



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20463

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BY EMAIL ONLY

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Caleb P. Burns

Andrew G. Woodson

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1776 K Street NW

Washington, DC 20006

RE: MUR 7593
Fox News Network, LLC

Dear Mr. Burns and Mr. Woodson:

On April 10, 2019, the Federal Election Commission ("Commission") notified your clients Fox News Network, LLC of a complaint alleging violations of certain sections of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended. On December 14, 2021, based on the information provided in the complaint, and information provided by you, the Commission decided to dismiss the allegations as to Fox News Network, LLC. The Commission then closed its file in this matter. A copy of the Factual and Legal Analysis, which more fully explains the basis for the Commission's decision, is enclosed.

Documents related to the case will be placed on the public record within 30 days. See Statement of Policy Regarding Disclosure of Closed Enforcement and Related Files, 68 Fed. Reg. 70,426 (Dec. 18, 2003) and Statement of Policy Regarding Placing First General Counsel's Reports on the Public Record, 74 Fed. Reg. 66132 (Dec. 14, 2009). If you have any questions, please contact Don Campbell, the attorney assigned to this matter, at (202) 694-1650.

Sincerely,

Lisa J. Stevenson
Acting General Counsel

Roy Q. Luckett

BY: Roy Q. Luckett
Acting Assistant General Counsel

Enclosure:
Factual and Legal Analysis

FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION**FACTUAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS**

RESPONDENTS: Fox News Network, LLC MUR 7593

I. INTRODUCTION

The Complaint alleges that Fox News Network, LLC (“Fox News”) made a prohibited in-kind contribution to Josh Hawley.¹ In particular, Complainant alleges that Sean Hannity and Jeanine Pirro, employees of Fox News, appeared on stage with President Donald J. Trump at a campaign rally and endorsed Hawley’s candidacy on behalf of Fox News.² Fox News admits that Hannity and Pirro traveled to the rally to appear on an episode of Fox News’s “Hannity” program in their professional capacities, but asserts that their subsequent appearance on the rally stage was in their personal capacities and is protected by the volunteer exception and media exemption to the definition of “contribution.”³ Because the available information does not support the allegation that Hannity and Pirro appeared on stage on behalf of Fox News and is denied by Fox News, the Commission dismisses the allegation that Fox News Network, LLC violated 52 U.S.C. § 30118(a).

II. FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Fox News is a television broadcaster and is a subsidiary of Fox Corporation.⁴ Sean Hannity is the host of Fox News’s “Hannity” program, which airs on weeknights.⁵ Jeanine Pirro

¹ Compl. at 1 (Apr. 8, 2019).

² *Id.* at 1-2.

³ Resp. at 3-14 (May 31, 2019).

⁴ Resp. at 2.

⁵ *Id.* Hannity is also the host of Premiere Radio Networks’ The Sean Hannity Show. *Id.*

is the host of “Justice with Judge Jeanine,” which airs weekly on Fox News, and she serves as a legal analyst on other Fox News programs.⁶

On November 5, 2018, President Trump attended a campaign rally in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, in support of Josh Hawley, a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate.⁷ Hannity conducted a live show from Cape Girardeau and interviewed President Trump on air before the rally, and Pirro also travelled to Missouri to appear on Hannity’s show.⁸ Fox News aired Hannity’s show live from the rally site and then switched to another program before the rally started.⁹ Although Fox News did not air the rally, other news organizations covered it.¹⁰

Following the conclusion of Hannity’s show, President Trump made some introductory remarks at the rally, and he invited first Hannity and then Pirro onstage to speak to the audience.¹¹ Fox News asserts that neither Hannity nor Pirro came to the stage with prepared written remarks.¹² Following the rally, Fox News subsequently issued a statement that it “does

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Compl. at 1; Resp. at 3.

⁸ Resp. at 3. Additional guest commentators also appeared on Hannity’s show. *Id.* at 5.

