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### **The Growing Conservative Bias in Sunday Morning Talk**

American Sunday morning news-talk programming is becoming increasingly over-saturated with a bias towards the conservative, right-wing. America's political direction has changed in recent years, particularly the time period encompassing Bill Clinton's second term as President (1997-2001) through to George W. Bush's present, second tenure in office (2001-2007).

Two wars (Afghanistan and Iraq) are currently underway in foreign lands and a third could take place in Iran (SPIEB 1). Bush, a Republican, came into office just before a traumatic time in American history<sup>i</sup>, to say the least, and his involvement in the media has been strictly for gaining political favour of his war mongering policies and economic oil battles ("All Bush Wants Is Iraqi Oil, Says Mandela"); On the other hand, Clinton, a Democrat, tried to win over the media for his more personal battles against impeachment (Neville).

Conservative/right wing followers support traditional values and opinions that fundamentally resist change and forward thinking. This take on conservatism also lends to the tendency of its followers to support the Republican Party, although this is not a pure requirement. Conservatives oppose progressive/left wing supporters who are more open to opinion and change of policy. Traditionally, progressives have aligned themselves with the Democratic Party, which also operates on the basis of left wing, liberal fundamentals.

When a media outlet operates with a bias vaulted at one end of the political spectrum, that outlet surrenders its objectivity, and the content it produces should be considered questionable. This volunteered subjectivity leads to the media's persuasion of the people, and thus, unfair representation of the real issues at hand.

The American political news-talk shows appear weekly on Sunday mornings. Currently, there are five major programs being aired: ABC's *This Week* (est. 1981), NBC's *Meet the Press* (radio est. 1945, TV est. 1947), CBS's *Face the Nation* (est. 1954), CNN's *Late Edition* (est. 1993), and *Fox News Sunday* (est. 1996).

Started by Australian business mogul Rupert Murdoch, Fox News has been identified as a right-wing sympathizer from its top level executives down to the news desk (Ackerman). The network has even been called "the most violent and conservative [network] in U.S. broadcasting" (Bagdikian 41). Although it has repeatedly denied accusation of having a bias, Fox did admit that it does have a penchant for slanting the political table when London bureau Chief Scott Norvell made these comments:

"Even we at Fox News manage to get some lefties on the air occasionally, and often let them finish their sentences before we club them to death..."

"Fox News is, after all, a private channel and our presenters are quite open about where they stand on particular stories." (Noah).

Fox's President, Roger Ailes is a staunch Republican supporter, and this affiliation stems back to his assisting of Richard Nixon's 1968 Presidential campaign (Felderstein). Nixon was a Republican, of course, and was once indicted on the felony charge of conspiracy to obstruct justice. Other undertakings by Ailes have included his producing of the short lived Rush Limbaugh show, which was whole-heartily dedicated to conservative

views and opinions (Ackerman). During this time, Ailes publicly lashed out against Liberals and even went so far as to call Bill Clinton a “hippie president” (Ackerman).

These one-sided notions – be they directly linked to the current president or not — clearly show how Fox has a not-so-hidden agenda of bashing non-conservatives in the political sphere. Simply put, Murdoch is a business man who is looking for ratings, and perhaps more importantly, protecting his other investment interests in America’s capitalist economy. As a long time Republican sympathizer, Roger Ailes is the perfect puppet for Murdoch’s scripted agenda.

After Fox, the second youngest network is CNN, an acronym for *Cable News Network*. Founded by Ted Turner as the first twenty-four hour news channel, today CNN is the most watched cable network during breaking-news and events (“The Project for Excellence in Journalism: Economics”). The station’s most popular news show is *Larry King Live*, which covers not only politics, but a variety of issues with a variety of guests, some pertinent to the political spectrum, some not (“The Project for Excellence in Journalism: Economics”). *Late Edition*, hosted by Wolf Blitzer, is CNN’s Sunday interview based show that focuses mainly on political talk. If anything, CNN and *Late Edition* have been criticized of being too leftist; they would more appropriately be categorized as liberal, perhaps the most politically centered of all the major news networks (Wilmouth). However, the cable giant could also be called the softest network when it comes to questioning panelists (Fox and Byungho). *Late Edition*, the only cable-broadcasted show of the bunch, garners the smallest viewing audience.

The networks that attract the largest amount of viewers for their Sunday morning shows are NBC, CBS, and ABC (Johnson).

NBC's *Meet the Press* is hosted today by Tim Russert, and it is the longest-running public affairs program in the history of United States TV broadcasting (Barnhart). It is also re-run on conglomerate MSNBC, a smaller twenty-four hour cable news network. CBS's *Face the Nation* is hosted by Bob Schieffer, who is their most experienced correspondent. ABC's *This Week*, the youngest of the three shows, is hosted by George Stephanopoulos, a journalist who previously served as a political advisor during in the 1992 Presidential election. These three shows comprise what used to be "the old-line triumvirate" (Bagdikian 41) of Sunday morning time slots for over twenty-five years.

