IN FOCUS: Right-Wing Media

Introduction

by HEATHER HENDERSHOT, editor

Since the Reagan administration’s suspension of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, the United States has experienced a surge in right-wing media production. This surge is not simply the result of the doctrine’s demise, however; the doctrine was just one of numerous victims of communications deregulation. Deregulation and, more specifically, the growth of cable television that deregulation enabled, led to a dramatic increase in the number of available broadcast outlets. While this would eventually culminate in the emergence of Fox News in 1996, in the 1980s the fallout was often less right wing than bathetic. Late-night TV was suddenly dominated by infomercials for timeless products such as the Flowbee (yes, you can cut your hair with a vacuum cleaner). Afternoons were taken over by syndicated strips of *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (syndicated, 1983–1985) and *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (syndicated, 1985–1986, 1989–1992) cartoons. And the early evening saw the rise of *Entertainment Tonight* (syndicated, 1981–present), *Hard Copy* (syndicated, 1989–1999), and other cheap news-magazine shows.1

The new content enabled by deregulation was hardly “apolitical,” but it would be excessive simply to label it “right-wing” across the board, even if *G.I. Joe* did shamelessly support military spending. That is, even as we acknowledge that a rightward turn in American politics has coincided with a rightward turn in communications policies, we must be careful not to fall into a conspiratorial fugue as we seek to understand the complicated coincidence of these two turns. Television became both more conservative and more liberal in the wake of deregulation in the 1980s.

Radio, on the other hand, swung right more ferociously in those years. Freed from the limits of “fairness” (though still theoretically beholden to specific regulations regarding “decency”), talk radio

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expanded rapidly, often tilting to the right. It was here that conservative political candidates were promoted, free-market economics were advocated, and reproductive rights were opposed. Rush Limbaugh began coining his neologisms: his friends were “dittoheads”; his enemies were “feminazis,” or worse. At the same time, shock jocks pushed at the boundaries of “decency” and aired increasingly risqué material. Broadcasting the sounds of women performing genital acts with ping-pong balls—acts that have probably never even occurred to most people (except, perhaps, seriously kinky Flowbee users)—is, in and of itself, neither left wing or right wing. It’s just funny, disgusting, immoral, or misogynist, depending on your point of view.

It is easy to say that deregulation created right-wing media, but it would be more accurate to say that deregulation led to the creation (and the elimination) of many kinds of media. Deregulation specifically enabled the rise of niche media. If The Rush Limbaugh Show (syndicated, 1992–1996) served a niche TV audience, so did Star Trek: The Next Generation (syndicated, 1987–1994), a program with flawlessly liberal credentials. And if Glenn Beck (HLN, 2006–2008; Fox News, 2009–2011) would never have thrived and found national sponsorship in a highly regulated environment of communications scarcity, the same is probably true of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–2003), a highly serialized program that never came close to drawing a blockbuster-sized audience. In other words, there are damn good reasons to be skeptical about the effects of deregulation, not only on content (the rise of profit-driven news being an obvious issue of concern) but also on labor practices, ownership, and so on. But, at the same time, we also need to admit that deregulation did affect content in some positive ways. Deregulation is a complicated phenomenon, and we aren’t telling the story properly if we stick to the all-too-common notion that deregulation had only negative effects on American media and regulation had only positive effects.

In the regulated pre-Reagan environment, news coverage did indeed attempt to be “balanced,” but regulation often seemed to promote not so much political parity as utter blandness. The Fairness Doctrine theoretically required broadcasters to cover “controversial issues of public importance,” and when covering controversy, broadcasters did have to provide more than one point of view, but it was tempting (and often advertiser friendly) to take the easy way out and not cover controversial material at all. The fall of the Fairness Doctrine did not inspire newscasters to suddenly become more politically adventurous, but the point is that the doctrine never really worked as well as regulators had hoped it would. In the pre-cable, regulated climate of media scarcity, it was most often not left- or right-wing speech that thrived but centrist, moderate speech.

2 Deregulation led to the virtual annihilation of independent television producers, for example. To my mind, the best books covering the effects of deregulation (although this is not their exclusive purpose) are Amanda Lotz, The Television Will Be Revolutionized (New York: New York University Press, 2007), and Derek Kompare, Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television (New York: Routledge, 2004).

3 The argument that the doctrine had a chilling effect on speech is not altogether true, as Patricia Aufderheide has demonstrated. See Aufderheide, “After the Fairness Doctrine: Controversial Programming and the Public Interest,” Journal of Communication 40, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 47–72.
Liberals have long complained that the communications industry needs to be re-regulated. A common retort from supporters of deregulation—aside from the obvious claim that there is more profit to be made by conglomerates in a deregulated environment—is that the regulation of broadcasting was necessitated by scarcity, and that such scarcity is irretrievably gone. Theoretically, anyone of modest means could print a broadside forty years ago, but not anyone could start up a TV or radio station, and thus regulation attempted to ensure that the public interest would be properly served. In an age of blogs, YouTube, digital cable, and Twitter, scarcity of communication is the least of our worries. Indeed, if our former problem was scarcity, our current problem may well be logorrhea. More speech from the left, right, and center is more widely accessible than ever before, but, realistically, how do you separate the wheat from the chaff? In terms of media consumption, it’s quite likely that you stick to what you know, whether that means bland sitcoms, nerdy sci-fi, lowbrow reality dating shows, right-wing radio, or left-wing blogs.

To state the obvious, plenitude can mean diversity, but it can also simply mean abundance. There are now TV channels devoted to food and pets, but none devoted specifically to, say, union activism or women’s rights—although plenty of programs are gently liberal. By contrast, finding news (or opinion) programs celebrating free-market economics is not very difficult. While deregulation and “nicheification” have hardly resulted in a right-wing takeover, there’s no denying that it’s easier to find certifiably right-wing speech on your TV or radio dial than certifiably left-wing speech. To summarize, deregulation has eliminated some kinds of expression, encouraged others, enabled rapacious acquisitions and mergers of communications companies, benefited viewers, and not benefited viewers. It’s a mixed bag.

I offer all of this background as context to frame this In Focus on right-wing media. Aside from Christopher Sharrett’s essay on Jack Webb, all the figures and topics examined in the following pages are in some way indebted for their very existence to deregulation and/or the concomitant rise of niche branding strategies. Sharrett’s essay takes us back to the late 1960s, when Jack Webb’s independent company, Mark VII, produced a new version of the crime procedural *Dragnet* (NBC, 1951–1959; 1967–1970). While the fifties incarnation of the program had hardly been liberal, the sixties version was relentless in its attacks on the counterculture, hippies, malcontents, and protestors. If you were “different” in any way—an intellectual, a freethinker, even a reader of French literature—*Dragnet* had nothing but contempt for you. It’s helpful to bear in mind that *Dragnet 1967*, and its incarnations through 1970, were running at the same time that the John Birch Society was at the peak of its activity. Further, a grassroots right-wing broadcasting movement, epitomized by figures such as Carl McIntire, H. L. Hunt, Billy James Hargis, and Dan Smoot, was thriving—though also fighting counterattacks from the Federal Communications Commission, the Internal Revenue Service, the Democratic National Committee, and liberal citizen activists.4 We generally think of the 1960s as an era of gimmicky TV—families were monsters, wives were witches, horses could talk, people marooned on desert islands relentlessly encountered

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rock bands and indulged in banana cream pies—sprinkled with a few moments of out-right political subversion such as The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour (CBS, 1967–1969). But on local radio and TV outlets, often operating under a dubious mantle of “public service,” the sixties was also a peak period for anti–civil rights, anticommunist, and anti-counterculture discourse. Webb’s program represents a mainstreamed version of the extremist rhetoric thriving on independent TV and radio stations all over America in those years.

Like Sharrett, Geoffrey Baym offers a textual analysis of a right-wing program, although Fox News’s 1/2 Hour News Hour (2007) was, in contrast to Dragnet, quite short lived. Created by Joel Surnow, the man behind 24 (Fox, 2001–2010), 1/2 Hour was intended as a conservative retort to The Daily Show (Comedy Central, 1996–) and the Colbert Report (Comedy Central, 2005–). It was a miserable failure, mostly because it was painfully unfunny, but also because it was more mean spirited than clever, and because it reinforced standard right-wing beliefs (e.g., climate change is a liberal conspiracy) rather than responding in a lively manner to current political events. As Baym explains, “Like 24, and like Fox News itself, 1/2 Hour presented a hermetically sealed discursive universe, one that demanded narrow ideological conformity and suggested, explicitly, that those who would disagree are fools.” What Surnow didn’t seem to get was that The Daily Show and Colbert aren’t funny simply because they are driven by a liberal political agenda. They are funny because their hosts understand comic timing, their writers are sharp, and they are willing to make fun of all political camps. If you are a public servant who gets caught e-mailing pictures of yourself in your underpants to total strangers, The Daily Show is going to make fun of you, whether you are a Republican or a Democrat (and especially if your name happens to be “Weiner”).

Jeff Jones and Laurie Ouellette take us in a different direction, examining how Fox News and Sarah Palin, respectively, function within branded, niche-media culture, reifying right-wing political dissent. Jones is interested specifically in how Fox News affects political reality through its ideological performance. “Through its own performative constructions of reality and aesthetic performances of the raw material of daily life,” Jones explains, “Fox has reformulated the ways in which news engages with and even shapes contemporary politics.” Ouellette examines Sarah Palin’s construction of herself as a branded political personality. Like Spiro T. Agnew some forty years earlier, Palin imagines herself in conflict with a biased, unfair media establishment. Unlike Agnew, however, Palin has many more communications outlets available to her when she chooses to vent her frustrations. If Palin is an “outsider” suffering from “lamestream media” persecution, she is also a best-selling author with a Twitter feed that goes out to well over seven hundred thousand people (including, it seems, every political journalist in the country); her own short-lived reality show; and a TV studio

in her home, which she uses to deliver her opinions on Fox News. It’s hard to imagine an outsider being any more inside the culture. As a politician, she is at this point a washout, but as a branded commodity she has struck gold.

Our final two In Focus contributors turn to the issues of homophobia and racism, in new media and old media, respectively. Robert Howard examines online videos, with a particular focus on antigay YouTube videos and the issue of gay marriage. Responding to the common notion that online recombinant media production represents a kind of progressive folk culture, Howard asks us to think through ways to interpret online videos that promote an overtly right-wing agenda, whether inviting debate and discussion or simply encouraging hatred. Howard demonstrates how the concept of vernacular authority can offer “a neutral way of imagining how everyday people access their non-institutional status to make authoritative claims.” Allison Perlman focuses on the racial politics expressed by Rush Limbaugh on his radio program. As Perlman explains, “Limbaugh has reiterated that it is he and fellow conservatives who are the true heirs to Martin Luther King Jr. and the black freedom struggle that he led, and that liberals are the true perpetrators of racial discrimination in the post–civil rights era.” Further, Limbaugh contends that “the greatest obstacle facing African Americans in the post–civil rights era is not continuing and inherited forms of racial discrimination but, rather, the collective ‘victim’ mentality foisted upon them by contemporary civil rights leaders, affirmative action programs, and multicultural education.”

Together, the six short essays presented here cannot overview the entire scope of American right-wing media, but they do give us helpful insights into the past, present, and future of such media. Although Palin, Limbaugh, and Fox News are all post-Reagan innovations, the case of Webb reminds us that right-wing media is hardly new to the American scene. Indeed, there have been three periods when right-wing broadcasting has thrived in the United States. The first was embodied by a single man, Father Charles Coughlin, in the 1920s and 1930s. Coughlin was shut down by his own church, under pressure from the Roosevelt administration. The second period was during the Cold War, when public affairs programs such as H. L. Hunt’s Answers for Americans and Facts Forum attacked communism from a hard-right perspective in the fifties, and The Dan Smoot Report and Carl McIntire’s Twentieth Century Reformation Hour attacked civil rights and the counterculture in the sixties. These programs were shut down by the combined efforts of the FCC, the IRS, and other concerned parties. The third period, of course, is ours, the era of Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, and Sean Hannity. Ratings are high, and there is no end in sight. The differences between the postwar right-wing media surge and the current one are really quite striking. Forty years ago, Dan Smoot was sponsored by a single wealthy right-wing dog-food manufacturer. The wide range of mainstream national sponsors happy to advertise today on Fox News could not offer a more remarkable contrast.

On the other hand, by the end of Glenn Beck’s run on Fox, his advertising was largely limited to metallurgical services (Beck proposed hoarding gold as a hedge against the declining economy). Beck’s viewer numbers were high, but he seemed too extreme—to car manufacturers and fast-food restaurants, if not to his fans—and Fox couldn’t sell ads. In other words, Beck was defeated by the free market. He’s
busy pursuing other ventures now, and there is no reason to believe that Beck won’t be successful in his own branded, niche, online environment. But it is instructive to remember that those who live by the sword die by the sword. In a news-opinion climate unfettered by regulatory concerns, the FCC can’t break you, but the free market can.