⁹ *Id.* at 7, 9.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Resp. at 3 (citing John Bennett, *Live Blog: Updates from Trump’s Final Day on Campaign Trail*, ROLL CALL, Nov. 5, 2018, available at <https://www.rollcall.com/news/politics/live-blog-updates-trumps-final-day-campaign-trail>; Chris Cillizza, *The 31 Most Over-the-Top Lines from Donald Trump’s Final 2018 Campaign Rally*, CNN, Nov. 6, 2018, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/06/politics/donald-trump-missouri/index.html>; Amy Davidson Sorkin, *Donald Trump’s Final, Bitter Midterm Rallies*, THE NEW YORKER, Nov. 6, 2018, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/donald-trumps-final-bitter-midterm-rallies>; Aaron Rugar, *Trump’s Final Preelection Speeches Featured Vicious Attacks on Kavanaugh Accusers*, VOX, Nov. 6, 2018, available at <https://www.vox.com/midterm-elections/2018/11/6/18066958/trump-attacks-kavanaugh-accusers-indiana-missouri-midterm-elections>).

¹¹ *Id.* at 8-9.

¹² *Id.* at 9. There is also no indication in the record that either Hannity or Pirro referenced Hawley during their remarks at the rally. *Id.* at 8-9 (citing Trump Holds Campaign Rally in Missouri, WASHINGTON POST, Nov. 5, 2018, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_PoP-q26K8).

not condone any talent participating in campaign events....This was an unfortunate distraction and has been addressed.”¹³

The Complaint alleges that Hannity’s and Pirro’s appearances on stage at the rally amounted to an endorsement of Hawley that was provided in their roles as agents of Fox News, and constitutes an illegal corporate in-kind contribution from Fox News to the Hawley committee.¹⁴ Fox News denies that it provided an in-kind contribution to the Hawley committee and claims that the activity is covered under either the volunteer exception or the media exemption.¹⁵

III. LEGAL ANALYSIS

The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, as amended (the “Act”), and Commission regulations prohibit any corporation from making contributions or expenditures to candidates and their authorized committees.¹⁶ A “contribution” includes “any gift, subscription, loan, advance, or deposit of money or anything of value”¹⁷ and an “expenditure” includes “any purchase, payment, distribution, loan, advance, deposit, or gift of money or anything of value.”¹⁸ The term “anything of value” includes in-kind contributions, defined as the provision of any goods or services without charge or at a charge that is less than the usual and normal charge for

¹³ *Id.* at 10; *see also id.* (citing Alex Thomas, *Fox News Calls Sean Hannity’s Campaign Appearance with Trump ‘An Unfortunate Distraction’*, INDEPENDENT JOURNAL REVIEW, Nov. 6, 2018, available at <https://ijr.com/fox-news-sean-hannity-trump-campaign/>).

¹⁴ Compl. at 1-2.

¹⁵ Resp. at 1.

¹⁶ 52 U.S.C. § 30118(a); 11 C.F.R. § 114.2(b).

¹⁷ 52 U.S.C. § 30101(8)(A)(i).

¹⁸ *Id.* § 30101(9)(A)(i).

such goods and services.¹⁹ The definition of “contribution” under the Act excludes uncompensated personal services provided by volunteers.²⁰

The Act and Commission regulations also exclude from the definitions of “contribution” and “expenditure” the cost incurred in covering or carrying a news story, commentary, or editorial by any broadcasting station, newspaper, Web site, magazine, or other periodical publication, including any Internet or electronic publication, unless such facilities are owned or controlled by any political party, political committee, or candidate.²¹ The Commission conducts a two-step analysis to determine whether the media exemption applies. First, the Commission considers whether the entity in question is a media entity, focusing on whether the entity produces, on a regular basis, a program that disseminates news stories, editorials, and/or commentary.²² Second, the Commission considers two factors in determining the scope of the exemption: (a) whether the media entity is owned or controlled by a political party, political committee, or candidate; and, if not, (2) whether the media entity is acting as a media entity in conducting the activity at issue (*i.e.*, whether the entity is acting in its “legitimate press

¹⁹ 11 C.F.R. § 100.52(d)(1).

²⁰ 52 U.S.C. § 30101(8)(B)(i) (exempting from the definition of contribution “the value of services provided without compensation by any individual who volunteers on behalf of a candidate or political committee”).

