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# *Ordinary Women and Conservative Talk Radio in the US: A Comparative Study of Women Callers on The Rush Limbaugh Show and The Laura Ingraham Show (2004 -2010)*

Sébastien Mort

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<sup>1</sup> Conservative talk radio (CTR)—and political talk radio overall—is a dial-in format: the host opens the airwaves to callers and invites their comments on the issues being debated. It therefore enables conservative citizens to express their views, articulate their opinions and engage in a debate with the host. As such, CTR has the potential for being a forum of public discussion for conservatives and as such, can be seen as contributing to political enfranchisement for those who feel that their views are not represented in the traditional media.

<sup>2</sup> A phenomenon that emerged in the early 1980s, the participation of ordinary people in media programs has now become a standard feature of the media environment, which observers have welcomed as the sound departure from the practices of traditional media—deemed to be disconnected from the lives of ordinary citizens—and as the popular reclamation of the democratic process. However, the scholarship recently produced on the subject has challenged the notion that audience participation in media programs is in and of itself a form of democratization. In

*Ordinary People and the Media*, Turner conceptualizes the phenomenon as ‘the demotic turn’, which he defines as “the increasing visibility of the ‘ordinary people’ as they have turned themselves into media content through celebrity culture, reality TV, DIY web-sites, talk radio and the like.”<sup>i</sup> He argues that the demotic turn is symptomatic of the recent shift in the media’s function from *mediating* and giving visibility to identities to creating and *producing* these identities (italics ours).<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The status of callers to CTR programs appears problematic as their actual capacity to express themselves seems to be quite limited: listeners tend to agree with the host most of the time, and if they do not, are usually interrupted by them. Consistent with this notion is Rush Limbaugh’s habit to refer to himself as a “benevolent dictator”, and the claim that he addresses the topics in which he is interested, not those the listeners want to hear.<sup>iii</sup> Therefore, the host’s voice dominates the show, and caller’s participation, though invited, is limited. While CTR programs are intended as “dial-in” programs, the host tends to occupy most of the verbal space.

<sup>4</sup> The status of female callers seems even more problematic and represents a case of double jeopardy insofar as they are callers and women: CTR is indeed a male-dominated field characterized by a tradition of macho chauvinism. When Limbaugh “reinvented” talk radio in late 1988, it was obvious that women were going to be systematic targets of his misogynistic, scathing remarks. As early as his pre-syndication days in Sacramento, he coined the portmanteau word “feminazi” to refer to women adhering to the core values of Second Wave Feminism.<sup>iv</sup> In 1993, as he delved into the question of relationships between men and women in his book *See, I Told You So*, he left no doubt as to his view of gender roles:

Some militant feminists apparently harbor such hatred for the opposite sex that they want to criminalize the process of courtship—the old-fashioned chase. I have news for these people: It’s normal for boys to pursue girls; it’s natural for men to pursue women. This normal and natural process, once called the fine art of seduction, is being confused with harassment.<sup>v</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Consistent with this view, *The Thirty-Five Undeniable Truths of Life* which he enumerated on the air in February 1994 include pronouncements such as “Feminism was established so as to allow unattractive women easier access to the mainstream of society.”<sup>vi</sup>

## 1. Women in the media

<sup>6</sup>The scholarship on women in the media indicates that, while they seem to be gaining ground—especially as news anchors<sup>vii</sup>—women are still outnumbered by men in key positions in major media outlets—according to the American Society of News Editors, in 2012, women accounted only for 36.9% of newspapers newsrooms staff, and the Fourth Estate Project reports that sourcing in news organizations and program is overwhelmingly dominated by males, with men being sources at least 66% of the time in the *Wall Street Journal*, up to 84.7% on *CNN: State of the Union with Candy Crowley*.<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Despite some advances, the representation of women in the media remains problematic. The essays in Pippa Norris's edited volume *Women, Media, and Politics* all point out to the notion that journalists tend to report on news and current events using gendered frames in order to structure the information into easily accessible scripts. Contributors to the volume argue that journalists' use of such frames contribute to forging representations of women as more competent than men with regard to social issues.<sup>ix</sup> They nonetheless stress that female politicians running for office as well as leaders of the women's movement are also responsible for the use of such frames, as the former are usually more successful when they campaign on issues traditionally associated with women, and the latter tend to present their movement in oversimplified terms.<sup>x</sup> In her meta-analysis of studies on the representation of women in the media, Stephanie Greco Larson found that the women's movement and feminism are either ignored or stigmatized by the media.<sup>xi</sup> Turning to ordinary women, the essay finds that the literature on the question provides evidence of the media's tendency to view women voters as one monolithic voting bloc. It emphasizes that, at the turn of the century, the media "grossly generaliz[es] women and reduc[es] them to depoliticized stereotypes whose only concerns were motherhood and consumerism."<sup>xii</sup>

## 2. Women and talk radio

<sup>8</sup>

Based on Limbaugh's various comments on women and feminists as well as on the fact that Limbaugh was the only

talk radio host of such prominence for almost 15 years, it is fair to surmise that CTR is likely to promote traditional gender roles and assign women an inferior status as they suffer from lesser representation and participation. In its report on the status of women in the media for the year 2013, the Women's Media Center notes that "when it comes to talk radio, men talk and talk. And talk some more."<sup>xiii</sup> Yet, although women as power brokers are underrepresented in the realm of CTR, they are not absent from the cohort of top-ranking CTR hosts. Top-ranking hosts are defined by *Talkers Magazine*, a monthly industrial magazine on radio, as talk radio hosts whose programs secure more than one-million weekly listeners, based on a computation of Arbitron and/or Nielsen ratings.<sup>xiv</sup>

9

The first-ranking female talk-radio host, Laura Ingraham, is a conservative. In August 2014, she ranked ahead of other political and non-political female hosts, and especially ahead of Stephanie Miller, the only liberal talk radio host.<sup>xv</sup> Ingraham's and other hosts' entry on the CTR market resulted from a change introduced in the rules of media ownership by the *Telecommunications Act of 1996* which waived the limits on the number of stations that media corporations could own on the same market<sup>xvi</sup> and triggered the emergence of large national syndication networks. This in turn created opportunities for new hosts to enter the race, thus challenging Limbaugh's monopoly of the genre which is now more diverse and has enabled women to make inroads into a male-dominated field.

10

However, Ingraham's entry in the league of nationally syndicated CTR hosts is but a first step toward equality as, in this field as well, the gender gap is significant and seems to be widening. In spring 2011, four women talk radio hosts had made it to the top talk radio audience ranking: conservative host Laura Ingraham (6 million listeners weekly), liberal host Stephanie Miller (3 million listeners weekly), computer and IT radio show host Kim Kommando (2,25 million listeners weekly), and Joy Browne, host of a call-in therapy show (1 million listeners weekly).<sup>xvii</sup> In August 2014, Browne's show was missing from the top talk radio audience ranking, and the three other programs displayed significant losses of listeners, with Kommando's and Miller's ratings having dropped by respectively 750,000 and 1.25 million listeners weekly. In this three-year span, *LIS*

experienced the most dramatic decrease in audience size, with a 4-million loss of listeners probably due to a change in syndicator. However, while *TALKERS'* ranking shows that overall talk radio ratings are eroding, the blow is not as significant for Limbaugh and Hannity whose audiences have only decreased by 2.25 and 2 million listeners respectively.<sup>xviii</sup> Therefore, not only is the significance of women as role players in CTR limited, but it also seems to be decreasing dramatically.

