

Ears Wide Shut: Epistemological Populism, Argutainment and Canadian Conservative Talk Radio

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For many people, radio has a slightly anachronistic air about it. Perceived as technologically inferior to image-based media and less serious than textual media, radio is often ignored as a marginal and ephemeral medium with little enduring political significance. This is far from an accurate portrait, however. For over the last two decades, political talk radio (PTR) has emerged as an influential medium for political debate, discussion and socialization, especially in the United States. In light of this, a growing number of scholars in communication and politics have focused on the nature and impact of PTR in North America. While a few scholars have begun to examine the impact of PTR on the broader ideological landscape of the US (Hall Jamieson and Cappella, 2008), the dominant research thematic has been fairly narrow, with most scholars combining survey research with quantitative analysis to measure the political impact of the medium across a range of attributes, including civic knowledge, partisan values, policy preferences, political efficacy and media use (Barker, 2002; Bennett, 1998, 2002; Hall and Cappella, 2002; Holbert, 2004; Hollander, 1997; Jones, 2002; Lyons, 2008; Perse and Butler, 2005; Pfau et al., 2001).

While these studies have generated a variety of fascinating insights, they have also left a number of important areas unexplored, two of which we find particularly important. First, the current literature leaves virtually entirely unexamined the content and/or rhetorical characteristics of talk radio. Existing studies have, at most, identified only the most straightforward discursive strategies such as agenda setting (in which certain

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issues are prioritized through repetition) or values framing (by which certain political issues are evaluated exclusively in reference to political values that privilege a certain policy conclusion).¹ There is good reason, however, to suspect that a variety of rhetorical techniques play, as they do in many other sites of political debate, a central role in structuring the discourse of political talk radio. In our view, if we are to understand how PTR functions as a space of political debate and persuasion, we need to study not only *who* PTR talks to/with nor simply *what* PTR talks about but also *how* PTR talks.

A second issue is that there are very few systematic analyses of Canadian PTR at all and none which analyze the content and rhetorical structure of Canadian PTR in the way that we propose.² In light of the differences in political culture between the US and Canada and the substantial and growing presence of PTR in Canada (see Sampert, 2009), we believe it is important to examine commercial Canadian PTR (especially those variants that exhibit a conservative orientation) as a significant medium in its own right.

As a first step to address these gaps, we have examined the rhetorical strategies of *Adler On Line* (AOL), the pre-eminent commercial PTR program in Canada. While our analysis has revealed many interesting findings, in this article we have chosen to focus on two elements which we believe are both noteworthy and previously unexplored. The first section of this article argues that the program's rhetorical practices establish a specific epistemological framework we call *epistemological populism*, since it employs a variety of populist rhetorical tropes to define certain types of individual experience as the only ground of valid and politically relevant knowledge. We suggest that this epistemology has significant political impacts insofar as its epistemic inclusions and exclusions make certain political positions appear self-evident and others incomprehensible and repugnant.

In the second section, we argue that the style of debate (as performed and enforced by the host) serves to privilege political speech which is passionate, simple and entertaining. More importantly, however, we show that this style, which we call *argutainment*, plays a key role in helping establishing the political preferences and views privileged by the program. The article closes with a speculative conclusion in which we identify some of the potential theoretical, political and normative implications of our findings. In particular, we argue that the most significant effect of *AOL's* rhetorical strategies is the cultivation of an ideal of political deliberation that offers very narrow and problematic answers to certain fundamental questions about the public realm: questions about *who* has (or shouldn't have) authority to speak, *how* and *when* we should (or shouldn't) speak, and *what type of knowledge* should (and shouldn't) be viewed as legitimate and worthy of our attention.

Abstract. Although scholars have identified political talk radio (PTR) as an important site of political socialization, the current literature has largely failed to examine the political relevance of PTR's rhetorical strategies and has virtually ignored Canadian PTR altogether. This article addresses these gaps by analyzing *Adler On Line*, Canada's only nationally syndicated commercial PTR program, to show that *how* Canadian PTR talks, particularly its use of populist rhetoric, plays a central role in establishing what type of political deliberation and debate is possible within it. Divided into two main sections, the article first explores how *Adler On Line* renders a particular epistemological framework authoritative. The second section then analyzes the rules and norms of political expression and debate encouraged by the show's style of argumentation debate. The article concludes with a more speculative evaluation of the practical consequences as well as the theoretical and normative implications of these discursive practices.

Résumé. Bien que les auteurs de recherches reconnaissent que la radio interactive politique (RIP) représente un lieu important de socialisation politique, la littérature courante dans ce domaine omet, en grande partie, d'analyser la signification politique des stratégies rhétoriques de la RIP, tout en laissant entièrement dans l'ombre les activités de RIP canadiennes. Visant à combler ces lacunes, le présent article offre, dans un premier temps, une analyse de l'émission *Adler On Line*, qui est la seule émission de RIP commerciale souscrite nationalement au Canada, puis démontre que le *mode d'expression* typique adopté dans cette émission, et surtout son usage de la rhétorique populiste, ont une incidence déterminante sur le genre de délibération et de débat politiques que permet la radio parlée au Canada. L'article se divise en deux grandes parties. La première explore le cadre épistémologique particulier de l'émission *Adler On Line* et la manière dont ce cadre se voit empreint d'autorité. La seconde partie analyse les règles ou normes de débat et d'expression des opinions politiques qu'encourage le style divertissant de cette émission-débat. Pour conclure, les auteurs évaluent de façon plus spéculative les conséquences pratiques de ces formes d'expression discursive, tout comme leur incidence théorique et normative.

