



**Political Media as Discursive Modes:
A Comparative Analysis of Interviews with Ron Paul from
*Meet the Press, Tonight, The Daily Show, and Hannity***

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*See the companion work to this article "Political Interviews:
Examining Perceived Media Bias and Effects Across TV Entertainment Formats"
by Lindsay Hoffman in this Special Section*

The landscape of public-affairs television continues to grow more complicated, as media producers, politicians, and citizens alike experiment with programmatic forms and generic configurations that transcend boundaries between news and entertainment, and politics and pop culture. Yet much scholarship still relies on largely obsolete distinctions inherited from an earlier media age. This study offers the concept of “discursive mode” as a complication of “genre” and a better means of conceptualizing contemporary practices and their implications. It then applies that concept to the study of one particular form of political media: the public-affairs interview. Examining interviews with the libertarian Ron Paul from four contrasting kinds of programs—*Meet the Press*, *The Tonight Show*, *Hannity*, and *The Daily Show*—this study explores the ways in which differing discursive modes meld traditions of journalistic accountability interviewing, television talk, and commercialized entertainment. It concludes by considering the implications of multiple discursive modes for the practice of politics and the study of political communication.

Over the past three election cycles, the landscape of political communication and public-affairs television has grown continuously more complicated. The wider media environment has rapidly expanded and complexified, reshaped by forces of multiplication, fragmentation, and hybridization. Economic reorganization, technological transformations, and cultural reimagination have driven creation of and experimentation with novel formats aimed at increasingly narrow and differentiated audiences. Politicians

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Date submitted: 2012–11–14

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have wider televisual resources at their disposal to make arguments, influence opinions, and build constituencies. Likewise, contemporary citizens, in their efforts to engage with, and perhaps find pleasure in, the political domain, are drawing on any number of programs and generic configurations that crisscross categories of news and entertainment, and politics and pop culture. It is apparent that public discourse is no longer contained, nor constrained, by the high-modernist institutions and discursive structures once narrowly assumed to constitute the legitimate arena for the exercise of representative politics (Baym, 2010). The nightly network news and the Sunday morning talk shows remain important sites for the articulation of politics, but these legacy media forms are increasingly complemented and complicated by new arrangements that reconsider the boundaries among entertainment, information, and advocacy.

On balance, however, much political communication scholarship still rests on assumptions derived from an older media paradigm and often falls short of adequately recognizing these foundational transformations (see Barnhurst, 2011). Scholarly research often reinvents obsolete distinctions—between news and entertainment (or hard and soft news, or “real” and “fake”), as well as between forms of politically oriented media predefined as useful or trivial, engaging or distracting. Similarly, much research continues to posit genre itself (i.e., “nightly news” or “late-night comedy”) as affording stable categories that a priori evince predictably meaningful distinctions. Nonetheless, it is increasingly necessary to recognize the impact of programmatic flux, generic recombination, and discursive integration in reshaping the nature of television and practices of political communication (Baym, 2010; Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009; Lotz, 2007; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

As an entry point into the conversation, this study focuses on one form of political media: the public-affairs interview. As much as political media have changed, the one-on-one interview remains a primary mode of political engagement. Especially during campaign season, the candidate interview is a programming staple—both a ratings draw and, at least nominally, an expression of civic responsibility, the exercise of the “classic public sphere in action” (Montgomery, 2008, p. 261). Yet *modes* of political interviewing are multiple and fluid, shaped, as is the media environment more generally, by shifting sets of dominant, residual, and emergent norms and practices (Baym, 2010; Montgomery, 2011). To explore this dynamic, this study offers an interpretive reading of contrasting but overlapping approaches to political interviewing. Specifically, I examine interviews with the same candidate—the provocative and largely marginalized Ron Paul—from four popular, but discursively distinct forms of public-affairs television. I take as a starting point Clayman and Heritage’s (2002) suggestion that “the whole manner in which the broadcast interview is conducted can be an index of much broader developments in journalism and national politics” (p. 15), both of which themselves have become contested domains, increasingly unmoored from the modernist consensus that once informed them.

Political Interviewing as Discursive Modes

The political interview has long been a central journalistic labor, a means of performing “core democratic functions” including “soliciting statements of official policy, holding officials accountable for their actions, and managing the parameters of public debate,” all under the “immediate scrutiny” of the citizenry (Clayman & Heritage, 2002, p. 2). The candidate interview in particular has been seen as a significant part of the democratic process, one in which “the journalist’s watchdog role is apt to be

particularly prominent" (Clayman & Romaniuk, 2011, p. 16). In turn, considerable scholarly attention has focused on the traditional candidate interview, which is largely understood as a rule-governed social exchange: simultaneously an institutional forum for mass communication with an overhearing audience, and an interpersonal interaction limited by narrowly prescribed roles for interviewer and interviewee. Clayman and Heritage (2002) define the "prototypical news interview," a form of speech marked by adherence to a strict question-and-answer format and the clear taking of verbal turns. In place of the potentially unruly give-and-take of most everyday talk, the interviewer is expected to maintain a posture of dispassionate neutrality, while the lexical options open to the interviewee are limited to answering the specific questions asked.

Perhaps like the mythic "real" news, the prototypical interview is difficult to find on contemporary U.S. television. However, its parameters provide a starting point for analysis of traditional interviewing forms, as well as of the "plethora" of emerging "quasi-news interview formats" that emulate the prototypical interview, "but with a twist of one sort or another" (Clayman & Heritage, 2002, p. 339). These twists include the wider turn toward "conversationalization" that has decreased both the formality of journalistic speech and the distance between news and more popular, entertaining forms of television talk (Fairclough, 1995), as well as the more complicated mixing of generic expectations and techniques within and across interviewing forms. Thus David Letterman may not be wrong in borrowing a familiar journalistic trope to insist "the road to the White House runs through me" (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 2008).

