

B. AUBREY FISHER MEMORIAL

**20
04**

LECTURE

**The Creation and Dissolution of Public
Trust in the New Media Environment**

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Philadelphia, PA

Eighteenth Annual B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture

University of Utah, October 17, 2004

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The Creation and Dissolution of Public Trust in the New Media Environment

by

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Call-in, political talk radio is one example of niche media whose consequences on political discourse have been feared, ridiculed, applauded, and acclaimed. The audience of political talk radio is substantial, attracting as its regular weekly listeners about 18% of the adult population. The voice of political talk radio is mostly conservative, and often angry. Yet, its topics and styles vary widely from one host to another and from the norms of mainstream news. A few shows dominate both in the size of the audience they draw and in the influence they have over the style of the rest of the genre.

The *Rush Limbaugh Show* is the preeminent call-in, political talk radio program on the air. It has spawned numerous clones. Its audience is the largest of its genre. Its influence on politics is assumed to be substantial. Limbaugh's supporters listen to him because they believe he tells stories the liberal, mainstream news will not. To them, he is entertaining, sarcastic, and credible. His detractors call him a demagogue, a propagandist, a liar, and even a hater. We argue that there is another phrase that should be applied to Limbaugh that helps to explain his popularity—"party spokesman" (Jamieson, Cappella, & Turow, 1998).

"Mass" is no longer an appropriate adjective for the media. "Niche media" are media that target audiences with particular needs and interests. To understand the influence of the media of the future, we must understand how niche media influence their narrow and, very likely, agreeable audiences. Political talk radio is a case in point. It uses an old medium in new ways. It is interactive or at least gives the appearance of being so. It can easily be syndicated and thus can reach a national, if not mass, audience. Most important, its content meets the pre-existing needs and interests of its audience.

The media of the 21st century will deviate from those of the 20th in some important ways. Interactivity, telepresence (virtual reality), and immediate, unique responsiveness are just three. But important continuities will remain: Sources must still appeal to their audiences to keep them; audiences will still choose particular media on the basis of their own needs, goals, and interests; influence will still depend on the persuasiveness of ideas and images (visual and metaphorical).

As 20th century media are remade to function in the 21st, much can be learned from studying how old media have recreated themselves. One such recreation is the use of syndicated radio for highly partisan, interactive, ideological, political discussion with the public. This format raises questions about political parties, the effects of niche media, and the issues to be faced by the media technologies of the 21st century.

Long-Term Trends in Trust and Civic Engagement

The encompassing term that captures the connections between people and between citizens and the institutions that serve them is social capital. Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) describes social capital as the "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 67). Three broad elements typically make up social capital. They are social (or interpersonal) trust, civic engagement, and political—that is, institutional—trust. In the latter half of the 20th century, we have seen precipitous declines in all forms of civic capital.

Social Trust

In the past 20 years, significant declines in both social trust and memberships in social groups have been observed. Over the past four decades, the number of persons who agree that “most people can be trusted” (versus “you can’t be too careful”) has dropped about 40%—from 57 % in 1960 to 34 % in 1998 (Norris 2000).

Today’s younger generations are different from previous ones. Unfortunately, they consistently exhibit even

lower levels of social trust than their elders. Rahn and Transue (1998) report that high-school students showed steeper declines in social trust from 1976 to 1994 than adults did. Like adults, young people are becoming increasingly mistrustful of others but at even faster rates than their parents.

During the same time span that social trust has plummeted, so has visiting with friends and neighbors, entertaining at home, playing cards with friends, and even dining as a family (Putnam, 2000). It seems that we’d rather watch make-believe friends interact on TV than interact with our own friends and family at home.

Trust in Institutions

In the late 1950s and early ‘60s, fully 75% of the public thought that you could “always” or “most of the time” trust the people in Washington to do what is right. By 1995, only 25% held this belief (Orren, 1997). Congress and the executive branch both share in this loss of trust in government. Those having a “great deal” of confidence in the executive branch dropped from a high of about 42% in 1966 to about 12% in 1996. Congress dropped just as much (Blendon et al., 1997). These changes were not confined to specific groups, either: The changes were similar for men and women, blacks and whites, those with extensive educational attainment and those without, young and old, union members and non-union workers,

and other demographic groups. Although these changes in trust in governmental institutions are not uniform over time, they do exhibit a consistent pattern of declining trust, and that decline applies to every agency at every level of government (Blendon et al., 1997).

Journalists have felt the spillover of the decline in confidence in social and political institutions. In the past 20 years, confidence in those running the news media changed from a very low “high” of 28 percent in 1976 to very low “low” of 11 percent in 1993 (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). In his dissertation research, Yariv Tsafti (2001) examines historical trends in media skepticism, focusing specifically on the General Social Survey from 1973 through 1996. Those who responded that they “have hardly any confidence in the press” increased from 15% in 1973 to 41% in 1996. The 1990s alone show an almost 10% increase. Forty percent of those surveyed having “hardly any confidence” is hardly a vote of confidence.

Civic Participation

These measured reductions in confidence and trust in institutions in the United States parallel reductions in civic engagement. Robert Putnam (2000) has carefully documented these trends. Focusing on the past 50 years and sometimes beyond, he describes in detail the declines in voting; in citizen participation in political campaigns; in attendance at political events; and in membership in national chapters of every stripe (including Scouts, Hadassah, the PTA, and other associations). Although Putnam has been criticized for failing to recognize new forms of civic participation untapped in previous survey instruments, his critics have themselves been unable to muster any evidence of the contradictory trends that they are so certain exist.

From the 1960s to the present, social trust, institutional trust, and civic engagement have all declined significantly. Trust is central to establishing cooperation (Rotter, 1980) exercising civic engagement (Putnam, 1993), and realizing team work in business and management

settings while avoiding malaise, depression, and anxiety. Sociologist James Coleman (1990), among others, argues strongly that social capital is critical to a functioning society and democracy. All societies must act in concert to solve common problems. Trust is crucial to the development of collective social action. Trusting citizens are more likely to be members of dense social networks, to be engaged in civic activities, to be less likely to cheat (e.g., on taxes), and to be willing to undertake the mutual obligations that allow efficient commerce and social exchange.

