

Beware the deadly new disease spreading across America: 'Foxitis'

According to a lawyer for an alleged Capitol rioter, his client was brainwashed by Fox News into participating in the 6 January attack



Trump supporters try to break through a police barrier at the Capitol in Washington DC on 6 January.

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For decades a debilitating disease has been spreading across America. Risk factors include being over 65, Republican and white. Symptoms include unhinged muttering, delusional thinking and an irresistible urge to storm the Capitol.

The disease is called “Foxitis” and a lawyer called Joseph Hurley, who is representing alleged US Capitol rioter Anthony Antonio, wants us to believe his client is suffering from it.

Antonio lost his job at the beginning of the pandemic and spent the next six months sitting at home watching Fox, Hurley told a DC court on Thursday. “He became hooked with what I call ‘Foxitis’ or ‘Foxmania’ and ... started believing what was being fed to him.” According to Hurley, Fox brainwashed Antonio into believing Trump wanted him to march on Washington as part of a patriotic movement.” Now Antonio is facing five charges over his role in the January riot.

It seems unlikely that Hurley’s inspired defense will get Antonio off the hook. Particularly as a number of alleged Capitol rioters have, in a similar move, already

unsuccessfully tried to blame the former president for their actions: a tactic that has become known as the “Trump defense”. (Gotta love rightwingers! While they love to talk about individual responsibility, they seem incapable of taking any themselves.) That said, while it may not end up getting a judge’s seal of approval, “Foxitis” is no joke. Unlike influenza, another disease-defense dreamed up by a lawyer, Foxitis is something we should all take very seriously indeed.

Fox may not be able to take over your brain and force you to do things in the same way that weird parasite that turns ants into suicidal zombies does, but it is hard to overstate the network’s outsize influence. A number of studies suggest that Fox News’s coverage of the pandemic, which was characterized by racism and misinformation, may have caused its viewers to take the coronavirus less seriously, for example, with consequences to public health.

Now Tucker Carlson, who was one of the few Fox News hosts who actually took the pandemic seriously early on, is diversifying his usual racist rants with dangerous anti-vaxxer propaganda. Weirdly, he never seems to mention that his boss, Rupert Murdoch, was one of the first people in the world to get the vaccine. Murdoch got his jab in the UK in December 2020: the King of Misinformation got vaccinated three weeks before the Queen of England.

Fox isn’t just a danger to public health, it’s a danger to democracy. It spent months amplifying Donald Trump’s lies about the integrity of the 2020 election; it may not have forced people to storm the Capitol, but it’s hard to argue that it wasn’t in some way responsible for inciting the riots. Antonio and his fellow alleged rioters shouldn’t be the only ones on trial: Fox should be too.

And, to some degree they are, the network has been sued for \$1.6bn by the North American voting machine company Dominion, which has accused the network of defamation. Media Matters has also started a campaign, unfoxmycablebox.com, urging people to ask cable carriers to drop Fox News from their packages.

Ultimately, however, lawsuits and protests are not going to be enough to fully eradicate Foxitis. Particularly as the disease has multiple variants, including the particularly nasty Facebookitis. Misinformation will never go away.

However, we can and must inoculate people against it. How? By heavily investing in education and media literacy. I’ve quoted Audrey Tang, Taiwan’s digital minister before, but I don’t think this point can be stressed enough: misinformation is a virus and the only way to get it under control is to build what Tang calls “nerd immunity”.