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Tuning in The Sound And the Fury

HOT AIR
All Talk, All the Time
By Howard Kurtz
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By Deborah Tannen

THIS BOOK will scare the hell out of you. If you don't listen to right-wing talk radio, it will give you an idea of what it sounds like and the power it can wield. If you watch televised political talk shows, it will articulate the changes you've noticed: There's more confrontation, more polarization, less information, less interchange of ideas. There is a chapter on "Daytime Dysfunction" television, but author Howard Kurtz, a Washington Post media reporter, is really interested in politics: the national television political talk shows and politically oriented call-in radio.

To television network owners, news and information are simply entertainment, and shows get better ratings if participants create conflict, shout at each other and play "get the guest." Nothing can be discussed that is subtle, complex or nuanced. Everything must be oversimplified and polarized. Viewers are more interested in personalities than in issues, and the proliferation of talk shows creates an "echo chamber": Kurtz shows that the same commentators appear on show after show repeating the same sound bites, often in the form of predictions, regardless of whether those predictions have any basis in expertise or fact. Radio, on the other hand, is under pressure not to compress time but to fill it. In an effort to provoke callers, radio hosts spread unsubstantiated rumors, outright lies and venom. Hate sells, and it is virtually impossible to correct the misinformation and distortions that are so easily disseminated.

Although references to the "liberal media" abound on such shows, Kurtz demonstrates that the range of political opinions heard on the airwaves is from middle to far right, with the far right predominating. There are many more right-wingers included ("conservative" doesn't accurately describe many of them) and no true left-wingers in sight. (When was the last time you saw Noam Chomsky on national television?) Republicans and right-wing enthusiasts defend their side at all costs, while Democrats and "liberals" are on the defensive and frequently criticize Clinton.

Hot Air illustrates an array of scary phenomena spawned by the talk show culture. One is the easy back and forth between politicians and talk show regulars, so that talk shows provide unfair media exposure for politicians' campaigns. Each time Pat Buchanan decides to run for office, for example, he draws on his "pundit" account for free campaign air time.

Another troubling phenomenon is that journalists who appear regularly on television become media stars, commanding large lecture fees from corporations and other interest groups. Ironically, although they see conflicts of interest in every move made by politicians, these journalists insist that their being paid by interest groups creates only a "perception" or "appearance" problem.

Kurtz deftly demonstrates the power and influence of talk radio. When Rush Limbaugh embellished a groundless rumor that White House lawyer Vincent Foster was murdered, "stocks, bonds, and the dollar all took a beating." Even more troubling: A bill that would have limited politicians' ability to accept lavish gifts from lobbyists and that required lobbyists to disclose their activities passed the House and swept the Senate by a vote of 95-2. Newt Gingrich, then House Republican whip, faxed Limbaugh a misleading statement claiming that the bill would force civic groups to disclose the names and addresses of their volunteers or face huge *—Continued on page 5*

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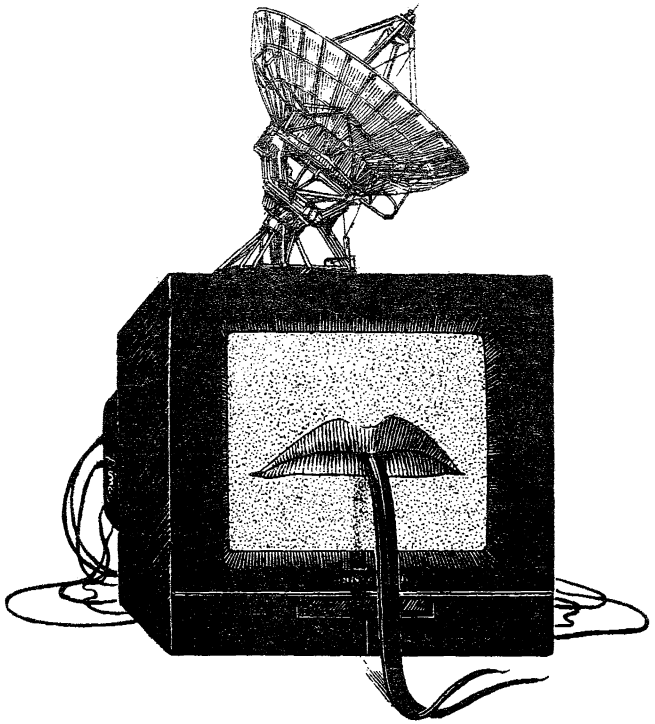
fines. Limbaugh read the fax on his show, calling the bill "unconstitutional" and "anti-American"; others, including talk show hosts Pat Robertson and Paul Weyrich, joined in. Congressional offices were flooded with calls. Senate opponents filibustered. Forty-four senators changed their votes, and the bill was defeated.

The power of radio call-in demagogues to provoke a rash of listener action is one of the most frightening aspects of the rise of talk radio. Kurtz tells, for example, of a Snohomish, Wash., woman who "sent a letter to USA Today criticizing talk radio for stirring up hatred." As a result, she "was assailed by Michael Reagan, the former president's son, on his Los Angeles show. 'I was swamped by hate calls, including six that were actual, violent threats,' she says." Kurtz found himself the recipient of similar calls when Limbaugh lambasted him on the air because he thought Kurtz had criticized him in a Washington Post article.

Though *Hot Air* provides an invaluable service by calling attention to developments many have sensed but no one has documented so thoroughly, it is not without weaknesses. The book reads at times like a series of columns, each following a stereotypical structure that begins with a sudden plunge into a new scene ("It is 8:17 p.m., and Skip Smith, the CNN makeup man, is applying a coat of powder to Larry King's face"). It is at times jumpy and repetitious. There is an impressive and useful accretion of examples, but they often cry out for more explanation, analysis or commentary.

In place of this, we get quotes from others—often without being told where the quotes come from. Over and over we read that someone said something, but not when, to whom, or in what context. Did Kurtz conduct an interview? Did he find the remark in print? How does Kurtz know what David Gergen said to Barbara Bush at a Christmas party at the vice presidential mansion? How does he know that Michael Kinsley "drove his friends crazy with his neurotic hand-wringing" when he was "racked with indecision" about whether to leave "Crossfire" to accept the editorship of New York Magazine? And why the snide tone?



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It is difficult to resist the suspicion that the vitriolic tone of anti-government rhetoric on talk radio has played a role in recent anti-government terrorism, but Kurtz stops short of making this claim. He notes the destructiveness of talk shows' negativity—it's far easier and more entertaining to attack something than to discuss its complex rationale and operation—but repeatedly reaffirms his belief that there must be no controls to limit the ability of extremists to broadcast whatever lies, verbal toxins and incitement to violence they like. After noting that, following the Oklahoma City bombing, a Washington Post poll found that 4 in 10 respondents "called for greater restrictions on what people may say on the radio," Kurtz dismisses this sizeable minority opinion by calling it "a troubling sign for those who believe in the First Amendment" and leaves it at that. I'm not sure he's wrong, but the issue merits more thoughtful discussion.

Kurtz sneers at journalists who join the talk show culture even though they see its weaknesses, but reveals that he himself is a frequent talk show guest and even had his own call-in radio show for 6 months. Yet he offers only a single (though compelling) paragraph explaining why he does it (more people hear you, your mother is impressed, your mechanic recognizes you). I am not inclined to fault him as he faults others, but he owes us more explanation and discussion—and perhaps he owes his colleagues a little more indulgence.

But these and other complaints aside, *Hot Air* is a vital account of an explosive and corrosive force in our society. I'm glad Howard Kurtz wrote it, and I hope everyone is listening. ■