Mainstream News Media Activates Mistrust

Previous research (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) has implicated certain forms of news coverage in activating mistrust in the context of political campaigns and in public policy debates. In one study, participants were involved in a simulated campaign for mayor. In one version of the study, participants received broadcast news about the candidates that was either strategic, emphasizing the “horse race” aspects of the campaign, or issue-oriented, emphasizing the problems in the community and how to resolve them. A third group received broadcast news segments unrelated to the election.

The conclusions were clear: Issue coverage neither depressed nor elevated mistrust. Those exposed to no news about the campaign had levels of political mistrust no different from those receiving issue-oriented coverage. Strategic coverage, on the other hand, activated mistrust over that reported by people in the control group and those in the issue condition.

These results were replicated in a more complicated study that employed both print and broadcast news segments. As in the previous study, infusing the audience with strategically framed news elevated their mistrust, in contrast to issue-based or no news exposure. The two media also had additive effects with

regard to levels of mistrust. The presence of an issue or strategy frame did not dominate the alternative frame—it either subtracted or added. In a media environment dominated by the strategy frame, additive effects imply continual reactivation of political cynicism and also imply that small doses of issue-framed news can reduce but do not have the power to counteract the larger doses of strategic information.

The results from these two experiments suggest a reliable effect of strategic news on activating mistrust about elections and candidates. We sought to generalize our findings to a more immediate issue or some importance to citizens: the health-reform debate that occurred early in the first Clinton administration (1993-94).

The data from this study are consistent with our previous findings about strategy frames but not about issue frames. Strategic news frames activated mistrustful responses confirming our previous expectations about the effects of strategy coverage. The effects are not large, but in the midst of dense coverage about a topic of some consequence to every citizen, the activation of any cynical response from a few news articles, in our opinion, is strong testimony for the effects of strategic framing of news. Issue

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news frames also activate mistrustful responses in comparison to the control. This finding was contrary to our

expectations about how issue framing of news should operate. Since the health-reform debate produced critical reaction to every plan proposed as well as extensive coverage of the plans and the critical reaction (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), one possibility is that increased mistrust of the policy debate process arose because of frustration with all the participants who generated collective criticism of all policy options—a kind of “death of a thousand cuts”—with no solution acceptable to alleviate what was acknowledged to be a serious set of problems.

Our previous research indicates that horse-

race coverage of both campaigns and public policy debates can increase the public's mistrust of the process and the participants. Even issue coverage of problems and their solutions or of political ads and their interpretations can increase mistrust when the coverage is critical of all alternatives, as it was during the health-care reform debate of 1993-94 and in some versions of ad watching, where the emphasis is on balanced criticism rather than unveiling the most egregious examples in need of correction.

We proposed two mechanisms to explain these results: (1) an analogy to interpersonal mistrust to account for strategy findings, and (2) the "death of a thousand cuts" metaphor to account for issue coverage criticizing all available policy alternatives.

Trust is a personal feeling that operates in private, interpersonal, and public life. Trust implies connection as a necessary condition. Without connection, trust is not an issue. Connection requires that your actions have some affect on me. In private life, trust or its absence matters only when there is connection between people—whether the connections are ones of business relations or intimate relations. So, too, in public life. Trust matters when there is connection. If actions at the highest levels of government are not seen as affecting daily life, there is no connection, and trust cannot be an issue.

Given connection, trust further implies that a leader's actions are undertaken so as to preserve common interests and not simply the leader's interests and the interests of her constituents. So the absence of trust—and worse, the assumption that an actor is untrustworthy—is based on the view that her actions are ones that are undertaken with her own interests paramount and "our" interests subsidiary. In short, mistrust implies that the self-interest of political actors is their primary goal and that the common interest is secondary, at best, or played out only for its political advantage.

The public's perception of the motivations

of actors determines their trustworthiness. Relationships with public figures are still relationships, even when these relationships are separated in time and space. If Rod Hart is correct in his assertion that television is fundamentally an interpersonal medium¹, then identification

with political figures is, at heart, an interpersonal process in which the attribution of motives determines the success of the relationship. Trust in others

must be earned through actions that are not always and only in pursuit of one's own interests.

When the coverage of politicians and their policies is framed continually as self-interested and seldom in terms of the common good—whether such characterizations are correct or incorrect—the public's experience of their leaders is biased toward attributions that induce mistrust. Strategy coverage invites precisely such attributions, and it is our hypothesis that one result is the activation of political cynicism.

Strategy Frames for News Activate Mistrust

One explanation of the effects of issue coverage on mistrust takes into consideration its "oppositional" character in print news articles. This oppositional commentary may have confused or, worse, frustrated readers. Just as strategic coverage paints the motives of each actor in negative colors and leads to the rejection of all alternatives, so issue coverage of health care from an oppositional point of view may lead to the rejection of all alternatives in the debate. Just as cynicism may be the result of the rejection of all candidates as self-interested manipulators in campaigns, so cynicism may be the result of the criticism and apparent rejection of all solutions to the problem of health care as ineffective. Issue coverage may undermine all available solutions, leaving the public frustrated, confused, and ultimately cynical

about the debate itself, no matter how substantive it may appear to be.

If our explanations of the mechanisms for activating mistrust are correct, then these mechanisms sow the seeds of the activation of trust as well. If strategic news coverage activates a sense of self-interest in citizens when they are served a regular diet of such coverage, then perhaps an antidote is exposure to a community of collaborators with similar forms of self-interest—in short, a community of the like-minded where self-interest is, by definition, mutual interest. Similarly, to circumvent the frustration of the rejection of all available policy alternatives, exposure to a community of like minds would suffice. Instead of coverage of politics and social affairs covered with a focus on politicians' self-interest and criticism of all available options, what about commentary in which criticism is directed only at those opposed and where one's own self-interest is the mutual interest of the community? To assess the impact of such a virtual reality, we turn to political talk radio and its most well-known and successful voice, Rush Limbaugh.