Some have bemoaned the rise of infotainment or "soft news," worried that such sources of information fall well short of the normative expectations of the Fourth Estate. Ekstrom (2011), however, argues that hybridity is "a main trend" across the landscape of political television talk. As news and entertainment genres blend in any number of combinations, interviewing practices themselves—of both hard and soft varieties—are exploring broader ranges of interactional techniques, expanded lexical repertoires, and mixed frames of talk. Perhaps with that in mind, Jones (2010) suggests that *most* forms of television interviewing are, at their root, hybrid. Indeed, all public-affairs interview programs are also television shows, the vast majority of which are interested, to varying degrees, in both the exercise of democratic publicity and the commercial profit earned by selling eyeballs to advertisers.

De Smedt and Vandenbrande (2011) insightfully argue that television interviewers tasked with "a multitude of institutional roles" are expected to pursue "traditional journalistic norms" while also acting "as competent media professionals, knowing all the tricks of the broadcasting trade" and serving the needs of "a market logic" (p. 75). The journalist-cum-television host must function as show producer—format manager responsible for on-set direction, timing, and pace—and as narrator, charged with structuring the interview's narrative flow. The interviewer's job thus is both to solicit information and "to maintain momentum, make interruptions, build tension, provoke conflict, and bring discussions to a close at predetermined moments" (p. 77). In the contemporary landscape, this integration of institutional roles runs in both directions: While television journalists must perform as media producers entrusted with aesthetic and market goals, so too are television entertainers increasingly assuming and adapting journalistic identities to serve a range of purposes.

In turn, politics and public discourse themselves are refracted through this multifaceted media prism. Modes of interviewing are constituent and constitutive of the wider play of discourses defining the current media age. Elsewhere, I have described the phenomenon of *discursive integration*—not simply the hybridization of speech genres and program formats, but a more fundamental “way of speaking about, understanding, and acting within the world defined by the permeability of form and the fluidity of content” (Baym, 2005, p. 262). To borrow from Bakhtin (1986), media forms themselves can be understood as “socio-verbal formations” that offer particular viewpoints on the world they speak of, “each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values” (p. 292). The slippage among them therefore attests not simply to the degradation of serious news into banal infotainment (or the converse, the interjection of politics into previously nonpolitical spaces), but rather to a more profound struggle between what Bakhtin called “different linguistic consciousnesses” (p. 358)—competing discursive configurations offering differing modes of conceptualizing the purpose of publicity and articulating the nature of the political.

Parameters of Study

To explore the complexifying range of public-affairs interviewing, this study examines interviews with Ron Paul, conducted in the same time frame—during the run-up to the Iowa caucus, where Paul was polling surprisingly well—but on four contrasting kinds of public-affairs television. Although largely overlooked by the mainstream news media, Paul appeared on NBC’s Sunday morning *Meet the Press* (*MTP*) on October 23, 2011. Airing regularly since its inception in 1947, *MTP* invokes the legacy of the network era and its high-modern journalistic paradigm—the now residual professionally minded ideal of news as the democratic exercise of critical publicity. For Clayman and Heritage (2002), *MTP* was an exemplar of the prototypical news interview. By contrast, NBC’s *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* evokes the glitter of network television entertainment and the commercialized approach to celebrity chat once assumed to be entirely distinct from the network’s news division. Some see the increasingly important role *Tonight* plays in national political discourse as an indicator of the transcendence of postmodern infotainment, the dominant paradigm of spectacle and story that has largely supplanted older assumptions of news-as-critical-inquiry. Paul appeared on *Tonight* on December 17, 2011.

On 24-hour cable news, Fox’s *Hannity* offers another version of postmodern infotainment: a rawly partisan and entirely market-driven form of celebrity punditry marked by a deep-seated epistemological relativism, privileging opinion over reason, volume over logic, and “believable fictions” over the empirically verified (see Jones, 2009). Host Sean Hannity interviewed Paul several times in the early days of campaign 2012, including on October 24, 2011, the day after Paul’s appearance on *MTP*. Paul had made his third appearance on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (*TDS*) a month earlier. Although *TDS* is often mistaken for a liberal version of conservative punditry or a slightly more serious brand of late-night comedy, it may be better understood as an emergent form of journalistic television. In the vanguard of a “neo-modern” paradigm of public affairs, the program harnesses postmodern textual poaching and aesthetic play in pursuit of distinctly modernist ideals of rational-critical inquiry and democratic accountability (Baym, 2010; see also Baym, 2007). A condensed version of Jon Stewart’s interview with Paul aired on September 26; the unedited version remains available on the show’s website.

In all of these interviews, Paul functions as a kind of control variable. Although different program formats and questioning styles focus on various aspects of his political perspective, that perspective itself remains quite consistent. Paul has long occupied an anomalous position in Republican politics. Ultimately a fringe player, he is nevertheless sufficiently enduring and popular to have earned a place on the national stage and a measure of attention from the news media. In turn, he has continually tried to advance what he calls “the message”—a complicated political stance the media have found difficult to pigeonhole.

By his own logic, Paul seeks largely to undo the 20th-century approach to governance, which he calls the “welfare/warfare state” (Paul, 2011). He advocates eliminating income tax, returning monetary policy to the gold standard, ending social entitlements, and undoing regulation. At the same time, he speaks out against the military-industrial complex and an interventionist foreign policy he blames for U.S. tension with the Islamic world. Finally, he supports civil liberties on a host of social issues, including abortion rights and the legalization of drugs. Paul, who seems well aware that this amalgam of stances chafes against the hegemonic left-right binary that overdetermines U.S. politics, has explained that his goal is to spark discussion about foundational political principles.

