

# **The Personal Is Political**

**The Political Economy of Noncommercial Radio Broadcasting  
in the United States**

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# Contents

Prolegomenon . . . . .	3
Enter the Professor . . . . .	6

In this essay, I look at the problems facing progressives and those on the political left in the United States in participating in political analysis and debate in mainstream journalism and the news media. I focus on radio broadcasting, as this is where much of political discussion takes place in the United States. Radio broadcasting is the least expensive of the media for production and reception, is ubiquitous, has adapted itself to the Internet, and is uniquely suited for locally based programming. I leave aside the matter of the Internet, as this is an issue I address in detail elsewhere; while the digital revolution is of indubitable importance, it does not alter my basic argument appreciably.<sup>1</sup> I also stay away from television, cable TV news networks in particular. While those channels are important, they too do not affect my core points. I look specifically at my own experience hosting a weekly public affairs program on an NPR (National Public Radio)-affiliated radio station in Illinois from 2002–2012. This was, to my knowledge, the only NPR series hosted by a socialist in the network’s history. But before I draw from my personal experiences, some context is necessary.

## Prolegomenon

Considerable scholarship has examined the range of legitimate debate in the U.S. news media. In short, the range tends to be bounded by the limit of debate among political and economic elites; when they agree on a topic, any view that challenges this is pretty much off-limits in the news media and various discussion programs.<sup>2</sup> As Jeff Cohen, the founder of Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting, puts it, the range of debate tends to extend “all the way from GE to GM.”<sup>3</sup> When non-mainstream views do get attention, they tend to be misrepresented, ridiculed, or trivialized. Occasionally, during periods of social upheaval and powerful social movements, dissident views can get a hearing, even a respectful one, but when the momentum recedes, the coverage declines sharply qualitatively and quantitatively.

For those firmly ensconced inside the mainstream, this tends to be no more a concern than drowning is to a fish; it barely warrants consideration as an issue. For those outside the mainstream, addressing the too-narrow range of legitimate discourse has been a constant problem, and an issue of almost singular importance. For much of U.S. history, the emphasis was upon creating independent media that could provide a forum for dissident views. By the middle of the twentieth century, the emphasis became gaining access to mainstream media and elite media discourse, as they dominated the political environment, and independent media such as they existed were increasingly marginal and ineffectual.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (New York: New Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Jeff Cohen, personal conversation with author, 2005.

For modern societies as a whole, elite-driven media debate may not be an especially enormous problem in political democracies with high voter participation, relative economic equality, vibrant political cultures, and economic growth and stability. As none of those criteria apply to the contemporary United States—and it is arguable how much the last criterion has applied since the 1980s—the nature of media and media systems is a very big deal.

To be precise, the ideological barriers are stronger in journalism and explicit public affairs coverage than in the balance of the media culture. Commercial entertainment allows a bit more wiggle room for dissident and left-wing ideas, though that point should not be exaggerated. It is striking, too, that celebrities from the entertainment world can get an audience in mainstream media to discuss ideas outside its parameters in a manner that scholars or activists could only dream about. But, again, that point should not be exaggerated. It is only “open” in comparison to the lockdown in place for the range of debate in the news media.

Much of the explanation for the constricted range of debate in mainstream journalism points to the commercial basis of the industry: private ownership supported by commercial advertising as the revenue base. This gives journalism an implicit small “c” conservative bias. Such a news media, especially as the firms get larger, the owners richer, and the markets less competitive, tend to have a built-in bias toward the status quo; this point has been understood for a good century. Even those analyses that emphasize the crucial role of professional ideology in setting the values for the field often acknowledge that the professional values emerged in an environment where the commercial and political values of the owners were internalized. This critique began with newspaper journalism and was extended to commercial broadcasting as it became pervasive by the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Indeed, from the 1930s through the ’70s commercial radio and later television broadcasting tended to be almost devout in their commitment to staying close to the middle of the road and not veering outside the boundaries of elite debate. (This is what is meant by neutrality or objectivity in journalism.) The principle was encapsulated in the Federal Communications Commission’s Fairness Doctrine which was formally adopted in the 1940s.

