary to the conventional wisdom of those who analyze talk radio, for instance.

Backed by memos

In its most discussed moments, the documentary backs its charge of bias with a series of memos the filmmakers obtained, written by Fox News chief John Moody and designed, apparently, to set the channel's coverage tone. "This should be a trademark issue for FNC today and in the days to come," Moody wrote in one.

He urged, for instance, that attention be paid to the idea that the post-war situation in Iraq was not so bad, or that presumptive Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry's alleged "flip-flopping" voting record be highlighted.
And then the clips from the channel show the directive being followed. But the sinister voice the director employs to read the Moody memos seems cheap (as does some dark background music in other sections).

More damning to Fox News is the study commissioned from FAIR for the film. In "Special Report With Brit Hume," the balance of one-on-one guests in a 25-week period was outrageously in favor of Republicans, by a 5-to-1 margin. That’s on the flagship news program, not one of the prime-time opinion shows.

And the conclusion, meant to be a rousing call to action, tries to tie the Fox enterprise into the notion that big media ownership means individual outlets are no longer responsive to the people. That’s a popular issue with the likely audience for this film, but it’s an issue across the news media, not a problem specific to Fox.

Movie Review: Outfoxed by Robert Greenwald
By Michael M. Grynbaum, Harvard Crimson, July 23, 2004

According to Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism, the Fox News Channel is a conservatively biased, pro-Republican network whose “fair and balanced” maxim is nothing less than a lie. A legitimate argument, indeed—and one that calls for a nuanced, gripping and affecting cinematic exposé.

Unfortunately, Outfoxed is not that film. Robert Greenwald’s low-budget documentary, co-sponsored by liberal advocacy groups MoveOn.org and the Center for American Progress, is short, sloppy, occasionally impactful and frequently superfluous. It presents a convincing compilation of damning footage and expert testimony demonstrating Fox’s myriad violations of journalistic ethics, but a key ingredient remains missing. Cinema must be engaging; it must be attractive. Greenwald falls flat on both counts.

Not to say the evidence isn’t compelling. Using dozens of clips from the 24-hour news network and interviews with prominent critics and commentators, Greenwald has pieced together a comprehensive look at how Fox distorts and twists the news.

But unlike its obvious counterpart, Fahrenheit 9/11, Outfoxed fails to translate its abstract ideas to the audience’s level. Michael Moore’s talent as a filmmaker is demonstrating how politics and policy affect the average Joe. Conversely, no apathetic viewer will be swayed by the statistics and wonkish experts Greenwald parades on screen. Without a dash of showmanship, the strains of Greenwald’s sermon will reach only the choir.

The film’s structure, essentially a series of bullet points from “fear” to “O’Reilly,” is bland and dilettantish. The music is dramatic but tinny: the Fahrenheit 9/11 score for Nintendo. Worse, the on-screen graphics bring to mind the videos on acids and bases you used to watch in your high school chemistry class. Greenwald calls this “guerrilla” filmmaking; I call it “shoddy.”

Most damningly, the film is devoid of humor. In using a clip from “The Daily Show,” Greenwald lets Jon Stewart make the jokes for him. A defter editor would have used the frequently absurd clips from Fox to comedic effect. Instead, the director elicits a few chuckles but misses the belly laughs his material so richly deserves.

Meanwhile, the dark irony of Outfoxed is that its worst offenses are journalistic, not cinematic. Greenwald splices his interview subjects to shreds, constantly cutting their words even as they

Indeed, you could argue that Fox News is excruciatingly responsive to its audience.

Smart moves

And "Outfoxed" seems to miss entirely the biggest reason for Fox’s success since its inception in 1996. Giving the channel an ideological base was a canny strategy, but even more cunning is how it functions as a kind of clubhouse.

The Fox News Channel’s favorite topic isn’t the valiant President Bush, as the film suggests. It’s the Fox News enterprise itself. More than political affirmation, viewers get to feel as if they belong to a tight-knit group braving the cultural storms.

And they will likely view "Outfoxed" as one more assault on their bunker, proof only that the "liberal media" is, indeed, out to get them.
ostensibly provide important evidence. The effect is the visual equivalent of a sea of ellipses. The practice is prevalent enough to cast doubt on the veracity of the comments (Were they taken out of context? Why can’t we see them uncut?), not an advisable tactic when the subject in question is an allegedly biased and slanted news network.

Furthermore, Outfoxed engages in some of the same tactics utilized by its antagonists. Greenwald holds up polls comparing the political beliefs of Fox viewers to those of patrons of public broadcasting. The numbers are alarming (nearly 70 percent of Fox viewers believed Saddam Hussein was connected to the Sept. 11 attacks, compared to 16 percent of PBS viewers), but causality is unclear.