The Paul interviews thus provide fertile ground to explore differing interviewing modes and the contrasting “linguistic consciousnesses” they articulate. I do not claim that the four cases selected for analysis here represent the totality of interviewing modes available on television. Explicitly feminine-inflected talk shows such as ABC’s *The View* provide yet other models of political talk, and indeed, Ron Paul appeared on that program during his campaign; however, that interview fell outside the time frame under exploration here. To make sense of the interviews conducted in fall 2011, the analytic effort proceeds on three interwoven levels, exploring the interviews’ *programmatic form*; their patterns of *language use* and *interactional techniques*; and their primary *interpretive frames*, the assumptions they advance about the project of politics and the purpose of publicity. Taken together, these factors give shape not necessarily to four different genres of television, but rather to four distinct discursive modes: what I label *interrogation*, *celebration*, *confrontation*, and *conversation*. Each of these offers a competing mode for understanding and engaging with politics. The discussion here concludes by considering the implications for political media, democratic discourse, and practices of citizenship.

Meet the Press: Interrogation

In any television interview, the verbal interaction is embedded within a programmatic form. In particular, the set design literally establishes the field of interaction, shaping the performance and its discursive edges. The set of *MTP* soundly locates the interview within a high-modern journalistic paradigm. Its array of glass, hardwood, and polished stone connotes institutional power, suggesting a space of serious exchange focused on decisions of public importance. The bookshelves lining the wall behind the interviewee represent epistemic authority—a familiar television technique that visualizes expertise through strategic placement of hardbound volumes. Interviewer and interviewee are starkly divided by a strong visual line that begins as the white desk separating them and continues up the wall in the shape of a Grecian column, invoking the weighty responsibility of the democratic state. This semiotic frame is made more explicit in the literal framing of host David Gregory, who is flanked by the program’s “Meet the Press” logo on one side and a wall-sized video monitor displaying the national Thomas Jefferson Memorial

on the other. Gregory is thus symbolically anchored to the Jeffersonian ideal of the *press* as democratic agent, an institution whose "meeting" exposes one to the critical light of public scrutiny.

Situated as agent of the Fourth Estate, Gregory briefly welcomes Paul to the program and immediately delves into the business of the exchange. "Let's get right to your plan," he says, forgoing any display of sociability, the suggestion that this is anything but an institutional exchange. For the benefit of the overhearing audience, he summarizes Paul's "Plan to Restore America," explaining, "the key element of it is you want to cut a trillion dollars of spending," primarily by eliminating the departments of "Energy, Housing and Urban Development, Commerce, Interior, *and* Education." Gregory's stressing of the conjunction "and" reveals his disapproval of the scope of Paul's plan and immediately puts Paul on the defensive. From there, he sets up his first question by playing a sound bite in which Paul asserts: "I have a personal conviction that this won't hurt anybody." Gregory then initiates the questioning: "How is that possible that a draconian cut like this won't hurt anybody?" Before Paul has said a word, the fundamental approach of the exchange is established. The question, and the entire interview, is grounded in the presupposition that Paul is draconian, perhaps dangerous, and it is Gregory's responsibility to hold Paul accountable to his words and to the potential consequences of his policy proposals. After Paul argues that massive budget cuts would enrich the American people, Gregory asks again: "Nobody gets hurt under President Paul's plan?"

An on-screen graphic suggests the purpose of the interview is to "Meet the Candidate," but this is hardly the social exchange the word "meet" suggests. Rather, Gregory is engaged in the critical work of exposing Paul for public view. Here *MTP* illustrates the traditional accountability interview, in which the journalist exerts pressure on those who hold or seek power to explain their actions and justify their words (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Clayman & Romaniuk, 2011; Montgomery, 2008). With Paul, Gregory's primary questioning strategy is to recite or play back for him prior statements that strain the boundaries of the discursive status quo. In so doing, Gregory reveals the tension in accountability interviewing between journalistic neutrality and adversariness, a porous boundary-line that, at least with Paul, he readily crosses. The interview becomes interrogation, with Gregory functioning as disciplinary agent, the prosecutor who positions Paul as defendant in the court of public opinion.

For example, Gregory takes issue with Paul's insistence that Israel would face little danger from a nuclear-armed Iran:

- Gregory:* You said in 2000 that the prospect of Iran attacking Israel was like the prospect of it invading Mars.
- Paul:* I didn't use those words, but essentially that might be . . .
- Gregory:* [interrupting] Right. No, you actually did. I checked the transcript.
- Paul:* Mars?
- Gregory:* Yeah.
- Paul:* OK.

Gregory here claims the same informational expertise underlying the high-modern paradigm. "I checked the transcript," he explains, justifying his epistemological authority to explain the actual and insist on *what is*. "The reality is," he continues, "the biggest existential threat Israel faces is from Iran." Here Gregory shifts from holding Paul accountable to his words ("Mars?") to challenging him with assertions about the nature of reality. This approach is *assertoric*, the offering of questions in the form of statements that stake out a claim on the real and demand a response (Montgomery, 2008).

Using his power as interviewer to trump the turn-taking system at the root of the traditional interview, Gregory regularly interrupts Paul. He similarly begins several questions with the contrarian contraction *but*. One sees both of these in their exchange over Paul's stance on government intervention in the housing crisis. Paul insists that government involvement in the mortgage industry "created the monster" and distorted the market. To that, Gregory interrupts:

- Gregory:* But play that through, Dr. Paul, because it's really quite jarring. There is no private market right now for mortgages.
- Paul:* Oh no, that's not true.
- Gregory:* Are you going to wind down these companies?
- Paul:* Sure.
- Gregory:* [talking over Paul] Who would buy them?
- Paul:* Well, put 'em up . . .
- Gregory:* [again talking over Paul] What happens to housing prices? To the housing market?
- Paul:* Well, the system would be cleansed. It would be over and done with by now. But all we . . .
- Gregory:* [interrupting again] You say cleansed. So the market would crash again, and you think that's acceptable?