Jack Webb and the Vagaries of Right-Wing TV Entertainment

by Christopher Sharrett

Any reflection on the reactionary ideology of television entertainment during the Cold War years and after must consider Jack Webb. One of the industry’s auteurs, Webb created the iconic cop show *Dragnet*, a program that today seems little more than propaganda for the Los Angeles Police Department. *Dragnet* was conceived at a time when the institution was fast losing legitimacy with the urban poor and even sectors of the middle class, but the show is more than a defense of the police. It wants to define “American values” and to separate the righteous not just from criminals but from all the misfits, oddities, and malcontents who pollute the American landscape.

Webb began as a supporting actor in *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and decent films noirs such as *Dark City* (William Dieterle, 1950); *Appointment with Danger* (Lewis Allen, 1951); and most crucially for Webb’s authorial vision, *He Walked by Night* (Alfred L. Werker, 1948), which would become *Dragnet*’s stylistic template, from its semidocumentary quality down to its opening title card that read, “The names have been changed—to protect the innocent.” After originating *Dragnet* on radio in 1949, Webb directed the series in its 1950s TV run (NBC, 1951–1959) and later directed and produced the show when it was resurrected for the 1960s (NBC, 1967–1970).

1 Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Lost in the Fifties: Recovering Phantom Hollywood* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 106–109. Dixon argues persuasively that Herbert L. Strock, a creative force in 1950s TV and film, was a crucial creator of *Dragnet* (he was also a regular director of another 1950s cop show, *Highway Patrol* [syndicated, 1955–1959]). Dixon conducted numerous interviews with Strock, who claimed that he was removed from *Dragnet* by an angry Webb and purged from its history. The difficulty with this account is that Strock’s style, although similar to the one developed by Webb, displays little of Webb’s neurosis and is fairly generic.

was embodied in *Dragnet* as completely as that of any celebrated film director in his or her most identifiable work. In Joe Friday, whom he always portrayed, he created a character who would be the mouthpiece for his social-political outlook. Webb the bullying director was Webb the angry, sometimes hysterical Sergeant Joe Friday. From its authoritarian voice-over to the two sweaty male fists that bang out the metal quasi-fascist Mark VII logo (symbol of Webb’s production company) at each episode’s conclusion, *Dragnet* and Webb seem synonymous with the right-wing worldview.

Webb’s show served specific institutional needs. NBC, the sponsoring network, was obviously one institution invested in the program; the other was the LAPD. The latter provided Webb with an encumbrance he insisted on, not only to aid the show’s verisimilitude but also to permit him to be an advocate for the LAPD and its controversial chief William H. Parker. In later manifestations of the show, Webb paid homage to whoever was at the particular moment in charge of the LAPD. Webb also used the names of actual LAPD officers for his walk-on cops, including DeWayne Wolfer, a forensics investigator whom some researchers have viewed as a central figure in covering up information pertaining to the Robert F. Kennedy assassination.3

Jack Webb’s Sergeant Joe Friday is the television incarnation of the paranoid style in American politics. The “other” is omnipresent, especially in the 1960s series. Webb’s lengthy establishing shots of the smog-laden LA cityscape show us not the generic “naked city” shielding criminals but, rather, an image of a normal world that can be easily capsized by those who don’t belong—which in Webb’s vision includes much of the population. Webb is a man possessed, focusing on the details of daily life as a way of holding off the storm. He is Wilhelm Reich’s “little man,” obsessed with minutiae, noting at the start of each *Dragnet* episode not only the day of the month but also the weather and the hour to the minute.

*Dragnet* is known for its sparse style, clipped delivery, and mise-en-scène shorn of fancy aesthetics. This lean aesthetic could be read as a rejection of feminine; indeed, the repression of the feminine is a preoccupation of the show. *Dragnet* has some very recognizable—one might say trademark—stylistic tics, including its four-chord opening theme, a dour, strident deformation of Miklos Rozsa’s opening for *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946). That, and Walter Schumann’s “Dragnet March,” aka “Danger Ahead,” conveyed the show’s essentially martial character. The show sticks to a strict shot-countershot formula, beginning with shots of Joe Friday and his partner at police headquarters, with its (in the color shows of the 1960s) brown wooden tables and green, metal office chairs. *Dragnet* has a strong sense of confinement, except for panoramic images of Los Angeles at the start of each episode and the occasional bridge shot of Friday and his partner going from place to place in their unmarked police car. While Joe Friday never used the line “Just the facts, ma’am,” which is associated with the show, the phrase captures Webb’s dismissal of that which has no practical use, that which is nothing but flourish and feminine.

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I find it important to focus on the *Dragnet* of the 1960s to understand Webb’s politics and relevance to television of the Cold War era. The *Dragnet* of the 1950s, which certainly established Webb’s iconic presence in television, seems to me to be brilliant sketch work, but Webb the mature director (and convinced ideologue) had not yet emerged. In the 1950s, Webb was a gangly, somewhat subdued man in the Joe Friday role. Although the formula for *Dragnet* was set in place, its worldview would not come into focus until Webb resurrected the show in 1967, precisely for ideological purposes. In *Dragnet 1967* (and the subsequent three seasons of the show), Webb has a full array of “others” who serve as raw meat for his angry, voracious ideological appetite: hippies, protestors, pot smokers, black militants, liberal intellectuals, and a gaggle of miscellaneous social misfits constitute an army of opposition that is always the fantasy life of the Right. Joe Friday in the 1960s also confronts thieves, killers, and bunko artists, but these villains are not nearly as compelling, nor as savagely caricatured, as the symbols of social upheaval that Webb so ardently despises.

Webb the fanatic starts to appear in his film *The D.I.* (1957), in which he cast himself as the overbearing Sergeant Jim Moore, a marine drill instructor. Moore, unlike Joe Friday, doesn’t have to put up with the niceties of bourgeois civilian life—although a key plot point is a woman’s attempt to make Moore “softer.” This concession, like his mentoring of an errant young marine, seems largely a facade so he can function in a world that won’t fully acknowledge his righteousness. Webb also appears as the narrator in the Cold War scare film *Red Nightmare* (George Waggner, 1962), about a suburban man who takes his freedom for granted until the commies overrun his town. Webb partook of the notion (expressed in this movie) that Americans under Eisenhower became “flabby” in their patriotism, a view shared by such apparently disparate figures as John Wayne and John F. Kennedy, who stoked Cold War paranoia during his presidential campaign with talk of a “missile gap” in the US-Soviet arms race that the Soviets were winning.

By 1967, Webb’s strident persona was moderated only slightly by the moments of restrained humor that had been part of his style early in his career. The Sergeant Joe Friday of the 1960s was no longer the lanky, usually easygoing guy with a winning grin. Instead, we see a thickset man, with a deeper, raspier voice, whose dark crew cut accents his tan, his large ears, and his grim, lined face. Although Friday still smiles and makes attempts at humor, he is mostly an outraged, driven man. Joe Friday doesn’t place a letter in his outbox, he shoves it in. All of his gestures are deliberate and snappy, in an attempt, it seems, to eliminate any trace of the feminine. Webb’s gait, his most recognizable characteristic, emerges in the 1960s. His arms swinging at his sides with a strange rigidity, Webb’s fast, robotic walk constantly provokes the by-now-tired but nonetheless relevant observation that he seems to have a steel rod lodged in his rectum. The heels of his shoes appear to have metal cleats or to be made of very hard leather, thus making his footsteps stand out assertively on the soundtrack. Above all, this Friday is often subject to fits of righteous rage. As he dresses down hippies, wise guys, perverts, or lazy younger cops, the veins in his forehead become prominent, his eyes flashing contempt as he motormouths his delivery at an incredible pace. Webb-Friday’s phallic presence is established not only in his verbal harangues and physical bearing but also in his relationships with other people.
Friday’s partner in *Dragnet 1967* (the first of the four seasons of the revived program, each designated by year to differentiate it from the *Dragnet* of the fifties) is Bill Gannon, played by veteran character actor Harry Morgan (Figure 1). (Ben Alexander, who played Friday’s former sidekick Frank Smith, was unavailable.) A good head taller than Morgan, Webb dominates the image whenever the two are in the same frame. But Webb’s view of cops-as-buddies goes far beyond physical superiority. Gannon is a family man; Friday, a confirmed bachelor. Gannon is a hypochondriac who complains of aches and pains; Friday is made of sturdier stuff. Gannon likes to eat and has eccentric habits, but Friday is downright ascetic, except for his constant smoking. We never see him eat; he is sustained by coffee, which seems purely a means to keep him on the job rather than a satisfying nutrient. Friday dates women, but we seldom see him in a woman’s company (in one episode, Gannon and his wife go to Friday’s apartment for a planned double date, but Friday’s girlfriend cancels). The point is that domestic life, though applauded, castrates a true man, taking away the edge he needs to do his job. The male-buddy construct was basic to the original *Dragnet* and clearly antedates Webb’s career, but Webb’s elaboration of it in his second version of the show is at times disturbing, so painfully strained is its repression of the homoerotic. His particular take on the buddy construct would be a constant in other TV series he created in the 1960s and 1970s and, of course, in many police shows that would follow *Dragnet*.4

Most intriguing about the 1960s *Dragnet* is the amount of time spent on Friday’s diatribes, to the point that they consume some episodes entirely. *Dragnet 1968*’s “The

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4 Webb’s show *Adam-12* (NBC, 1968–1975) continues the two-character construct, this time focusing on uniformed patrol cops Pete Malloy (Martin Milner) and Jim Reed (Kent McCord). Malloy is the single man with no vices except occasional humor. Reed is married and wears sideburns; he tries to make Pete smile and loosen up. The repressed gay subtext becomes more flagrant in Webb’s vision: it does not strain a gender or LGBT reading to see how the show contains the idea of “rough trade” and the young punk he is taking under his wing. Although Reed often frees Malloy from the bad guys, Malloy is always the seasoned team leader. In years to come the construct would become flagrant as the genre sought legitimacy by including counterculture elements, as in *Starsky and Hutch*, in which the two hipster cops are regularly falling into each other’s arms when not tooling around in their red-and-white Gran Torino.
Prophet” is devoted entirely to Webb and Gannon verbally jousting with an LSD proponent named Brother William, clearly modeled on Timothy Leary. The show is nothing but rapid shots and countershots, as Friday and Gannon exchange verbal blows with the arrogant LSD apostle. To William’s remark that he could show Friday the way and the truth, Friday tersely responds, “You couldn’t show me directions to the men’s room.” The point of the encounter is less William’s advocating drugs than it is his effete, snide, overbearing intellect. Intellectuals get stuck in Friday’s craw, so much so that they are axiomatically associated with criminals. Brother William cannot be merely a deluded acid advocate—he is an outright crook who has a record as a con artist preying on the elderly. In the show’s coda (during which Dragnet always tells us the fate of the culprit, setting aside the dreary details of trials), we learn that Brother William was eventually arrested for selling drugs to minors—the notion of preying on kids, combined with Brother William’s foppish, “evil faggot” demeanor, are part of Webb’s formula for coding homosexuals.

In the Dragnet 1970 episode “The Student,” Webb makes an unrestrained attack on young people whose book learning either drives them crazy or is evidence of an antisocial, criminal personality. Jeff, an alienated college student preoccupied with Flaubert and Rimbaud, starts shooting people. Friday and Gannon interview the boy’s female literature instructor, depicted as a solid if hopelessly naive citizen who debunks nutty movements like existentialism (when Gannon raises a confused eyebrow, the teacher responds, “If you don’t know, don’t worry, Mr. Gannon, no one else seems to know either—it’s sort of an anti-philosophy really. They do seem to have one thing in common—they’re preoccupied with the darker side of life”). Friday and Gannon get better information from the boy’s baseball coach, a straight shooter who doesn’t hesitate to label the kid a “sorehead,” and therefore a menace. The two cops also encounter the boy’s crazed aunt and guardian (played by Virginia Gregg, a regular in Webb’s troupe since the 1950s), a Bible-thumping, poor-white-trash harridan who detests her nephew’s interest in “Flow-Bare” and other sinful French influences. Friday eventually encounters Jeff, who dismisses his coworkers and classmates as “illiterate scum.” The various interviews are telling: both the aunt and her nephew are oddballs, the teacher not much better—only the male baseball coach is a reasonably reliable support to the police. (The coach is a black man lacking any trace of the ghetto or the South, or any militant or similar coding associated with race politics of the 1960s, a topic to which I will return.) When Jeff is put under arrest, a librarian asks, “Do you think Flaubert was the reason?,” to which Friday responds, “No ma’am, not the reason, just the excuse.” In summary, literature and the arts provide kooks with a rationale for violence.

