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Call-In Political Talk Radio: Background, Content, Audiences, Portrayal in Mainstream Media

Joseph Turow

University of Pennsylvania, jturow@asc.upenn.edu

Joseph N. Cappella

University of Pennsylvania, jcappella@asc.upenn.edu

Kathleen Hall Jamieson

University of Pennsylvania, kjamieson@asc.upenn.edu

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For information about publications, contact:
The Annenberg Public Policy Center
3620 Walnut Street
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Foreword

The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania which would address public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. Consistent with the mission of the Annenberg School for Communication, the Center has four ongoing foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; and Health Communication. Each year, as well, a special area of scholarly and social interest is addressed. The Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas. This series of publications disseminates the work of the Center.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson
Director

Joseph N. Cappella is author of *Multivariate Techniques in Human Communication Research*, a fellow of the International Communication Association, and co-author of the forthcoming *Spirals of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*.

Joseph Turow's work includes *Media Industries, Media Systems and Society: The Production of News and Entertainment*, and *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World*.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson has written *Packaging the Presidency, Eloquence in an Electronic Age, Dirty Politics*, and (with Cappella) *Spirals of Cynicism*.

Executive Summary

With funding from The Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, a research team headed by Professor Joseph N. Cappella, Professor Joseph Turow, and Dean Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania conducted a year long study of political call-in talk radio. The study included a three wave national survey, content analysis of Rush Limbaugh's talk radio show, examination of fifty political talk shows on each of three days during the Republican primaries, and review of 2,647 print articles mentioning talk radio from Fall 1993 to Fall 1995.

The talk shows were divided into four groups: Limbaugh, Conservatives, Moderates, and Liberals. Survey respondents were divided into four groups — (1) non-listeners; (2) regular listeners to Limbaugh only; (3) regular listeners to conservative shows but not to Limbaugh; (4) regular listeners to moderate or liberal shows (and not to Limbaugh). A fifth group of regular listeners to Limbaugh and a second show was excluded from study. Regular listeners were those who listened to political talk radio at least twice a week. In the initial survey, 1,203 were sampled; an oversample of regular listeners pushed the final sample to 1,666.

Findings

1. Audience size: 18% of the adult population reports listening to at least one call-in political talk radio show at least twice a week. These regular listeners are distributed as follows: 4% listen to Limbaugh and at least one other host; 7% listen only to Limbaugh; another 7% listen only to some other show. Of the last group, 2-3% listen primarily to a conservative host; 4-5% to a moderate or liberal show.
2. Regular political talk radio listeners are more likely than non-listeners to consume all types of news media (excepting tv news), to be more knowledgeable about politics and social issues, and to be involved in political activities. This is true regardless of the ideology of the hosts of the programs to which they listen. In other words, Limbaugh's audience is no more or less knowledgeable or active than the audience for moderate/liberal or conservative talk radio. However listeners to conservative talk radio are more likely to vote than are listeners to Limbaugh or liberal/moderate political talk radio.
3. Talk radio is not monolithic. Rather, its content is varied. In general, conservative shows are more likely to focus on foreign and military affairs than do the other shows; moderate/liberal shows focus more on family and education than the other types of political talk radio.
4. Limbaugh's focus differs substantially from that of the other shows. His topics are more likely to focus on domestic politics and business. In addition, Limbaugh spends more time than other hosts urging his audience to assume personal responsibility and insisting they can make a difference. Limbaugh's priorities are as different from the mainstream media as from conservative talk shows.
5. Limbaugh's audience responds more positively to Republican leaders and more negatively to Bill and Hillary Clinton than any other group in our survey. Limbaugh's listeners are also more likely than other

groups to oppose government regulation of business, to believe that corporations seek the public interest, and to be distrustful of government. This is consistent with the fact that Limbaugh focuses more on business and domestic politics than both the mainstream media and conservative and moderate/liberal talk shows.

6. Political talk radio listeners are more critical of the mainstream media than are non-listeners. Limbaugh's listeners are more critical than the listeners of conservative or moderate/liberal talk. Consistent with this, Limbaugh listeners felt that the news media treated the alleged "Unabomber" more favorably than the alleged bomber of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Since Limbaugh stressed the difference in treatment, he may have given his audience a different interpretation of the media's coverage or simply reinforced what they were already disposed to believe.
7. The mainstream media give only superficial treatment to political talk radio portraying it as powerful, pernicious, and monolithic.
8. In contrast, content analysis of seven weeks of Limbaugh (105 hours), 150 hours of other hosts, and analysis of a stratified sample of more than 2500 newspaper articles about political talk radio suggests that
 - A. By focusing on extreme moments of talk radio without indicating how typical they are of the most widely heard shows, mainstream news may invite the inference that political talk radio is, at best, routinely uncivil, and at worst, downright dangerous.
 - B. By focusing on moments in which talk radio may have mobilized citizens or influenced legislation but not on those in which it failed to do so, newspaper articles on talk radio may exaggerate its impact. During two weeks in mid-March, two Senatorial and two Congressional offices (one from each party) monitored their faxes, e-mails, calls and letters for references to political talk radio and found few.
 - C. News articles overstate the homogeneity of political talk radio.
9. Mainstream media portrayal may account for the fact that non-listeners view political talk radio negatively. Regular listeners may see in mainstream media a portrait inconsistent with their own experience of political talk radio. This discrepancy may account in part for the finding that listeners are more cynical about mainstream media than are non-listeners.
10. At the same time, mainstream media's focus on the extremes of talk radio (e.g., claims that opponents should be killed, dismissal of other groups as subhuman) enables those who disapprove of the extreme statements to take actions designed to minimize a repeat of the offensive talk.

Political Talk Radio and Its Audiences

What is Unique About Talk Radio?

- talk radio is an intimate medium
in which
- the caller is generally anonymous
- and in which callers and hosts participate in spontaneous interaction.

In May 1993, 60% told a *US News and World Report* survey that they listened to call-in programs or talk radio shows. In July and August of 1995 *Talk Daily* conducted the largest survey of talk radio completed to date. The survey reached 3,035 Americans. That survey found that the audience that had listened today or yesterday was 40% female, 38% Republican, and nearly twice as likely as the general public to have a college degree. The audience was somewhat older than the population at large. Where 22% of the population is over 60, 27% of talk radio listeners fall in that category.

Arbitron reports that in 1994, there were 11,790 commercial and non-commercial radio stations in the U.S. The 1990 *Broadcasting Yearbook* reported that 488 stations, 419 of them on AM employed a full time talk format.¹ By 1993 *Newsweek* was reporting that nearly a tenth of 10,000 stations included talk.² In October 1995, the *M. Street Radio Directory* reported 1,005 AM news/talk stations with 304 on FM³ and a total of 11, 834 stations.

Seventy five members attended a first gathering of the National Association of Radio Talk Show Hosts in the late 1980s. Today the group includes more than 3,000.

According to FCC Chair Reed Hundt, talk radio produced “one out of every \$7 that broadcasters earned in radio in 1993”.⁴ An Arbitron/Billboard database indicates that in 1990, talk /news radio was exceeded only by the contemporary music format in its reach in the top seventy five markets.⁵ In Fall 1994 news/talk was the nation’s most popular format.⁶ The Spring 1994 Arbitron survey found that 32.6% of the audience of news/talk, which included, news, business news, talk, sports, and children’s formats, was over 65, with roughly 17.2% in each of the categories, 55 to 64, 45-54, and 35-44.

Call-in political talk is, in other words, one of many different kinds of talk radio. When listeners report that they are part of the “talk radio” audience they may be telling surveyors that they listen to car talk, money talk, medical talk, spiritual talk, food talk, sex talk, sports talk or political talk. They may also be listening to some combination.

It is on call-in political talk that our studies focused. But even that category is hard to pin down. Among the hosts who occasionally talk politics is “shock jock” Howard Stern who has paid over a million dollars in FCC fines for indecency and whose topics range from Clinton to clitoral orgasm.

Another reason for caution is evident in the finding of Hofstetter and his colleagues that in surveys respondents do not “discriminate accurately among political, nonpolitical, and other programming.”⁷ What this means is that reports of listenership to talk radio should not be taken as signs that a large percent of the population is in fact focusing on interactive talk about politics.

Factors Contributing to Growth of Talk Radio

DEMOGRAPHICS

One factor accounting for the growth in talk listenership is demographic. Older listeners tend to prefer talk to music. The baby boomers are, in other words, a natural constituency for talk radio.⁸

TECHNOLOGY

In the 1970s and 1980s the clearer signal and stereo sound of FM radio gave it an advantage as a channel of music. Since AM stations were designed to reach people in the places they lived in the 1940s and 1950s, AM also had trouble reaching those outside their urban core. Because the FM stations were set up in the 60s and 70s, they were able to reach the desirable suburban markets.⁹ AM stations foundered. “The mass exodus of listeners from AM to FM over the last 20 years,” wrote *Broadcasting* in August 1990, “has left some 5000-plus stations scrambling to keep from being in the red—or, worse yet, going dark.”¹⁰ Talk radio is, in the minds of some, the savior of AM.

Changing technology has made national talk radio possible. When syndicated talk shows had to be sent by copper wire over phone lines, as they did until the mid 1980s, the audio quality was too poor to carry long programs. Another prohibitive factor was the cost of linking stations together by phone lines. The satellite dish changed all that. Stations can now receive broadcast quality from anywhere in the country at a comparatively low cost. Among other things, the new technology made it possible for local hosts to “link several stations together into an ‘instant network.’”¹¹

Although national syndication is now technologically easy to accomplish, attracting large audiences in major markets is not. Of the top four political radio talk show hosts—Limbaugh, Liddy, Leykis and Grant, only Limbaugh is consistently aired in the major markets. Of the nationally syndicated talk programs in the major markets only Limbaugh consistently talks politics and takes calls. Of the others, Casey Kasem plays the “Casey’s Top 40”, Paul Harvey delivers news and folk wisdom, and Howard Stern provides commentary on contemporary culture.

The satellite is to the programmer what the car phone is to the listener. Fueled in part by the advent of the car phone, talk radio is a staple of drive time. Indeed some mobile phone services have made deals with local talk shows. By punching a single button, the driver can call-in.¹²

If the satellite made the national broadcast feasible it was the 1-800 number that made the interactive national program possible. When Ma Bell was broken up in deregulation, the cost of long distance calls dropped making 1-800 numbers feasible.

The other staple of talk radio—the tape delay—has been available since the late 1950s.

THE END OF THE FAIRNESS DOCTRINE

In 1985, the Federal Communication Commission concluded that the fairness doctrine was no longer needed.¹³ A Federal Appeals Court upheld that conclusion in 1989.¹⁴ When Congress added the doctrine to the Communications Act, President Reagan vetoed it. Congress failed to override the veto. The doctrine had required that broadcasters provide a reasonable opportunity for the presentation of opposing views on controversial public issues.

The arguments against the doctrine included:

- “The growth in the number of broadcast outlets has made the scarcity rationale obsolete, thus ending the need for the fairness doctrine....
- Rather than enhancing broadcast coverage of public issues, the fairness doctrine ‘often worked to dissuade broadcasters from presenting any treatment of controversial viewpoints....’
- Enforcing the doctrine put the government ‘in the doubtful position of evaluating program content.’
- By its existence, the fairness doctrine gave the president, his administration, and members of Congress ‘an opportunity to abuse it for partisan purposes.’ ”¹⁵
- The end of the fairness doctrine paved the way for talk radio as we know it today. Neither hosts nor stations currently have an obligation to provide balance or voice to competing views.
- A central argument of conservative hosts is that they provide needed balance in the media. “Many liberals are perplexed by the growing market for the conservative media, but by using the evening news as a left wing doormat, they have unwittingly created demand for a right-wing product,” says talk show host Blanquita Cullum.¹⁶ “I provide my audience with information that the mainstream media refuses to disseminate,” says Limbaugh. “And I do so in an entertaining, enjoyable way. That is why I always say my views and commentary don’t need to be balanced by equal time. I am equal time. And the free market has proven my contention.”¹⁷

The Range of Talk

Although most shows are conservative in character, there is a broad ideological range on political talk radio. Three of the nationally syndicated hosts who move across the conversational landscape but do not articulate an ideological agenda are Talk Net’s Bruce Williams, Mutual’s Jim Bohannon and NPR’s Ray Suarez. A widely heard libertarian voice is that of Gene Burns, past president of the National

Association of Talk Radio Show Hosts, who is carried on more than 100 stations. Atlanta's Neal Boortz who is heard on WSB also describes himself as a libertarian.

Ellen Ratner, Tom Leykis, Gloria Allred, Marjorie Claprood and— until his decision to leave radio —Mario Cuomo are among the liberals with Michael Jackson of KABC in Los Angeles a moderate to liberal.

The formats of the shows differ as well. Where Limbaugh and Liddy rarely have guests, they are a regular feature of Oliver North's show which includes both liberals and conservatives.

In both number of shows and size of audience—from Limbaugh and Liddy to North— most talk radio is conservative. And within the conservative group are a number of Christian conservative stations. Included in this conservative mix are a number of black talk show hosts, including KABC's Larry Elder. A number of stations including Spokane's KXLY have paired a liberal and a conservative on the same show.

Even conservative talk radio is not monolithic, however. During the Republican primaries, for example, Limbaugh attacked Buchanan's positions while Michael Reagan and Chuck Harder defended them. Of the major hosts, Liddy seemed most disposed to Dole.

On the ideological fringe are programs available in the main over short-wave. These programs drew public attention after the Oklahoma bombing. They include, Mark Koernke's "The Intelligence Report," William Cooper's "The Hour of the Time", Ernst Zundel's "Voice of Freedom."

The *Talk Daily* survey , which provided the first large scale nationwide data on hosts, reported that of talk radio listeners:

37% listen to Limbaugh

10% listen to Liddy

3% listen to Bob Grant of New York and nationally syndicated Liberal, Tom Leykis.

Of the top nine hosts, only two, Leykis, and Los Angeles based Michael Jackson are liberal. Nonetheless, the Summer 1993 *Times Mirror Survey* found that the 112 hosts surveyed considered themselves more liberal than their callers and reported favoring Clinton over Bush and Perot in 1992. In 1992, according to Times Mirror data, 83% of the talk radio audience voted with 27% voting for Clinton. By contrast 43% of the national population cast a ballot for the Arkansan.

Like the callers and listeners, most of the hosts are white males. A *Radio and Records* survey of 73 mainstream talk-news stations in the top 100 markets identified fourteen black hosts.¹⁸ A 1994 survey of 74 talk stations in the top 100 markets located 138 female hosts of talk shows. Of these 57 were hosting issues-based talk. This represented a drop since the 1991 survey by *Radio and Records*.¹⁹ Radio's ability to segment the audience is one of its characterizing features. As a result, there is radio talk in languages from Spanish to Chinese and Vietnamese.

The Politician as Host

Talk radio is a haven for aspiring, retiring, and out-of office politicians. Some believe that radio launched the political career of Ronald Reagan. “Ronald Reagan got elected,” says his former adviser Michael Deaver, “because he was on the radio every day for nearly five years, talking to 50 million people a week.”²⁰

In Fall 1992, nine talk show hosts ran for Congress. One — J.D. Hayworth of Arizona — won.²¹ Ross Perot’s radio talk show was short lived as was the program of Texas former agricultural commissioner Jim Hightower.

