



2008

# Balkanization of Knowledge and Interpretation

Kathleen Hall Jamieson

*University of Pennsylvania*, [kjamieson@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:kjamieson@asc.upenn.edu)

Joseph N. Cappella

*University of Pennsylvania*, [jcappella@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:jcappella@asc.upenn.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers](https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Jamieson, K. H., & Cappella, J. N. (2008). Balkanization of Knowledge and Interpretation. *New York: Oxford University Press*, 191-213. Retrieved from [https://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/609](https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/609)

Jamieson, K. & Cappella, J. (2008). Chapter 12. Balkanization of Knowledge and Interpretation. In K. Jamieson, J. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the conservative media establishment*. (pp.191-213). New York: Oxford University Press.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/609](https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/609)

For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

# Balkanization of Knowledge and Interpretation

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Comments**

Jamieson, K. & Cappella, J. (2008). Chapter 12. Balkanization of Knowledge and Interpretation. In K. Jamieson, J. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the conservative media establishment*. (pp.191-213). New York: Oxford University Press.

In his book *Republic.com*, Cass Sunstein argues that the highly segmented and partisan content of internet sites can lead to polarization of public opinion and the balkanization of knowledge and understanding.<sup>1</sup> This argument resonates with Elihu Katz's concern that fragmentation in media consumption will undercut social integration and our sense of shared national identity,<sup>2</sup> and with Joseph Turow's notion that the "creation of customized media materials... will allow, even encourage, individuals to live in their own personally constructed worlds, separated from people and issues that they don't care about or don't want to be bothered with."<sup>3</sup>

Sunstein believes that polarization and balkanization undermine public deliberation, social consensus, and united action within societies. Although his argument is directed at the internet with its proliferation of partisan sites, the notions are relevant as well to other partisan sources of information such as those provided by Limbaugh, the Fox News programs on which we focus, and the online and print editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.

In this chapter, we argue that Limbaugh's listeners and, by implication, the audiences to other partisan sites, whether liberal or conservative, can come to hold specific knowledge largely unshared by those unexposed to these or similar outlets. The audience can at the same time come to hold common frames of interpretation different from those deployed by audiences reliant on other media outlets. And if the cues from the host of the program persuasively invite hostility to other sources, such as, in Limbaugh's case, the mainstream media, exposure can over time reduce the attention given to those alternative sources and in the process minimize susceptibility to points of view persuasively argued from alternative ideological vantage points.

One byproduct created by these insulating, knowledge-building phenomena is what we call balkanization—a metaphor drawn from the way the Balkan countries degenerated into separate, individual, self-contained political units after World War I. Specifically, we will show that Limbaugh's audience differs in the kind of knowledge it holds and in its interpretation and

distortion of political information. In the following chapter, we add to this argument the notion that distortion of political information in a way that is both systematic and consistent with a source's rhetoric can create a polarized view of political phenomena. Whereas in this chapter we focus on the possibility that Limbaugh helps turn his audience into a balkanized cohort in a sometimes distorted knowledge enclave,<sup>4</sup> in the next we argue that exposure to his message and to that on Fox News polarizes these audiences' attitudes toward Democrats and the mainstream media.

To advance our argument, we first look at the nature of the content. At the core of our analysis is the phenomenon of selective exposure.<sup>5</sup> We show as well that Limbaugh's content—isolated in analyses of transcripts of his show and compared to that of other PTR and mainstream news sources—is distinctive.

After considering content, we will present evidence that exposure to Limbaugh creates balkanization in three arenas: knowledge, interpretations of current events, and rationalizations about election outcomes. We extend these claims to include the effects of exposure to Fox News. In sum, we show here that Limbaugh's audience differs systematically from those not in his audience in its views of politics and social affairs and its interpretations of events. To make this argument, we compare those who are exposed to Limbaugh to other citizens exposed to more general forms of mainstream mass media who are just as motivated and just as able as Limbaugh's audience when it comes to politics. Our analysis begins with Limbaugh's rhetoric.

### *What Limbaugh's Audience Hears*

Throughout this book, Limbaugh's rhetoric has been examined in a variety of specific cases. Here we report more systematic investigations of the content of his program over an extended period, during the presidential campaign in 1996. We asked whether Limbaugh's discussion each day differed from that of the mainstream news and from ideologically similar and dissimilar PTR.

To assess such differences, as noted, we conducted a content analysis of Limbaugh and the mainstream mass media during the primary election period in 1996. The topics treated on the Limbaugh show for the weeks from February 3 through March 29, 1996, were evaluated. Limbaugh had guest hosts during one of these weeks. Even though the results were virtually identical, topics from the guests' shows were excluded from the Limbaugh summary. During the same period, the front-page news stories from three major newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *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.

#### CONTENT DIFFERENT FROM MAINSTREAM NEWS AND SOME OTHER PTR SOURCES

As we noted in earlier chapters, the *Rush 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. Limbaugh redistributed this agenda<sup>6</sup> by giving 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 at that time, his program was more focused on domestic politics than were the mainstream media. His talk show also promoted a fundamental value of personal responsibility and efficacy in support of political involvement and as a basis for rejecting big government and affirmative action. The priority given topics by Limbaugh's show is also at odds with the mainstream news.<sup>7</sup>

The *Rush Limbaugh Show* was different from news coverage not only in the mainstream media but also in other PTR outlets.<sup>8</sup> Conservative PTR shows are too diverse to permit extensive content analysis of them. However, we did compare Limbaugh's topics to those of other PTR shows in a limited time frame during the 1996 primary. In the two-week period from March 4 to 18, we calculated the proportion of coverage on 13 topics by Limbaugh, conservative, liberal, and moderate PTRs, and the mainstream print and broadcast media.

Large differences emerged in the category of foreign affairs and military, with conservative shows (other than Limbaugh's) devoting a great deal of time to this topic area, while Limbaugh all but ignores it. In fact, Limbaugh gives less time to this topic than any other outlet, including liberal shows. Instead Limbaugh allocates this time to discussion of Congress and the president, third parties and the religious right, and especially business and technology and personal responsibility and political efficacy. In contrast to Limbaugh's show, conservative talk radio in that 1996 period gave its attention to crime, punishment, and the justice system, as well as family, education, and ethics.

