

A political history of talk radio in the United States
By Seth Masia

This paper examines the rise of political talk radio in the context of the rightward shift of the political balance in the U.S. after 1964. It discusses the genre as one element of a complex of emergent “metanews” sources competing successfully for attention with traditional hard news media, and shows that political talk radio has been exploited as part of an organized propaganda network. Metanews media are here defined as programs which consciously frame the news so as to build a specific worldview. Examples are ideological talk programming, political satire, and some forms of religious programming.

Talk radio derives its vitality from a nominally spontaneous interaction with interviewees, including celebrity or expert guests and call-in audience members. Many of these programs are service-oriented (*Car Talk*, *The Clark Howard Show*), or oriented toward special interests, most often sports fans. *Political talk radio* centers on discussion and explanation of public policy, including programs that purport journalistic objectivity and programs that overtly advocate an ideology. The importance of the medium lies in the fact that a core audience for rowdy talk radio—socially conservative working-class white men—has often been the key swing constituency in national politics.

The history of radio programming falls naturally into three major periods: The Golden Age of national networks, commencing in the 1920’s and lasting until the advent of television; an interregnum or transition during which radio was supplanted by television as a “buy” for major national advertisers, leading to weakening of radio networks; and a modern era of local programming, niche audiences, mobile receivers, and concentrated corporate ownership constituting the creation of new networks within a more diverse universe.

Radio has had political uses since its inception. As early as December, 1923, President Calvin Coolidge broadcast an address to Congress. Thereafter he spoke to a network radio audience about once a month. The 1924 political conventions were broadcast live, by sports

announcers. (1) Huey Long made effective use of radio when running for governor of Louisiana in 1924. During the 1928 campaign, New York Governor Al Smith, the Democratic presidential candidate, was able to reach a national audience. Regarded at home as an effective orator, Smith broadcast in a thick lower-class New York accent. Political analysts at the time considered this a handicap when talking to voters residing west of the Hudson and north of the Bronx.

By the mid-Twenties, rural radio audiences were already voicing the American tradition that experts, academics, bureaucrats, authorities—stuffed shirts in general—are neither trustworthy nor entertaining. Country music, live sport coverage and escapist fiction proved more popular than classical music and Shakespeare. (2) Decades later, the sentiment would mold both network programming and political talk radio.

In the meantime commercial programming swung sharply away from high-brow institutional fare. The nascent National Broadcasting Co., founded in 1926, sought broad, popular audiences for its networks. The company had already proven itself averse to controversy. That year, the news commentator Hans Von Kaltenborn wrote

In point of fact the radio has been extremely timid about permitting the broadcasting of anything that contravenes the established order. Its influence has gone towards stabilizing rather than change. The best broadcasting stations everywhere are owned by large corporations whose dependence on the good-will of the public authorities and the public at large makes them extremely unwilling to risk giving offense. . . . As radio is now controlled, it objects to that which provokes and stimulates independent thinking as “too controversial.” (3)

This would remain the governing principle for most radio programming for six decades.

Networks self-censored; programmers were under orders to avoid themes and personalities that might offend any identifiable group of listeners. Ethnic minorities were not yet considered to be viable, addressable markets, so ethnic stereotyping was an accepted convention in comedy and drama. The most popular program of the era, beginning in 1928, was *Amos 'n Andy* (4).

The new Federal Radio Commission, organized by Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover under the business-friendly Coolidge administration, promoted commercial stations over non-profit institutional broadcasting. Stations operated by colleges, labor unions and churches

were squeezed out by the spectrum allocations of the Radio Act, while commercial stations got powerful signals. To find the largest possible audience, advertisers and their agencies developed tepid pop-culture programming. By 1929, religious and political broadcasters realized that in order to reach a national audience they would need to buy commercial time from networks. (5)

Networks and the Golden Age

The Wall Street Crash of October, 1929 disrupted most business, but solidified the position of Big Radio. Once the radio set was purchased, anyone could listen to it for free, so radio's popularity rocketed as the Depression deepened; the number of radio sets doubled between 1929 and 1933. (6) Small advertisers failed, leaving only solidly established corporations to buy advertising. The result was further entrenchment of the conservative network system. The new commercial reality would be institutionalized in the Federal Communications Act of 1934, thanks largely to Franklin Roosevelt's debt to radio.