Webb’s most unrestrained assault on intellectuals is probably “Night School,” from Dragnet 1970. Joe Friday believes in self-improvement if it has real practical value, so he enrolls in an evening class in “sensitivity training” at a local college. Webb’s real attitude toward the course of study (and anything like it) is made explicit by Gannon’s skepticism about a bunch of people “sittin’ around talkin’.” Professor Grant (played by Leonard Stone, another Webb regular) wears a hip leisure suit and an ascot, and he affects a snotty demeanor. The class is full of stereotypes, ranging from a ticked-off businessman to a defiant longhair named Jerry, who rants about civil liberties and Vietnam. Friday spots a “lid” of marijuana in Jerry’s possession and arrests him in the
hall, thus raising the professor’s ire. He arranges a class vote aimed to expel Friday from the course, and Friday acquiesces, a dramatic device designed to permit Friday a long, angry, but restrained speech after the class votes to expel him. But in a quick turn of events, a lawyer who was silent throughout the episode stands up and accuses the professor and the class of engaging in job discrimination. He volunteers to represent Friday in a civil action, noting that no one in the class had the right to conduct such a vote, a point that one would think would be manifest to all participants. The point is that the professor and the university, while purporting to espouse fair-mindedness and openness (the professor slaps Jerry on the wrist for his exaggerated statements) are finally what liberalism is really all about—a form of tyranny that has a strong totalitarian cast, an ideology cloaking its communist reality, a notion that the American right espoused then and now.

In “B.O.D.,” Friday works the police headquarters’ main information desk as a tidal wave approaches Los Angeles. Here, he encounters a parade of comic alcoholics, lost souls, aging loonies, and dangerous psychotics. But few episodes are as strident as “Public Affairs,” in which Webb displays his harshest assault not only on the elements he despises but also on the public as a whole, who are portrayed as deluded cretins. The episode is about the “liberal media” and their hatred of authority. Friday and Gannon are told by their supervisor to appear as representatives of the police force on a leftist talk show called “Speak Your Mind,” hosted by Chuck Bligh (Anthony Eisley). The deck is stacked against the cops: Bligh wears a judge’s robes bedecked with a peace symbol and love beads. Their opponents on the show are a liberal-left professor and a hippie newspaper publisher, both of whom refer to cops as “fuzz” and “goons.” Both men make deliberately fractured and caricatured arguments about the police caring only about the status quo and the propertied sectors of society, and their points are easily demolished by Friday and Gannon, even as the audience cheers on the counterculture eggheads. Halfway through the show, audience members are allowed to address questions from the podium. In a low point for both Dragnet and television, a black militant named “Mondo Mabamba,” head of the Black Widow Party (a slap at the Black Panthers), takes the microphone. He wears a huge Afro, dashiki, sunglasses, and a ragged beard, and he speaks with a snide “jive-ass” tone, berating the two cops as “honkies” and “Nazis who don’t dress as sharp.” He accuses the police of wanting to catch one of us alone so you can work us over or blow our heads off,” as legitimate a claim as could ever be leveled against the LAPD, but it is leveled here in a manner designed to bring it instant discredit. His nearby supporters, all dressed like Mabamba, nod their heads to their friend’s every word. Friday responds to the charge of police violence against blacks with the remark, “I’m not here to say that race relations have been perfect, on either side,” which means that blacks are guilty of discrimination against whites, so blacks provoked the violence against them. At one point the topic of police patrols comes up, and the opposition argues that the police travel only in cars rather than walk a beat and meet the community. Gannon responds with a key point that occurs regularly in the show. He says that Los Angeles is a “city on wheels,” and that by the 1960s the undermanned force is simply unable to patrol this vast expanse on foot.
The city-on-wheels notion recurs often in the *Dragnet* of the 1960s, featured in various ways in Webb’s opening voice-overs, many of which end with a shot of Parker Center, the police headquarters built to memorialize Chief William F. Parker. These sequences, rather than presenting the city as a dangerous, infested place as in film noir, become Chamber of Commerce promotions of Los Angeles, as Webb speaks highly of the recreational, cultural, commercial, and spiritual assets of Los Angeles and of those who partake of them. Webb notes the vastness of the polluted LA basin (streets are photographed to emphasize pop-art gloss) while declaring that such a huge city is difficult for the undermanned police force to monitor.

In his exceptional work on Los Angeles, Mike Davis notes that LAPD Chief William H. Parker, the early mentor of *Dragnet*, was an “avowed white supremacist” who was long known for carrying out a “reign of terror” against ghettoized LA blacks. Although the overdeveloped, horizontal sprawl of Los Angeles offered a daunting challenge to drivers, Parker kept his cops off the streets and in squad cars not because foot patrols were impractical but because, according to Davis, he wanted them to be “uncorruptible because unapproachable, ‘a few good men’ doing battle with a fundamentally evil city.” Davis further remarks: “*Dragnet*’s Sergeant Joe Friday precisely captured the Parkerized LAPD’s quality of prudish alienation from a citizenry composed of fools, degenerates, and psychopaths.” If Davis is correct, no work of art could have served Parker with more enthusiasm. The difficulty here is that the real LAPD—from the first racial pogroms to the Los Angeles rebellion of 1992—is nowhere to be found, its reality present only in the anxious, angry tirades of Jack Webb.

6 Ibid., 251.
7 Ibid.
Rush Limbaugh with a Laugh-Track: The (Thankfully) Short Life of the 1/2 Hour News Hour

by GEOFFREY BAYM

The premiere episode of *The 1/2 Hour News Hour* opens with a conservative fantasy: two years in the future (2009), a newly elected President Rush Limbaugh (played by Limbaugh himself) addresses the nation. Explaining that he had emerged victorious from “a bitter recount” fight with Democratic opponent Howard Dean, Limbaugh assures the audience that Dean was “finally getting the medical attention he has so desperately needed for so long.” To that, laughter rings out—although it is unclear whether the source is real or canned. Either way, Limbaugh then exclaims, “After two years of the Democrat congress”—emphasis on the word *Democrat*—the “grown-ups are back in charge.” With that, he calls for his vice president and in walks the shrill Ann Coulter.

That moment might be the subtlest in the short run of the 1/2 Hour News Hour, the Fox News attempt at right-wing political satire from conservative TV creator Joel Surnow. The juxtaposition of grown-ups and Coulter is ambiguous, perhaps suggesting that she is the adult, or conversely, suggesting that in this hyperpartisan dreamscape, the inmates would be running the asylum. That, however, may be overinterpretation. After all, self-reflexivity and carefully constructed humor was not the stock-in-trade of 1/2 Hour, which more consistently offered creatively void and mean-spirited barbs such as Limbaugh’s dig at Howard Dean. That might have been expected, though, from a show that headlined Limbaugh and Coulter—a clear move to locate it within the discursive universe of conservative attack media.

It also might have been expected given the track record of Surnow, the show’s chief visionary and reported good friend of Limbaugh. In 2007, Surnow was at the top of his game, having created the Fox prime-time drama *24* (2001–2010), that post-9/11 conservative fantasy in which action hero Jack Bauer races every season to defuse another ticking time bomb and always finds torture among the most effective tools in his arsenal. As former Fox executive David Nevins has explained, *24* had a definite “political attitude,” a “lack of patience for the niceties of civil liberties or due process” that was a direct
reflection of Surnow’s worldview. According to Nevins, “Joel’s politics suffuse[d] the whole show.”

Surnow has referred to himself as a “right-wing nut job,” once explaining to the New Yorker that he could “hardly think of” Ronald Reagan “without breaking into tears.” Surnow has long chafed against the entertainment industry’s progressive inclinations. “Conservatives are the new oppressed class,” he has half joked. “Isn’t it bizarre that in Hollywood it’s easier to come out as gay than as conservative?”1 Prompted by the same sense of victimhood that saturates the discourse of Fox News, Surnow and Manny Coto, his fellow executive producer from 24, decided that, late in the Bush years, the time was ripe to launch a right-wing satire show. “One of the things that’s definitely not out there,” Surnow argued, “is a satirical voice that skews to the right as opposed to the left. You can turn on any comedy satire show on TV and you’re going to hear ten Bush jokes, ten Cheney jokes, but you’ll never hear a Hillary Clinton joke or a global-warming send-up. It’s just not out there.”2

Surnow pitched the show to his “friend,” Fox News chair Roger Ailes, who agreed to back an initial two episodes. Premiering on February 18, 2007, the first episode of 1/2 Hour attracted more than 1.4 million viewers, a number that quickly encouraged Ailes to add the show to the channel’s regular Sunday-night lineup. For Surnow, the ostensible point was, as Fox News so often claims, to bring “balance” to television. He suggested that “in the interest of equal time there was a real need for sharp, intelligent political satire on TV from a conservative perspective to counterbalance all the really good political satire already on TV that comes from a left-of-center perspective.” To that he tellingly added that he hoped the show “would make Michael Moore spontaneously burst into flames.”3 “Flaming”—in the Internet sense—might have been the real agenda. As Coto explained, the show was aimed at “the millions who tune in to Rush Limbaugh and like-minded people who want that same kind of acerbic commentary and liberal bashing they get on his radio show everyday.”

At least nominally, 1/2 Hour drew on a rich, global tradition of news parody and political satire—programs such as the BBC’s seminal That Was the Week That Was (1962–1963); the Canadian This Hour Has 22 Minutes (CBC, 1993–2009); and of course, Comedy Central’s The Daily Show (1996–) and The Colbert Report (2005–), which use the form of news and the substance of current events to challenge discursive authority and offer alternative political interpretations.6 Indeed, the promotional

2 Ibid.
campaign for 1/2 Hour promised “A Daily Show for the rest of us.” In form, though, 1/2 Hour more closely resembled Saturday Night Live’s “Weekend Update,” the long-running fake-news segment that loosely draws on current events to set up punchy but often politically vacuous one-liners. Further drawing comparisons to SNL, 1/2 Hour would also feature the former “Weekend Update” anchor Dennis Miller, who delivered angry monologues in a segment called “The Buck Starts Here.” To that, 1/2 Hour added feeble sketch comedy—mock interview segments between faux anchors and a variety of pretend experts, as well as prerecorded skits, all attacking Democratic politicians and progressive positions.

Heavily promoted, and with the popular Sean Hannity as a lead-in, the first episode was a ratings hit, although it is unclear how many of those initial 1.4 million viewers tuned in out of sheer curiosity. From there, however, despite Surnow’s promise to provide “sharp, intelligent political satire,” the show was an unquestionable failure. The audience rapidly dwindled, and criticism, from both left and right, was fierce. The conservative strategist David Frum, for example, worried that 1/2 Hour confirmed the picture (painted, he said, by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert) that “Republicans are ridiculous.” Rather than prove that conservatives could tell a joke, he wrote, the show suggested that “conservatives are a joke.”

The response on the Left was even more acute. Even the Onion couldn’t resist such low-hanging fruit, writing, “If you’re the least-talented member of your second-rate college sketch comedy group, don’t worry. One day you could host a Daily Show rip-off on the Fox News Channel.”

At the time of this writing, 1/2 Hour had earned a 2.3 rating (of 10) on the website IMDb. For its part, Fox canceled the show after a total of seventeen episodes, and most interesting, it has tried to erase the program from public memory. Outside of private collections and clips posted to YouTube, episodes are virtually impossible to find online. The link to the show’s web page redirects to the Fox News homepage, where one must dig deep into the archives to find even a mention of the program. The question then becomes why the show failed so abjectly, to the extent that its own network would disavow it. Avoiding essentialist assumptions about connections between political orientation and comedic aptitude—the liberal suspicion that conservatives simply aren’t funny—the answer instead lies more with the show’s fundamental misunderstanding of the project of political parody.

On its face, 1/2 Hour was of remarkably low quality; it was badly written and poorly performed. It felt inauthentic and staged, a point emphasized by the fact that its two anchors were played by largely unknown actors, who, appearing with fake names, brought to their roles no comedic reputations, obvious improvisational talents, or clear interest in or mastery of current events. Instead, they stiffly read forced one-liners and engaged in awkward scripted banter with each other and with a variety of “guests” whose performances were even less compelling.


Consider the series of jokes targeting Barack Obama from the debut episode. Then-candidate Obama had recently admitted to cocaine use. That revelation, anchor “Kurt McNally” explains, dropped Obama’s “approval rating among Democrats to 99.9 percent [insert laughter].” But, McNally continues, it also had earned him an endorsement from “former Washington, DC mayor Marion Barry [insert more laughter].” The 99.9 percent reference, though verbally clunky, might elicit a chuckle among those frustrated with Obama’s cultural celebrity, but the Barry joke was a tremendous stretch, reaching back nearly two decades to tie Obama to an African American politician who had all but faded from public view.

Absent comedic flourish, the Barry joke further carries clear racial undertones, a point made more explicitly in the following segment, a pretend advertisement for a Barack Obama fan magazine. “It’s official,” the announcer exclaims. “The American people have a crush on Illinois Senator Barack Obama.” This claim is illustrated, remarkably, by video of what clearly is a group of Africans celebrating. “How can you stay on the cutting edge of Barack Obama hysteria?” the announcer continues. “By subscribing to B-O: Barack Obama magazine.” At “B-O” the audience (or perhaps a laugh track—again unclear) lets out a guffaw. The joke is simultaneously juvenile (B-O: get it, like body odor!) and racially inflected—do black men stink? (It seems hard to imagine Jon Stewart making a similar joke about Fox’s Bill O’Reilly.)

