COGITATIO

Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183–2439)
2022, Volume 10, Issue 3, Pages X–X
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i3.5260

Article

Hijacking Journalism: Legitimacy and Metajournalistic Discourse in Right-Wing Podcasts

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Submitted: 13 January 2022 | Accepted: 29 March 2022 | Published: in press

Abstract
Whereas personal expression has become a core practice of journalism whose merits can include greater attention to context and interpretative analysis, these freedoms from the constraints of traditional broadcast conventions can pose serious risks, including the ideological hijacking of journalism by partisan actors. In popular right-wing podcasts, such as those hosted by Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino, the element of opinion amplifies the tendency of the podcast medium to relegate news to a secondary concern behind the emotional impact. Not only do podcasters like Shapiro and Bongino contribute to a fractured media environment of hyper-partisan news and commentary, but they also utilize social media platforms and transmedia networks to undermine traditional journalism and replace it with an alternative conservative media ecosystem—a multiplatform, full-service clearinghouse of news and commentary afforded by the publishing capabilities of the internet and the distribution algorithms of social media platforms like Facebook. This study charts the evolution of conservative audio production, from the influential work of talk radio star Rush Limbaugh through the latest innovations by conservative podcasters, as exemplified by Shapiro and Bongino. Our study builds on previous scholarship on metajournalistic discourse to examine how right-wing podcasters use exclusionary language to delegitimize the institution of journalism and offer a self-contained, ideologically conservative version of journalism as a replacement.

Keywords
Ben Shapiro; conservative media; Dan Bongino; metajournalistic discourse; right-wing podcasts; Rush Limbaugh

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Journalism, Activism, and Social Media: Exploring the Shifts in Journalistic Roles, Performance, and Interconnectedness" edited by Peter Maurer (Trier University) and Christian Nuernbergk (Trier University).

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1. Introduction

Despite its emancipatory promise to abet free speech as one of the world's least censored media forms, podcasting's democratic function is uneven and highly contested (Jarrett, 2009; Sienkiewicz & Jaramillo, 2019; Sterne et al., 2008). Podcasting's greatest assets of aural intimacy and expressive power through the human voice also alternately carry "a great risk of exploitation" (Lindgren, 2016, p. 38). Whereas "speaking personally" has become a core practice of journalism whose merits include greater attention to context and interpretative analysis (Coward, 2013), these freedoms from the constraints of traditional broadcast conventions can pose serious risks. As Nee and Santana (2021, p. 12) explain, "an outcome of the emphasis on form and storytelling" in podcast journalism "is that the dissemination of new news becomes less important than the packaging and emotional impact."

The intimacy and informality of the podcast medium reach listeners at deeper emotional levels than traditional radio reporting due to freedom from constraints of time, format, and content regulations. Freedom from such constraints "presents both opportunities and

dilemmas for news podcast producers within the context of journalistic norms" (Nee & Santana, 2021, p. 2), thus posing challenges to the storytelling process (McHugh, 2016; Spinelli & Dann, 2019; van Krieken & Sanders, 2019). The first-person perspective can be used as a tool of propaganda wielded by persuasive and charismatic hosts, thus "creating tension between podcast journalism and the boundaries of traditional journalistic practices" (Nee & Santana, 2021, p. 2). Despite journalistic values and professional practices being a part of podcasts, metajournalistic discourse and podcasting are rarely linked, with the notable exception of Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau's (2021) study of *The New York Times*' series *Caliphate.* The emotional connections afforded by podcasts can serve as opportunities for right-wing podcasters to enact exclusionary practices through metajournalistic commentary and victim positions (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019) or through attachments to class-driven, populist rhetoric (Peck, 2019) to goad their audiences to distrust mainstream journalism.

Certainly, podcasting did not invent personal attacks, over-the-top commentary, and emotional packaging. Rush Limbaugh used these strategies to great effect while hosting the highest-rated talk radio show in the US from 1988 to 2021. His influence is evident in the conservative podcast industry where right-wing podcasters like Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino have adopted Limbaugh's political positions, media strategies, and even vocal inflections. Not only do podcasters like Shapiro and Bongino contribute to a fractured media environment of hyper-partisan news and commentary, but they also use social media platforms and transmedia networks to undermine mainstream journalism and replace it with an alternative conservative media ecosystem. Following Limbaugh, contemporary conservative podcasters criticize the institution of journalism, rail against "the media," and cast doubt on the value systems of mainstream journalists. Shapiro and Bongino leverage the publishing capabilities of the internet and the distribution algorithms of social media platforms to create a multiplatform, full-service clearinghouse of news and commentary Limbaugh could not. Our study builds on scholarship about metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016) to examine how right-wing podcasters use exclusionary language to delegitimize the institution of journalism and offer a self-contained, ideologically conservative version of journalism as a replacement.