Before turning to our findings, however, a few words about our object of study and our method of analysis are in order. We chose *AOL* as our main object of study for a variety of reasons. Given our broader interest in the growth of popular conservative philosophy in Canada, *AOL* was an obvious choice given the fact that Adler brings an openly “conservative” (in the broad philosophical sense rather than the narrow partisan sense) perspective to bear on the issues of the day. However, the most important reason underlying our choice of *AOL* is the fact that it is the largest and farthest reaching commercial PTR program in Canada. Hosted by Charles Adler, a Canadian broadcaster who returned to the country in 1998 after working in US talk radio for a number of years, *AOL* is a nationally syndicated English language current affairs talk show produced in Winnipeg and broadcast across the Corus Radio Network. One of Corus' flagship programs, *AOL* proudly describes itself as “Canada's only national private sector talk show” and it is the only program of its kind to have a quasi-national profile. It currently airs in twelve Canadian markets (including all major urban centres from Vancouver to Toronto), takes callers from across the country and is streamed live on the web. It is also highly popular and is broadcast on stations that, for the most part, have a significant presence in their respective regions. During the period analyzed for this study, the stations carrying Adler's program were ranked

by the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement as number one overall in three markets (Winnipeg; Vancouver; Edmonton), number one in the talk radio category in three others (Calgary; Hamilton; London) and number three in the news/talk format in two others (Toronto; Montreal).³ In this sense, it is not only a potentially valid exemplar of PTR in general, given its prominence and marketplace dominance, it is a worthy object of study on its own.

For this study, we analyzed a sample that included all the program's broadcasts during the 2005–2006 Canadian federal election campaign which ran from December 2, 2005, to January 23, 2006. During this period, *AOL* aired for three hours (from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.) in its home market of Winnipeg but it took the form of a two-hour (re)broadcast in most other markets.⁴ Accordingly, we recorded and analyzed the two-hour version which aired on the Vancouver Corus station, CKNW, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday. With the exception of the week before Christmas when a guest host filled in for Adler, all of the broadcasts during the campaign were transcribed and systematically analyzed for a total sample of 30 days and 60 hours of programming. The substantial size of this sample and the fact that it covers the entire election cycle make it a very robust object for analysis. We chose the election campaign time frame both because such moments of heightened attention to politics are precisely when the political implications of the underlying rhetorical patterns become the most explicit and because we suspected that it would be a period in which the relative density of political topics (compared to other topics such as lifestyle, sports, consumer goods and entertainment) was higher than normal. Consistent with our expectations, the sample offered an especially rich set of discourse about politics: overtly political topics headlined the broadcast at roughly twice the frequency during this period than in the weeks preceding and following the campaign.⁵

In terms of analytic method, it is important to note that our goal was *not* to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of every aspect of the program. Rather, our primary objectives were to identify a number of core rhetorical elements in the discourse of Canadian conservative PTR, to analyze how they structure its sphere of political debate, and to consider the political and normative consequences of this model of political deliberation. Accordingly, we conducted a systematic and rigorous qualitative analysis of the program's discourse. In broad terms, our methodological framework draws upon a wide range of theories of textual and discourse analysis employed in social and political theory (for example, Connolly, 1995, 2008; Foucault, 1977, 1980; Gramsci, 1971; Lakoff, 2002; Strauss, 1988; Westen, 2007) and critical discourse analysis (for example, Fairclough, 2001; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). These intellectual traditions assert that a qualitative study of the rhetorical patterns of particular

discourse generates insights and knowledge which are different, but no less valuable, than those offered by quantitative analysis. While we have conducted a quantitatively based content analysis of talk radio elsewhere (Gunster, 2008), we have chosen in this study to employ a qualitative method as we believe it offers the best way of exploring how the rhetorical characteristics of conservative PTR cultivate a very specific model of political deliberation.

Having briefly outlined the parameters of our study, the remainder of this article will now turn to a discussion of the results of our analysis.

“Opinions Armed with Life Experience”: Epistemological Populism, Everyday Experience and Common Sense

Epistemology—theories about what legitimate knowledge is, how we acquire valid knowledge, what markers are reliable indicators of valid knowledge—is often assumed to be the exclusive domain of philosophers. Few would believe that it could ever be a hot topic of discussion on PTR. Our analysis, however, suggests both that defining and policing what counts as legitimate knowledge is a key component of *AOL*'s discourse and that these practices of epistemological inclusion/exclusion play a crucial, if subtle, role in rendering certain political perspectives reasonable and dismissing others as illegitimate.

What is the epistemology of *AOL* and how does it function? Broadly, it is a perspective which we call epistemological populism since it borrows heavily from the rhetorical patterns of political discourses of populism⁶ to valorize the knowledge of “the common people,” which they possess by virtue of their proximity to everyday life, as distinguished from the rarefied knowledge of elites which reflects their alienation from everyday life (and the common sense it produces). Epistemological populism is established through a variety of rhetorical techniques and assumptions: the assertion that individual opinions based upon first-hand experience are much more reliable as a form of knowledge than those generated by theories and academic studies; the valorization of specific types of experience as particularly reliable sources of legitimate knowledge and the extension of this knowledge authority to unrelated issues; the privileging of emotional intensity as an indicator of the reliability of opinions; the use of populist-inflected discourse to dismiss other types of knowledge as elitist and therefore illegitimate; and finally, the appeal to “common sense” as a discussion-ending trump card. Let's examine how these parts fit together in concrete terms.

“Opinions that are armed with life experience, that's what we're looking for on this show.” One of the many promos that transitioned *AOL* into commercial breaks, this particular declaration offers an excellent entry

point into our analysis of *AOL's* epistemological populism as it deftly captures the program's unequivocal preference for political sentiments which emerge directly from the crucible of both ordinary and extraordinary experience at the individual level. Such individual experience is what lies at the core of the common sense which is consistently celebrated on the program as a counterpoint to the excessively ideological, intellectual or idealistic politics of those who lack grounding in the "real world." "Opinions are great, I always say on this program. Opinions are wonderful. But opinions armed with personal experience, knowledge. Man, those opinions are a whole lot better" (December 14, 1–2 p. m.).⁷ On this view, knowledge that grows out of an individual's lived experience is knowledge one can trust. Indeed, knowledge and experience become virtually identical. An individual's lived proximity to something becomes an index of their capacity to truly understand it, care about it, develop valid opinions about it and speak about it with authority. Conversely, the more abstract the form of knowledge and reasoning, the less rooted in concrete individual experiences, the more such knowledge is to be regarded with suspicion, especially when their conclusions contradict the wisdom of common sense and practical, everyday experience.