²¹ 52 U.S.C. § 30101(9)(B)(i); *see also* 11 C.F.R. §§ 100.73 (excluding bona fide news coverage from the definition of “contribution”); 100.132 (same as to the definition of “expenditure”).

²² Factual and Legal Analysis at 5-6, MUR 7206 (Bonneville International Corp., et al.) (“Bonneville F&LA”); Advisory Op. 2016-01 (Ethiq) at 2 (“AO 2016-01”); Advisory Op. 2010-08 (Citizens United) at 2 (“AO 2010-08”).

function”).²³ A corporation may be held responsible for the acts of an employee that are within the scope of the employment and that benefit the corporate employer.²⁴

Here, Hannity’s and Pirro’s participation in the rally does not constitute an illegal corporate in-kind contribution from Fox News to the Hawley committee because the available information supports the conclusion that Hannity and Pirro were acting in their personal capacities, and not as agents of Fox News. Neither Hannity nor Pirro mentioned Fox News in their comments, Fox News did not cover or broadcast their comments, and it disavowed their appearances the very next day.²⁵ Even if their association with Fox News was mentioned, the use of endorsers who are identified by their corporate positions does not violate the Act, provided that the employee volunteers his or her time and the campaign pays for any associated expenses.²⁶

²³ Bonneville F&LA at 5; AO 2016-01 at 3; AO 2010-08 at 3. With respect to the second factor, when determining whether an entity is engaging in a legitimate media function, the Commission examines (1) whether the entity’s materials are available to the general public; and (2) whether they are comparable in form to those ordinarily issued by the entity. Bonneville F&LA at 6-7; AO 2016-01 at 3; AO 2010-08 at 6. If the media entity is not owned or controlled by any political party, political committee, or candidate, and if it is acting as a media entity with respect to the conduct in question, then the Commission’s inquiry is at an end. However, the media exemption “does not afford *carte blanche* to media companies generally to ignore FECA’s provisions.” Advisory Op. 2008-14 (Melothe, Inc.) at 3 (citing *McConnell v. Fed. Election Comm’n*, 540 U.S. 93, 208 (2003), *overruled by Citizens United v. Fed. Election Comm’n*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010)).

²⁴ See, e.g., Factual and Legal Analysis at 4-5, MUR 6143 (Galen Capital Group).

²⁵ Resp. at 8-9; see also *id.* at 7 (citing Trump Holds Campaign Rally in Missouri, WASHINGTON POST, Nov. 5, 2018, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_PoP-q26K8).

²⁶ See, e.g., Factual and Legal Analysis at 5-6, MUR 7508 (Whirlpool Corporation) (dismissing allegation that Whirlpool made a corporate contribution when Whirlpool employees appeared in a campaign advertisement that used the Whirlpool logo because the advertisement was filmed on public property and the featured employees appeared in their personal capacities on their personal time); Advisory Op. 1984-43 (Brunswick) at 1-2 (permitting corporate employee to appear in campaign advertisement and be identified as a corporate official when he volunteers his time for the advertisement and when no corporate funds were used); Advisory Op. 1978-77 (Aspin) at 1 (permitting corporate officer to appear in campaign advertisement and be identified as a corporate official when he volunteers his time for the advertisement and the advertisement is paid for by the committee).

1 Fox News asserts, and there is no information to the contrary, that Hannity and Pirro's
2 work for Fox News concluded before the Josh Hawley rally started.²⁷ Moreover, there is no
3 available information suggesting that Fox News directed Hannity or Pirro to speak at the rally,
4 and Fox News quickly distanced itself from their appearances with a statement that it "does not
5 condone any talent participating in campaign events" and calling the event "an unfortunate
6 distraction."²⁸ Accordingly, we conclude that the volunteer exception applies to the specific
7 facts of this case. As such, it is unnecessary to resolve Fox News's argument that the media
8 exemption applies.

9 Accordingly, the Commission dismisses the allegation that Fox News Network, LLC
10 violated 52 U.S.C. § 30118(a) and closes the file.

²⁷ Resp. at 12.

²⁸ *Id.* at 10.