In 1996, Limbaugh's content differed from that in liberal and moderate talk radio as well. Business and commerce, Congress, and personal efficacy were more prominent in Limbaugh's show and lower in the other three ideological

groups; foreign affairs, crime, and family and education were elevated in the other three talk radio groupings. The pattern, put broadly, is that Limbaugh's show focused on domestic politics, personal (and political) efficacy, and business. Conservative, moderate, and liberal PTR tended to concentrate more centrally on family and education (especially the liberal shows), foreign affairs (especially conservative and moderate shows), and crime and justice.

Limbaugh's agenda did not agree with that of the mainstream media during this two-week period, nor did it coincide with that of other typical PTR sources regardless of their ideological stance. Other PTR and network television news and print news gave fairly similar priorities to topics, while Limbaugh's show assigned different priorities. We would expect these differences in focus to show up in differences in knowledge, interpretation, and opinion.

We cannot be sure that these weeks are representative of Limbaugh or of conservative PTR, but if they are, significant differences do emerge. These differences distinguish Limbaugh's agenda from that of other PTR, even differentiating it from its closest ideological ally, conservative PTR. In fact, Limbaugh's priorities of coverage are just as different from those of other PTR shows (conservative, moderate, or liberal) as they are from the mainstream media's priorities. It is important to note that this content analysis was conducted in 1996, before the advent of Fox News, and did not include a comparison to the editorial page of the *Journal*.

In 1996, Limbaugh's agenda concentrated on domestic politics, personal and political efficacy, and business and free enterprise. We will explore whether these themes are linked to differences in the audiences' knowledge about interpretations of political events and actors.

## *Differences in Knowledge and Interpretation*

### CREATING APPROPRIATE COMPARISON GROUPS

In order to compare regular Limbaugh listeners to other audiences, we segmented our 1996 survey respondents by media consumption. Three of the groups were the usual regular listeners to PTR: Limbaugh only, conservative PTR, moderate/liberal PTR. Two other groups were created from those reporting that they were not regular listeners of PTR (i.e., listening fewer than two times per week). This nonlistening group was divided into those consuming mainstream mass media (MSMM; television or print) news heavily and those not. This yielded five groups, three of which listened to PTR

regularly and two which did not. (For details about these groups and how they were created, see the appendix to this chapter at our website.)

Those consuming MSMM news less were quite different from the heavy users and from the PTR groups, particularly in terms of exposure and attention to and interest in politics.

Those in the heavy media consumption groups were similar to the three PTR groups in education and political involvement. Party affiliation and ideology were as expected. This means that the most liberal and democratic groups were those listening to liberal and moderate PTR. The audience becomes increasingly Republican and conservative in the conservative PTR group. Limbaugh's group is the most conservative and Republican.

The isolation of these groups makes it possible for us to make some simple comparisons among them. The minimal news consumption group is lower in education and political involvement than the other four. As a result, any differences in knowledge or in interpretation we find between the low-news group and the others will not be particularly informative, while differences between Limbaugh and other more heavily exposed groups will be. Differences among groups in knowledge or opinion will be informative when the groups being compared are similar in education and news exposure. In short, the interesting comparisons are among the three PTR groups and the heavy MSMM group, with the light MSMM group serving as a baseline group likely to be different from all the other groups.

## KNOWLEDGE

If the balkanization hypothesis is correct, those who attend to partisan PTR will have different levels of knowledge about campaign topics, with these differences reflecting discussion of those issues by the host, and not simply mirroring educational and involvement difference across audiences. Similarly, when there are differences in coverage of campaign issues by PTR and the MSMM, we can expect differences in knowledge between PTR listeners and those exposed only to MSMM. Because the groups have similar levels of education and similar levels of political interest, differences in knowledge should reflect different levels of discussion and reinforcement across sources. When differences in knowledge emerge across our exposure groups, this can imply the creation of more well-informed and less well-informed subgroups in the larger society on specific issues. These differences are not across-the-board but are issue specific and reflect the biases in coverage across sources.

Our surveys in 1996 focused on a wide variety of topics and events. Here we present ones raised in the campaign by the candidates and receiving some

coverage in one or more media outlets, whether mainstream sources or PTR. (For summary of the questions employed, which are detailed in our survey instruments, see the appendix to this chapter at our website.)

During the primary, participants responded to nine questions assessing their knowledge of issues discussed in the campaign. (For a list of these questions, see the appendix to this chapter at our website). Of the answers, four exhibited patterns relevant to and supportive of the balkanization hypothesis (see figs. 12.1a–12.1d).<sup>9</sup> These queries focused on U.S. troops in Bosnia, Republican contender Bob Dole's involvement in the Trilateral Commission, whether exports were increasing or decreasing, and an issue surrounding the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski.

In cases B and C in figure 12.1 (Bob Dole's association with various international groups and knowledge about exports), the PTR groups are significantly different from both the light and heavy MSMM users. Since light news users are less interested and involved in politics, their limited knowledge is unsurprising. Since heavy users consume a great deal of political information from MSMM, we would expect them to be as well-informed as PTR

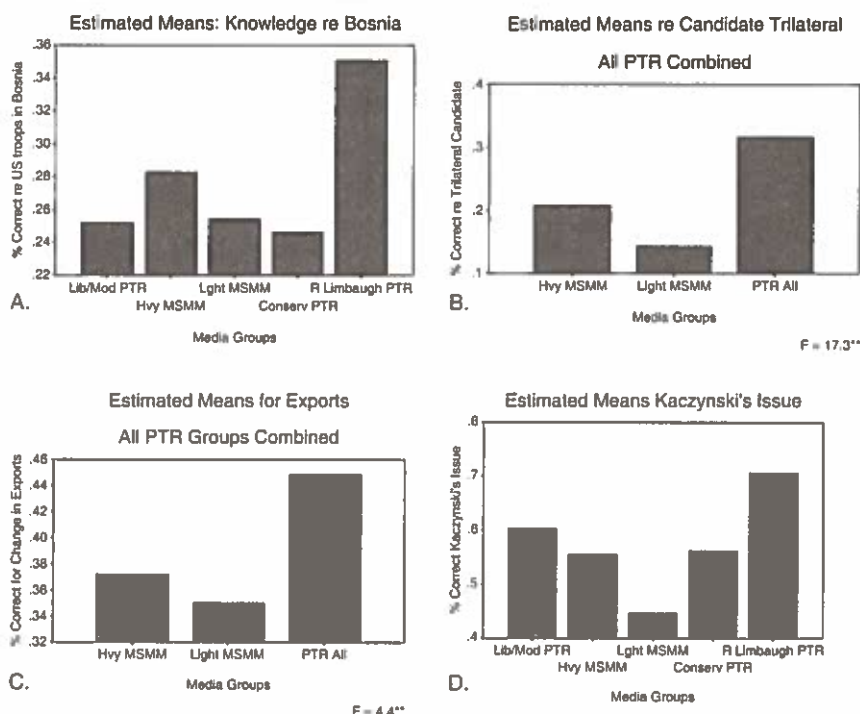


FIGURE 12.1. Knowledge as a percentage correct on four issues covered during the primary campaign: Differences among PTR and mainstream news groups.