This study first reviews metajournalistic discourse literature, focusing on legitimizing discourses, exclusionary language, and conservative media. Next, we trace the origins of right-wing podcasting from the Fairness Doctrine to the conservative radio revolution led by Limbaugh in the 1980s and 1990s. We then analyze two of the most influential conservative podcasters of the early 2020s, Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino, through an interpretive critical analysis of their podcasts, news coverage, and digital media infrastructures. Our analysis highlights the ways the two hosts discursively delegitimize mainstream journalism while propping up alternative media infrastructures that reflect their ideological perspectives. In conclusion, we explore the future of far-right podcasting in the context of conservative media.

2. Metajournalistic Discourse and Conservative Media

As an institution, journalism is quite reflexive. The ability to interpret one's own production practice along with its social and cultural implications constitutes one of the most important facets of the institution (Zelizer, 1993). News organizations and journalists work to commune their values, purposes, and norms through several practices that help discursively define journalism. This metajournalistic discourse allows for journalism to strengthen, challenge, and reinforce its institutional boundaries (Carlson, 2016). A core component of Carlson's (2016) original typology is legitimacy, which is closely attached to a journalist's authority. While it is common to assume that authority can be lost, Carlson (2017) contends it instead is negotiated through journalistic roles and practices that legitimize the institution and its actors. Seeking legitimacy is historically important for the press, especially in relation to new media. For example, the print journalists covering the Hutchins report worked diligently to insert their authority and legitimacy. Through their coverage, they sought to distinguish themselves from radio and the new medium of television by inserting themselves as the true medium with an understanding of its audience (Walters, 2021). As new media emerge, attempts to prove legitimacy are also tied to a need for the institution of journalism to negotiate its relationship with professional values like transparency (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021) and broader, more systemic values like democracy and truth (Vos & Thomas, 2018). Seeing authority and legitimacy as a relationship is important to the context of this study. We argue right-wing podcasters engage in a relationship with their mainstream media counterparts that works to delegitimize the institution of journalism through exclusionary discourse.

Boundary-building is often studied as exclusionary discourse, particularly through the ways journalists definitionally situate actors, sites, audiences, or topics outside the boundaries of journalism to strip them of cultural authority (Johnson et al., 2021). Exclusionary discourse typically is used to excise deviant actors (Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Cecil, 2002). Outsiders can also use exclusionary discourse to attack journalism and its ethical and democratic foundations. Such outsiders, like right-wing podcasters, seek to redraw the boundaries of journalism to promote their own methods and values as superior to established professional practice. In one example, Eldridge (2019) explores how a digital-peripheral media outlet, the sports and entertainment blog *Deadspin*, was welcomed to the journalist fold after it published a video takedown of conservative media owner Sinclair's "must run" programming.

In some respects, the right-wing media, specifically, and right-wing populism, broadly, serve as catalysts for mainstream media to reinforce their boundaries (Nygaard, 2021). According to Krämer and Langmann (2020), journalistic norms like objectivity are reinforced when engaging with discourse about right-wing media and right-wing populism. Although other forms of media struggle to position themselves as legitimate authorities—cultural critics as an example (Whipple, 2022)—the contention between the *elite* mainstream press and the common man approach in right-wing media lends itself to conservatives challenging journalistic authority. Media producers on the ideological right use five distinct positions as means to perform both an exclusionary discourse and to delegitimize their mainstream journalism counterparts. These include performing an insider position by focusing on their knowledge of the field, an expert position through the use of facts, a victim position to share how the mainstream press victimizes them, a citizen position to enforce more populist ideas of representation through comment and criticism, and an activist position that reinforces their opposition to the elite press they attack (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). This is clearly seen in Reece Peck's 2019 book *Fox Populism*. In it, Peck argues that Fox's rhetoric is undoubtedly populist, both through its visuals and its language. And, when Fox engages in metajournalistic discourse within this framework, they do so by elevating exclusionary tactics as attack strategies. The confrontational right-wing discourse employed by Fox is an early manual for far-right podcasters to adopt. Peck (2019) believes Tucker Carlson serves as the thread between the populism of right-wing Fox News and the nationalist and combative discourse of far-right podcasting. One way this can be interrogated further is by looking at the rise of partisan media, podcasting, and their associated journalistic practices.

3. The Origins of the Right-Wing Podcast

Established by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949, the Fairness Doctrine mandated balanced, equitable, and honest treatment of controversial issues. It aimed to control an unwieldy pattern in manipulative radio content, the most dangerous of which resounded in the brutal antisemitism of Father Charles Coughlin, the Nazi sympathizer with 15 million listeners in the mid-1930s (Hilmes, 2014). The National Association of Broadcasters originally banned Coughlin from radio in 1939, two decades before the federal mandate. At the time, the capacity for radio networks to act swiftly in defense of democracy was enabled by a leaner, more centralized industry capable of reaching consensus for developing, amending, and enforcing its own professional code of ethics.

