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New Focus on TV Ads Largely Finds Conservative and Republican Ads and Arguments Objectionable

## Negative Ad Season, Negative GOP Coverage

With less than two weeks to go before the elections, the airwaves are full of campaign ads. Sadly, the regular TV news pattern is re-emerging. Often, the only objectionable ads are Republican, the only objectionable ad critics are conservative, and liberals are never called to account for inaccuracy.

Last night's network newscasts broke out the liberal outrage over Rush Limbaugh's critique of Michael J. Fox commercials, which insist that Republicans in Missouri and Maryland are opposed to stem-cell research, charging they oppose "life-saving" research and want to "criminalize the science." The network breakdown:

**Andrea Mitchell was angry.** On Tuesday's *NBC Nightly News*, reporter Andrea Mitchell focused on two apparent outrages, both from the right. First, there was an RNC ad mocking Rep. Harold Ford Jr for attending a *Playboy* magazine party. Since a satirical *Playboy* party girl in the ad asking Ford to call her is white, NBC suggested racism. Mitchell then added: "Take a look at what Rush Limbaugh is saying about Michael J. Fox, the actor who suffers from Parkinson's disease and is campaigning for Democrats who support stem cell research. Limbaugh said Fox was acting, exploiting his illness, when he taped this ad for the Democratic Senate candidate in Maryland." Mitchell had Fox respond to Limbaugh, but did not note Limbaugh apologized for the acting remark before the show ended. She also had nothing to say about whether Fox's ad was fair or accurate.

**Matt Lauer was scandalized.** On Wednesday morning, NBC's *Today* replayed the Mitchell piece, but at least co-host Matt Lauer added: "And we should note that Rush Limbaugh did eventually apologize for calling Michael J. Fox's tremors an act, but he added that Fox is allowing his illness to be exploited." But Lauer began *Today* by asserting "How did it all get so ugly?...it got really personal this week when Rush Limbaugh accused Michael J. Fox of exploiting the effects of Parkinson's disease to make a political point in a campaign ad."

**Jake Tapper presented both sides.** On Tuesday's *World News* and Wednesday's *Good Morning America*, ABC reporter Jake Tapper jumped on the liberal story of the day, but covered both sides, and noted the apology: "After listeners contacted Limbaugh to say it was no act, the radio host apologized. Roughly 60 percent of Americans support embryonic stem cell research, though it's unclear how many will cast votes based on the issue." Tapper noted Sen. Jim Talent thought the ad's claims were "false."

**Diane Sawyer was appalled.** On Wednesday's *Good Morning America*, Diane Sawyer questioned Sean Hannity about the Fox ads: "Rush Limbaugh. What, what is going on here? Attacking Michael J. Fox?...Rush Limbaugh, even in his apology, said that Mike Fox was allowing his illness to be exploited, shilling for a Democratic candidate. If you have

Parkinson's disease, and you believe embryonic stem cell research is the, is the answer, a possible answer, a possible cure, don't you have a right to speak up?" Hannity said yes, and that Fox's critics have a right to criticize him.

Sawyer also pressed Hannity on whether the GOP ads against Ford were a sign of "desperation by the Republicans." Hannity replied that conservatives are tired of "selective moral outrage" on racial political ads.

**Katie Couric was missing.** Oddly, *CBS Evening News* anchor Katie Couric, such a fan of Michael J. Fox's that she's appeared repeatedly at fundraisers for his foundation, aired no story, perhaps recusing herself from the conflict of interest. On *The Early Show* Wednesday morning, co-host Hannah Storm asked if the Fox ads were "inappropriate," but Bob Schieffer declared "It's a very sad story that Michael J. Fox tells here. But I think, all in all it's a fair tactic." They skipped over whether Fox was factual. — *Tim Graham*

**Who judged the accuracy of ad claims that Republicans oppose "life-saving" stem cell research and want to "criminalize the science" of it? ABC didn't, but allowed GOP protest. CBS didn't. NBC didn't.**

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