The political right found such journalism insufficiently sympathetic to their worldview and political program, and a detriment to their prospects of political success. In the 1970s, it began an intense campaign to make the mainstream news media be more sympathetic to the right, and it specifically sought to overturn the Fairness Doctrine, which required stations to provide balance in their coverage of public affairs.<sup>4</sup> The right got its wish when the Reagan FCC overturned the Fairness Doctrine in the 1980s. Soon thereafter, Rush Limbaugh and a legion of charismatic far-right blowhards all but monopolized the commercial airwaves with regard to political chat, generally mouthing

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<sup>4</sup> John Nichols and Robert McChesney, *Dollarocracy: How the Money and Media Election Complex is Destroying America* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

the same Republican Party talking points *ad nauseam*. If one were to visit the United States anytime after around 1990, and one assumed commercial radio provided an accurate reflection of the nation's political temperament, one might logically conclude the United States was the most extreme right-wing nation since the defeat of fascism in 1945. An outsider might be surprised that Pat Buchanan or Michele Bachmann did not win the presidency with 90 percent of the vote.

Moreover, with regard to structural and core economic issues, the range of political debate has shifted far to the right in the United States since the 1970s. This has been driven to a large extent by aggressive campaigns by moneyed and corporate interests to assert their domination of the political process.<sup>5</sup> Issues that once were accepted as mainstream—e.g., public education, progressive taxation, labor unions, social security, the need for full employment—are now subject to withering criticism and their future is in jeopardy. Inequality has increased sharply, and the political system is awash with institutionalized corruption. As both parties have followed the money trail, the flag of centrism has been pushed toward the right field foul line. This has accentuated the problem of journalism and media for progressive activists, and for citizens who wish to assert democratic values and practices. As may be evident by now, I fall under that heading.

Ironically, mainstream discussion of the parties emphasized how they have “polarized,” with each party moving further to extremes. That is inaccurate, if not preposterous. The alleged “polarization” refers to how the parties no longer overlap as white southern Democrats have stopped getting elected while moderate and liberal Republicans have become extinct; but both parties have moved appreciably rightward on core structural issues. The lack of overlap in a system where the two parties have made it virtually impossible for there to be effective third parties contributes to making the governing system degenerate—an outcome that apparently is no great concern to the moneyed benefactors who pay for the politicians. Democratic voters, in contrast, have not moved to the right—if anything, the opposite is the case—which is a recurring tension in the political system, and a basis for hope.

In the United States, there have been two forms of broadcast media since the 1960s that have been created to counter the problems in the commercial system, for journalism, public affairs, and entertainment. Both were born of a more liberal era, when the notion of generating media to expand awareness and political participation was considered a legitimate public policy objective. The Public Broadcasting Act was passed in 1967, which established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and eventually the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television network and National Public Radio (NPR). Beginning in the mid-1970s scores of community radio stations were created, joining the handful of stations like the Pacifica network stations that were established prior to the 1970s.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Hacker and P. Pierson, *Winner Take All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

Although both NPR and community radio stations depend upon CPB support to sustain their operations, they each followed a different logic. The NPR stations began in a time when they were envisioned as providing a forum for dissident voices, for those precluded from the commercial system. Political pressures made that an impossibility for public broadcasters early on. NPR stations settled into the role of being a main source of political information and discussion online. With the disappearance of commercial radio journalism in the United States by the end of the 1990s, NPR stations often became the only game in town. NPR journalism and public affairs programs tend to avoid the salaciousness, idiocy, and asininity of the commercial broadcasting world—which is no small contribution—but they stay resolutely within the boundaries of elite debate. They are perpetually in fear of budget cuts driven by the political right with its endless jihad against “liberal” bias. NPR stations are firmly lodged into a relatively well established niche of the media system.