The Fairness Doctrine effectively prevented ideologues from winning an undue share of the radio audience, as witnessed in the culture of civil on-air political discourse that prevailed from 1949 to 1987. Among President Ronald Reagan's widespread cuts to federal programs and government regulations, the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 stands out for its lasting and profound impact on the media climate, the nature of political discourse, and the trajectory of the "Grand Old Party" (GOP). Originally spearheaded by Republican lawmakers who argued that the regulation served to silence conservatives (Barbaro, 2021), the removal of the Fairness Doctrine ushered in a boom in conservative talk radio (Rosenwald, 2019). Without responsibility for equitable treatment of controversial issues, hosts like Limbaugh were unleashed to foment against liberals, leveraging extremist rhetoric that became the cornerstone of conservative talk radio. The effort to make politics entertaining drew on a base element in the listening audience that savored meanspirited attacks and crass humor. Analysis and independent critical thinking were willingly abrogated for blind compliance, as Limbaugh's followers dubbed themselves "ditto-heads."

Limbaugh's 1992 book *The Way Things Ought to Be* cemented his credo that recast the GOP's self-concept toward a more extreme and unrelenting posture readily apparent in his 1994 "Address to Incoming House GOP Freshmen" (Limbaugh, 1994). Moderation, Limbaugh claimed, was a sign of weakness and no quarter should be given to liberal values such as compassion for the working class (Barbaro, 2021). He advised them to anticipate and actively resist appeals to their humanity in phrases like, "The war on the poor," and in allegations that the removal of social programs is "cold-hearted, cruel to the poor" (Limbaugh, 1994). All are tactics, he warned to the newly elected GOP House members, "designed to get you to moderate, to maybe not follow through as you intended to on welfare reform and other cultural issues" (Limbaugh, 1994). This reinvention of the GOP as entrenched and militant resonated with a wave of extreme conservatism that denigrated feminism, affirmative action, disability rights, and the environmental movement. Limbaugh's ideological positions, his routine assaults on the mainstream press as a liberal propaganda mill, and his repeated dalliances with conspiracy theories provided a roadmap for right-wing podcasts that carry Limbaugh's legacy forward in the podcast industry (Nadler & Bauer, 2019; Rosenwald, 2019).

4. Industrial Context and Method

Despite early indications to the contrary, podcasting is no longer a predominantly liberal-leaning media space. A large and rapidly expanding number of the top 200 titles on Apple Podcast charts brand themselves as right-wing podcasts (Quah, 2020). In addition to shows by Republican elected officials such as *Verdict with Ted Cruz* and *Hold These Truths with Dan Crenshaw*, the most downloaded conservative podcasts include *The Dan Bongino Show*, *The Ben Shapiro Show*, *The Glenn Beck Program*, *The Sean Hannity Show*, *The Rubin Report*, *The Michael Knowles Show*, and *Bill O'Reilly's No Spin*

News and Analysis (Quah, 2020). Many lean far-right, embrace extremist ethno-nationalist perspectives, and include a "combination of serious discussion of political, cultural, and social issues along with satirical and biting humor, which parodies previously 'untouchable' personalities and topics" (Travis & Sexton, 2021).

Fueled by false allegations of voter fraud and the Stop the Steal movement, several right-wing podcasts broke into the top rankings after the 2020 US Presidential Election. For example, *The Dan Bongino Show*, which typically hovered between 20 and 40 on Apple Podcast charts, became one of the top two most-downloaded shows (Quah, 2020; Roose, 2020). Bongino's popularity surged on Facebook, driven by his ability to drive headlines and set the agenda for the right on the national level (Roose, 2020). This ascent of right-wing podcasts is due in part to their unique historical moment during the Election Day 2020 buildup and the ensuing firestorm of conservative voter fraud allegations that followed. Listeners commune with conservative talk show personalities from four to five hours per week, heightening the parasocial relationships fostered by the medium's unique technological affordances (Zuraikat, 2020). Additionally, as a senior executive at Westwood One claimed, "right-wing podcasting nowadays seems purposefully integrated with the broader right-wing infrastructures and are themselves individual assets of much larger multi-platform presences" (Quah, 2020). Figures like Bongino marshal "attention between his multiple media outputs, from his broadcast radio show to his social media feeds to his podcasts to his various media appearances" (Quah, 2020). In 2018, Westwood One repackaged *The Ben Shapiro Show*, consistently a top-10 podcast, for radio broadcast, an instance of a born-digital podcast expanding its audience through terrestrial radio.