For his part, Surnow insisted that this particular segment wasn’t “mean-spirited”; it was just a critique of the “hysteria” of the public’s infatuation with Obama. It’s difficult, however, not to detect a crass meanness to the B-O joke, and this was among the show’s milder attempts at humor. Slightly sharper was the opening one-liner of the premiere episode: “Tonight’s top story: dispelling reports that she would staff her White House with longtime cronies and political appointees, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton vowed that if she becomes president, she will surround herself with a diverse, multiethnic, multigenerational group . . . of angry lesbians.” Barack Obama stinks, Hillary Clinton is an angry lesbian (another common Limbaugh refrain), and we’re off and running. If many would find the content offensive, that seemed to be well planned, despite Surnow’s insistence to the contrary. A thirty-second promotional spot proudly promised that the show would “offend the left, the far left, anyone standing to the left,” as well as “Democrats, people who voted for Democrats, and people who know Democrats.” Mining a residual repertoire of cultural stereotypes, the show aggressively sought to offend its political opposition, a different comedic agenda than one finds on more sophisticated satire shows that use humor to examine policy and advance critique.

Sharper still, and even more intentionally offensive, were Dennis Miller’s appearances. If his political humor was once intellectual, on 1/2 Hour he substituted rage for erudition. Here, for example, is a bit of his vitriolic attack on Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid: “Senator, only in the off-the-rack culture that we currently have could a whiny hack like you somehow rise to a position of leadership. . . . You are a vague, translucent living shade who barely matters, and if you really want to serve the country that affords a trifle like you the opportunity to delude himself into thinking he matters,

10 Battaglio, “The Right to Laugh.”
you must never, ever speak out loud in public again.” It is hard to find humor here; the rawness of the anger is astonishing. This is hardly satire, let alone the “sharp, intelligent” kind that Surnow promised.

Unlike the successful political parody of our time, 1/2 Hour further failed to offer meaningful engagement with the actual world of politics and current events. Although the anchors certainly referenced real people and occasional headlines, the show largely ignored that which was actually occurring. Whereas The Daily Show consistently borrows the tools of actuality from the real news, 1/2 Hour instead used almost no B-roll video footage of the real world and never offered sound bites from real people, right or left. Neither did it have interviews—comedic or otherwise—with actual politicians or authors. If Stewart and Colbert regularly interview political figures—those with whom they agree, and those whom they oppose—that kind of contribution to wider political discourse is entirely absent here.

Instead, the program offered tightly scripted interviews and chat segments with entirely unbelievable fictional characters. Those characters, designed in every instance to mock the Left, represent not real people, or even realistic ones, but rather straw men—fantastical manifestations of the right-wing imagination. Thus the parody is never of the actual, but instead of a fiction, invented for effect. For example, the debut episode offers an interview with “former game-show host and noted climatologist, Dr. Samual Pinkner,” a youthful man who acts more like an arrogant frat boy than a scientist, sneering as he aggressively tries to link “any problem in the world today . . . to global warming in six steps or less.” An attack on those concerned about global warming, the “doctor” (as the anchors regularly refer to their guests) is undermined both by the suggestion that he is a “former game-show host” and by his absurdly immature behavior. “C’mon,” he challenges the anchors, “try me.” Similarly, the show features “School Recess Facilitator Dr. Harvey Jenkins,” a sniveling liberal wimp whose argument to ban all children’s games is revealed to be the result of his traumatic childhood and his “chronic impotence.” We also meet the “anti-terrorism expert” who is incapable of realizing that Islamic terrorists are Muslim (despite the anchors’ repetitive recitation of their Arabic names). “After thousands of hours of studying this,” he says, “we’re stumped.”

Perhaps this is the same technique used on The Daily Show or Colbert, exaggerating particular political positions to the point of ludicrousness to invite critique. On 1/2 Hour, however, the characters are ludicrous from the start. Anchored only in the imagination of their producers, rather than by resemblance to the real, they fail to represent the actual liberal positions the show seeks to demonize. Instead, the show constructs crude caricatures that, in turn, are quickly undermined and humiliated. Never actually offering insight or advancing critique, the caricatures instead function only as punching bags for the already ideologically committed. In this, 1/2 Hour employs a technique common to Surnow’s 24, which also never paused to consider its own assumptions. Instead, the only characters who would argue with Jack Bauer were “softhearted dupes,” easily shouted down. Like 24, and like Fox News itself, 1/2 Hour

presented a hermetically sealed discursive universe, one that demanded narrow ideological conformity and suggested, explicitly, that those who would disagree are fools.

In place of clever humor and insightful critique, 1/2 Hour instead presented the same reductionist conservative talking points regularly articulated by Limbaugh, Coulter, and other discursive agents of the Right. That, of course, was intentional. Cocreator Manny Coto had envisioned 1/2 Hour as “a television version” of conservative talk radio, and thus, rather than offer a unique contribution to the public conversation, the show instead lashed the same imaginary whipping boys and dug into the same set of fears that constitute the content of most contemporary right-wing media.  

For example, the show repeatedly took up the issue of gun control, a continual concern for the Right, even as the issue continues to lose traction on the national level. In one segment, the “guest” argues that all guns should be outlawed. The “comedic” twist then comes with the revelation that the gun-control advocate is actually a criminal who has been shot repeatedly by armed citizens protecting themselves from his assaults. That point is echoed in the skit “Gun Free Zone,” in which the announcer speaks to “those who are sick of gun violence but don’t want to own their own guns.” Offering a “better way to protect your home, your loved ones, even your own business,” the announcer suggests posting a “gun free zone” sticker. A series of vignettes then follow, each portraying a criminal thwarted in his efforts to rob ordinary (read: white, middle-class) people because a sticker on the wall says no guns.

Here the show works on behalf of the agenda of Surnow, his patrons at Fox News, and the right-wing discursive machine. Both segments articulate familiar assertions that daily life is dangerous, guns are necessary for one’s protection, and liberals want to take your guns and leave you vulnerable to armed predators. This discourse of fear, echoed on 24, throughout the Fox News lineup, and across talk radio, implicitly speaks on behalf of the National Rifle Association (one of the most powerful political lobbies) and in favor of Republican politicians who posture as strong on defense and tough on crime. As such, 1/2 Hour offered arguments that were prevalent across conservative media and, more important, already politically dominant.

If the power of parody lies in its ability to offer a form of resistance, a counterweight to discourses of hegemony, 1/2 Hour instead functioned as an agent of hegemony, using comedy in support of institutional power and its political-economic agenda. Surnow may have imagined that 1/2 Hour was a necessary oppositional voice in a landscape in which “liberal” comedy dominated the airwaves, but produced in the midst of the Bush presidency, following three decades of a rightward shift in American politics and public discourse, the show hardly could be said to have spoken truth to power. Instead, it functioned to amplify “truths”—perhaps the “truthiness” that Colbert has worked so hard to deconstruct—created to serve the interests of power.

The question 1/2 Hour leaves us with, then, is not can conservatives be funny, but rather, can satire function on behalf of power? Even as he imagined the “oppression” of conservative voices, Surnow also maintained relationships not only with Limbaugh and Ailes but also with Karl Rove and the Cheney family. According to one friend of Surnow’s, the writers’ room at 24 was “like an auxiliary wing” of the Bush White

12 Miller, “Two Liberals.”
House. From that perspective, 1/2 Hour also functioned as a discursive auxiliary of the White House, crudely bludgeoning the Left in hopes of amusing its audience while pushing a clear political agenda on behalf of the Bush administration and Fox News. 1/2 Hour failed not because conservatives can’t be funny, but because it lacked quality and critique and, even more important, the outsider stance that motivates satire and empowers parody.

13 Ibid.

Fox News and the Performance of Ideology

by JEFFREY P. JONES

For the first half of the 1990s, success in television programming eluded Roger Ailes, media consultant to several Republican presidents and later the president of Fox News Corporation. First as executive producer of The Rush Limbaugh Show (1992–1996), a syndicated television talk-show program featuring the right-wing talk radio icon, then as creator and president of NBC’s conservative vox-pop cable channel, America’s Talking (1994–1996), Ailes attempted to feature overtly ideological programming to attract conservative audiences, and in both instances he failed. With Limbaugh, he had the star power and the ideology but the wrong format; the visibly uncomfortable Limbaugh made for bad TV. With America’s Talking, he had the populist-conservative ideology but few stars and weak formats.

Yet with the creation of the Fox News Channel in 1996, Ailes was able to assemble all three ingredients in one location—star power (using familiar news reporters drafted from the broadcast networks, as well as successful talk-radio and tabloid TV hosts) and a conservative ideology, but also the right format for attracting audiences: the news genre.


Within a decade, Fox was crushing its cable news competitors in ratings and profitability. What is more, the network did so by presenting politically biased (that is, overtly ideologically conservative) news and opinion while also branding itself with slogans such as “Fair and Balanced” and “We Report, You Decide.”

Apparently, the conjunction of a consistent set of ideological narratives sustained across programming within the genre of news accounts for Fox’s tremendous success in developing a loyal audience (as well as its brand). That is to say, Fox’s performances of ideology cannot be separated from their occurrence as news, and both—the genre and the ideology—are crucial in attracting and retaining audiences in the era of niche news. It is the genre of news that offers important and necessary “cover” for the network, helping to thwart charges of propaganda or partisanship. Fox thus benefits from the traditional legitimating aspects of the genre, including its authoritative language, the access it grants to political players, and its ability to craft political “reality” and structure audience receptivity to its messages. But it is also the performances in that genre that contribute to its believability as a source for the establishment of “truth.” Those performances are examined in the following pages, first as aesthetic acts that shape political reality in ideological ways from the “raw material” of public life and, second, as performative acts that produce that which they purport to represent. Indeed, the case of Fox News demonstrates the ways in which representation within the news genre has changed—from the journalistic representation of events to the political representation of audiences.

Why Ideology? That Fox News is, consistently and across all of its programs, offering a conservative ideological voice and doing so under the heading of “news” is, at this date, an undeniable point. Scholars and media-watchdog groups have provided detailed evidence of Fox’s overtly ideological narratives in both its news and its opinion programs. The network itself even defends its conservatism by contending that it serves as a “counterweight” to the liberalism of mainstream news media outlets. And audiences too recognize Fox as conservative, as demonstrated by their opinions of the network, as well as by their viewing behaviors. What is the more important point of interrogation is not whether Fox News is or isn’t ideological, but what does being overtly ideological do for the network? Part of the answer has to do with the pressures of operating within the cable television environment.

In the network era, the “big three” would interrupt their entertainment programming for thirty minutes of public service reports based on a rational-critical style and

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4 See, for example, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), as well as Media Matters for America (http://mediamatters.org), a media-watchdog group dedicated to monitoring and reporting on right-wing media, and also the many reports critiquing Fox that are regularly offered on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart (Comedy Central, 1996–).
framed by a logical-positivist approach. The end product, though, had ideological effects in that the networks shared an amazingly unitary vision of nation and events, one in which they constructed, as Geoffrey Baym argues, “a singular worldview that limited the range of understandings about the nature of the political domain and the ways in which it could be represented.” For their part, viewers ritually attended to these messages, perhaps reacting as “captive” audiences who chose news over nothing at all, or, just as well, accepting the informed “good citizens” role that journalistic and political norms demanded.

But as the multichannel era saw the center of gravity shift to cable news channels, networks needed to fill twenty-four hours of airtime and attract and retain niche audiences who had a broad range of viewing choices now at their fingertips. The “aesthetic-expressive” turn in the emergent postmodern journalistic style—a style that Baym describes as occurring in broadcast news beginning in the mid-1980s—became even more pronounced in the competitive cable news era. In particular, such demands necessitated that cable news channels, like their nonnews competitors, had to engage in postnetwork strategies of channel branding and community building.

As I have argued elsewhere in relationship to network talk shows, the postnetwork era is marked by the transformation of media businesses from content companies to audience companies. It is no longer sufficient merely to provide content and expect audiences to watch simply because of the inherent value, quality, or attractiveness of the programming. Rather, it is necessary for cable channels to craft intensive relationships with their viewers, connections that will encourage routine and repeated viewing. Crafting a distinctive and attractive brand is one important way to accomplish this. The other, perhaps more significant way is the intentional formation of “community.” Whereas for talk shows those connections can occur through consumer behaviors and commodity interests, for Fox News, the connections occur largely through ideology. And as Roger Silverstone reminds us, media play a central role in crafting the symbols and meanings necessary for the constitution of such communities: Communities have always been symbolic as well as material in their composition. . . . They are acted on and acted out. Yet without their symbolic dimension, they are nothing. Without their meanings, without belief, without identity and identification there is

13 Beth Comstock, “The 3 C’s of Success in the New Digital Age,” *Television Week*, April 24, 2006, 9. The three C’s refer to context, community, and content.
nothing: nothing in which to belong, in which to participate; nothing to share, nothing to promote, and nothing to defend.”

