

# Can the Neoliberal Subject Condemn [Him]self?: Locating Masculinity at FOX News in *Bombshell*

Hui Wong<sup>1</sup> and Brent Strang<sup>1#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, CA

#Advisor

## ABSTRACT

Director Jay Roach's 2019 film *Bombshell* draws on a series of real-life sexual allegations against FOX News founder Roger Ailes, depicting the climate in the newsroom and portraying a number of FOX personalities. As a film marketed for mass audiences, it is crucial to question the extent to which the film successfully serves to critique sexism in the FOX News newsroom. The purpose of this paper is thus to examine the portrayal of masculinity and sexism and FOX News in *Bombshell*. To explore the dynamic of this newsroom, this paper centers on interrogating *Bombshell* against the notion of a "feminist film". I first attempt to analyze and locate gendered dynamics within *Bombshell*, then reflect on portrayed gendered dynamics with reference to the history of FOX News and the way competing masculinities work in the news organization. The FOX News newsroom is unique in the ways varying dynamics of gender manifest within its locale: in front of the camera, a kind of neoconservative "traditionalist" morality and gender order; behind the camera, an "amoral" gender dynamic that aligns with neoliberal free-market principles. I then explore how a gender order is upheld in contradiction, often by the very subjects who are subjected under a masculine-dominant gender order. I question the possibility of any future of gender egalitarianism at FOX News, and conclude by arguing that *Bombshell* misses the mark in interrogating a gender order, instead problematically framing sexism as chiefly upheld by individuals.

## Introduction

*Bombshell* (2019) draws on a series of real-life sexual allegations against FOX News founder Roger Ailes. Director Jay Roach and writer Charles Randolph, along with the portrayals of such FOX personalities as Megyn Kelly (Charlize Theron), Gretchen Carlson (Nicole Kidman), and Jeanine Pirro (Alanna Ubach), attempt to depict the climate in the FOX News newsroom both leading up to and after the allegations. The film, I first suggest, reflects and performs the dynamics of a gendered order in a newsroom that, as articulated by Louise North, views women in the organizational structure as an incursion (5). Newsroom culture is not only largely comprised of men, but men "are the 'culture'" (North 13).

*Bombshell*, however, portrays a unique kind of newsroom: FOX News, a news organization that espouses neoconservative moral principles. This neoconservatism, as Wendy Brown explains, is "animated by an overtly avowed power drive, by angst about the declining or crumbling status of morality within the West, and by a concomitant moralization of a certain imaginary of the West and its values" (697). This supposed crumbling morality, of course, includes the loss of a gender order in which women are confined to the domestic sphere (697). Brown argues that in the United States as a whole, neoconservatism works symbiotically—and contradictorily—with neoliberalism. Brown explains neoliberalism as an economic-political rationality that wields the state as a means to create markets not only out of economic spheres, but also political and social spheres (693). That is, in neoliberal logic, individuals are figured as economic actors, and social and political spheres become "instruments or symbols" that too can be acted upon through market mechanisms (702).

It is within this neoliberal logic R. W. Connell finds and conceptualizes "transnational business masculinity"

(16). Connell suggests that neoliberalism forms a masculinity that relies on the logic and language of individualism and markets to create a neoliberal subject “marked by increasing egocentrism, very conditional loyalties (even to the corporation), and a declining sense of responsibility for others”; additionally, this masculinity also has a “tendency to commodify relations with women” (16). I posit that FOX News operates as a site on which to investigate this masculinity: Rupert Murdoch, founder of FOX News’ parent company News Corporation/21st Century Fox/Fox Corporation, and Roger Ailes, are arguably subjects formed under neoliberal masculinity and thus may be interrogated in reference to Connell’s template.

FOX News works on the basis of pandering to neoconservative views, oftentimes producing and essentializing them (Hoewe et al. 380). The non-masculine in FOX News then hold an ambiguous position, as they are in every way, whether under a neoconservative “moral” order or neoliberal order, subjugated. The masculine and non-masculine are subjected, pressured, and molded in relation to and in accordance with neoliberal masculinity. I argue for the possibility of these two competing masculinities to produce contradiction and failure as the non-masculine subject is pushed to their extreme: in a newsroom that upholds multiple masculinities dynamically, the likes of Gretchen Carlson and Megyn Kelly appear to rip into the precarious, thin fabric of FOX News with sexual allegations, challenging this gender order.

How, then, does FOX News construct itself in a #MeToo/post-#MeToo era that tries to work toward workplace gender liberation, when FOX News is built on principles of gender hierarchy, both behind and in front of the camera? I explore one possibility: FOX News, as it has done with current CEO Suzanne Scott, uses performative gender victories required by neoliberal logic to maintain a masculine gender order. At the same time, I suggest that women like Scott who attempt to perform an approximation of transnational business masculinity figure as subjects who uphold a gender order, subjugating the anti-masculine while simultaneously still themselves subjected as they are unable to leave the political category of “woman”. I believe that this is made available through the neoliberal facade of amorality and further suggests that any significant reform in the newsroom depends on the weakening and defeat of transnational business masculinity, a solution in turn reliant on overturning neoliberalism. Finally, I ground my work in *Bombshell* by proposing that the film, to an extent, misses the mark in galvanizing gender emancipation as it fails to effectively critique the structure of the newsroom, choosing instead to frame Roger Ailes as an individually sexist, troubled person. Indeed, *Bombshell* represents a popular discourse unable to critique itself, and thus critiques of neoliberal masculinity must be drawn from what is embedded and unsaid in the film.