Within this context, we offer a close reading of the two most popular conservative podcasters today, Dan Bongino and Ben Shapiro. The qualitative method of interpretive critical analysis of production practice, media texts, and digital consumption allows for examination of the ways the principles of journalism are threatened and/or transformed in various media contexts (Brennen, 2017; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) in the example of right-wing podcasters. Interpretive critical analysis is methodologically deployed in our case studies as a historically informed close reading, a type of textual analysis that, "beyond the manifest content of the media, focuses on the ideological and cultural assumptions of the text" (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240). Thus "context is an important part of interpretive analysis" (Brennen, 2017, p. 22), particularly as applied to media texts selected strategically and parsed to build analysis in support of a broader argument (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240). Additionally, our method leverages Caliandro's (2018) approach appropriate to digital ethnographies that suggests *following the thing*, *following the medium*, and *following the natives*. This paradigm helps guide our examination of each show's impact on social media and information flows across platforms, particularly in terms of tracking or "following the circulation of an empirical object within a given online environment or across different online environments and observing the specific social formations emerging around it from the interactions of the digital devices and users" (Caliandro, 2018, p. 560). This process brings the *thing* (podcasts), *medium* (devices and digital spaces where they are consumed and discussed), and *natives* (hosts and listeners) into sharper focus.

We gathered a variety of different types of content as we followed the podcast hosts across multiple digital spaces, resulting in a large collection of podcast episodes by Bongino and Shapiro, news stories about them, editorials written by them, their television appearances, and their digital media infrastructures. Given the vast amount of audio content produced by Bongino and Shapiro—each distributes five or more hour-long podcasts every week—we focused specifically on podcast episodes where they engage with the journalism industry broadly or individual journalists specifically. Such criterion sampling is common in interpretive qualitative studies in which the amount of data is far too large to allow for close, in-depth analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). To identify podcast episodes in which the hosts engage in the metajournalistic process of defining the journalism industry, specific journalists, and themselves in relation to "the media," we read summary descriptions for every podcast episode released between January and September 2021. After identifying and listening to the most relevant episodes, we collectively compiled notes to "chunk" our dataset into appropriate categories (Lofland et al., 2006), before engaging in the interpretive process of developing second-order concepts through pattern recognition (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The following analysis draws from topics and critical incidents that best illustrate Bongino's and Shapiro's efforts to delegitimize the journalism industry and offer themselves as suitable replacements. For Bongino, this dynamic is exemplified by his response to the January 6 attempted insurrection, his campaign against fact-checking, and his algorithmic prominence on Facebook. For Shapiro, our analysis focuses on Shapiro's liminal position as a conservative pundit, journalists' reaction to Shapiro guest-editing *Politico* "Playbook," and *The Daily Wire*'s success on Facebook.

4.1. The Dan Bongino Show

In the wake of the insurrection of the US Capitol, Dan Bongino, former secret service agent and erstwhile guest on Alex Jones's *InfoWars* who once hosted a program on NRA TV, vigorously defended the mob on his podcast. Bongino framed the riot as an extension of political violence normalized by the left, especially those who supported the Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder. On January 7, 2021, episode "About Yesterday," Bongino (2021a) asserted that "media hypocrisy regarding political violence is impossible to

watch" because liberal media celebrated violence committed by protesters on behalf of racial justice during the summer and fall of 2020. Bongino (2021a) also took aim at Twitter for blocking then-President Trump's account "after he calls for peace," claiming it is a liberal organization bent on destroying conservative values. Calling for a virtual uprising through social media, Bongino (2021a) asked, "is the digital media revolution coming?" before exhorting his listeners to rebel against media totalitarianism.

Although Bongino (2021a) made explicit on the show that he does not endorse political violence, he nonetheless laid the blame for the insurrection on liberal media's alleged support of Antifa riots on behalf of racial justice in Washington, D.C. He reported that his former secret service colleagues feared that the liberal protesters would storm the Capitol. These agents were "legitimately concerned that the White House would fall…if 100 or 200 people stormed the fences of the White House, they wondered what would happen." He claimed to have "never heard that conversation before, even as an active agent," suggesting that liberals normalized political violence first and thus were the true cause for the insurrection. "There are liberal media people," he insisted, "who say don't you bring up BLM and Antifa. We're going to keep the conversation solely on what happened with a limited group of people yesterday." Relishing the occasion for defiance, he lashed out at the collective enemy in a voice rising to a shout, "If you've been in the media and have been dismissing political violence for the last four years, you should sit down and shut up!" (Bongino, 2021a). Throughout his coverage of January 6, Bongino claimed mainstream journalists were not allowed to condemn Capitol insurrectionists after what he perceived to be their failure to criticize those who marched for racial justice months earlier. In doing so, Bongino questioned the legitimacy of mainstream media coverage of the attempted insurrection by accusing them of covering up the true origins of the January 6 violence.