Community radio stations, in contrast, have a more fragile basis for existence. There are fewer of them, they largely rely on volunteer labor, they can struggle to find effective management systems, and many of them are one bad pledge drive away from catastrophe. At the same time, the community stations as a rule have a much broader range of political ideas; they are the broadcast media that are not constrained by the range of elite debate. It is where one can go to get real criticism of corporate capitalism or U.S. foreign policy, or where one can go to get thorough discussion of the environment, that is impossible with NPR or commercial stations. The entertainment, too, tends to be far more eclectic than what can be found elsewhere on the dial. The downside: with meager resources, the patchwork of stations is barely visible to the great mass of the population.

## Enter the Professor

Much of the above is reflected in the critical scholarship on media, journalism, and politics. Some of it draws from my own research on the political economy of communication. As my career advanced in the mid-1990s, and I had a few books that attracted considerable attention for academic titles, I experienced firsthand how the interview/talk programs worked. Between 1993 and 2013, I did approximately 1,000 guest appearances on radio programs. Only a smattering were on commercial radio stations, where, without exception, the interviews were brief and/or I was paired with a mainstream person to provide “balance.” Such balance is *never* required of mainstream guests.

(How I would have adored seeing Thomas Friedman, some retired general who serves as the “expert” on all cable news channels, John McCain, or any other mainstream pundit paired with Noam Chomsky—or any informed critic during some debate on U.S. foreign policy! It never happens, even on NPR stations as a rule, even when history demonstrates, as with the 2003 Iraq invasion, the closer one gets to war the more the

mainstream explanations approach being adulterated half-truths and lies. Someone like Christopher Hitchens was *persona non grata* in mainstream media when his views were stridently critical of U.S. foreign policy; when he became a firm proponent of U.S. military intervention in the Balkans and Iraq and the loudest and most articulate critic of the antiwar movements, he became a household name. The quality of his writing and thinking did not change; only his political views.)

The rest of my 1,000 radio interviews were split between community stations, NPR affiliates, and foreign public service broadcasters. The community stations were hit and miss; some interviewers were unprepared and unfocussed while many of the shows were absolutely first-rate. Those interviews were respectful and serious, and perhaps the best I have ever had. The NPR stations tended to be more professional, but the hosts were—and are—much more cautious. Again, many of the programs were tremendous, and the callers on the NPR call-in programs were sympathetic and discerning. There was nothing whatsoever like this on commercial radio in the United States. It is where ideas and thoughtful discussion go to die.

In 1995 I began my own career as a radio host. I was teaching in Madison at the time and I was asked to do a shift hosting a public affairs program every second week on WORT-FM, the local community station. I was a volunteer. I sought out guests who had little exposure in the media but I knew had a good deal to say. Many were academics whose work had a political orientation. I had complete liberty to select guests, and the responsibility to do so. When I accepted a teaching position at the University of Illinois in 1998, I stepped down from the show. I soon realized that I missed doing the show; it was fun being on the other side of the table.

What I especially enjoyed about doing hour-long interviews on noncommercial stations was that I could give guests an opportunity to really lay out their positions and explain themselves. This is something that is rare for critical scholars and progressives, who invariably struggle with the sound-bite cliché Olympics on commercial media. Critical ideas outside the mainstream need time to be explained. Mainstream views can generally invoke deeply ingrained cultural references; e.g., free enterprise, entrepreneurs, markets, America, choice, etc. I wanted to give those dissident voices—often the truth-tellers—an opportunity to speak, and give a starving audience the opportunity to hear them.