consumers; in many cases, they are. However, in these two cases, PTR groups have significantly greater knowledge than either MSMM group. In cases A (U.S. troops in Bosnia) and D (issue involving Kaczynski), Limbaugh listeners not only were more accurate than heavy MSMM users, they were also more knowledgeable than other PTR groups, conservative and liberal.

These four cases show enhanced knowledge both for those who consume Limbaugh and for the broader group of PTR listeners including Limbaugh listeners. When our focus shifts from the primary period—where the vast majority of the content on PTR (and in the MSMM) is about the primary candidates and hence Republican issues—to the fall election campaign, some instructive differences emerge.

During October 1996, we asked respondents about eight different knowledge items that were discussed heavily by the campaigns and, therefore, covered by PTR hosts and the MSMM. Three were about issues central to the Clinton campaign—funding for job training, permitting late-term abortions under some circumstances, and banning cigarette ads targeted to children. Two were addressed by both candidates—a reduction of spending on Medicare and not legalizing same-sex marriages. Overall on these issues, Limbaugh listeners were *less* accurate than those listening to liberal/moderate PTR and than heavy consumers of MSMM while being more accurate than light consumers of MSMM. They were no different from listeners to conservative PTR.

So just as there was a kind of balkanization of knowledge favoring Limbaugh listeners with regard to Republican issues during the primary, there was a comparable differentiation favoring listeners to liberal/moderate PTR (and heavy MSMM), indicating balkanization as well, but of a qualitatively different kind. (For details of these findings, see the appendix to this chapter at our website.)

The basic message here is that knowledge of campaign-related issues is balkanized across media consumption and ideological divides. While Limbaugh may see an advantage to being certain that his conservative listeners are well-informed about Bob Dole's, Pat Buchanan's, and Steve Forbes's views, there is less value to Limbaugh's listeners knowing that Clinton favors a ban on cigarette advertising that targets children or, even more, does not favor legalizing same-sex marriages. These differences in the accuracy of political knowledge can impair informed political decision making, leading audiences to make false inferences about candidates and about their supporters. If citizens wish to choose their candidates on the basis of self-interest (or not for that matter), then it is crucial that they be informed about how candidates will serve that self-interest. To the extent that they are minimally or incorrectly informed, then sources that provide such information—while

serving their own political vested interests—are not serving the needs of the common good.

What about views of the presidential candidates' positions during the fall election period when attention to these issues is intense in a variety of outlets?

#### CERTAIN LIMBAUGH LISTENERS HAD DISTORTED PERCEPTIONS OF BILL CLINTON'S VIEWS

In the 1996 presidential election, we explored people's judgments about the positions of candidates. To do so, we asked eight questions about "proposals that have been discussed during this year's election." Respondents indicated whether Bob Dole, Bill Clinton, both, or neither favored the proposal. Three were Dole proposals, three Clinton, one was both, and one neither. The questions focused on which candidate(s) favored the following:

- "Reducing spending on Medicare" (both)
- "Developing an anti-missile system" (Dole)
- "Increased federal funding for job training" (Clinton)
- "A 15% across-the-board tax cut" (Dole)
- "A ban on cigarette advertising that might reach children" (Clinton)
- "Eliminating the U.S. Department of Education" (Dole)
- "Permitting late term abortions" (Clinton)
- "Legalizing same-sex marriages" (neither)

Later in the interview, the same set of questions was asked of the interviewee using the format "Now I'd like your own views."

Four measures of distortion were created, two for Dole and two for Clinton. Total distortion is distortion due to what is called assimilation<sup>10</sup> (thinking a politician's position is more like your own than it is) and to contrast (thinking a position is more different from your own than it is); our scale ranged from 0 to 8. Directional distortion indicates how much contrast and how much assimilation there is; our scale ranged from -8 to +8. When the value is negative, people think their positions are more different from the candidate's than they actually are—a distortion toward contrast. (For a more detailed description of these measures, see the appendix to this chapter at our website.)

What the directional and total distortion measures provide is a way of assessing the extent to which campaign information is getting through to various groups. We were interested in ideological groups and specific PTR audiences and sought to determine whether there was an association between the PTR environment and direction and the amount of accuracy audiences had about candidates' positions.

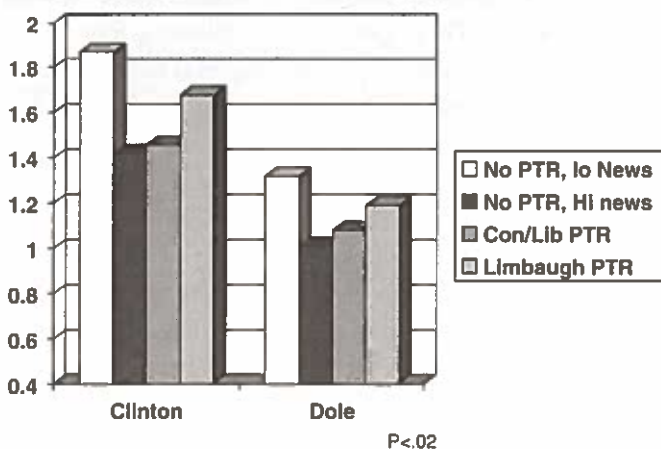
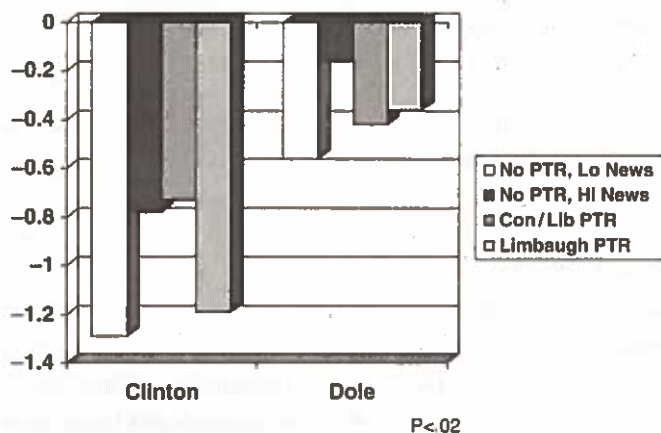
## RESPONDENTS' MEDIA NEWS CONSUMPTION AND DISTORTION OF CANDIDATES' POSITIONS