In 1995, with an estimated New York audience of 250,000, former New York mayor Ed Koch rivaled even Rush Limbaugh on WABC in New York. Former governor and presidential aspirant Jerry Brown’s daily show was aired by 45 stations. Former Chicago Alderman “Fast Eddie” Vrdolyak was on the air in Chicago. Marjorie Clapgood, who lost a race for lieutenant governor in Massachusetts in 1990 was on the air in Boston, former Senator and presidential hopeful Gary Hart had a show on KOA-AM in Denver. The former Texas agriculture commissioner’s three hour Saturday and Sunday call-in show was heard on 145 stations across the nation.

More recently, former Republican gubernatorial contender Ellen Sauerbrey could be heard on WBAL-AM in Baltimore and former Connecticut Governor Lowell Weicker on CRN International. Alan Keyes, a Reagan appointee and Baltimore talk show host, and columnist, tv and radio host Pat Buchanan were among the Republican contenders in 1996 as was Rush Limbaugh’s occasional substitute host California Representative Bob Dornan.

The complexion of talk radio is constantly changing as hosts switch stations (e.g., Bob Grant and Alan Dershowitz), move from weekdays to weekends (e.g., Gloria Allred in Los Angeles), are dropped from the airwaves (e.g., Jim Hightower), leave of their own accord (e.g., Mario Cuomo and Ross Perot) or join syndicates (e.g., Blanquita Cullum)

Talk radio can be a springboard as well. Current New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman was a part time radio call in host before successfully running for governor. Maryland Governor, Donald Schaefer, hosted a weekly show.

Comparative Audience

Talk radio is not a mass medium in the sense that television is. Although the radio audience seems large in aggregate, at any point in time it is small. When 17-18% report regular listening to talk radio, one should compare that to the 93% that reports regular watching of local news.²² Indeed 50% report reading a newspaper the day before and 48% say they watched television network news the previous

night. Where Rush Limbaugh reaches 20 million listeners a week, ABC, NBC, CBS and “The News Hour with Jim Lehrer” attract a combined audience of more than 30 million a night.

Even some high impact talk show hosts such as Seattle’s Mike Siegel are comparatively unknown in their own market. A Spring 1995 survey of 500 people in 15 Western Washington counties found that a majority of those surveyed “have never heard of Siegel even though he has courted controversy, ridden popular causes and promoted his political ambitions for six years on the airwaves.” An additional 23% didn’t know enough about him to rate him. Fifteen percent of those polled had a favorable evaluation of him, 13% an unfavorable one.²³

The public appears wary about the influence of both the main stream media and talk radio, with the news media the less approved of the two. A *U.S. News* poll conducted in May 1995 found that 50% of those surveyed said that the news media and the work they do conflict with their and their families’ goals; 41% said the same thing about talk show hosts.

But the audiences for political talk radio and mainstream news are not mutually exclusive. Importantly, surveys suggest, as we will show, that talk radio callers and listeners are more likely than the population at large to consume most other media regularly. This is in part a function of their demographic characteristics. Older audiences are more likely than younger ones to read a newspaper; wealthier individuals are more likely than poorer ones; those with more education are more likely than those with less.

The surge in talk radio listenership occurred in the Winter of 1991 as citizens sought an outlet to voice their views about impending U.S. involvement in the Gulf War.²⁴ Viewership of mainstream news, particularly CNN, rose during the same period.

Limbaugh

Originally a host on KFBK-AM in Sacramento, Limbaugh moved to New York in July 1988. Heard on over 650 stations nationwide as well as on short wave and Armed Services Radio, Limbaugh reports that his nationally syndicated AM three hour radio show reaches a cumulative weekly audience of more than twenty million. It is the most popular talk show on radio. “[It] is nearly impossible to find an inhabited place in the U.S. where the Rush Limbaugh Show cannot be found on the radio dial,” writes *Talk Daily*.²⁵

At one time his half hour TV show ranked third among late night offerings, exceeding Arsenio in the ratings. His book, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, held the top spot on the *New York Times*’ best seller list for seven straight weeks. “The Limbaugh Letter”, a monthly publication with 170,000 subscribers, is promoted on the radio and television show. As a lecturer, Limbaugh commands \$25,000 an appearance.

And in so-called “Limbaugh bars” and “Limbaugh restaurants” patrons gather to listen to his radio program. Limbaugh claims to reach a combined radio and television audience of 90 million people.

The power of his message is increased as well by his invitations to supporters and opponents to communicate with him by phone, fax, and e-mail.

Callers to Talk Radio

Talk show hosts agree that shows attract repeat or regular callers. Indeed some shows have a policy that limits callers to one time on the air per week or every other week. Regular callers have an agenda setting power that the one time caller lacks. The 1993 *Times Mirror Survey* indicates that callers are more likely to be men, and that male callers have a better chance to be heard than female callers. Republicans and conservatives are more likely than Democrats and liberals to call in and to get through. There are differences among callers, listeners, and non-listeners.

Differences Among Callers, Listeners, Non-listeners

Callers are more active communicators and more politically active than listeners and non-listeners. Scholars have known for a long time that those who are ideologically committed are more likely to engage in such forms of communication as returning political questionnaires and initiating contact with public officials.²⁶ Talk radio has provided another outlet for this group. On every communication and participation dimension from writing elected officials, newspapers and members of Congress to attending public meetings, contributing to campaigns and participating in polls, callers were more active than listeners.²⁷ In most cases, the difference between callers and listeners is more dramatic than that between listeners and non listeners.

Consistent with the finding that talk radio listeners report closer following of news than non-listeners,²⁸ callers and listeners are high consumers of other forms of media. Callers are also more likely than listeners and listeners more likely than non-listeners to consume most forms of other print and broadcast media.²⁹

The survey also showed that listeners were somewhat more likely to be critical of network news and newspapers than non-listeners.

What these findings suggest is that it is inappropriate to assume that the views of callers are identical to those of listeners or that the views of listeners reflect the views of the public at large.

The Content and Audiences of Political Talk Radio

Surveying Audiences

Our survey of political talk radio (PTR) asks the question “Is political talk radio homogenous or heterogeneous in its contents and its effects?” If PTR varies in content, its effects on listeners might as well. To answer these questions, we conducted a content analysis of seven weeks of the Rush Limbaugh show during the Republican primaries and a content analysis of 50 political talk radio shows on each of three days during the primary season. The audiences of political talk radio were surveyed at three points during the Republican primaries. The survey included an “over-sample” of regular listeners of PTR.

In order to study listeners of PTR, a national sample of 1,203 people was taken and supplemented by an oversample of regular listeners of political talk radio. “Regular” listening was defined as two or more days per week.

Care was taken to define to respondents what we meant by political talk radio — “where the host talks mostly about politics, government, and public affairs. Sometimes listeners are invited to call in to discuss these issues on the air.” Some studies of talk radio have not distinguished political talk radio from other forms of talk radio which can include discussions of health, car maintenance, personal psychology, relationships, and sports, among other topics.

1. **Audience size:** 18% of the adult population reports listening to at least one call-in political talk radio show at least twice a week. These regular listeners are distributed as follows: 4% listen to Limbaugh and at least one other host; 7% listen only to Limbaugh; another 7% listen only to some other show. Of the last group, 2-3% listen primarily to a conservative host; 4-5% to a moderate or liberal show.

Those who listened fewer than two times per week were treated as non-listeners. This group includes those who listen once a week (6%) or less (12%) and those who do not listen at all (82%).

In the initial sample, 7% were regular listeners only to the Rush Limbaugh show; 7% were regular listeners to some other PTR show (at least one); 4% were regular listeners of Limbaugh and at least one other PTR show each week. The remainder constituted a fourth group we dubbed non-listeners. These numbers were supplemented with an oversample of people who were regular listeners either of the Rush Limbaugh show only or one of the other PTR programs. Regular listeners to Limbaugh and another program were excluded from the sample. This strategy allows us to study a group exposed regularly only to Rush Limbaugh’s show and other groups exposed to PTR but not to Limbaugh.

Previous research on PTR identified those listening to Rush Limbaugh and those listening to PTR in general. Our procedures indicate that many regular listeners to Limbaugh are also regular

listeners of other PTR. Of the 18% of the initial sample who listen to at least one show regularly, roughly 1 in 6 of these regulars is listening to two or more shows. These findings mean that previous surveys of “Limbaugh listeners” are really surveys of a mix of Limbaugh and other listeners. Also previous surveys of “PTR listeners” are surveys of Limbaugh listeners and listeners to other hosts.

Those listening to other PTR hosts were further divided into two subgroups: regular consumers of Conservative PTR and regular consumers of Liberal/Moderate PTR. (See Appendix for discussion of how the groups were established.) Four groups are studied in our survey: three groups of regular listeners — Limbaugh only (N=213), Conservative PTR (N=139), and Liberal/Moderate PTR (N=283) — and a group of non-listeners (N=988). These groups allow us to ask whether distinct audiences of PTR are similar or different in knowledge, political involvement, attitudes, media consumption, attitudes toward media, and so on.

Table 1. Distribution of Population and Sample by Regular Talk Radio Exposure

| Description of Group (Regular=2X/wk; non-<2X/wk) | % in Population | # in Base Sample | # in Over-Sample | Total # Responses |
|---|-----------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Regular listeners to Limbaugh only | 7% | 86 | 127 | 213 |
| Regular listeners to Other PTR = | 7% = | 86 | 336 | 422 = |
| Conservative PTR | 2.3% | | | 139 |
| + Liberal/Moderate PTR | + 4.7% | | | +283 |
| Regular listeners to Rush Limbaugh and other hosts | 4% | 43 | 0 | 43 |
| Non-listeners to PTR | 82% | 988 | 0 | 988 |
| Total | 100% | 1203 | 463 | 1666 |

BASIC DIFFERENCES AMONG GROUPS

The primary differences among groups are between regular listeners and non-regular listeners of PTR. The table below compares groups in terms of education, race, age, income, political party affiliation, ideology, and gender. (See Table 2)

As in many previous surveys of PTR, ours finds that regular listeners are more educated, older, and male than non-listeners. They also tend to be white, have higher incomes, be Republican, and conservative. There are few differences among listener groups.

The exceptions are these. Limbaugh PTR listeners are more conservative (70%) and more likely to be Republican (61.4%) than even the listeners of Conservative PTR (47.8% conservatives and 44.8% Republican).

On religion, there is a tendency for Protestant Limbaugh listeners to identify themselves as “born again” Christians (58.7%) while Liberal and Moderate listeners are less likely to do so (41.3%). On race, Limbaugh listeners tend to be white rather than not (ratio of 9 to 1); non-listeners and listeners to Liberal/Moderate PTR show a less strong racial grouping (4 to 1); listeners to Conservative PTR are in between.

Table 2. Four Political Talk Radio (PTR) Groups
Demographics by Percentage

| Demographic | Non-Listener | Limbaugh Listener | Conservative PTR Listener | Lib/Moderate PTR Listener |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Male | 47.2 | 61 | 54 | 54.8 |
| Female | 52.8 | 39 | 46 | 45.2 |
| Age 18-29 | 22.1 | 18.8 | 16.9 | 14.9 |
| Age 30-49 | 44.4 | 43.0 | 49.3 | 53.6 |
| Age 50-64 | 19.1 | 21.3 | 19.1 | 16.7 |
| Age 65+ | 14.4 | 16.9 | 14.7 | 14.9 |
| Less than high school | 10.0 | 3.3 | 3.6 | 6.8 |
| High school graduate | 35.1 | 31.3 | 21.6 | 26.7 |
| Some college | 26.7 | 30.8 | 34.5 | 20.6 |
| College graduate | 28.2 | 34.6 | 40.3 | 45.9 |
| Income <\$20,000 | 25.7 | 14.3 | 12.9 | 18.7 |
| Income \$20-30,000 | 20.5 | 21.9 | 12.1 | 19.0 |
| Income \$30-50,000 | 26.0 | 24.5 | 30.6 | 23.0 |
| Income >\$50,000 | 27.8 | 39.3 | 44.4 | 39.3 |
| Race - White | 77.5 | 89.2 | 83.5 | 79.2 |
| Race - Non-White | 22.5 | 10.8 | 16.5 | 20.8 |
| Conservative | 32.4 | 70.0 | 47.8 | 19.5 |
| Moderate | 44.2 | 21.4 | 34.1 | 51.1 |
| Liberal | 23.3 | 8.6 | 18.1 | 29.4 |
| Republican | 26.3 | 61.4 | 44.8 | 17.8 |
| Independent | 38.1 | 24.8 | 29.1 | 39.0 |
| Democrat | 35.6 | 13.8 | 26.1 | 43.1 |

Political Knowledge and Participation

2. Regular political talk radio listeners are more likely than non-listeners to consume all types of news media (excepting tv news), to be more knowledgeable about politics and social issues, and to be involved in political activities. This is true regardless of the ideology of the hosts of the programs to which they listen. In other words, Limbaugh's audience is no more or less knowledgeable or active than the audience for moderate/liberal or conservative talk radio. However listeners to Conservative talk radio are more likely to vote than are listeners to Limbaugh or Liberal/Moderate political talk radio.

KNOWLEDGE

Survey respondents were asked a variety of questions about their knowledge of political and social issues. They were asked about how much they felt they knew about various topics in the news (e.g. "How much do you feel you know about the debate in Washington about the budget?"). They were also asked factual questions about civics (e.g. the percentage of the House and Senate required to override a presidential veto), general information (e.g., the percentage of welfare mothers receiving benefits for more than 3 years), and current information in the news (e.g. the number of troops in Bosnia who are members of the U.S. armed forces).

Two conclusions obtain. First, regular listeners of PTR have higher levels of knowledge and correctly think they have higher levels of knowledge than non-listeners. Second, regular listeners of Rush Limbaugh, Conservative, and Liberal/Moderate PTR are no different from one another in actual or reported knowledge. This is true of civics knowledge, general factual knowledge about social and political issues, and factual knowledge about things in the news. The claims are based on knowledge and felt knowledge scores after they are corrected for a variety of controls including education, sex, gender, age, main stream media exposure, and ideology.

The audience of PTR may bring some special characteristics with it to the medium which we are unable to measure. Or the content of PTR may add to or facilitate the audience's store of knowledge. What is clear is that for the questions we used, no one audience of PTR — Limbaugh's or others — is different in social or political knowledge, from the other listeners.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In previous surveys, PTR listeners have been shown to have higher levels of political participation than others. Some hosts may encourage their listeners to oppose or support specific issues. For example, our content analysis of Limbaugh's show suggested that a substantial proportion of his time is spent on personal and political efficacy.

Respondents were asked about their participation in political affairs including contacting public officials, contributing money, contacting newspapers or TV stations, and so on. Other forms of participation include a general question on following what's going on in public affairs and government and reported voting frequency.

Regular listeners of PTR report higher levels of political participation, closer following of politics and government, and higher levels of voting than those who do not listen regularly. These differences remain after a variety of controls for demographic, party and ideological differences, and exposure to other media. With one exception, which we will note in a moment, those who listen regularly to Rush Limbaugh, Conservative, and Liberal/Moderate PTR do not differ from one another in participation, or the extent they follow "what's going on in government and public affairs."