Paul struggles to speak, as Gregory maintains the floor and treats Paul's efforts to answer his questions as themselves interruptive. Here, the exchange has more in common with the style of "belligerent" interviewing common on cable news (see Hutchby, 2011) than the tradition of public-service journalism. The latter may have been built on journalistic skepticism, the underlying question of "why is this lying bastard lying to me?" (Clayman & Heritage, 2002, p. 31), but Gregory's stance is more a variation of "are you kidding me?" His exasperation with Paul is clear in both the content of his words and the stridency of his tone.

Gregory challenges Paul with unverifiable assertions ("the markets would crash again"), but most revealingly, he asks questions that are not intended to be answered. He wonders (a) if Paul would "wind down" the mortgage companies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, (b) who might buy them, and (c) what the effect *would be* on housing prices. Not waiting for an answer, Gregory profoundly deviates from the core principle of interviewing: that the question is designed to solicit a response. Instead, the purpose here is to pin Paul to the underlying premise—that Paul represents a public danger. As such, the questions function to validate themselves, and indeed, Gregory's wider adversarial stance.

To be sure, Gregory lets Paul speak for the vast majority of the interview. Gregory, though, remains in complete control, determining when Paul speaks, and how he is allowed to speak. If Gregory is free to violate the turn-taking, question-and-answer format, the same is not true for Paul. Although he largely abides by the rules, Paul does, at one point, try to refashion the exchange from interrogation toward something more conversational. Gregory had asked about the use of unmanned drones in Afghanistan, which Paul asserts is illegal and counterproductive:

There's no authority in our constitution that we can just willy nilly drop bombs on anyone we want. We kill innocent people this way. Why do you think people hate us? . . . What would we do if they did that to us, David? We would be a little upset if China did that to us, wouldn't we?

Paul violates the rules of interviewing, questioning Gregory, and even appealing to him through use of his first name. In turn, Gregory disregards the questions and their conversational inflection, bluntly shifting to the next question on his list.

In this example, and throughout the interview, Gregory often pays little attention to Paul's answers. More than once, Paul offers provocative claims, at one point insisting that "we're witnessing . . . the failure of a Keynesian economic model, and we have to replace it with something. We either replace it with more government and more authoritarianism, and more controls, or we look toward the free market," and later arguing that "income tax is based on the assumption that the government owns you . . . that, to me, is immoral." In neither instance does Gregory follow up on Paul's claims, asking for clarification or questioning his logic. Instead he responds with narrowly constructed questions about specific policy stances.

Thus although Gregory interrogates Paul, he is unwilling to talk with him or explore the deeper philosophical questions Paul would want to discuss. This point is at its most acute early in the exchange, when Paul answers Gregory's first question by explaining: "The question I ask myself is 'what should the role of government be?'" Gregory rejects the line of thinking (and indeed, Paul's right to question himself), instead returning to questions about specific policy. Later in the interview, however, he unwittingly echoes Paul, and says, "Let me ask you about the role of government." Perhaps he avoided the issue when Paul raised it because he had a scripted question intended for later in the interview. Or perhaps he was uninterested in that kind of discussion. Indeed, he immediately follows with a narrow question about the tax code.

This may be consistent with Clayman and Romniuk's (2011) observation that candidate interviews rarely explore the interviewee's ideology in abstract, philosophical terms, and are instead limited to discussing concrete policy choices. That approach, however, is indicative of an absence of dialogue. Although Gregory is successful in exposing aspects of Paul's politics to public view, the interview-as-interrogation eliminates the possibility of a discursive exchange capable of transcending the hegemonic patterns of political sense-making, that is, the "inside-the-beltway political epistemology" (Jones, 2010, p. 46) that rejects deliberation in favor of antagonism. The abrasiveness of the Paul interview—that another marker of contemporary television accountability interviews—too easily risks

slipping into cynicism (Montgomery, 2011), an overarching despair that politics is simply a “dastardly business” better left alone (see Hart, 1998).

Tonight: Celebration

If on *MTP*, politics is an exercise in abrasion, on *Tonight* it is a joy. “I enjoy having this gentleman on,” says Jay Leno, introducing Paul. “Whether you agree with him or not, one of the things you can’t do [*chuckling*] is call him a flip-flopper. That’s what I like about this guy. He’s consistent. Please welcome, *Dr. Ron Paul!*” As does the live audience, Leno stands up clapping as Paul enters the stage. Theatrical pageantry defines the scene as the house band plays a riff, chanting “Ron Paul” on every beat, all while the audience cheers in supportive delight. If the audience for the news interview is indirect—unmentioned and unheard—here it is an active participant. This crowd, in particular, is rabidly pro-Paul, cheering his every statement. “Oh,” says Leno, acknowledging the outpouring of goodwill, “a standing ovation!” He then asks his first question: “If you win, do they all get to come to the inauguration?” Paul answers “absolutely,” and Leno waves his hand at the audience, and proclaims “There you go!” As they do throughout the interview, the people in the audience roar in approval.

From the start, the interview conforms to the expectation that late-night chat provides politicians a supportive environment in which they face few difficult questions (Baum, 2005). Unlike on *MTP*, the emphasis is on sociability—good-natured interaction between celebrity personalities. Leno begins by explaining what he “like[s] about this guy,” and concludes the interview with a warm “Good luck, my friend.” Whether the two are actually friends is doubtful, but the distinction from journalistic interviewing is clear. There, interviewer and interviewee are supposed to bracket any interpersonal connection—the exchange is considered a matter of public significance, not personal affection.

In further contrast to *MTP*, Leno presents himself not as institutional agent, but as everyman. For example, he begins by asking Paul to explain where he stands in the Iowa polls. Claiming no epistemic authority, Leno calls on Paul to supply the kind of factual information the journalist would normally lay claim to, implicitly suggesting that he himself does not know, or that it is not his role *to* know. Likewise, he asks about the Republican primary debates, and particularly Paul’s “lone wolf” status on foreign policy. “I was watching the other night,” he explains, “they’re all kind of going after you there. Tell me about that.” Leno suggests that he, like many in the audience, was *watching* the debates. Gregory, of course, moderated one.