This populist epistemology of common sense experience was particularly prominent in the program's extensive treatment of crime during the election. Despite the fact that national polls had consistently identified health care as the most important political priority for Canadians (Wattie, 2005), discussions of crime and criminal policy received more attention than any other single issue on the program during the campaign. Law-and-order themes, for example, were featured on over one-third of the program's broadcasts, which was close to twice the frequency with which health care was discussed.⁸

At the most straightforward level, our analysis confirms that, like American PTR, *AOL's* unequal weighting of certain topics like crime functions to privilege a conservative political perspective insofar as it primes the value of individual security, which, in turn, correlates closely with conservative political views/behaviour in North America (Lyons, 2008). More interesting for our purposes, however, is the fact that the type of guests, callers and experiences through which the program legitimized certain opinions and knowledge about crime rely on and reinforce epistemological populism. There was virtually no discussion of statistical crime rates at all. Instead, evidence of the urgency of this issue largely took the form of guests and callers serving up a mix of anecdotal confirmation and common sense observations (which themselves function as theoretical generalizations while simultaneously disavowing their theoretical status). Has violent crime become a major problem in Canadian cities? Has Canadian penal practice become a revolving door for violent offenders? The answer for Adler was clear. "If I opened up the lines and

simply discussed situations that people are aware of,” he explained, “I mean, some people actually, you know, have scrapbooks on this stuff, of situations where people involved in heinous crimes are either those out on parole or have committed two, three, four, five, six other crimes and simply sit in the bucket for a year or two. We could do a show like that and go for twenty-four hours and still have phone calls to do” (January 6, 1–2 p.m.). As the anecdotes pile up in segment after segment, they not only immunize listeners against countervailing arguments and evidence about declining crime rates or the futility of law-and-order campaigns. Equally importantly, they valorize the accumulation of anecdotes as a viable form of populist knowledge making, enabling out-of-hand dismissal of contradictory arguments, reasoning or facts as untrue.

What is key here is how Adler’s affirmation of a mode of experiential political reasoning, which effortlessly shifts back and forth between personal experience (either one’s own or others) and broader social and political questions, invariably champions the former as providing answers to the latter. Broader trends or perspectives are never allowed to challenge the generalizability of certain individual experiences. But one of the challenges faced by such an experience-based epistemology is that not everyone’s experience is the same. Not all anecdotes fit the common sense conclusions served up by *AOL*. So how does Adler distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of individual knowledge, experience and common sense?

Part of the answer lies in a straightforward ideological filtering of guests which, for the most part, strains out those whose experiences, opinions and epistemological framework differ from Adler’s own. The epistemological filtering is particularly notable. Of the thirty guests that appeared on the show to discuss crime over the seven weeks, not a single one was a criminologist or social scientist specializing in these issues. This absence was especially apparent during a four-hour live “Silence the Guns” town hall special which was broadcast from Toronto ten days after a horrific Boxing Day shooting (which killed a teenager and wounded several others).⁹ Despite the fact that this special was promoted as an attempt to understand both the causes of violent crime as well as practical solutions to it, the two-hour Vancouver segment of the program (which was the final half) did not feature a single criminologist or other social scientist who might have been able to offer insights into the social causes and consequences of crime or a historical and comparative assessment of different approaches to penal policy. In contrast, the show’s fourteen guests did include victims of crime, police officers, community activists, faith leaders and politicians. What is the common link between these guests (other than the politician who primarily acted as a foil for the others)? From many perspectives, there is little coherence. Our analysis, however, suggests not only that the show’s

choice of guests is defined by the dictates of epistemological populism, but also that its choice of guests functions to reinforce and enhance the epistemological legitimacy and the moral authority of the opinions of certain types of individuals who are portrayed as having a particularly close, immediate and personal experience with crime in one way or another.

While this epistemological filtering of guests plays an important role in effectively erasing contending perspectives, the epistemological framing of certain types of experience also served to valorize certain forms of knowledge and opinion. Here, the “Silence the Guns” special is again illustrative. After opening the Vancouver segment of the program by interviewing Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty, *AOL* then turned to a panel composed of two community activists, two church leaders and the mother of a Toronto youth who had been killed while attending the funeral of a friend. Adler opened the discussion with the last guest, somberly noting “You’re the mother an eighteen-year-old gun murder victim. Who on this program that you’re listening to is making sense to your ears?” (January 5, 1–2 p.m.). This set up—and the question and follow-up discussion—clearly framed her experience as furnishing special insight into discussions of criminal policy and, more specifically, as giving her a privileged standpoint from which to comment upon (and criticize) the claims of the foils of the panel (such as politicians) as a representative of those who have actually experienced first hand these issues.

On one level, Adler’s question embodied a real and laudable respect and sympathy for the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of this woman’s son. Moreover, we agree that the public sphere needs spaces where our individual experiences, especially in regard to important policy discussions, are voiced and taken into account. Epistemological populism, however, goes well beyond opening up space for individual experience as one type of valid knowledge that deserves its place alongside a variety of others. Rather, epistemological populism tends to elevate individual experience as the only legitimate form and extend that epistemological authority well beyond the realm where the person’s immediate experience itself might be seen as relevant. This tendency was perfectly encapsulated in Adler’s later exchange with the mother of one of the RCMP officers murdered in Mayerthorpe (January 5, 1–2 p.m.), when he positioned her experience as a grieving mother as offering her an authoritative vantage point from which to advocate opinions on a range of topics ranging from mandatory minimums and the abolition of judicial sentencing discretion to raising the legal age of consent for sexual activity.

It was not only direct victims of crime, however, whose experiences were accorded the epistemic authority of real experience. The views of certain types of people working on the front lines in the fight against crime

were also given epistemological priority. In particular, police officials and correctional workers (though not social workers) were consistently positioned as having a monopoly on expert knowledge in this area. This prioritization did not always translate into quantifiably measurable factors such as extra time for such individuals. During the “Silence the Guns” special, for instance, representatives of the police did not receive an excessive amount of attention. Rather, their views were accorded special authority through the uncharacteristically deferential manner in which Adler solicited and framed their views and opinions. Consider, for instance, how Adler opened a segment with a Toronto police officer. “You’re a constable in Toronto,” Adler began,

You’re an executive board member of the Ontario Gang Investigators Association. My guess is that when you deal with gang violence on a day-to-day level and you hear talk on the radio, read about it in the newspapers, there must be times when you say to yourself, “Oh man, that’s just BS, that has nothing to do with the problem.” I wonder if you could just tick off one or two points for us of light. In other words, I want you to tell me where it is that your mind kind of implodes on listening to certain kinds of rhetoric where “I say I wish you’d stop talking about that, that’s not relevant.” (January 5, 2–3 p.m.).

