

THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL TALK RADIO ON THE POLITICAL ATTITUDES OF DIFFERENT SEGMENTS OF THE AMERICAN AUDIENCE

This article contains analysis of the political talk radio influence on its audience. Comparisons are drawn between regular listeners and non-listeners of the political talk radio shows. Demographic description of these two groups is given. Reasons for listening and participating in the talk shows are explored and analyzed in relation to the hypodermic theory and the theory of gratifying users. It is suggested that the exposure to political talk radio determines the extent of influence on the audience.

While listening to the Lowell Green CFRA talk show on tax breaks for Ottawa Senators, Ottawa-Carleton municipal restructuring, and Ontario provincial legislation on squeegee kids, I asked myself the following question: "How does the talk radio show influence public opinion concerning different issues and shape attitudes towards the government and its policies?" Referring to this question I hypothesized that the exposure to political talk radio determines the extent of influence of the audience. Regular listeners are less influenced by talk radio, while non-listeners are more likely to be under significant influence of the talk radio. Therefore, the present paper will examine how political talk influences individual's opinions. I will do this by looking at the development of talk radio genre, its audiences and the differences between its listeners and non-listeners.

Tom Shales, the Washington Post's television critic, labeled the 1992 presidential election "the talk show campaign" because of the influence of radio and televised talk shows. Political radio started in the 1930's. Nationally-syndicated radio call-in programs originated in the 1970's with The Larry King Show. The expansion of audience participation in political talk began in the late 1980's with the rise of Rush Limbaugh's popularity. Moreover, the number of talk radio stations has rapidly increased during the past ten years. The effects of political talk on political processes have been widely debated. Most political talk radio hosts are local and many of the issues they address are also local, even though some national hosts, who focus exclusively on national political issues, are also popular. Talk radio programs span a political and ideological spectrum. Further, there are various kinds of shows. The stereotypical talk show features a charismatic host

who takes strong, anti-establishment positions, and who encourages callers to do the same [1].

The audience for today's political talk radio differs markedly from the listeners and callers of a previous era. In the 1960s and 1970s, talk radio focused less on political and more on personal issues. Audience members were frequently isolated and less educated individuals with few social or political ties [2]. Talk radio today, given its commercial incentives, would not survive if it catered to the clientele of yesterday. The new talk radio audience members are not social isolates who hail from the lower echelons of the educational and economic charts. Instead, they are individuals who are highly integrated into society [3]. According to the Adams Research of Arlington poll conducted in 1995, nearly half the adults in the USA tune in to political talk at least occasionally; one in six seem to be regulars [4]. Regular listeners will be defined as those who listen 2,6 hours a day or more on a regular basis at least two times per week [5]. The term non-listeners will be used in regards to those who listen to the political talk less than 2,6 hours a day and without regularity.

What is a typical regular political talk radio listener like? Here are some demographic characteristics. Men are substantially more likely to tune in than women. Sixty percent of talk radio listeners are men, compared to 40 % who are women. The sex difference is better seen in Rush Limbaugh audience, which is 67 % male [6]. The age of the talk radio audience is concentrated in the 30 to 49 year age range. Talk radio's reemergence as a popular format was largely in response to Baby Boomers' developing preference for talk over music programming as they age. Some critics claim that radio is a predominantly white medium. Limbaugh fans are almost entirely

white — ninety-five percent of his audience are Caucasians. The political talk radio audience is better educated — fifty-six percent of Limbaugh fans have at least some college education. The income level of listeners is higher than that of nonlisteners. Close to twenty percent, or more, earn over \$75,000. Taking into account high education and income levels, it can be stated that the listeners are usually able to be more analytical about the information they receive from the media.

Political talk radio has a defined audience segment. Indeed, some talk hosts develop close linkages to their audiences. They use mechanisms, such as Internet sites, regular newsletters and publications to develop closer bonds with the listeners. For example, Rush Limbaugh and Michael Reagan by issuing monthly newsletter for their listeners, develop a valuable mailing list of conservatives throughout a nation. Such a data can be used for election fundraising campaigns.