Because I had ample time to explain my own views in my own writings and in my own interviews where I was guest, I had little desire or need to use my position as host to make my own views the heart of the show. To the contrary, I treated my guests exactly the way I liked to be treated when I was a guest: I read their books and/or articles, tried to assist the guests get their main ideas communicated clearly, and I let them explain their work and their ideas. Having been interviewed a great deal gave me a sense of what a good interview entailed. I recalled how baseball legend Ted Williams responded when asked if he—arguably the greatest hitter in the game’s history—could possibly manage pitchers. As I recall, he said something along the lines of “I was a great hitter because I studied pitching, so I think I can coach it.” To do

the job well was a lot of work. I generated a great deal of respect for the good hosts I had dealt with over the years. It requires a lot of preparation and the ability to be a good listener. Lots of local radio hosts like Ian Masters, Marc Steiner, and Sonali Kolhatkar—to name but a few—provided a model for my work. At the national level I learned a lot by listening to Amy Goodman, David Barsamian, Bill Moyers, and Terry Gross, and, curiously enough, Larry King.

An incident in the summer of 2000 reinforced to me why my approach to doing public affairs radio was necessary. I began writing a column that year for the *Silicon Alley Reporter*, a trade publication started by Jason McCabe Calacanis for the Internet boom in New York City. My book *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* had just been published, and Calacanis wanted me to provide a critical take on Internet matters, which I gladly obliged. (The column was titled “Homage to Catatonia.”) Before the dot-com crash threw the magazine out of business in 2001, it was a big deal, and each issue was fat with advertising. In the summer of 2000, at its peak, the *Silicon Alley Reporter* hosted a one-day conference in Westchester County, New York, for the movers and shakers in the New York Internet economy. Several hundred people paid a pretty fee to attend, and I was flown in to be one of the plenary speakers.

Instead of giving speeches, the four plenary speakers were interviewed on a stage in a theater packed with hundreds of people by Charlie Rose, then as now the host of a daily PBS interview program. Rose apparently had a close connection to Calacanis or others high up at *Silicon Alley Reporter*. At that point, Rose’s PBS show was at its peak, and many academics and public figures considered it the premier interview show in U.S. media. It was a show that exemplified the constricted range of debate in U.S. mainstream media: corporate CEOs and mainstream thinkers dominated. Thomas Friedman had what seemed like a second residence on the set. It was the voice of the establishment. Dissidents were generally restricted to entertainers and artists, and were often “balanced.” I confess I was intrigued by the idea of having thirty to forty-five minutes with Rose by myself. In the back of my mind, I thought that perhaps once Rose saw what a good interview I was he would have me on his TV show. I could dream, couldn’t I?

My excitement increased when I watched Rose interview the plenary speaker before me. The person who immediately preceded me on stage was a Yale professor whose claim to fame was having been a victim of one of the Unabomber’s mail bombs a few years earlier. I discovered during the course of Rose’s interview that this professor had right-wing views, though I had never heard of him before—nor subsequently. At any rate, Rose peppered this guy with softball questions right down the middle of the plate. To hear Rose, one might think this guy was the greatest genius of the twentieth century. Most of the questions were seemingly prefaced by Rose stating something along the lines of, “Because you are such a great genius and wonderful human being....” I suspect some people in the audience contemplated naming their next child after the Yale professor. I was salivating at the thought of getting a round of those questions



and smacking the answers over the centerfield fence to the thunderous applause of the audience. Yee haw!

Instead, Rose's tone changed perceptibly the moment I came on stage for my interview. Batting practice was over and the questions were more like brushback pitches or beanballs. Rose had little apparent sympathy for my position and less interest in allowing me to explain myself in my own terms. He was civil, don't get me wrong, and the interview went smoothly. But I was dealing with his trip—being the border policeman for the range of legitimate debate—and never getting much of a chance to explain what I was about. It confirmed what I already knew: there needed to be a place for progressives and those outside the mainstream to have their voices heard and reach a larger audience than that provided by the smattering of community radio stations. It did not exist in the United States.

To some extent that impulse motivated my political work in the subsequent years. In 2002 and 2003, John Nichols, Josh Silver, and I formed Free Press, the media policy reform group. Free Press exploded into prominence during the Iraq War in 2003 when it became public knowledge that the same media conglomerates whose news divisions had uncritically reported the official lies that got the United States into the war were attempting to change the rules so they could own even more media outlets. Free Press has been active since then on a number of issues regarding democratizing the media system and expanding the range of legitimate debate beyond that sanctified by Wall Street, political elites, and corporate America.