To investigate the possible role of media consumption in people's judgments of candidates' positions, we first divided those who were not regular listeners to PTR into two subgroups: those who were not attentive or regular consumers of news through mainstream news sources (print and/or broadcast) and those who were. (For the details about how this was done, see the appendix to this chapter at our website.) The regular PTR listeners were grouped into those listening to Limbaugh and those consuming other forms of PTR (liberal, moderate, or conservative, but not Limbaugh).<sup>11</sup> Thus, we compared four groups, two PTR and two non-PTR, with one of the latter groups being attentive consumers of mainstream news.

We compare the distortion of candidates' stands in figure 12.2 for the four groups of news consumers. The graphs invite the following four conclusions (for the statistical details, see the appendix to this chapter at our website).<sup>12</sup> (1) There is more distortion of Clinton's positions than Dole's. (2) No group shows evidence of thinking that a candidate's views overall are more similar to their own positions than is actually the case; the opposite is true. (3) The low-consumption nonlisteners exhibit more distortion than the other groups, which is not surprising, since they tend to be less interested and to consume less information about the campaigns and candidates. (4) Limbaugh regulars tend to have more distorted views of candidates' positions, especially thinking that Bill Clinton's views are more different from their own views than they actually are.

We then explored the distortion of Clinton's positions among Limbaugh listeners to see what group among his listeners were most susceptible to this effect. Here we built on the work of researchers who have carefully studied differences in the public's ability to absorb information from the media about politics. John Zaller and Vincent Price have shown that people with high levels of "civics knowledge" are likely to be more disposed toward successful and habitual reception of information from news.<sup>13</sup> By "civics knowledge" we mean correctly answering simple questions about which party currently has the majority in the House of Representatives, the number of successive terms of office a president can serve, and so on.

Consistent with past research, we used civics knowledge as an indicator of "habitual news reception." We wanted to separate, even within our high exposure, high-attention news groups, those more likely to store the information they received from those less likely to do so. So, as other researchers have, we assumed that those with elevated civics knowledge would be more capable of obtaining and storing accurate information about political candidates and

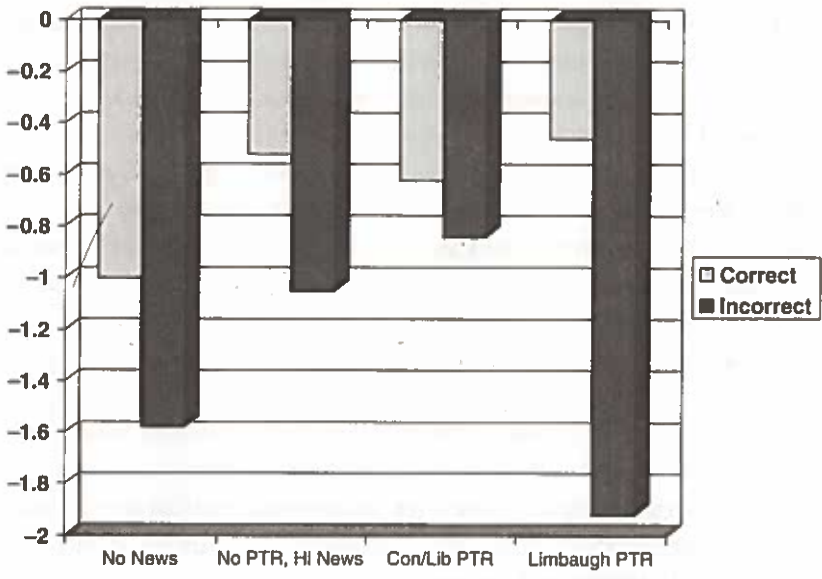


FIGURES 12.2A AND 12.2B. Measures of distortion: Directional distortion (2a) and total distortion (2b) of Clinton's and Dole's positions for four media groups. (Note: in 12.2a the more negative the more distortion away from one's own position; in 12.2b the larger the score the more distortion regardless of direction.)

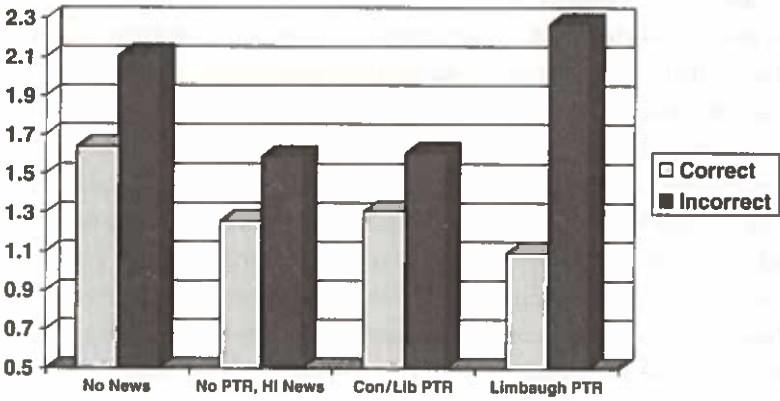
their campaigns and, therefore, less likely to make erroneous inferences. For simplicity, we focus here only on distortions about Bill Clinton.

The comparisons between those with better capacity to digest news (high civics knowledge) and those with lower ability are presented in figure 12.3a and b. They show that people who are knowledgeable about politics distort less in every media group: they show less overall distortion and less contrast.