It is worth unpacking how this exchange functions rhetorically in some detail. On one hand, Adler employs turns of phrase that clearly showed empathy for, and encourages his audience to sympathize with, the officer (such as “your mind kind of implodes”). This in itself primes the audience to accept the constable’s opinions as their own by creating a rhetorical identification of the officer and the listeners. Even more important, however, is the fact that Adler’s introduction encourages the audience to accept the constable’s opinions as *facts*—as the objective truth—not on the basis of any evidence presented but rather because the constable’s “day-to-day level” experience as a police officer and member of the OGIA grants him a special, automatic epistemological authority.

If the persuasive force of epistemological populism flows, in part, from its ability to activate and apply (at an epistemological level) the populist celebration of “the people” and common sense, it also uses the other side of the populist trope—the attack on elites—to dismiss contending forms of knowledge and political opinions. The laudable voices of the people are contrasted with the “elitist” views of academics, defence lawyers and political progressives who were condemned as representing the “special interests” of criminals and gangs.

If we return to Adler’s introduction of the constable with this in mind, we can see very clearly that the constable’s epistemic authority was not only secured by reference to his own experience but, equally as important, by reference to what the constable and his views were *not*, namely

the “BS” and “certain kinds of rhetoric” one hears elsewhere “on the radio ... in the newspapers.” Although the peddlers of this “BS” and “rhetoric” were left unnamed, the populist overtones of Adler’s discourse ensures that his listeners likely filled in “elites” as the unnamed source.

Dismissing contending epistemological accounts by explicitly attacking them as elitist is a pattern that recurs frequently throughout *AOL*. One particularly good example of this was a call by Brian about the shootings in Toronto (January 5, 1–2 p.m.). The call started with an introduction that both established the caller’s populist epistemological credentials (for example, Brian “grew up in the Jane and Finch area ... where you have a proliferation of gangs and gang related violence” and “worked at the liquor store at Jane and Finch so I had a chance to see quite a bit of things”) but also primed and activated a series of coded network associations (Jane and Finch, liquor store) that framed, moralized and racialized the issue in subtle but concrete ways. What is also crucial to our argument, however, is that the main strategy that Brian employed to bolster the credibility of his own views was by attacking opposing views as not only absent any real, lived experience of the area but also as embodying his debating opponents as both elitist and profoundly self-interested and self-serving. For the bulk of Brian’s introductory comments was to assert that many who claim to be trying to solve the issues (such as politicians, civil servants, criminologists, community activists) are actually “part of what I would call an industry and they are basically preying upon the victims of the people within the Jane and Finch area and trying to get money for their own special purposes and their own special programs and failing to see that what has to be created in that area to have any chance of people who currently live in the area of ever having a normal life or a better life ... And, frankly, the only people who can create that environment at the beginning to deal immediately with the crime issue are the police.” In textbook fashion, the force and legitimacy of his opinion, the idea that only the police can solve the problem of violent crime is rooted in his personal experience and enhanced by the populist rhetorical gap he constructs between those who, like himself, have really lived in the area and a parasitic industry of self-interested experts, bureaucrats and elites who depend upon the area’s social problems to justify the continued misuse of government resources.

“Rapid Fire Radio”: Political Debate as Argutainment

As we noted above, one of the enduring challenges faced by an experientialist epistemology is that lived experience does not necessarily generate any single type of politics. Experience is too diffuse, contradictory and ambiguous and the translation of experience into political knowl-

edge and opinion is a profoundly complex process which is subject to a wide range of significant variables and interpretation and contestation (Gramsci, 1971). Moreover, even a cursory review of Canadian political history reveals any number of progressive and radical populisms founded upon the politics of experience (see Griffin, 1999; Young, 1969). Similarly, as a medium which privileges real time, two-way debate, talk radio can accommodate and express a wide range of political perspectives. As other studies have shown (see Botes and Langdon, 2006), PTR can adopt a wide diversity styles of political conversation (from loud and controversial to solicitous and open) which open up space for more radical forms of populism (Gunster, 2008).

The previous section demonstrated that *AOL's* rhetorical marriage of an experientialist epistemology with tropes of populism is an important strategy that functions to filter out many experiences and perspectives which would challenge the conservative opinions of the host and callers. In this section, we show that the *style* of debate of *AOL* is a second important element which helps determine what types of opinions and ideas can be expressed and whether they appear reasonable or ridiculous.

Building on the well-known concept of "infotainment" (for example, Postman, 1985; Thussu, 2007), we call the performative model embodied in *AOL's* discourse *argutainment* and argue that this style has several defining characteristics.¹⁰ Self-consciously adopted and defended by means of a populist logic which defines itself as a utopian alternative to mainstream models of journalism, argutainment justifies itself through its ability to speak to and represent the interests of "the people." In defining what is good for the people, it moves effortlessly between political and market tropes in which commercial success and the public good are fused together. What people want in commercial terms (as evidenced by market share) and what people need in political terms (alternative perspectives which cut through the morass of mainstream media) is represented as ultimately the same thing: a provocative and entertaining style of debate, defined as highly emotional and passionate, strongly opinionated, simple and brief and very confrontational. Moreover, argutainment assumes that an aggressive and opinionated host is needed to filter out ideas and modes of speech which he (or she) judges the audience does not want to hear (a host that, in his endless quest to discipline his callers towards a very specific model of "free" discussion might well be seen to embody the many paradoxes a postmodern, market-oriented version of Rousseau's legislator might imply).

Adler frequently uses populist tropes to implicitly and explicitly justify his style of discourse. He regularly celebrates his style as ushering in a "broadcast revolution" in which the antiquated conventions of journalism and the bland, empty rhetoric of public relations are swept aside in the interests of energizing political discussion and debate. He invites us

to participate in a populist renewal of the public sphere in which public discussion and debate simulates what he imagines at kitchen tables and coffee shops of the nation, a frank, honest and confrontational exchange of opinion that is open to anyone who wants to join the conversation. Unsurprisingly, one of the most powerful rhetorical defenses offered for his style is the supposed contrast between it and the decayed elitist forms it seeks to replace. For Adler, mainstream media's traditional commitment to balance, objectivity and politically correct speech—all of which tend to be lumped together—have led to an anemic (and boring) public sphere in which an unconditional respect for the views of others has emasculated our capacity and desire to make difficult but necessary political judgments. According to Adler, such norms have become the shelter of those whose claims could not otherwise withstand the scrutiny of common sense reasoning and experience. Calls for balance and objectivity merely encourage an apathetic public sphere and allow the political claims of vocal special interests to exercise disproportionate influence. In this context, a style that is confrontational, aggressive and highly passionate is politically valuable since it shakes people free from an elite-induced apathy and ignorance.

