

Exclusive: PR Guru Behind Fake Fox News "Study" Speaks Up

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A fake study claiming conservative viewers of FOX News were significantly dumber than conservatives who *didn't* watch FOX News spread through the internet like wildfire, even though the briefest of attention to the details in this glorified press release should have raised suspicion. The pr guru behind the hoax -- our term, not his -- said he was surprised by how quickly and broadly the item spread but not by how easily its claims went unquestioned. "Facts are obsolete," said P. Nichols, the contact given for the press release who claimed Nichols was his last name but refused to confirm his entire name, the name of the Republican PAC he says backed the "study" or any of the people behind the actual report he insisted did truly exist. And no, he wouldn't send us a copy of it.

If you're a liberal, it sounded too good to be true: a four year "study" by the Intelligence Institute found that viewers of Fox News who identified themselves as conservative had an average IQ of 80, some 20 points lower than those conservatives who got their news from other sources or did not watch the news at all. Typically, this was reduced online to the idea that people who watch FOX News are dumb, dumber than the national average or that watching FOX News makes you dumber.

The story -- or rather the press release posted on [PRWeb](#) that was soon reposted on Yahoo News and numerous liberal political blogs as a genuine article -- spread quickly, thanks to juicy quotes like this one from P. Nichols, named as the "lead researcher" on the study. "Several previous studies show that self-identified conservatives are less intelligent than self-identified moderates," said Nichols in the press release he himself wrote. "We have never seen such a homogeneous group teetering so close to special needs levels." Nichols also quoted himself as saying, "Fox News' content is presented at an elementary school level and plays directly into the fears of the less educated and less intelligent."

Since then, sites like [Daily Kos](#) have noted that the study was likely a hoax. And for good reason.

***The Intelligence Institute does not exist** -- It was a name created by Nichols and his team to give the "study" they were releasing some credibility. They didn't even bother to create a fake website as a front for the imaginary group. However, that may change. Nichols said that this study/press release was so effective that now perhaps there was some value to the name of The Intelligence Institute and they might use it for other studies they did or perhaps even create an actual conservative non-profit group.

***The lead researcher P. Nichols was not the lead researcher** -- When asked various questions about the methodology of the study, Nichols -- who was reached by a Google Voice phone number that forwarded the call to his real telephone number -- said that wasn't really his area of expertise. But wasn't he the "lead researcher?" He admitted that may not be the most appropriate title for his role. So what title would he choose? Nichols thought for a minute, tossed out "publicity" and then settled on "maybe project manager?"

***The study did not take four years** -- Why would the study as described take four years? He couldn't answer. When asked for specifics, Nichols admitted the people backing the study became actively interested in taking action after the 2010 mid-term elections. I pointed out that was two years ago, making it impossible for the study to have taken four years to do. He said two years would probably be more accurate. "That's one of those things that if it had been fact-checked by CNN might not make it through," Nichols cheerfully said.

***The study may not have tested anyone's IQ in the first place** -- The only tests described in the press release were social science experiments and nothing that would measure someone's IQ. When asked which if any of the standard IQ tests were administered, Nichols demurred again on specifics, though insisting that actual IQ tests were in fact performed. He would not however release any details or make anyone who actually worked on the study as a scientist available for interview.

***The study was rigged from the start** -- Nichols himself brought up the fact that the

study was designed to reach the conclusion they were looking for: that is, to show that self-identified conservatives who watched FOX News were less smart than conservatives who didn't. "They told me what they wanted to do and I said I could do it," he claimed. Nichols said the moderate Republicans behind the PAC supporting this effort wanted to counter the effect of the Tea Party and encourage moderates to come forward. Making people embarrassed to say they watched FOX News (or better yet not watch FOX News at all) might help that goal. So the 5000 people who took part in the study were chosen by Nichols and non-scientists, essentially selected to guarantee the results they were looking for. "We stuck to the rural South," said Nichols, who admitted they had a hard time finding conservatives in Alabama and other states who didn't watch FOX News but dug them up to give the study some balance. He insisted the actual study was performed and that the results were genuine, though of course the "scientists" involved accepted the fact that the people being studied would be supplied to them and therefore not be random. Nichols admitted this meant the study would never have passed any sort of peer review panel or be accepted for publication by any journal of note. Still, he repeatedly stated that the study was real and did exist. "I would not have published it were it completely fraudulent," he said, pointing out that to do so might have crossed some legal boundaries and "nobody wanted to do that." Hence his claim that the study was actually commissioned and performed, even though it would never meet the most minimal standards for a valid scientific report. The fact that the details Nichols offered up about the study undercut its scientific validity lend some credence to his claim that the study was in fact technically done.

You might think that having the study exposed as a hoax just days after a press release touting it was released would mean Nichols was in hot water. Far from it. He did strenuously defend PRWeb, which is a website that offers a clearinghouse for press releases and can hardly be expected to vet every single claim made in every single notice that passes from their users to the web. In fact, Nichols said he had to rewrite his press release four times before PRWeb would post it. They sent the first draft back "and said it read like b.s.," claimed Nichols, who said they didn't use that word. PRWeb asked for more details about the study and more specifics until five drafts later they were finally satisfied that it met some minimal standards, he said.

Once people started poking around into the suspiciously vague nature of the study and the nonexistent group that produced it, Nichols said PRWeb suspended the account of the group that posted the press release and demanded a meeting on Monday December 10 where they expect Nichols to provide more evidence to back the press release's claims before they will keep this press release up or agree to post any others down the road.

So is the unnamed Republican PAC of moderate conservatives unhappy about this tempest in a teapot? Probably not. The meme -- people who watch FOX News are dumb -- is out there and spreading. No matter how often the study is refuted (and it happened within days), the original press release that was picked up as news will still be out there, forwarded and joked about and commented on like those hoax emails about Bill Gates giving away money to people who send him a message.

"It's making a social commentary," suggests Nichols about the lightning spread of this flimsy excuse of a press release. "Facts are obsolete. And numbers aren't as objective as they should be."

In other words, don't believe everything you see on the web, even if it's repeated by a news site or blog you trust. Especially if it seems too good to be true.

A Brief Look At Some Of The Sites That Linked To Or Posted The Hoax

[Daily Kos original post on press release.](#)

[Daily Kos questions validity of study three hours later but says FOX News viewers are suckers anyway and claims other studies confirm the main point it makes.](#)

[Yahoo News posting of press release on its news site.](#)

[RSN/Reader Supported News reposts the press release in whole and lists PRWeb as the writer.](#)

[Democratic Underground reposts the study.](#)

[FreeRepublic posted a thread on the press release and then pulled it once suspicions were raised.](#)

[Reddit posted a link to a story on the press release but the comments all questioned its validity.](#)

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