## Locating Neoliberal Masculinity in *Bombshell*

In *Bombshell*, the dynamics of transnational business masculinity and the gender order appear to be evident in the embodied relations between Roger Ailes and FOX News’ female personalities. The relations are *embodied* as they center on bodies: as portrayed by female news personalities in *Bombshell* (26:25-26:35, 38:35-38:55), “spins” in interviews with Roger Ailes—involving a woman physically turning and showing her body to Ailes in his private office—represent a power dynamic that objectifies the female body, turning her into a spectacle on-screen. “It’s a visual medium” (*Bombshell* 26:25-26:30), Ailes’ character remarks; Megyn Kelly, watching the film, articulates her real-life experience:

I was asked to do the spin, and God help me I did it. [...] I put myself through school. I was offered partnership at Jones Day, one of the best law firms in the world. I argued before federal courts of appeals all over the nation. I came here, I’m covering the United States Supreme Court. I graduated with honours from all of my programs and now he wants me to twirl. And I did it. (“Megyn Kelly Presents” 16:35-16:55)

The female body, stripped of anything beyond its to-be-looked-at-ness, is here commodified in one sense: insofar as the body is profitable for the “visual medium” of FOX News, she is useful. The body is a subjected non-subject under the neoliberal gender order that works through market forces.

But what of Roger Ailes himself? The performance of transnational business masculinity, as explored by Connell, includes commodified sexual relations (16). As if self-aware of his own masculinity, Ailes’ character coins

the brusque remark: “to get ahead, you need to give a little head” (*Bombshell* 14:20-14:25). Thus, transactionality goes beyond the body’s profitability on-screen, and into its profitability within the order of the newsroom. In another scene, when a younger Megyn Kelly rejects Ailes’ advances, Ailes asks: “When is your contract up?” (01:28:00-01:28:10); this scene rings true for the real-life Megyn Kelly, who wrote that Roger Ailes had said this exact phrase (Guthrie). This is the neoliberal power dynamic within the locality of the newsroom. Roger Ailes’ masculine power uses sex and sexuality as both a threat and a means for advancement, and additionally values the female body based on profitability in her ability to become an eye-catching object on screen.

It is true that Roger Ailes’ character does not stand as the sole sexist one in *Bombshell* (or in reality). A scene between Brian Wilson and Rudy Bakhtiar’s characters portrays Wilson offering Bakhtiar career advancement in return for a sexual favor (15:00-16:30). Real-life Rudy Bakhtiar reflects on this experience, saying that “that was the end of [her]. That was the last time [she] was in DC for FOX News. [Wilson] actually took [her] off the show the next day” (“Megyn Kelly Presents” 13:30-13:40). Other scenes, as well, do depict the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity in the newsroom: a male coworker being, as Megyn Kelly’s character puts it, “ambitious” as he remarks on her appearance, Gretchen Carlson’s compilation of on-air microaggressions at FOX, conservative pundits on the radio disparaging Kelly’s appearance, and a number of other slights against women come up in the film (*Bombshell* 3:40-3:50, 12:30-13:10, 24:50-25:00). Despite this, however, Jay Roach and Charles Randolph’s framing of Roger Ailes could and should be called into question, especially of the extent of his singular agency and influence on FOX News’ sexist culture.

To be sure, Roach and Randolph do excellent work in the film in showing how the non-masculine subject is objectified, attacked, and commodified. But perhaps it is due to their being part of the neoliberal order in their position as Hollywood creatives, or as being men in charge of a supposedly feminist film, that the film relays to audiences that gender order in the FOX News newsroom is symptomatic of the flawed Roger Ailes. “Fish rots from the head” (*Bombshell* 01:19:15-01:19:20), remarks Juliet Huddy’s character, the metaphor suggesting that Roger Ailes as the “head” is responsible for the culture of the FOX News newsroom. Indeed, after Ailes is fired, women in the newsroom are shown as finally being able to wear shirts and pants (as opposed to a tight dress) (01:40:50-01:41:00). What is the message?

Roach and Randolph appear to represent either Roger Ailes, Rupert Murdoch, or perhaps the FOX News-specific atmosphere as the root of sexual assault and harassment, the rotting head that destroys the rest of the body. But as Louise North explored, masculinity pervades the culture of the newsroom itself, as “women were clustered in lower paid, less prestigious positions in the newsroom, and were missing from most decision-making roles” (6). Gender subjugation goes beyond explicit sexual harassment, too—men’s “talents and capacities” are depicted as “more consonant with more valued jobs and opportunities” (Martin qtd in North 11; North’s emphasis), and the newsroom intrinsically has a locker room culture North calls “blokishness” (7). Roach and Randolph fail to show the way the newsroom appears to inherently be rooted in masculinity beyond individual actors, and in scenes where it seems that they do, the film misses the mark as it presents Ailes as the root of the problem. Even if it is the atmosphere of FOX News that causes discomfort, what is the structure that begets it?