The same findings (under the same set of controls) obtain on measures of political efficacy (“people like me don’t have any say ...”) and political meaningfulness (“there aren’t any important differences between Republicans and Democrats ...”). Regular listeners are higher in efficacy and lower in meaningfulness than non-regular listeners (even after controls) indicating that they believe that politics is important and they can influence government and politicians. No differences were found among the three regular listener groups.

One exception to this pattern which is not readily explainable is that listeners to Conservative PTR report higher levels of voting than any other group and this effect remains even after differences due to audience characteristics and media exposure are removed. Since there are no other differences in political participation, knowledge, media use, or other obvious factors which would explain these differences, we have an anomaly without an explanation.

As with knowledge questions, those who are regular listeners of PTR have elevated levels of political involvement either because PTR activates their involvement or because of some unknown characteristics the audience brings with it to PTR. What can be said is that the consumers of PTR are political activists.

The Topics of PTR and Mainstream News

Across the United States, Political Talk Radio programs number in the hundreds. To get a flavor of the diversity of content, more than 50 programs were studied on each of three days during the primaries: March 4, March 11, and April 8, 1996. These programs span the ideological spectrum from conservative (24 hosts) to liberal (12 hosts) and include moderate hosts as well (17). They have some of the largest audiences within their ideological groups. The programs and their hosts are listed in the Appendix.

3. Talk radio is not monolithic. Rather, its content is varied. In general, conservative shows are more likely to focus on foreign and military affairs than do the other shows; moderate/liberal shows focus more on family and education than the other types of political talk radio.

Two significant differences stand out in comparing the three ideological groups of PTR shows (see table 3). The first is that moderate and conservative shows tend to cover foreign affairs and military matters at a higher rate than liberal shows (at least on these three dates). The second is liberal shows give more attention to matters of family, education, children, prayer, gender roles, and ethics. Some smaller differences arise in coverage of crime, courts and justice with moderate shows giving greatest attention; business, commerce, and technology get the attention of conservative hosts; the scandals of the Clinton administration get some more air time on conservative than on liberal shows. Despite these differences, the rank order (or priority) of coverage across the three types is similar with the relationship between

liberal shows and the others (.78, .79) somewhat weaker than that between moderate and conservative shows (.92). There is similarity in the priority of issues if not in the amounts of coverage each receives.

The differences among PTR shows go deeper however. When random subsamples of each type of PTR are selected and compared to the unselected half, significant differences remain even within ideological type. A random half of the liberal shows is different from the other half of the liberal shows. The differences are strongest for the moderate shows and significantly different but weaker for the liberal and conservative shows.

Table 3. Subjects Discussed by Talk Radio Hosts on Three Days
(March 4, 11 and April 8)

| Subject Discussed | Liberal # of minutes % of total | Moderate # of minutes % of total | Conservative # of minutes % of total | Total Subject # of minutes % of total |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| Foreign & Military Affairs | 84 6.2% | 179.5 13.1% | 407.5 15.4% | 671 12.5% |
| Clinton & Scandal | 12 0.9% | 39.5 2.9% | 111.5 4.2% | 163 3.0% |
| Pres. Clinton Administration/General | 37 2.7% | 15 1.1% | 5 2.1% | 108 2.0% |
| Republican Candidates & Primary Campaign | 189 14.0% | 117.5 8.6% | 321.5 12.1% | 628 11.7% |
| Congress | 56.5 4.2% | 32.5 2.4% | 111.5 4.2% | 200.5 3.7% |
| Third Party/Religious Right | 43 3.2% | 18.5 1.4% | 36.5 1.4% | 98 1.8% |
| The Media | 23.5 1.7% | 69.5 5.1% | 96.5 3.7% | 189.5 3.5% |
| Federal Budget, Taxes & Deficit, Role of Gov't | 154 11.4% | 186 13.6% | 295 11.2% | 635 11.8% |
| Family, Education & Public Ethics | 323.5 23.9% | 177 12.9% | 262.5 9.9% | 763 14.2% |
| Human Rights & Minorities | 135.5 10.0% | 162.5 11.9% | 239 9.0% | 537 10.0% |
| Crime, Punishment & Justice | 194.5 14.4% | 289 21.1% | 427 16.2% | 910.5 17.0% |
| Business, Commerce & Technology | 74 5.5% | 78 5.7% | 253 9.6% | 405 7.6% |
| Personal Efficacy & Public Optimism | 24.5 1.8% | 5 0.4% | 25 0.9% | 54.5 1.0% |
| Total | 1351 | 1369.5 | 2642.5 | 5363 |

The Rush Limbaugh Show and the Mainstream Media

4. Limbaugh's focus differs substantially from that of the other shows. His topics are more likely to focus on domestic politics and business. In addition, Limbaugh spends more time than other hosts urging his audience to assume personal responsibility and insisting they can make a difference. Limbaugh's priorities are as different from the mainstream media as from conservative talk shows.

The topics treated on the Rush Limbaugh show for the weeks from February 3 through March 29, 1996, were coded. Limbaugh had guest hosts during one of these weeks. Topics from the guests' shows were excluded from the Limbaugh summary even though the results were virtually identical.

During the same period the front page news stories and editorial page topics from three major newspapers — *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*— were coded. Similarly the number of minutes of coverage from the nightly television news programs (ABC, NBC, and CBS) was obtained from a news analysis service.

Across the eight weeks studied (see table 4), the Limbaugh show gave scant attention to foreign affairs and military matters in contrast to the mainstream media which devoted fully one fourth of its coverage to these topics. How did the Rush Limbaugh show redistribute this coverage? As the table of proportions shows, Limbaugh gave greater attention to the Clinton administration and its scandals, to the Congress, to third parties and the religious right, and to the general topic of personal efficacy, responsibility, and public cynicism and optimism. These differences suggest that Rush Limbaugh's program is directed more at domestic politics than is the mainstream media. Too, it promotes a fundamental value of personal responsibility and efficacy in support of political involvement, and as part of the basis for rejecting big government and affirmative action. The order of priority given topics by Limbaugh's show is also at odds with the mainstream news and opinion.³⁰

**Table 4. Subjects Covered by Mainstream Media
and the Rush Limbaugh Radio Program**
February-March 1996

| Subject Discussed | Number of <i>News Stories*</i> % of Total | Number of <i>News & Editorials*</i> % of Total | Limbaugh*** # of mins. % of Total | Broadcast News** # of mins. % of Total |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| Foreign & Military Affairs | 158 27.1% | 355 27.2% | 58 2.2% | 457.6 24.1% |
| Clinton & Scandal | 7 1.2% | 24 1.8% | 68.5 2.8% | 20.2 1.1% |
| Pres. Clinton Administration/General | 12 2.1% | 26 2.0% | 163 6.1% | 12.7 0.7% |
| Republican Candidates/ Primary Campaign | 163 28% | 316 24.2% | 567.5 21.3% | 481.1 25.3% |
| Congress | 23 3.9% | 37 2.8% | 264 9.9% | 10.8 0.6% |
| Third Party/Religious Right | 2 0.3% | 8 0.6% | 143 5.4% | 5.7 0.3% |
| The Media | 5 0.9% | 34 2.6% | 113 4.2% | 36.3 1.9% |
| Federal Budget, Taxes, Deficit, Role of Gov't | 50 8.6% | 111 8.5% | 313.5 11.7% | 197.2 10.4% |
| Family, Education & Public Ethics | 21 3.6% | 58 4.4% | 157.5 5.9% | 131 6.9% |
| Human Rights & Minorities | 20 3.4% | 78 6.0% | 52.5 2.0% | 99.3 4.8% |
| Crime, Punishment & Justice | 20 3.4% | 58 4.4% | 28.5 1.1% | 164.3 8.6% |
| Business, Commerce & Technology | 102 17.5% | 196 15.0% | 505 18.9% | 289 15.2% |
| Personal Efficacy & Public Optimism | 0 0% | 5 0.4% | 235.5 8.8% | 4 0.2% |
| Totals | 583 articles | 1306 articles | 2669.5 mins. | 1900.2 mins |

* *Washington Post, New York Times, Wall Street Journal* (weekdays)

**ABC, NBC, CBS evening news programs (weekdays)

***The Limbaugh totals are for 7 weeks with guest hosts of 3/18-3/22/96 excluded.

The Rush Limbaugh Show and Other PTR

The Rush Limbaugh show cannot be compared to Conservative PTR in a comprehensive way. The Conservative voice is too diverse to permit extensive content analysis. However, we can compare Limbaugh's topics to those of other PTR in a limited time frame — namely during the two week period around the March 4 and 11 snapshots.

Table 5 following gives the proportion of coverage on 13 topics during the two week period by Limbaugh, Conservative, Liberal, and Moderate PTR, and the mainstream print and broadcast media. Large differences emerge first in the category of foreign affairs and military with Conservative shows giving a great deal of time to this topic while Limbaugh gives very little time. In fact, Limbaugh gives less time to this topic than any other outlet, including a snapshot of Liberal shows. Limbaugh distributes this time to discussion about Congress and the President, third parties and the religious right but especially to business and technology and to personal responsibility and political efficacy. In contrast to Limbaugh's show, conservative talk radio gives its attention to crime, punishment, and the justice system as well as family, education and ethics.

The differences between Limbaugh and conservative talk radio seem to be paralleled in liberal and moderate talk radio to a large extent. Business and commerce, Congress, and personal efficacy are elevated in Limbaugh and lower in the other three ideological groups; foreign affairs, crime, and family and education are elevated in the other three talk radio groupings. The pattern, put broadly, is that Limbaugh's show focuses on domestic politics, personal (and political) efficacy, and business. Conservative, Moderate, and Liberal talk radio tend to focus more prominently on family and education (especially the Liberal shows), foreign affairs (especially Conservative and Moderate), and crime and justice.

In fact, when the various channels are compared in terms of how similar and different they are in the distribution of coverage across these categories, the Limbaugh show is low and in no case statistically significant (range from $-.01$ to $.43$) (see table 6). By contrast, the categories of the mainstream media correlate highly ($.81$, $.83$, $.84$); categories of Liberal, Moderate, and Conservative PTR correlate highly with one another ($.87$, $.88$, $.92$); categories of Liberal, Moderate, and Conservative PTR correlate highly with categories in the mainstream media (range from $.63$ to $.87$). In short, only Limbaugh's agenda does not agree with that of the mainstream media during this two week period. Other political talk radio and network television news and print news give fairly similar priorities to topics while Limbaugh's show assigns different priorities.

One possible objection to the conclusion that Limbaugh has a different topical priority than other forms of PTR is that the three ideological types of PTR are based on individual shows on or near March 4 and March 11 while the data from Limbaugh are across a two week period. To counter this objection, we conducted the same analysis during the same two week period for three PTR shows representative of

their ideological type: G. Gordon Liddy's show representing the conservative voice; Bohannon representing the Moderate voice; and Tom Leykis the Liberal. The results show that the three PTR shows exhibit strong similarities to mainstream media and to the Conservative, Moderate, and Liberal snapshots while they are unrelated statistically to the Limbaugh show.

Table 5. Comparison of Media Agendas for Two Weeks (Weekdays Only)
 March 4 - March 15, 1996
 part 1 of 2

| Subject | Limbaugh Talk Radio | Conservative Talk Radio | Moderate Talk Radio | Liberal Talk Radio | Network PM News | Print - News Only | Print - News & Editorials |
|---|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Foreign & Military Affairs | 25 minutes 3.2% | 304.5 mins. 17.6% | 149.5 mins. 16.3% | 70 mins. 6.9% | 173.8 mins. 35.6% | 43 articles 27.9% | 103 articles 30% |
| Clinton & Scandal | 11.5 mins. 1.5% | 58 mins. 3.3% | 1.5 mins. 0.2% | 11 mins. 1.1% | 5.5 mins. 1.1% | 0 arts. 0% | 4 arts. 1.2% |
| Pres. Clinton/ Admin. General | 36 mins. 4.6% | 36.5 mins. 2.1% | 9 mins. 1.0% | 28 mins .2.8% | 6.5 mins. 1.3% | 4 arts. 2.6% | 7 arts. 2.0% |
| Rep. Candidates & Primary Campaign | 164.5 mins. 20.9% | 296.5 mins. 17.1% | 114.5 mins. 12.4% | 186 mins. 18.3% | 102.6 mins. 21.1% | 48 arts. 31.1% | 85 arts. 24.8% |
| Congress | 63 mins. 8.0% | 76.5 mins. 4.4% | 25 mins. 2.7% | 48.5 mins. 4.8% | 0 mins. 0% | 7 arts. 4.5% | 9 arts. 2.6% |
| Third Party & Religious Right | 33.5 mins. 4.3% | 26 mins. 1.5% | 17.5 mins. 1.9% | 36 mins. 3.5% | 0 mins. 0% | 0 arts. 0% | 0 arts. 0% |
| The Media | 14.5 mins. 1.8% | 79 mins. 4.6% | 65.5 mins. 7.1% | 19.5 mins. 1.9% | 0 mins. 0% | 0 arts. 0% | 11 arts. 3.2% |
| Fed. Budget, Taxes & Deficit, Role of Gov't | 65.5 mins. 8.3% | 184 mins. 10.6% | 110 mins. 12.0% | 102.5 mins. 10.1% | 26 mins. 5.3% | 8 arts. 5.2% | 16 arts. 4.7% |
| Family, Education & Public Ethics | 39.5 mins. 5.0% | 209.5 mins. 12.1% | 131 mins. 14.2% | 288.5 mins. 28.4% | 28.3 mins. 5.8% | 3 articles 1.9% | 8 articles 2.3% |
| Human Rights & Minorities | 22.5 mins. 2.9% | 128 mins. 7.4% | 66.5 mins. 7.2% | 67.5 mins. 6.7% | 19.8 mins. 4.1% | 3 arts. 1.9% | 20 arts. 5.8% |
| Crime, Punishment & Justice | 5 mins. 0.6% | 184.5 mins. 10.7% | 173 mins. 17.2% | 89.5 mins. 8.8% | 31.9 mins. 6.6% | 7 arts. 4.5% | 21 arts. 6.1% |
| Business, Commerce & Technology | 195.5 mins. 24.9% | 139.5 mins. 8.1% | 67 mins. 7.3% | 68 mins. 6.7% | 92.3 mins. 19% | 31 arts. 21.1% | 59 arts. 17.2% |
| Personal Efficacy & Public Optimism | 109 mins. 13.9% | 9.5 mins. 0.5% | 5 mins. 0.5% | 0 mins. 0% | 0 mins. 0% | 0 arts. 0% | 0 arts. 0% |
| Totals | 785 minutes | 1732 minutes | 920 minutes | 1015 mins | 486 minutes | 154 articles | 343 arts. |

Table 6. Spearman Rank-order Correlations for 13 Categories of Content:
March 4 through March 15, 1996

| | Limbaugh | Print News & Op-ed | Print News Only | TV PM News |
|--------------|----------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Conserv PTR | .04 | .85*** | .74** | .87*** |
| Moderate PTR | -.01 | .67** | .79*** | .79*** |
| Liberal PTR | .22 | .69** | .63* | .75** |
| Limbaugh PTR | XXX | .43 | .09 | .16 |

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Table 7. Spearman Rank-order Correlations for 13 Categories of Content:
March 4 through March 15, 1996

| | Leykis | Bohannon | Liddy |
|--------------------|--------|----------|--------|
| Limbaugh | .19 | .16 | .00 |
| Conserv PTR | .73** | .76** | .90*** |
| Moderate PTR | .81*** | .77** | .92*** |
| Liberal PTR | .85*** | .56* | .82*** |
| Print News & Op-ed | .60* | .72** | .80*** |
| Print News Only | .54* | .62* | .75** |
| TV: PM News | .60* | .61* | .88*** |

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

We cannot be sure that these weeks are representative of Limbaugh or of Conservative PTR but if they are, significant differences emerge. These differences distinguish Limbaugh's agenda from that of other talk radio, even differentiating it from its closest ideological ally, Conservative talk radio. In fact, Limbaugh's priorities of coverage are just as different from PTR (Conservative, Moderate, or Liberal) as they are from the mainstream media's priorities. Limbaugh's agenda gives precedence to domestic politics, personal and political efficacy, and business and free enterprise. Below we will explore whether these themes are linked to differences in the audiences' attitudes about politics, involvement in political life, attitudes toward the mainstream media, and political and social values.