### 3. Scholarship on CTR programs

<sup>11</sup>

Since its golden age in the 1990s, PTR has received a great deal of scholarly attention, particularly after the 1992 presidential election and the 1994 midterms. During this two-year span, PTR became almost exclusively conservative, as *The Rush Limbaugh Show* (RLS) secured a weekly listenership of 20 million and became the first nationally syndicated talk radio program. The second half of the decade, more specifically, witnessed a boom in academic studies on CTR, a period during which the Founding Fathers of the research on CTR programs—David C. Barker, Stephen Earl Bennett, Joseph N. Cappella and C. Richard Hofstetter—were the most productive.

<sup>12</sup>

One strand of research describes the specificity of CTR as a genre in the post-Fairness Doctrine repeal in 1987, insisting on the demographics and sociology of listeners, and on predictors of exposure. In a study published in 1999, Barry A. Hollander notes “a net loss of talk radio exposure among panel participants” following a booming period from 1988 to 1996 when PTR audiences reached a stabilization point. The author finds that between 1992 and 1996, PTR audiences lost low educated and lesser affluent individuals, as well as more liberal non-white women from other areas than the South, while gaining Southern white males with higher education and higher income.<sup>xix</sup> The dominant line of research, however, focuses on the effects of CTR on listeners’ attitudes on issues, opinions of political role-players and institutions, and levels of information and political knowledge. David Barker’s 1998 landmark study of CTR listeners’ attitudes on the 1993 healthcare reform shows that both in 1993 and 1995 listening to Limbaugh was positively associated with negative attitudes towards

the healthcare reform.<sup>xx</sup> A third strand explores the genre's effects on listeners' political engagement and voting behavior, such as Barker's analysis of the relation between CTR listening and voting decisions which evidences the influence of exposure to CTR programs on the outcome of the 1994 midterm elections and the 1996 presidential election.<sup>xxi</sup> Surprisingly, the status of callers—and all the more so, that of female callers—has received no scholarly attention and the question remains a blind spot in the research on CTR programs.

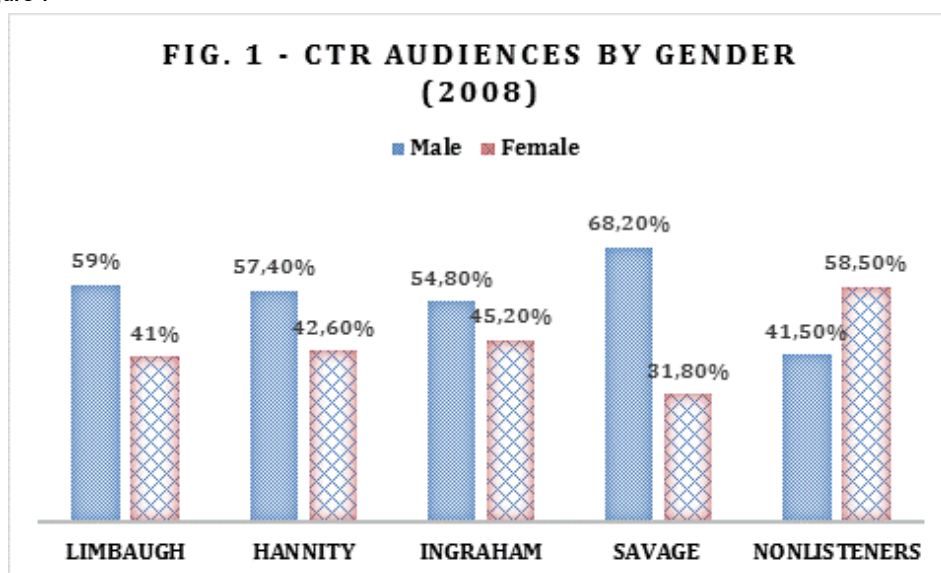
#### 4. Callers' participation in CTR programs

<sup>13</sup>The most thorough analysis of individuals calling in to talk radio program is provided by Christophe Deleu's seminal *Les Anonymes à la radio: usages, fonctions et portée de leur parole* published in 2006, where the author provides a typology of French call-in radio programs, examines the various ways in which callers are invited to contribute on the airwaves, and analyses how the shows' apparatus and the hosts restrict the callers' capacity to express themselves freely.<sup>xxii</sup>

<sup>14</sup>

The question of women callers has garnered even scant scholarly attention, as is reflected in the gender breakdown of the audience: data from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey collated in figure 1 indicate that CTR programs cater to an overwhelmingly male-dominated listenership.

Figure 1



Source: National Annenberg Election Survey 2008



<sup>15</sup> The survey reveals a significant gender gap between individuals who listen to one of the four major CTR shows and nonlisteners. Most strikingly, women outnumber men by 17% among nonlisteners, the former accounting for 58.5% and the latter 41.5% of the listenership. Such a gender breakdown is inverted among Limbaugh's and Hannity's audiences. The gender gap is even wider among Savage's audience, with men outnumbering women by 36.4%. Counterintuitively, although women in Ingraham's audience are slightly more represented, they fail to bridge the gender gap and are outnumbered by men by 9.6%—gender is not a strong predictor of exposure to *LIS*.

<sup>16</sup>

Women are also less likely than men to call in CTR shows. The first comprehensive survey of talk radio audiences conducted by the Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press published in 1993 found that “only 11% [of the American population] reports having attempted to call into a radio program.” Furthermore, only half of them has been offered an opportunity to talk on the airwaves. The survey also reveals a significant gender gap as “men [...] are far more likely to call than are women, by a margin of 14% to 7%, and are almost twice as likely to actually make their views known on the air, by a margin of 9% to 5%.”<sup>xxiii</sup> In other words, not only do women tend to call less into talk radio programs, but they seem to be selected to talk on the airwaves in lesser proportions than men.

## 5. Theoretical and analytical framework

<sup>17</sup>

The participation of ordinary women in CTR program is a meaningful avenue of research in several respects. First, although it is a niche media—as its ratings are in no way comparable to cable or broadcast hard news programs—CTR enjoys high visibility and hosts boast significant name-recognition. For instance, Hannity and Ingraham also appear on *Fox News* on *Hannity* and *The O'Reilly Factor*. CTR shows also boast loyal and assiduous audiences displaying higher levels of political engagement and participation, especially during elections.<sup>xxiv</sup> Second, even though they account for a smaller part of CTR listenership and are underrepresented in the cohort of callers, women do listen to and call in CTR shows nonetheless. Third, women are increasingly represented in the realm of

conservative politics—former vice-presidential hopeful and Tea Party leader Sarah Palin; former Representative of Minnesota Michelle Bachman—as well as in conservative media—Fox News’ Ann Coulter and Michelle Malkin. Therefore, it is interesting to see if this means that ordinary conservative women are also represented in the media and taken seriously. Most importantly, if the mainstream media represent ordinary women as depoliticized, does CTR, as a political dial-in radio format, allow for the *repoliticization* of women and afford them opportunities to express their political opinion?