Maybe it is the imperative of the Hollywood drama to close the story with a somewhat hopeful ending. This is, however, evidently not the case with real newsrooms: Marie Hardin and Erin Whiteside have explored the way that women in newsrooms have become “tokens” in response to a gendered organization (627), and Karen Ross and Cynthia Carter have shown that in reporting, “men’s views and voices are privileged over women’s” (1148). In a series of interviews, Martina Topić and Carmen Bruegmann explore what it takes for a woman in a newsroom to succeed, finding that “cultural masculinity seems to be constructed as anti-female and women who fit into a feminine style of behaviour struggle in succeeding in journalism whereas those who can join boys’ clubs are, they say, embraced and praised for their ability to fit in” (92). It is this aspect of what seems to be inherent in contemporary newsroom culture that *Bombshell* fails to critique. Gender order goes beyond individual action. Roach and Randolph, writing about events transpiring before the #MeToo movement, fall prey to issues that the media would later have in framing #MeToo and such events. As Lisa Cuklanz finds in studying #MeToo’s news framing, “news framing still tends to

bolster the point of view of the accused and his organization” (268). Cuklanz argues that in these stories that are fundamentally about imbalances of power, it is even more imperative that we remain attentive to the practices and structures that create and maintain power imbalances, and that we endeavor to make them visible so that real change is possible. (268)

*Bombshell*, though fictionalized, strives to represent as best as it can the climate of FOX News and events as they occurred. This is evident in production designer Mark Ricker’s painstaking efforts to research the appearance of the FOX News newsroom, the hiring of an accent coach for Charlize Theron to replicate Megyn Kelly’s accent almost uncannily (Keegan), and Randolph’s clear understanding of Roger Ailes as needing his relationships to have a “transactional quality” (Randolph qtd in Galuppo). This representation, in Cuklanz words, is “fundamentally about imbalances of power” (268). Yet, why is it that they are unable to fulfill the second part of her statement, to “remain attentive to the practices and structures that create and maintain power imbalances” (268)?

As I have suggested earlier, perhaps Roach and Randolph are simply too much a part of the neoliberal gender order, unable to criticize the newsroom structure and implicate themselves. But how is this true? The answer can be extrapolated from the “multiplicity of masculinities” that Connell explores (4). A plurality of masculinities may exist at once, Connell elucidates, and though “[t]here is generally a hegemonic form of masculinity, [...] [m]any men live in a state of some tension with, or distance from, hegemonic masculinity” (5). Roach and Randolph have undoubtedly critiqued an aspect of the neoliberal subject, but at the same time, they appear to have failed in recognizing themselves as neoliberal subjects, part of the gender order. As shown, however, much about the dynamics of transnational business masculinity can still be drawn from the atmosphere that Roach and Randolph construct in *Bombshell*.

## **An All-American News Channel**

Then, what of FOX News? To what extent is FOX News actually predicated on neoliberal tenets, gender order included? FOX News’ entanglement with neoliberalism is evident in its history. This history begins with Rupert Murdoch, the founder of FOX News’ parent company, News Corporation (later 21st Century Fox and Fox Corporation). Graham Murdock writes that Rupert Murdoch holds a long-term, deep commitment to “neoliberal ideology” (106), drawing on News Corporation’s history following “a long-term policy of expansion without effective opposition,” enabled by “diversification and globalization” (106-107). Before moving onto create FOX News, Murdoch was globally involved with various press. An aggressive expansion of his father’s business encompassed: *The Australian*, a national Australian newspaper (Murdock 93); *The News of the World*, *The Sun*, and *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in Britain (93-94); the *San Antonio Express and News*, *The Boston Herald*, the *Chicago Sun Times*, the *National Star*, and the *New York Post* in the U.S. (94). Murdock quotes *The Sunday Times* editor Andrew Neil in saying that Murdoch “expects his papers to stand broadly for what he believes ... a radical-right dose of free market economics and hard line conservative views on subjects like drugs, abortion, law and order and defence” (qtd in 106). This belief and Murdoch’s “populist hostility to the ‘left elite’” in his press (106) can be equally located, arguably even more so, in FOX News.

Rupert Murdoch’s FOX News was founded on “concerns of the right wing of the Republican Party who felt themselves effectively excluded from national debate by media they saw as dominated by a liberal elite” (Murdock 94). However, the channel’s founding first had to be enabled by certain cultural and policy changes. Hoewe et al. point to some of these, such as the 1984 Cable Communication Policy Act that “helped cable television enter new markets,” “the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine” that had “previously required political broadcast programming on controversial issues to present both sides of an issue,” and conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh, who “quickly capitalized on the new freedom for media entrepreneurs” (369). As “conservative media activists worked diligently to expose a so-called liberal bias in the media” (Hoewe et al. 370), Rupert Murdoch found a niche to exploit within the television market. Given his fierce neoliberalism, that this niche aligned with his own worldview was likely just a perk. Murdoch also found a partner in Roger Ailes, who had “launched Limbaugh’s television career,” worked “as a media consultant for Richard Nixon,” and previously pushed for a “GOP TV” (Hoewe et al. 370-371).