Greenwald also interviews a kennel of liberal media watchdogs, but does not include, say, Columbia Graduate School of Journalism Dean Nicholas B. Lemann ’76 (also a former Crimson president), who has offered a more tempered view of Fox’s problems. How are slanted statistics and experts like these any different from those used on “The O’Reilly Factor”?

The film’s troubles are only compounded by the fact that Greenwald did not approach Fox News for comment. His excuse? Fox “gets its message out every day,” Greenwald said at a press conference here last Monday. Perhaps, but a Bush-bashing story by any legitimate news outlet won’t run without White House comment, despite a press secretary’s daily briefings. Greenwald’s error is a grave one, and Outfoxed suffers for it.

Beyond its surface flaws, does Outfoxed harbor an important message? Yes. Fox’s news coverage is rife with fearmongering, mistruths and rampant partisanship. The most powerful sequence of the film is Bill O’Reilly’s on-air interview with Jeremy Glick, the son of a Sept. 11 victim. Glick attempted to explain his opposition to Bush’s post-attack foreign policy; an enraged O’Reilly interrupted and browbeat his guest, even asserting that his father “would not approve of this.” Later, O’Reilly claimed Glick had “accused President Bush of knowing about 9/11 and murdering his own father.” Glick, of course, had said nothing of the sort. Such repugnant behavior is a testament to the network’s hypocrisy and distortion.

Americans need to be exposed to these facts. Fox News’s persistent bias and manipulation is a clear and present danger to the viewing public. Too bad, then, that Outfoxed is a flawed, uninspiring film.

Joe Scarborough Says MSNBC is Just As Biased As Fox News — and He’s Right
By Shana Mansbach August 8, 2013, PolicyMIC.com

Ridiculing Fox News’s Republican bias is nothing new among talking heads —— Steve Colbert famously celebrated the two "making it official" in a 2010 episode —— but when MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough openly accused his network of being just as biased as Fox, many viewers were shocked. It turns out, however, that Scarborough is right.

In the Pew Research Center’s 2013 “State of the News Media” special report, MSNBC was reported as dedicating a whopping 85% of its airtime to commentary and opinion, leaving only 15% for factual reporting. Fox News, in contrast, split its broadcast much more evenly, with roughly 55% commentary and 45% objective reporting. CNN was reported with a similar 46%-54% split.

MSNBC also spends a fraction of what CNN and FOX do on news production, with outlays of around $240 million in 2012, compared to CNN’s $682 million and Fox’s $820 million.

Not only is MSNBC’s airtime biased towards commentary over fact, but its coverage is astonishingly skewed to the left. This partially was on its fullest display during the 2012 presidential campaign, where coverage reflected a clear preference for Barack Obama over Mitt Romney. In the final week before the election, for example, MSNBC provided zero negative coverage of Obama while offering no positive coverage of Romney. Throughout the entirety of the campaign, MSNBC’s coverage of Romney was 68% negative, whereas the rest of the combined news network’s
coverage was only 33% negative. Finally, throughout the campaign, MSNBC aired 23 negatively toned clips of Romney for every positive one — a remarkable ratio even compared to Fox’s eight to one negative-to-positive split on Obama.

MSNBC’s leftward lurch is part of a 2010 marketing campaign dubbed "lean forward," initiated after the network jumped to second place in ratings over CNN. "We’ve taken on CNN and we beat them," MSNBC President Phil Griffin told employees when announcing the multi-billion dollar campaign. "Now it’s time to take on Fox." With the addition of left-leaning anchors such as Rachel Maddow and Ed Schultz, MSNBC has made an all-out effort to climb its way to the top by branding itself as the bulwark of progressive politics.

Ironically, MSNBC’s leftwards gamble has cost them viewers. This quarter the network delivered its worst quarterly prime-time showing among total viewers and adults from 25-54 years since 2007, falling 16% in prime-time ratings to come up third behind CNN. Rachel Maddow’s audience was recorded as the smallest since its 2006 debut, and Lawrence O’Donnell’s Last Word garnered the lowest rating for the 25-54 demographic since 2006.

Clearly, MSNBC’s partisan ruse hasn’t paid off for the network. More worrying than the fortunes of the network’s ratings are the implications for the state of the news media — as networks grow more partisan in the battle for viewers, they risk pushing each other to the extremes. The fourth estate is facing its most tumultuous period, with audiences gravitating toward Twitter and other individualized sources of news, and news networks risk being left behind unless they stop sinking to partisan extremes and start innovating.