What is more, as Silverstone notes, communities are “defined not just by what is shared but by what is distinguished,” that is, by how “boundaries . . . are drawn to distinguish one community from the next.” In their study of Fox News and its relationship to the broader conservative media establishment, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella demonstrate the functions of ideological boundary maintenance and its benefit to the conservative community. Conservative media produce a safe haven, they argue, that “reinforces the views of these outlets’ like-minded audience members, helps them maintain ideological coherence, protects them from counter persuasion, reinforces conservative values and dispositions, holds Republican candidates and leaders accountable to conservative ideals, tightens their audience’s ties to the Republican Party, and distances listeners, readers, and viewers from ‘liberals,’ in general, and Democrats, in particular.”

The argument here is that Fox News, in conjunction with other conservative media outlets, provides a steady and consistent diet of such overtly ideological symbolic material to sufficiently sustain viewer interest and commitments as a community, and that those symbols are best witnessed and understood through the lens of how they are performed. For as Silverstone also notes, “Awareness of the symbolic boundaries of our culture and their dramatization in their performance is a precondition for the making and holding of community.”

Performing Ideology. To suggest that news is a performance is saying nothing new. Events, issues, and social tensions are performed daily in television news, brought to life through narratives, acted out through visuals, embroidered with emotions, and so forth. What is more, TV news has operated by a standard set of performance codes or tropes, each used to establish first and foremost the legitimacy and authority of those imparting such “truths,” and each central to its stated purpose of representing “reality.” This is typically achieved by the performance of “truth” through poetics such as verisimilitude, indexicality, visual evidence, discourses of sobriety, and so forth.

But the question here is, What happens if this representational regime of news changes from the representation of social reality or “truth” to the representation of the audience itself? In this instance, audience representation refers not to the notion of the press as stand-in for the public (in a watchdog role vis-à-vis power) but, instead, to the notion of reflecting audience desires in the realm of values and beliefs—thus, Fox News enacts a form of political representation through ideology. My interest here is

15 Silverstone, Why Study the Media?, 99.
16 Jamieson and Cappella, Echo Chamber, x.
17 Silverstone, Why Study the Media?, 99. My emphasis.
not in the relationship between Fox and the Republican Party or the broader conservative establishment but, rather, in ideology’s role in attracting and sustaining television audiences at the level of identification with values, beliefs, emotions, fears, and so forth, all achieved through a performance of politicized narratives.20

These politicized narratives are delivered as aesthetic performances, artistic renderings with dramatic and dramaturgical elements. What Victor Turner calls “social dramas” provide the “raw material” for such aesthetic performances.21 But in a world replete with social conflicts, which ones are taken up and which ones ignored? Ideology, of course, can be central to the selection of which social dramas matter. As Clifford Geertz notes, “Whatever else ideologies may be . . . they are, most distinctively, maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience.”22 Thus, ideology plays a dual role in highlighting which issues will be dramatized while also helping a community cohere around the alleviation of such tensions, potentially producing catharsis. “Political ideologies,” Richard Merelman contends, “provide the themes of political action, the points of conflict around which political action is to revolve.”23 What more, ideologies need dramaturgical devices to be successful, and what better place than a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week news channel to offer a steady flow of dramaturgical renderings, including conflict, personification, identification, symbolism, suspense, catharsis, and so forth? Ideologies are distinguished, Merelman notes, not by their sophistication but by their dramatic functions in social structures.

Space here does not permit a full accounting of the numerous dramatic devices that Fox employs in linking ideology and audiences.24 As with all TV news, action, conflict, and drama are central ingredients of news performance. But what proves most noticeable with a news channel that, in essence, “picks sides” in political and social struggles is how those things are linked semiotically (paradigmatically and syntagmatically) to a consistent set of narratives that threaten or embolden core values and beliefs. By operating from an ideological perspective, Fox can more easily engage in what Kenneth Burke called “cluster agons,” or “God and Devil” terms—an us-them rhetoric that allows for conflict, victimization, and scapegoating.25 When Fox News programming—morning talk shows, midday and evening news formats, and prime-time talk shows—consistently dramatizes ideological threats (e.g., Muslims, immigrants, socialists, Black Panthers, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now [ACORN]), as well as “patriots” fighting those threats (e.g., Tea Party

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20 This is not to suggest that in previous eras, television news did not occupy a place as part of the “ideological state apparatus” or within the hegemony of the ruling bloc. Rather, the effort here is to distinguish the movement away from a discourse that obscured its ideological leanings to one in which a particular stripe of ideological thinking within the liberal-pluralist-capitalist system becomes utilized, displayed, and celebrated.

21 Turner quoted in Elizabeth Bell, Theories of Performance (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 111.


rallies, health-care town halls, a congressman shouting “You lie!” to the president, Sarah Palin discovering “death panels” within health-care legislation) through a variety of narratives, visuals, interviews, guests, sound bites, and so forth, viewers are linked to an ongoing struggle, one they can ritually participate in through their repeated viewing. What is more, such conflict—in ideological terms—leaves committed viewers with little choice but to care, to be concerned, to be outraged. Victor Turner makes this point nicely when he notes, “Conflict seems to bring fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse, into frightening prominence. People have to take sides in terms of deeply entrenched moral imperatives and constraints, often against their own personal preferences. Choice is overborne by duty.”26 In short, the aesthetic performance of social dramas based on ideological divisions within the genre of news is one important means of linking audiences to repeated viewing, not to mention commitment to the brand that is Fox News. Fox thus emerges as the place where viewers can trust that such threats will be exposed and fought against.

Yet a second aspect of performance may be even more powerful in the actual constitution of political reality, and that is what theorists such as J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler call performativity, a recognition that language often produces, not just reflects upon, that which it names.27 This is contrasted with constative speech acts or utterances, language aimed at the production of true and false statements. This is the language traditionally embraced by journalists who see reality as constituted by utterances that describe, report, find, and discover. But performativity highlights how words can be “actions in themselves”; they bring into being that which is spoken.28 While a classic example is a preacher pronouncing a couple “husband and wife,” such performat ive utterances can occur in the realm of political speech acts as well. Sarah Palin’s claiming that President Obama’s health-care bill contained provisions for what she branded “death panels” brought into being a reality that up to 40 percent of citizens came to believe as true, despite numerous news reports debunking the claim.29 Yet it is important, in discussing performativity, that we don’t cling too closely to a Platonic ideal of truth’s correspondence to reality—that we don’t insist that speech acts can or should be assessed in terms of their truth or falsity.30 For as Austin notes, “It is essential to realize that ‘true’ and ‘false’ . . . do not stand for anything simple at all; but only for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions.”31 But how does one assess purposes and intentions? Austin suggests

27 For a helpful summary of performativity theory, see James Loxley, Performativity (London: Routledge, 2007).
28 Ibid., 2.
31 Quoted in Loxley, Performativity, 20.
that we look to the circumstances of issuing an utterance across three axes. These are what he calls locution, the naming or referential function of language; illocution, the intent in saying; and perlocution, the effect of saying.

If I tell you a mad dog is loose on Loxley Street, for instance, I have named the creature and given its location (locution). But my utterance is also intended to warn you (illocution), perhaps even having the effect of scaring you or encouraging you to go retrieve a gun (perlocution). Thus, Fox News’s speech acts may name something—say, for instance, branding an Islamic community center in the Manhattan neighborhood near the former World Trade Center a “Ground Zero mosque”—but the utterance also warns citizens of a supposed threat to American values and honor, perhaps even mobilizing people to vote in the midterm congressional elections for candidates voicing opposition to such a “mosque.” Thus, the repeated iteration of such utterances across programming day parts not only creates realities—“mosque,” not community center, becomes the standard usage, even outside of Fox’s utterances—but also has the potential to mobilize actions through its performative power. Beyond an event such as the Islamic community center, performative utterances on Fox also occur around issues such as health-care reform and the redacted video creation of town-hall “revolts”; around societal rituals such as “the war on Christmas” and “the war on Easter”; around political actions such as talk-show host Glenn Beck’s “9/12 Project” serving as a rhetorical call to arms in the formation of the Tea Party movement; and around feelings of victimization, such as news anchor Megyn Kelly’s campaign against Philadelphia’s New Black Panther Party members for supposedly intimidating white voters in the 2008 elections.

To summarize, then, performativity points our attention to political speech not for its referentiality or relationship to truth or falsehood but for its potential to bring reality into being by the act of being spoken. But as Austin noted about the success of such utterances in establishing reality, context is everything. And this is where the genre of news is vitally important in making such statements real, believable, accessible, knowable, provable, and repeatable. Without news, such statements are little more than opinions. Within news, they become “facts.”

“We Report, You Live with It.” It appears that Fox News has produced a fundamental reconfiguration and reconceptualization of the role, purpose, and function of television news. In its search for audiences and establishment of its brand, Fox has successfully shown how TV news need not be about politics but can be politics instead. Fox has demonstrated that news production is aimed not at representing truth but at representing audiences it can assemble around its ideological renderings of “truth.” Through its own performative constructions of reality and aesthetic performances of the raw material of daily life, Fox has reformulated the ways in which news engages with and even shapes contemporary politics. Using the genre of news as cover, Fox confidently creates and dramatizes all sorts of contestable and debatable ideas about public life using the codes and conventions of established journalistic practice. And through this confluence of niche audiences, feelings of community, ideological performance, and news genre, Fox has established itself as the most successful cable news operation in the United States. Contrary to the assumption that overt
ideological performances detract from Fox’s legitimacy as a news operation, such performances do quite the opposite. They are directly related to its economic success, its importance to partisan politics, and its newfound role as a constructor of political reality.

Branding the Right: The Affective Economy of Sarah Palin

by Laurie Ouellette

In April 2010, Saturday Night Live announced the launch of the Sarah Palin Network. Impersonating the former Alaska governor and 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate, comedian Tina Fey pitched the new television channel as the logical extension of her commentator gig with Fox News and her TLC reality program, Sarah Palin’s Alaska. Poking fun at Palin’s hokey right-wing populism and media saturation strategies, Fey promised TV viewers propagandistic made-for-television movies, game shows like Tea Party Wheel of Fortune and Are You Smarter Than a Half-Term Governor?; reality competitions like Dancing with the Real Stars: America’s Small Business Owners; a renegade cops-and-robbers drama featuring Todd Palin on a snowmobile; and a public affairs program geared to ordinary people called Elites, in which C-SPAN-like footage of “smarty pants experts” is redubbed with the teacher’s monotonous voice from the Charlie Brown cartoons. The hilarity of the skit hinged on the uncanny possibility of an actual Sarah Palin Network. Given the extent to which Palin’s overnight celebrity was channeled into a lucrative brand across print, television, film, and digital media platforms, the prospect of an entire network devoted to perpetuating—and profiting from—the unlikely politician from Wasilla is not so far fetched.

Since entering the national spotlight as John McCain’s running mate, Palin has built a pop culture franchise around her campaign image of an average hockey mom whose approach to how the nation should be governed combines kitchen-table economics and the rugged self-reliance ascribed to the Alaskan frontier. From the outset, her self-billing as a Washington outsider has been fashioned against the malfeasance of the “media elite.” Upon accepting the vice presidential nomination at the 2008 Republican National Convention, Palin dismissed journalists who questioned her qualifications as “snobs who look down their noses at ordinary Americans and are out of touch with
their major concerns.”¹ In subsequent speeches, interviews, and tweets, she pitched herself as an authentic representation of “real” America against the “lamestream” media and pretentious, big-city elites, who favor big government and other evils. To be sure, the media also perpetuated this spin on Palin, playing up her folksiness and articulating her deficiencies as a professional ruler in class-coded cultural and geographical terms. Venues from SNL to the New York Review of Books have delighted in reiterating Palin’s nasal working-class accent, grammatical mishaps, chain-store tastes, carnivorous appetites (she’s fond of moose and caribou), and penchant for “faux-genteel cuss words like dang, heck, darn, geez, bullcrap, and bass-ackwards.”²

Palin ups the ante by channeling the mockery into the purported authenticity of her homegrown political brand. In fact, while she defines her political persona in opposition to the media elite, Palin’s enduring visibility since the 2008 election evidences a strategic mastery of both old and new media forms. Well before Palin disappointed her fans by declining to run in the 2012 presidential primary, a long exposé in New York magazine called “The Revolution Will Be Commercialized” suggested that her motivation for branching into popular media was largely financial. Accompanied by graphics that render Palin in the image of Ford, Pepsi, Chevron, and other brand-name logos, the article explains that Palin turned to memoir writing because she was earning $125,000 per year and was plagued by debt; she eventually landed a $7 million deal with HarperCollins.