Bongino's critique of mainstream media also emerges in his repeated attacks on fact-checkers, who he claims either focus on insignificant stories or get the "facts" wrong. In one episode, Bongino introduced a recurring segment called "Fact Check Clown Show" to highlight the worst offenses of fact-checkers (Bongino, 2021b). In another episode, Bongino called fact-checkers "a filthy bunch of losers" responsible for "ushering in this moment of totalitarianism" of the Biden presidency (Bongino, 2021c). Bongino also engages in ad hominem attacks against individual fact-checkers, criticizing one by name as an "embarrassment to humankind" (Bongino, 2021b) and another as a "loser of epic proportions" (Bongino, 2021c). In the September 6, 2021, episode, Bongino encouraged listeners to block fact-checkers on social media, presumably to ensure Bongino's listeners were never exposed to contrary views unless appropriately framed and refuted by Bongino on his show. Through his regular critiques of fact-checking and fact-checkers, Bongino presents mainstream journalists as hostile toward conservatives as well as professionally incompetent. This positions Bongino as the only trusted arbiter of truth. In both his attacks on fact-checkers and media coverage of January 6, Bongino attempts to discredit reportorial concern for accuracy, a bedrock principle of journalism. This denigration of production routines dedicated to the principle of accuracy attempts to further delegitimize mainstream journalism while also positioning himself outside its institutional boundaries. He by no means identifies as a journalist, but the public positioning of his program and concern for shaping public opinion continue to blur the lines between how his far-right media community sees him and the institutional boundaries of ethical journalism.

Bongino's criticism of Twitter and Facebook for discontinuing Trump's account underscores the podcast host's own colossal presence on social media, and dependence on it for his massive listenership. His total number of Facebook interactions nearly doubled that of Ben Shapiro and Sean Hannity in October 2020 (Roose, 2020). Monthly engagement on Bongino's Facebook page is greater than the pages for CNN, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* combined. During a 24-hour period in October 2020, Bongino accounted for eight of the top-10 performing link posts by US Facebook pages (Roose, 2020). The content of these posts echoes his podcast arguing against mask-wearing as an effective means of preventing the spread of Covid-19, spearheading election fraud conspiracies, and inculcating fear of a coup led by Democrats. He functions as one of the most potent agenda-setters on the far right, generating arguably more viral headlines and misinformation than any conservative podcaster. Roose (2020) observed that Bongino "is skilled at a certain type of industrial-scale content production, that is valuable on today's internet, flooding social media with a torrent of original posts, remixed memes and videos and found footage." His *Bongino Report* aggregates right-wing news stories as an extremist alternative to *The Drudge Report*, the conservative online news outlet that debuted in 1995. On his podcast, Bongino referred to *The Drudge Report* as a "disgusting site" that has become a "full-blown liberal attack machine," using exclusionary language to encourage listeners to abandon it in favor of the *Bongino Report* and other ultra-conservative alternatives (Bongino, 2021c). Through the podcast, which is often cut into shorter segments and distributed on social media and the *Bongino Report*, Bongino creates an alternative information ecosphere that consistently affirms a far-right worldview and uses traditional journalistic practices against mainstream media to delegitimize any media outlet that dare challenge that worldview.

4.2. The Ben Shapiro Show

Shapiro's podcast episode published the day after the Capitol insurrection offers an illuminating contrast to

The Dan Bongino Show. In his signature rapid-fire staccato delivery—displaying far more sheer verbal agility and intellectual precision than Bongino—Shapiro (2021a) urged that "Trump is not guilty of directly causing or directing violent actions"; yet Shapiro added that Trump was guilty of "raising the temperature" through his accusations that Congress was stealing the election, "falsehoods" that set the stage for insurrection. Shapiro's lack of loyalty to Trump did not mitigate his partisan fervor, as he lashed out at the way "the left blames all Republicans for the insurrection" (Shapiro, 2021a). Although Shapiro's show reflects his anti-gun control, anti-abortion stances, and staunch opposition to the LGBTQIA+ community, he condemns alt-right ethnonationalist and extremist groups such as Proud Boys and is a vocal critic of Trump's voting fraud claims.

Shapiro holds a different position relative to mainstream journalism than Bongino. While Bongino is dismissed largely as a conspiracy theorist or far-right agitator, Shapiro has appeared as a guest on MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, CNN's *Reliable Sources*, and HBO's *Real Time With Bill Maher*, and is a frequent presence on public panels. This is not to say that all journalists are willing to include Shapiro within their boundaries. Journalists' ambivalence toward Shapiro was most evident on January 14, 2021, when *Politico* invited Shapiro to guest edit "Playbook," the site's morning political news briefing that is widely read by prominent journalists and politicians. Several journalists criticized *Politico* for granting Shapiro control over the site's signature offering given Shapiro's "long history of bigoted and incendiary commentary, particularly in the aftermath of last week's violence" (Izadi, 2021). "It's not just that he's incendiary or conservative," one reporter told the *Washington Post*. "It's that he sells falsehoods as an incendiary persona" (Izadi, 2021). These journalists sought to define Shapiro as an extreme and "incendiary" right-wing figure and, thus, an unacceptable choice to edit one of the industry's go-to news roundups. In response, Shapiro claimed the incident provided further evidence of the media's efforts to demonize and silence conservatives. "I'm completely unsurprised by the blowback," Shapiro told the *Washington Examiner*. "The staff at *Politico* actually proved my point: that the goal for much of the Left is complete ostracization of the Right from cultural and political life" (Van Dyke, 2021). In Shapiro's response, he characterized journalists critical of *Politico*'s decision as "the Left," claiming their goal was to target and marginalize all conservatives. Thus, while some journalists sought to delegitimize Shapiro as someone who does not belong within the boundaries of respectable journalism, Shapiro, in turn, sought to define mainstream journalists as partisan actors, no different from himself. Shapiro questioned the media's willingness to engage with alternative viewpoints, thereby attacking their commitment to balance and fairness.