But as important as policy activism was for reforming the system, in the meantime there was work to be done or else the prospects for structural reform on any issue, including media, would lessen. In 2001, I approached officials at WILL-AM, the NPR affiliate associated with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and broached the idea of my doing a weekly public affairs program, with an emphasis on media issues. I knew it was a long shot as no other NPR station had a program like the one I proposed. But I also knew that the saying went that the further one got from salt water the better the chances that an NPR station would be open-minded. That was certainly the case with WILL. The management responded positively, listened to tapes of my WORT program from the 1990s, and when an opening came in the schedule I went on the air in April 2002. The program, *Media Matters*, ran every Sunday from 1–2 PM central time for the next ten-and-a-half years, until the final episode in October 2012.

The reason the show worked was that WILL gave me *carte blanche* to do as I pleased. I was solely responsible for selecting (and procuring) guests. The station provided me the engineer to be in the studio, but I provided my own labor for free and I was responsible for getting and paying my producer with my own funds. My guests over the 500-plus weeks were a Who's Who of progressives, including: Andrew Bacevich, Sherrod Brown, Sundiata Cha-Jua, Noam Chomsky, Barbara Ehrenreich, Bill Fletcher, Jr., Thomas Frank, Janine Jackson, Chalmers Johnson, Lawrence Lessig, Toby Miller, Michael Moore, Ralph Nader, Bernie Sanders, Norman Solomon, Gore

Vidal, and Howard Zinn. I had many of the finest journalists of our era on the program on a routine basis, people like Robert Scheer, Amy Goodman, Juan Gonzalez, Katrina vanden Heuvel, Jeremy Scahill, Michael Hastings, Naomi Klein, John Pilger, Glenn Greenwald, Chris Hedges, Salim Muwakil, Matt Taibbi, and Alexander Cockburn. Despite their accomplishments, many of those people could not get an hour-long audience on an NPR station. Nearly all of them appeared at least twice, and many of them appeared at least once every year or two. Journalist John Nichols, my occasional co-author, was a guest thirty-three times, in part because he always co-hosted my twice-annual pledge drive shows.

Probably one-half of the programs were with more obscure guests who I wanted to bring into the public eye. Occasionally my show was able to increase the visibility of an important writer making an original argument with compelling evidence. In 2009, for example, I had Wendell Potter as a guest. Potter had been a former health insurance industry executive who provided an inside-account of the nefarious practices in his former industry. Potter would later get national attention. In 2011, I had Michelle Alexander as a guest to discuss her astonishing book, *The New Jim Crow*. At the time barely anyone knew about it; within a year it would be a bestseller. I was also delighted to have Diane Ravitch on the program to present her eloquent defense of public education and her critique of school privatization efforts. It was then, as now, a voice rarely heard in the mainstream media. In all of these cases I received a flood of feedback in the days following the broadcasts.

A recurring theme among my guests was the state of the economy, the nature of economic policy debates, and how the news media covered the economy. The guest roster included multiple appearances by Paul Krugman, John Bellamy Foster, Joseph Stiglitz, Dean Baker, Mark Weisbrot, James Galbraith, Michael Perelman, Robert Reich, Robert Kuttner, Juliet Schor, and Robert Pollin. There were scores of other times I knew the program was providing material not available elsewhere, and that it had an effect. It reinforced the importance of blasting open the media system.

The show was surprisingly non-controversial. I suspect part of that was due to my approach: I did not use the program to push my own views and ideas; it was about the guests. Casual listeners who did not know of my work otherwise would have been unlikely to know much about my specific political positions or writings. I disliked interviewers who inserted themselves into the limelight. I tried to let the guests speak about what they knew best and I gently guided them. Nor were my guests doctrinaire; they ranged all the way from Democratic Party liberals and progressives to socialists and beyond. I even had a few non-political and mainstream guests when the topic was appropriate. If all my guests had appeared in the same room at the same time some explosive arguments would have certainly ensued. Only on a few occasions did I really challenge a guest to back up a statement I found far-fetched. I figured that was the listeners' job as this was a call-in show. And most weeks the phone lines filled up at WILL; the callers often asked better questions than I did.