<sup>18</sup>

Two hypotheses emerge. On the one hand, the overwhelmingly male chauvinistic dimension of CTR tends to suggest that female callers’ contribution to CTR programs only reinforces gender stereotypes. On the other hand, the tradition of grassroots activism among conservative women—as exemplified by Phylis Schlafly—and the status of CTR as instrument of dissent also warrant the hypothesis whereby CTR programs operate as forums where ordinary women can be politically active. This is the focus of the following research questions:

<sup>19</sup>

**RQ1:** How do women participate in CTR program?

<sup>20</sup> **RQ2:** Is women’s participation treated differently on *The Laura Ingraham Show*?

<sup>21</sup> Focusing on a series of conversations between women and hosts taken from episodes of *RLS* and *The Laura Ingraham Show (LIS)*, this article analyzes the issues being discussed (what women choose to talk about) and the way women frame them (how women talk about such issues) in order to identify possible thematic and rhetorical patterns. It also explores the way host and callers interact by paying particular attention to the way conversations are conducted to probe the extent of callers’ freedom as they express themselves.

<sup>22</sup> Conversations have been selected out of the episodes of *RLS* aired between May 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> 2004, and from episodes of *RLS* and *LIS* aired between April 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> 2010. Conversations are extracted by following the natural syntax of the program: they begin when the caller starts speaking (e.g. *JASON: Hey, Rush, how are you, man?*) and end with a greeting by the host when there is one, or when the caller seems to vanish off the air (e.g. *RUSH: [...] But*

*nevertheless, I appreciate your call, Jason. Thank you a whole lot).*

<sup>23</sup>Klaus Krippendorff defines conversation as “a way of being together in talk and interaction.”<sup>xxv</sup> He identifies a series of criteria defining an authentic conversation, three among which are of relevance to the present study: in conversation, (1) participants are dialogically equal, (2) they maintain mutual understanding, and (3) conversations are intuitive, not rule governed.

<sup>24</sup>Dialogical equality is defined by each participant’s right to contribute to the conversation and to have their contribution acknowledged and “appropriately responded to.”<sup>xxvi</sup> It implies that participants address the content of each other’s contribution and not something else. Consequently, if a participant redirects the attention toward irrelevant, the authenticity of the conversation is violated. In order for contributions to be properly responded to, mutual understanding needs to be maintained so as to make sure that the conversation moves ahead step by step, and that each step is fully understood by each participant—it does not mean mutual agreement.<sup>xxvii</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Furthermore, dialogical equality implies equality of status between participants: none of them should try to force the authority they deem is vested in them on others, nor on the contrary should they act subserviently to the others. Concretely, none of the participants should be afraid of speaking their minds because they think they are speaking with someone who is in a superior position. Conversely, none of the participants should feel entitled to patronize the other or consider that their point of view is more valid than the others’ because of the position they think they occupy. In order for contributions to be properly responded to, authentic conversation should also be “intuitive, not rule-governed”—they “do not follow rules; they give birth to further conversations.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Conversations should therefore be free of external constraints bearing an influence on the way they unfold and on their content.

<sup>26</sup>

Content notwithstanding, conversations between the host and the caller on CTR programs are not likely to fit the definition of an authentic conversation. Firstly, conversations on CTR programs are “rule-governed”: due to time constraints, they last on average no more than one minute and thirty seconds and hosts never have more than a ten-minute-long segment in between news or commercial

station breaks. It implies that callers need to be up to the point and to have carefully thought of the view they want to articulate, and are also not likely to have an opportunity to pause and think about their next conversational move.

<sup>27</sup>Secondly, dialogical equality is problematic because of the natural power imbalance between host and caller that the screening process induces. No academic study has been conducted on the topic, but the existence of such a process is not concealed to the audience. For instance, the Public Radio Program Directors Association provides guidelines for the proper screening of callers.<sup>xxix</sup> On *RLS*, the screener is often mentioned by the host: "Our screener of calls [...] is Mr. Bo Snerdley and he is eagerly answering calls now in our studio control room, and placing these calls on hold, readying them for the air."<sup>xxx</sup> Some non-scientific sources provide a description of the screening process, such as Joe Muto, a former associate producer at Fox News from 2004 to 2012 who worked for Bill O'Reilly's TV and radio shows. Muto describes the screening process for O'Reilly's radio factor as follows:

You have ten phone lines [...]. The phones are hooked up to a computer [...]. The host has a monitor in front of him, right next to his microphone, and his monitor mirrors your monitor exactly. He sees what you type, and that's how he knows what caller he wants to go to next. So you'd better be specific and let him know exactly what each caller is going to say. No surprises please.<sup>xxxi</sup>

- 28 The host can therefore choose to steer the discussion in any direction they see fit, and select callers based on whether they are likely to bring support to their point and on what topic they have more knowledge and arguments to oppose.

<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, the present study does not aim to determine whether conversations on CTR are authentic as it operates on the premise that such conversations are by nature unauthentic ones. Rather, this article aims to assess the extent to which these criteria are violated, plumbing for possible differences across programs. Particular attention is also given to interpersonal exchange and more precisely to markers of caller's deference towards the host and of host's flattery towards callers, two measures of dialogical inequality.

## 6. Women's participation in *The Rush Limbaugh Show* during the Abu Ghraib Scandal (May 3<sup>rd</sup> – May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004)

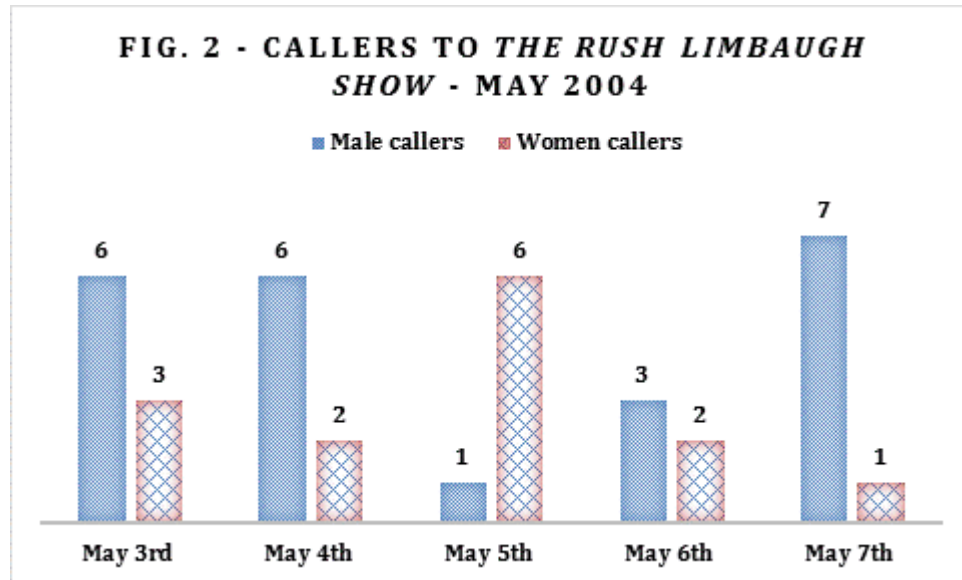
<sup>30</sup>The Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal provides an adequate case study to explore the treatment of female callers on CTR programs. The revelation of the prisoner abuse on Wednesday April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2004, when photos of US soldiers molesting Iraqi prisoners were shown on the program *60 Minutes* on CBS triggered a massive flow of news coverage that crowded out other topics on all major networks.