Her best-selling book, Going Rogue: An American Life (2009), was followed by America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith, and Flag (2010), and former campaign aides were hired to plan book tours with “all the trappings of a national political campaign.”³ When the demands of her new cash stream clashed with her day job as governor (and with Alaska’s public-sector ethical regulations), she resigned. When Palin subsequently signed a three-year contributor contract with Fox News worth an alleged $1 million per year, she set up a television studio in her home in Wasilla, Alaska. Shortly thereafter she coproduced Sarah Palin’s Alaska with Mark Burnett of Survivor (CBS, 2000–) fame. When the reality TV series about her family’s adventures hunting, fishing, mountain climbing, camping, and gold mining sold to the cable network TLC, her take was a reported $250,000 per episode, reported New York.⁴ (The Palin family’s pilgrimage to national historical sites in the summer of 2011 was also strategically publicized and widely covered as a national news story, perpetuating her ongoing status as a political celebrity, even in the absence of any elected position.) In 2011, Palin was the subject and narrator of The Undefeated (Stephen K. Bannon), a feature-length documentary with commercial distribution, based loosely on her memoir Going Rogue.

⁴ Ibid.
Palin is also notoriously active on Twitter and Facebook (her official Facebook page claims 3,254,484 fans). And, in addition to Palin’s own social media sites, she is also the subject of more than one hundred unofficial fan websites, most of which promote her books, TV appearances, and documentary film.

The magnitude of Palin’s media career can be grasped by recalling for a moment another little-known Republican governor who also became famous for lambasting journalists, the media, and the liberal establishment—Spiro T. Agnew. Selected as Richard Nixon’s running mate in the 1968 election, Agnew pitched the president as the natural ally of the silent majority against “an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals.” Speareheading the Right’s uptake of working-class, middle-American iconography (a phenomenon Stuart Hall would later term “authoritarian populism”), Agnew aligned wealthy conservatives with the common people against East Coast liberal elites, and he painted the media as a toolbox for big-city perversions, upper-class pretensions, and bureaucratic fantasies of social engineering. Believing the media of the turbulent 1960s was biased against the Right, the Nixon White House scrupulously monitored the national press, television, and especially the new public broadcasting system for evidence of these biases, and, in this broader context, Agnew delivered a series of famous speeches protesting the “monopolization” of national opinion by the major news networks and the “concentration of more and more power over public opinion in fewer and fewer hands.”

Although he appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Life* magazines and “special features on his criticism aired on all three national broadcast networks,” Agnew never achieved anything like the media celebrity afforded Palin. At a time when broadcasting was dominated by three national networks, specialized cable channels didn’t exist, and social media was the stuff of science fiction, the infrastructure for establishing branded interfaces among right-wing politicians, commercial media, and citizens simply didn’t exist. Palin, in contrast, unabashedly channels her ideologically charged conflict with the old-school elites who control the commercial media into her self-branding as an authoritarian populist political figure. Her ability to sell this narrative to media consumers owes less to any innate quality than to the transformation of media culture since the 1960s.

If Agnew (unlike Palin) lacked the rural, working-class credentials to convincingly pass as a populist, he did set into motion a free-market vision of media reform that would later be perfected by Ronald Reagan. For Agnew and his ilk, the problem of the

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8 Ibid.
liberal media was to be solved through deregulation and unfettered competition. The promotion of free enterprise as the solution to elite dominance and liberal bias set the stage for some of the major media developments of the 1980s and beyond, including consolidated corporate ownership, the proliferation of channels, the segmentation of the mass audience into specialized lifestyle clusters, the downsizing of broadcast news departments, and experimentation with cost-cutting modes of production and new forms of popular factual entertainment that would prove much more profitable than journalism. While Agnew probably never imagined carving his own lucrative right-wing niche in the commercial mediascape, his complaints against the media elite indirectly paved the way for what would eventually become the Sarah Palin phenomenon.

The point to be emphasized in this short essay is that Palin is less the author of her fate and fortune than the beneficiary of broader developments that media scholars can help illuminate. The proliferation of specialized cable channels, each seeking to establish distinctive brand identities and consumer markets, set the stage for conservative-themed channels like Fox News, which make it possible for right-wing politicians to cross over into commercial news and entertainment. As Lynn Spigel points out in her astute analysis of media responses to September 11, this is not the same as collecting “aggregate audiences for national culture.” The logic of narrowcasting assumes that consumers are deeply divided by lifestyle and taste; nationalist popular culture manifests “more as another niche market (those people who hang flags on their cars) than as a unifying cultural dominant,” Spigel contends. Something similar has happened with political culture, when differences steeped in class, region, race, gender, and generation, as well as party membership, are mapped onto taste cultures and consumer markets. Although Palin lost at the polls and is parodied by sophisticated and savvy media outlets, she nonetheless successfully inserted herself into the mediated taste cultures associated with wholesome, hardworking families (TLC) and conservative ordinary Americans (Fox News). The “breakup” of the mass media, particularly network broadcasting, made it possible for Palin to serve as the unelected representative of specialized brands of consumer citizenship.

Media fragmentation also authorizes brand membership as a form of civic participation. This is even more the case with “politainment,” to the extent that consuming Palin on TLC or Fox News, or buying her book, or following her tweets, or joining a fan site counts as an act of citizenship. Concurrent sociopolitical trends such as individualization and privatization further complement the conflation of electoral politics, media consumption, and niche marketing. Many scholars have also observed the diminishing ideal of the “informed citizenry” and the emergence of prescriptions for democracy that emphasize personal choice and self-enterprise. The Palin phenomenon

evidences these shifts—from the rhetoric of self-reliance and personal responsibility running across her media products to Palin’s activities as a politician and mogul. In the debut episode of *Sarah Palin’s Alaska*, Palin observes female bears. Interpreting their behavior for TV viewers, she infers that the mama grizzlies are showing their cubs, “You’ve gotta do it for yourself, nobody’s going to do it for you.”

The reality series is a carefully staged tribute to Palin’s own self-reliance, as evidenced by repeated scenes of Palin cleaning fish, weathering the brutal Alaskan elements, and hunting and processing wild animals for food. In a cross-promoted episode involving a cold and rainy camping trip with the TLC stars from *Kate Plus Eight*, celebrity mom Kate Gosselin becomes unhinged; she can barely contain her lack of enthusiasm. Palin, however, cheerfully sets up camp in her waterproof gear while the cameras roll. Throughout the series, Palin attributes her work ethic to her close affinity to ordinary people and to hard Alaskan living (Figure 1). Pausing from her outdoor adventures only long enough to shoot segments for Fox News, she approaches the reality series not only as a moneymaking venture but also as an especially powerful (and timely) venue for self-branding. Like other reality TV stars, Palin trades the “private” performance of self and personal relations for the affective consumer connections that sell commercial television programs, websites, DVDs, and books. Indeed, her political celebrity has no economic value in the formal political system; only in the broader domain of media and consumer culture can its profit-making capacities be realized.

The Palin phenomenon has something else in common with the new forms of celebrity associated with reality television and social media. Like the reality performer or YouTube star, her claim to fame hinges on her ordinariness. Palin’s self-presentation as just an average hockey mom mirrors the diffusion of celebrity, or what Graeme Turner calls a “demotic turn” in media culture. Just as practically anyone can gain visibility in the commercial media, so, too, can an outsider without legitimated credentials gain access to the political system. Of course, ordinariness can always be enhanced and improved. Critics who noted the hypocrisy of Palin’s campaign makeover rightly observed the tension between her populist image and the large sum spent by the Republican National Committee on expensive haircuts, spa treatments, and designer clothes, to upgrade her appearance. However, they also failed to grasp the centrality of reinvention in US culture and the discursive construction of ordinary celebrity specifically. Palin navigates the contradiction between representativeness and individual achievement particularly well. Unlike the vast majority of ordinary people who now

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Figure 1. On her reality show, a blatant exercise in self-promotion, Sarah Palin emphasized her affinity to ordinary people and to hard Alaskan living (TLC, 2010–2011).

provide free labor for the television and social media industries, however, she is in a position to capitalize on her media performances.

Palin’s mastery of branded politainment also speaks to a broader integration of marketing, technology, and media culture in Western capitalist democracies. In his work on convergence culture, Henry Jenkins explains the ascendency of emotional branding as a response to anxieties about the decline of mass audiences and the zapping capacities of new technologies. Marketers rely on emotion to turn casual consumers into fiercely loyal brand communities; audience interactivity is considered the “golden gateway” to these aims, he suggests. Jenkins cautions against writing this off as an “insidious new marketing strategy.”

Taking The Apprentice as an example, he argues that “the product placements work because they are tied to something people care about—whether it’s how to defeat George Bush or who is going to the boardroom. . . . We may chuckle over the heavy-handedness of The Donald’s self-promotion, but at the end of the day, he makes great television.” Jenkins also links affective economics to a positive shift in the “public’s role in the political process,” which suggests that media fandom (especially in today’s converging transmedia environment) may provide a training ground for increased political participation and even activism. What Jenkins doesn’t account for are the stakes involved in what appears to be a permanent convergence of branded entertainment and the formal political system (the fact that Donald Trump was taken seriously as a possible 2012 presidential contender is especially telling in this regard). Palin’s successful mobilization of media platforms confounds any clear distinction between politics, entertainment, and profiteering. What’s more, her constituents have a lot in common with media fans.

More than any political figure to date, Palin translates the traditional voter-politician relationship into the logic of fandom and branding. She invites her right-wing political constituents to track and consume her appearances and products across print, electronic, and digital media, and she thus directly profits from their participation in convergence culture. Even political websites organized by Palin supporters embrace integrated branding and a vision of active citizenship based on niche media consumption. For example, Team Sarah, a website representing a “diverse coalition of Americans dedicated to advancing the values that Sarah Palin represents in the political process,” promotes Palin’s upcoming appearances on Fox News with banners, status updates, and video clips. There are also links to her books, audio CDs, and The Undefeated DVD on Amazon.com. Fans are invited to put up photos of Sarah and her family and, in this way, to build both the Team Sarah website as well as the Palin brand. Political participation here mirrors the richer experience of media fans: “Like most of Governor Palin’s supporters, and many of her detractors, I read Going Rogue the moment it hit the shelves in late 2008 to get a deeper sense of who she is, what

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14 Jenkins, “Affective Economics 101.”

15 See Jenkins, Convergence Culture, chap. 6 and conclusion.
she’s accomplished, and where she might be headed... I have also listened to the CD several times and continue to do so, over and over,” wrote one website user.\textsuperscript{16}

If loyal media consumers can sometimes alter the fate of commercial entertainment (by protesting the cancellation of their favorite shows, for example), the same cannot be said of Palin’s political consumers. When Palin announced that she would not be running for president in 2012, her grassroots supporters quickly mobilized social media platforms and organized online meetings (including the 2011 GrizzlyFest Summit) to express their views and collectively strategize ways to change her mind. Although Palin participated in these forums, she hasn’t wavered on her decision. In the current mediascape, the political branding mastered by Palin is evidently far more rewarding than public service.


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”The Homo Depot” and Other Works: Critiquing Vernacular Video

by Robert Glenn Howard

”RevSpitz” is an activist who posts amateur videos on YouTube centered on two issues: abortion and homosexuality. Most of his videos have fewer than one hundred views. A few have in the thousands. One of RevSpitz’s lesser-known pieces is entitled “Home Depot Chairman Frank Blake Continues Showing Support for Gay Marriage.”\textsuperscript{1} The video begins with a stark black screen as a melancholy piano plays. Then text fades in slowly, the simple white letters stating, “This Month Home Depot Chairman Frank Blake told shareholders that his company would continue to support gay marriage activists and gay activities.” The text fades, and after a moment, the Home Depot logo appears. The classic orange and white logo, however, has been altered to read: “The Homo Depot.” For the following two minutes, the piano plays while the video displays a series of images of a gay pride parade, the covers of children’s books about having same-sex parents, and text of quotations from the Bible.

Observing the “The Homo Depot” in terms of RevSpitz’s other videos on YouTube—he has produced more than one hundred—it is

clear that he has developed a unified video style. Not unique in its form, however, his video work is very much part of a popular tradition in amateur online video in which professionally recorded music is set to a moving collage of images found online. As part of this larger tradition, “The Homo Depot” is a powerful example of what Lawrence Lessig has lauded as “read/write culture” and what Henry Jenkins describes as “convergence culture.”

Harvard law professor Yochai Benkler dubs the phenomenon of recombinant culture a “new folk culture” that encourages “a wider practice of active personal engagement in the telling and retelling of basic cultural themes.” For Benkler, this practice “offers new avenues for freedom.”

Any self-conscious social critic has to wonder how to reconcile the new freedoms of this folk culture with the fact that “The Homo Depot” video has transformed the logo of what we might simply think of as an unsympathetic corporate power, Home Depot, to voice hate. As social critics, how do we approach amateur media that resists the liberal tolerance that is often (if not always) found in mainstream culture?

Heather Hendershot has already attacked this problem in terms of institutional Christian media. Seeking to apply social criticism to a media industry “that has been invisible to many of the researchers interested in the progressive potential of popular culture,” she calls on social critics to consider “what it would mean to ‘resist’ mainstream culture from a conservative political position.”