Adler's discussion of crime with guest Margaret Wenté, a columnist for *The Globe and Mail*, serves as a perfect example of this rhetoric at work. Prompted by Adler, Wenté attacked the CBC for airing opinions which suggested that media attention to white victims of crime was much greater than to black victims. "I get very, very frustrated by this," fumed Wenté.

We have the CBC and other media and they trot out the usual suspects naming all the usual culprits. And after you listen to this stuff you'd think that Jane Creba was killed by Mike Harris who was premier some time ago and cut back social programs. Or you might think that Jane Creba was killed by the Americans because they manufactured so many guns down there. Or maybe Jane Creba was killed by society, that's the most common explanation ... because we stood by and we don't care about these poor kids who grow up and enter lives of crime because there are no opportunities in society and no jobs for them. I've heard this so often that I've just gotten sick of it! (January 3, 1–2 p.m.)

A media that has grown overly dependent upon "the usual suspects naming all the usual culprits" is fingered as peddling the "sickening" liberal dogma that structural, socio-economic factors have some role to play in explaining crime. Sharing Wenté's contempt for those who propagate such misinformation, Adler asked, "Why is it then, that—I'll just call them the hustlers—why is it, then, that the hustlers, the usual suspects that are the so-called experts in all things, why is it that they can continue to get away with it? Is it because somebody gives them a microphone because they are entertaining on TV?" White guilt, Wenté replied without hesita-

tion, is what now stands in the way of the “truth telling” that we need in order to grapple with this issue. A few moments later, Adler endorsed Wente’s claim that crime in Canada was, in part, connected with a Jamaican subculture of violence imported by immigrants. “Is it racist to want to screen out the ones who are part of the gun and drug culture?” he asked. “Because every time you ask a question like this, people say ‘Charles, it’s very, very complicated.’ And you know what, I don’t think it is” (January 3, 1–2 p.m.).

For Adler, a pervasive elitist commitment to a polite, non-confrontational, politically correct style stands in the way of an open, honest and frank discussion of social problems and how they should be addressed. Complexity is stigmatized as little more than an excuse to avoid asking the tough questions and, conversely, a willingness to violate PC conventions of “cultural sensitivity” becomes, in and of itself, a sign of lucid and honest speech. In fact, it becomes a sign of moral courage. “It just hurts my heart to have people tell me that you can’t talk candidly about the specific problem, that you’ve got to go all around it. And I’m saying, ‘Why? Am I going to offend the gangstas? Why would I care about that?’” (January 3, 1–2 p.m.). The implication is clear. Complicated elitist theories are not only misguided. They are morally corrupt, privileging the hurt feelings of “gangstas” over the duty to protect hard working, law-abiding common people.

Adler often openly ruminates on the value of his style, congratulating himself for having the fortitude to challenge political correctness as an organic defender of the people’s interests and pointing to his ratings as the market share equivalent of a democratic vote of confidence in support of his approach. In the final days of the campaign, for example, Adler boasted that the show’s higher ratings were a tribute to his bold and aggressive style. “Naturally, because of the election campaign and because politics has become mass appeal ... a lot of new people are tuning [into AOL]. And a composite sketch of the thousands of emails that we’re getting from you people reads like this: ‘One of the reasons I like listening to your show as opposed to the others is that you don’t let people get away with crap.’” After replaying a segment in which he aggressively challenged and cut off a caller (James) who disagreed, Adler opined that

Sometimes it’s about confrontation and sometimes it’s not. But if someone wants to come on—it doesn’t matter if it’s a politician, a listener, a so-called expert—and simply dump effluent, see I take it personally, because I think of you as family. And I don’t like it when people try to dump effluent on you and so I will defend my family. People call it an attack, those who are critics of the program. I don’t see myself as ever attacking. I did not attack James. I defended you from his stuff. And what motivates me? Based on all the emails I get I’m told that on many other shows, that doesn’t happen. (January 13, 2–3 p.m.)

Earlier the same week, Adler adopted an equally aggressive tone with a caller trying to argue that a Tory plan to cut the GST would disproportionately benefit the wealthy. "That's not an argument! I mean that's not even on the level of a three-year-old rattling a little baby rattle ... I know this is where some people say 'Oh, why does he have to be such a bully? Why does he have to be obnoxious?' Because I'm not an idiot! And I refuse for the audience to be insulted" (January 10, 1–2 p.m.).

Virtually every time Adler challenged a host or guest in this fashion, he explicitly defended his actions as being in the interests of his audience, the people. Serving as a proxy for their political judgment, he acts when and where they cannot, symbolically taking back the airwaves by ruthlessly evicting the fuzzy logic and indefensible opinions of those who have monopolized that space for far too long. As we will discuss later, there is something genuinely utopian and democratic about this populist vision. But it is also the case that in much the same way that conservative populism often invokes an authoritarian sensibility and process as necessary for democratic renewal (Hall, 1988), Adler's populist rhetoric authorizes, indeed requires, a discursive strong man, someone who will safeguard our interests by vigorously patrolling and enforcing the boundaries between "good" and "bad" talk in the interests of the people.

As we have seen, this role is often justified on political grounds: such interventions are required to clear out the elitist nonsense perpetuated by the mainstream media. But there is a second rhetorical defense of an aggressive and confrontational style: entertainment. "I really believe that radio is turned on for three reasons," Rush Limbaugh once explained. "People turn it on to be entertained, to be entertained, and to be entertained" (cited in Boggs and Dirmann, 1999: 80). Some scholars, in fact, argue that the business end of the medium necessarily trumps its significance as an ideological or political tool. "Ratings govern ideology and not the other way around; talk radio is still primarily an entertainment medium. Thus it must respond to entertainment imperatives far more than political ones" (Davis and Owen, 1998: 69, 71). Many practitioners in the media and public relations industries share elements of this view and reflect on the consequences of reducing political talk to the commercial imperative to entertain (such as Luntz, 2007).