Shapiro consistently casts traditional journalists and "Big Tech" as supporters of and apologists for Democrats and President Biden. After social media companies limited the spread of a thinly sourced story about Hunter Biden weeks before the 2020 Presidential election, Shapiro cried foul. In a column headlined "The Media Officially Becomes the Communications Department for Joe Biden," Shapiro claimed that mainstream media outlets and tech companies were protecting Biden because of their own liberal biases: "At a time when our trust in media is already low, the media have thoroughly debunked themselves as neutral arbiters of fact" (Shapiro, 2020). Days after Biden's inauguration, Shapiro again warned readers to prepare for "four years of media sycophancy," claiming declining trust in the media was a result of "their own journalistic malfeasance for years on end during former President Barack Obama's administration…followed by their aggressive repetition of even the most thinly sourced scandal regarding Trump" (Shapiro, 2020). Similarly, on his podcast, Shapiro (2021c) framed a story about the US Surgeon General working with Facebook to reduce Covid-19 misinformation as part of an effort by the White House "to bring Big Tech under their control…to use these as instruments of the Democratic party." Predicting a future in which the Left succeeds in bringing about "monopolistic control of mainstream media," Shapiro (2021b) suggests in one column that disenchanted news consumers would seek out alternative information sources. By defining mainstream media and Big Tech as one-sided propagandistic tools of the Democratic party, Shapiro questions the legitimacy of news outlets and social media sites as spaces for competing viewpoints. By asserting that conservative perspectives can only be found elsewhere, Shapiro's self-serving metajournalistic rhetoric positions himself as precisely such—an alternative information source.

Shapiro's podcast is an extension of the online news publication he founded, *The Daily Wire*, which NewsWhip identifies as "by far" the top right-wing publisher on Facebook (Nicholson, 2020). Although Shapiro resigned as editor-in-chief in June 2020, *The Daily Wire* still hosts Shapiro's podcast and his writings on its site. Shapiro's commanding following on Facebook depends on a network of *Daily Wire*-affiliated Facebook pages to generate traffic. The clandestine network consists of "14 large Facebook pages that purported to be independent but exclusively promote content from *The Daily Wire* in a coordinated fashion" (Legum & Zekeria, 2020). The method entails identifying incendiary news items preying on bigotry and fear, stories that are months or years old and thus out of the current daily news cycle. *The Daily Wire* is actively promoted by the rewriting of these stories (with no indication that they are old) for right-wing pages titled Mad World News, The New Resistance, The Right Stuff, American Patriot, and America First. What appear to be new links to *The Daily Wire* on these sites are actually repurposed to both readers and Facebook's algorithm, thus artificially inflating its numbers. At typically no more than 500 words in length with no original reporting,

these stories propelled *The Daily Wire* to the seventh spot among Facebook's top publishers (Legum & Zekeria, 2020). Social media strategies like this have allowed *The Daily Wire* to expand its reach, add to its growing podcast lineup of conservative figures, and launch new media ventures, including a book imprint and a film production company.

The ideological agenda behind Shapiro's podcast is best understood through the combined function of social media distribution and media ownership. Bentkey Ventures's Farris C. Wilks owns *The Daily Wire*, which Shapiro launched in partnership with Jeremy Boreing in 2015. Wilks, who made his fortune through the sale of his fracking company to a Singapore firm, is a GOP supporter (Vickers et al., 2019). The Texas fracking billionaire donated $10 million to GOP Super PACS during the 2016 election and runs a politically conservative church (Vickers et al., 2019), which supports his views of abortion and homosexuality as crimes. These perspectives intersect with the political principles of Shapiro's podcast, and this funding has allowed *The Daily Wire* to become a conservative news enterprise offered as an alternative to what Shapiro views as Leftist media.