One final caution must be offered. The analyses of the content of PTR just presented concerns what is discussed on PTR and the mainstream news media, not how topics are discussed. The reader should draw no implications from these findings about similarity and difference in these channels regarding conflict, sarcasm, sidedness, superficiality, objectivity, or any other quality of the discourse aside from topic of discussion and its priority.³¹

Political Leaders and the Audiences of PTR

5. Limbaugh's audience responds more positively to Republican leaders and more negatively to Bill and Hillary Clinton than any other group in our survey. Limbaugh's listeners are also more likely than other groups to oppose government regulation of business, to believe that corporations seek the public interest, and to be distrustful of government. This is consistent with the fact that Limbaugh focuses more on business and domestic politics than both the mainstream media and Conservative and Moderate/Liberal talk shows.

On all three waves of the survey, we asked questions about the performance of President Clinton and Republican Leaders in Congress. Respondents' views about political personalities — including Bob Dole, Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Rush Limbaugh, some seeking the Republican nomination for President, and selected others — were also obtained

The pattern of results for the leaders of the Republican party and their performance and the President's performance, the President himself, and Hillary Clinton is instructive. The charts below summarize the typical findings.

Regular PTR Listeners are less positive toward the president and his performance in office. On the other side, regular PTR listeners are more positive toward House majority leader Gingrich, and the performance of Republican leaders in Congress than non-listeners. But the differences between listeners and non-listeners are driven primarily by Limbaugh listeners. This group is more negative toward the Democrats and more positive toward the Republicans than even regular listeners of Conservative PTR.

Even after correcting for differences in the audiences' political party, political ideology, education, age, exposure to mainstream media, income and race, Rush Limbaugh's audience is the most negative toward Democratic leadership (including specifically Hillary Clinton) and most positive toward Republican leadership (including specifically Newt Gingrich).

One possibility is that these differences are due to the content of Limbaugh's programming. The content analyses suggested that domestic politics is a focus of the Limbaugh show, even as foreign affairs is downplayed. Another possibility is that the differences in evaluation may be due to characteristics of Limbaugh's audience which attract them to his show in the first place.

What is surprising is that the listeners of Conservative PTR have opinions that are less intense than the Limbaugh listeners. To be sure, the Conservative listeners are not equivalent to the Liberal/Moderate listeners but they are still different from the Limbaugh listeners.³²

Public Policies and Issues

Respondents to our survey answered a number of questions on "programs and proposals being discussed" as well as their views on race, business, immigrants, the environment, and various other matters. In the charts, the views of our four groups on two proposals (same sex marriages, flat tax) and two

social values (corporations balancing profit and public interest (wave 3), government regulation of business) are displayed.

In all four cases, Limbaugh listeners' views differ from the other listening groups and from non-listeners. The differences reported hold up in the presence of a variety of controls for party, ideology, age, gender, education, and media exposure.

Limbaugh listeners favor the flat tax and oppose government regulation of business more than non-listeners and more than listeners to Conservative and listeners to Liberal/Moderate PTR. They oppose same sex marriages more strongly than any of the listening or non-listening groups. They are less likely to say that business corporations are guided by profit than any of the other groups.

It would be incorrect to think that Limbaugh listeners always have views different from listeners to Conservative PTR. On some issues we polled, differences between Limbaugh listeners and listeners to Conservative PTR were absent. These included reducing Medicare funding, relaxing air and water pollution standards, offering educational vouchers, immigrants, and Blacks needing help from government.

Although these are small rather than large effects, they do suggest that in some areas Limbaugh listeners have views consistent with the topics privileged by the host — centrality of business and free enterprise and freedom from government intervention and bureaucracy. That the differences between listeners of Limbaugh and Conservative PTR can be attributed to the content differences is plausible. But equally plausible is the supposition that audiences with these attitudes are attracted to the hosts with views like their own.

Trust in Government

Like every survey of public opinion about government, our respondents expressed low levels of trust in the “government in Washington to do what is right.” Non-listeners were no different from regular listeners in their levels of trust in government. But regular listener groups differed from one another in trust. Limbaugh listeners were least trusting differing from both Conservative listeners of PTR and from Liberal/Moderate listeners of PTR (even after corrections for demographic, ideological, party, and media consumption differences among listening groups).

The Mainstream Media vs. PTR

6. Political talk radio listeners are more critical of the mainstream media than are non-listeners. Limbaugh’s listeners are more critical than the listeners of Conservative or Moderate/Liberal talk. Consistent with this, Limbaugh listeners felt that the news media treated the alleged “Unabomber” more favorably than the alleged bomber of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Since Limbaugh stressed the difference in treatment, he may have given his audience a different interpretation of the media’s coverage or simply reinforced what they were already disposed to believe.

Regular listeners of PTR consume more news from elite media than do non-listeners; the exception is television news which is watched equally by listeners and non-listeners. The three groups of regular listeners are equivalent in reading newspapers and news magazines and watching television for news (including C-SPAN). Liberal/Moderate PTR listeners do watch more PBS and listen to more NPR than Limbaugh and Conservative PTR listeners.³³

EVALUATIONS OF PTR

Survey respondents were asked what they thought about PTR in general. Was it balanced or one-sided, honest or dishonest, fair or unfair, dangerous or safe, entertaining or boring, and too cynical or not too cynical? Answers were grouped into more and less positive evaluations.³⁴

Non-regular listeners evaluated PTR much more negatively than did regular listeners finding it more one-sided, dishonest, unfair, dangerous, boring, emotional, and cynical. Regular listeners of Limbaugh, Conservative, and Liberal/Moderate PTR were equally positive about PTR in general, although clearly a certain amount of projection from their own experience was the basis for their “general” evaluations. Liberal/Moderate PTR listeners did see PTR in general as more liberal than conservative while Limbaugh and Conservative PTR listeners saw the genre as more conservative than liberal.

What is distinctive about these findings is the size of the discrepancy in evaluation between those who are regular listeners and those not.

Limbaugh was the only host directly evaluated in our survey. Unsurprisingly, Limbaugh listeners evaluate him most positively, listeners of Liberal/Moderate PTR most negatively. Limbaugh listeners are more favorable than listeners to Conservative PTR. These differences remain after corrections for differences among the groups. Again the size of these differences in favorability is striking.³⁵

Some of the political Conservatives in the survey are unfavorable toward Rush Limbaugh.³⁶ This group is more female, non-white, of lower income, and less strongly Republican than conservatives who are favorable toward Rush Limbaugh. But they are no different in age, education, civics knowledge, knowledge of current news items, or reported participation in politics. These conservative detractors feel less knowledgeable and report following politics less than Limbaugh’s conservative supporters — even though these feelings are not borne out in the accuracy of their political knowledge.

The social agenda of Limbaugh’s conservative detractors is more like that of moderate and liberal Limbaugh detractors. Their social beliefs (that the country does not need big changes in the way the government is run, that Blacks should have help from the government, that some government regulation of business is necessary, and that environmental laws are worth the costs) parallel those of liberal and moderate detractors. These differences persist controlling out the effects of sex, education, media exposure, party, and race.

As in the comparisons among groups of regular listeners, we see in comparisons between conservatives who favor and oppose Rush Limbaugh, quite varied views about this conservative spokesperson.

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

For many people, PTR is a supplement to mainstream media for news and analysis of politics and current affairs. Commenting on how mainstream journalists deal with political and social issues is one of the standard topics on PTR.

In the figures below we compare groups of PTR listeners on some general and then some more specific questions about mainstream media. The first figure compares groups on general attitudes toward the mainstream news media. Regular PTR listeners believe that news media hinder society's solving its problems more than do non-regular listeners. They also tend to view the mainstream media as less fair and balanced. These differences are strongest among the Limbaugh listeners with other regular listeners less cynical than Limbaugh listeners but generally more cynical than the non-regular listeners.

MEDIA FRAMING OF KACZYNSKI AND MCVEIGH

One example of framing media coverage of a particular story concerns Timothy McVeigh, the alleged Oklahoma bomber, and Ted Kaczynski, the alleged Unabomber. When asked “Do you think that news stories about Kaczynski have been more favorable than ones about McVeigh, less favorable, or have they been about the same?”, Limbaugh listeners were more likely to say the media favored Kaczynski than were non-listeners. Other PTR listeners tended to view coverage more like that of non-listeners than Limbaugh listeners. Although all groups reported that Kaczynski got more favorable coverage, Limbaugh listeners were strongest in this view.

Limbaugh covered the Kaczynski case as an object lesson in media bias. On his April 8, 1996 broadcast Limbaugh reads what he calls a “great” letter to the editor of *USA Today* in which the writer blasts the paper and the media in general for its differential treatment of the Unabomber and the Oklahoma City bombing. The letter writer asserts that the media will not likely make any strong connections between the Unabomber and the radical environmental group *Earth First!*, although it drew the connection between the Oklahoma City bombing suspects and militia groups. Limbaugh says:

That’s exactly right. I mentioned last week, if they had found one nine millimeter pistol in this guy’s shack, they would have portrayed him as a right wing, anti-government zealot, [with] links to the militia movement.

On the April 9, 1996 broadcast, Limbaugh says

Now there’s the February 2, 1994 edition of the publication called *Earth First!*. And I love the way the *Washington Post* refers to *Earth First!* ‘an outspoken environmentalist group.’ When is the last time you have ever read in the *Washington Post* about me being outspoken? Rush Limbaugh ... it’s the radical right wing, controversial, talk show host....

After reading the article in the *Washington Post* about *Earth First!*’s negative comments about a PR firm executive who had Exxon as a client, Limbaugh relates how this executive was killed by one of Kaczynski’s bombs.

...Kaczynski read all this and sent a Burstin-Marsteller PR executive, Thomas Moser .. a pipe bomb, because of this *Earth First!* journal ... Now even in this story [in the *Washington Post*] nobody gets on *Earth First!*’s case. But if this were a conservative, right wing publication that had inspired this guy, the headline and cover story would be about the group and the Unabomber would be simply a mindless twit little tool of the extremist right-wing group. There’d be no talk about genius gone awry ... And the *Weekly Standard* apparently asks this question ... ‘If its OK to blame Rush Limbaugh for Timothy McVeigh, can’t we agree that Al Gore is responsible for the Unabomber?’

Limbaugh's commentary on Kaczynski and McVeigh attempts to balance what he sees as an ideological bias in the mainstream media's treatment of right-wing extremists as opposed to extremists on the left. With this event and with many others Limbaugh tries to teach his audience to interpret the mainstream news media by pointing to what he perceives to be their inconsistencies and their ideology. In the case of Ted Kaczynski, he may have succeeded.

Conclusion

PTR is anything but homogeneous in its content or in the attitudes and values of its audiences. Even comparing the programs and audiences which take up positions to the right of center — the Rush Limbaugh show, Conservative PTR shows, and their audiences — sometimes reveals surprising, if not large, differences.

The topics treated by PTR vary considerably both across ideological type and within ideological genre. But the largest deviation seems to be Rush Limbaugh's show which is at odds with the priorities of mainstream media and with even its closest ally ideologically, Conservative PTR. In the period we studied, instead of allocating air time to foreign affairs like others in PTR and the mainstream, Limbaugh gives time to domestic politics, personal and political efficacy, and the role of business in a free market place.

The audiences of PTR, too, are different from one another in some important ways. Putting education, age, gender, party affiliation, and ideology aside, the audiences are *similar* in political participation, media use, political efficacy, close following of politics, their self-reported knowledge, and their actual knowledge about social affairs.

Under the same set of controls, they *differ* in their assessment of leading political figures on the left and the right and in their evaluation of proposed social innovations (flat tax; same sex marriages). They differ in their views of the motives of big business and government regulation of business. They differ in their trust of government and in their evaluations of the fairness, balance, and helpfulness of mainstream media.

When those who listen to PTR that is right of center differ from those who listen to PTR that is left of center, we are not surprised. But the audiences of Limbaugh's show and Conservative PTR also differ, as do the contents of their programs. Either PTR is helping to mold the views of its politically sophisticated audiences or it is drawing audiences whose pre-existing views it reinforces. Either way these ideological channels create or help maintain views consistent with the channel's contents.

The perception in the wider population (of non-listeners) is that PTR is dishonest, emotional, unfair, one-sided, and cynical. The source of these larger perceptions leads us to consider the portrayal of PTR, its hosts, and its agenda in the mainstream media.

Mainstream Print Media's Portrayal of Talk Radio

7. The mainstream print media give only superficial treatment to political talk radio portraying it as powerful, pernicious, and monolithic.

Since the late 1980s, the attention the press has paid to talk radio has grown substantially.

This conclusion is based on a newspaper index we created to track the mention of the phrases “talk radio” and “radio talk” in articles over the past six years. We examined how often 28 daily newspapers mentioned the phrases from November 1989 to November 1995. The papers we chose are the only top-50-circulation newspapers in the Lexis/Nexis or Dialog databases that go back before 1989.³⁷ (Using papers that fell into the databases during all six years ensures that an increase in the phrases is not simply due to an increase in the number of periodicals in the database.)

Chart 1 shows that from 1989 to 1995, the yearly appearance of the phrases “talk radio” and “radio talk” in these daily newspapers rose from about 2,700 to almost 7,000. The increase suggests that the increase in press attention to talk radio has been quite sharp rather than gradual.

Chart 1

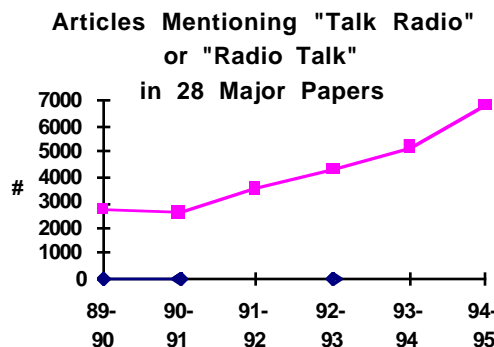


Table 8 allows us to compare the number of articles in which policy makers, celebrities and talk hosts have been mentioned in the mainstream print media from Fall 1993 through Fall 1995. To conduct this analysis, we drew on the Lexis/Nexis and Dialog databases which together allow the full-text retrieval of articles from over 2,200 newspapers and magazines (see Appendix).