Leno’s questioning style further constructs his everyman persona. Although his questions are scripted, his delivery is slow -- he appears to carefully put his words together, as if he doesn’t know what exactly he’s trying to say. In word choice, he draws readily from the vernacular. On foreign policy, he asks simply: “This whole Arab Spring thing?” On the topic of the corporate tax rate, he says, “Of course, everybody is ‘ooh, evil corporations,’ but what would you lower it to, and why?” And on income tax, he sets up the question of whether Paul’s desire to eliminate the IRS is ultimately realistic by first recalling the recent health care debate. “I mention it,” he explains, “because President Obama said, ‘if I get elected I want to do this health care thing,’ and boy, that just looked like boom boom, fighting fighting.” Here Leno mimics a boxer, hunched shoulders and clenched fists, throwing imaginary punches. “How hard

would that be?" Employing a range of intonations and physical gestures, Leno demonstrates a wider lexical repertoire than Gregory, "mixed frames" of talk that blend "informal socializing, personal experiences, jokes and everyday-like conversation" with serious questioning (Ekstrom, 2011, p. 136).

To be sure, Leno asks a number of serious questions about taxation, civil liberties, and foreign policy. He also directly engages, as Gregory does not, with Paul's underlying political philosophy. "What role," he asks, "should the federal government play in people's lives?" After Paul explains his theory of limited federal power, Leno then raises the question of states' rights, a central element of Paul's philosophy that was elided on *MTP*. "Elaborate on states' rights," he asks. "What did they used to be able to do that they can't do? What should they be able to do?" This may not be traditional journalism, but neither is it the human-interest fluff usually expected from late-night talk.

The substance of the interview, however, is folded into the larger televisual performance. Leno well understands the formal demands of his role and the market agenda of his program. Leading in to the first advertising break, Leno offers what the industry calls a "teaser"—a promise of alluring content still to come. "We're going to take a break," he tells Paul. "When we come back, I want to ask you about legalizing drugs. Your plan. Is it either you're for it, or you're for states being able to do it. But don't tell me now; we'll answer that when we come back." He then turns to the camera and exclaims, "More with Dr. Paul, right after this!" Leno asks a quite insightful question, but immediately explains that he's not actually asking the question—or rather, that he will ask again it after the advertisements. For some in his fan base, Paul's stance on drug legalization is one of the more appealing parts of his platform. Here Leno raises the issue as much for its consumer appeal—its ability to hold the audience's attention—as for its informational content.

After the break, Leno again asks the question, and the two engage in a brief but interesting exchange on law and civil liberty. Paul insists the federal government ideally should "protect our right to do to our bodies what we want." As the crowd cheers, Leno counters: "Even if it's harmful to us?" This is one of the few moments where Leno pushes back, however slightly, against Paul's staunch libertarian views. He does the same thing on the question of environmental protection ("I mean if one state is allowed to pollute and another state isn't, and then it blows over into that state. Isn't it good to have certain things that everybody, as a country, we should agree on?") and relations with Israel ("We Americans, we don't like to see the little guy get picked on, and they're our friend, and it seems like we *should* be helping them"). On balance, however, Leno is deferential, providing an open platform for Paul to espouse his views without critical response.

Leno often interjects supportive utterances or "acknowledgment tokens" (e.g., "yeah," "sure," "right"), which pepper everyday speech but are generally disallowed in political interviewing out of concern that they function to unduly affirm the interviewee's positions (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Montgomery, 2008). In other instances, Leno, like Gregory, simply does not respond to Paul's more provocative claims. For example, when Leno asks what would happen to government revenue if income taxes were eliminated, Paul casually suggests it would be "where it was before 1913." Leno avoids any consideration of the implications of Paul's suggestion that government revenue should fall to pre-World War I levels, and instead nods along with Paul's assertion that either "the people" lose "their appetite for big government"

or “we’ll continue on until we’re totally bankrupt and our currency fails.” Magnified by the audience’s cheering, Leno’s emphasis on cordiality—his rejection of adversariness—translates into celebratory endorsement.

This point becomes acutely clear at the end of the interview, when as is customary on *Tonight*, Paul moves over a chair to make way for the next guest, the comedian and reality television host Joe Rogan. Rogan enters wearing a Ron Paul t-shirt, about which Leno notes, “obviously a Ron Paul fan.” Rogan proclaims: “Huge, huge Ron Paul fan.” Leno then asks Rogan to explain “what part of his platform” he likes, and Rogan replies: “Every single thing that comes out of his mouth, I go, yeah, yeah, finally! When he talks about the gold standard, when he talks about civil liberties, when he talks—everything he says, you know.” With a backdrop of continuous roaring from the audience, the scene ends where it began, in a well-staged pep rally.

The *Tonight* interview is a hybrid form, mixing serious concerns about government, economy, and civil liberty with joyous and banal televisual spectacle. Its melding of politics with pop culture and policy with pleasure may work toward bridging the divide between lifeworld and system-world, rescuing the political from the nasty business it appears to be on *MTP*. Indeed, Paul himself voices the guiding ethos of the interview when Leno asks him about gay marriage. His preference, he says, would be to “stop all this arguing.” The crowd again cheers, and Leno smiles approvingly, but however appealing the notion, the can’t-we-all-get-along approach to political discourse here slides quickly into hollow promotion, indivisible from the commercial spectacle of much postmodern publicity.

Hannity: Confrontation

Sean Hannity’s interview with Paul presents an equally hybrid, but distinctly different discursive blend. Interestingly, it begins with a clip from Paul’s *MTP* appearance the day before. Despite Fox News’ frequent attacks on NBC as exemplar of “the liberal media,” here *MTP* is used to authorize *Hannity*, linking his mediation of the political with the high-modern legacy of serious journalism. The suggestion is that *Hannity* and *MTP* are of the same ilk—rational-critical attempts to interrogate politicians and policy. *Hannity*, however, melds the appearance of accountability interviewing with the kind of argumentative and confrontational exchanges common to conservative talk radio, to create an infotainment-inflected take on political interviewing, overtly opinionated and unbounded by journalistic norms of impartiality (Hutchby, 2011).