Political Talk Radio

By Political Talk Radio (PTR), we mean call-in radio shows where hosts and callers interact spontaneously about issues primarily focused on politics and social affairs. In 1985, the Federal Communication Commission concluded that the fairness doctrine was no longer needed.²

Rush Limbaugh is the pre-eminent voice of Political Talk Radio (PTR). Heard on over 650 stations nationwide as well as on short-wave and Armed Services Radio, Limbaugh reports that his nationally syndicated, three-hour AM radio show reaches a cumulative weekly audience of more than fifteen million. "[I]t is nearly impossible to find an inhabited place in the U.S. where the *Rush Limbaugh Show* cannot be found on the radio dial," writes *Talk Daily*.³

From data reported in 2003 by Princeton

Survey Research Associates (2003), one in ten people reported listening to at least some of Rush Limbaugh's show during the week, and as many as one in three reported listening to some PTR show in a typical week.

Not only does Limbaugh's show (and other PTR) have reach that is significant, but it can

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be seen as a vanguard of the new media—partisan in its ideology, highly segmented in its appeal to

those with strong interests in politics, and at least pseudo-interactive in giving the appearance of control over content through questions from callers. PTR provides a venue through which the impact of new media on political and social concerns might be understood. To the extent that new media are sources of news and public affairs information that are partisan and directed at an interested and involved population, the impact of PTR may tell how those media will function.

Five Wave Panel Survey

From February 21 to March 5, 1996, we conducted a survey of regular and non-regular listeners of PTR as part of a large-scale national study of political talk radio during the presidential election year. The study included a five-wave national survey, an experiment, and content analyses.

The talk shows and their audiences were divided into four groups: Limbaugh, Conservatives, Moderates, and Liberals. Survey respondents were divided into four groups: (1) non-listeners; (2) regular listeners to Limbaugh only; (3) regular listeners to conservative shows but not to Limbaugh; (4) regular listeners to moderate or liberal shows (and not to Limbaugh). A fifth group of regular listeners—those listening to Limbaugh and a second show—was excluded from study. Regular listeners were those who listened to political talk radio at least twice a week. In the initial survey, 1203 were sampled; an over-sample of regular

listeners pushed the final sample to 1666.

Care was taken to define to respondents what we meant by political talk radio: "where the host talks mostly about politics, government, and public affairs. Sometimes listeners are invited to call in to discuss these issues on the air." Some studies of talk radio have not distinguished political talk radio from other forms of talk radio, which can include discussions of health, car maintenance, personal psychology, relationships, and sports, among other topics.

Those listening to other PTR hosts were further divided into two subgroups: regular consumers of Conservative PTR and regular consumers of Liberal/Moderate PTR.⁴ Four groups were studied in our survey: three groups of regular listeners—Limbaugh only (N=213); Conservative PTR (N=139); and Liberal/Moderate PTR (N=283)—and a group of non-listeners (N=988). Distributions of respondents by listening group in the first three waves are summarized in the appendix to this chapter.

Waves 4 and 5

The three-panel survey of talk-radio listeners and their non-listening counterparts was followed during the fall presidential election with two additional waves. The fourth wave took place October 17-27, 1996, immediately following the second presidential debate between Bill Clinton and Robert Dole. The fifth wave was carried out during November 12-18, 1996, in the week following the presidential election. The fourth wave surveyed 1376 people, and the fifth included 973.

Mistrust of Mainstream Mass Media

To understand the mistrust that the audience of PTR has for mainstream sources of news, we asked a series of questions over the course of the presidential election year and conducted an experimental test of the impact of PTR on audience attitudes. In addition, the content of Limbaugh's programming was scruti-

nized over an 11-month period, from January 1996 until just after the presidential election in November 1996.

Trust in the mainstream news media was assessed four times during the presidential year. Early in the primary, people were asked a general question about the major news media, including television news, the newspaper with which they were most familiar, and news magazines. The question asked whether these media "help society solve its problems or get in the way." Four groups were compared after statistically controlling for a variety of demographic factors and exposure to mainstream media. The differences are summarized in Figure 1, which shows that Limbaugh listeners were more likely to believe that the major news media tended to get in the way of society solving its problems rather than helping. Not only were regular Limbaugh listeners more likely to choose this option than were non-listeners, but these listeners also were more mistrustful of the mainstream news media than listeners to both liberal/moderate and to conservative PTR.

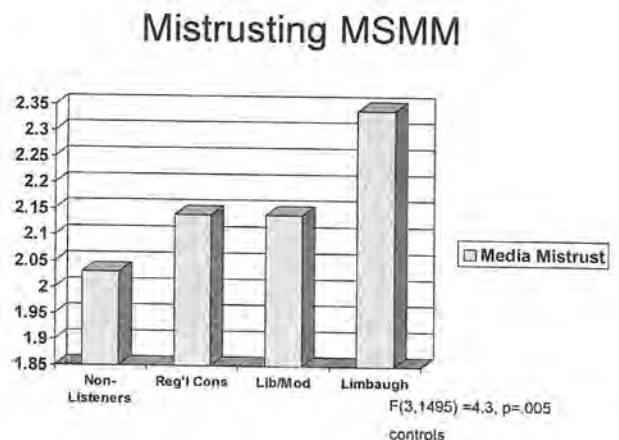


Figure 1. Mistrust of mainstream news media by PTR listening group.

These findings indicate that Limbaugh listeners are quite mistrustful of mainstream news sources but do not distinguish one news source from another and do not indicate whether two significant news norms, fairness and balance, are implicated. Later in the primary period, we asked respondents how fair and balanced they thought each of several news sources were, including newspapers with which they were familiar, television evening news, and PTR itself. They were asked to rate their responses against a seven-point scale, with 1 indicating “least fair and balanced” and 7 indicating “most fair and balanced.” The findings are not reported here, but they demonstrated that listeners to Limbaugh rate TV and newspapers as “least fair and balanced” and rate PTR as “most fair and balanced,” even after controlling for a variety of other factors. As before, non-listeners indicated that they were most trusting of the mainstream news sources and less trusting of PTR, with other PTR listening groups in between.