Most important, though, is the comparison between four media groups for high and low in civics knowledge. The figures show that distortion by



P < .02



P < .01

FIGURES 12.3A AND 12.3B. Measures of distortion of Bill Clinton's positions: Directional distortion (3a) and total distortion (3b) for four news groups. (Note: No news = low news consumption, no PTR; Con/Lib PTR = listeners to conservative, moderate and liberal PTR)

Limbaugh listeners is greater for those with low civics knowledge. In fact, Limbaugh listeners who are more adept at learning from the media do not distort much at all in comparison to other groups.

Limbaugh's rhetoric about Clinton could have affected his low ability listeners' perceptions of Clinton's policies, leading them to think that Clinton's positions were more different from their own than they actually were. This distorted view occurs with those least capable of making sense of information from sources such as the mainstream media—that is, those who have low levels of civics knowledge.

One likely explanation of the distortion differences among Limbaugh listeners is the balancing effect of other news media. Regular consumers of Limbaugh's attacks on President Clinton carry away distorted views if they ignore other coverage of news. In fact, regardless of their consumption of PTR, those with low civics knowledge do consume less and attend less to mainstream media. This group is the most susceptible to influence by sources they deem credible, such as Limbaugh.

When Limbaugh presents distorted or ambiguously framed descriptions of Clinton's views, for those with low civics knowledge the absence of more complete knowledge from other media sources is associated with acceptance of Limbaugh's presentations of Clinton's views. The Limbaugh regulars with high civics knowledge show less distortion, because they use other news media for their information. Those without such additional, balanced information distort Clinton's position more and think his views are less like their own than they actually are. This finding in 1996 anticipated the possibility that when Fox emerged as an alternative source of news for conservatives, and Limbaugh listeners responded by displacing some of their mainstream broadcast exposure to news with exposure to Fox News, their distortion of Democratic positions would increase.

In sum, in our 1996 study, exposure to mainstream media seemed to be effective in reducing distortions. The Limbaugh listeners who were consuming these sources were more accurate than those who were not. Regular Limbaugh listeners who were less able to integrate alternative news sources into their thinking exhibited more distortion of Clinton's positions than other groups.

Limbaugh's representation of Clinton's campaign and presidency paid off with this segment of his audience. These listeners thought Clinton's positions were more different from their own than they actually were; at the same time, Limbaugh's audience did not show the same distortion in judging Dole's positions. In fact, the high and low civics knowledge groups were equally accurate about Dole. Those who were hearing conservative and liberal/

moderate PTR and were low in civics knowledge exhibited more distortion of Dole's positions than did the comparable Limbaugh group.

The least informed groups were those avoiding other news sources and with little readiness to receive other available information. At the same time, exposure to Limbaugh's show misdirected the judgments of his least politically aware listeners regarding Clinton but correspondingly informed their judgments of Dole.

We next ask whether these differences in the informational base reflect distortions in interpretation of political events.

## INTERPRETATION OF EVENTS

We would expect those exposed to partisan PTR to have different kinds of interpretations of the same political events occurring during the campaign. We separate "events" from knowledge and policy proposals because events have a physical reality to them. They are anchored in action. Although events are often filtered through broadcast news or other news sources, they have a presence that is less ephemeral than knowledge gained only vicariously or through policy proposals that are hypothetical. This would certainly be true of presidential debates, which provide viewers with direct experience of the event, even though postdebate commentary is all too often a mad dash toward spin control. Nevertheless, perceptions of real-world "events" may be less susceptible than abstract considerations to exhortation and ideological framings by media personalities.

In most contexts, we would expect liberals to embrace a liberal interpretation and conservatives a conservative one. However, after controlling for these factors, differences across PTR groups and between PTR and MSMM should reflect the effects of information on the creation of homogeneous interpretive communities consistent with partisan, one-sided discussion. These interpretive differences, when they materialize, reflect differences in how the groups understand social and political events. In effect, highly interested, informed, and motivated groups seek to produce interpretations of specific events in ways that support their a priori ideologies, and these interpretive biases may be exacerbated—or at least reinforced—by the rhetoric of partisan media sources.

Respondents were asked for their interpretations of several specific events occurring during the primary period. The interpretive options often reflected more and less cynical, more and less self-interested perceptions. For example, during the primary campaign, Los Angeles police were videotaped beating illegal immigrants in a fashion reminiscent of the Rodney King incident.

Respondents were asked both if they thought these tapes showed only one side of the event and if they thought they represented police brutality. Interpretive questions are not to be confused with opinions about general issues not tied to specific events. A survey choice such as "Government regulation of business (1) is necessary to protect the public interest, or (2) usually does more harm than good," for instance, is an opinion about regulation of business in general, not an interpretation of an event occurring in the public's ken.

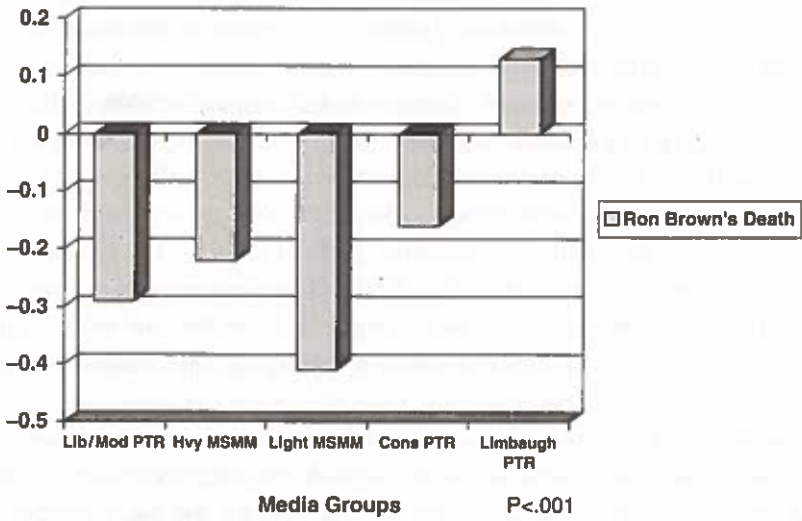
Late in the primary period, we asked about respondents' interpretations of six specific events: the Los Angeles police beating captured on video; the death of Clinton cabinet member Ron Brown; Republicans in Congress favoring an increase in the minimum wage (then pending before Congress); President Clinton's veto of the late-term abortion ban; the Republicans' movement for a constitutional amendment on government spending; and the media's coverage of Ted Kaczynski and Timothy McVeigh. For example, regarding changed Republican views on the minimum wage, we asked the respondent which of these reasons he or she thought was closer to the Republicans' motives: compromise on an important political issue or abandoning their principles for political gain. (For the wording of each question listed, see the appendix to this chapter at our website.)