In the 1932 presidential campaign, Roosevelt faced determined opposition from most major newspapers. To reach voters, his campaign purchased network radio time. Unlike Al Smith, Roosevelt had a measured, temperate speaking style and a pleasant radio voice: a light baritone, with a mildly patrician accent, culturally accessible anywhere in the nation. Roosevelt was also the first politician to appreciate the utility of the microphone: it obviated the need to bellow at a campaign rally and allowed him to talk in a friendly, conversational tone to a national audience.

Immediately upon his inauguration, on the occasion of the banking crisis of March, 1933, Roosevelt commenced a series of fireside chats. (7) These 30 short speeches, given about every six months, were directed at ordinary working- and middle-class people in their own homes. In straightforward language, the President explained his economic and foreign policies in detail. The initial chat helped to rebuild confidence in the banking system. Thereafter, the chats gave Roosevelt a way to bypass both press and Congress and speak directly to voters. By framing

debate on economic issues in his own language, FDR anticipated the effective use of radio by conservative voices after the 1964 election.

Election night, 1932, also saw the emergence of early audience-participation radio, as networks broadcast man-in-the-street interviews regarding voting intentions (8). The success of that innovation induced KTRH in Houston to launch the *Vox Pop* program. NBC picked up the program for its national network commencing in July, 1935, and it would run, morphing through a series of new formats, until 1948. *Vox Pop* would be a model for most forms of audience-participation programs to come.

Roosevelt was not the only master of radio politicking. Beginning in 1933, Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin used broadcasting with great effect in opposition to Roosevelt. (9) Where Roosevelt used radio as an intimate, conversational medium, Long and Coughlin used radio as a demagogic tool. Radio's one-way technology was ideally suited to a top-down, authoritarian style of address. (10) Both men used radio to rail against "elite" forces in Washington and New York, appealing to an insecure lower middle class. They spoke directly to working class urban ethnic populations, whose upward mobility had been halted by the Depression. (11) It was a strategy that would work for two generations of politicians.

By 1935, after sidestepping the Associated Press monopoly, networks had established a solid presence in news delivery. Stations felt some pressure to meet the public interest clause of the broadcast license. Broadcast news, espousing mainstream journalistic values, certainly met the requirement. News was pitched to reflect the sympathies of the audience, and it treated the Roosevelt administration kindly. Like FDR, the networks behaved as if they led a fragile coalition. Programmers couldn't afford to alienate Southern whites by mentioning civil rights or lynching issues.

As the Depression dragged on, the public mainstream shifted subtly leftward. The formation of the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1935 signaled the start of an aggressive campaign to organize factory workers on a large scale. Violence by factory goons

against strikers—including shootings—produced press reports sympathetic to the unions, helping to legitimize radical thought in the public sphere. A key development in media was the launch, in 1935, of the Federal Theatre Project within the Works Progress Administration. In its four-year run the FTP produced dozens of scripts, including some radio plays, about topical issues, written with a progressive perspective. (12) Subjects included the threat of European fascism, the stubborn persistence of America's lynching tradition, and labor issues. Leftist playwrights, previously forbidden by the networks to propagandize for socialist causes, found increasing freedom to propagandize against fascism. CBS aired some of their dramatizations. After the outbreak of World War II in Europe, NBC began to do so, too. Anti-fascism had become part of radio's function in unifying the nation as the U.S. prepared for war. Black artists like Duke Ellington and Paul Robeson, previously banned from the ether, began turning up in variety programming after the invasion of Poland. And after Pearl Harbor, writers deemed unemployably Red before 1935 worked as propagandists for the government. Arthur Arent joined the Office of War Information, Marc Blitzstein ran an Army Air Force radio station in London, and so on.