This challenge is made only more salient as the locations of such media resistance move from professional (if low-budget) productions to the actual “folk” or, more properly, “vernacular” media that now form a sizable portion of the overall media landscape. With the growth of this vernacular video, our consideration of it must also be tempered by Hendershot’s question: How should the social critic engage networked folk as they resist from the Right?

Although it is difficult to advocate against the underdog in the struggle between powerful commercial institutions and everyday consumers, it is also unacceptable to leave intolerance in these new forms of media uncritiqued. In this short essay, I suggest that a conception of vernacular authority can aid us toward this end. The concept of vernacular authority does not celebrate the vernacular or folk unreflectively, because it acknowledges the power of the everyday as a neutral force. In my use, vernacular authority is a specific kind of attempt to garner power through discourse. Vernacular authority is asserted whenever noninstitutional processes participate in the emergence of conditions that support assertions, beliefs, or practices. Just another avenue through which to seek power, vernacular authority is neither just nor unjust. It is neutral. As such, particular expressions can be assessed by making distinctions between more and less appropriate deployments of this authority.

To exemplify this theoretical conception, the rest of this essay briefly explores conservative Christian vernacular videos posted to YouTube in terms of two ends of a continuum. On the socially problematic end, some videos (like “The Homo Depot”) engage an authoritative vernacular that seems to impede tolerant online discourse. On the other end of the continuum, some videos engage in a deliberative vernacular that may encourage (or at least not foreclose the possibility of) tolerant online discourse. Imagined on this continuum, these vernacular videos can be assessed in terms of the degree to which they use their authority to open or to foreclose the possibility for future constructive discursive engagements between parties with different views.

Vernacular Authority. The term vernacular refers to noninstitutional beliefs and practices that exist alongside but apart from institutions. In one of its earliest uses to describe expressive human behavior, the Roman philosopher and politician Cicero suggested that the vernacular was a means of persuasive power. In a work on rhetoric, Brutus, he wrote of an “indescribable flavor” that rendered a particular speaker persuasive. He dubbed this power “vernacular” because the speaker had learned it outside of Roman institutions. Cicero understood the vernacular as alternative to what he and other Roman politicians saw as the institutional elements of persuasive communication available through the formal study of oratory, Roman history, literature, and philosophy. In this sense, vernacular authority is authority derived specifically from not being institutional.

As used in cultural theory today, it is not usually imagined in these neutral terms. Instead, it tends to take on one of two generally positive valences. Most closely associated with Gerard Hauser’s Vernacular Voices, the common resource view of the vernacular imagines it as a communal chorus emerging from the multiplicity of voices speaking in the noninstitutional discursive spaces of quotidian life. The “subaltern” view, best articulated by Kent Ono and John Sloop, imagines it as the expression of groups historically subject to sublimation. Both of these conceptions place a significant, positive valence on the term.

When a vernacular voice becomes strong enough to subvert a corporate logo with the goal of disseminating intolerance, however, the positive valence of these conceptions becomes troublesome. “The Homo Depot” is a clear case in which the responsible social critic must acknowledge that the vernacular redeployment of the corporate image demands critique. By applying the more neutral concept of vernacular authority, a more nuanced view of vernacular conservative Christian videos emerges because it does not come loaded with positive connotations.

Authoritative versus Deliberative Vernaculars. Surveying one hundred videos returned from a YouTube search of the terms “Christian,” “Jesus,” and “homosexual,” two basic forms of videos emerge. The first are primarily authoritative. In this group, the videos tend to assert single and straightforward claims to truth exhibiting relatively interesting visuals, often coupled with quotes from the Bible. These claims are sometimes made with collages of images and video collected from around the Internet, as in “The Homo Depot.” Other times they focus on video of real events, like the video made by a Canadian man as he preaches at a what he calls a “sodomite parade” in Toronto.\(^\text{10}\) In other cases, they are largely dressed-up video blogs such as that of the “Christian Road Warrior” who wears sunglasses and American-football shoulder pads with six-inch spikes to deliver “rants” against atheists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.\(^\text{11}\)

“The Homo Depot” video very much exemplifies this authoritative style of vernacular Christian video. Like most of RevSpitz’s other videos, this example is composed of a series of still photos gathered from news media and from other websites. The images appear on the screen interspersed with text while a commercially produced musical recording plays in the background. In “The Homo Depot,” Spitz shows revelers at what appears to be a gay pride parade. As a photograph of a man in a clownish costume parody of a nun appears, Spitz adds the text: “Gay Pride.” When the photo fades, it is replaced by the text of Romans 1:24: “Where God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves.”

These images are followed by a series of photos, including the covers of children’s books about having same-sex parents and the images “Children at Gay Pride Parade.” At thirty-three seconds in, the famous picture of the smiling child-murder victim Jesse Dirkhising has the text added: “Raped and Murdered by homosexuals.” While this video is shocking, he has other videos that are even more disturbing.

One of his most extreme, titled “You Make Me Want to Shout—Saints of God,” combines a rousing audio track of the classic Isley Brothers’ 1959 song “Shout” with images and text celebrating the convicted murderers of doctors who have performed abortions.\(^\text{12}\) A similar video titled “Soldiers in the Army of the Lord” features an obscure country-style song by the Scottish pop band Big Country titled “Soldier of the Lord.” Although the song seems to be darkly poking fun at the United States’ problems with domestic Christian terrorism, Spitz seems to take it in earnest and posts the full text of the song in the space below the video. Its lyrics include:


\(^\text{12}\) “You Make Me Want to Shout—Saints of God,” YouTube video, 6:00, posted by RevSpitz 21, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnwUUGK3fWU.
I spent long nights seeking wisdom
’Til I heard the voice of God
He said, “Suffer the little children.”
Then I knew I had a job

You can use a truck of fertilizer
Or a can of gasoline
There’s a guy out at Fort Campbell
Who can get you what you need

Although these sorts of authoritative videos demand critique, not all conservative Christian vernacular video is in this authoritative mode. Others take on a more deliberative voice. These deliberative videos tend to be less visually complex and to use little or no found images, video, or music. They generally follow the more simple conventions of video blogs: most often they are single shots of an individual “talking head” speaking into a computer webcam. Instead of offering visual interest or rousing audio, they emphasize intimate and personal responses, and, in many cases, they include overt cues for their intended audience to respond.

A good example of this kind of conservative Christian vernacular video is the exchange between “thedarkener” and “nathow.” Nathow is a fifty-one-year-old member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. “Thedarkener” is a thirty-one-year-old video blogger who often offers long philosophical discussions to his YouTube followers. In one of thedarkener’s more popular videos, he looks directly into the camera and muses: “You can think of everything as one entity . . . . Maybe the purpose of life is to experience ourselves subjectively: to try and understand each other as one when we’ve become individuals—when we have separated ourselves from ourselves.” In a specific response to this video, nathow offered thedarkener a point-by-point rebuttal arguing for the existence of a soul instead of thedarkener’s philosophy of “oneness.” Though thorough in his criticism, nathow repeatedly uses phrases that invite a response from thedarkener, stating, “I hope this video helps you think about it from a different perspective.” This unlikely pair of interlocutors continued to exchange several videos on the nature of life. As gentle as this debate sounds, nathow is not always so sedate in his videos, nor are his interlocutors always so understanding.

For example, nathow made a series of videos encouraging other YouTube users to vote yes on California’s Proposition 8. In 2008, the state of California considered a ballot initiative to change the state constitution to read: “only marriage between a

15 “The Purpose of Life,” YouTube video, 5:10, posted by thedarkener, March 26, 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhsvQhp14p8&feature=plcp&context=C3ad58b0UDOEgSs0PDskTnDATjA6zdtrVbHjkyCmR.
16 Ibid.
man and woman is recognized in California.” After its initial passage, the measure has been the subject of continual litigation and ongoing debate at the vernacular level. In September 2008, Nathow joined this debate by posting the video: “RE: Vote No on Prop 8!” Nathow’s video is itself a response to a video by another user called “Vote No on Prop 8!,” which is composed of a series of short shots of individuals stating their name, age, and a mundane thing about themselves. The speakers conclude by saying that they have same sex-parents.17

Nathow begins his response to this video saying: “Everybody in this country has the right to live their life the way they so choose . . . I believe that.” He goes on to make several relatively sophisticated arguments about the nature of rights and the California constitution. Then, he argues that voting for the proposition is the “only fair vote,” and he implores people to look at the issues, “learn about it,” and then “vote ‘yes!’”18

Apparently, Nathow received negative feedback on this video, because in his next video, “Be Fair, Vote Yes on Prop 8,” he begins by asking: “Why is there so much hatred for people who disagree with your moral choices?”19 Having received even more hostile feedback, he made another video: “Undecided on Prop. 8 . . . ? Watch This Video.” In this video, Nathow argues specifically that while some Christians may “hate” LGBT people, he and his Christian friends do not. He does go on to express his concern that there is an LGBT “fringe” element that is fostering intolerance. To support his case, he displays some of the feedback he has received. One quotation reads: “this ignorant peckerhead deserves to be shot between the eyes.” Another threatens: “I would literally cut your dick off and stick it in your mouth you homophobic bitch!!!!”20

Obviously, these comments are less deliberative than even Nathow’s problematic statement that LGBT people constitute a “fringe.”

Nathow’s arguments here and elsewhere are generally troubling. However, even after extremely hostile feedback, he continues to post videos that offer cues for interlocutors to respond to him in deliberative ways. More interesting, while he continued to advocate for Prop 8, he repeatedly returned to a discussion of how certain kinds of online discourse actually inhibit deliberation. In this sense, he uses his vernacular videos to call for more open deliberation. Though still troubling, his overall corpus displays a healthier deployment of vernacular authority than does that of RevSpitz. While both bodies of work are filled with intolerance, Spitz uses an authoritative style that aggressively shuts down further discourse through a singular and aggressive rejection of LGBT rights. Nathow’s videos, in contrast, strive to keep deliberation open by directly engaging his interlocutors about the nature of individual rights even after receiving what he calls death threats. In this sense, Nathow’s videos are more on the side

of deliberation and RevSpitz’s are more on the side of authority. Because nathow’s seek to open dialogue between people with different views, they are less deserving of criticism than are RevSpitz’s.

**The Social Critique of Vernacular Video.** In this short article, I have suggested that if network communication technologies like YouTube are increasing the power of the everyday people who use them, then social critics must develop ways to fairly critique them. The concept of vernacular authority can aid in this task by offering a neutral way of imagining how everyday people access their noninstitutional status to make authoritative claims. By imagining the power that YouTube has offered them as this sort of neutral authority, we can isolate different deployments of that authority, and then make critical judgments about the many instances and ways it is deployed.

In a video titled “Standing Up for What’s Right (No on Prop 8),” for example, a self-described straight married man tearfully appeals for the rejection of Prop 8 so that his wife can participate in her gay sister’s marriage. “When my wife and I got married, her little sister stood up for us at our wedding and was part of our wedding party. And we would like the opportunity to stand up for her at her wedding. And she deserves that as a US citizen, as part of this community, and as part of this nation. Anyone who would deny that . . . knows nothing about family values.”  

Rush Limbaugh and the Problem of the Color Line
by Allison Perlman

“What’s next, folks,” queried radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh on his October 31, 2011, program. “A cartoon on MSNBC showing Herman Cain with huge lips eating a watermelon?” Limbaugh was incensed over a story published in Politico that recounted how Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain had been accused of sexual harassment in the 1990s when he was chair of the National Restaurant Association. Limbaugh characterized the report as indulging in the “ugliest racial stereotypes” and posited that it “tells us who the real racists are.” In the days to follow, Limbaugh would amplify how the Cain story shed light on the true purveyors of racism in the United States—the liberals and the mainstream media who were conspiring to destroy conservatives of color, the very existence of whom threatens the “plantation” mentality that structures liberal politics. Although Limbaugh’s response to the sexual harassment charges would circulate in the mainstream press, his charges of racism becoming a key part of the Cain story, for weeks he already had been commenting on Cain’s candidacy as evidence of what he had been preaching for twenty years: liberals are the “biggest bigots among us all,” and prominent, successful black conservatives are proof positive that conservatism is the best prescription for racial justice in the United States.

Though often dismissed as “racist,” and thus unworthy of critical attention, Limbaugh’s position on race has been an important part of the reimagining of injury and discrimination, and of the rescripting of the civil rights movement, central to conservative politics since the
Reagan era. On his radio program, as well as in his monthly newsletter, Limbaugh has circulated a neoconservative position on race that conflates racism with race consciousness and color blindness with racial progress. Although Limbaugh has been gleefully derisive toward other social movements of the 1960s, especially feminism and environmentalism, he has claimed the mantle of civil rights for conservatives. This assertion has been evinced by his close ties to black conservatives, who at once legitimate his assessment of discrimination and harm; demonstrate through their life stories the interrelationship of conservatism and racial progress; and ostensibly disprove the charge that conservatives in general, and Limbaugh specifically, are racist.

