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## ABSTRACT

An instructor uses a unique instructional paradigm in his MCOM 1003/Introduction to Mass Communication course at Southern Arkansas University (SAU) in a unit on media and politics. According to his students, one of the most popular learning strategies is the use of original edited videos that focus on dubious practices by some media professionals. While watching these videos, students evaluate how print and broadcast pundits practice "predictive journalism." The question is whether politics or journalism is well served by this practice. Moreover, this tendency of journalists to prognosticate or pontificate is becoming more of a staple of conversation/questioning on Sunday network and cable television political talk shows. Students must understand how this trend affects news coverage of the political process. What questions or comments (ideally, non-predictive) might SAU students ask if placed in similar circumstances? This paper examines some of the programs on which pundits used their less-than-reliable crystal balls in discussing several recent elections. The paper considers the formats and components of various weekend political talk shows, including "This Week with David Brinkley," "Meet the Press," "The McLaughlin Group," and "The Capital Gang." It concludes that students need a sense of perspective when critically evaluating these programs, and that though shrill exchanges often make political talk show participants sound more like professional wrestlers, solid information can still be obtained by viewers. It also states that more low-key programs, such as "Washington Week in Review" on PBS or "Washington Journal" on C-SPAN, might better suit some viewers. (NKA)

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"Shaping American Political Discourse Through Media Punditry and  
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(Mass Communication Instructional Unit)

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I use a unique instructional paradigm in my MCOM 1003/Introduction to Mass Communication course at Southern Arkansas University in a unit on media and politics. One of the most popular learning strategies, according to students, is the use of original edited videos that focus on dubious practices by some media professionals. Students evaluate how print and broadcast pundits practice "predictive journalism". Is politics or journalism well served by trying to predict what will happen in advance of an event or election? Moreover, this tendency of journalists to prognosticate or pontificate is becoming more of a staple of conversation and questioning on Sunday network and cable television political talk shows. Students must understand how this trend affects news coverage of the political process. What questions or comments (ideally, non-predictive) might SAU students ask if placed in similar circumstances?

Since their inception on television in the late 1940s, political talk shows have taken on increased importance to news reporters and newsmakers. Issues or personalities of the day can often be amplified, as weekends, when these programs are shown, are typically lacking in news content. But are important events being sidetracked as more programs with opinionated columnists become prominent? As a result, will their analyses of issues be fair or instead be seen through ideological lenses? Are

questions focusing more on the "horse race" than policy? Could this constant fascination of who is up and down be contributing to a backlash of journalistic credibility by the American public?

The edited videotape that accompanies this essay examines ideological punditry from various political events and talk shows representing network, cable and public television. Specifically, video clips will be shown that discuss the 1992 presidential campaign, 1994 midterm election results and 1996 presidential election speculation. This paper examines just some of the programs on which pundits use their less-than-reliable crystal balls.

This Week with David Brinkley on ABC is a combination of hard news, interviews and a roundtable discussion where reporters take off their impartial hats and give opinions regarding important news of the day. With the impending retirement of Brinkley in early 1997, ABC correspondents Sam Donaldson and Cokie Roberts currently share hosting chores for the program.

This Week can be broken down into four distinct areas of analysis. Brinkley begins each program with a short update of news that is not in the Sunday newspapers. This is followed by a background report, most often filed by Jack Smith, which details the issues or personalities to be profiled in the interview segments. Brinkley, syndicated columnist George Will, Donaldson and Roberts conduct interviews. The final segment of This Week

involves reporters discussing views in an opinionated manner. Can Donaldson and Roberts effectively contain their opinions concerning issues within the context of the Brinkley roundtable? That is a question often asked by media watchdogs looking for perceived liberal biases in traditional broadcast news coverage.

It can be argued that Meet the Press host Tim Russert is one of the most flagrant offenders of horse race or "gotcha" questioning rather than issue-oriented interrogation. He has been quoted as saying that one of the objectives of a Sunday talk show is to obtain a guest response newsworthy enough to make that evening's network newscasts.

Russert's style is unique among current hosts in two respects. First, he is not a journalist by trade, as his political experience came from serving as an aide to former New York Governor Mario Cuomo. Second, video clips or full-screen graphics with quotations are occasionally used to back up Russert's assertions in questions. While NBC correspondents such as Lisa Myers or newspaper columnists such as David Broder are frequently on Meet the Press, Russert asks the lion's share of questions.