During the heat of the 1996 presidential election, we asked respondents whether the mainstream news media were doing a good job with the campaign. We employed a version of a question that we had used in our previous studies of mistrust. The question read as follows: “Network TV evening news tells people what they need to know about the presidential candidates’ stands on issues OR Network TV evening news spends too much time reporting on campaign strategies to tell people what they need to know about issues.” Possible responses were scored as 3 for “focusing on strategy rather than issues”; 1 for “focusing on issues”; and 2 for a voluntary response of “both” or “it depends.” Figure 2 presents a familiar pattern, with Limbaugh listeners responding that the established media are most likely to focus on strategy rather than campaign issues.

After the election was over and Bill Clinton had defeated Bob Dole to earn his second term in office, we contacted our respondents once again to ask them about the election’s outcome and, in particular, their perceptions about the

Mistrusting Campaign News

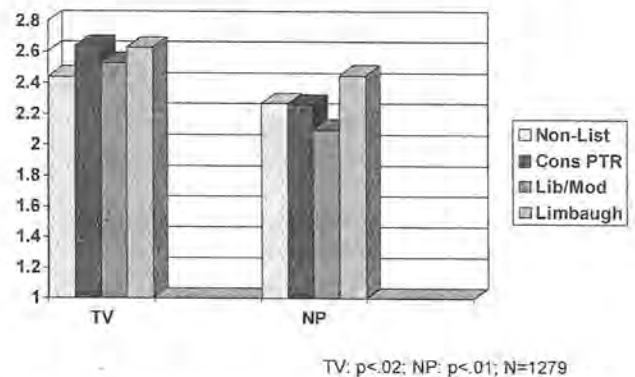


Figure 2. Adjusted means for issue-oriented judgments about news media by PTR group.

media’s role in the election’s outcome. We asked about the major news media in general and whether they helped citizens make good decisions among candidates or whether they got in the way. We also asked questions about whether TV news was fair and balanced in its coverage of the political campaigns, and we asked those same questions regarding newspaper coverage. The responses on these two were similar enough to put them together in an index.⁵ The index is displayed in figure 3 for the three PTR sources and non-listeners. Unsurprisingly, Limbaugh listeners evaluate mainstream TV and newspapers sources as most fair and balanced in the coverage during the election.

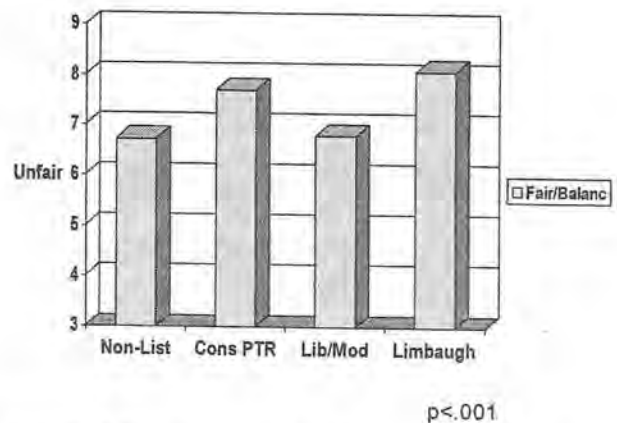


Figure 3. Adjusted means for mistrust of mainstream mass media during election: “Unfair and imbalanced and hurts decisions rather than helps.”

The overall pattern of results remains about the same across four periods of time and across questions, even when they are worded differently. Limbaugh listeners are more mistrustful of mainstream news sources, evaluating them as more likely to get in the way of society solving its problems, not being helpful to citizens' decision-making, and being unfair and imbalanced. There are sharp differences between Limbaugh listeners and non-listeners, but some differences exist even between Limbaugh's audience and the audiences of other conservative programs.

To see if exposure to PTR could exert a causal effect on people's perceptions of the news media's biases, we conducted an experiment in which people of all ideologies were exposed randomly to various types of talk radio for a week's time. Six listening groups were created, and each listened to one hour of PTR each day for a week: (1) *Talk of the Nation* from NPR; (2) Rush Limbaugh; (3) conservative hosts other than Limbaugh; (4) liberal hosts; (5) a combination of liberal and conservative hosts; and (6) non-political talk, including relationships, movies, health, cars, etc. Each day focused on a different topic, with all the shows discussing that same topic.

At the conclusion of the week of talk radio, participants completed a questionnaire about the programs as well as political and social issues. One question asked for their evaluations of the mainstream news media, including specifically how much they agreed with the statement, "the news media get in the way of society solving its problems." Participants were grouped into those who were politically liberal, moderate, and conservative. These three groups were mostly similar and nearly neutral in their agreement with the claim that news media "get in the way." However, conservatives exposed to conservative PTR, including Limbaugh, tended to agree more with the claim than did liberals exposed to the same PTR. Interestingly, the same pattern obtained when liberals and conservatives listened to *Talk of the Nation* for the week. It was as if ideological conservatives were primed to think of their disdain for the news

media's role in society both by the conservative hosts and the more liberal hosts of PTR, while liberals had the opposite reaction.⁶

These experimental data indeed suggest that exposure to PTR can affect attitudes toward the media even after exposures as brief as five one-hour segments of political talk about events and about the media.

Limbaugh's Rhetoric about Mainstream News Media

During the 1996 presidential campaign, our research group conducted in-depth content analyses of various news media outlets, including political talk radio and, especially, the programs of Rush Limbaugh. In fact, transcripts of Limbaugh's shows were available to us from one of Limbaugh's ardent fans for most of the year. After a time, Limbaugh's unpaid transcriber decided it was time to get a life outside of the world of Rush Limbaugh's programming. The transcripts permitted computerized word searching as well as more subtle forms of content analysis.

Two topics were discussed every day on Limbaugh's program from January 1, 1996, until election day—President Bill Clinton and the mainstream mass media. The next four topics not related to the news media were Democrats (96% of shows); Republicans or the GOP (94 %); Bob Dole (91 %); and Hillary Clinton (88%). Limbaugh was clearly preoccupied with the mainstream print and broadcast press, and he was specific about the outlets. Mentions of the *New York Times* occurred on 88% of his shows; the *Washington Post* was mentioned 66% of the time; the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Times* 64%; CNN, 57%; and the three major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) at least 40% of the time.

How were the media discussed? From just after Labor Day (September 3, 1996) until just after election day (November 11), Limbaugh's comments about the mainstream news media were evaluated. The comments were not always negative but fell into three broad categories:

attacks, positive citations, and reframings. On these 47 dates, we found clear examples of 58 reframings, 52 attacks on the media for their actions and commentary, and 76 positive citations of news that Limbaugh found useful for his own ends.