The number of items in the mainstream press that have mentioned “talk radio” and host Rush Limbaugh compares favorably to the number that have mentioned key U.S. government and media figures.

As Table 8 shows, about 225,000 items mentioned President Clinton between November 1993 and November 1995. About 67,000 mentioned Vice-President Gore, 15,000 mentioned then-Senator George Mitchell, almost 28,000 mentioned David Letterman, and about 4,200 mentioned Ted Koppel. Talk radio and Limbaugh fit right in the middle of this ranking, with substantially fewer articles than Vice-President Gore but substantially more than George Mitchell, Richard Armev and Ted Koppel.

Table 8†
Mainstream Print Items Mentioning National Figures
November 1, 1993 - November 1, 1995

| National Figures | Number of Items |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| Bill Clinton/President | 225,370 |
| Supreme Court | 225,108 |
| Newt Gingrich | 111,713 |
| Bob Dole | 75,920 |
| Hillary Clinton/First Lady | 73,255 |
| Al Gore/ Vice-President | 67,109 |
| Janet Reno/attorney general | 42,210 |
| “Talk Radio”/ “Radio Talk” | 30,424 |
| David Letterman | 27,606 |
| Rush Limbaugh | 20,799 |
| Larry King | 17,078 |
| George Mitchell | 15,234 |
| Richard Arney | 11,985 |
| Ted Koppel | 4,263 |

† Items retrieved from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog. See Appendix for details.

Clearly, talk radio as a phenomenon is deserving of coverage, as far as the press is concerned. Rush Limbaugh, though, has been the only host granted the kind of extraordinary attention that the nation’s top policy makers receive.

By far, Rush Limbaugh has been the most mentioned political talk show host in the mainstream press.

Table 8 indicates that from fall 1993 through fall 1995 Limbaugh was mentioned in 20,799 items in the Lexis/Nexis and Dialog databases. The number of items in which the 15 other national talk hosts appeared added to 8,910. That was only 43% of the total host mentions, with Limbaugh appearing in 57% of the total.

This finding can be compared to a 1995 poll by the trade newsletter *Talk Daily* of more than 3,000 people who said they had listened to talk radio the day they were questioned or the day before. Among the 59% of the 3,000 respondents who mentioned one or more of the top 7 hosts, Rush Limbaugh’s name came up 62% of time.³⁸ In our study of press items that mentioned one or more of those 7 hosts, Limbaugh’s prominence was even greater. His name came up in 74% of the total host mentions. This suggests that press coverage of Rush Limbaugh is even more focused on Limbaugh than even the listeners are.

Table 9
 Number of Articles† Mentioning Top Talk Show Hosts in Mainstream Print Media
 Fall 1993 - Fall 1995

| Talk Show Hosts | Number of Articles |
|---|--------------------|
| National: | |
| Rush Limbaugh | 20,799 |
| G. Gordon Liddy | 3,344 |
| Alan Keyes | 1,647 |
| Oliver North (from 4/1/95)* | 1,645 |
| Ken Hamblin | 594 |
| Michael Reagan | 523 |
| Jim Hightower | 351 |
| Tom Leykis | 281 |
| Joe Madison | 181 |
| Jim Bohannon | 118 |
| Gil Gross | 87 |
| Alan Colmes | 54 |
| Barry Farber | 43 |
| Marlin Maddoux | 38 |
| Roger Fredinburg | 2 |
| Jay Severin | 2 |
| Local: | |
| Bob Grant (New York City) ³⁹ | 537 |

*This is the date North's radio program began airing.

†In Lexis/Nexis and Dialog.

Apart from Limbaugh, the press presence of three talk hosts—Liddy, Keyes, and North—was far greater than the others, as Table 9 shows. Note, too, that Tom Leykis, a Liberal/Libertarian, has gotten substantially less coverage than Bob Grant, even though according to *Talk Daily* they have about same audience among political talk radio listeners. But there is a caveat here: Table 9 indicates the number of articles that mentioned the *names* of the radio talk hosts, not necessarily their connection to radio or their programs. Later analysis will reveal that many press accounts of even the most popular radio hosts made little direct connection to their on-air activities.

It is *national* talk radio that gets press attention. Local talk radio hosts and their daily programs do not receive much notice in their cities' daily papers, even in listings.

Table 10 shows strong differences in the presentation of the 9 local hosts in a major newspaper of their respective markets. Bob Grant and Michael Jackson received more coverage than the others. Overall, though, the local talk hosts, broadcasting daily, appeared in their major local daily newspapers on much less than a weekly basis. In fact, Rush Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy received more attention in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Chicago Tribune during the period examined than did the local hosts.

Table 10
Articles Mentioning Local and National Talk Show Hosts in Major Newspapers
 Fall 1993 - Fall 1995

| Talk Show Hosts | Number of Articles |
|--|--------------------|
| Local Hosts: | |
| Bob Grant (in <i>New York Times</i>) | 38 |
| Michael Jackson (<i>Los Angeles Times</i>) | 30 |
| Don Wade & Roma (<i>Chicago Tribune</i>) | 20 |
| Bernie Ward (<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>) | 23 |
| David Newman (<i>Detroit Free Press</i>) | 6 |
| Vic Segal (<i>Dallas Morning News</i>) | 0 |
| John Matthews (<i>Houston Chronicle</i>) | 4 |
| Chuck Adler (<i>Boston Globe</i>) | 1 |
| Trumbull & Core (<i>Washington Post</i>) | 0 |
| National Hosts: | |
| Rush Limbaugh (in <i>New York Times</i>) | 308 |
| Rush Limbaugh (<i>Los Angeles Times</i>) | 510 |
| Rush Limbaugh (<i>Chicago Tribune</i>) | 372 |
| G. Gordon Liddy (in <i>New York Times</i>) | 50 |
| G. Gordon Liddy (<i>Los Angeles Times</i>) | 54 |
| G. Gordon Liddy (<i>Chicago Tribune</i>) | 58 |

The less-than-weekly mention of local hosts in their cities' papers is surprising since our analysis included radio listings (lists containing such information as the time, the station, the topic, the guest) when they came up in periodicals. But listings comprised only 3% of the 2,647 articles in the entire sample, and only 5% of the articles that mentioned local talk-show hosts. Local newspapers simply do not announce the presence or forthcoming topics of popular talk-radio programs on anything like a routine basis.

What is the Nature of the Attention to Talk-show Hosts and Their Programs?

To answer the question, we examined the mainstream print media's portrayal of talk radio hosts and their programs from Fall 1993 through Fall 1995. To conduct this analysis, we drew on the Lexis/Nexis and Dialog databases. We searched for articles mentioning any of the 16 top national hosts mentioned in Table 9. We also searched for articles mentioning any of the hosts noted in Table 10 who broadcast locally in 9 of the nation's largest markets. From the more than 30,000 articles retrieved, we selected a random sample of 2,647 articles for our content analysis. (See Appendix for more details).

Because of the large percentage of articles mentioning Rush Limbaugh in the world of print media, the print media's treatment of him strongly influences the overall portrayal. Broadly speaking, though, the findings apply to all the hosts. Later in the analysis, differences among hosts will be discussed.

Press Portrait: Talk Radio is Superficial

Our study indicates that a reader of the mainstream print media would find little in-depth analysis of the hosts or their programs.

We found, in general, that the print media's attention to talk radio is *narrow* and it is *unfavorable*. In the press, talk radio is a domain of brash anger and bizarrely conservative behavior that is generally disconnected from mainstream politics.

Political talk radio hosts, when mentioned in the press, appear only briefly.

Table 11
How much space do articles devote to talk show hosts?*

| | % of Total |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| 1 Sentence | 63.7 |
| >1 Sentence and < 1 paragraph | 9.4 |
| 2 Paragraphs | 11.2 |
| 3 Paragraphs | 4.0 |
| More than 3 Paragraphs | 11.7 |
| Total (n = 2674) | 100.0 |

*Sample from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog. Weighted sample. See appendix for explanation.

The programs receive substantially less attention than the hosts themselves.

As Table 12 indicates, fully 83% of the articles mentioning the hosts did not have talk radio as a major topic.

Table 12
How central are talk programs in articles that mention talk hosts?*

| | % of Total |
|--|------------|
| Entire article built around talk shows | 7.6 |
| Article is about show and other talk shows | 9.5 |
| Article not devoted to talk shows | 82.9 |
| Total (n = 2674) | 100.0 |

*Sample from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog. Weighted sample. See appendix for explanation.

In fact, we found that in 61% of the cases that the host was mentioned, the host's program was not mentioned. We found that the talk hosts were typically treated as entertainment or political celebrities—individuals to note and gossip over—rather than as serious political commentators deserving of careful examination. Rush Limbaugh's marriage received much attention, for example, and the fact that Alan Keyes was running for the Republican presidential nomination while working as a talk host received far more coverage than the actual show he was hosting and what he was saying on it.

In general, the talk programs themselves received such short shrift that several of their key elements were hardly ever discussed. Understanding talk-show audiences, callers, guests and advertisers is crucial for understanding how the programs are organized, why different types of people listen, and what they might get out of the shows. Yet, as Table 13 indicates, articles where talk hosts appeared virtually ignored audiences, callers, guests and advertisers.

Table 13
Does the article mention...?*

| | % of Total |
|---|------------|
| The talk program? | |
| No | 61.1 |
| Yes | 38.9 |
| The audience? | |
| No | 97.6 |
| Yes | 2.4 |
| Callers? | |
| No | 99.3 |
| Yes | 0.7 |
| Guests? | |
| No | 98.6 |
| Yes | 1.4 |
| Advertisers? | |
| No | 97.3 |
| Yes | 2.7 |
| Social controversies over talk programs? | |
| No | 95.9 |
| Yes | 4.1 |
| Effects of the talk programs? | |
| No | 93.0 |
| Yes | 6.2 |
| Quote the talk show host? | |
| No | 92.0 |
| Yes | 8.0 |
| Host's stance on public issues not on the air? | |
| No | 80.0 |
| Yes | 20.0 |
| Public issues discussed on the program? | |
| No | 88.8 |
| Yes | 11.2 |
| Totals (n=2674) | |

*Sample from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog. Weighted sample. See appendix for explanation.

The mainstream print media pay little attention to issues discussed on radio's political talk programs.

Table 13 indicates that when talk-radio listeners read about talk-radio hosts in the mainstream press, they were not likely to read about the role of talk-show radio in society, or about the issues discussed on talk programs.⁴⁰

When public issues were mentioned in the articles, they took up little space. Table 14 examines this topic in two ways. It notes space taken up by all public issues as well as the space taken up by only those issues discussed on the air.

Table 14
How much space is devoted to issues?*

| | % of Total |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| <hr/> | |
| All issues (on air or not) | |
| No space | 70.7 |
| One paragraph or less | 16.6 |
| 2 paragraphs | 3.0 |
| 3 paragraphs | 1.5 |
| More than 3 paragraphs | 8.1 |
| <hr/> | |
| Total (n = 2,674) | 100.0 |
| <hr/> | |
| On-air issues only | |
| No space | 88.8 |
| One paragraph or less | 5.2 |
| 2 paragraphs | 0.7 |
| 3 paragraphs | 0.6 |
| More than 3 paragraphs | 4.6 |
| <hr/> | |
| Total (n=2,674) | |

*Sample from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog. Weighted sample. See appendix for explanation.

As the table shows, in both cases, during the relatively few times issues came up, the space they occupied in the article tended to be “one paragraph or less” or “more than 3 paragraphs.” Even when public issues took up more than 3 paragraphs, that was overwhelmingly not because of any in-depth discussion of individual issues. Nor was it because the article discussed how the host raises public issues on radio or how issues become elaborated through interactions of the hosts with callers and guests across commercial breaks. Rather, public issues took up more than 3 paragraphs when writers linked the radio host to various conservative political positions.

This superficial handling of issues is startling when one considers our finding that articles mentioning political issues tended strongly (69% of the time) to present two or more sides. How two or more sides could be handled in so few sentences becomes clearer when one realizes that views opposing the hosts’ positions were not in the articles as an exercise in political debate. Rather, the opposing views were described primarily when the articles noted that many quotable figures in the mainstream of society disagreed with hosts and considered them extremists.

In other words, views contrary to opinions expressed by the talk hosts were not presented as part of an extended discussion of ideas but as ways to indicate unfavorable attitudes toward the hosts.

Press Portrait: Talk Radio is Pernicious

Press reports of talk radio suggest that it typically offers a discordant perhaps dangerous discourse that is intolerant and histrionic, unmindful of evidence, classically propagandistic.

When articles convey attitudes about talk hosts, they are overwhelmingly unfavorable.

As Table 15 shows, about 1 in 3 articles (36%) offered one or more clear opinions (by the author or someone else) toward the host or the program. Table 16 indicates that in articles mentioning both the talk show as well as the host, the number offering opinions rose to almost 1 in 2 (about 48%).

Table 15

What was the attitude toward the show or host in the entire sample of articles?*

| | % of Total | % of described |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Not Described | 63.7 | |
| Described, Positive | 0.5 | 1.0 |
| Described Negative | 34.0 | 94.0 |
| Described Mixed | 1.7 | 5.0 |
| Total | 100.0% N=2674 | 100.0% N=970 |

*Sample from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog. Weighted sample. See appendix for explanation.

Table 16

What was the attitude toward the show or host in articles that mentioned the talk show as well as the host?*

| | % of Total | % of described |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Not Described | 51.7 | |
| Described, Positive | 1.2 | 2.5 |
| Described Negative | 43.1 | 89.1 |
| Described Mixed | 4.0 | 8.4 |
| Total | 100.0% N=1040 | 100.0% N=503 |

*Sample from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog. Weighted sample. See appendix for explanation.

In both cases, the overpowering disposition was negative. Fewer than 2% of the articles reflected a positive attitude toward a host or show, and fewer than 5% offered a mixture of positive and negative opinions. Whether the negative comments were directly from the writers of the articles or someone they quoted, readers could not help get the sense that press was taking a thumbs-down attitude toward political talk radio.

The reason for this consistently negative refrain was what commentators saw as the hosts' brashness, extremist language, and socially divisive opinions. "Listening in for a day is to be pelted with

tales and travails, vehemence and vitriol, paranoia and pettiness, stupidity masquerading as wisdom and, to be fair occasionally even vice-versa,” noted a writer in the *New York Times*.⁴¹

“There is a meanness in the land,” wrote Neal Gabler in an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*.⁴² “You can hear it in the angry howls on talk radio....As Limbaugh or some other imitator goads his listeners on, the basic message is: We are entitled to our meanness....” “The heat is on all across the dial,” wrote Patrick Goldstein in *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*.⁴³ “Talk radio has pumped up the volume of our public discourse and created a new political language—perhaps the prevailing political language.” “But to listen to talk radio these days is to listen to a country on the verge of an apocalypse,” writes a reporter for the *Boston Globe*.⁴⁴

“What passes for political debate on many talk shows is often a cacophony of inflammatory rhetoric and half-truths,” notes an op-ed in the *Chicago Tribune*.⁴⁵ AM talk radio is “a medium that these days has distinguished itself as a toxic waste dump for amorphous scorn and resentment,” noted a writer in *Technology Review*.⁴⁶ “Bullying hosts goad callers to vent as much venom as possible, especially if the anger is directed at welfare recipients, environmentalists, government spending, taxes, and liberal politicians.”