The threat of war gave new immediacy to newscasting. H.V. Kaltenborn's real-time reportage of the 1938 Munich Crisis riveted his CBS audience. (13) It set the pattern for Edward R. Murrow's sympathetic coverage of the Battle of Britain. Meanwhile, man-in-the-street interviews and audience-participation programming completed their commodification: by 1939, programs like *Vox Pop* abandoned pure spontaneity and began screening interviewees for their entertainment value. (14) A decade later, this would become standard practice for talk shows.

Postwar interregnum and Fordist pluralism

The years following VJ day saw an explosion of radio broadcasting. With a change in spectrum regulation in 1947, more licenses became available. From 961 AM stations in 1946, radio grew to 2006 stations in 1949. By 1965 there'd be over 4000 stations, two-thirds of them independent of the networks. (15) Today the U.S. has 13,000 stations. (16) Many of the new stations targeted ethnic markets ignored by the networks. Unhappily, all these new stations had to share a stagnant

level of revenue as advertising agencies stampeded to television. Radio stations turned to local advertisers for support, and average per-station revenue fell from \$246,000 in 1947 to \$194,000 in 1953. (17) At the same time, radio talent defected to television in droves. Local stations needed to generate local content, with new talent, in new genres. The war had habituated Americans to radio news—in a 1949 survey, 63 percent of Americans reported that radio was their primary news source—and in 1946, about six million cars were equipped with radios. (18) Drive time therefore became the most valuable advertising buy. The target listener was an isolated driver, envisioned as an upwardly mobile adult male consumer commuting from his new suburban home. Program managers rushed to develop content that would appeal to this guy. Sports and news were proven, masculinized talking formats. A new genre emerged: talking opinion and commentary on news and issues. In 1949, in Delaware, Joe Pyne became the first right-wing talk radio personality, and in California, Lewis Hill launched the left-leaning Pacifica Foundation, presaging the emergence of liberal talk. When, in 1967, Phil Donahue positioned himself as a sensitive, caring “feminized” host of a show aimed at women, he would be perceived as “Joe Pyne’s Other.” (19)

Pyne, and talkers like him, seemed to take risks with the Fairness Doctrine. Promulgated in 1949, the policy was supposed to force networks to air countervailing views. (20) But the McCarthy hearings had cleared the air of leftists, so a right wing voice went unanswered, except rarely by a mainstream Democrat or Republican.

Niche marketing led to identification of ethnic minorities as viable market segments. Advertisers now wanted to avoid offense to African-American, Asian and other ethnic groups. As disk jockeys worked rhythm & blues and other ethnic music into the mainstream mix, white audiences learned to listen to black voices. (21)

After the Atlanta bus boycott in 1955, broadcast news could no longer ignore the civil rights movement. Network media treated the civil rights movement with sympathy. The movement fit well with the prevailing faith in progress and pluralism. The hegemonic ideology held that America had room at its table for all its citizens, and the image of a prosperous working

class was America's strongest weapon in the Cold War. American workers, especially the rising professional/management class and unionized industrial workers, enjoyed a rising standard of living and were able to take pride in driving not only the world's strongest economy, but also its most magnanimous democracy. Meanwhile, Europe and Japan had arisen from their WWII ashes just far enough to provide America's affluent workers with cheap imports, among them Volkswagens and transistor radios. The American worker had no significant foreign competition.

What Roosevelt had wrought, via rough, persistent, pragmatic experimentation during the Depression, and through his success as a war leader, was a liberal consensus that survived into the 1980s. Even the Republican presidents Eisenhower and Nixon found it expedient to support and extend New Deal policies. The strength of the labor unions was one of the legs that propped up Fordism through the 1960s.