What may be surprising is that Limbaugh's comments about the mainstream news outlets were not always unfavorable. When a news report provided him ammunition to skewer Bill or Hillary Clinton or to attack the Democrats in Congress, he did not hesitate to cite the article or broadcast, sometimes noting its author as well, and always noting the network or newspaper.

Mistrust and Consumption of Mainstream News

The clear picture that emerges from the data is that Limbaugh listeners have greater mistrust of the news media than any other group. This claim finds support at several points in time and with several different questions assessing the trustworthiness of the news media. Does this mistrust translate into behavior? Do Limbaugh listeners consume lower quantities of news from mainstream sources than other listeners to PTR and the general public of non-listeners?

The short answer to this question is that they do not consume less. In fact, Limbaugh listeners are heavy consumers of mainstream news, despite their elevated mistrust of these sources. When asked about their consumption of news and editorial from a daily newspaper, 53% of Limbaugh listeners reported they were regular readers, in contrast to 51% of other PTR listeners and to 38% of non-listeners. When asked about "national TV evening news," 63% of Limbaugh listeners claimed to be regular consumers, as did 64% of other PTR listeners and 58% of non-listeners. Limbaugh listeners are big fans of C-Span, with 50% reporting watching "regularly" or "sometimes," in contrast to 44% for other PTR listeners and 32% of

non-listeners. These comparisons indicate that Limbaugh listeners, despite their mistrust, are heavy consumers of mainstream news. They are not fans of NPR or the *News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, whereas listeners to other forms of PTR are.

During the heat of the election in October 1996, participants were asked how many days in the past seven they had watched national TV news or read a newspaper for national news. Of Limbaugh listeners, 44% said 5 or more days for TV news, and 46% said 5 or more days for newspapers. By contrast, listeners to other PTR said 36% for TV and 41% for newspapers. Non-listeners reported 33% for TV news and 33% for newspapers. So during both the primary and election periods, Limbaugh listeners are as strong consumers of mainstream national news sources as other groups.

Even though Limbaugh listeners are mistrustful of mainstream news media, they showed no evidence in our 1996 data of consuming less of these sources than any other group. If the higher levels of mistrust did anything, they were associated with greater exposure to PTR during the days leading up to the election.

The fact that those with elevated mistrust of mainstream media still consume mainstream media seems both counterintuitive and to some degree irrational. Why continue to use media as sources of information when they are not trusted sources? Some other research on mistrust and consumption of mainstream and non-mainstream media has reported that those with greater mistrust tend to consume more non-mainstream sources, such as PTR and internet news, but also tend to consume less of mainstream sources, counter to what we reported above for the 1996 data (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). The consistent result across studies is that mistrust of the mainstream media is associated with more exposure to PTR and internet sources. Tsfati and Cappella (in press) also

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show that some people who mistrust media still consume it, and these mistrusting consumers of mainstream media have a high need for cognition (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). People who need higher levels of cognitive stimulation and are attracted to puzzle solving are most likely to still consume mainstream media, even when they have elevated levels of mistrust of the very sources they consume.

Trust and Participation in Government, Political Processes, and Campaigns

It would be easy to claim that political commentators such as Rush Limbaugh help to sow the seeds of political mistrust and in the process breed cynicism about politics, elections, and public policy discussion. However, the evidence simply does not agree with this assumption. Indeed, our claim that Limbaugh functions as a surrogate leader of the Republican party would be undermined by finding that his listeners are politically disengaged and fundamentally mistrustful of campaigns and political processes.

During the primary period and Fall presidential campaign of 1996, we asked a series of questions about the public's trust of government, political campaigns and politicians. In response to the question "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" Limbaugh listeners were more likely to give the less trusting response than other listening groups and than non-listeners. However, this finding should not be construed to suggest that Limbaugh listeners are mistrustful of political processes in general or that they are disconnected from politics.

The kind of mistrust they express here is more ideological in the sense that conservatives and Republicans tend to mistrust the "big government" that the federal government in Washington exemplifies. It is not surprising, therefore, that given the overwhelmingly conservative leanings of Limbaugh listeners, they

would be more mistrustful of the government in Washington. If there is a single, central tenet of Reagan conservatism, it is that the government in Washington is too big, too bloated, too inefficient, to conduct the people's business well.

When the same people were asked during the same time period whether they agreed or disagreed with statements about politicians' honesty ("Politicians won't talk honestly about the hard issues ... because that would lose them support") and money buying votes ("Money buys the votes that determine the laws that are passed"), no differences were obtained among the listening groups. Limbaugh listeners distrusted big government in Washington but did not accept statements about the honesty of politicians or the role of money in legislative processes as any more true. Their mistrust did not extend to these domains, supporting the view that their mistrust of Washington is ideological.

Neither does their mistrust of Washington extend to the presidential campaign, the candidates involved in the campaign, or to the way political campaigns are run. No differences between listening groups were found when respondents were asked to choose between alternatives representing more and less cynical alternatives ("candidates tell voters what they believe is best for the country" versus "candidates tell voters what they think voters want to hear"). When the focus shifted to the "major party candidates for president" rather than political candidates in general, the same lack of differences obtained.

Instead, Limbaugh listeners are politically active and anything but indifferent toward politics. Political indifference was obtained by asking respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: "I really don't care who wins the presidential election this fall" and "There aren't any important differences between Republicans and Democrats in what they stand for these days." Limbaugh listeners were low in indifference in comparison to some groups (non-listeners and listeners to liberal/moderate talk radio).

The reports of feelings of elevated efficacy and less indifference are manifest in reported behavior as well. Participants in our surveys answered a series of questions about their political activities regarding the election to that point (second to third week of October). The questions asked them to report if they had given money to a candidate; watched one or both of the nominating conventions; watched the first debate; watched the second debate; volunteered to work on the campaign; personally heard a speech live; or contacted a newspaper or TV station to comment on the campaign. Limbaugh listeners reported the highest levels of participation in comparison to other listening groups, as is portrayed in Figure 4.