While these approaches helpfully foreground the importance of a commercial logic in talk radio, our analysis suggests that the medium's most striking achievement may not be the privileging of commercial imperatives over political ones but rather its ability to fuse together these two logics by creating a style and justification of argutainment. The populist genius of talk radio may very well lie in its ability to portray the logic of commercialism (treating political talk as an entertainment commodity) as a politically virtuous invigoration of democracy. According to this logic, the discipline imposed by the need to entertain *also* keeps

political speech honest, accessible and authentic and counteracts the mainstream media's counterproductive pursuit of diversity, balance, objectivity, moderation. In this view, "giving the people what they want" does not lead to the decline of public discourse but instead to its invigoration and democratic rebirth by welcoming in the values and priorities of ordinary Canadians. Market logic, the logic of commercial culture, is recast as an instrument of political democratization, the means by which the people are put back in charge of the public sphere (Frank, 2000).

Adler employs both political and commercial logics when he describes his program. "Ladies and gentlemen, radio that makes you think," Adler mused at one point, reflecting upon the rationale for his program. "Well, if you're not going to get people to think, why do radio?" (January 17, 1–2 p.m.). Yet the larger impression one gets from Adler is that he does not want to "make" his audience do anything at all. Although he may enter into the odd shouting match with specific callers or guests (who, by dint of their non-compliance with the norms of debate are automatically disqualified and exiled from belonging to the common people whose interests Adler is there to serve), Adler consistently reminds his audience that serving their needs and interests is his top priority and that all interventions he makes to discipline and shape political speech are designed to make the discussion more palatable to them. As he explained,

On this show we often use the slogan "boredom kills" which is why we use a lot of entertainment values, production values, call it what you will. We try to do an animated conversation. Sometimes people say "You're a little rude, you're interrupting people." I say, "Look, I'm most concerned about the listener. I want to move on." One of the death knells of talk radio is listeners and others going on and on and on to make a point so we like to do rapid-fire radio. (January 20, 2–3 p.m.)

The obvious suggestion is that listeners are either incapable or unwilling to follow lengthy, complex or abstract arguments; instead, politics must be served up in appetizing morsels which the audience can easily appreciate or enjoy. Avoiding boredom as the defining criteria for the style of show? Avoiding boredom as the justification of the added cost of "a lot of entertainment values, production values"? This is not the logic of political discourse or democratic debate; it is the logic of the culture industry in which the need to entertain the consumer from moment to moment trumps any other obligations. As consumers in the marketplace of political ideas, we learn that we are under no obligation to listen to opinions or statements that we find unpleasant, challenging or even boring. Each time Adler erupts indignantly when challenged by a contrary view or arbitrarily cuts off a caller who hesitates or stumbles, it symbolically gives license to the rest of us to adopt an equally arrogant and narcissistic pos-

ture when it comes to (not) listening to and (not) engaging with the views of others.

Yet such an “entertaining” style of discourse is also routinely defended as necessary to overcome the apathy and decadence of mainstream media. For Adler, brevity and passion are among the most important characteristics distinguishing speech that has entertainment value from that which does not. Entertaining talk is that which can be quickly boiled down to a brief, passionate comment or a single emblematic anecdote. Arguments must be made as quickly and succinctly as possible and any hesitation invites immediate condemnation from the host. Attempts to explain the reasoning or context behind a political opinion in more than a sentence or two, for example, is customarily met with the terse injunction to make your point. Failure to do so usually leads to being cut off. “Folks,” Adler explained after one such incident, “you’re really going to have to motor. I’ve just ... It’s not that I don’t have any patience, I just have a sense of what it’s like to be a listener. I’ve actually listened to programs at the other end where I’m saying to the host, ‘Hey, move it on and move it up’ ... Because we really are concerned most about the actual listening audience” (January 10, 1–2 p.m.).

Given Adler’s market share, it is clear that emotionally intense debate can make for entertaining and commercially successful radio. What we find more interesting, however, is that privileging this style of debate performs and reinforces the lessons of epistemological populism. If someone sincerely believes in something and has the personal experience to back it up, they should be able to make their case forcefully, quickly and emotionally. Similarly, passion—and especially outrage—becomes an index for the perceived sincerity, quality and truthfulness (or, as Stephen Colbert put it beautifully, “truthiness”) of political speech. Passion testifies to the close connection between expression and experience, persuading us that talk is not idle chatter or born of purely instrumental motives but solidly grounded in real life experience and deeply held moral convictions. Conversely, any stylistic sign of hesitation or ambiguity signals a possible disjuncture between political beliefs and personal experience and reasoning which is abstract, complex, takes too long or is simply boring is immediately identified as ideological, elitist, and contrary to the interests of the common people.

At a visceral level, then, Adler’s style of argutainment performs, models and even intensifies the dictates of the epistemological populism of *Adler On Line*. Argutainment teaches us that we can judge the validity of a particular comment not merely by the ad/pro hominem shorthand offered by epistemological populisms (such as the subject position and experience of the speaker) but by an even more immediate shorthand of the passion and brevity of a speaker’s communication style or our emotional reaction to it. It thus plays a key role in establishing the parameters of

who is allowed to speak, what experience or knowledge can be offered, and how we are allowed to speak in the public realm of talk radio, all in the name of a renewal in which democratic and market imperatives coalesce. The lesson is clear. Speak up and speed up. Or shut up. Why? Because what's good for ratings is good from democracy.

Concluding Thoughts: Ears Wide Shut

Where does this leave us? We have argued that beneath the surface of what might seem like trivial and ephemeral discourse lie sophisticated rhetorical patterns which profoundly impact the type of experience, knowledge and styles of political speech that are allowed entry into the political debate of *AOL*. We believe that these findings are important insofar as they help us understand how conservative talk radio functions as a discourse. However, we also believe our analyses raise broader questions which we can only briefly touch upon at this point in the hopes of spurring further discussion.