Limbaugh started his career in broadcasting as a Top 40 disc jockey spinning records under the pseudonyms Rusty Sharpe and Jeff Christie. In 1984, he replaced shock jock Morton Downey Jr. on KFBK in Sacramento, California, where he developed his outspoken conservative views and his bombastic on-air persona; it was at KFBK that he dubbed himself “El Rushbo” and created his Excellence in Broadcasting (EIB) Network. In 1988, he moved to New York, where he agreed to broadcast a one-hour local show on WABC for free in exchange for a national program carried by the ABC Radio Network. By 1990, Limbaugh had the most-listened-to radio talk show in the United States. His popularity accelerated in the 1990s, when he extended his franchise to include the publication of the monthly magazine The Limbaugh Letter, two best-selling books, and a syndicated half-hour television series produced by Roger Ailes that lasted for four years. Limbaugh’s popularity survived a 2003 scandal over his addiction to and alleged illegal acquisition of prescription drugs, and in 2008 he signed an eight-year contract with Premiere Radio Networks, a subsidiary of Clear Channel, for $4 million, for which he received a $1 million signing bonus. As of 2009, he boasted a weekly audience of around twenty million listeners. Even though Limbaugh’s ratings declined in May 2011, he continues to be the top-rated radio talk-show host and to be recognized as a powerful voice within conservative politics.

In 1992, Ronald Reagan dubbed Limbaugh the “No. 1 voice in American conservatism,” and Limbaugh himself has not been shy about touting his own importance. Limbaugh defeats liberal arguments with “half [his] brain tied behind [his] back,” and he preaches conservatism using his “talent on loan from God.” Since he took to the national airwaves in 1988, “El Rushbo” has been the merry prankster of American conservatism, as his parodies, hijinks, and ever-escalating string of epithets for his political adversaries—“feminazis,” “environmental wackos,” “Dingy Harry” (Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid), the “Breck Girl” (former North Carolina Senator John

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6 Ibid., 42–44.
Edwards)—have ridiculed the liberal establishment and punctured what he views as the absurd strictures of political correctness.

On air, Limbaugh also delivers jeremiads on the destructiveness of American liberalism and positions himself as a lay educator who instructs his audience in how to see through liberal rhetoric and uncover the actual nefarious motivations behind it. Limbaugh’s is a Manichaean world in which virtuous conservatives do battle with a pernicious liberal establishment, composed of the Democratic Party, the media, the academy, and social justice organizations. Limbaugh additionally has preached a consistent class politics, one that advances “the interests of capital over the needs of the rest of the US population” and that forecloses any discussion of economic inequality by labeling it “class warfare” and the sour grapes of people who do not work hard enough to take advantage of the opportunities of the free-market system.\(^\text{10}\)

His views on race further the animosity he engenders for liberals and complement the reworking of the Right’s relationship to civil rights inaugurated in the Reagan era. As Kevin Phillips explained in *The Emerging Republican Majority* in 1969, the ascendancy of the Republican Party in the 1960s hinged on its opposition to the civil rights movement. The New Deal coalition that had delivered electoral victories to Democrats had fractured over the “Negro Problem” and the Democratic Party’s association with pro–civil rights legislative reforms. The new Republican majority would unite the South and the West in a conservative coalition, one enabled by the “Negrophobe politics” of the Deep South states. The GOP did not need African American support to win elections. On the contrary, its identification as the opposition party to the civil rights movement was critical to its regaining of power.\(^\text{11}\) In the post–civil rights decade of the 1980s, the Reagan administration would rhetorically shift the conservative position on civil rights even as it rolled back the policy gains of the previous decades through its strong opposition to affirmative action and multiculturalism. It would do so by embracing a discourse of “color blindness,” one that has enabled conservatives to decimate affirmative-action programs while claiming that their actions are inspired by the civil rights movement.

This realignment was part and parcel of the reinterpretation of the black freedom struggle that was ascendant in the 1970s and was heavily popularized in the 1980s. As Jacqueline Dowd Hall has demonstrated, this narrative was a cleansing of sorts of the old Right by the New Right think tanks of the 1970s. Cognizant that conservatives had been on the wrong side of the fight for civil rights, conservatives in the 1970s embraced the goals of civil rights, yet they did so by diminishing the ambitions and complexity of both the black freedom struggle and of Martin Luther King Jr., who would become a synecdoche for the movement. The complexity of the movement, the work done on behalf of economic justice, the links forged between domestic racism and imperialism abroad, were symbolically erased.\(^\text{12}\) In their place stood King, delivering his “I Have


a Dream” speech in 1963, and preaching the virtues of judging individuals not by the “color of their skin” but by the “content of their character.” For the New Right, such a call led to a moral equivalency between all forms of race consciousness, in which there was no meaningful difference between affirmative-action programs and laws of the Jim Crow South that segregated whites from blacks.

On his radio program, Limbaugh has performed the cultural work of this political project. Limbaugh has reiterated that it is he and fellow conservatives who are the true heirs to Martin Luther King Jr. and the black freedom struggle that he led, and that liberals are the true perpetrators of racial discrimination in the post–civil rights era. His logic on this point goes as follows: After the legislative victories of the 1960s, state-sanctioned racism was extricated from American society, opening up equality of opportunity for all Americans. The greatest obstacle facing African Americans in the post–civil rights era is not continuing and inherited forms of racial discrimination but, rather, the collective “victim” mentality foisted upon them by contemporary civil rights leaders, affirmative-action programs, and multicultural education. Conservative values of hard work, individual enterprise, and moral virtue are the best prescription for people of color to advance in American society.

Limbaugh furthermore has held that if racism still exists in the United States, it is in the hearts and actions of liberals themselves. He makes this claim in two ways. First, it is liberals who insist on “seeing” race, which in and of itself constitutes an act of prejudice. In the spring of 1993, for example, Limbaugh had commented on an exchange between Democratic Michigan Congressman John Conyers and Attorney General Janet Reno over the Department of Justice’s actions against the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. President Bill Clinton joked about this at that year’s White House Correspondents’ Dinner, musing that the main reason that Limbaugh defended Reno was that she was being attacked by a black person. In his account of that incident, Limbaugh claimed, “The man’s race never even occurred to me.” He insisted, “I do not have a racist bone in my body. I despise racism. Racism has nothing to do with me. And to further exacerbate Clinton’s predicament, it was clear that it was he who was noticing the color of people’s skin.” Not only had Clinton’s joke backfired; its very premise had confirmed, from Limbaugh’s perspective, that it is liberals, not conservatives, who are preoccupied with race as a meaningful category of identity. In addition, Limbaugh has argued that Democrats conspire to keep African Americans economically disadvantaged, undereducated, and reliant on federal programs as part of a liberal effort to shore up their power and influence. He refers to the Democratic Party as the “plantation,” where they keep black support by virtue of a sustained cycle of dependency.

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14 Ibid., 241.
infringe on liberty and opportunity, suggesting that Democrats’ ostensible support of African Americans is really a pernicious paternalism that keeps them enslaved.

Limbaugh has extended this demonization of the Democrats by suggesting that it was they who acted as the opposition party to civil rights. One of Limbaugh’s talking points is that the “old segregationists”—individuals like Bull Connor, the Alabama police chief who turned fire hoses and police dogs on African Americans in 1963, or Lester Maddox, the avowed segregationist governor of Georgia—were Democrats. He has insisted that it was “Democrats that were opposed to civil rights” and “Democrats that lynched blacks in the Old South.” Although Limbaugh’s history is not entirely wrong, it is profoundly selective. When Democratic presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson championed the cause of civil rights, the South turned on the party and, as Phillips reasoned, delivered to Republicans an electoral majority. The political alignments of the major political parties shifted in the 1960s, although Limbaugh suggests an implied continuity and that today’s Democrats are the successors of Maddox and Wallace, not of Kennedy and Johnson. In addition, Limbaugh has not, and would not, acknowledge how conservatives of the 1960s lined up in support of segregation, both in the South and in the North, and that conservatism gained popular traction by providing white Southerners the racially neutral language of property rights and individual liberties to legitimize their opposition to civil rights.

Even Limbaugh’s notorious racial parodies are framed as consistent with his positions on race. During the 2008 election season, for example, he took especial glee in repeatedly playing the song “Barack, the Magic Negro” on his radio show. Sung by an Al Sharpton impersonator to the tune of “Puff, the Magic Dragon,” the song referenced a Los Angeles Times column by David Ehrenstein in which he labeled Obama a “Magic Negro,” a figure of “postmodern folk culture” frequently embodied in film who assuages white guilt over the history of racial prejudice in the United States. The song managed at once to suggest that Obama was not an “authentic” African American, to cast suspicion on his credentials, and to denigrate figures like Sharpton as egomaniacs who cloak their personal ambitions in the language of “justice.” Limbaugh has defended himself against accusations of racism by suggesting that the purpose of the song was to highlight the absurdity of a conversation going on in liberal circles, namely whether Obama was “black enough” and whether his candidacy amounted to more than the assuaging of liberal guilt over the sins of the past.

Similarly, James Golden, also known as Bo Snerdley, is Limbaugh’s call screener and, as of 2008, his “Official Obama Criticizer.” When Limbaugh attacks Obama, Snerdley follows with a “translation for EIB brothers and sisters in the hood” as follows:

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“Oh, no he di’n’t! Oh, no, he di’n’t! . . . You better step off, yo, and to relook this situation, dog.” This routine was another side of Limbaugh’s mockery of the way he perceives Obama changing his speech patterns when speaking to African American audiences. It is Obama, in other words, who is guilty of pandering to black audiences and treating them differently than white ones, the Snerdley routine merely holding up a mirror to Obama’s own practices.

In addition, Limbaugh’s long-standing relationships with prominent black conservatives have affirmed his understanding of race and politics. Limbaugh had been one of the most impassioned defenders in 1991 of Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. As he would twenty years later during the Cain scandal, Limbaugh interpreted the Thomas hearings as evidence not only of an unhinged, militant feminism but also of a concerted effort to ruin the life of a prominent conservative black man, what Thomas himself would refer to as a “high-tech lynching.” What made Thomas so threatening, according to Limbaugh, was that his success exposed the lie of liberalism and the virtue of conservatism, as he advanced “by relying on himself, rather than prostituting himself into the dependency cycle.” Although Thomas himself would acknowledge the role of affirmative action in his gaining entrance to Yale Law School, Limbaugh insisted that it was Thomas’s defiance of such programs that accounted for his achievements.

Limbaugh also has promoted black conservatives on air and in his publications, and he has drawn on their views to bolster his own understanding of race in post–civil rights America. In See, I Told You So, for example, Limbaugh draws on the work of Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams to emphasize how conservative values of individual achievement and entrepreneurialism, and not the “defeatist victimization game” of contemporary liberal projects, are the best prescription for African American advancement. Limbaugh has been a champion of figures like J. C. Watts, Alan Keyes, and Ward Connerly, whose life stories affirm the centrality of conservative values and whose understandings of discrimination line up with Limbaugh’s own. Since the late 1990s, Limbaugh routinely has been effusive over the writings of Shelby Steele. On a March 2008 broadcast, for example, he both lauded Steele’s White Guilt as “one of the greatest books I’ve ever read” and affirmed his application of its argument to Obama, who succeeded where previous presidential contenders Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton failed, not by virtue of the substance of his ideas, but because of his skillful manipulation of white guilt; Obama presents himself as an opportunity for white supporters to experience racial innocence in a society in which they live under

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constant threat of being labeled “racist.” Limbaugh, on a broadcast in September 2011, was “nearly orgasmic” over a column by Steele that argued that Obama’s biggest failing was his disavowal of American exceptionalism and his embrace of a leftist politics that recasts the nation’s greatness as the outcome of racism, imperialism, and unbridled capitalism.

In 2008, Limbaugh fielded a question from a caller asking whom he imagined Martin Luther King would have supported in the presidential election. Limbaugh stopped short of suggesting that King would have voted Republican, but he predicted that he might not be a Democrat if he were alive today. In Limbaugh’s vision of King, the former civil rights leader would be outraged by twenty-first-century America, although his anger would not be over the astonishing rates of incarceration of black men, or the great discrepancies between the unemployment rates and levels of household wealth between white and black Americans. Rather, King would be outraged at how the achievements of people like Clarence Thomas and Shelby Steele are “ridiculed” or “destroyed” by the political culture engendered by liberals; he would likewise be outraged by how Democrats pander to black voters.

It was the logical conclusion for Limbaugh, who for decades has compared his political adversaries to slave masters and lynch mobs while denying the significance of the legacy of white racism for the way that race operates in the contemporary United States, who has denied the existence of structural barriers to equality by pointing to a handful of black conservatives whose success in post–civil rights America is linked in no small part to their sanctioning of a neoconservative narrative on race, and who has claimed to be color-blind and insists that it is liberals’ obsession with race that is responsible for the deferred realization of King’s dream.


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