Although answers to these questions certainly have an attitudinal base, they are concerned with interpretations of specific events in the news and not abiding issues. They can be understood as interpretations by the audiences derived from a complex of a priori dispositions, as well as frames for these issues provided by media sources.

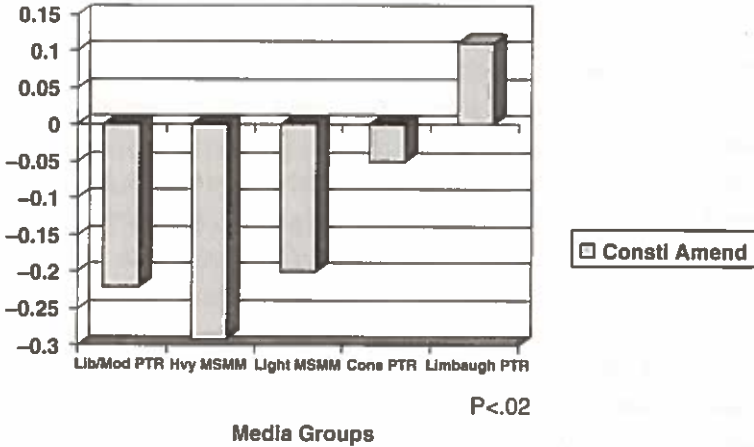
Of the six interpretive questions, four exhibit results that are consistent with our hypothesis, and the other two (on minimum wage and police beatings) exhibit the same pattern but not significantly so.<sup>14</sup> Two of the issues are represented in figures 12.4a and 12.4b. In panel A, Limbaugh listeners were more likely to say that President Clinton's words of admiration about Ron Brown after his death in a plane accident were uttered for political advantage rather than because Clinton really admired Brown. No other group leaned toward that reaction. In panel B, a similar result is apparent on the opposite end of the ideological continuum. Limbaugh listeners were more likely to infer that Republicans' purpose in discussing a constitutional amendment to require a two-thirds majority in Congress for tax increases was to hold down deficits (less cynical) rather than to contrast themselves to Democrats (more cynical). These results show that it is not just being conservative or liberal that determines the interpretation of the event but how different sources cast the event. Limbaugh's advocacy could be part of the reason his listeners share his views.



Interpretation of Reactions to Ron Brown's Death (+1 = cynical)



Constitutional Amendment Required to Raise Taxes (1= less cynical)



FIGURES 12.4A AND 12.4B. Differences in interpretation of events by five media exposure groups. (Note: In panel A, higher score indicates "political advantage for President Clinton versus heartfelt admiration"; in panel B, a higher score indicates "Republicans argue for a constitutional amendment for tax increases to hold down deficits versus contrasting with Democrats.")

## *The Second 1996 Presidential Debate*

We next consider the effect on Limbaugh listeners of exposure to the second presidential debate. Of interest to us was the question whether Limbaugh's listeners' views of Clinton's and Dole's performances differed from those of other PTR listeners and nonlisteners. People's assessments of a candidate's debate performance are based on a more direct experience of the debate (for watchers anyway) than is the case for a candidate's policy positions. The details of candidates' policies are found in lengthy and often complex position papers. The details of performance in a debate are directly experienced using the tools people feel comfortable with—their own eyes and ears and lifelong experience judging the competence and trustworthiness of others.

Distortion of Clinton's policy positions by Limbaugh listeners is perhaps more likely than distortions that arise from a directly experienced event such as a presidential debate. The stands that the Clinton and Dole campaigns took on various issues were generally available through the media outlets covering the campaigns. In 1996, before widespread use of the internet to communicate candidates' positions, misrepresentations of Clinton's positions by Limbaugh were not as easily corrected by locating statements and briefs from the campaigns themselves. By contrast, the presidential debates were directly experienced events, which may be more difficult to distort through media interpretation and framing from ideological spokespeople such as Limbaugh.

The fourth wave of our 1996 PTR survey was timed to be in the field during the week following the second presidential debate. Some of the questions asked about whether interviewees watched the debate or not, which candidate they thought did a better job, their reasons for this judgment, and other aspects of their perceptions and knowledge.

The PTR listeners were more likely to report watching the debate than were the nonlisteners. Limbaugh listeners watched at a higher rate (70%) than nonlisteners (53%) and at somewhat higher rates than listeners to conservative (62%) and to liberal/moderate PTR. That PTR listeners would be more likely to watch the debate is consistent with previous research on their higher levels of political involvement and following of politics.<sup>15</sup>

To evaluate the audience's judgments about who did a better job, we asked: "Regardless of which candidate you personally support, who do you think did a better job in the debate—Bill Clinton or Bob Dole?" The audiences were scaled from +1 for Dole to -1 for Clinton, with those who either volunteered "both" or were unsure scored at 0.

No one would be surprised to find partisans saying that they thought that their candidate did a better job. Indeed, Republicans and Democrats said precisely this about who they thought won the debate. However, in comparing how strong the differences are between Republicans and Democrats across PTR audiences, the disparity is sharpest for those listening to Limbaugh. For this group, the Republicans were more likely to say that Dole won than Republicans in any other media group.