These portrayals are fueled in part by the self-promotional hype of talk show hosts. Leykis, for example, is quoted saying that he is the “only talk radio host who is not a right-wing wacko or a convicted felon” —the latter a reference to G. Gordon Liddy.⁴⁷

Other accounts are more balanced. “Call-in government is a needed jolt to sclerotic Washington,” writes Howard Fineman in *Newsweek*.⁴⁸ “But it also raises the specter of government by feverish plebiscite—an entertaining, manipulable and trivializing process that could eat away at the essence of representative democracy.”

Our coders were instructed to copy all comments in the 2,647 articles about controversies and effects of talk radio. As indicated by Chart 2, they found a fairly narrow range of concerns about the controversies caused by talk radio. In fact, only a handful of comments about or statements by Bob Grant, G. Gordon Liddy and Rush Limbaugh made the rounds of many articles.

- Gordon Liddy attracted national attention in the wake of the Oklahoma bombing for his comments about using the first lady and the president and ATF agents for target practice. Of ATF agents, Liddy said “Head shots, head shots—kill the son of bitches!”⁴⁹
- Bob Grant precipitated a furor in the press when he called New York’s black mayor “a washroom attendant.”⁵⁰ He also described blacks as “savages” and in the context of discussion of crime by young blacks suggested that those involved in auto theft belong in a morgue. Grant was also reported to have said that it would be ideal if Haitian immigrants drowned. He also promoted the Bob Grant Mandatory Sterilization Act for welfare mothers.⁵¹
- Rush Limbaugh was quoted widely when he labeled certain feminists ‘feminazis.’ He was also accused by the media watchdog group FAIR of misrepresenting basic social facts on the air.

Chart 2
Representative Controversial Comments by Talk Hosts
Reported Often by the Print Media

About Bob Grant:

- Calling blacks savages⁵²
- Calling L.A. rioters savages and blacks genetically inferior⁵³
- Calling Martin Luther King a scumbag, bum, fake, phony, fraud⁵⁴
- Saying that Haitian boat refugees should be allowed to drown⁵⁵
- Calling New York City Mayor Dinkins “the washroom attendant”⁵⁶
- Calling Congressman Charles Rangel a “pygmy”⁵⁷

About G. Gordon Liddy:

- Presented on-air directions on the best ways to shoot federal law enforcement officers. Advised “head shots” to ATF agents; “kill the S.O.B.’s”⁵⁸
- Noted his practice of using stick figures of “Bill” and “Hillary” for target practice⁵⁹

About Rush Limbaugh:

- Calling feminists “feminazis.”⁶⁰
 - Inaccurate statements on air; lying on air⁶¹
 - Assaulting Clinton health care initiative in a way allegedly “designed to terrify people about health care.”⁶²
 - “Nasty comments” about the poor and people with AIDS.⁶³
-

Press Portrait: Talk Radio is Powerful

When it came to noting the effects of talk radio, the most frequent judgment in the print media was that it was politically powerful.

As Chart 3 shows, journalists typically conveyed the opinion that talk radio was influencing political races in the direction of conservatism. “Today the big noise comes from talk radio,” noted one article. “Its conservative hosts are the kings of AM radio and the kingmakers of the new Republican party.”⁶⁴

Another major theme, associated mostly with G. Gordon Liddy and encouraged to some extent by Bill Clinton, was that talk radio was spreading the kind of hate and divisiveness that led to the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

One statement that came up a number of times was that the impulses attracting people to political talk radio were not shared only by “disaffected white men.”⁶⁵ The statement showed up in stories relaying *Talk Daily’s* findings on audiences for the most popular talk-show hosts. Much was made of the study’s finding that 40% of listeners to talk show programs were women and only 22% were “angry male Republicans.”⁶⁶

Chart 3

Representative Comments on the Social Effects of Talk Radio in Context of Particular hosts⁶⁷

- The Fall elections “witnessed a masterful act of propaganda on an enormously powerful new medium [as part of a] strategy to undermine Clinton.” [Grant]⁶⁸
- “[WABC’s program director] has helped make talk radio meaner and angrier—a forum for people fed up with everything.” [Grant]⁶⁹
- “This all-gab environment has changed the rules for politicians and their handlers.” [Grant]⁷⁰
- “Hate radio may well serve publicly to vent the rage of upscale listeners but it also runs a greater risk of inflaming hair-trigger half-wits.” [Grant]⁷¹
- [Conservative talk radio is] “galvanizing a constituency . . . based on misplaced anger.” [Grant]⁷²
- “Each of them [talk show hosts], whether they spew the venom or let it drip like honey, spreads enough of it to push the lunatic fringe of their audiences over the edge.” [Grant]⁷³
- “Talk radio didn’t buy the fertilizer and fuel oil” [used in the Oklahoma City bombing].” [Limbaugh]⁷⁴
- “Gun nuts were nutty prior to Liddy’s talk.” [Liddy]⁷⁵
- “Maybe you can’t directly blame political and media hate-hypsters for the Oklahoma murders, but they created a climate in which violence blossoms.” [Limbaugh]⁷⁶
- “Talk radio. . . can serve as an echo chamber for extremists...” [Liddy]⁷⁷
- “The hot tongues in the conservative, anti-government movement did little . . . to cool their rhetoric despite President Clinton’s warning that mean talk can fuel violent action.” [Reagan]⁷⁸
- “Talk radio appeals to more than angry white males.” [Ken Hamblin, Tom Leykis]⁷⁹

While the language of call-in political talk radio is less civil than the discourse of national party leaders, the segments mentioned in articles on talk radio are not typical of the hosts quoted, nor are they representative of the political talk radio shows with the largest audiences.

The fifty shows to which we listened three times during the primaries were chosen to include the nine shows with the majority of the talk radio audience (Limbaugh, Liddy, Leykis, Grant, Michael Jackson, Ken Hamblin, Chuck Harder, Oliver North and Michael Reagan). Other shows were selected to ensure that we included liberals and moderates, Hispanics and African Americans. A list of the analyzed shows can be found in the Appendix.

Although we heard such words as “liar”, “slimeball” and “scumbag”—language usually not found in the public discourse of mainstream politicians, in coding 150 hours of talk from fifty programs and 105 hours of Rush Limbaugh, we located no instances comparable to Liddy’s reported call that threatening ATF agents be shot or Grant’s identification of some African Americans as “savages.” Even for Liddy and Grant, these comments were not the norm. The most offensive material identified among the top nine shows appeared on Ken Hamblin’s program. Hamblin is not among those whose remarks are featured in story length articles on talk radio.

At his most extreme in our sample of three hours Liddy said that Dole was going to “run for president against a yellow coward who turned and ran, someone who’s got a thumb up his ass instead of a bullet in his heart. Oh, you 43% suckers!”⁸⁰

Limbaugh suggested that feminists might form a country called “Ovaria”, “Hysteria” “Estronia” and “Lesbanon”.⁸¹ On another show he read a news account of cosmetic testicles for dogs who had been neutered and suggested that feminists and their male companions might want them.⁸²

Grant tags Senator Lautenberg “vicious”, calls Dick Gregory a “slimeball”, calls Bill Clinton a “draft dodger”, and describes a caller as a “weirdo”. But the strongest language on the three hours of his program that we studied came not from him but his callers. Without eliciting disapproval from Grant, one called Grant’s antagonist “that scumbag Alan crybaby Dershowitz” and went on to refer to an article about “those black douchebags”.

Interestingly in one⁸³ of the hours we monitored, Grant explicitly championed the cause of African American Republican presidential aspirant Alan Keyes and dismissed with disgust a caller prepared to reject Keyes because of race. The caller likens Keyes to activist Dick Gregory:

Grant: “Keyes loves this country. Alan Keyes is a great American! How dare you put him in the same bag as that slimeball Dick Gregory.”

Caller: “He may have a Harvard education and he may be an ambassador but deep down...”

Grant: “Deep down, he’s...”

Caller: “He’s...”

Grant: “Black?”

Caller: “And a typical one!”

With a sense of disgust Grant cuts the caller from the air saying “You stink.”

We did hear parodies suggesting that Bill Clinton is a philanderer and a “liar”, suggestions about Hillary Clinton’s sexual preferences, and assertions that Ross Perot is “crazy” as well as statements that were plainly inaccurate (e.g., Rush Limbaugh’s claim that “Willie” Horton was a “mass murderer.”) And typical of partisan political discourse, we heard a great deal of one sided argument that ignored the evidence on the other side.

On the left, we heard Mary Mason describe Dole as “evil,”⁸⁴ Imus run a parody on Bill Clinton titled “Beavis and Bill”⁸⁵ and Tom Leykis say he has “sampled” fake “boobs” and they feel like “plastic beach balls.”⁸⁶

We heard Chuck Harder discuss the “Arkancides” (Arkansas plus suicide) of the Clinton presidency. On Michael Reagan’s show a guest suggests that Hillary Clinton had an affair with Vincent Foster. Both claims have circulated in conservative publications for some time.

The most extreme comments we heard were not voiced by a talk host who has attracted sustained attention in the mainstream media: Ken Hamblin, a black conservative. On April 16, Hamblin told a caller who identified himself as a drug dealer and insisted that no one would take care of his children without welfare and affirmative action, “Bring your woman to me so that I can gut out her reproductive organs [and] ... if your son shows signs of being like you I want to castrate him so that he cannot reproduce and be a burden to society.” Joking about the Million Man March on April 8, Hamblin asked what the only thing missing was. His answer: “an auctioneer.”

Hamblin is syndicated to over 120 stations. Since the size of his audience places him within the top ten talk radio shows in the nation (*Talk Daily*⁸⁷) it is surprising that the self styled “Black Avenger” has

not received greater media attention. This may be a function of the fact that unlike Limbaugh, Liddy, and Grant—he does not originate from a major media center. He hosts from Denver’s KOA. The major markets in which he airs, including San Francisco, Seattle, and Kansas City, are all far from such national media centers as New York and Washington, DC and hence outside the earshot of many of the more influential journalists. It is also possible that the mainstream press is uncomfortable reporting on comments to a black caller from a black host.

Since the spotlight of the national mainstream media has not focused on Hamblin, he has not felt the pressure that Grant, Liddy, Limbaugh and others have to speak in a more measured way.

In sum, the hosts most often singled out for critique do not now typically engage in the sorts of comments that have entered media lore. Whether they once did is impossible to know from our study. Nor is the typical caller a kook. The researchers who listened to 105 hours of Limbaugh and 150 hours of other hosts including the nine hosts with the largest audiences concluded that on the shows to which they listened extremist comments by hosts are the exception not the rule.

The hosts we selected for analysis are, in the main, well established in markets of at least intermediate size. It is possible that extremist talk is more common, as Mutual Host Jim Bohannon suggested, on the shows with smaller audiences hosted by the “wannabes”.

By focusing on moments in which talk radio may have mobilized but not those in which it failed to do so, mainstream media may exaggerate its impact.

Those reading story-length accounts of talk radio in the mainstream media would learn that it has been effective in

blocking or overturning legislative action

In 1989 talk radio was given credit for mobilizing the masses against a recommended Congressional pay hike. Radio listeners also created public pressure against the confirmation of Clinton’s attorney general nominee Zoe Baird and fueled opposition to his proposed ban on discrimination against gays in the military.⁸⁸

In February 1994, Michael Farris, the executive director of the Home School Legal Defense Association, concluded that a provision in a piece of education legislation was a threat to home schoolers. He got on the phone to talk radio hosts around the country, reaching almost fifty of them. Within hours, Congress was flooded with cards, calls, and faxes. “We got a lot of calls on NAFTA, we got a lot of calls on gays in the military,” reported Brian Gunderson, Rep. Dick Armey (R-Texas)’s administrative assistant, “but I’ve never seen anything like this: going from no calls one day to the switchboards shut down the next.”⁸⁹

In the 1980s Jerry Williams of WRKO in Boston “organized a citizen’s initiative that overturned the state’s mandatory seat belt law and ...helped generate so much opposition to a proposed capital gains tax increase that the state legislature rejected it.”⁹⁰ In 1986, he got 2,000 people to show up on Beacon Hill in a snowstorm to decry a Dukakis tax increase.”⁹¹

advocating legislation

California governor Pete Wilson credits talk radio with pushing the state legislature to pass more than a dozen anti-crime bills. "I have seen in California," he reports, "that talk radio can be a force that galvanizes as well as expresses public opinion to produce change."⁹²

influencing political behavior

Talk radio may have contributed to House Speaker Newt Gingrich's decision to give up the multi-million dollar advance on his book. "He's selling out the new Congress," one caller said.⁹³

mobilizing political support

Calls to the office of Republican Michael Forbes increased after WABC host Bob Grant mentioned his campaign to unseat the Democratic incumbent.⁹⁴

And talk radio is credited with magnifying the power of the conservative message in the 1994 elections. Over half of those surveyed in exit polls in November 1994 reported paying attention to political talk shows at least occasionally and "of those, the most frequent listeners voted Republican by a 3-to 1 ratio."⁹⁵

and occasionally of failed attempts

KOA's Mike Rosen, who had the top rated talk show in Denver in 1990 advocated an increase in the local sales tax to build a new baseball stadium and also supported a statewide limitation on taxes proposal. The tax for the stadium passed; the limit on statewide taxes was defeated.⁹⁶

Talk radio does not appear to generate an ongoing regular stream of identifiable communication to members of Congress.

During a two week period of heated Congressional debate in March 1996, two Congressional and two Senatorial offices that monitored calls, letters, e-mail and faxes for references to talk radio found them in fewer on average than 1-3% of the communications and these were not concentrated on any single issue.

There have been important areas of disagreement between influential hosts and the public and the Congress.

So, for example,

- Although conservative hosts opposed the assault weapons ban it was passed and Republican nominee Bob Dole is no longer saying that he will work to repeal it.
- Despite strong talk show opposition Frank Lautenberg in New Jersey and Edward Kennedy in Massachusetts were re-elected.
- Although Rush Limbaugh opposed an increase in the minimum wage, Congress passed it.

Press Portrait: Talk Radio is Homogeneous and Embodied in Limbaugh, Liddy and Grant

The unfavorable tone toward political talk-show radio was heavily influenced by the large presence of Rush Limbaugh, G. Gordon Liddy and Bob Grant in our sample. This presence, however, reflects their association with political talk programs in the print media.

Their greater association with talk radio than the other hosts goes beyond numerical presence. Keyes and North, though high in numbers, were hardly connected to on-air activities. Keyes was treated as a political candidate who happened to be a talk radio host; North was treated as an off-air political pundit and political aspirant who runs a talk show.

That leaves Limbaugh, Liddy and Grant. The press portrayed them as the embodiment of talk-radio, albeit with important differences. Rush Limbaugh was depicted as a kind of entertainment celebrity. Gossip about his brash personality, his personal life and his off-radio activities dominated discussions of Limbaugh even as the articles made clear that much of his celebrity was based on his show. As Table 17 shows, Limbaugh was relatively low on the list when it came to being discussed in terms of issue-oriented elements of his program. Articles were more likely to note issues when they related to Grant, Liddy, and “other local” and “other national” hosts than Limbaugh.