And thus, the neoliberal logic that both enabled Murdoch and that Murdoch continued to perpetuate here clashes—and simultaneously combines—with what Wendy Brown terms the “moral-political rationality” of “American neoconservatism” (691). What does this neoconservatism entail? What is it, exactly, that FOX News purports? This question is a pertinent one for piercing the shroud of FOX News, which enchanted “3.6 million viewers nightly” in 2020 (Adgate). Neoconservatism (and thus FOX News), according to Anne Norton, desires “a strong state [...] that will put its strength to use,” “family values and [...] older forms of family life, where women occupy themselves with children, cooking and the church, and men take on the burdens of manliness” (Norton qtd in Brown 697); ultimately, it desires “a revival of patriotism, a strong military, and an expansionist foreign policy” (Brown 697). Neoconservatives additionally “reject the vulgarity of mass culture,” and “deplore the decadence of artists and intellectuals” (697).

For both Brown and Norton, neoconservatism entails a different—perhaps more traditionally Western-patriarchal—kind of gender hierarchy. Brown sums up the neoconservative (and accordingly, the FOX viewer) as such: “Neoconservatism includes intellectuals and anti-intellectuals, secular Jews and evangelical Christians, chamber musicians turned Sovietologists, political theory professors turned policy wonks, angry white men, and righteous black ones” (696). This is the FOX News audience, and neoconservatism can be taken to be those values aforementioned that FOX News aims to spread within American culture, resisting a supposed “liberal bias”. And if this intersection of neoliberalism and neoconservatism is, as explicated by Brown, distinctly American (690), then perhaps FOX News, too, is a distinct all-American news channel, both behind and in front of the camera.

## **Complementary Workings of Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism at FOX News**

In what ways do neoliberalism and neoconservatism work in tandem, and how do these symbiotic workings manifest in the FOX News newsroom? Broadly, neoconservatism, and “neoconservative governance,” alongside neoliberalism, believe in the state as a tool for “regulation of morality, state steering of the economy, and, of course, building a mighty state military enterprise” (Brown 700). “[Neoconservative governance] unapologetically steers the moral, political, and economic ship” (700). Thus, neoconservatives aim to, through Brown’s metaphor, “steer” the ship of American culture by using “neoliberal political technologies” (701). If FOX News is one of these “technologies,” neoconservatism as led by Ailes and a number of conservative pundits would then be pilots for the neoliberal ship of FOX News.

It is clear, in what Connell has explored as transnational business masculinity, that neoliberalism is not “amoral”. Brown uses this term (692), but challenges it in her notes: “there is its figuration of the subject as entrepreneur and normative promulgation of entrepreneurship itself” (711); it is not “amoral,” as it is premised on the normative moral good of entrepreneurship. In the realm of gender, Connell too challenges that this “promulgation” is free of gendered implication, for though “it speaks a gender-neutral language of ‘markets’, ‘individuals’, and ‘choice’, [...] the world in which neoliberalism is ascendant is still a gendered world, and neoliberalism has an implicit gender politics” (15). Most notably, neoliberalism’s “attack on the welfare state generally weakens the position of women” (15), and “has also undermined the progressive-liberal agendas of sex role reform represented by affirmative action programs, antidiscrimination provisions, child care services, and the like” (17). This is evident from previously explored studies of the newsroom: Topić and Bruegmann interview “some women [who] felt they would be afraid to announce they were pregnant out of fear of losing their job” (85), Hardin and Whiteside point to “work policies that privilege individuals without primary childcare responsibilities (generally, men)” (629), and North states that “[t]he issue of mothering and women’s childcare responsibilities was raised in many of the interviews as being a deterrent to a long-term and successful career for women in the industry” (12). The gender hierarchy of neoconservatism here fits in with the market mechanics enabled by neoliberalism; first, women are subjected to a traditionalist gender role, then forced further into it by a neoliberal logic that takes away welfare both in and out of the workplace. If pregnancy, as Topić and Bruegmann’s interviewee says, is contrary to a successful career, then the most efficient neoliberal subject would simply not be one that can, or will, become pregnant.

## Contradiction, Sublation, and Perpetuating Sexism Under Neoliberalism

How, then, do neoliberalism and neoconservatism contradict? Brown frames this contradiction as “the Republican Party trying to be both the Party of Moral Values and Party of Big Business” (698). FOX News is similar. The “moral values” (in front of the camera, the niche that FOX News had carved out) is kept separate from its “big business” (behind the camera, a Murdoch family business that relies on laissez-faire economics and a market morality over “morality”). According to Connell, however, “[t]ransnational business masculinity differs from traditional bourgeois masculinity by its increasingly libertarian sexuality” (16). A contradiction then arises from these two competing masculinities in the way women are treated, one belonging to the realm of conservative, traditional family values while the other belongs to the realm of a masculinity that commodifies sexual relations. They are competing in the way that, as Connell articulates, “different forms of masculinity exist together and that hegemony is constantly subject to challenge” (17). Arguably, the neoliberal masculinity that is not relegated to any realm of explicit moral order (except the morality of free-market capitalism) is more adaptable, able to mask its sexism under the guise of “markets”. On the other hand, neoconservatism is bound to its roots of traditionalism and “the supplement of religion” (Brown 705) that marks its sexism more explicitly. Despite this, they are consequentially similar: both work to subjugate the feminine. Feminine here is probably best defined through litotes: to be feminine is to not be masculine.