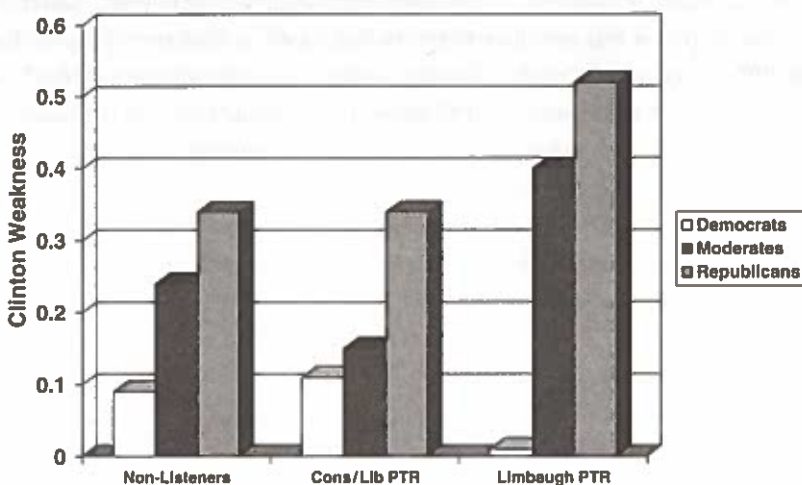
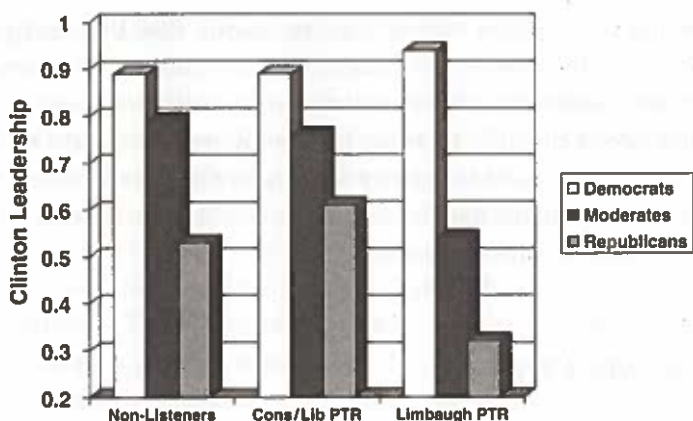
### *Perceptions of Debate Styles*

In addition to perceptions of which candidate did a better job in the debate, we were also interested in people's perceptions of the debaters' performances. Accordingly, those who watched the debate were offered a series of terms to choose from. We asked: "Thinking about what you saw while watching the debate, please tell me if each one [word] does or does not apply to Bob Dole." The words were: "mean," "weak," "warm," "dishonest," "leader-like," and "angry." The list was repeated for Clinton. How people perceive the debaters' styles is certainly not the only criterion they use to judge who does a better job, but it is an important one.<sup>16</sup>

In figures 12.5a and b, we compare perceptions of how much Clinton showed leadership and weakness during the presidential debates for each of three groups—Limbaugh listeners, listeners to other PTR, and those who are not regular listeners. The key comparison is between Limbaugh's moderates and Republicans and the same types of persons in the other groups. To find that Democrats saw Clinton's performance as leader-like and not exhibiting weakness is to define what it means to be a Democrat. But Limbaugh's moderates and Republicans see Clinton as considerably weaker and less leader-like than do other moderates and Republicans.<sup>17</sup>

Bill Clinton was also evaluated differently by some Limbaugh listeners on meanness and anger—two characteristics that could have been applied to either Dole or Clinton. Republicans who were Limbaugh listeners were more likely to say Clinton was mean and angry than Republicans who did not listen to PTR. Combined with the perceptions of leadership and weakness portrayed in figure 12.5, we have more negative judgments of Clinton's style among Republicans listening to Limbaugh than those not listening to PTR at all. In short, Limbaugh's attacks on Clinton may have paid off even among his most partisan listeners.

Perceptions of candidates' performance in the second debate were associated with the styles viewers attributed to the candidates, specifically the



FIGURES 12.5A AND 12.5B. Perceptions of Bill Clinton's leadership and weakness during the second presidential debate: Media groups by party identification.

qualities of meanness, weakness, warmth, and leadership. Perceptions of Clinton's weakness and leadership during the debate were more negative for Republicans who were regular listeners of Limbaugh than for other Republicans. In effect, Limbaugh activated Republicans' negative evaluations more than did being in other listening and nonlistening groups.

Limbaugh's listeners tended to use political party heuristics to judge the candidate who did the best job in the debate more than any other listening or nonlistening group. While party is an important factor in accounting for

judgments of debate performance for any partisan, Limbaugh listeners relied on this more than others. These data suggest that he is successful in activating party as a criterion for judgment.

No one was surprised to find Republicans who watched the debate saying that Dole did a better job. However, Republicans who were Limbaugh regulars did so more often than Republicans who were regular listeners of other talk shows and than Republicans who did not listen to PTR regularly at all. In effect, Limbaugh listeners used their party identification as Republicans as a judgmental criterion for debate performance more than other groups did. They were primed to think in terms of their party affiliation, and so party became a more salient basis for judgment among Limbaugh regulars.<sup>18</sup>

### *Attributions about 1996 Presidential Election Outcomes*

At the conclusion of the 1996 presidential campaign, we tested a specific class of perceptions, namely, the reasons that election turned out in favor of Clinton rather than Dole. Through both open- and closed-ended questions, we elicited specific explanations—sometimes called attributions—from respondents as to why they thought the election turned out as it did. Our interest in postelection attributions was motivated by two factors. First, all available evidence anticipated a Clinton win. We wondered how Limbaugh would maintain the spirit and commitment of the party faithful in light of the win by his arch-nemesis. Second, events discomfiting to Limbaugh's listeners provided an opportunity to investigate their attributions, or reasons, explaining these outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

To ensure that we wouldn't influence the kind of attributions offered, open-ended questions were posed first. Participants were asked what they thought was "the main reason Bill Clinton was elected over Bob Dole and the other candidates." Later in the interview, respondents were presented with a series of 15 one-sentence explanations for the election results and were asked to indicate whether they thought each was a "major reason," a "minor reason," or "not a reason."

Included were both substantive explanations (e.g., "Clinton has a good record as President during his first term") and justifications dealing with the strategies of the campaigns or characteristics of the voting public. For example, one of the strategy-based explanations posited that "Dole did not stress family values as strongly as he should have"; another suggested: "Dole doesn't come across as well on television as Clinton." Responses ranged from high to low. The most accepted explanation had to do with Dole's lack of

presence on television; the least accepted was public rebellion against the treatment Clinton was receiving from some talk radio hosts. (For a complete list of these items and their weighted means, see the appendix to this chapter at our website.)<sup>20</sup>

The topics volunteered in the open-ended responses were compared to the closed-ended ones. By and large, the explanations that were highly ranked in the closed-ended questions were common in the open-ended ones; similarly, the election explanations that were ranked as unimportant tended to be relatively rare in the open-ended responses.