Like Gregory, Hannity begins with reference to Paul’s “Plan to Restore America.” Consider, however, his first question:

When you laid out your plan, I mean here we’ve got, you know, at the end of this last budget deal it’s gonna be 16.7 trillion dollars in debt. We’re robbing from our kids and grandkids. . . . You’ve come up with a pretty, with a plan I actually support. You want to cut a trillion dollars. How fast can you do it? Where would that money come from?

Here one sees several markers of Hannity's style. He uses vernacular language loosely ("I mean" and "you know"), throws out nuggets of fact divorced from context, and, most importantly, uses both to establish the assertions upon which every question is based. Throughout the interview, Hannity asserts the problem in ideologically laced terms ("robbing from our kids"), offers his own preferred solution, and then expects Paul to confirm and conform to those assertions. In this instance, though, Paul does not answer the questions as asked, instead delving into a philosophical meditation on the dangers of government. For his part, Hannity is less interested in contemplation than in platitudes, and rephrases his question: "How quickly do you think you could knock off a trillion in spending?"

Both the accountability interview and what Hutchby (2011) has described as Hannity's "non-neutral" approach position the host as champion of the audience. The latter element, however, reveals a more extreme, unmitigated foregrounding of the interviewer's agency. Whereas the accountability interview focuses on the interviewee, here the emphasis falls primarily on Hannity himself. That he "actually" supports Paul's plan is the guiding sentiment of the opening line of questions. For the rest of the exchange, however, Hannity confronts Paul about their differences. "Here's my one area of disagreement with you," he suggests, challenging Paul's stance on foreign policy. As with the topic of spending, Hannity's question is grounded in his opinion. "I, I, I look at what's happened in Libya," he says, "and I look at, I don't think this president thinks through what he's doing. . . . I'm worried about Islamic extremism." Telling Paul that "you seem to believe that we're causing it by being involved in any way," he asks if Paul's approach is akin to "putting our head in the sand in terms of extremists who are ready, have had a desire to kill us, and have shown so?" In comparison to David Gregory's institutional identity, Hannity's repeated use of the pronoun *I* is noticeable, as is the ease with which he conflates *I* with *us*, and claims he speaks for the latter. Indeed, in further contrast to *MTP* and *Tonight*, Hannity's own words take up nearly as much time as he allows Paul.

Remarkably, the questions on spending and foreign policy are the only policy questions Hannity asks in the interview. Together, they frame the real purpose of the exchange, which is, as Hannity explains, a "question of a personal nature." Clearly displaying the fundamental personalization of his approach, Hannity confronts Paul over an earlier comment of Paul's, in which he accused Hannity and other right-wing talk show hosts of misrepresenting themselves, and making "their livelihood fooling the people into thinking that they're the real leaders of limited government." In response, Hannity launches into an extended monologue of self-defense, insisting on his conservative credentials:

You know, I have said for years, that I think you have been somebody that has been, you know, out there, warning of the dangers of big government, and the Fed. I'm not a fan of Bernanke, I'm not a fan of Tim Geithner, I'm not a fan of monetary policy in this country, I think we can do a lot better, I've said this for years . . . I'm thinking, I agree with you on cutting a trillion . . . I think that Republicans spend too much money, and this president is four times worse.

All this is setup for the actual question: "So," he asks, "*where did that statement come from?*" (emphasis in original). If the accountability interview can provoke strong emotion from the interviewee, here the interviewer himself engages in "belligerent and emotionally heightened" confrontation (Hutchby,

2011, p. 351). When Paul tries to ameliorate Hannity's anger, Hannity interrupts. "That's a direct attack *against me*," he says, pointing with both hands to his own chest. Monopolizing the floor, he continues his self-defense for another 30 seconds before concluding: "So I thought, I thought, that charge was unfair."

Abruptly changing the subject to foreign policy ("we'll move on from me"), Hannity refuses to let Paul explain his logic—that Hannity's hawkish support for continuously increased military spending is fundamentally at odds with a philosophy of limited government. That point, of course, could be deeply threatening to Hannity's character as anti-government crusader, a narrative identity foundational to his multimillion-dollar personal brand, a media empire that includes revenue streams from radio, television, and books. The purpose of this interview, therefore, has little to do with accountability goals of soliciting information or exposing the interviewee to public scrutiny. Instead, Paul is a foil for the Hannity character, a tool to be used ultimately for *brand management*. Hannity's question for Paul lies not with the substance of Paul's philosophy, or the implications of his policy, but rather with the threat both pose to his own heroic identity.

On *Hannity*, politicians and policies both are filtered through Hannity's style of identity politics. The measure of Paul is the extent to which he conforms to Hannity's rigid expectations. Like the broader play of cultural politics, of which Hannity is a constituent piece, the discourse here represents the political as a zero-sum game: one side's advancement necessitates the other's defeat; one is either *with me* or *against me*. And yet, at the same time, Hannity is marked by deep inconsistencies. On foreign policy, for example, Hannity proclaims that Paul's opposition to military intervention in the Middle East is his "one area of disagreement" with him. As Paul tries to make his case, Hannity snipes at him and interrupts argumentatively. Surprisingly, however, he ultimately tries to silence Paul by announcing "I agree with you." Paul is thrown off balance, but continues his argument, and Hannity interrupts once again, smugly insisting "I agree. I'm with you." Directly contradicting himself, Hannity reveals the deeper postmodern indeterminacy that underlies his speech, the disconnect between words and meaning, statement and intention, that undermines the premise of rational-critical accountability and relocates political talk into the domain of emotive spectacle.