This is not to say that WILL did not get complaints about my show, especially its political orientation. In the first few months the station management kept me apprised of the criticism; thereafter they kept me in the dark, saying there was very little to worry about. So I will never know how much flak the station received. The only serious attack came in 2008 or so, when a prominent far-right winger who makes a career red-baiting progressives (and who has never lived in Illinois) tried to raise a ruckus about the left leanings of my guests. The right-winger claimed this was an abuse of public broadcasting and any NPR show should have what he deemed to be balanced guests lists or be tossed off the air. I explained to the right-winger and my station manager that my bias was toward guests who were mostly unavailable in the commercial and public media otherwise. Since one could listen to endless far right-wingers on the AM radio coast to coast, twenty-four hours per day—in fact, they were almost impossible to avoid—there was no case that I needed to offer them a slot on my measly show. My program, in fact, *was* the beginning of a real balance at NPR and in the broader media culture. The station manager at WILL gave me unconditional support. It made it a pleasure for me to work there.

This support gave me added incentive to help raise money for the station during pledge drives. As it developed, *Media Matters* became a barnburner during pledge drives, invariably raising far more money than any other program on the station. Listeners wanted to send an emphatic message to station management that the show had a strong following, and the message was received loud and clear. Moreover, at one point the WILL person responsible for such matters told me that *Media Matters* was the top-ranked program in the area in its timeslot for listeners aged twenty-five to fifty-four. I was told at another point that one-half of all the Internet traffic or downloads for the station were attributed to *Media Matters*. Thanks to podcasting, the audience for the program was national, even international, and a significant portion of the audience did not listen in real time. We got callers from all over the nation and the world. When I decided to discontinue the program to have more time for other projects in 2012, I was inundated with emails and letters and messages from fans from across the planet. Literally hundreds of them in a few weeks. By just about any measure for an NPR program, it was a smash hit.

I was especially moved by the significant number of young people who contacted me to describe how they had stumbled across *Media Matters* and it introduced them to a world they did not know existed. It changed their lives. It reminded me how, when I was fourteen-years old, I saw a TV interview with Gore Vidal where he described the United States as an empire. Later that same year I saw another interview on local TV where someone described racism in Cleveland, Ohio, where I grew up. Those two events shook the foundations of my world and helped push my life in a very different direction. *Media matters*. The right-wing gets it, the mainstream gets it. Progressives have got to get in the game. Except for the occasional station carrying *Democracy Now*, with the end of Bill Moyers's run on PBS in 2015, progressive voices are all but non-existent in public media.

Therefore perhaps the most sobering feature of the *Media Matters* experience has been that no other NPR station, not a single one, has attempted to emulate it. One might think that given its popularity by all measures, other NPR stations might be looking to do something like it in their own communities. It is not like these stations are setting the world on fire with their present offerings. If anything, programs like *Media Matters* can be money-makers, possibly cash-cows, because they reach a large, underutilized, and appreciative audience. Nor is it the case that I am the only person capable of hosting such a program; the country is crawling with talented people who could do a bang-up job. And as I discovered, there are extraordinary guests—I barely scratched the surface of what is out there—who richly deserve to be part of the public conversation in the United States. Our media and our nation are much weaker for their absence. Yet there has been zilch interest by anyone else in doing such a show; indeed there was no interest by other NPR stations to pick up *Media Matters* when WILL management briefly pursued the matter a few years into the show's run when they saw how popular it was with listeners. I am left with the conclusion that the left politics scared the pants off NPR officials outside of Champaign-Urbana. If there is an alternative explanation, I am—to invoke Ross Perot—all ears. My program was the exception that proves the rule.

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