Why do educated and financially successful people listen to political talk radio? Even though most of the regular listeners are well integrated into society, one of the factors motivating them into their listening habits is a strong need for interpersonal communication [7, 8, 9]. In their article Armstrong and Rubin suggest that talk radio serves many of the same functions as face-to-face communication. According to Katz's gratifying users theory, it can be stated that political talk radio satisfies the listener's social and psychological needs. Callers, as well as regular listeners, are also more interested in finding confirmation and support for their own beliefs. Thus, the regular listeners use this medium because they find it to be gratifying. Dr. Laura Schlessinger supports this idea while examining Rush Limbaugh's performance. Indeed, she says of him that he "is responding emotionally and his listeners respond back... What he has to say and how he says it reinforced what people were thinking. It made them feel they had a home, a voice, a representative for their way of thinking" [10].

Moreover, the fact that listeners have warm feelings toward the host, who shares their own ideas, cannot be ignored. On a 100 point scale, Limbaugh was rated twice as high by his listeners than by nonmembers of his audience [11]. The Limbaugh listeners tend to be conservative republicans, like the host himself. People whose prior beliefs do not contradict the point of the host cannot be lead. For example, exit polls conducted on election day of 1992 showed that frequent listeners voted Republican by a three-to-one margin [12]. "Talk radio voters — especially Rush Limbaugh's listeners — voted more thoroughly Republican than non-listeners, sending a Republican majority to Congress for the first time in 40 years" [13]. Following this idea, they should

have warmer feelings toward like-minded individuals and colder feelings toward Democratic leaders. Indeed, many Limbaugh listeners are already inclined to dislike the Clintons, liberals, and feminists even before they listen to him bash these individuals. Therefore, this begs the question: if host and audience are like-minded, how much of an opinion shift can there be?

Political talk radio gives its listeners an opportunity to realize their right to express political opinion and their frustrations with policies and politicians. The modern tendency in public administration and governance is to see citizens as clients, to whom the government delivers services. This often creates tension among individuals who believe that by living in a democratic society, they have to be treated as citizens and have the right be heard rather than being objects of consumerism. Paul Rutherford, a media historian, says that "talk radio has a significance because it is a safety valve, an outlet for expressing opinions, normally — but not exclusively — of the right, opinions of protest and resentment. It gives people a voice to say what would otherwise be silenced. The downside is that sometimes it becomes a vehicle for all sorts of nasty opinions and views which we might want to see silenced" [14].

Many studies show that talk radio audiences tend to be highly engaged in politics. They are heavy consumers of news, more opinionated about politics, more engaged, and more actively involved in the political process than non-listeners [15,16]. Political talk radio listeners pay more attention to political messages in mass and interpersonal media and are more exposed to political news than non-listeners. Indeed, almost fifty eight percent reported paying close attention to the discussion on the air between host and callers. According to Hofstetter and Gianos, all indicators of political participation and attention to public affairs in mass media were consistently, clearly, and positively associated with political talk radio audience involvement. Sixty eight percent of listeners indicated a high personal interest in politics [17]. A full ninety percent are registered to vote [18]. "Zaller suggests that general political involvement, associated with the greater knowledge, political sophistication, and critical acumen [...] increases the likelihood of exposure to a variety of messages in mass communication. These characteristics are also said to prepare citizens to sample which content they will accept and which they will reject" [19].

More evidence of political consciousness can be found. In the study conducted by Hofstetter, fifty seven percent reported that they agreed with the political talk radio hosts "some of the time." Another twelve percent said that they agreed "very little of the time". One might use this evidence to

argue that the audience and host have different points of view. Yet, these numbers suggest that many listeners are not uncritical. They do not follow talk hosts in a blind manner and express support for what hosts assert no matter how controversial or outrageous assertions may appear [20]. They are "actively participating in an ongoing, dynamic process of constructing their own meanings from what they hear on talk radio, in light of their own experience and knowledge" [21]. It may also be that the type of person who listens to Limbaugh is less likely to rely on external cues in the first place. Moreover, they are known as having some political knowledge that allows them to be critical about the host's and callers' statements.

Most listeners do not use talk radio shows as an information source. Voters depend of the news media for information to help them make sense of the array of candidates, their issue positions, and personal qualities. Moreover, a national poll on public attitudes toward the news conducted by Media Monitor in the USA in 1997 found that the majority of people — sixty six percent — consider television as their most important news source. Only ten percent derive most of their information from the radio and not necessarily from political talk radio shows. Therefore, most of the listeners already have information and positions on the political figures, policy and issues from other sources before listening to political talk show.