5. Affirming Politics, Asserting Boundaries

Our findings show that Dan Bongino seeks to delegitimize mainstream journalists as corrupt and incompetent by using exclusionary discourse to position himself as a trusted truth-teller. He does so by wielding mainstream journalistic practice against itself, casting its own institutional code rooted in the principle of verification as the thing that makes it untrustworthy. Ben Shapiro similarly seeks to delegitimize traditional journalists as partisan actors working on behalf of the Left. Relative to that characterization, Shapiro positions himself as equally legitimate and justified in attacking traditional journalistic practice. Although he acknowledges his role as a partisan actor, he legitimized himself as a necessary counterweight to the mainstream media, which he characterizes as a proxy for the Left, a strategy that both serves as commentary and as a way to help his audience to see him as a victim (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). Although Shapiro is rhetorically closer to mainstream media than Bongino, both have leveraged their podcasts and social media to hi-jack journalism's core function through self-legitimizing and exclusionary rhetoric navigated through inflections of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Eldridge, 2019). While questioning the legitimacy of traditional media is a strategy perfected by Limbaugh, the publication and distribution affordances of digital media have allowed Bongino and Shapiro to create conservative media ecosystems that serve as alternatives to mainstream journalism. These alternatives, as our analysis shows, reflect a current divide both in how journalism is understood and seen, as well as how political discourse has evolved. It is also reflective of the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, which allowed for more extreme views to be voiced without fairness and balance.

Podcasting's intimacy and informality can be leveraged for what Kovach and Rosenstiel (2011) call the "journalism of affirmation." This relatively new form of neo-partisan media caters to audiences interested in reinforcing their own pre-existing political perspectives. The journalism of affirmation lends color, theater, and even valor to one's ideological self-concept. It offers "the security and convenience offered by faith, as opposed to fact and empiricism" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011, p. 47). Rush Limbaugh was a master practitioner of the journalism of affirmation. In his 1994 address to Congress, Limbaugh described his method accordingly: "What happens on talk radio is real [sic] simple: We validate what's in people's hearts and minds already" (Limbaugh, 1994). Radio's original public service ideal of "mixed programming designed for the listener to encounter something unheard of" has yielded to "increasing specialization and formatting" often "tailored to fit the most precise personal tastes" (Lacey, 2013, p. 15). Listeners seek affirmation of their own pre-existing political values as "an expression of a desire to have the world reflect back and echo the listening subject, either as some sort of narcissistic extension and self-confirmation, or an expression of anxiety about difference or the unknown" (Lacey, 2013, p. 15). This process reflects the information ecospheres Bongino and Shapiro have both created.

The media empires of Bongino and Shapiro are not simply about the podcast creators themselves, but the affirmative publics they have built and serve. This is seen in their dominant presence in social media spaces, particularly their placement in the top-10 in both daily Facebook shares and podcasting charts. Their discourse capitalizes on traditional right-wing politics, but they have moved beyond the populist identity originally reflected in conservative media, especially Bongino. While Shapiro tends to affirm the beliefs of more mainstream conservatives through his attacks on elite media, social welfare, and social justice, Bongino shifts the discourse from right-wing to far-right. His affirmations focus on more extreme nationalist identities and bolster the opinions of his audiences. This is exemplified by his commentary before, on, and after the January 6 insurrection. He elevated his listeners, and his listeners elevated him to the top of the podcasting charts.

Bongino's and Shapiro's podcasts transform politics into an entertaining spectacle for audiences combining the journalism of affirmation with the *journalism of assertion* in which "what were once the raw ingredients of journalism—the rumor, innuendo, allegation, accusation, charge, supposition, and hypothesis—get passed onto the audience directly" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011, p. 40). In this sense, journalistic leads become subject to speculation and are delivered directly to audiences as published content, in the process removing the importance of reporting. Bongino and Shapiro both delegitimized mainstream journalism following the January 6

Capitol insurrection. Bongino's attack was more forceful, falsely sharing information that Antifa was responsible for the rise in political violence and that Antifa was an arm of the elite, leftist press. Shapiro, while not as severe in his attack, condemned journalists for reporting on the Trump presidency with intense critical scrutiny while consistently giving Obama and Biden a free pass. In both cases, there was a reliance on speculation for the sake of assertion and audience affirmation.

This method is anathema to the *journalism of verification*, an approach steeped in documentary and interview evidence that entails thorough fact-checking prior to publication (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Instead, the journalism of assertion is prone to factual errors because "it is easier to assert misinformation" in this mode of discourse, a tendency that grows with the number of outlets practicing it as the norms of the profession shift (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011, p. 44). Because of Shapiro's reputation among the journalism community, many journalists believed his guest editing of *Politico*'s "Playbook" would lead to a lack of verification. But the fact that he was invited to serve as guest editor for *Politico* indicates Shapiro was granted some level of legitimacy by his journalistic peers. On the other hand, the journalistic community has marginalized Bongino for his journalism of assertion, even though his audience rewards him for it. Bongino's goal is to dispel the reporting of traditional journalism as a mechanism for legitimating the extreme and often unverified ideas he exposes on his show.