Returning to *Bombshell*, perhaps the working of competing masculinities can then be found in Kayla Pospisil, a feminine subject. Kayla, played by Margot Robbie, “isn’t based on a single person’s experience, but is actually based on many people’s experience working at Fox News under Ailes” (Vaynshteyn). Kayla, as portrayed in the film, comes from a FOX News–watching family, Christian fundamentalist as they come: she has not heard of The Eagles because she does not know “secular music” (*Bombshell* 4:20-4:25). She is forced to suppress her traditionalism in a neoliberal newsroom that constructs women as something at which straight men can look. She has “church jeans” (35:25-35:30), she says as a retort to a comment about the shortness of her dress; this encapsulates the difficulty and hypocrisy of FOX News at work. FOX News is a culture that promotes traditionalism in “moral” behavior that still somehow operates by logics of profit and neoliberalism, embodied in an obsession with legs shown on screen for they are known to be profitable. Perhaps FOX News tells us that the boundaries of neoconservative sexuality are in a woman’s lower limbs.

In *Bombshell*, this dialectic between neoconservative “church” morality and neoliberal morality is brought to its extreme when, as Kayla is in Roger Ailes’ office and told to “spin” for him, she is continually asked to “pull [her] dress up” so that Ailes may see her upper thighs (38:40-40:10). Kayla is noticeably uncomfortable, as Ailes’ enacts the aspect of transnational business masculinity that sanctions him with the masculine market power to turn sexuality into a transaction. The palpable discomfort in the scene, orchestrated by Jay Roach, is the discomfort of neoliberal masculinity, exacerbated by its uncomfortable alliance with neoconservatism, placing the church-going female subject in an apparently ambiguous space for profit. Kayla is simply acting out what neoliberalism asks her to do, subjected to a gender order. This is one contradiction out of many. Two moralities are working not only in tandem, but in ways that produce a feminine subject who struggles to be subjugated in two ways.

*Bombshell* dramatizes what may seemingly be the necessary consequence of the contradictions between subject and subjected in neoliberal subject formation. Sexual assault and harassment, when exerted on the feminine neoliberal subject who is expected to *remain* subjected, comes to an impasse when the subjected resists, as with Gretchen Carlson and Megyn Kelly, and with the closely following #MeToo movement as a whole. The failure that arises from the contradiction here is thus the “Bombshell,” in which these subjected female personalities, as in the events at FOX News, go public with their sexual allegations. In a Marxian line of thinking, the neoliberal masculinity and the subjugated are a dialectic that produces its own contradiction and failures. If these “contradictions inherent in the movement of capitalist society” must produce a failure (Marx 12), then in the same vein progress must happen through “sublation,” the idea that any resolution from dialectical relations is a new state that seems like a solution, but in actuality preserves some old contradictions while producing new ones, a continual dialectical process maintaining versions of the same order (Fuchs 11).

The neoliberal, adaptable sublation can be found in *Bombshell* itself: the film frames Roger Ailes as the “head” of the “rotting fish,” and thus the solution that maintains qualities of the neoliberal gender order is as simple as firing Roger Ailes. If this is where *Bombshell* fails to accurately interrogate the structures of masculine power inherent in the newsroom, then Roach and Randolph’s failure are actually only a reflection of real life: in 2018, FOX News hired CEO Suzanne Scott, succeeding Roger Ailes (Steinberg). “We became No. 1 under President Bush. We stayed No. 1 under President Obama. We are still No. 1. My focus is on business” (Scott qtd in Steinberg), Scott said in 2019, a female figure at the head of a corporation that had subjected women to torment. To keep her “focus on business” is also, I suggest, to perform an approximation to transnational business masculinity, the same way that women “who can join boys’ clubs are [...] embraced and praised for their ability to fit in” as Topić and Bruegmann’s interviewee articulates (92).

Similar to Suzanne Scott is Megyn Kelly. Though victim of a structure that subjugated her and subjected her to discriminatory and violent sexist practices on the basis of transactional relationships, she still purports to follow neoconservative values and works to perform the individualism of which she is required under neoliberalism. Megyn Kelly does not call herself a “feminist,” as mentioned multiple times in *Bombshell* (02:05-02:10, 06:45-06:50) and in real life (Guthrie). “Feminism,” here, evidently has social-progressivist and leftist implications with which Kelly does not wish to associate. For Kelly, the inherent sexism in the newsroom is nothing more than an individual problem, solved by individuals not being sexist. She is not adverse to being the neoliberal subject or a little bit of “adversity” either—when interviewed about being Donald Trump’s “target” after she brought up his views on women at a Republican primary debate, and the difficulty of her year at large, Kelly had this to say: “Adversity is an opportunity. [...] the younger kids today are getting too soft. I worry about the millennial generation that can’t have any upset in their lives [...] back in our day, sister, we had to have bad things happen to us, and did” (“Megyn Kelly Talks Roger Ailes Allegations” 3:35-4:00). In response to Tweets containing sexist slurs from Trump supporters, endorsed by Trump himself (Crockett), Kelly decides to impart a message of adversity onto “the millennial generation” that is “too soft”. What, as I have tried to show, can be perceived as the inherent sexism of neoliberalism is for Kelly simply an obstacle to be overcome. Neoliberal logic, as Connell and Brown have explored, attempts to appear gender-neutral and amoral (Connell 15; Brown 692). Unfortunately, the success of this performance requires the self-perpetuating subjugation of the feminine subject under neoliberalism.