Fordism had an internal flaw. Strong unions and government regulation of industry infuriated a small group of capitalists and libertarian Westerners. Beginning in 1961, under the direction of conservative organizer Clif White, the cabal slipped the Republican Party out from under the Eastern establishment represented by Nelson Rockefeller. While Rockefeller campaigned noisily in public, White's agents privately sewed up state caucuses. (22) Nominated by a minority, and framed by both Rockefeller and the Johnson campaign as an extremist, Goldwater took only 38 percent of the popular vote in November, 1964. Decades later, the conservative activist William A. Rusher wrote

Barry Goldwater's key role in the drama of America is clear: He served, when no one else would or could, as the political rallying-point for a conservative movement that was quietly gathering its strength to take over the country. To do so, he gave up his seat in the Senate he loved, and quietly endured a smear campaign that professionals, thirty years later, still talk about with awe. (23)

The conservative movement learned, and rallied. With funds from wealthy backers including William F. Buckley, Jr., Joseph Coors, Richard Mellon Scaife and John M. Olin, they launched a group of right-wing foundations to sell the conservative agenda to the legal and legislative communities, to churches and academia, and to the press. Among the start-ups funded

was Reed Irvine's Accuracy in Media, founded in 1969. AIM functioned specifically to frame mainstream press institutions as liberal if not left-leaning, and to drive the center rightward. AIM was funded almost exclusively by Richard Mellon Scaife—between 1985 and 2003 his Scaife and Carthage Foundations provided 90 percent of AIM's grant money, totaling over \$3.5 million. (24)

In the mid-Sixties, the civil rights movement and protest against the Vietnam War began to drive a wedge through the Roosevelt-era Democratic Party coalition. On one side stood educated northern liberals and urban black voters; on the other stood socially conservative Dixiecrats and patriotic blue-collar workers. Richard Nixon peeled away enough workers and southerners to win the presidency in 1968, and re-election in 1972. Nixon had in fact revived the Huey Long and Father Coughlin campaign strategies of 1935, with a strong appeal to white working class voters.

Following the Supreme Court's *Murray vs. Curlett* school prayer decision (1963) and *Roe vs. Wade* (1973), the right wing began expanding its voting bloc amongst fundamentalist Christians. The effort was institutionalized in James Dobson's Focus on the Family (1977) and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority (1979). The alliance of Christian fundamentalist sects with the anti-tax conservative groups was mediated by the secretive Council for National Policy, created in 1981. (25) From 1988 the political effort to take over grass-roots Republican organizations was coordinated in large part by Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. By 1994 the alliance had seized control of the Republican Party, apparently for good. (26) The modern Republican coalition overseen by the CNP consisted of two main elements: anti-regulation/anti-tax corporatists (including the military-industrial complex and their neoconservative foreign policy hawks), providing funds; and the religious right, providing votes. This coalition targeted as swing voters three very large groups that could reasonably be described as anxiety-driven: traditionally Democratic blue-collar males, suburban "white flight" voters, and small business owners.

Blue collar and suburban white collar workers—the heart of the talk radio audience—had good reason for anxiety. The liberal Democratic coalition had lost its wheels with failure of the

Fordist economic model, during the long recession and stagflation that followed the first OPEC oil embargo of October, 1973. Deficit spending to support the Vietnam War had already triggered an inflationary spiral. Through the early Seventies, the U.S. unemployment rate averaged 4.8 percent. With the oil shock, the economy slowed. By 1975 unemployment stood at 8.5 percent, then soared to 9.7 percent in 1982. (27) Wages stagnated, and an era of rising expectations ended. Disoriented and disenchanted, working class voters often looked for something on which to blame the listless economy. It was easy to focus on the recent arrival in the workforce of minorities and women; it was easy to blame an influx of cheap imports from Japan; it was easy to blame illegal immigrants. Mainstream reporters found it very difficult to ascribe blame to capitalist institutions. To do so invited charges of class warfare, socialism or worse. These charges originated from the complex of right-wing institutions later to be described by David Brock as *The Republican Noise Machine*. (28)

Political talk radio was an important element in that machine. About 15 percent of American radio stations list news or talk as their primary format; they speak very clearly to disgruntled and displaced industrial workers. News/talk stations draw an audience that's 60 percent male. (29) Job loss for most men feels emasculating; when underemployment is structural, as came to pass by the early '80s, working class men become the target market for a gender-specific message.