Still, Limbaugh came in third to Liddy and Grant when it came to the chance of being described unfavorably in articles. He was depicted unfavorably in more than 1 of every 3 articles mentioning him. The unfavorable attitude the press projected about Limbaugh centered now and then on a few specifics—his characterization of feminists as “feminazis” and allegedly inaccurate comments that he had made on his program.⁹⁷ Most often, however, negative remarks about Limbaugh tended to be generalities about his on-air style, his ability to “terrify people about health care,”⁹⁸ and the opinion of those who disliked him that he was, in the words of Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, “a big bag of air.”⁹⁹

Articles mentioning Liddy and Grant, on the other hand, commented most of the time on what they were doing on air. As Table 17 indicates, of all articles mentioning hosts, articles with Bob Grant were most likely to quote on-air comments and articles mentioning G. Gordon Liddy were most likely to mention the host’s on-air stance regarding issues. The reason was that Grant and Liddy were champions of the very specific, outrageous behaviors that represented controversy in the print media’s portrait of talk-show radio.

In fact, 46% of the press comments about talk-radio controversies revolved around Liddy and 43% revolved around Grant—a combined total of 89%. The press linked Rush Limbaugh to controversy only 5% of the time, with the other hosts hardly discussed at all in terms of controversy.

In contrast to Limbaugh, press disapproval of Liddy and Grant was usually tied to specific and bizarre on-air comments. Such Grant references to then-New York City Mayor David Dinkins as “the washroom attendant,” his comments that blacks are savages, and his opinion that Martin Luther King was

a “scumbag” were presented as vivid examples of the hatefulness of talk radio. So were Liddy’s claims to use stick figures of “Bill” and “Hillary” for rifle practice and his exhortation, regarding U.S. Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents, to “kill the S.O.B.s.”

The articles and editorials that noted Liddy’s or Grant’s disturbing comments tended to use the occasion to generalize their activities to the broader realm of talk radio. Although writers sometimes used limiting phrases such as “hate radio,” they rarely pointed out that other, more moderate forms not only exist but are the norm. Those who didn’t believe that talk radio shows were so powerful as to create hate argued instead that “talk radio. . . can fan the flames of hatred.”¹⁰⁰

But the overpowering sense that came through in comments about the effects and controversies of the programs was that for people who are not social and political conservatives, talk radio is a scary, pernicious domain that is stirring up trouble.

Table 17

When you confront an article in which a host’s name appears, what is the likelihood that...[†]

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>The article will mention the particular host’s show?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Probability (%)</p> <p>1. Other Local 73.2</p> <p>2. Bob Grant 72.2</p> <p>3. G. Gordon Liddy 60.8</p> <p>4. Other National 57.4</p> <p>5. Rush Limbaugh 35.8</p> <p>6. Oliver North 23.1</p> <p>7. Alan Keyes 7.8</p> | <p>The article will mention social controversies over talk programs?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Probability (%)</p> <p>1. G. Gordon Liddy 19.3</p> <p>2. Bob Grant 17.8</p> <p>3. Other National 2.6</p> <p>4. Rush Limbaugh 2.0</p> <p>5. Other Local 1.8</p> <p>6. Oliver North 0.5</p> <p>7. Alan Keyes 0.0</p> |
| <p>The article will quote the talk host on air?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Probability (%)</p> <p>1. Bob Grant 25.9</p> <p>2. Other Local 23.9</p> <p>3. G. Gordon Liddy 18.1</p> <p>4. Oliver North 7.6</p> <p>5. Rush Limbaugh 6.6</p> <p>6. Other National 5.2</p> <p>7. Alan Keyes 0.7</p> | <p>The article will mention effects of the talk programs?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Probability (%)</p> <p>1. Bob Grant 20.8</p> <p>2. G. Gordon Liddy 14.1</p> <p>3. Other National 9.2</p> <p>4. Oliver North 8.3</p> <p>5. Rush Limbaugh 4.4</p> <p>6. Other Local 5.4</p> <p>7. Alan Keyes 0.9</p> |
| <p>The article will mention the overall negative tone of the host?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Probability (%)</p> <p>1. G. Gordon Liddy 53.7</p> <p>2. Bob Grant 53.0</p> <p>3. Rush Limbaugh 36.9</p> <p>4. Oliver North 25.8</p> <p>5. Other Local 10.5</p> <p>6. Other National 10.1</p> <p>7. Alan Keyes 5.8</p> | |

[†]In Lexis-Nexis and Dialog. Unweighted sample. See text for explanation and Table 18 for the numbers in each host’s sample. The comparisons in the tables are statistically significant at greater than the .05 level.

8. In contrast, content analysis of seven weeks of Limbaugh (105 hours), 150 hours of other hosts, and analysis of a stratified sample of more than 2,500 newspaper articles about political talk radio suggests that
 - A. By focusing on extreme moments of talk radio without indicating how typical they are of the most widely heard shows, mainstream news may invite the inference that political talk radio is, at best, routinely uncivil, and at worst, downright dangerous.
 - B. By focusing on moments in which talk radio may have mobilized citizens or influenced legislation but not on those in which it failed to do so, newspaper articles on talk radio may exaggerate its impact. During two weeks in mid-March, two Senatorial and two Congressional offices (one from each party) monitored their faxes, e-mails, calls and letters for references to political talk radio and found few.
 - C. News articles overstate the homogeneity of political talk radio.
9. Mainstream media portrayal may account for the fact that non-listeners view political talk radio negatively. Regular listeners may see in mainstream media a portrait inconsistent with their own experience of political talk radio. This discrepancy may account in part for the finding that listeners are more cynical about mainstream media than are non-listeners.

While problematic statements by Bob Grant and G. Gordon Liddy made it into print over and over again, what didn't show up very often—and what another part of this Annenberg project confirms—is that political talk show radio also includes less volatile but perhaps more important contributions to political discourse being made by national and local hosts who cumulatively reach large numbers of people.

The point also applies to Rush Limbaugh. His ongoing attempts to teach his listeners how to “interpret” the “liberal” press are rarely mentioned in the nearly 3,000 articles we read. Yet one can make a case that from the standpoint of the general press, and perhaps the entire political process, these daily lessons are one of the most far-reaching consequences of his program.

The superficiality and negativity that we found in political radio's treatment by the print media may account in part for the Annenberg group's finding that audience members for talk shows have a higher degree of cynicism about the mainstream press than the population at large. Listeners to political talk radio undoubtedly believe that their shows are a good bit more diverse and useful than the press depicts them. Ironically, then, print media coverage of political radio may well validate for listeners what conservative talk hosts such as Limbaugh say about the press—that it stacks the ideological deck against them. For these politically aware listeners, the mainstream print media may be reinforcing cynicism about the press through their reporting about political talk radio.

10. At the same time, mainstream media's focus on the extremes of talk radio (e.g., claims that opponents should be killed, dismissal of other groups as subhuman) enables those who disapprove of the extreme statements to take actions designed to minimize a repeat of the offensive talk.

Corrective Mechanisms in the System

These self-corrective mechanisms are able to be activated when attention is focused on the problematic discourse.

The Host as a Campaign Issue

New Jersey incumbent Senator Frank Lautenberg and a number of African American ministers demanded in the 1994 Senatorial contest that Republican nominee Chuck Haytaian condemn Bob Grant for the racist remarks noted earlier in this report. Grant was championing Haytaian against Lautenberg. Some felt that his association with Grant contributed to Haytaian's defeat. That sentiment prompted Grant to note "I felt awful about it, because a good man who should have been elected wasn't." ¹⁰¹

ACTIONS BY STATIONS

Colorado Springs talk show host Don Baker urged listeners to take their guns to Washington to protest the assault weapons ban. Francisco Duran of Colorado Springs did that and was arrested for shooting at the White House. When callers blamed Baker, he withdrew from the air for a time.¹⁰² The incident prompted Baker's station, KVOR, to set up a "formal policy against advocating violence or retribution." ¹⁰³

After the Oklahoma bombing, a number of stations stopped airing Liddy's program.

In February 1995, San Francisco's KSFO fired J. Paul Emerson after six weeks. His attacks on gays and suggestion that AIDS patients be quarantined had produced protests and a boycott of his advertisers.¹⁰⁴

Atlanta's Sean Hannity (WGST) responds to a discussion of the gay lifestyle of Representative Barney Frank by telling listeners that he lost his first radio position for "criticizing a lesbian over artificial insemination pregnancy." He adds, "It's unnatural and I still believe that...but the bottom line is I just think we ought to leave people alone and I don't think conservatives ought to be coming on the radio and making statements that, well, if you're gay and lesbian, you can't be in Congress.... This is America...." ¹⁰⁵

"I still want to ride that razor's edge," Hannity tells an interviewer. "I want to be outrageous. I want to catch people and get them to listen...but there are certain lines I wouldn't want to cross." ¹⁰⁶

In March 1996, Alan Dershowitz's Sunday evening show on WABC was canceled when he called Grant a racist and a "despicable talk show host" ¹⁰⁷ and Grant was fired by WABC for expressing regret that Commerce secretary Ron Brown may have survived a plane crash. After reports of the crash of Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown's plane in Croatia, Grant had said, "My hunch is that he is the one survivor. I just have that hunch. Maybe it's because, at heart, I'm a pessimist." Although Grant was hired by WOR within two weeks of his dismissal, he suggested that the action had sobered him. "To be blunt about it, I guess all of us [talk hosts] shouldn't only want other people to listen to us—we also should

listen to ourselves....I don't want the WOR management to ever feel that they have to defend anything I say, I don't intend that should happen.”¹⁰⁸

On an April 11, 1996 simulcast with Spokane's Richard Clear (KGA)¹⁰⁹, Seattle host Mike Siegel (of KVI) in the words of *Talk Daily* “recounted the allegations—that (Mayor Norm) Rice (Mayor of Seattle) was shot by his wife, while he was engaged in homosexual activity. Siegel said the story was being repeated by ‘people in very high places’ and that he had been hearing the story ‘privately’ from people who ‘will not talk publicly about it.’ ‘Because it’s such a rampant rumor,’ Siegel urged Rice to confront it and ‘deny it.’”¹¹⁰ On May 13, Rice held a press conference condemning Siegel and KVI for spreading “vicious lies.” KVI aired the press conference live. Siegel appeared on a subsequent KVI program and apologized to the Mayor and on his own program on May 14 Siegel apologized to the mayor and his family.

Siegel's callers debated whether he should have apologized. Some called for his resignation. One asked “Do you feel any need to apologize? I know you demand a lot of accountability from other people. What kind of accountability do you demand of yourself?”¹¹¹

In late May, Fisher Broadcasting, owners of KVI, announced that Siegel had been fired. The statement said “Our decision was based on an investigation of the impact of Mike's actions on the reputation and credibility of Fisher Broadcasting, not on the allegations surrounding the Mayor Rice broadcast on the Mike Siegel Show. Although Mike's actions initially impacted only KVI radio, it has now become a company-wide issue, damaging the reputation of both KVI and Fisher Broadcasting....In seeking a resolution to this matter, we focused on the values and commitments that shape our day to day programming standards. We remain committed to talk radio and to those who support the standards our community has come to expect from us.”¹¹²

PRESSURE THROUGH SPONSORS

After Hispanic groups threatened a boycott of the sponsors of his program, Howard Stern apologized on air in Spanish for ridiculing slain Hispanic singer, Selena. Stern had played the sounds of gunshots over one of her songs.

Hispanic leaders concluded that the apology was insincere. “The self-proclaimed ‘satirist’ did read a carefully worded ‘apology’ though only in Spanish...” noted an op-ed in *The Austin American Statesman*. “Spanish-language media correctly characterized Stern's attack and his ‘apology’ as ‘burlas’ or mockeries.”¹¹³ The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) responded by asking those offended by Stern to refuse to buy products advertised on his program. The sponsors who then apologized indicating that they had been unaware that their ads were airing on Stern's show included: Sears, Gatorade, Miller Brewing, Slick 50 and La Quinta.

SELF-CORRECTION

After calling Judge Lance Ito “little” and mocking him in a Japanese accent on Don Imus’s radio show, Senator Alphonse D’Amato apologized to the Japanese community.

When in a radio interview, Representative Dick Armey referred to Representative. Barney Frank, who is gay, as “Barney Fag”, he apologized calling it an “unintentional mispronunciation.”¹¹⁴ The comment and apology were widely reported in the print and broadcast media.

Rush Limbaugh too has abandoned a number of tasteless tactics. For a time, he placed a condom over his microphone to engage the audience in “safe talk” and cued a taped sound of a vacuum cleaner to “abort callers” whose positions he found repugnant. They were cut from the air to the sounds of a vacuum cleaner and a scream. He no longer does so.

In his early programs, Limbaugh included an “AIDS Update” whose theme song was “I’ll never love this way again.” Under protest from AIDS activists, he stopped airing the segment. “It’s the single most regretful thing I’ve ever done because it ended up making fun of people who were dying...”

Limbaugh is quoted saying. “It was a totally irresponsible thing to do.”¹¹⁵

His imitations of Benjamin Hooks also drew protests. Limbaugh’s Hooks sounded like Amos and Andy’s Kingfish. That too has been set aside.

Appendix: Method and Analysis

Survey

The sampling design and administration of the survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. Of the four groups initially identified in the survey (Regular Limbaugh only, Regular Other, Non-listeners, Multiple Listeners), the first three were followed for two more interviews, or waves, creating a “panel” design where the same person is interviewed on more than one occasion. The first wave of interviews was conducted between February 21 and March 5, 1996. Wave 2 was conducted between March 13 and March 24. The final wave was conducted between April 25 and May 7. In the second wave, 1,087 of the original sample were reinterviewed and 885 on wave 3. About 45% were interviewed on all three waves. The panel results are not presented in this report.

The “Multiple Listeners” group (4%) are those listening to Limbaugh and (at least) one other show regularly. Of these 43, 24 listen to another conservative host, 12 listen to a moderate host, 6 to a liberal host, and 1 was uncertain. This potentially interesting group was not followed because we wanted to study the Limbaugh audience unaffected as much as possible by the influences of other hosts. Following the multiple listeners as well as the other groups was simply too costly

The group designated as “Other” regular listeners to PTR (N=422) was subdivided into those listening regularly to Liberal/Moderate (N=283) or Conservative shows (N=139). These two subgroups were determined on the basis of the listener’s assessment of the host’s political views as liberal, moderate (in between, neither conservative nor liberal, both conservative and liberal), or conservative.

Of regular listeners to PTR (other than Limbaugh) (N=422), a small number indicated they listened to two (N=53) or more (N=13) PTR shows at least twice per week. Of these 66, 26 listen to ideologically similar shows as their first and second choices; 26 more listen to ideological neighbors (moderate to conservative or liberal to moderate, etc.) as their second choice. In all cases respondents were assigned to Conservative or Liberal/Moderate listening groups based on the show they named first.

Respondents were assigned to listening groups on the basis of their identification of the host’s political views as liberal, conservative, or moderate. The groups could have been determined in two other ways. One alternative was the name of the show or its host along with its avowed — often published — political orientation. The second was the listener’s own political ideology in combination with their assessment of the degree of similarity or dissimilarity with the host’s views. The groups created by the three methods were all very similar and preliminary results indicated little difference in findings regardless of which method was used to establish the groupings. The most direct method was used thereby preserving the most observations. So listeners to Conservative PTR are those who identify their host as conservative; listeners to Liberal/Moderate PTR say their host’s views are either liberal or moderate in orientation.