<sup>31</sup>Because it placed the Bush administration in a difficult position by pointing at possible flaws in the management of the Iraq occupation, it offers a context in which media outlets were likely to be polarized along ideological lines in their treatment of the issue. While the major cable and broadcast networks, *The New York Times* and NPR framed the scandal in ways that were highly unfavorable to the administration—"prisoner abuse has caused major damage to the Iraqi people", "prisoner abuse is the result of a breach in the change of command" (ABC); "Prisoner abuse is the result of subcontracting areas of defense to private corporations" (NPR *All Things Considered*); "Americans are behaving worse than Saddam" (NYT)—partisan media outlets endeavored to frame the scandal in a such a way as to insulate the Bush Administration from the scandal, attributing the responsibility to the soldiers—"Abuse is due to the deviance of a few soldiers" or "Abuse does not represent America".

<sup>32</sup>

During the first week following the publication of the pictures, Limbaugh took 37 calls from listeners, 14 of which were from women—women's participation in the show thus amounted to 37%.

Figure 2



- 33 As shown in figure 2, the daily number of women callers varied throughout the week. There was a peak on May 5<sup>th</sup>, with six callers out of seven being women, the day the scandal received more intense coverage when President Bush issued an apology to the countries in the Arab world.

34

Women who were given access to the airwaves during that week overwhelmingly chose to discuss the Abu Ghraib photos: this issue was the focus of the 14 conversations. Most strikingly, the large majority of them unfurled a rhetorical strategy that minimized the impact of the event. Gendered frames dominated women's explanations of England's act, shifting the blame away from the Bush Administration towards the female guards herself. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, callers attributed responsibility for the abuse to what they considered women's natural predisposition. For instance, Shelly (Columbia, SC) expressed her bewilderment at the fact that women might be entrusted with watching prisoners: "What I was surprised at is that a woman is put in charge of guarding male Iraqi prisoners, for the sheer difference between strengths of women—men and women—why would a woman be in charge of guarding these men?" For this caller, women's physical constitution ("sheer difference between strengths") precludes the possibility to put them in charge of guarding men in a prison. Later in the show, Robin from Champagne, Illinois further developed the argument of women's special nature:

I am not the least surprised that women are involved in this because no one does humiliation like women, [...] I mean, we know that from kindergarten up [...]. When little boys fight, they want to bloody a nose. They want to blacken an eye [...]. Girls

will hold a grudge and they won't bloody your nose. They will go after who you are [and] spread rumors. They'll spread gossip. They'll destroy your reputation. I mean, they're just vicious. I would much rather have some boy at school mad at my daughter than any other girl because they'll destroy them.

- 35 Through this argument, the caller reaffirms a grossly stereotypical view of gender differences by emphasizing that, by essence, men and women are prone to resort to different strategies in order to resolve conflict, with men using physical violence while women tend to use psychological manipulation. Such a view represents men as straightforward and direct, and women as shrewd and conniving.

36

While still attributing responsibility for the abuse on women, the explanation of Cheryl (Stafford, VA) on the same day seems to contradict that of her counterparts:

For the last 30 years, we've been trying to glorify the masculinization of women. It may not be new, but now it's glorified [...]. And we've put women in the military. Women have wanted to get into men's sports, men's clubs and, you know, they want to be men, and they've been masculinized, and the feminist movement has basically said, "We don't like the men are men." We can be better men than men are.

- 37 Here, women are not held responsible for the act of cruelty because they are allegedly different from men, but precisely because they have been encouraged to emulate men. The caller therefore places the blame on the women's movements by equating feminism with hatred of men ("the feminist movement basically said, we don't like men are men"), consistent with the way the mainstream media traditionally represent such movements. More generally, she attributes responsibility for the acts of torture to the efforts towards gender equality, the disappearance of traditional gender roles—which she refers to as the "masculinization" of women—and to women's more equal access to the public space.

38

Female callers also used gender neutral frames in order to account for the acts of torture, as Rita (Virginia Beach) on May 5<sup>th</sup>:

It was humiliation more than torture. I was watching *Good Morning America*, and about 20 minutes after they showed that, they brought in seven Iraqis, whose hands—whose right hands had been chopped off by Saddam Hussein and his men. And why they didn't put them one after the other, I'll never understand, because it seemed to me this was a perfect, perfect scene to show after what our people did to humiliate and not torture—I hate that word because it's not torture.

- 39 Such an argument both recategorizes the abuse ("it was humiliation more than torture") and contrasts it with that perpetrated by the hit men of the Hussein regime. It also



downplays the violence of the abuse and minimizes its impact, thus pointing out at Iraqis' cruelty while preserving the US's status as defender of civilization in the world. Through this argument, the caller reinstates the traditional geopolitical balance that the revelation of scandal had jeopardized. Finally, she resorts to a leitmotiv of the conservative discourse as she accuses mainstream media—ABC's *Good Morning America*—of intentionally failing to pit Iraqis' absolute cruelty against Americans' recourse to mild physical brutality.

40

Still other female callers chose to blatantly dismiss the importance of the story to discuss issues unrelated to it. Among them, Patricia (Tallahassee, Florida) called in the show on May 3<sup>rd</sup> in order to discuss the Florida vote recount of the 2000 presidential election and insist that Limbaugh was right in his analysis of the event: "I tried to call you several times during the election—or during the post-election media campaign, but you were the only one that got it right. [...] You were the only one who gave the straight story." She agrees with Limbaugh on the topic of the day but above all, she calls him in order to reminisce about an event of the past that is not connected to the matter at hand. She praises and flatters him by reaffirming both his position as an outsider in the media ecology and the special status of CTR programs. She then changes topic to contrast the pictures of the prisoners with commercials on erectile dysfunction:

But I am more offended by the erectile dysfunction ads that come on during all hours of television. The other night, there were, I think, two different ones competing during prime time news hour on regular ABC, CBS, NBC types of programs. And I just can't even believe it. I mean, I have young children. I'm sitting there watching the national news, and you have these erectile dysfunctions, and they're trying to outdo each other.