As in the earlier comparisons among those who did and did not listen to PTR, we divided those not listening to PTR during the fall election campaign into heavy and light consumers of mainstream media.<sup>21</sup> As before, five groups were compared on a summary index that included the following explanations: (a) "Bill Clinton stole good ideas from the Republicans"; (b) "The public wasn't interested enough in getting the truth about the candidates"; (c) "Bill Clinton lied about his record"; (d) "Newspapers were biased in favor of liberals"; (e) "Bob Dole didn't make an issue of Bill Clinton's character as strongly as he should have"; (f) "Bill Clinton has a good record as President during his first term"; (g) "The public was easily fooled by Clinton's slick ads and campaign." These were grouped together because people tended to respond to them in similar ways.

Those accepting statements such as these as explanations for the election's outcome were subscribing to accounts that blamed President Clinton, the media's "liberal" attitudes, and the public. Or they were attributing the election's result to strategic factors, such as Dole failing to attack Clinton on the issue of character. The only substantive account in the list was the one stipulating that Clinton had a good record during his first term—a kind of begrudging admiration.

Limbaugh listeners differed significantly from all other media groups in the degree to which they attributed the election's outcome to these types of reasons. Although they differed least from those listening to conservative talk radio, there were differences between the two groups; the non-Limbaugh groups were about the same as one another in their attributions.

Limbaugh's pre- and postelection rhetoric helps to account for these differences in attribution. Limbaugh criticized President Clinton in every coded broadcast from May until Election Day in 1996. The scandals associated with Clinton's administration were often revisited by Limbaugh. They ranked third, behind the Democratic president himself and the mainstream media, in analyses of Limbaugh's subject matter. His ongoing emphasis on character flaws and on the pro-Clinton, anti-Dole bias of the media may have served

to prepare listeners for attributions that sidestepped substantive differences between Clinton and Dole and activated other explanations.

For example, both during the campaign and in the voting booth, in the 1996 election women voters preferred Clinton over Dole. The media were aware of and extensively reported this preference. Limbaugh responded by making a significant issue of female voting dispositions in 1996. He characterized these women's judgments as silly and emotion-driven, implying an association between women and untrustworthiness or irrationality. His disdain for mainstream media coverage may have helped his audience to conclude or reinforced its disposition to believe that the mainstream media were manipulative and underhanded. These implications, in turn, could have contributed to his audience's account of the election results as the product of misguided or misled voters or the triumph of style and guile.

The attributions Limbaugh listeners made about the election reinforced their belief in the legitimacy and effectiveness of their conservative beliefs. In their minds, their candidate did not lose because of his proposed programs or because of Clinton's defense of the Democratic agenda. Rather, Dole lost because of an easily duped public, a slick and media-savvy opponent, and biased news media. Such sense-making enables this audience to retain its ideological worldview.

Much of the research into the effects of strongly partisan media such as PTR has focused on the direct effects of exposure on audiences' attitudes and beliefs about the candidates or the issues.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, we suggest that one way that media frame and thereby affect audience perceptions is by shaping their interpretations of the causes of political events. These interpretations, in turn, can have implications for audience members' feelings and attitudes not only about the issues confronting the nation but also about those seeking and holding elective office.

### *The "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" SBVT and Mainstream News (2004)*

We had another opportunity to study balkanization in August 2004, when the SBVT aired ads challenging Kerry's patriotism on the basis of statements the SBVT alleged he had made when he testified against the war to a Senate committee. The group also challenged the legitimacy of the medals he had been awarded during that war. The Kerry campaign denied these charges, claiming that the group was misconstruing his statements and impugning

his integrity without evidence. Kerry representatives clashed with the SBVT spokesman largely on Fox, MSNBC, and CNN throughout August 2004 as the mainstream media held back. When mainstream print and broadcast news media, including Ted Koppel's *Nightline*, finally weighed in, it was with evidence that largely corroborated Kerry's accounts. Here, in other words, was a classic test case in which facts were contested and the mainstream media largely vindicated one side.

In an Annenberg postelection survey in 2004, we asked whether our respondents had seen or heard about ads by a group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (for details about the survey, see our website). Those who indicated that they had were asked, "In general how accurate do you think those ads were?" Listening to Limbaugh and watching Fox each independently predicted an increased likelihood that those surveyed had seen or heard about the SBVT ads and believed the group's claims were accurate, despite extensive controls to account for other explanations. (For details, see the appendix to this chapter at our website.) This finding would suggest that these two outlets magnified their audience's exposure to the attack on Kerry and at the same time insulated that audience from corrective information advanced in the mainstream media.<sup>23</sup>

## *Conclusion*

Balkanization is the byproduct of a process of creating differences among segments of the public in knowledge, interpretation, and opinion. Here we attribute this phenomenon to exposure to specific sources. Balkanization differentiates one group of citizens from another in what they know about, and in how they interpret social and political events. Although differences among members of the public in ideology, knowledge, and opinion are the hallmark of human interest and variability, new media—and specifically partisan PTR—use rhetoric that capitalizes on human needs and motivations to create, in some cases, and reinforce, in others, special knowledge enclaves. In this chapter, we have suggested some ways balkanization might be expressed among the listeners to PTR, especially Limbaugh's programs. His rhetorical style and content distinguish him and, therefore, his listeners not only from those unexposed to his program but also from those attentive to other PTR hosts. In 1996, mainstream audiences were largely unexposed to his daily doses of intense anti-Clinton rhetoric, his lessons about the "liberal biases" of the mainstream media, and his calls for ideological integrity and political and social involvement.



Limbaugh's audience comes away from its daily encounters with the conservator of Reaganism knowing what is necessary to be a good conservative and a good conservative Republican. Listeners experience the minor and major events of political and social life through the lenses Limbaugh offers. When Ron Brown was killed in a plane crash and President Clinton eulogized his close friend and cabinet member, Limbaugh seized the opportunity to criticize Clinton as an opportunist ready to take political advantage of even the death of his friend. When Republican nominee Bob Dole lost the 1996 presidential election to the man Limbaugh had criticized every day for the past year, his listeners emerged from exposure to his program seeing this outcome as evidence that the media were biased in favor of "liberals"; the public, too easily fooled; and Clinton, slicker than their party's nominee.

The concept of balkanization describes in a summary way the kind of influences Limbaugh can have on his audience. The phenomenon may always have existed. But we see it as a harbinger, in 1996, of the effects of newer forms of partisan media as well, including Fox News and partisan blogs.