The McLaughlin Group, a PBS/NBC co-venture, also uses reporters, but its style is more fast-paced and confrontational than other political talk shows. It is still going strong after 14 years on the air. While its look and structure are similar to

that of the now-defunct Agronsky and Company, McLaughlin's program is louder, in addition to being more contentious and opinionated. Of the political talk shows currently on the air, it has the highest amount of predictive journalism. It is more theatrical than substantive in tone, often similar to professional wrestling. Many of McLaughlin's questions are phrased in such a way as to provoke suppositions or guesses from panelists. He often interrupts or demeans their responses, thus provoking intemperate discourse.

Panelists on McLaughlin include moderate/conservative columnist Morton Kondracke, conservative columnist Fred Barnes, liberal Newsweek reporter Eleanor Clift and Jack Germond of the Baltimore Sun. Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Clarence Page of the Chicago Tribune is a semi-regular guest. Each telecast is broken down into a series of segments, with all topics selected by McLaughlin. Recent subjects, called "Issue one", "Issue two", and so on, included the specter of President Clinton's reelection. This was done even though the presidential election was still months away. In keeping with the predictive journalism philosophy, each panelist gave prognostications at the end concerning the subject or personality of his or her choice.

CNN's The Capital Gang addresses issues and viewpoints from four reporters/columnists and a fifth participant, often a Washington politician or insider. The Gang has proved successful

enough since its 1989 debut to spawn a Sunday version.

Unfortunately, it features lesser lights in journalism, many of whom are unknown outside the Washington "Beltway". For instance, what is conservative columnist Mona Charen's claim to fame? Her qualification for national punditry, apparently, comes from her former position as a speechwriter for Nancy Reagan.

The Capital Gang (Saturday edition) is a tamer imitation of The McLaughlin Group. Before Pat Buchanan attempted an unsuccessful bid at the 1992 Republican presidential nomination, he served as a host and frequent guest. Buchanan's program pacing and questioning was more confrontational than either of his successors, Wall Street Journal reporter Al Hunt and syndicated columnist Mark Shields. Buchanan's questions were framed from a conservative perspective, while those asked by Hunt and Shields were more politically moderate in tone.

The Gang of regulars includes conservative columnist Robert Novak, with the fourth chair rotating between conservative columnist Kate O'Beirne and liberal Time columnist Margaret Carlson. The fifth person on the panel is usually a Washington expert. Recent guests have included former Bob Dole campaign adviser David Keene and Connecticut U.S. Senator/Democratic National Committee Co-Chair Christopher Dodd.

Novak often plays the curmudgeonly, conservative catalyst of issues, similar to his role in the 1980s on The McLaughlin Group.

Participants, talking over each other in high-decibel attempts to make their points, often overshadow in-depth coverage of issues. The program concludes with each regular issuing an "Outrage of the Week" against some person, group or action found to be particularly egregious. The Capital Gang (Sunday edition) concludes with pundits selecting nominees for induction into a "Hall of Fame" or "Hall of Shame".

After the shouting has died down, and after opinions have given way to substantive impartial issue analysis, is anything of value learned from political pundits? Can we stand their brand of self-righteous, all-knowing smug remarks? Of course. Any savvy viewer can separate posturing, myopic blather from substantive political analyses. Problems can potentially arise if political partisans see ideas or personalities they do not agree with on these programs.

However, there must always be a sense of perspective when critically evaluating these examples. Some columnists on The Capital Gang and The McLaughlin Group go out of their way to provoke arguments, such as Novak and Barnes. There is nothing inherently wrong with these techniques, but viewers should see them as entertainment. Each program, or video segment viewed during the course of this KCA presentation, should clearly be labeled as opinion and evaluated as such.

Phil Jackson, head coach of the Chicago Bulls of the



National Basketball Association, has a unique take on punditry, whether the subject for discussion is politics or sports. His 1995-96 squad, led by Michael Jordan, won a record 72 regular season games en route to a fourth NBA championship. Jackson had a blunt, provocative assessment of Windy City sports talk radio criticism: "Mental masturbation".

Are political pundits any different? Could they be categorized as rough equivalents of the Psychic Friends Network or weather forecasters before Doppler radar? Though shrill exchanges can often make political talk show participants sound more like professional wrestlers, solid information can still be obtained, but it not an easy process.

For those viewers who intensely dislike the genre, low-key programs like Washington Week in Review on PBS or Washington Journal on C-SPAN, the latter featuring viewer questions, faxes and E-mail, may prove to be preferable fare. For the rest, it is a matter of not taking issues personally with reporters or columnists, and turning the television volume down a bit when these programs air.



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