It is difficult to say if Suzanne Scott and the like can actually ever *be* masculine, or whether they must simply be formed as a subject at some opposition or approximation from transnational business masculinity. Topić and Bruegmann, as aforementioned, have interviewed women who believed that they too needed to perform masculinity to get ahead. Yet, as Louis North finds in an interview, “to guys what is camaraderie, to [women] would be seen as I’d just be unprofessional” (5). What can be made of this? I believe that the answer can be found in Stephen Whitehead’s argument that “women cannot be masculine in any essential sense”; while women “can take up those practices, languages and behaviours that are considered masculine, [...] that is not the same as being a masculine subject” (210). Thus, for Whitehead, it is “more accurate to say that ‘being masculine’ is, for women, a form of femininity” as the individual can never be fully removed from their gendered “political category” (210). Thus, though women may perform masculinity, they are still not, and can never be, the domineering male figure and may still face forms of subjugation and discrimination, as shown with Megyn Kelly. Connell similarly states that “[m]asculine conduct with a female body is felt to be anomalous or transgressive, like feminine conduct with a male body” (5). Whitehead and Connell speak to the interviewee’s point in North’s study: try as she might to resist, the female subject formed under neoliberalism will always be in some way subordinated through hegemonic masculinity. She is a tragic hero whose tragic flaw is being a woman, a political category from which she can never depart.

So then what of the “women who can join boys’ clubs” (Topić and Bruegmann 92)? What of Suzanne Scott and Megyn Kelly, and how are they too still complicit? After all, performing (an approximation to) transnational business masculinity, despite still being a “form of femininity” as Whitehead says (210), is still a performance that approximates neoliberal masculinity, subjugating the feminine (again, non-masculine). R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt explore this dynamic; “gender hierarchy,” for Connell and Messerschmidt, is a difficult term to

navigate as “[h]egemony may be accomplished by the incorporation of [nonhegemonic patterns of masculinity] into a functioning gender order rather than by active oppression in the form of discredit or violence” (848). Such “processes of incorporation and oppression may occur among girls and women who construct masculinities” (848). These “nonhegemonic patterns of masculinity” that Connell and Messerschmidt point to are those masculinities constructed by subordinated groups, such as those marginalized on the basis of race, disability, class, sexuality, and gender (848). Thus, the incorporation of a non-hegemonic masculinity by “girls and women” are done by those women who are able to join “boys’ clubs,” those women who incorporate a masculinity that is “a form of femininity,” who are nonetheless complicit in perpetuating neoliberal masculinity. This incorporation is done by Megyn Kelly, who tells younger women to toughen up, and it is done by Suzanne Scott as a female CEO. This, too is all the sublation in response to the dialectic of gendered subject/subjected, the neoliberal solution to sexual allegations, also represented by *Bombshell*, a film that helps to culturally enable the mindset in painting sexism as an individual problem.

## **Gender Egalitarianism and the Neoconservatist FOX News: An Unworkable Future**

Gender egalitarianism in the workplace, as I have shown, is not dependant on a female figure such as Suzanne Scott, or on neoliberal “individuals” that can adapt to anything in the name of profit such as the Murdoch family. To note, Rupert Murdoch, as the profit-incentivized male subject in global capitalism, may be closer in approximation to neoliberal masculinity than the blustering Roger Ailes, too attached to television and not attached enough to profit. “I never cared about the money” (*Bombshell* 01:38:52-01:39:00), says the fictionalized Ailes. Murdoch as portrayed in *Bombshell*, on the other hand, quickly disposes of Ailes and tells him that “there’s no audience for [Ailes’] side of the story” (01:37:40-01:37:50). It is abundantly clear that Murdoch is an individual chiefly concerned with profit, as required by neoliberal thinking. This characterization in *Bombshell* is, as explored earlier in News Corporation’s ascendancy, rooted in reality. We can reason that if it had been profitable for Ailes to stay at FOX News, Murdoch would have kept him. Murdoch’s sons, portrayed in the film as a more “progressive” generation, wanting to quickly dispose of Ailes on account of his actions, in reality endorse their father’s own “support of a neoliberal economic agenda and worldview” (Murdoch 107). This shows, I think, that the neoliberal “individual” will not be overtly sexist if it is unprofitable, but will refuse to acknowledge what, as I have shown, is neoliberalism’s innate disjunction with gender liberation.

Then, what does a newsroom and workplace of a gender egalitarian future look like? I suggest that it requires an overturning of neoliberal logic, requiring money taken from the free-market to service individuals based on their needs, social welfare for marginalized groups, and an individual that is not simultaneously “individualistic”. Following this logic, and as shown in North, Topić and Bruegmann, Ross and Carter, and Hardin and Whiteside, this seemingly utopian ideal does not fit into the framework of any extant newsroom. So what of FOX News specifically?

FOX News, and any news organization that perpetuates views similar are, I argue, distinct because of their dance with neoconservatism. As neoconservatism is in part driven “by angst about the declining status of morality within the West, and by a concomitant moralization of a certain imagery of the West and its values” (Brown 697), and as these values are heavily entrenched into the minds of viewers—Hoewe et al. posit that “positive feedback loops” between “prior attitudes and media consumption” can work to “reinforce political attitudes” (380)—an audience for a FOX News that is radically progressive in gender is not the audience of FOX News that we know today, or perhaps not an audience at all.