Talk radio is as much—maybe even more—about gender politics at the end of the century than it is about party politics. There were different masculinities enacted on radio, from Howard Stern to Rush Limbaugh, but they were all about challenging and overthrowing, if possible, that most revolutionary of social movements, feminism. They were also about challenging buttoned-down, upper-middle-class, corporate versions of masculinity that excluded many men from access to power. The “men’s movement” of the 1980s found its outlet—and that was talk radio. (30)

Thus the emergence of “adolescent male” talk radio: Morton Downey, Jr., Howard Stern, Don Imus, Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly and dozens like them felt free to rant and rave on the airwaves, breaking every convention evolved over decades of polite “feminized” programming.

Much of the message was overtly anti-feminist: Limbaugh spoke contemptuously of “feminazis,” Stern loved to interview strippers.

Much of the message was coded racism. For a right-wing ideologue, the primary function of the state is to maintain order. When the “other” is a threat to order, any effort by the state to legitimize or enfold the “other”—in the form of welfare support, equal employment opportunity, or desegregation—is a breach of the social contract. The ultimate outrage for an insecure white middle class worker is affirmative action. Right wing radio tells its audience that affirmative action will turn a white worker’s job over to a less qualified minority worker. The right wing language conveyed by radio talkers, and embodied in reactionary legislation, inverts liberal civil rights language: it labels affirmative action as racism directed at white workers, and calls for color-blind hiring practices. (31)

Radio’s one-way communication characteristic still encouraged a demagogic mode of address. A call-in talk show gives the impression that it functions as a democratic debating society or town meeting of the air, but in fact only a very small percentage of callers ever get through, and these are screened for orthodoxy. A typical political talk host entertains six to eight calls per hour; at that rate, Rush Limbaugh can talk with only about one caller for each half-million listeners. The host can, and does, cut a caller off at any time. The impression of give and take is a choreographed act.

The rhetorics used by conservative talk show hosts and right wing Christian broadcasters are markedly different in tone, but are based on an identical underlying worldview. Where talk show language is direct, masculine and often vengeful, religious programming often preaches forgiveness of the oppressor, implying that victimhood carries no right of redress. Both genres serve a double corporatist purpose: to build a loyal voting bloc for candidates who will support corporatist anti-regulation legislation; and to indoctrinate a working class audience to accept a high-unemployment, low-wage economy. The underlying “social justice” worldview of both conservative broadcast genres is that taking from anyone to give to anyone else is theft. Thus

taxes are theft, and tax-supported welfare is theft. It follows that you deserve only what you work for, and if you have little you didn't work hard enough. It further follows that generosity breeds sloth and sin; liberals, who are foolishly generous, are thieves and sinners. This message reverses a humanitarian reading of Christianity, but it is a morally consistent message and is accepted by a large proportion of the population as a legitimate worldview, according to George Lakoff, professor of linguistics at Berkeley. (32) Christian environmental writer Bill McKibben wrote this critique in 2005:

... the soft-focus consumer gospel of the suburban megachurches is a perfect match for emergent conservative economic notions about personal responsibility instead of collective action. Privatize Social Security? Keep health care for people who can afford it? File those under "God helps those who help themselves." (33)

To this simple formulation, most political talk hosts add the concept that foolish liberal generosity destroys a nation's economy.

There's a reason right wing hosts found a warm reception in commercial broadcasting. The industry is now dominated by tightly-controlled corporations that are, themselves, part of the anti-regulation Republican alliance. The National Association of Broadcasters has a vested interest in controlling the FCC. A key figure in the evolution of media has been the Australian-born magnate Rupert Murdoch, who began acquiring U.S. newspapers in 1973 and rapidly expanded his empire to include broadcast stations and movie holdings. He launched the Fox News Channel in 1996 as a conservative voice. Murdoch chafed under FCC regulations restricting media concentration and corporate growth. He lobbied aggressively, and successfully, for the right to own both newspapers and broadcast licenses in any single market; he is also an anti-tax corporatist, apparently paying no corporate tax at all on \$2.1 billion in profits between 1988 and 1999. (34) Murdoch-owned media have consistently promoted the right wing message in their news coverage and talk programming. Right wing ideology also finds a home at 1200 stations owned by Clear Channel Communications, founded in 1972 by Texans Red McCombs and Lowry Mays; and at Sinclair Broadcasting, founded in 1971 by Julian Smith, which controls

97 local TV stations reaching 24 percent of U.S. households. Taken together, four or five corporations “own” 75 percent of the audience in the top ten markets, and in 2001 the top ten radio corporations controlled 65 percent of the industry’s revenue. (35) None of these voices espouses a liberal worldview.