Political Participation: Fall 1996

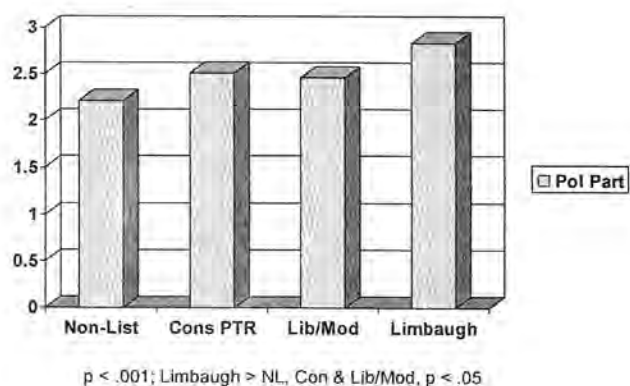


Figure 4. Adjusted means for political participation: Four listening groups.

In sum, Limbaugh listeners were more politically involved during the 1996 election than all other groups. They were more politically efficacious and less indifferent than other groups. They exhibited no more or less mistrust of politicians, candidates, or political campaigns than any other group during the primary and election periods. The only exhibition of mistrust was regarding the ability of the federal government in Washington to be trusted to “get it right.” This mistrust can be described as “toothless” in that it has little impact on behavior or civic engagement. Mistrust of the

government in Washington is associated with political participation, but the association is positive—that is, people who report greater mistrust are more likely, not less likely, to also report political activities in the election period. In fact, this relationship is strongest for the Limbaugh group and virtually absent for the non-listeners.

Limbaugh’s Political Rhetoric

To get a sense of Limbaugh’s rhetoric in comparison to that of other PTR hosts and to the mainstream media, a content analysis was conducted. Computerized word search techniques operated on transcripts of the show. For the approximate 11-month period from early January 1996 to the end of November 1996, Rush Limbaugh mentioned President Clinton every day at least once, often many more than that. Bob Dole was mentioned in 92% of the shows, and Hillary Clinton in 88%. The Republican and Democratic parties were present in 94 and 96% of the programs, assuring that they were compared and contrasted almost daily. Other prominent political leaders included Newt Gingrich (52%), Ross Perot (55%), Al Gore (47%), and Jack Kemp (36%).

The content analysis revealed two important trends. First, the focus on personal responsibility and efficacy were not themes to be found in the mainstream media. While the mainstream was focused on the Clinton scandals in the period of comparison, there was greater emphasis in Limbaugh, consistent with Democrats in general and President Clinton in

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particular as targets for political critique. Combined with the daily focus on political party and on political personalities from each party, Limbaugh’s daily rhetoric took the form of “us and them” as well as “us versus them.”

The rhetorical style that focused daily on the inadequacies of opposition party leaders, using techniques aimed at getting the audience's blood boiling, is not associated with distancing and disdain of the political process. To the contrary, this style may invite involvement in the political process in terms as simple as discussion with those of like and dissimilar minds and other sorts of personal investment in politics. But why? Why would a more partisan, one-sided, conflict-oriented treatment of political battle as entertainment lead to political involvement when a more balanced, dispassionate, compassionate, and consensus-oriented style did not? The answer lies in what some critics of Limbaugh find most disturbing about him—he rouses passion through various types of emotional appeal, especially employing a form of moral outrage activated by examples of the double standard employed by mainstream mass media and by liberals (and Democrats) in criticizing the right.

During the election period in 1996, we asked on wave 4 of our survey a number of questions about emotional reactions to Bob Dole and Bill Clinton. These included: "Has Bill Clinton because of ... something he has done, ever made you feel ..." followed by the words "angry," "hopeful," "afraid," and "proud." The same question was asked about Bob Dole. The response alternatives were simply "yes" and "no." With a "yes" response counting as a one, the responses were combined into negative emotions toward Bill Clinton ("angry" and "afraid") and positive emotions toward Bill Clinton ("hopeful" and "proud"). Similar combinations were calculated for Bob Dole.

When the total emotional response was calculated (Dole and Clinton, positive and negative), the three PTR groups were similar in emotional reactions to the candidates (3.62 out of a possible 8) and were different from non-listeners who had less strong emotional reactions (3.20). More subtle differences emerged when the four groups were compared in terms of the positive and negative emotional reactions to the

candidates. The Limbaugh listeners revealed more positive emotion toward Bob Dole and more negative emotion toward Bill Clinton than any other group; they experienced less positive emotion regarding Bill Clinton than the other groups and less toward Bob Dole than non-listeners and listeners to liberal/moderate PTR.

These data do not show that Limbaugh listeners report more total emotional reaction to the presidential candidates in 1996 but, instead, that the emotion generated is better targeted toward the political ends of the Limbaugh show. The techniques of generating emotional reaction may have been more politically effective for Limbaugh.

The emotional reaction of PTR listeners in comparison to non-listeners might too readily be interpreted as antithetical to rational, deliberative outcomes so favored by political theorists (Marcus, Neuman, & Mackuen, 2000). However, affect can be a mobilizing force for politically important behaviors. In our listening and non-listening groups, the relationship between political participation and emotional

... affect can be a mobilizing force for politically important behaviors. reaction to candidates was positive.

Those who report more emotion about the political candidates also are more likely to participate in political activities in the vicinity of the election.⁷ Those with more emotional reaction to the candidates are less indifferent to who wins and feel more efficacious about their role in government.⁸

Although Limbaugh listeners have strong negative emotional reactions to Bill Clinton and more positive ones to Bob Dole than any other listening (and non-listening) group, the impact of this emotional response is not to undermine what have been the ordinary criteria for good citizenship—political participation, a sense of efficacy, and informed voting decisions. The contrary is the case: more emotional respondents, in general, are more likely to participate in campaign political events and to feel efficacious. The negative emotions about Bill Clinton and positive emotions about Dole

reported more strongly among Limbaugh listeners do not translate into more emotionally based voting intentions; all groups seem to employ character, issues, and emotional response to similar degrees.⁹

Summary

The mistrust of mainstream news media has increased steadily over three decades. Limbaugh competes with the mainstream media for audience and offers a message that reinforces the ideological leanings of his listeners. His rhetoric about the mainstream is complex but primarily self-serving. He critiques mainstream news sources for bias and inaccuracy; he uses these same sources to help make his arguments when they provide support; and he reframes their presentation of many issues to make the case that they have a double standard when it comes to reporting on issues relevant to ideology and party. The consequence of this rhetoric is manifest in the elevated mistrust of mainstream media that Limbaugh listeners have in comparison to other listening and non-listening groups.