But possibly one does not have to think as far as a “radical” progressiveness for FOX News to already appear incompatible with a much nearer future: one with more Suzanne Scotts and a neoliberalism that allows women to get closer in approximation to its perfect individualistic subject. After all, neoconservatism encourages “older forms of family life, when women occupy themselves with children, cooking and the church” (Norton qtd in Brown 697). It already “identifies liberals with support for gay marriage, abortion, women’s rights” (Brown 713). If this

neoconservative “morality” does not change, then maybe the future of FOX News is to simply implode without an audience to sustain it, as a more progressive post-#MeToo society places FOX News under heavy scrutiny, forcing it to bow to new markers of gender progress that are antithetical to their current viewership.

However, if FOX News does, as Hoewe et al. show, have the ability to change its audience’s views, then maybe the sublation in the gendered neoliberal dialectic may—one might say hopefully—be enough for FOX News to shift away from its neoconservative tendencies. Guided by a Murdoch family that needs to profit over all else, perhaps the future of FOX News does lie in more female CEOs, more female news anchors, and women that—as shown in *Bombshell* to be the fashion-victory post-Roger Ailes—can wear pants on television. And perhaps these performative gestures are enough to challenge the neoconservatist status quo, shifting the minds of FOX News viewers as cable news can act as a “persuasive force” (Hoewe et al. 380) that not only reflects viewpoints, but creates and essentializes them. From there, work may be continued to reach a gender egalitarianism that departs from neoliberalism and hegemonic masculinity. Ultimately, this vision is predicated on the belief that those in the FOX News newsroom attempt to match the societal progression in a #MeToo/post-#MeToo era, itself doubtful.

### ***Bombshell* as a Feminist Film(?)**

Finally, what of *Bombshell*? Throughout this paper, I have periodically attempted to critique *Bombshell* in relation to the perceived structural gender order of neoliberalism, and argued that not only does *Bombshell* miss the mark of being a feminist film, but it actually hurts movements like #MeToo for its portrayal of sexism and hegemonic masculinity as being solely perpetuated by individuals. But this too may be an exaggeration as it is clear that the film’s creators believe the text is for social good; Charles Randolph speaks of women coming to him after screenings of *Bombshell* with “tears in their eyes,” wanting to thank him (Galuppo). Randolph also believes that the film has the power to change men’s actions (Galuppo). Additionally, in *Bombshell*, Roach’s constructed atmosphere of masculine domination, a “pervasive paranoia” in the newsroom is strikingly effective and affective (Keegan): in a scene in which the fictionalized Megyn Kelly, Gretchen Carlson, and Kayla Pospisil step in an elevator together going up to Roger Ailes’ floor (*Bombshell* 48:25-49:00), a masculine tension holds power over the three women, silencing them without a physical male body in the space. Megyn Kelly, Juliet Huddy, Rudi Bakhtiar, and Julie Zann, in responding to the film, speak to the emotional power of the scene: “I feel like we all cried,” Kelly says (“Megyn Kelly Presents” 06:00-06:10). Then, maybe the power of the film as resistance lies not in moments constructed to be explicitly “feminist,” such as women getting to wear pants in the workplace, but instead in those that present an atmosphere of repressive gender dynamics without so much as a word, moving the viewer to discomfort. Perhaps it is from these moments that we might locate and reimagine the film as a polemical piece resisting and challenging neoliberal masculinity.

But what is a “feminist film”? Claire Johnston, thinking through a feminist “counter-cinema,” believes that “[a]ny revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality; “it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology is effected” (37). From this perspective, *Bombshell* does not qualify. Roach and Randolph do somewhat challenge “the language of cinema” in breaking the fourth wall; most interestingly, Nicole Kidman, as Gretchen Carlson, speaks directly to the camera as she hopes that she can “be that person” who supports those speaking out about sexual assault (01:43:00-01:43:10). Beyond this, however, the film does not heavily “interrogate” reality or too radically depart from Hollywood conventions; indeed, this might be because of Roach and Randolph’s own proximity to neoliberal masculinity. For Johnston, an alternative to “the rigid hierarchical structures of male-dominated cinema” is “collective work” (39), “a film made collectively by women” (36). By this criterion, Roach and Randolph have already failed by virtue of their gender.

Later on, in concluding her essay, however, Johnston suggests that “a repressive moralistic assertion that women’s cinema is collective film-making is misleading and unnecessary: we should seek to operate at all levels: within the male dominated cinema and outside it” (40). It is here, perhaps that we should find and reconceive *Bombshell*. While it does not challenge the structure of “male dominated cinema” (in fact, with a male writer and

male director, it is male dominated cinema) or the structure of neoliberalism that enabled Roger Ailes, perhaps as a film of the neoliberal order, its dialectics, sublations, contradictions, and solutions can be found within it. If the onus is on us to reveal what makes *Bombshell* “feminist” and understand how the film may be generative in finding ways to resist hegemonic masculinity, then perhaps that is where this essay figures.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Brent Strang for his guidance, generosity, and advice in writing this paper.