Finally, political talk radio serves as a source of political mobilization and stimulation for outside discussion. Indeed, it was found that thirty five percent of the listeners had talked with someone else about political talk radio content. Moreover, fourteen percent had taken action because of something they had heard on political talk radio [22].

Taking into account that the regular political talk radio listener is better informed, has his own point of view and is more politically involved, the influence of the political talk radio on the regular listener can be described as reinforcement and shaping of existing points of view rather than manipulation and change of the listeners' opinion. "Most of talk radio's influence may be in setting the political agenda, rather than pressing a particular cause" [23].

Unfortunately, there was not much research done on the non-listeners to talk radio. What is known is that they are more likely to be women, they tend to be less educated and have lower income than regular listeners [24].

Thirty-two percent of non-listeners earn less than \$20,000 per year, and only eight percent make over \$75,000[25], which is a striking contrast with regular listeners income level. It is often said that the level of political culture is often associated with

education and income level. Taking this in account, it can be stated that some people with lower levels of education and income have less knowledge about political processes, and a lower level of political efficacy. Thus, it can be assumed that they have a lower level of political culture.

As has been mentioned earlier, it can be concluded that, in general, non-members of political talk radio audience have a lower political culture than the regular listeners. In many cases low political culture means that people are not as interested in political news, are not as involved in politics and are less likely to vote. Non-listeners have less knowledge about political processes because they are not exposed to political news or informed about these current processes as are political talk radio listeners. In other words, many non-listeners either do not have their own opinion or do not have enough information and knowledge in order to formulate one. Therefore, it is a lot easier to change their attitudes because they do not have background information in order to critically analyze the messages received from the air.

Talk radio may successfully persuade poorly informed non-regular listeners because it routinely uses traditional propaganda techniques to convey its message. Rush Limbaugh, for example, most successfully uses propaganda techniques such as name-calling and card stacking. Name-calling happens when he encourages the audience to form judgement without examining the relevant evidence. Card stacking is the effort to arrange arguments and evidence to serve his own purposes [26]. Of course, some non-listeners are well educated and aware of political processes; therefore, they have their own personal positions on the issue. This would be the reason why they do not listen to a particular host. This show simply does not satisfy their needs or confirm or reinforce their own opinions.

Political talk radio affects regular listeners and non-listeners differently. Regular listeners are usually less affected by political talk radio than are non-listeners. Because of constant exposure to the political radio, regular listeners are better informed on the issues and can be more critical on the information they receive. Non-listeners are usually less aware of political events and can be influenced a lot more easily. It may be concluded that because many regular non-listeners are less critical about information they receive through political talk radio influences this type of audience by constructing and manipulating their political views. The most involved listeners appear to be active listeners who are not simply passively consuming the host's view points, but appear to be capable of making critical judgments about politics. These judgments are possibly stimulated by what has been heard on talk

radio but, at the same time, fully independent of whatever the host may advocate. "This audience uses talk radio as a "public sphere," exchanging, validating or rejecting information drawn from all sources, modifying their opinions based on what is heard, then taking their conclusions to the political arena" [27].

In sum, talk radio is a unique medium. It makes no claims of objectivity and entertains its listeners. It repeats its messages, and allows audience members to express their opinions, thus legitimizing the message in listeners' minds.

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ВПЛИВ ПОЛІТИЧНИХ РАДІО-ТОК-ШОУ НА РІЗНІ КАТЕГОРІЇ АМЕРИКАНСЬКОЇ АУДИТОРІЇ

Ця стаття містить аналіз впливу політичних радіо-ток-шоу-програм на їхніх слухачів. Проводиться порівняльний аналіз демографічних характеристик постійних та нерегулярних слухачів політичних радіо-ток-шоу. Автор розглядає причини і мотивації слухачів, які беруть участь в таких програмах, на основі теорії прямого впливу й теорії задоволення споживача. Автор показує особливості впливу на аудиторію в залежності від тривалості та періодичності прослуховування політичних радіо-ток-шоу-програм.