

# Extra Terrestrial

The Outsized Influence of Talk  
Radio in America's Political  
Discussion

# Liberadio(!): Liberate Your Radio from the Right

As I'll demonstrate, this turns out to be a surprisingly difficult thing to do.

- Show launched in October 2004. Obviously had limited impact.
- Originally called Rock Wonk was designed to elicit political opinions from the music community in an effort to keep young people engaged.
- Eventual demand for political news and commentary convinced us to broaden scope.
- Weekly mission: current political news and commentary, local guest, national guest, promotion of progressive ideas and outlook.

# Enough about the Show. Let's Hear about Me.

- Why am I doing the show? Because Mary asked.
- Why did she ask? Because she knew I was interested in politics.
- How did she know I was interested in politics? Because she knew I had challenged Beth Harwell, then-Chair of the TNGOP, for State House in 2002. (My challenge was unsuccessful.) Some of you might have seen us this afternoon on a panel discussion.

My first foray into electoral politics was unsuccessful, but it was a great civic education, and I remain keenly interested in both politics and policy.

# Radio is dead.

That's what I heard, anyway. From a Democratic strategist. When we were talking about ways to promote progressive ideas.

Funny, because according to Arbitron data compiled at the end of 2007, radio reaches 233 million listeners per week. Among those listeners, the News/Talk/Information format has the largest share of average quarter hour listenership.

Also according to Arbitron, Nashville is tied for 3rd among large and medium markets in terms of total radio listening done in-car. In-car listening turns out to be huge for the News/Talk/Information format, too.

# Radio is reborn!

In fact, it's being supplemented by satellite and digital radio. Audio-only information channels continue to compete and spread.

As long as we're driving cars or doing things that require our focused attention for long stretches of each day, we're going to have radio or it's equivalent.

So radio ain't dead by any stretch.

# Local Radio by the Numbers

What follows is my personal research and analysis of the local talk radio landscape.

## Supertalk 99.7 WTN

- **Monday-Friday:** Ralph Bristol, Michael DelGiorno, Dave Ramsey, Phil Valentine, Michael Savage, Bill O'Reilly, Neal Boortz. 21 hours of conservative talk daily.
- **Saturday:** Phil Valentine, Neal Boortz, Jerry Doyle. 7 hours of conservative talk.
- **Sunday:** Focus on the Family (Dr. Bill Maier, Dr. James Dobson), Laura Ingraham, Bill Cunningham. 7 hours of conservative talk.

WWTN: 119 hours of conservative talk radio per week in Middle Tennessee.

# Local Radio by the Numbers (Cont.)

## NewsRadio 1510 WLAC

- Monday-Friday: Steve Gill, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck. 12 hours of conservative talk daily.
- Saturday: Steve Gill, Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck. 8 hours of conservative talk.

WLAC: 68 hours of conservative talk radio per week in Middle Tennessee

Total: 187 hours of conservative talk radio per week!!

# More and Bigger Numbers

In a [joint report by the Center for American Progress and Free Press](#), we get a bird's-eye view of the radio landscape.

- Our analysis in the spring of 2007 of the 257 news/talk stations owned by the top five commercial station owners reveals that 91 percent of the total weekday talk radio programming is conservative, and 9 percent is progressive.
- Each weekday, 2,570 hours and 15 minutes of conservative talk are broadcast on these stations compared to 254 hours of progressive talk—10 times as much conservative talk as progressive talk.
- A separate analysis of all of the news/talk stations in the top 10 radio markets reveals that 76 percent of the programming in these markets is conservative and 24 percent is progressive, although programming is more balanced in markets such as New York and Chicago.

# The Invisible Ear

Looking through the [TALKERS Magazine top talk radio audiences](#), we find that Rush Limbaugh is reaching 14.25+ million listeners, Sean Hannity is reaching 13.25+ million, Michael Savage is reaching 8.25+ million listeners, Glenn Beck is reaching 6.75+ million, Bill O'Reilly is reaching 3.5+ million. The first clearly left-leaning name on the list is Ed Schultz, who reaches 3+ million listeners. But we pretty much knew this from the Center for American Progress and Free Press report.

Add to that Focus on the Family, which is broadcast on [more than 3,000 radio stations in North America](#).

[According to Arbitron](#), public radio reaches ~14 million listeners/week in the news/talk format, almost as many as Rush Limbaugh. But NPR is not liberal talk radio!

