

The effects of political news on the mass audience are usually difficult to establish empirically. Recent models of mass communication effects have held that political knowledge is a better indicator of media reception than traditional measures of exposure.

This claim is tested in two studies of attitudes toward Democratic and Republican leaders during the 1996 U.S. presidential primary campaigns, not to mention the supporters of those parties. The impact of messages from three types of political talk radio (PTR) is examined: Rush Limbaugh, other conservative hosts, and liberal/moderate hosts. Political knowledge and exposure to talk radio are found to be equally good predictors of attitudes toward political leaders when studied separately.

However, when tested against one another, exposure is the more effective measure. Agreement between Rush Limbaugh's messages and his audience's attitudes toward political figures is consistent and strong.

As of today, Talk radio has mostly taken a turn for the worst in some cases. We have heard negative rhetoric from talk show radio hosts calling for masses to rise up and "take their country back," others have gone a step higher by giving a list of targeted politicians to eliminate. And all of this started ever since a Chicago Democrat named Barack Obama became the 44th and First African-American President of the United States of America.

It is worth considering the strange media landscape in which political talk radio is a salient. Never before have there been so many different national news sources—different now in terms

of both medium and ideology. Major newspapers from anywhere are available online; there are the broadcast networks plus public TV, cable's CNN, Fox News, CNBC, et al., print and Web magazines, Internet bulletin boards, The Daily Show, e-mail newsletters, blogs.

All this is well known; it's part of the Media Environment we live in. But there are prices and ironies here. One is that the increasing control of U.S. mass media by a mere handful of corporations has—rather counterintuitively—created a situation of extreme fragmentation, a kaleidoscope of information options. Another is that the ever increasing number of ideological news outlets creates precisely the kind of relativism that cultural conservatives decry, a kind of epistemic free-for-all in which "the truth" is wholly a matter of perspective and agenda. In some respects all this variety is probably good, productive of difference and dialogue and so on. But it can also be confusing and stressful for the average citizen. Short of signing on to a particular mass ideology and patronizing only those partisan news sources that ratify what you want to believe, it is increasingly hard to determine which sources to pay attention to and how exactly to distinguish real information from spin.

But "explaining" the news really means editorializing, infusing the actual events of the day with the host's own opinions. And here is where the real controversy starts, because these opinions are, as just one person's opinions, exempt from strict journalistic standards of truthfulness, probity, etc., and yet they are often delivered by the talk-radio host not as opinions but as revealed truths, truths intentionally ignored or suppressed by a "mainstream press" that's "biased" in favor of liberal interests. This is, at any rate, the rhetorical template for Rush Limbaugh's program, on which most syndicated and

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This is, at any rate, the rhetorical template for Rush Limbaugh's program, on which most syndicated and large-market political talk radio is modeled, from ABC's Sean Hannity and Talk Radio Network's Laura Ingraham to G. G. Liddy, Rusty Humphries, Michael Medved, Mike Gallagher, Neal Boortz, Dennis Prager, and, in many respects, Mr. John Ziegler.