- 41 In other words, the caller redirects the discussion toward premises that are not connected with the issue being discussed. By drawing a false analogy (pictures of prisoner abuse / erectile dysfunction commercials), she refocuses the discussion on a moral issue relevant to the canons of moral conservatism, in an attempt at downplaying the significance of the abuse.

42

A most salient feature of the exchanges between Limbaugh and the women calling in the show is also that disagreement with the host seems to be unwelcome. On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, introducing herself as an independent voter,



Tiffany calls to explain that she is shocked by the pictures and thinks that the US occupation of Iraq is unwarranted:

Tiffany: This morning you said something about those pictures of the prisoners. And I got to tell you, I was absolutely disgusted seeing that. Absolutely disgusted. Those soldiers, what they did was absolutely disgusting. I mean, we are occupying their country, and they don't—

Limbaugh: Oh, you're an independent, are you? You're an independent, are you?

- 43 Here, Limbaugh refuses to acknowledge her contribution as he does not address the content of her argument but focuses on the way she chooses to label herself politically. Consistent with his starkly polarized view of politics as being clearly divided between liberals and conservatives, because she articulates an argument that runs counter to his, Limbaugh refuses to recognize that she is an independent, and in the end, takes her off the air without greeting her.

44

Women callers' deference to Limbaugh as they introduce themselves appears to be a standard feature of the conversations. Such deference ranges from simple expression of admiration—"Well, I must tell you that I listen to your program a lot. And you know, I agree with a lot of the things you say," (Tiffany, May 3<sup>rd</sup>); "I can't believe I finally got through. I've been listening to you for a while and," (Patricia)—to obsequiousness—"Thank you, Mr. Limbaugh. I'm sorry to disturb you" (Mary)—to complete sycophantism—"Oh, Rush, I'm just so honored. I used to be such a Feminazi and now I just love you!" (Erin, May 4<sup>th</sup>); "First let me tell you I have listened to your show for years and years and years. I think you're wonderful" (Lindy May 7<sup>th</sup>).

45

In the same way, Limbaugh does not refrain from flattering the caller when it serves his purpose, as was the case when Tiffany begged to disagree:

Tiffany: Just because I don't agree with you on a couple things, my God.

Limbaugh: No, Tiffany, no, you misunderstand, Tiffany -

Tiffany: - partisan politics is that we get labeled for no reason -

Limbaugh: Tiff - Tiffa - Tiffany. Take a breath. Don't torture me here.

Tiffany: I'm trying not to, you're so great. (laughter)

Limbaugh: Tiffany, you know, I - I love you. You have to understand this, I love you and I want you to be right. I don't want you to sound like a kook. I don't want you to sound like a typical Democrat kook that is coming to define the Democrat mainstream.

- 46 Instead of debating the callers' arguments by explaining his own, Limbaugh chooses to be overly condescending ("I love you and I want you to be right") and tries to persuade her to change her opinion for her own good ("I don't want you

to sound like a kook”). In other words, he is shifting the discussion away from the rational and the argumentative to the personal and the emotional. Such a rhetorical strategy betrays the host’s representation of women as individuals that can be mollified by a few deceptively flattering words and that are devoid of debating skills. This blatant violation of Krippendorff’s criteria of dialogical equality shows that the woman caller is therefore not treated as an equal partner in the conversation.

47

The analysis of conversations between women callers and Limbaugh therefore reveals that, in the particular context of the scandal, women’s contribution to the discussion seems to be used as part of the host’s operation of damage control after the publication of the prisoners’ pictures. Whether they resort to gendered frames to account for the abuse, redirect the discussion away from the issue at hand, or minimize the impact of such abuse, women appear to be instrumentalized as part of the host’s strategy to insulate the Bush Administration from the fallout of the revelations. Consistently, those who disagree are patronized or denied access to the verbal space.

48

Lastly, out of the 14 women who call in the show, only one is greeted at the end of the conversation—“Anyway Erin, I appreciate the phone call, very nice and I appreciate it,” (Erin, May 4<sup>th</sup>)—while the other 13 seem to “vanish off” from the program. However, such a treatment is not exclusive to women, as Limbaugh does not appear to greet men in more significant proportions. Instead, the absence of greetings at the end of the program seems to be a standard feature of conversations on CTR programs and is not a significant predictor of unequal treatment between men and women, even though it reinforces the impression of the host’s hostility towards the caller when they happen to disagree.

## **7. Women’s participation in *The Laura Ingraham Show* and *The Rush Limbaugh Show* during the Tea Party’s ascendancy of spring 2010 (April 12<sup>th</sup> – April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010)**

49

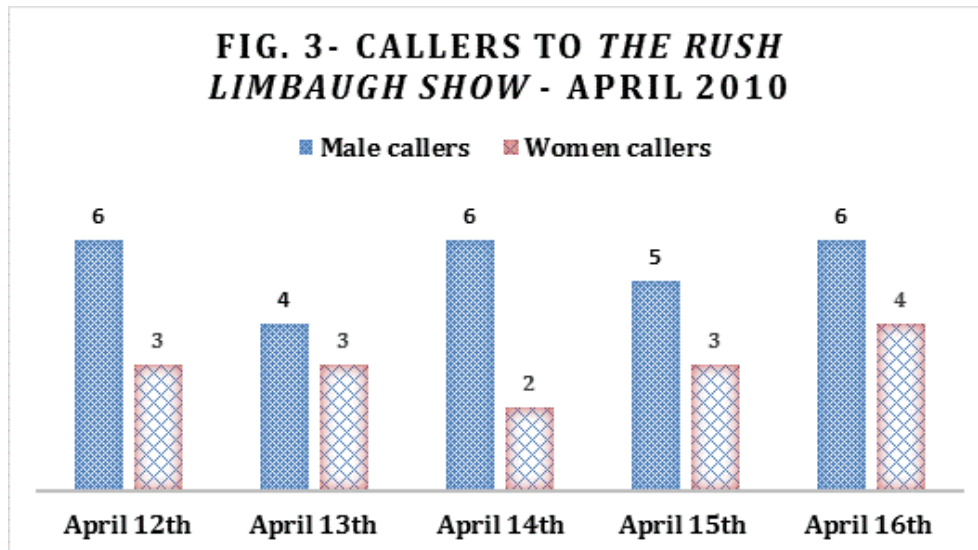
Several topics made it to the headlines during the week from April 12<sup>th</sup> to April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010. President Obama had

signed the Affordable Care Act a couple of weeks earlier, and tax returns were due on April 15<sup>th</sup>, a day also known as “Tax Day”. Potential Supreme Court nominees were being vetted and a great deal of media attention was focused on Elena Kagan as a possible replacement for Justice Stevens. As the campaign for the midterm primary elections had kicked off a few months before, discontented citizens were holding Tea Party rallies throughout the countries in order to protest against the Obama administration and support conservative candidates. In that respect, a poll conducted by CBS/*The New York Times* describing Tea Party supporters as overwhelmingly white middle-aged men was published on April 14<sup>th</sup>. A great deal of media attention was given to the story of a Russian boy who had been adopted by an American family but then sent back to Russia with a note pinned down his sweater because the mother was unable to manage his emotional imbalance. Lastly, a nuclear summit to reduce the volume of nuclear weapons globally held in Washington, D.C. on April 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> also made the headlines.