# Turning the Dial

- Repeat: NPR is not liberal talk radio!
- Locally, all we have is WRFN-LPFM. [Radio Free Nashville](#), a low-power FM station based in Pasquo that barely reaches into Nashville. WRFN is the only Pacifica Radio affiliate in Tennessee.
- There are 132 [Pacifica](#) affiliates in the country.
- [Air America](#), by my count, has 66 affiliates around the country. Not a single one of them is in Tennessee. Also, they've spent the past year recovering from bankruptcy.
- Liberadio(!): Monday mornings, 7:00-9:00 a.m. on 91.1 WRVU-FM

See? It's hard to liberate your radio from the right.

# The Great Liberadio(!) Experiment of 2007: Strictly Commercial

- 13-week commercial pilot project on [WAMB-AM](#) and [WNSG-AM](#)
- As salesforce, producers, and on-air talent, we fully funded all but a few hours of purchased brokered time.
- The hard truth of commercial radio: advertisers only buy into Arbitron ratings, and neither WAMB nor WNSG subscribed to Arbitron.
- Also, it would take 18 months at a minimum to have anything to show in Arbitron.
- WLAC offered us a 3-hour Sunday afternoon block for \$550/hour. That's \$1650/week and \$85,800/year.
- 5 days a week? \$286,000.

We're still wide-eyed optimists.

# The Vast, Right-wing Conspiracy

The vast, right-wing conspiracy is built on a foundation almost 40 years in the making that includes:

- think tanks
- FOX News
- countless print news outlets owned by Rupert Murdoch or imitators
- forums like Grover Norquist's Wednesday Meeting
- ... and conservative talk radio

A peerless, endless echo chamber of talking points.  
("environmentalist whacko," "feminazi," "cut and run")

# The Pathetic Left-Wing Conspiracy Theorists

- Air America [declares chapter 11](#).
- The Rockridge Institute [closes its doors](#).
- And a prominent local strategist declares "Radio is dead."

Maybe there's no need for debate, dissent, or dialogue. Maybe conservative ideas are the right ideas for the right time.

# Debate, Dissent & Dialogue

The evidence makes it plain that conservatives dominate the radio landscape. If you've listened to any of the conservative offerings we are able to receive locally, you'll notice that they're not focused on debate or dialogue, and they typically do whatever possible to discredit and discourage dissent.

I would also argue that, with explicitly conservative television networks and newspapers, they dominate the media landscape as a whole. Though some editorial boards demonstrably endorse Democrats more often than not, and some employ or syndicate left-leaning pundits, the purpose of most traditional media has not been to cater to any particular segment of the political population or to advance an agenda. This does not hold true for FOX News and newspapers like the Boston Herald or Washington Times.

# Debate, Dissent & Dialogue (Cont.)

I'm concerned that media organizations from NPR to The New York Times have too much self-respect and too little self-awareness to realize that they're being outFOXed by Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and all the conservative media acolytes who parrot the claim that anything that isn't conservative media is, by assertion (the least valid form of proof), liberal.

My question is: What do we, as Americans, want in our media? And, as a corollary, what is good for us? Do we prefer that our media become polarized so that we can dial directly in to known agendas? Or do we prefer an objective core of media with a periphery of well-known viewpoints and agendas? Do we prefer debate, dissent, and dialogue, or do we prefer a dittoheaded existence of our making and choosing?

# Mild Solutions to a Major Problem

Some solutions offered by the Center for American Progress and Free Press to address the radio imbalance include:

- Restore local and national caps on the ownership of commercial radio stations.
- Ensure greater local accountability over radio licensing, including stricter requirements on the part of licensees (these are our airwaves after all) to demonstrate how they're serving the public interest.
- Require commercial owners who fail to abide by enforceable public interest obligations to pay a fee to support public broadcasting.

I think these are all good ideas. But without a movement to see that they're enacted, I think the status quo is unsustainable. Conservatives and the conservative media establishment will continue to lay siege to what is left of the journalistic bulwarks until they crumble and the mainstream media empire lies in polarized tatters.

# Picking up the Pieces of the Roundtable

Right now, I feel my role on Liberadio(!) is specifically agenda-driven. And the agenda is to provide any weight on the scales of ideas in local radio. Reality-based promotion of progressive ideas I personally hold and reality-based dismissal of the worst people and policies conservatives offer up.

Over time, though, I'd relish a forum along the lines of Teddy Bart's Round Table. When the different, often competing political ideologies have an actual forum into which to send their best champions, it seems to do the best service by the listener or observer.

Liberadio(!) doesn't serve this role today, but one day I hope to be able to be a better participant in such a process.

Questions?

Answers?