Not all political talk belongs to the right wing. Beginning in 1974 Alan Berg hosted a famously combative liberal program in Denver. But Berg was ambushed and shot to death in 1984 by members of a neo-Nazi group. The incident in no way dampened the testosterone-fueled discourse of Berg’s conservative competitors. The right wing talkers parroted messages coordinated by the CNP organizations. They continually denigrated the “authority” of mainstream media that still seemed to convey a Roosevelt-era liberal consensus. After Ronald Reagan’s abolition of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, attacks on the press morphed into attacks on liberalism in general, on liberals and intellectuals as a class, and on Democratic politicians. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the right wing wasted no more time decrying the evils of Communism (except in its Latin American manifestations) and concentrated on destroying Democrats.

The talk radio audience grew rapidly, especially after the popularization of cell phones in the early Nineties. In 1993, 12 million cell phones were in use. (36) Commuters could call in to talk shows during drive time. The superstar of the medium, Rush Limbaugh, launched his national show in 1988; at the peak of his popularity, during the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns, he claimed an audience of about 20 million (it’s about 13 million at the close of 2005). (37) And Rush didn’t even use drive time, which raises a question about the work ethic of his Dittohead listeners.

On the other side, liberal talk radio was for years decidedly tepid in tone, and got lost in the ratings shuffle. According to one commercial station manager, “Liberals are ‘genetically engineered to not offend anybody. People who go on the air afraid of offending are not inherently entertaining.’” (38) In recent years, liberal radio has discovered that in order to thrive,

programming needs first of all to be entertaining. Entertainers and professional radio talkers do better at it than do politicians, academics, and even-handed journalists. Pacifica Radio has been broadcasting leftist and pacifist programming since 1949, and currently feeds content to about 86 stations around the country. Its most popular program, *Democracy Now!*, hosted by Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez, owes much of its success to Goodman's confrontational interviewing style. The program has now outgrown the Pacifica network and reaches 330 community-supported stations. Goodman's audience may total as many as 6 million listeners. She consciously positions the program in opposition to the mainstream non-profit network, National Public Radio, which she has referred to as "government radio." (39)

In the fall of 2004, NPR claimed an audience of about 23 million listeners weekly (40). Its news program *Morning Edition* reached 13.2 million listeners weekly. NPR launched its news service in 1970 with liberal intent, but currently runs it as neutral hard news. (41) Nonetheless, conservative talkers excoriate NPR as a liberal viper's nest, and listeners identifying themselves as liberal favor the network. (42)

The fastest-growing commercial talk show belongs to Ed Schultz, who pitches a liberal message to a union-member audience. A former football player turned sportscaster, Schultz speaks a blue-collar rhetoric. He shouts into the mike and often insults Republican politicians. "He sounds like Rush, but makes sense," says his producer, James Holm. Schultz launched his national program on Jan. 4, 2004, and in November, 2005 reached about 2 million listeners daily on 105 stations. The *Ed Schultz Show* was capitalized with a \$1.8 million investment, and then sold to P1, a company formed by Stu Krane, a former Clear Channel executive, and Randy Michaels, formerly of ABC. Krane and Michaels were among the original backers of Rush Limbaugh. Their adoption of a liberal program does not represent a political change of heart. "Stu and Randy love money," said Holm. "They saw in Ed the same audience appeal they saw in Rush in 1988." Their business sense may already have been validated: While the typical talk show

takes three years to establish a profitable advertising base, the Ed Schultz Show moved into the black after 23 months. (43)

The P1 phenomenon underscores the reality that political talk radio is a profitable business. Talk radio does not need to be subsidized by political groups. Capitalists like Krane and Michaels follow the market. Their investment in liberal talk may signal a perception that the market for conservative talk is saturated.