The Daily Show: Conversation

Ron Paul's interview on *TDS*, marked by continually shifting frames of talk, displays the broadest lexical repertoire of the four. Like Leno, Stewart begins with an expression of interpersonal warmth. He greets Paul: "Nice to see you. Are you feeling the love from the people?" Paul answers that first question with a chuckle: "All of the time, especially the media. They really love me." From the start, Paul himself stakes out a different discursive space, offering his own style of ironic humor. If an unwritten rule of journalistic interviewing requires the interviewee to remain in serious and literal voice, on *TDS* Paul can deviate from that expectation and express multiple dimensions of his public identity (see Baym, 2007; Ekstrom, 2011). As Stewart often does, Paul uses humor here to establish an air of camaraderie and articulate a critique: that, despite giving considerable coverage to the likes of Herman Cain and Michele Bachmann, the media had been largely dismissive of his candidacy.

Delving into the kind of meta media criticism that is entirely absent in most interview forms, the first five minutes of the *TDS* segment focus on this question. "I'm a threat to the establishment," Paul suggests, foreshadowing his confrontation with Hannity: "They don't understand the message." At this point Stewart asks few questions, instead offering a series of jokes about how Paul could bolster his image, including "flip-flopping" to appeal to a news media for whom "consistency" is "a real problem." Blending humor with argument, Stewart then shifts into the purely banal, showing a number of Photoshopped images of Paul's head superimposed on other politicians' bodies, including a leather-clad Sarah Palin. With Stewart no longer asking questions or expecting response, the audience laughs and Paul simply sits in silence. Here Stewart seems to engage in another variation of the vacuous aesthetic play characteristic of much postmodern political talk. But the move is intentional, an extended introduction that precedes the serious turn. "Here's what we're going to do," Stewart explains, shifting frames. "We're going to go to commercial and when we come back . . . we'll get into it a little bit deeper."

Like Leno, Stewart follows the break with Paul's stance on drug legalization. First, though, he explains: "There's so much of what you say that appeals, and then, I always feel like, you know 'Ron Paul he's really telling it like it is,' and then you'll go one step, and I'll go like 'oh, Ron, no!'" A touch of *Hannity* is apparent here, at least to the extent that Stewart's performance is grounded in his personal opinions. He functions as interpretive guide, providing the lens through which we are to understand Paul. But unlike on *Hannity*, that work is based in good-natured respect. Stewart begins from a position of *appeal* and then shifts to critical standpoint. As the conversation unfolds, Paul argues that personal responsibility trumps federal law. Recalling his own youth working in a pharmacy, he explains that codeine was available over the counter, but "I don't remember any of my friends drinking codeine to get high!" Here Stewart exclaims in joking disbelief: "I could introduce you to some of my friends! To be honest with you, you and I run in very different circles." Stewart's interjection of humor provides a dynamic shift in voice, but more importantly functions to frame his differences with Paul humorously, challenging him without appearing confrontational.

Most interestingly, this exchange does not appear on television. Unlike on *Tonight*, where Leno teases the issue of drug legalization to maintain audience interest, on *TDS* the segment is edited out of the televised interview but preserved in the unedited version online. Although *TDS* is a for-profit, advertising-based commodity, market logic here appears to play a less influential role in shaping the content of the interview itself. Instead, the rest of the exchange is a serious discussion of political philosophy: a conversation about libertarian principles and the tension between free market and government regulation.

Thoughtfully exploring what is elided in the traditional accountability interview, Stewart shifts into rational-critical voice to engage Paul in reasonable debate over the ideal role of government. Advocating effective regulation and a social safety net, Stewart nevertheless acknowledges Paul's counterarguments and affirms them when they are sound. "Good point," he says, to Paul's suggestion that "the people I know in Washington quite frankly aren't capable of telling you what to do." But he also challenges the deeper logic of Paul's positions. "Does the failure of government to protect adequately make it a failure of government having that responsibility?" he asks. "Does their inability to do it effectively, make it so they

shouldn't do it?" Unlike the other three interviewers, Stewart presses Paul on principles and asks him to explain and justify claims that the others were content to leave unexamined.

Paul, for example, insists that in the absence of government, the market would self-regulate. Specifically, he argues, the housing crisis would have been avoided "because you cannot commit fraud, you cannot steal, you cannot hurt people . . . in a true libertarian society, you have to be responsible." Only here does Paul reach the crux of the question he would have us consider—the theoretical debate over the best way to structure the "good society." Whereas Gregory and Hannity show no interest in this question and Leno offers no counterargument, Stewart challenges him. "When you say that," he asks, "has that ever been tried?" The studio audience laughs, but rather than bask in the affirmation, Stewart talks over the laughter. "It's an honest question," he says reassuringly. Invoking context, he continues: "It's hard for people who know the history of the industrial revolution to feel like that is in any way not a pipe dream." The audience cheers, and Stewart quickly adds, "I don't mean that as disrespect to the idea." Paul replies that there has never been a "perfect" libertarian society, "but has socialism or authoritarianism ever been perfect? No. It's horrible, you lose all your freedoms that way." Here Paul echoes another comment he made on *MTP*, equating government regulation with tyranny. But unlike Gregory, who ignores the suggestion, Stewart questions it. "Is that our choice?" he asks, rejecting the dichotomy "between authoritarianism and tyranny, or a free market that we must trust," and arguing instead for a government committed to protecting the public good.

To that, Paul jokes that government is like pregnancy—that one never has "just a touch of pregnancy," and that a "little income tax" inevitably grows into "a monster." Despite his opposition to Paul's argument, Stewart laughs at the joke, keeping the discussion grounded in the affable. Similarly, Paul acknowledges Stewart's desire for regulatory constraints. Making a point he does not express elsewhere, he explains, "We have no prohibition against the state. If you sort of like this stuff, let [Mayor] Bloomberg write all the regulation." Here Stewart bursts out laughing. "So, oppression is not OK for the federal level," he exclaims, "but if your state wants to oppress you!" Neither question nor assertion, Stewart's comment is a hybrid mode of speech—a humorous exclamation that exposes inconsistencies in Paul's argument and invites critical assessment, but does so in a way that does not force Paul onto the defensive. And indeed, Paul immediately clarifies his logic, arguing, "you have more control if it's local," a point Stewart affirms with a conversational "right, right, right."