First, the specific epistemological orientation and style of debate of *AOL* is an important factor in helping us understand why, despite the fact that the medium of talk radio is open to political perspectives that span the ideological spectrum, much *commercial* PTR does not seem to promote real political debate but rather serves to naturalize certain political and policy conclusions and dismiss others as worthy of ridicule. In the case of *AOL*, we have shown that this is achieved not only by overt guest selection, issue prioritization and values priming, but also by rhetorically establishing very specific epistemological and stylistic rules of debate. The act of limiting public discourse to those perspectives which can express themselves anecdotally, quickly, passionately, and confrontationally filters out a wide host of perspectives and policy positions based on broader analyses of structural inequality and power. Since many (though not all) “progressive” perspectives employ these disallowed types of analyses and many (though not all) “conservative” perspectives can be communicated according to the dictates of epistemological populism and argutainment, *AOL*'s rhetorical practices function to pre-emptively immunize its audience from having to seriously confront and reflectively consider many progressive ideas. In this sense, our key point is not that *AOL* may tell people to vote conservative (though it may also have this effect). Instead, what we find more interesting is how it cultivates epistemological convictions and stylistic habits that, despite not appearing as overtly political, tend to frame many conservative policies as commonsensical and reasonable while portraying progressive policies as self-evidently illogical and ridiculous.

Second, we believe that showing the central role that populist tropes play in even the epistemological and stylistic rules of debate of *AOL* dem-

onstrates how influential political discourses of populism remain in Canada and how widely they are dispersed throughout our broader political and media culture. In one sense, then, this confirms the continuing relevance of David Laycock's thoughtful study (2002) of the growth of new right populism in Canada. For our work shows that although conservative calls for an intensified "plebiscitarian politics" (in which the instruments of direct democracy—referendum, recall and citizen initiated policies—were idealized as a means of restoring democratic accountability) have been quietly dropped by the Conservative government, such populist arguments continue to receive powerful expressions in a variety of other contexts such as talk radio.

What conservative populism often calls for at the level of political institutions, Adler's epistemological populism and style of argument provides at the level of political discourse. Both forms of populism challenge the assumption that politics and political discourse should involve forms of mediated and reflective action, reasoning and communication distinct from those immediate ones which govern life in the private sphere. In both cases, the antidote is an elimination of such differences and a systematic purging of those mediating institutions and discursive practices which maintain the distinction between public and private in favour of a pure form of political expression that "directly" reflects the will of the people.

The ability of conservative parties to deliver populist institutional reform has been remarkably limited, however. From this perspective, the epistemological populism of sites such as *AOL* might be relevant to partisan politics in two further ways. At the most general level, by modelling a renovation of the public sphere in which the value and authority of knowledge, opinion and argument is directly proportional to (and a reproduction of) the lived experience of the people, *AOL's* discursive populism might be seen to function as a dress rehearsal and/or compensatory stand-in that allows its believers to avoid becoming overly cynical about the concrete failures of certain conservative parties to deliver on institutional reform. At a more concrete level, we would also argue that populist discursive sites such as *AOL* play an important role in helping shaping specific political events insofar as they continue to nurture and popularize populist themes and affective investments that can be activated at key political moments (such as the aggressive Conservative attack on the prospect of an opposition coalition government as fundamentally anti-democratic in December 2008).

Finally, our findings suggest a variety of important political and normative questions about the type of political deliberation that is authorized and modelled through the epistemological framework and rhetorical style of *AOL*. Central to any ideal vision of the public sphere and political deliberation are the answers given to the fundamental questions

of *who* gets to talk, *what type of knowledge/experience/opinions* should be accepted as legitimate and politically relevant, and *how* and *when* we should talk when engaging in political deliberation. What are the implicit and explicit answers that the epistemological populism and the argutainment style of *AOL* embody and perform? On one hand, there is something genuinely utopian insofar as the model of political deliberation performed by *AOL* challenges neo-liberal and technocratic tendencies to dismiss the value of political debate in favour of technical expertise. In this sense, *AOL's* commitment to encouraging ordinary individuals to speak and its valorization of lived experience as a form of legitimate knowledge are noble and, in one sense, echoes other approaches (such as Fraser, 1992; Negt and Kluge, 1993; Habermas, 1989) that seek to challenge the exclusion, marginalization and denigration of lived experience effected by many sectors of the public sphere and mass media. We too believe that any defensible model of participatory democracy needs to ensure an important place for discourse based on individual experience. And we could easily agree with Adler that it is crucial to give those who have been directly affected by crime time and space to share their anger, frustration, sadness and policy/political ideas in the public sphere.

On the other hand, we worry that a closer examination offers a much more disturbing portrait of *AOL's* implicit ideal of political deliberation. Consider the question of *who* gets to speak and *what should count* as the basis for valid knowledge. While we agree that lived individual experience can and should be an important starting point for political deliberation, we do *not* agree with the additional lesson hammered home by *AOL's* epistemology and style, namely, that it should also *end* there. Other presumptions of the show, that only those with specific types of experiences have the right to speak about particular issues or that the only knowledge worth considering is that which can be reduced to individualized anecdotes, are equally problematic. A model of the public sphere that focuses the critical attention of its audience solely on the ad/pro hominem dimensions of a speaker's subject position and style of speech, and restricts entry to the sphere of public deliberation to those speakers who pass the populist test of specific individual experience, is as problematic and arbitrarily exclusionary as abstract and expertise-obsessed models which seek to disallow all individual experience altogether.

Even more worrying, however, is *AOL's* implicit answer to the question of *how* we should engage in political debate. *AOL* cultivates an ideal and a sensibility of political deliberation in which there is little room, and even less reason, to *listen* to others. In a thoughtful book on the politics of listening, Susan Bickford opens with an epigraph from Heraclitus: "Not knowing how to listen, neither can they speak" (1996: 1). *AOL* inverts this ethic, schooling its listeners that in the cut-and-thrust of political debate, the only way to find one's own voice is to ignore the

voices of those who do not agree. Sometimes such silencing is achieved using obvious tactics: guest and caller choice, intimidation, verbal bullying, ridicule, and so forth. As we have shown, however, there are also more subtle stylistic patterns which encourage its listeners to stretch their ears wide shut. The insistence upon rapid-fire radio and entertaining brevity at all costs does exactly this. Adler loves to describe his program as a conversation with ordinary Canadians, but there is very little genuine interaction with callers that actually occurs beyond registering the concordance or clash of opinion. The program conducts a rapid survey of what callers think or feel but rarely takes the time to explore why they might hold a particular opinion or belief. Nobody ever changes their mind or demonstrates any willingness to recognize, accommodate or learn from those with differing perspectives. Adler's insistence on a rapid-fire radio style may encourage talk, but it doesn't seem to encourage listening and thinking.