## References

- Adgate, Brad. “In January 2021 Fox News Ratings Fell Behind CNN And MSNBC.” *Forbes, Forbes Magazine*, 5 Feb. 2021, [www.forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2021/02/03/in-january-2021-fox-news-ratings-fell-behind-cnn-and-msnbc/?sh=b3662dbf37e3](http://www.forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2021/02/03/in-january-2021-fox-news-ratings-fell-behind-cnn-and-msnbc/?sh=b3662dbf37e3).
- Bombshell*. Lions Gate Films, Inc, 2019.
- Brown, Wendy. “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization.” *Political Theory*, vol. 34, no. 6, 2006, pp. 690–714. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20452506](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20452506). Accessed 28 Mar. 2021.
- Connell, R. W. “Masculinities and Globalization.” *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1998, pp. 3–23., doi:10.1177/1097184x98001001001.
- Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, pp. 829–859., [www.jstor.org/stable/27640853](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27640853). Accessed 25 Mar. 2021.
- Crockett, Emily. “This Chart Shows Just How Many Sexist Slurs Trump Supporters Are Tweeting at Megyn Kelly.” *Vox*, Vox, 27 Jan. 2016, [www.vox.com/2016/1/27/10852876/donald-trump-supporters-sexist-tweets-megyn-kelly](http://www.vox.com/2016/1/27/10852876/donald-trump-supporters-sexist-tweets-megyn-kelly).
- Cuklanz, Lisa. “Problematic News Framing of #MeToo.” *The Communication Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2020, pp. 251–272., doi:10.1080/10714421.2020.1829302.
- Fuchs, Christian. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. Sage eReference (Online service), SAGE, London, 2014;2013.
- Galuppo, Mia. “‘Bombshell’ Writer on Roger Ailes: ‘He Almost Wanted to Sexualize His Power.’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2 Jan. 2020, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bombshell-writer-roger-ailes-he-almost-wanted-sexualize-his-power-1265322](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/bombshell-writer-roger-ailes-he-almost-wanted-sexualize-his-power-1265322).
- Guthrie, Marisa. “Megyn Kelly Gets Candid: ‘Dangerous’ Roger Ailes, Her Trump Saga, That Offer and Why She Won’t Call Herself a Feminist.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 21 Dec. 2016, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/megyn-kelly-gets-candid-dangerous-roger-ailes-her-trump-saga-offer-why-she-wont-call-a-femi](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/megyn-kelly-gets-candid-dangerous-roger-ailes-her-trump-saga-offer-why-she-wont-call-a-femi).
- Hardin, Marie, and Erin Whiteside. “Token Responses to Gendered Newsrooms: Factors in the Career-Related Decisions of Female Newspaper Sports Journalists.” *Journalism*, vol. 10, no. 5, Oct. 2009, pp. 627–646, doi:10.1177/14648849090100050501.
- Hoewe, Jennifer, et al. “The Role and Impact of Fox News.” *The Forum*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2020, pp. 367–388., doi:10.1515/for-2020-2014.
- Johnston, Claire. “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema.” *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, by Sue Thornham, New York University Press, 1999, pp. 31–40.
- Keegan, Rebecca. “Making of ‘Bombshell’: How Charlize Theron, Nicole Kidman and Margot Robbie Re-Created the ‘Pervasive Paranoia’ of Roger Ailes’s Fox News.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 15 Dec. 2019,

- [www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/how-charlize-theron-nicole-kidman-margot-robbie-created-pervasive-paranoia-roger-ailes-1258931](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/how-charlize-theron-nicole-kidman-margot-robbie-created-pervasive-paranoia-roger-ailes-1258931).
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A New Abridgement*. Edited by David McLellan, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- “Megyn Kelly Presents: A Response to "Bombshell" - Full Discussion.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Megyn Kelly, 9 Jan. 2020, URL. <https://youtu.be/MmSz7HqkI9s>.
- “Megyn Kelly Talks Roger Ailes Allegations, 'Dark Year' As Donald Trump's Target | TODAY.” *YouTube*, uploaded by TODAY, 16 Nov. 2016, URL. <https://youtu.be/opK1ZJaK9jQ>
- Murdock, Graham. “News Corporation.” *Global Media Giants*, edited by Benjamin J. Birkinbine et al., Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, pp. 92–108.
- North, Louise. “‘Blokey’ Newsroom Culture.” *Media International Australia*, vol. 132, no. 1, Aug. 2009, pp. 5–15, doi:10.1177/1329878X0913200103.
- Ross, Karen, and Cynthia Carter. “Women and News: A Long and Winding Road.” *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 33, no. 8, 2011, pp. 1148–1165., doi:10.1177/0163443711418272.
- Steinberg, Brian. “Meet the New Boss: Fox News CEO Suzanne Scott Keeps Network on Top Amid Controversy.” *Variety*, Variety, 2 Apr. 2019, [variety.com/2019/tv/features/suzanne-scott-fox-news-ceo-1203177554/#!](http://variety.com/2019/tv/features/suzanne-scott-fox-news-ceo-1203177554/#!)
- Topić, Martina, and Carmen Brueggemann. “‘The Girls at the Desk’: Timeless Blokishness in the Newsroom Culture in the British Press?” *Journalism Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2020, pp. 77–95., doi:10.1080/1461670x.2020.1854620.
- Vaynshteyn, Gina. “Margot Robbie’s Bombshell Character Serves An Important Role In The Roger Ailes Story.” *Refinery29*, 19 Dec. 2019, [www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/12/9041854/is-margot-robbie-bombshell-character-real](http://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/12/9041854/is-margot-robbie-bombshell-character-real).
- Whitehead, Stephen. “Desires of the Masculine Subject.” *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, pp. 205-226. Print.