Although it would have been useful to separate the Liberal and Moderate PTR groups, the number of regular listeners identifying their host’s views as liberal was too small (N=86) to permit a

separate group. The groups allow us to compare and contrast the audiences of Rush Limbaugh to those of Conservative PTR and Liberal/Moderate PTR while comparing each to the non-listeners.

Content Analysis of PTR

SNAPSHOTS

In order to get a sense of the content of PTR across the ideological spectrum, more than fifty shows were coded for the topics they treated on three different days [(1) March 4, (2) March 11, and (3) April 8, 1996]. The shows were:

| Conservatives | Liberal | Moderate |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Art Bell, "Coast to Coast" | Jerry Brown, "We The People" | Jimmy Barrett (1,3)* |
| Roe Conn | Alan Colmes | Jim Bohannon |
| Blanquita Cullum (3) | Mario Cuomo (1,2) | Clapgood & Whitley |
| Larry Elder | Alan Dershowitz (1,2) | Bruce DuMont |
| Jim Eason | Don Imus | John Gambling |
| Barry Farber | Michael Jackson(1,3) | Gil Gross |
| Roger Fredinburg (2,3) | Ed Koch | Joan Hamburg |
| Bob Grant | Tom Leykis | Phil Hendry |
| Ken Hamblin | Jay Marvin | Hudson & Bauer |
| Sean Hannity | Mary Mason | John & Ken |
| Chuck Harder | Diane Rehm | Ted Leitner(1,2) |
| Rush Limbaugh | Bernie Ward | Joe Madison |
| G. Gordon Liddy | | David Newman |
| Marlin Maddoux | | Talk of the Nation (1,3) |
| John Matthews | | Warren Pierce(2) |
| Oliver North | | Trumbell & Core |
| Michael Reagan(1,2) | | Susan Bray |
| Rick Roberts | | Kathryn Johns (1,3) |
| Mark Scott | | |
| Mike Siegal | | |
| Jay Severin | | |
| Randall Terry | | |
| Kirby Wilbur | | |

*Numbers in parentheses indicate that host was taped only on those particular snapshot days.

The shows were selected to represent the top rated programs in each ideological category and to reflect some of the racial and gender diversity in the PTR genre. Ideology was determined on the basis of published reports, producer's descriptions, and expert opinion from representatives of the talk radio industry.

At least one hour of each show was coded. Coders were carefully trained until they were reliable in assigning topics to 30 second segments of the show. Unlike coding newspapers or television news, where the topic of a segment is relatively clear with a defined beginning and end, talk radio discussions are more fluid. Finding the beginning and end of topics is extremely difficult. The use of 30 second seg-

ments alleviated the problem. Coders also determined the format being employed in the segment (host monologue, host plus caller, host plus guest, and so on). Reliabilities for assigning topics ranged from a low of .55 during training to a high of .94 (Krippendorff's Alpha). Coding proceeded when reliabilities were above .75. Reliabilities for format were very high (> .90). Periodic re-testing on reliability was also conducted with re-training as necessary.

Rush Limbaugh

The entire three hours of Rush Limbaugh's show was coded for topic and format during the period February 3 to March 29. The same coding system used in coding the three snapshots was also used here. Occasionally, some portions of tapes were missing or garbled and could not be coded. During the week of March 18, the Rush Limbaugh show had a guest host. The guest was coded but held out of the summaries of Limbaugh shows.

Mainstream News

During the eight week period from February 3 until March 29, four newspapers — *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*— were coded for the topics they treated on the front page and on their editorial pages. The topics used in coding were developed separately for newspapers and for PTR. Reliabilities for more general and more specific codes were .80 using Krippendorff's alpha.

The *Washington Times* was not considered a "mainstream" newspaper but was tracked because of its possible importance to more conservative PTR.

Television news coverage from ABC, NBC, and CBS evening news shows was obtained from a news tracking service which provides a weekly description of the number of minutes of coverage of topics in the news.

Content Analysis of PTR in the News

In the fall of 1995, the National Aircheck company presented us with a list of the 16 top-rated nationally broadcast political talk radio programs as well as the top-rated programs broadcast locally in 9 of the nation's largest markets. This became our sample of programs.

Our next step was to collect a large, representative sample of mainstream print-media coverage of the hosts and programs. For each national host, we searched the two major electronic periodical databases, Lexis/Nexis and Dialog, for all items that mentioned the host during the two year period from fall 1993 to fall 1995. For each local host, we searched Lexis/Nexis and Dialog for all items in a major daily newspaper from that host's city.¹¹⁶

The one exception was Bob Grant. Though at the time broadcasting only in New York City, Grant and his show had received much national coverage for remarks that he had made on-air and

because prominent politicians had appeared on his show. Consequently, we decided to take a look at Bob Grant's national profile, and we conducted our database search as if he were a national host.

RETRIEVING THE ARTICLES

Many of the articles retrieved from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog mentioned more than one talk show host. In our study, however, the unit of analysis was the individual host. We searched Lexis/Nexis and Dialog separately for each host and the analysis focused on each article's treatment of individual hosts and their programs. It was therefore perfectly possible for the same article to be part of more than one host's sample.

In search of host names, we downloaded more than 30,000 items from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog. We examined the items to eliminate individuals with the same names as the talk-show hosts. We also realized that Lexis/Nexis and Dialog contain more than articles from print sources. Transcripts of speeches and Cable News Network (CNN) programs also appeared during our downloading process. However, because this non-print component did not make up more than 5% of the items retrieved, were not peculiar to any one host, and would be difficult to trace amid the thousands of articles, we did not eliminate them when we compared the "mainstream press" coverage of talk hosts. We did, however, eliminate them from the sample of Lexis/Nexis and Dialog articles that formed the basis for the central part of this study: the content analysis.

THE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The aim of the content analysis was to explore the way print media—newspapers and magazines of all types—cover the top radio political talk-show hosts and their programs. To carry out the content analysis, we chose a random sample of about 2,700 articles from the entire corpus of items we had retrieved from Lexis/Nexis and Dialog.

We stratified our sample by host categories. That is, instead of selecting articles completely by chance, we chose a similar number of articles for hosts whose press coverage we wanted to compare. If we had selected articles in a purely random as opposed to stratified way, those about Rush Limbaugh would have overwhelmed our sample, since we found almost 21,000 articles in Lexis/Nexis and Dialog about him and only about 3,300 for the next most-mentioned host, G. Gordon Liddy. Stratifying our sample allowed us to compare in a statistically meaningful manner how different hosts were treated by the press.

Instead of concentrating on choosing approximately the same number of articles for all 16 hosts, we focused on the four most-mentioned national hosts and the most mentioned local host. We placed the remaining hosts in two categories, "other national" and "other local." Table 18 presents the number of articles that represented the 7 host categories we chose for our stratified sample. The "other local" group totaled only 113 articles because that was all we found about those hosts in Lexis/Nexis and Dialog. This did not present any statistical difficulties.

We used the sample when comparing the way the press treated different hosts, since in that type of analysis the point was not to discuss the general distribution of articles. Still, the stratified sample could be unhelpful for answering some questions. It was, for example, important to ask what readers learn

about talk hosts and their programs when they confront general press coverage—coverage in which hosts are unequally represented. The stratified sample would not allow for such an analysis.

To conduct this analysis, we had to simulate the original distribution of articles. We weighted the stratified sample to reflect the relative percentages of articles from each category in the original sample of over 30,000 articles. Rush Limbaugh made up 68.6% of the adjusted sample, G. Gordon Liddy made up 11%, and so on. Moreover, a statistical comparison of hosts required percentages in the sample that far exceeded their real presence in the press. This technique of being able to shift between weighted and unweighted samples for different purposes allowed us to get as much as possible out of the content analysis.

Table 18
Number of Articles on Talk-Show Hosts in Stratified Sample

| Talk Show Host | Number of Articles |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| Rush Limbaugh | 453 |
| Bob Grant | 452 |
| Alan Keyes | 449 |
| G. Gordon Liddy | 442 |
| Oliver North | 433 |
| Other National: | |
| Ken Hamblin, Michael Reagan | |
| Jim Hightower, Tom Leykis | |
| Joe Madison, Jim Bohannon, | |
| Gil Gross, Alan Colmes | |
| Barry Farber, Marlin Maddoux | |
| Roger Fredinburg, Jay Severin | 305 |
| Other Local: | |
| Michael Jackson, Bernie Ward | |
| Don Wade & Roma, | |
| David Newman, John Mathews | |
| Chuck Adler, Trumbull & Core | 113 |
| Total | 2,647 |

We conducted quantitative and qualitative content analyses on 2,647 articles. For the quantitative analysis, a trained team of graduate and undergraduate students analyzed the articles, gathering information about four main aspects: the nature of the periodicals (including when and where published); the attitude of the article toward the host; the coverage of the program itself along with its callers; advertisers and guests; and the discussion of public issues raised by the host.¹¹⁷ We defined a public issue broadly as any topic that could have an impact on society.

In addition to this quantitative coding, the article readers were asked to record any comments in the articles about the effects of talk radio as well as any controversies surrounding particular shows. The readers also kept “diaries” that recorded qualitative impressions about the way the press portrayed particular talk hosts, their programs and their issues.

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The following individuals contributed to the work as research assistants, coders, and consultants:

Megin Adams holds an MA from the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania.

Kristine M. Alvarez is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Paige Andersen holds a BA in Political Science from the University of Pennsylvania.

Avi Benus is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

A. Joseph Borrell, III is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. He holds an MA from the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania and an MA from Duke University.

Katie Carpenter is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Elaine Casey is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds a BA from Tufts University.

Susanne Chan is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds a BA from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Stacey Davis is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds an MA from the Annenberg School.

Erika Falk is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds an MA from San Diego State University.

Kelly M. Fitzsimmons is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Andrew Frankel holds a BA in Communication from the University of Pennsylvania.

Karen Frazer is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds a BA from the University of California, San Diego.

Rachael Goldfarb is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Alice Hall is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds an MA from the Annenberg School.

Susan Hearn is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Lisa Joffe is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Molly Johnson is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds a BA from Augustana College.

GangHeong Lee is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. He holds an MA from the Annenberg School.

Olivia Leon is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

David Nathanson is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Tom Nessinger is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. He holds a BA and a JD from the University of Notre Dame.

George Nimeh is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. He holds a BA from Rutgers University.

Malkia Payton is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds a BA from Rutgers University.

June Woong Rhee is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. He holds an MA from Seoul National University.

Stacey Sarfatti holds a BA in Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania.

Melinda M. Schwenk is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds an MA from the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania and an MA from the University of Maryland.

Susan Sherr is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds a BA from Brandeis University.

Heather G. Steingraber is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds a BS from the University of Florida.

Brian Southwell is a master's candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. He holds a BA from the University of Virginia.

John Sullivan is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. He holds an MA from the Annenberg School.

Ann Tracey holds a BA in Communication from the University of Pennsylvania.

Rita Ventresca holds a BA from the University of Pennsylvania.

Jason Vinikoor is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Matthew Wasowski is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Emory H. Woodard, IV is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. He holds an MA from the Annenberg School.

Maisie Wong is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Rachel Weinstein is a student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Tamara York holds a BA from the University of Pennsylvania.

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- ³⁰ The rank order correlations between Limbaugh and the three main stream channels are (.10, .17, and .35) which are all non-significant. The rank order correlations among the main stream channels are .85, .93, and .94, all highly significant.
- ³¹ In this section, the correlations reported concern the ranks of topics, and ignore similarities in the amount of air time or column inches that might (or might not be present). For example, consider three different sources covering two topics, sports and fashion. Suppose the percentage of treatment of each topic is as follows:
Source A: Sports 90%; Fashion 10%
Source B: Sports 80%; Fashion 20%
Source C: Sports 55%; Fashion 45%.
Sources A and B are more alike than are A and C, even though all three sources have the same priorities giving more coverage to sports than fashion.
When PTR and main stream media are evaluated in terms of the proportion of coverage and not just the priority of coverage, the same conclusions obtain.

³² These differences in evaluation of political leaders by groups of listeners are repeated in waves 2 and 3 of the survey despite the smaller and increasingly (politically) sophisticated samples.

³³ Unlike most of findings presented here, none of these differences are corrected for demographic differences among the audiences.

³⁴ Two other pairs were also used — emotional or calm and liberal or conservative — which did not fit into the positive-negative group.

³⁵ In wave 3, respondents were asked how fair and balanced various media were. Regarding PTR, regular listeners found it more fair and balanced than non-regular listeners but this was due primarily to regular Limbaugh listeners who said PTR was more fair and balanced than listeners of Conservative, or Liberal/moderate PTR.

³⁶ About 38% of the conservatives are unfavorable but this number does not characterize the population at large since it is based on a mix of a random cross-section and an oversample.

³⁷ The papers are: *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *LA Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *New York Newsday*, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Rocky Mountain News*, *Detroit News & Free Press*, *Miami Herald*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *Phoenix Republic and Gazette*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Columbus Dispatch*, *Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, *Los Angeles Daily News*, *Philadelphia Daily News*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, *St. Petersburg Times*, and *Seattle Times*.

³⁸ *Talk Daily*, 1995.

³⁹ From January 1995 to March 1996, Bob Grant had a syndicated weekend program in addition to his daily New York show. Our literature search indicated that the overwhelming number of references treated him as a local host, so we did as well.

⁴⁰ When these categories did occur, they tended to appear together. As a result, for example, rather than the articles noting a program's discussion of public issues or quoting a host's on-air comments representing 19% of the sample (11% for the former plus 8% for the latter), only 14% actually did either or both.

⁴¹ B. Weber, "A Loud Angry World on the Dial," *New York Times*, June 7, 1992, p.31.

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⁴³ July 16, 1995, 16

⁴⁴ Siegel, November 3, 1994, p. 63.

⁴⁵ Peter Drier and Wm. Middleton, *Chicago Tribune*, December 21, 1994, p.29.

⁴⁶ Winner, May/June 1995, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Timothy Egan, "Triumph Leaves Talk Radio Pondering Its Next Targets," *New York Times*, January 1, 1995, p. 1.

⁴⁸ February 8, 1993, p.25.

⁴⁹ Patrick Goldstein, op cit, p.16.

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¹⁰⁹ Near the close of the 1994 campaign Spokane host Richard Clear told then House Speaker Tom Foley "People have stated, even on this program, that you are a homosexual. Would you like to address that?" Foley responded "That's ridiculous!"

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¹¹⁴ *Washington Post*, June 2, 1996, p. W17.

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¹¹⁶ Because of the way the database search was carried out, the exact starting and ending dates of the two-year period varied somewhat during the fall. For the great majority of hosts, the starting and ending dates were in October.

¹¹⁷ Krippendorff's Alpha was used to determine intercoder reliability. See Krippendorff, Klaus, *Content Analysis: An Introduction To Its Methodology* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980).

**THE ANNENBERG PUBLIC POLICY CENTER
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA**

3620 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-6220

Telephone: (215) 898-7041 • Fax: (215) 898-2024
Internet: appc@asc.upenn.edu