The two utilize exclusionary discourse to delegitimize journalism and its actors. In doing so, they both rely on journalism of affirmation to build their audiences, which in turn reinforces to their audiences that (a) traditional journalism is not legitimate and that (b) their ideologically-right version of journalism is the right journalism. The exclusionary discourse also provides cannon-fodder for Shapiro and Bongino's attachment to assertion. Shapiro's tightrope walk between attempts at ethical journalism as a right-wing pundit and his dance with disillusion and distrust in his far-right assertions make him a complicated case. While he certainly does not want to be included within the boundaries of journalism, he attempts to utilize the traditional roles and responsibilities of the institution in order to legitimize himself. In this process, he also exemplifies the journalism of assertion in an effort to delegitimize his peers. Bongino heavily depends on the tactics of assertion not only to delegitimize journalism but to advocate for the destruction of the institution entirely. The combined utilization of the journalisms of affirmation and assertion provides a looking glass into what the future holds for right-wing podcasting and, perhaps, right-wing media more broadly.

6. The Future of Right-Wing Podcasts: The Far-Right

The right-wing editor and podcaster Matthew Sheffield commented on the loss of journalistic credibility among many conservative news media producers, observing that "they don't see journalism the way that more traditional journalists do" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). Historically, this began with the populist turn in conservative media. With Fox's Murdoch at the helm, and original conservative stars like Bill O'Reilly and Limbaugh building relationships with the common man, there has continued to be a need to delegitimize the mainstream press in favor of building a coalition (Peck, 2019). What began as a need to be a place for conservative voices is now shifting from purely populist recitation toward nationalist ideologies (Peck, 2019). The shift is bolstered by a deep-seated distrust in the institutional press (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Vos & Thomas, 2018), and a need for these far-right media leaders to instead "see their media enterprise as [being] about activism and about supporting whoever is their top Republican" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). Sheffield added, "they see [this] as their duty," a dedication tracing "from the very beginning of conservative media in this country," one "heavily linked to political electioneering" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). A major challenge exists in holding right-wing media accountable, particularly in the new digital space of journalism of affirmation that drives partisan podcasting. Sheffield urged that "the funders of right-wing media need to face social business consequences for what they do" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). Ownership with doctrinaire leanings in the age of conglomeration raises the specter of figures such as Murdoch, who "has been enabling a growth of a fanatical movement in this country," according to Sheffield (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020). Conservative media owners funding far-right publications are poised "to grow radicalization over and over" (Bauman & Chakrabarti, 2020).

Conservative media ownership may not be well suited to a gatekeeping role, however, since in several instances it is indistinguishable from the on-air personalities. This increasingly self-serving system now places hosts in a supervisory role with the editorial power of a publisher, as evidenced by Dan Bongino's co-ownership of Parler and Ben Shapiro's editorial oversight of *The Daily Wire*. Rush Limbaugh's 15 million listeners per week who tuned into his three-hour per day show have been readily absorbed by Bongino, Shapiro, and Sean Hannity. This generation of podcasters is the latest remediation of conservative talk radio, particularly Limbaugh's legacy that Hannity credited for the development of Fox News (Grynbaum, 2021). The extraordinary reach of conservative media's conglomerate ownership structure, as well as the proliferation of voices in the podcast universe directly patterned after Limbaugh's, is evident in the ownership of Limbaugh's show by iHeartMedia, which also syndicates Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity's programs. The intersection between old guard talk radio and the new wave of conservative podcasting is perhaps best captured in Bongino's dedication of an entire episode to Limbaugh. In a *Fox News* interview, Bongino reprised his sentiments from that episode,

paying homage to Limbaugh and crediting him for setting the standard for conservative podcasting. Identifying the origins of contemporary conservatism in Limbaugh's show, Bongino commented that "every conservative I know…has had that Rush Limbaugh moment where they were listening and heard an idea for the first time ever" (Lanum, 2021). Acknowledging that he now works within the same space Limbaugh "created," Bongino explained that "Rush Limbaugh invented the national conservative talk radio space—he invented the game" (Wulfsohn, 2021). It is fitting, therefore, that *The Dan Bongino Show* took over Rush Limbaugh's radio time slot on May 24, 2021 (Wulfsohn, 2021).

Bongino's allusion to conservative podcasting as contiguous with "the game" of "conservative talk radio space" (Wulfsohn, 2021)—one as carefully attuned to the ideological hyperbole as to market share—captures precisely how its rhetorical conventions of caustic, pejorative attacks on rivals and overt misinformation have become normalized (Meltzer, 2020). The journalism of affirmation in this instance has fueled partisan extremism capable of inverting reality to rally support. Brian Rosenwald observed that "without Rush Limbaugh, there is no way you get from the party of George H. W. Bush to Donald Trump" (Peters, 2021). The Trump presidency—through the final stages of denial of the election result and support for the insurrectionists—could be understood as the political apotheosis of Limbaugh's legacy (Rosenwald, 2019). Over the 32 years Limbaugh was on the air, "he conditioned his audience as to what they wanted to hear and what they had an appetite for," Rosenwald explained. "And it thrilled them to hear someone who said what they might have thought, but felt uncomfortable saying" (Peters, 2021). That sense of affirmation galvanized the far-right, particularly through emotionally-charged conservative news-related podcasts, and now the mantle is carried forward by Bongino, Shapiro, and the conservative digital media infrastructures they command.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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