50

As shown on figure 3, on *RLS*, 36% of the calls were placed by women—namely 15 out of 42—which, compared to 37% six years earlier, indicates some degree of stability in women’s participation in the program.

Figure 3



51 Although some conversations between host and women callers focused on the CBS/*NYT* poll, they were not limited to that topic only and other issues were discussed, among which were Limbaugh’s “Curathon”, an operation to raise

funds against leukemia, the IRS, or the way liberalism shapes college curricula.

<sup>52</sup>Very few conversations addressed social issues or issues traditionally considered to belong specifically to women's field of expertise. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, Becky (Salem, Oregon) called to express her frustration regarding the IRS's infringement on the finances of her household:

I just wanted to share something [...]: I got a mini-audit from the IRS. My husband and I are always on time with our taxes, we are not part of the 47% who do not pay their Federal income taxes, we have always been on time, and [...] we've got to explain ourselves for the deductions we claimed on our taxes for 2007.

<sup>53</sup> It is worth noting that she begins by describing herself, not her husband, as the target of the audit ("something I got in the mail: I got a mini-audit from the IRS"), thus suggesting that she is the head of the family or at least that she participates equally in balancing the books of the household. On April 15<sup>th</sup>, Kara from Indianapolis called to lament a teacher's attempt to force his liberal bias on his students—"Each and every class time, in my English class, we are required to read two articles out of *NYT* that he chooses for us [...], 'cause to him *NYT* is the best thing"—thus signaling the audience that the young generation of women is as concerned with the liberal bias in the media and on campuses as older men. Elaborating on Kara's contribution, Holly from Powell, Wyoming inveighs against her son's Government teacher:

I'm so upset today I don't know whether to sit down and cry or stand up and scream so I thought I'd call you for advice [...]. I had a call from my son this morning who's in high school. [...] So the teacher started going on a rant about the Tea Parties today, and then she said something like, [...] "This country will be better off when the old people are gone." [...] And I'm thinking, "Ok, here I am in rural conservative Wyoming and my son's class is getting fed this garbage, how many other kids across this country are getting fed this garbage?"

<sup>54</sup> Her contribution is altogether a charge against the influence of liberalism on students, a vindication of the Tea Party, and a celebration of family values as she defends older citizens.

<sup>55</sup>Women who called to discuss the publication of CBS/*NYT* poll on the Tea Party's ethnic make-up were African-American, as Melissa (Cincinnati, Ohio) who bluntly disproved the survey's findings later that day: "I just had a couple of comments to make about the poll... Well, they got a couple of points wrong, well most of them wrong: I'm not forty, I'm not male, I'm not wealthy and I'm not white, but I am angry, and I am a conservative." Along the same line of

argument, Diane called to express her exasperation at being considered part of a minority:

Hey Rush! I'm a black conservative and Tea Partier who's sick of hearing that I am a minority. I'm 13% the US population—I wake up a minority, I go to bed a minority... that's not gonna change. And furthermore, we lost our status as top majority because of illegal immigration. In a hundred years Latins and White will be the majority, so we'll be a superminority.

- 56 Not only does she disown the poll's results by presenting herself as the embodiment of the Tea Party's ethnic diversity ("I'm a black conservative and Tea Partier"), but she also indirectly repudiates identity politics which have traditionally been criticized for considering the US population in terms of sociological groups. A pattern similar to 2004 therefore emerges as women seem to be given access to the airwaves because their opinions fits in the host's line of argument.

57 Lastly, women were very much reactive to the annual operation organized by the host to raise funds for research on leukemia treatment, as Jennifer from New Hampshire who called on April 16<sup>th</sup> to share her experience as a leukemia survivor:

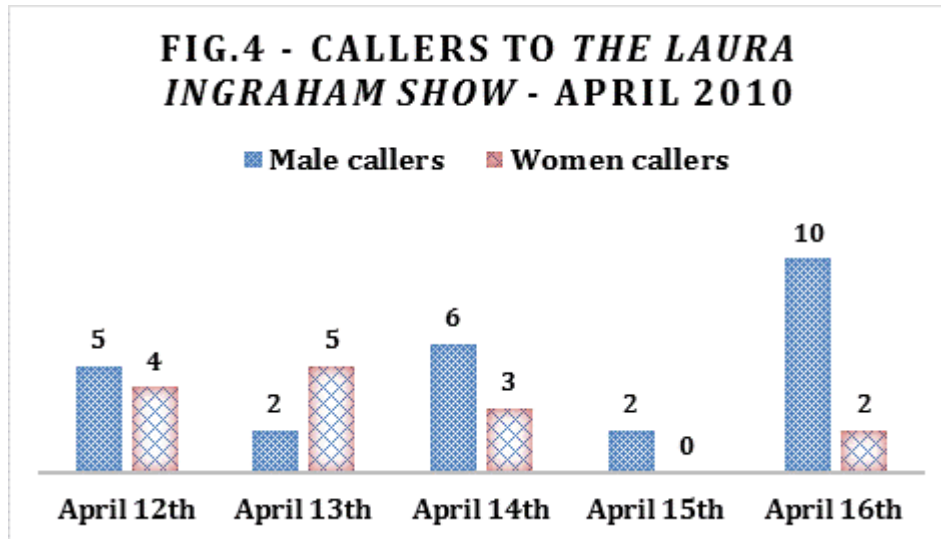
Well, Rush, this is quite a day in my life, I have wanted to speak to you probably for twenty years now [...] I absolutely adore you. I wanna thank your wonderful, generous audience, and you're the heart of it Rush, it's your big heart, this is why it's so successful. [...] When I was 24, I was diagnosed with stage 4 Hodgkin's disease [and] it was a year out of my life just doing the chemotherapy and the radiation and I brought you with me though Rush—I want to tell you Rush, you came with me. I scheduled everything around your show.

- 58 Not unsurprisingly, the conversation is an opportunity for the caller to praise the host for the success of the effort in the fight against the disease which she attributes to his personal qualities ("you're the heart of it Rush, it's your big heart"), and to express her absolute devotion to him ("I absolutely adore you", "I want to tell you Rush, you came with me").

59

Turning to *LIS*, figure 4 shows that, out of 39 calls, 14 were placed by women, namely 36%. Surprisingly, women were not given access to the airwaves in larger proportions than on *RLS*, and their participation was unevenly distributed throughout the week.

Figure 4



60 Most of the issues that women chose to discuss pertain to family values: an overwhelming majority called to talk about Tiger Woods's perceived selfish behavior during a golf tournament as opposed to that of Phil Mickelson who dedicated his victory to his wife who was battling cancer, bullying at school, footage from a Planned Parenthood practice, the relevance of financial incentives in child-rearing, and the scandal over the adopted Russian child being sent back alone by plane to Russia.