However, the impact of this mistrust does not extend to behavior. Limbaugh listeners, despite their skepticism about the mainstream media, use them much as their host does. They may be making a quite rational decision that it is important to know one's opponent in the ideological wars and so consume mainstream news sources as if their mistrust was irrelevant. The positive consequence for non-mainstream sources is to increase their share of the audience's media diet, sometimes at the expense of mainstream media, but not for our sample of Limbaugh listeners who, instead, maintain their exposure to the mainstream.

Similarly, Limbaugh listeners have an elevated mistrust of the government in Washington, DC, to do what is right. This mistrust does not extend to mistrust of cam-

paigns, political candidates in general, or to the way elections are run. Quite the contrary: Limbaugh listeners are more politically participative, have feelings of greater efficacy, and have a stronger sense of the importance of political decisions and differences between the parties in terms of what they represent. The mistrust of the government in Washington is more an ideological statement about big government than it is anything else. Those feeling greater mistrust of the government also tend to report greater participation in the election. This kind of mistrust, then, is not corrosive.

The emotional intensity of Limbaugh's rhetoric may account for the stronger emotional reactions that listeners have to Bill Clinton and to Bob Dole, but these reactions do not alter the way Limbaugh listeners weigh factors in their voting decisions. Their thinking about Bill Clinton and Bob Dole, while different in evaluation from that of other, more liberally oriented citizens, does not give greater or lesser weight to emotion over character and issue factors. The portrait of Limbaugh's audience and potentially the effects of his rhetoric on them may characterize the segmented and even isolated audiences of the news-opinion media of the future. Contrary to public perception, PTR in general and Rush Limbaugh in particular do not produce an ignorant, disengaged public but, instead, produce an audience engaged, outraged, informed, and with strong, even extreme, opinions. These consequences may be seen as occurring through the creation of a virtual community of like interests and like minds.

Limbaugh Creates Community

Limbaugh creates an environment where engaged trust and nuanced mistrust (e.g., of enemies and of contrary voices) can flourish by creating a mediated or virtual community. He does so not by embracing diverse voices or viewpoints—that is painfully obvious. Instead, Limbaugh's community creates an in-group of those with like minds and correct, informed

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opinions as well as out-groups of opposed opinions and ideology who are a threat to the community of “ditto-heads.” This is not the only way that a cohesive community can be built, but it is demonstrably effective, as Sherif (1966) has shown in other contexts.

The mechanisms for creating a cohesive community—or, at least, the sense of such a community—include the creation of in-groups and out-groups; the development of special language unique to the community; the generation of unique or what is believed to be unique information only available to members of the community; the identification of the out-group as both threatening to the interests of the in-group and as powerful; the denigration of the out-group through attack, often humorous and sarcastic, and through caricature; and protection of members of the in-group from attack on their beliefs by providing unique information, ways of arguing against opponents, and motivational rhetoric to maintain efficacy.

The consequences of community established in these ways is to provide reinforcement and support for views of the members of the community, to maintain ideological coherence, to protect against counter-persuasion by opponents, and to maintain a community of like-minded, supportive persons who reinforce values and ideological dispositions. To the extent that Limbaugh listeners do not cut themselves off from ideas presented in the mainstream media—and there is ample evidence that they do not—they are open to influence from these sources. Limbaugh engages in a kind of instruction for his listeners every day—instruction about how to read and interpret mainstream media messages and instruction about how to respond to attacks on Republicans and conservatives as well as how to frame actions by Republican leaders. By having an ideological enclave where followers can be assured of support for their views, Limbaugh listeners can find a safe haven against the messages of the mainstream media that attack and undermine conservative positions and leaders. They are insulated, in part, from the “death of a thou-

sand cuts” because the rhetoric, reason, and argument of Limbaugh’s neighborhood of make believe is completely supportive. Perhaps this is exactly what listeners crave and need in the face of complex social issues about which elite opinion is always divided.

Objections to Limbaugh’s PTR Community

The sense of a closed, insular, like-minded community is not the sense of democratic, deliberative community that is advocated by some social, deliberative and political theorists (Guttman & Thompson, 1996; DelliCarpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). They would advocate a different deliberative ideal open to alternative and oppositional points, carried in an atmosphere of rational exchange, where balanced information and access is the norm and the characteristics of propaganda via caricature, sarcasm, and distortion have no place. They would almost certainly object to the Limbaugh model of virtual deliberation for being one-sided, unbalanced, promoting an “us versus them” mentality that promotes conflict, and ultimately undermines the kind of democratic deliberation necessary to govern in a free society.

One-sided. The vast majority of PTR is partisan and one-sided in the information it provides. In Republic.com, Cass Sunstein (2001) argues that the new information environment allows individuals to control their exposure to information that suits their biases and predilections (politically and in terms of interests). If people are susceptible to pressures toward selective exposure (by interest and ideology), then groups exposing themselves to one-sided opinion will polarize in the direction of that opinion. The result will be a limited amount of inadvertent exposure to ideas that challenge one’s point of view, polarization of group opinion, and the balkanization of knowledge in what ideally should be an open marketplace of ideas.

As we have seen, exposure to the main-

stream mass media among listeners to Limbaugh remains high despite their mistrust of these sources. So, inadvertent exposure to opposing points of view remains strong in this group, despite their commitments to Limbaugh's three-hours-per-day, five-days-a-week juggernaut. To obtain exposure to alternative points of view, Limbaugh listeners must seek out oppositional views from mainstream media or from equally biased liberal and moderate sources. But as is well known, PTR is itself not balanced as a programming source; instead, it is strongly skewed toward the conservative.