Adler's confrontational and highly emotive style also encourages us to close our ears all the more tightly in a variety of other ways. For if emotional intensity on the part of the speaker and emotional reaction on the part of the listener are the sum and substance of legitimate political judgment and unequivocal expressions of authority, support and disgust come to be the primary hallmarks of legitimacy, then many contending sensibilities are ruled out. In the world of *AOL*, openness, reflectiveness, curiosity and exploratory empathy cannot but be read emotionally as indecision, uncertainty, weakness and prevarication. The fact that *AOL's* stylistic preferences are also explicitly articulated and justified by rhetorical tropes of populism only intensifies and solidifies this distaste for listening as it legitimates and encourages its audience to feel emotional and political disgust towards those who disagree or present different experiences (since they are a priori identified as self-interested elites). The rhetorical strategies of *AOL* thus create a model of a public sphere in which communication is viewed primarily as the individualized right to express oneself rather than a collective opportunity to deliberate that involves both listening and speaking.

Now, just to be clear, we fully understand that pure listening is an impossible idealization and that all of our ears are only partially open at the best of times. Moreover, we appreciate the importance of emotion to the political sphere and do not seek to expunge it (as if that were possible) nor to idealize some purely rationalist fiction of deliberation. However, our concern is that instead of treating political discussion as an opportunity to both *share* your own perspective and to try to *stretch open your ears* a bit further so as to *learn* from the perspectives of others—an admittedly messy opportunity that takes time and effort to realize—PTR views political discussion as nothing more than the spectacle of verbal gladiatorial battle in which there is room for nothing other than the game

of asserting and defending one's own views. Sometimes, of course, this type of debate is necessary and, as we all know, it can be an enjoyable and helpful exercise in certain contexts. It becomes a serious problem, however, when this is seen as the only type of dialogue possible on important issues of collective interest. And this is the real issue with *AOL*. For by exclusively employing and celebrating a narrow model of discussion as verbal combat, *AOL* teaches us that we should talk endlessly about the importance of discussion while it simultaneously teaches us that discussion never requires us to cultivate any genuine willingness to reconsider our opinions or explore the logic of political opinions we do not already hold.

Perhaps most worrying of all, however, is that by fusing the rhetoric of populism with the logic of the market, the discursive populism of *AOL* colonizes the emancipatory language and utopian aspirations of democratic deliberation. In this sense, *AOL's* affective and conceptual fusion of commercial entertainment and political discourse into a species of market populism (Frank, 2000) is a significant ideological accomplishment, for it encourages us to conceptualize ourselves not as simply a citizen or a consumer but rather as a hybrid—a consumizen or a citizumer perhaps—that is always already defined by the consumer side. It inspires us to take up the philosophical banner of market utopianism, promising us that it is only by recognizing and cultivating ourselves as empowered consumers that we will finally reach the promised land of democratic nirvana. Positioned as consumers in the marketplace of political ideas, we are taught that free political deliberation requires only that we express loudly our own desires, experience and tastes. We are taught that voting for market share with our earbuds is more relevant than engaging in political participation with representative democratic institutions (other than perhaps voting for parties who similarly promise to commodify politics and political speech). We are taught that we are under no obligation to listen to opinions or statements that we find unpleasant, challenging, emotionally ambivalent or just boring. Most of all, we learn that if we want to engage in democratic political deliberation, all we need to do is crank up the mic and turn off the headphones.

These are not trivial lessons for our political culture. And commercial PTR is not a trivial medium speaking to a small minority. Despite all the hand wringing that goes on about Parliamentary norms of discourse and civility in question period, many, many more Canadians learn much, much more about the norms of political debate from PTR than they do from the heckling on the Hill. For this reason and more, a full reckoning with the consequences of PTR's epistemological populism and its mode of argumentation is an essential first step if we are ever to redeem the utopian aspirations of democratic communication which *AOL* invokes only to deny.

Notes

- 1 Hutchby's detailed studies using conversational analysis (1992, 1996, 2001) makes him one of true exceptions to this rule. However, his investigations are almost exclusively undertaken in the UK context and do not focus on *political* talk radio. Boggs and Dirmann (1999) as well as book-length studies by David Barker (2002) and Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Capella (2008) also touch briefly on these issues. However, Barker and Jamieson and Capella devote significantly more attention to measuring talk radio's audience effects than conducting critical analysis of its discourse.
- 2 While five recent publications and conference papers on Canadian PTR offer some interesting insights into the phenomena (Sampert, 2009; Gingras, 2007; Dale and Naylor, 2005; Krebs, 2008; Marland and Kerby, 2008), none offers the type of critical discursive analysis we have conducted.
- 3 BBM Canada, "Top Line Radio Statistics S4—2005 (September 5–October 30)" and "Top Line Radio Statistics S1—2006 (January 9–March 5)." BBM Canada ratings which are publicly available are limited to a station-by-station comparison for a limited number of major markets. More detailed ratings and audience demographic data are proprietary and thus unavailable to the public. Note: CINW Montreal which was broadcasting the program in 2005–2006 has since switched formats and thus *AOL* is no longer available in that market.
- 4 The content of the program does not differ on a regional basis; the content aired in Alberta and British Columbia, for instance, is a rebroadcast of the live program which aired earlier in the day in Manitoba and Ontario.
- 5 During the campaign period, 18 of 30 broadcasts started with political topics. This compares to one of five broadcasts during the week of November 7, 2005 (four weeks before the campaign), and two of five broadcasts during the week of February 20, 2006 (four weeks after the campaign).
- 6 For one classic discussion of the definition of populism, see Margaret Canovan (1981).
- 7 The date refers to the *Adler On Line* broadcast from which the quote has been taken.
- 8 Crime issues were featured on 11 of 30 broadcast days as compared to health care which was discussed on 6 of 11 broadcast days.
- 9 Our analysis of this program was limited to the final two hours which was broadcast on the CKNW edition of the program.
- 10 Since the original version of this paper was written, the phrase "argutainment" has been used by Dick Meyer in his 2007 book *Why We Hate Us: American Discontent in the New Millennium*. Meyer, however, uses the term only twice in the entire book and never systematically develops it into a full concept.

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