In November, 2005, *The Al Franken Show* reached about 1.5 million listeners on the 72 stations subscribed to Air America Radio. The new network launched in March, 2004, and in August, 2005 claimed a national audience of 3.1 million. (44) Franken and Schultz became the first liberal talkers to break into Armed Forces Radio on December 5, 2005. The two programs aim at different demographics: Franken at the upper-middle class NPR and youth market, Schultz at the key swing voter: the working stiff.

Liberal talk radio reaches a fraction of the audience held by conservative radio—perhaps 12 million, compared to perhaps 30 million for Limbaugh, O’Reilly and their allies. But this new liberal audience is growing, whereas the conservative audience appears to have reached a plateau—at least until the next presidential election.

Liberals, and Democrats, have no equivalent of the Council for National Policy, and haven’t been working for four decades on a consistent worldview. The party stands accused of nostalgia for Franklin Roosevelt’s liberal consensus; a key trope for conservatives is that liberals “look backward.” Liberals believe in social safety nets, in the value of collective bargaining, in the pernicious effect of monopoly, and in the actual humanity of every human. George Lakoff suggests that these concepts are too complex for sound-bite discussion, and advises that liberal talkers adopt a rhetoric of simple morality. (45) There’s some movement in this direction. In recent weeks, especially after the Nov. 22, 2005 announcement by General Motors that the company would close 12 factories and lay off 25 percent of its workforce over the next three years, liberal talkers have tended to frame corporate behavior as shortsighted greed. This message

that may resonate better with socially conservative working voters than can any discussion of corporatism and quarterly dividends.

Decline of the mainstream press

The rising power of broadcast news—and especially of TV news—began to cut into newspaper readership during the Sixties. In 1945, daily newspaper circulation totaled about 50 million, against 39 million households in the US—roughly 1.28 newspapers per household per weekday. By 1970, weekday circulation had risen to 62 million, but there were now 62 million households—or one newspaper per household. By 1990, readership was in decline: daily circulation had slipped to 60 million, and Americans read .64 newspapers per household each day. In 2000, circulation was 55 million, and the household ratio was a mere .52. Most of the losses came amongst the ranks of evening papers, which saw circulation drop from 38 million in 1970 to 9 million in 2000. The culprit appeared to be the 6 o'clock evening news on TV. (46)

The situation has turned ominous for mainstream television newscasting, too. According to Nielsen figures, over the past three years most network news audiences peaked in the first quarter of 2003 (Fox peaked in the second quarter of that year). Since then, ABC's World News Tonight, the CBS Evening News and NBC's nightly news have seen audiences slide 24 percent, CNN is down 20 percent, CNBC crashed 50 percent, and MSNBC is off 25 percent. Fox lost just 9 percent. (47)

Michael Massing of the *Columbia Journalism Review* ascribes part of the decline in hard news audiences to the corrosive attack on mainstream media by the CNP's Noise Machine. He argues that "a disciplined and well-organized news and opinion campaign directed by conservatives and the Christian right" supported by "newsletters, think tanks, and talk radio as well as cable television news and the Internet" serves "to discredit what they refer to disparagingly as 'MSM,' for mainstream media." (48) Since 1993, a consistent conservative movement message has been coordinated weekly at the Wednesday Meeting chaired by anti-tax activist Grover Norquist. (49) One result is a serious erosion of trust in old-fashioned hard news.

In a 2005 study (based on surveys covering 2004), The Pew Research Center reports that the credibility gap is most severe amongst that audience most likely to listen to Noise Machinery:

But Republicans have become even more negative about the media's believability, widening the partisan gaps and driving down the overall ratings of several major news organizations. In 1998, 44% of Democrats and 39% of Republicans gave CNN very high ratings for believability. By 2002, the partisan gap had widened significantly: 45% of Democrats and 32% of Republicans gave CNN the highest rating. In the current survey, CNN's rating among Democrats remains at 45%, while falling further among Republicans (to 26%).