At the interview's close, Stewart returns to his sociable standpoint. "It's great to see you," he tells Paul, "I always enjoy our conversations." Here Stewart offers a label for his approach to public-affairs interviewing. Having long said his goal is to "improve the conversation" (Baym, 2010), he seeks to enact a more deliberative model of political exchange, a reasonable dialogue built on civility and mutual respect. With Paul, he performs as neither journalist nor pundit, but citizen. Bolstered by his televisual appeal, his claim to authority ultimately rests on his command of fact and facility with logic—not on his institutional weight, nor ideological bluster, but rather on what Habermas has called the *unforced force* of the better argument.

Conclusion

Despite their common guest, the four modes of interviewing function in notably different ways. They offer multiple discursive resources, each of which complicates assumptions about the boundaries of genre and the relationship between particular genres and political practice. To varying degrees, all four are hybrid forms, offering differing articulations of accountability interviewing, public talk, and televisual entertainment. Together they reject black-and-white differentiations between news and entertainment, information and spectacle, and public goods and commercial products. They further call into question facile assumptions about which kinds of media genres can a priori be taken as serious markers of political engagement, and which can be dismissed as distraction.

Instead, it may be more useful to assess each discursive mode in terms of what Williams and Delli Carpini (2012) have described as *political relevance*—the extent to which any specific instance of media, irrespective of genre, facilitates understanding of, deliberation about, and intervention in public life (p. 122). Different modes may variously enable or constrain engagement, not only with the issues and debates of the day but also with the institutions and processes that structure the political field, as well as the foundational ideals that motivate political action in the first instance. The concept of political relevance points in turn to both the informational resources offered by different discursive modes, and the roles these modes play in modeling political interaction—the ways, that is, they themselves enact civic engagement (p. 309).

Conforming most clearly to the expectations of public-affairs interviewing defined in an earlier media age, *MTP* may be assumed to be the most politically relevant of the four. Indeed, it is explicitly the most “journalistic”—the most focused on specific policy stances and the issues that comprise the current mainstream political agenda. At the same time, however, *MTP*’s discourse of interrogation is fundamentally hostile and argumentative. It is largely an attempt to “nail” Paul, in the sense of both “gotcha” journalism and the effort to fix his position and its distance from preconceived standards. In every case, Paul’s specific stances are attacked for falling too far outside the range of “legitimate” differences the mainstream news media are willing to acknowledge. Aggressively disallowing consideration of political foundations, *MTP* constrains potential lines of thinking and modes of understanding, thus implicitly reinforcing the hegemonic status quo (see Jones, 2010; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2012).

By contrast, the two modes explicitly labeled as “entertainment” are characterized by a far greater sense of civility and cooperative spirit. Emphasizing respect over antagonism, they are also open to discussion of the foundations of public life, willing to give a public hearing of sorts to Paul’s “message.” Despite research suggesting late-night talk-show interviews avoid the serious substance of politics (e.g., Baum, 2005), the discourse of celebration on *Tonight* takes up a breadth of topics, covering many of the same specifics that arise on *MTP* and also engaging in questions of structure and foundation that are elided there. At the same time, *Tonight*’s celebratory discourse is marked by an absence of depth, void of the critical impulse democratic theorists have long suggested is essential to meaningful political engagement. That critical spirit, of course, is well displayed in the course of conversation on *TDS*, which provides an energetic dialogic exchange over foundational principles. The discussion allots little consideration to specific issues and policy preferences, however. Stewart, for example, makes no mention

of Paul's plan to cut the federal budget, and the interview is unlikely to improve one's score on the kind of current events quizzes that so often are used as a measure of political *knowledge*.

Finally, *Hannity* offers a curious case of an outlier that works in fundamentally different ways. Despite appearing on an outlet that self-identifies as a "news channel," the Paul interview there is the least journalistic of all four. *Hannity's* discourse of confrontation draws on the political neither to facilitate understanding nor to spark deliberation, but rather to construct an emotive spectacle, a narrative performance carefully calibrated to the political presumptions of a particular subset of the citizenry. Profoundly antagonistic and self-promotional, and designed entirely to sell, it offers the least serious engagement with the political.

From a comparative perspective, the four interviews construct different modes of talking about politics, and thus different ways of thinking politically—"linguistic consciousnesses," to use Bakhtin's phrase, that correlate to the boundaries of genre less than might be expected. That is not to say that genres themselves have ceased to be meaningful, but rather they cannot be assumed to *determine* content or be seen as isomorphic with political relevance. Particular genres may lend themselves more readily to particular discursive modes or erect greater barriers to the articulation of others, but in a fundamentally hybrid age, the concept of genre itself may have outlived its usefulness as a predictive analytical tool that can a priori inform our understanding of the democratic value of any given approach to political talk.

What remains unclear is the relationship that real audiences, be they citizens or consumers, have with various discursive modes. It is beyond the reach of the textual analysis here to speculate on what audiences might actually learn from attending to these interviews or how they ultimately make sense of these differing models of political engagement. To that end, empirical studies such as Hoffman's (in this volume), which examines audience reaction to these four interviews, are invaluable. Hoffman's findings correspond to and extend the analysis offered here, giving weight to the argument that guides this entire collection—that as scholars of political communication work to see past inherently limiting assumptions about genre and programmatic forms, we should also strive to overcome the epistemological and methodological divides that equally obscure their ability to profitably conceptualize the complexity of contemporary political media.

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