61

All the women calling to react to Woods's attitude during the golf tournament expressed a negative opinion of the professional golfer, as Darleen on April 12<sup>th</sup>:

Hi. I'm not even a golf watcher but yesterday I got hooked into watching it, and to see the character of Phil playing the game for his wife and family, and when he hugged her, and the tears that came down his face for her, and then to flash over to Tiger standing there like a spoilt child, he's not going to come back to play and everything went wrong for him; and I thought, "what a poetic thing to see."

62 While sports is traditionally viewed as being the realm of men, the caller was interested in the 2010 Masters Tournament not as sports event but as a moment of celebration of family values. By contrasting Woods' lack of fair play after his defeat with Phil Mickelson's fighting spirit as he played in front of his recovering wife whom he later hugged and kissed publicly, the caller turns the latter into an allegory of the power of strong family ties against life's challenges.

63 A significant number of women also called to react to the story of a mother who literally returned her emotionally imbalanced adopted son to Russia, and framed the issue in



various ways. On April 12<sup>th</sup>, Terry (Austin, Texas) emphasized its humane aspect:

Yes, hi! Actually, I'm listening to what you say and I totally agree with you: I think it makes the American people look terrible and uncompassionate. I researched myself for over a year to adopt from Russia and Pakistan [...] and you are so made aware of the physical and mental challenges of these children. [...]. I think it's appalling, and I think she should be charged for child abandonment.

- 64 The highly dysphoric lexicon that pervades her discourse (“terrible”, “uncompassionate”, “appalling”) forcefully conveys the cognitive dissonance that the event created, and insists on its emotional impact. Furthermore, her concern for the impact on the image of the country in the world almost suggests that the mother’s infelicitous gesture is downright un-American. Women callers emphasized other aspects of the issue, as Emily from Washington, DC who, on the same day, expressed her concern for the legal dimension of the story: “Hi. My little brother was adopted from Russia and even if the US considers him a citizen, Russia still considers him a Russian citizen. So, how does that affect how they’re gonna deal with the child since they don’t recognize US citizenship?”

65

Following Ingraham’s confession that she gave her daughter a jelly-bean in exchange for her commitment to good behavior, the use of bribing as a way to raise children was also very high on women callers’ agenda during the week under study, and diverging opinions were expressed on the topic. For instance, on April 13<sup>th</sup>, Beth (Haymarket, Virginia) expressed her approval of bribing as a child-rearing strategy:

Hey Laura, I don’t call it a bribe I call it an incentive [...] and actually we do pay our kids for their grades because we feel like if you work hard at school it relates later on your life, if you work hard, you get a better job and you make more money. So we pay our kids for As and Bs, they don’t get anything for Cs and Ds [...].

- 66 In this case, the caller does not frame the question in moral terms but in strictly functional ones. By drawing an analogy between financially gratifying children for their achievements at school with the way they will be rewarded as industrious employees in the future, she praises the US core values of strong work ethics (“work hard”) and the accumulation of material wealth (“get a better job”, “make more money”). Thus, she expands the issue beyond its mere social or moral significance in order to give it a more universal one. Later that day, Carry (Denver, Colorado) concurred with her fellow caller:

Laura, you know what? Whenever I have a situation like this with my kids, and what should I do,... I go back to *WWJD*, “what would Joan do?”, that’s my mom. And you know what? So much of what my mom and dad did is what is lacking today: our

parents had it right. [...] Giving them a jelly bean is like you are basically training them on skills in the future, just in terms of interviewing, they're negotiating, they're learning negotiating skills [...].

- 67 Pushing the argument further, this caller equates bribing children with equipping them with the necessary job-hunting skills ("interviewing") and properly training them as future businesspersons ("learning negotiating skills"). Her contribution to the discussion also celebrates family values and traditional child-rearing, as she pays tribute to the way her parents raised her ("our parents had it right") and establishes them as role-models for today's parents ("So much of what my mom and dad did is what is lacking today"). On the contrary, Janet (Benton Harbor, Michigan) strongly differs on the question:

Janet: Hi there! Well, I don't have any credentials like doctor or anything, but I am a citizen [...] that knows their history. Bribing children, I have a problem with that, 'cause I feel like we're training them to do right for monetary reason instead of doing right because it's right.

Ingraham: Yeah, doing right because it's the right thing to do... er, I hear you, and you're worried that they're just gonna wait for the cash or otherwise they might not do the right thing, right?

- 68 Such a point of view debunks the argument put forward by the previous callers as it dismisses the use of bribing as a strategy likely to instill greed in children and make them confuse personal interest with good manners.

69

Most notably, from a strictly formal perspective, the exchange between caller and host attests to the latter's effort to maintain mutual understanding: she reformulates the caller's argument in order to show that she understands it properly ("Yeah, doing right because it's the right thing to do"), uses linguistic markers showing that she acknowledges the caller's opinion ("I hear you"), and asks her to confirm that she is not misinterpreting her point through the use of a rising tone ("right?"). Consistent with such discursive practices is the follow-up to the conversation with Beth (Haymarket, Virginia) on the question of bribing children, as Ingraham explained that she usually does not resort to bribing:

Ingraham: I can tell you that Beth, when I say that [I'll talk to her teacher], I come in and she's been an angel all day long, I mean she's a good kid anyway, but she's been especially good, and I didn't even have to bribe her...

Beth: Yeah...

Ingraham: ...I don't have to bribe her, I just said I'm gonna show up and ask questions...

Beth: ...That's right...

Ingraham: So I'm... Go ahead...

- 70 This exchange shows that, even though she seems adamant to make her point, Ingraham surrenders the floor when she



realizes that the caller is trying to say something (“So I’m... Go ahead...”), thus managing turn-taking in a way that ensures equal participation of both speakers.

71

Lastly, the issue of bullying at school also received a fair deal of attention from women callers such as Deana (Verona Beach, New Jersey) on April 14<sup>th</sup>: “Hi Laura, I’m just calling because I was bullied as a kid at school by one particular girl and I stood up for myself. Parents need to teach their children that when someone is picking on you, you have to fight back and defend yourself.” While the issue may be considered to be a social one, and as such, one that is part of women’s field of expertise, the caller offers a solution that may appear to be typically masculine (“you have to fight back and defend yourself”).

72

One other striking feature of conversations on *LIS* is the fact that social issues do not seem to be discussed by women exclusively, as men also called to react to such topics. However, their contributions do not emphasize the same aspects of the issues as their female counterparts. On April 13<sup>th</sup>, Dan (Ken Island, Maryland) reacted to the Planned Parenthood hidden camera footage: “I’m a sales manager and after listening to that call, I would hire that Planned Parenthood person because they’ve taken their training well, they’re anticipating a lot of objections, partly overcoming those in their presentation to the customers and set ‘em up for a strong close!” This analysis of the footage does not frame the issue in moral terms as abortion in itself is not discussed. Instead, the caller chooses to focus on how the Planned Parenthood employee tries to convince the young lady that getting an abortion is only a minor procedure. He is interested in the technique of persuasion the employee uses which he equates with the selling technique of a salespersons.