Unbalanced. There is little doubt that PTR is unbalanced and skewed toward the conservative voice. Zengerle reports in *The New Republic Online* (2004) that in the top 45 shows in PTR, 310 hours are conservative, while only 5 are liberal. This very strong skew may change with the addition of Air America Radio, which hopes to add an equally outrageous liberal voice to the conservative voices now dominating PTR. Only time will tell whether the imbalance in PTR will be rectified by liberal hosts such as Al Franken and Randi Rhodes.

In the meantime, conservative hosts such as Limbaugh are not the least apologetic about the conservative character of PTR. Their view, certainly Limbaugh's, is that his show is a balancing force against what he perceives to be a very strong liberal slant of the mainstream media. There is little hope in the short run for a successful balanced voice in PTR, which gains its audiences by cultivating an agonistic format. Conflict and outrage are the standard operating models for the rhetoric of this genre, and to be successful, "feeding the beast" requires continued conflict, confrontation, and one-sidedness.

Balanced coverage is available across the institution of news and opinion and even, with considerable effort, across the genre of PTR, but not without some effort on the part of a listening audience that may not be so inclined.

Us versus them. Limbaugh promotes a conflict model of deliberation, making sure that his

audience always clearly understands who "them" is, how threatening they are, and how powerful they are. Critics argue that creating in and out groups undermines the possibility of social cooperation and sets groups at odds with one another rather than trying to find common ground or, at least, common values from which to reason to common ground, as Guttman and Thompson (1996) argue. Yet some have argued, perhaps inadvertently, in support of Limbaugh's approach, identifying Limbaugh's one-sided, self-interested citizens as the "good citizens" of the late 20th and early 21st centuries

As long as oppositional voices are present in the institutions of the press and not necessarily in every voice the press owns, historical evidence reveals the possibility of successful democratic deliberation.

(Schudson, 1998):
"A rights-regarding citizenship does not 'answer' democracy's discontents, but it is a necessary part of any answer. ... We

need to teach ourselves and our children more, not less, about rights" (Schudson, p. 309).

Self-interested citizens may make governance more difficult and only criticism easier. Yet the Republic survived and even flourished when the press was partisan rather than balanced before the turn of the 20th century, and the press outside of the United States has been more partisan than the press in the United States, while democracies rose and fell and prospered again. As long as oppositional voices are present in the institutions of the press and not necessarily in every voice the press owns, historical evidence reveals the possibility of successful democratic deliberation.

Undermines collaborative democracy.

Whether communities like PTR are beneficial or detrimental to a fully democratic society is, in many ways, irrelevant. New media entities allow the creation of narrow interest, single-minded, common interest virtual or mediated communities. What we will do with them as a society is up to us.

Contrary to popular opinion, PTR creates no more serious mistrust than other media do. When mistrust is created within PTR, it is often toothless. When intense emotion is creat-

ed, it is often linked to politically engaged outcomes. PTR and similar new media entities are here to stay. Sustaining engagement across the moral divides of PTR and what will surely be like entities among other new media outlets is certainly one of the challenges of the 21st century.

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Notes

¹Roderick P. Hart, 1994, *Seducing America*, New York: Oxford University Press.

²*Inquiry into Alternatives to the General Fairness Obligations of Broadcast Licensees*. 102 F.C.C. 2d 143 (1985).

³May 28, 1996.

⁴Respondents were assigned to listening groups on the basis of their identification of the host's political views as liberal, conservative, or moderate. The groups could have been determined in two other ways. One alternative was the name of the show or its host along with its avowed—often published—political orientation. The second was the listener's own political ideology in combination with his/her assessment of the degree of similarity or dissimilarity with the host's views. The groups created by the three methods were all very similar and preliminary results indicated little difference in findings regardless of which method was used to establish the groupings. The most direct method was used thereby preserving the most observations. So listeners to conservative PTR are those who identify their host as conservative; listeners to liberal/moderate PTR say their host's views are either liberal or moderate in orientation. Although it would have been useful to separate the Liberal and Moderate PTR groups, the number of regular listeners identifying their host's views as liberal was too small (N=86) to permit a separate group. The groups allow us to compare and contrast the audiences of Rush Limbaugh to those of Conservative PTR and Liberal/moderate PTR while comparing each to the non-listeners.

⁵The internal reliability for these two items was .72.

⁶The interaction effect of three levels of ideology with 5 listening groups was significant $F(10, 390) = 2.13, p < .03$.

⁷The correlation between emotionality and participation is .19 ($p < .001$). The unstandardized regression coefficient is .11 ($p < .001$) in the face of controls for PTR group and other demographic factors.

⁸The correlations are small but significant: -.09 for emotionality and inefficacy ($p < .01$) and -.18 ($p < .001$) for emotionality and indifference.

⁹The results of this table indicate no significant differences among groups in their use of emotional, character, or policy position similarity as criteria in judging candidates.

Table. Unstandardized regression weights for vote strength (3=strong Clinton, -3 = strong Dole): Four listening groups.

Predictor	Non-Listeners N=690	Limbaugh N=189	Conservative N=98	Liberal/Moderate N=168	All (weighted) N=1147
Clinton Similarity	.12*	.04***	.09	.22**	.11***
Dole Similarity	-.06	-.10	-.13	-.04	-.04
Party Strength (5=strong Rep)	-.36***	-.25***	-.26***	-.20***	-.33***
Emotion Pos Clinton	.24***	.62***	.65***	.48***	.29***
Emotion Pos Dole	-.54***	-.34**	-.54***	-.23**	-.55***
Clinton Character	.33***	.21***	.30***	.37***	.33***
Dole Character	-.20***	-.32***	-.14	-.16***	-.21***
R ²	.79***	.82***	.85***	.79***	.82***

Note. Other controls were also used including education, age, race, and sex; these are not reported here.

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B. Aubrey Fisher served as a faculty member in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah from 1971 to 1986. He began his professional career as a high school teacher and radio announcer in South Dakota. After receiving his Master's and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Minnesota, he spent four years on the faculty at the University of Missouri.

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He has served on the editorial boards of 15 different journals including *Communication Monographs*, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Journal of Personal and Social Relationships*, *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Research*, and *Communication Theory*. He is a Fellow and past president of the International Communication Association and a recipient of ICA's B. Aubrey Fisher Mentor Award.

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