More surprising is the sharp decline among members of both parties but especially Republicans in ratings for the Wall Street Journal. In 1998, Republicans were more trusting than Democrats of the Wall Street Journal by a margin of 48% to 42%. That was still the case in 2002 when 35% of Republicans and 29% of Democrats gave the Journal a very high rating for believability. Today, Democrats are actually more trusting of the Journal 29% give it a high rating vs. 23% of Republicans.

Ratings for the NewsHour and the Associated Press also have changed dramatically among Republicans. As recently as two years ago, fairly comparable percentages of Democrats (28%) and Republicans (24%) gave high credibility ratings to the PBS news program. Today, about the same proportion of Democrats (29%) give the NewsHour high marks for believability, compared with only 12% of Republicans.

Even C-SPAN, the non-profit, public affairs network has seen its ratings become more politicized. In 1998, Republicans were slightly more likely than Democrats to view C-SPAN as highly believable. By 2000, the balance of opinion had shifted, though Republicans and Democrats still had fairly similar views about C-SPAN. Today significantly more Democrats than Republicans give C-SPAN high marks for believability (36% vs. 23%, respectively).

Credibility ratings for the major news networks have not changed as dramatically in recent years, largely because they have long been divided along partisan lines. In the case of NBC News, the partisan gap is as large as it was in 1998 (13 points), and partisan differences in evaluations of ABC News have grown only marginally. But ratings for CBS News have become more partisan: currently, 34% of Democrats and just 15% of Republicans view CBS News as highly credible. The network's rating among Democrats is about the same as it was six years ago (33% in 1998), while its credibility among Republicans has fallen eight points (from 23%).

Opinions of the believability of *Time* and *Newsweek* also have become more partisan. In 1998, 34% of Democrats vs. 23% of Republicans gave *Time* a high believability rating. Today, 30% of Democrats and 15% of Republicans view *Time* as highly believable. A similar pattern can be seen for *Newsweek*. (50)

The decline in newspaper circulation and network news audiences may equally be blamed on the rise of internet news delivery. 29 percent of Americans now read news online, up from 23 percent in 2000. According to the Pew Research Center, however, the story is more

complex. Readers of internet news are also readers of newspapers, at the same rate as non-users of the internet—about 40 percent. This implies that if the internet evaporated tomorrow, newspaper circulation would not rise. (51)

Whatever the reason for the decline in the hard news audience, the appetite for metanews—talk radio, religious news, Fox, and political satire—is strong, and growing, though not quite as fast as the hard news audience is shrinking. The Pew Research Center reports that conservatives like to hear news filtered through Limbaugh (77 percent of his listeners identify as conservative), O'Reilly (72 percent), religious programs (53 percent), Fox (52 percent), and call-in radio programs in general (45 percent). Liberals appear less polarized, but tend to prefer news explained by NPR (30 percent identify as liberal), the PBS *News Hour* (27 percent), and TV comedy (21 percent), followed by network news (18 percent). (52) The ideological sources, in aggregate, have expanded their audiences over the past decade, as has NPR, which has seen its audience swell 77 percent in ten years.

Another consciously ideological environment, the political blogosphere, is skyrocketing in audience: As of July 2005, the top 1000 political blogs totaled a readership of three million unique visitors per day, with two million daily pageviews per day for the top 98 progressive blogs and 1.42 million daily pageviews for the top 150 conservative blogs. Political bloggage jumped 54 percent during the 2004 election year. (53)

The growth of audiences for politically framed news and analysis, at the expense of hard or “neutral” news, has been variously explained by the phenomenon of selective listening; by the marketing power of the right-wing “sell;” and by the abdication of responsibility by mainstream journalists. I would like to suggest that a rewarding avenue of research is to investigate the appetite of a confused populace, overwhelmed by contradictory information, for *meaning* espoused in any palatable form.

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