73

In the same way, on April 12<sup>th</sup>, Jim (Phoenix, Arizona) stressed the legal aspect of the Russian adoption of scandal: “Hi. I guess I have the same question as a lot of people are asking Laura, ‘Why isn’t this woman in jail?’” In other words, men seem to be interested in social issues but do not react in a way that could be construed as un-masculine. One exception is Jason (Salem, Oregon) who nonetheless expressed concern with the way parents are doing their job on April 14<sup>th</sup>:

I couldn't agree with you more what is one more law going to do when the laws that are in place are already doing that, when the parents aren't there showing their children, setting the example? [...] Where were the parents? How come the parents aren't doing something for their children?

- 74 While this caller opens the conversation stressing the judicial dimension of bullying (“what is one more law going to do?”), he also stresses the parents’ failure to raise their children adequately as a significant factor in bullying.

75

Except for one woman caller who praised Ingraham’s parenting skills on April 13<sup>th</sup>—“Kudos to you Laura, you’re doing the right thing”—callers’ deference to the host and host’s flattery to the caller were completely absent from the conversations: discussions centered exclusively on issues and were not rooted in the sentimental or the interpersonal relation between host and caller. Conversations show that callers do not produce a meta-discourse on the host and/or his personal qualities, or on the show itself, contrary to the discursive codes that dominate *RLS*.

76

Overall, exchanges between caller and host on *LIS* are straightforward, opinions and arguments are articulated in a very simple and direct manner, and the tone is neutral. Within the constraints imposed by the show’s apparatus, the analysis reveals that, just as male callers, female callers are given an opportunity to articulate their opinions without being interrupted. They agree with Ingraham some of the time but they express their agreement in a neutral fashion, without deference towards the host, although they may sometimes display some liking for her. Thematically, women seem to discuss social or family issues, suggesting that women who call *LIS* tend to remain within the boundaries of what is traditionally considered to be women’s field of expertise. Most notably, women seem to shy away from economic issues, as only one of them discussed Tax Day. However, the choice of a topic is not a function of the caller’s gender as men contribute to discussions on social issues in significant proportions, even though they tend to frame them in ways that are traditionally expected from men, emphasizing the commercial, the legal, or the technical, while deemphasizing the social, the moral, or the emotional. On *LIS* Greetings at the end of conversations seem to follow the same pattern as Limbaugh: the hosts rarely closes conversation with a greeting, even though she seems to do it more often than her counterpart. Here again, it does not seem to appear as a discriminating factor.

## 8. Conclusion

77

Overall, female callers on CTR programs tend to be slightly underrepresented compared with men, which is probably accountable by the fact that they call less than their male counterparts. The “greeting” variable is not operational in determining a difference in treatment as making the caller vanish off the air is a standard practice on CTR shows.

<sup>78</sup>On *RLS*, women are given more visibility when their participation is instrumental in the host’s argument or defense strategy, as was the case during the Abu Ghraib scandal in 2004, or when the poll survey on the demographics of the Tea Party movement was released in the spring of 2010. As such, the representation of women seems to be a function of the salience of particular issues on the show. Women participating in this show also appear subservient to the host and are therefore instrumentalized as part of the host’s strategy of self-aggrandizement. Women’s attitude towards Limbaugh can be accounted for by the fact that he is more than a radio anchorperson; he is a real star with multiple-digit contracts whose comments on current events are often discussed on other outlets. Besides, just like other CTR hosts, he usually places himself in a position of authority, presenting his views as the truth or the right take on the questions being discussed. On the contrary, whether female or male, the caller is an anonymous American whose contribution on the airwaves is likely to be biased by the unusual context of the discussion. There seems to be a “fame factor” whereby the caller is likely to be very much impressed by the opportunity to talk to the host and therefore be tempted to make their time on the air last as long as possible, including by pleasing the host. Overall, the way female callers appear on *RLS* tends to reinforce the traditional representation of gender roles, even though the diachronic examination of conversations suggests an evolution that appears more favorable to women.

<sup>79</sup>*LIS* seems to represent women differently from *RLS* and to forge more diverse representations of women and, as such, contributes to recalibrating gender relations by showing that, while women tend to discuss social issues in greater proportions than other issues, they do not

necessarily frame them in ways that are traditionally expected from women. Furthermore, looking at women's calls in comparative focus with men's, reveal that social issues are not the exclusive realm of women as men also choose to discuss them, even though they tend to frame them differently than women. Moreover, there seems to be no fame factor as on RLS.

<sup>80</sup>In the end, the role of the screening process is central in the way hosts represent the identity of their callers. The fact that they are in complete technical control of the show gives them absolute freedom to decide who they choose to talk with or to take the caller off the air if they happen to dislike what they are saying. Ultimately, they have the power to forge representations of callers in specific ways—consistent with Turner's proposal, identities are thus *created* instead of being *mediated*. In that respect, CTR hosts appear as Prometheus of the airwaves, and the way social groups and categories are represented is therefore intentional. As such, Limbaugh appears as custodian of traditional gender roles and what historian Phil Tiemeyer refers to as the "Cold War gender order"<sup>xxxii</sup>, whereas Ingraham seems to be moving conservatism beyond the way it traditionally conceives of gender roles, taking heed of the way such roles have evolved throughout the past decades. As such, *LIS* operates as a laboratory where conservatism reassesses its stance on gender and gender relations, affording conservatism opportunities to reshape itself in that arena.

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## ABSTRACTS

A phenomenon that emerged in the late 1980s under the aegis of Rush Limbaugh, conservative talk radio has played a major role in US politics. By offering a forum for the expression of conservative ideas which hitherto had been underrepresented in mainstream media, CTR has operated as a powerful instrument of dissent. However, the status of callers is problematic as the apparatus of these programs—such as the screening process or the host's complete control over conversations—implies the violation of the criteria of authentic conversations. The caller's status is even more problematic when callers are women: whether it deals with social or economic issues, CTR appears as an exclusive boys' club.

This article explores the status of women callers in comparative focus through a qualitative analysis of conversations between female callers and hosts on *The Rush Limbaugh Show* and *The Laura Ingraham Show* in 2004 and 2010. It shows that conversations on these two programs reveal a significant gender gap but argues that women's contribution to the discussion is treated differently across programs: while Ingraham tends to offer women a more genuine opportunity to express themselves and treats them as equal partners in the conversation, Limbaugh instrumentalizes women's contribution as part of his overall rhetorical strategy in order to advance conservatism, resorting to flattery and condescension. Ultimately, Limbaugh invites women's participation mostly to reinforce the status quo of gender relationships, and thus appears as custodian of the traditional gender order. On the contrary, Ingraham recalibrates

gender relationships in a way that is as favorable to women as it is to men, thus allowing conservatism to redefine its stance on gender equality.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** conservative talk radio, conversation theory, demotic turn, gender relations, gendered frames, partisan media, women

**Mots-clés:** Bill O'Reily, Laura Ingraham, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity.

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