*Media Matters for America*, a non-profit research group, conducted a study from 1997-2005 analyzing nearly 7000 news/talk guests appearing on *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation*, and *This Week*. Guests were classified in the following categories: Democrat, progressive, Republican, conservative, or neutral. The study revealed that when Bill Clinton, a democrat, served his second term as President, politically identifiable, non-neutral guests were represented quite equally at a rate of 52 per cent being Republican/conservative, and 48 per cent being Democrat/progressive. However, during the initial reign of George W. Bush, a Republican, guests' political bias favoured the right. During this period from 2001-2005, 58 per cent of politically identifiable and non-neutral guests' beliefs were Republican/conservative while only 42 per cent were Democrat/progressive representative. Furthermore, these results were replicated at the same rate for the year 2005. Clearly, these statistics do not lie

and are indicative of a conservative bias. This slant has been picked up by viewers too<sup>1</sup>.

A 2004 poll calculated that over 69 per cent of viewers believe that American news/talk shows have a significant bias. Of this portion, nearly half the respondents felt that there was a “great deal” of bias in the media. Alternatively, only 7 per cent of total people surveyed believed that the media is neutral and objective overall (Morris).

It is hard to believe that these figures are merely coincidental, or are out of the booking agents’ control. Guests on these shows – usually favoured are political types – are booked in advance, and the booked guests are chosen from a pool of roughly thirty people per week (Cox). There is also no irony in the fact that the White House can pick and choose whomever it wants to make available for an appearance on these shows. The insiders of this game revealed that the Bush administration has made its guests more readily available to preach about the war efforts overseas (Cox). With this kind of filtering and censorship one would think that these talk shows would look to other sources for information, yet this is not the case. In fact, White House officials admit to using these programs to propagate their message. “The Sunday show is our opportunity to get beyond the sort of one-liner that the press is looking for and really explain and fully articulate our positions and policies,” assistant White House press secretary Adam Levin told the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2002 (Cox).

This ideology is representative of a government who is trying to persuade the minds of the voting public during a time in which they need public support for their

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<sup>1</sup> All of these statistics, plus others, can be found within “If It’s Sunday, It’s Conservative: An Analysis of the Sunday Radio Talk Show Guests on ABC, CBS, and NBC, 1997-2005,” see [Work Cited]

war efforts. As an attempt at thought control, this could have dangerous repercussions because when one side dominates it may have serious consequences for unfolding events. ("If it's Sunday, It's Conservative" 3)

This dominance is partially controlled in part through the licensing agreements companies must obtain from the government.

The radio-TV companies and networks all require government licenses and franchises and are thus potentially subject to government control or harassment. This technical legal dependency has been used as a club to discipline the media, and media policies that stray too often from an establishment orientation could activate this threat. (Herman and Chomsky 13)

By merely browsing through Sunday morning TV channels or scholarly articles on media bias, one can see the *perceived notion among political experts and media corporations* is that today's talk shows, and the media as a whole, have a liberal bias. This logic should be dismissed as a self-imposing cover-up of a conservative bias by mass media corporations.

An alternative conclusion that can be drawn is that bias may be merely indicative of the government who is in power. This derivation is proven by the media bias being more left/central during Clinton's second term as president, and then shifting more rightward during Bush's first tenure in office. It is possible that following the aftermath of 9/11, and its consequential wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush White House needed to take control of the media in order to evoke sympathy for their causes.

American Sunday morning news-talk programming is becoming increasingly over-saturated with a bias towards the conservative, right-wing. Perhaps with a

change of power in government this bias might shift, but until that time, as an abstract addition to the argument of media bias, the following may reduce some conservative swelling in the media:

Many conservatives continually gripe that the media is liberally biased. Whether there is a basis of truth or not to this notion is irrelevant in this theory. Since Fox has been considered slightly right of center, CNN has at best been considered central, and the other three networks have been pegged all over the spectrum, the creation of a Liberal specific news channel could be beneficial.

Fox could become even more ultra-conservative in its broadcasting while CNN could assert itself as the central voice of news. The networks of ABC, NBC, and CBS would simply keep up their status quo of semi-central/slightly right reporting. With this plan conservative empathizers would be satisfied with Fox representing their view(s); progressives could be appeased with their new, liberal biased network; and the remaining viewers could be satisfied with CNN or another network that caters to the remaining public political tastes. Under this plan, every person is able to ride their own pony in the race for perceived accuracy; reporting; and above all, ratings.

Additionally, having a public network, such as PBS, broadcasting a talk show on Sunday morning would be a feeble minded and inconsequential approach to leveling the political playing field. The America public broadcasting system operates much differently than systems in Great Britain or Canada<sup>ii</sup>, and could not effectively serve the needs of the public. With smaller budgets and less power, public telecasts would be brushed aside, their funding slashed even more.

Another possibility surrounding public broadcasting is total control and corruption from the government itself, utilizing these networks for the same purposes

as it already does private networks. It is undeterminable what could happen in this scenario since it is unlikely to occur under the same circumstances of today.

All of these measures are great, in theory, but the most reasonable option may lie in the hands of the viewer. Viewers should be selective in the programs they watch. They should watch programs that reflect objectivity if they wish to have an objective media. After all, the common man's voice will never be heard until he voices it ("NBC Chief").

### **[Notes]**

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<sup>i</sup> Bush came into office on January 20, 2001, only months before the September 11 bombings

<sup>ii</sup> American public broadcasters have little or no influence in news reporting, whereas Canadian and British Public broadcasters (CBC and BBC respectively) serve as primary news and information sources



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