FROM ACTOR TO OBJECT:

POLITICAL INFLUENCE, POLITICAL ENTERTAINERS,

AND THE SYMOBLIC CONSTRUCTION OF RUSH LIMBAUGH

DURING THE 2008 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

by

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Abstract:

This dissertation highlights dynamics of American political culture contributing to the development of political talk radio show host Rush Limbaugh's political influence. Current research suggests Limbaugh's political capital is produced from an ability to generate valuable advertising space for media organizations, his role as an opinion leader of a politically active audience, or his position within mediated political networks. Regardless of explanation all assert that Limbaugh's inclusion into national news and commentary legitimates and reflects Limbaugh's pre-existing political capital. The research presented here contends that the role of the press must be revaluated as a possible causal factor in establishing his political influence. Drawing from the analytical and empirical resources of Cultural Sociology this dissertation argues that cultural structures manifest in the press create a 'public image' of the talk show host. In this way Limbaugh is no longer just a political actor. He also becomes a symbolic political object. By richly recreating news and commentary centered on the 2008 US Presidential elections containing Limbaugh textual analysis can be used to provide evidence for the existence of these dynamics. In turn alternative explanations of Limbaugh's influence in the US political public sphere, along with other political entertainers like him, can be further evaluated.

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"Dynamics of Political Influence of Political Entertainers"

At times political influence appears to emerge from somewhat unlikely sources. One of these sources, political entertainers gain access to the political (or official) public sphere, and are regarded by others operating in that social space as wielding a significant degree of political influence. They have been increasingly afforded an aura of public authority and political legitimacy despite a lack of official position. The aim of this dissertation is to further advance understandings about the dynamics of political influence this type of public figure, the political entertainer, exercises within civil society.

Several sociological frameworks offer insights helpful for modelling the dynamics of political influence of political entertainers. General models of political influence offer explanations as to how power is exercised in a non-coercive manner by actors situated within particular social spaces without recourse to coercive force. These also models describe what forms influence takes, specifies the mechanisms through which influence is channeled, and describes effects on social outcomes. However, it is important to note that this scholarship has most often been restrictively applied to the political domains of social life. These are delineated by the actors and institutions comprising the state and civil society. How politicians, political parties, corporations, and social movements exercise influence has been thoroughly studied, even if scholars disagree about details.

More recent scholarship has addressed questions about how actors and institutions oriented towards the state and civil society but not drawing their authority from those spaces exercise political influence. For instance, robust models of how academics or lobbyists steer political outcomes have added further nuance to sociological understandings of political life. A subset of these frameworks have begun to tackle questions about political entertainers. This dissertation

attempts to make a modest contribution to this work by modelling how these non-elected, non-appointed, and non-office occupying actors who at best have weak claims to some form of expert knowledge come to steer political outcomes.

Any proposed explanation seeking to capture how political entertainers exert political influence must address certain questions. Research must investigate characteristics making political entertainers unique vis-à-vis other influential political actors. Scholarship must also contend with questions about how the mediated political organizational structures supporting the political entertainer, and more broadly the mediated political contexts within which they are positioned, impact their potential to steer outcomes. Likewise it is important to think about what frames, styles of rhetoric, and ideological stances political entertainers contribute to political discussion.

We will look at four specific analytical frameworks to further tease out these questions and attempt to resolve them. Each brings helpful concepts for developing answers to concerns raised here. A "political economy" and a "political culture" framework construct important foundational concepts helping tie together politics and media. A third "communicative-networked" framework makes a subsequent and crucial contribution to the questions outlined above. It puts forth models of organizations and actors operating within and across interconnecting mediated political networks. A final framework reimagines understandings of culture making it an autonomous social force portending important ramifications for politics. "Cultural sociology" has done much to refashion and reinvigorate understandings of power and influence. The next chapter explores ways each of the outlined frameworks can be used to study political entertainers and dynamics of political influence.

This dissertation suggest that much of the scholarship focused on the dynamics of influence exercised by political entertainers tell us a good deal about how political entertainers gain access to public discussion and debate, but to date they produce diminishing returns in explaining important political dynamics of influence once access is granted. In other words, many theoretical frameworks seem to explain considerably less about what happens *after* political entertainers enter the national public discussion and debate. This dissertation picks up at this point, and explores what happens after political entertainers enter the social spheres of the state and civil society.

More pointedly much of the extant scholarship on the subject suggests that incorporation by the press is a reflection of a political entertainer's already established influence. The research here seeks to invert the logic of this sequence. It will suggest that explanations of how political entertainers exercise political influence must consider *how* they are taken up as cultural objects in national discussion and debate. The research here asserts that the stories told about and with them are important factors contributing to the influence of political entertainers. To this end it will explore how political entertainers are textually constructed, and built into public discussion by studying their presentation in news and commentary. It must be considered that 'their' political influence may not exclusively be based on their actions, benefactors, or dedicated and active citizen-audiences. Rather, the very discussion they are a part of helps establish their public image.

The dissertation will develop a case study of particular political entertainer to create an exploratory model of how this process operates. Political talk radio host Rush Limbaugh will be the primary object of analysis because he is a prominent political entertainer with a well-documented history of participation in national political discussion, is considered by many speakers in the public sphere (e.g. journalists, politicians, academics, and audiences) as influential, and is an icon of a mass media channel relatively understudied within contemporary sociology.

Detailed reasons will be put forth as to why Limbaugh makes for a pragmatic case study well suited for the research here.

Perhaps the biggest way by which the research here diverges from the extant academic literature on the conservative herald deals with Limbaugh. Much of the extant literature conceptualizes exclusively as an actor whose exploits are reflected in the press this scholarship assesses how Limbaugh is "textualized", that is, how he is made part of the political discussion permeating through the writings and broadcasts of national news and commentary. In doing so the dynamics of Limbaugh's specific political influence can be better understood, and it is hoped that this in turn will contribute to developing more general understandings about dynamics of political influence pertaining to political entertainers. But first, let us sketch the growing recognition of entertainment's influence in the social sciences. We then outline the political entertainer and briefly situate the typological category within some germane academic literature and American political history.

Politics, Entertainment, and the Social Sciences:

For much of its history sociological scholarship addressed questions concerning influence. As the discipline developed scholarship has in part emphasized social dynamics existing between mass media and politics to explain influence. In these instances the research has privileged the relationship between 'journalism and politics' over 'entertainment and politics' leaving the latter a comparatively muted scholastic history. The differentiation between the two in the literature has traditionally constructed entertainment as less politically relevant because of an assumed lack of commitment to factuality, overriding commercial interest, or anemic level 'seriousness'. Not

claiming objective truth, being used to primarily sell commodities or services, and, purportedly, privileging pleasure over information for the civic minded, entertainment has historically been dismissed in sociological research as capable of generating or organizing serious political discussion (Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2007; Schudson 1978, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2011).

In the instances when the political impact of entertainment *was* considered it was often critiqued and lamented. Dismissed for banality, triviality, and standardized content claims were made that if anything entertainment was a force antagonistic to collective political debate and action. Entertainment, some scholars also argued, deformed the structures sustaining vibrant public discussion. By denigrating solidarity and distorting the representations of power relations it effectively stripped an audience of any civic capacity. Citizens were reduced to an unthinking, uncritical, and conformist mass of atomized individuals. This effectively rendered them susceptible to manipulation with dreadful social consequences. Entertainment was the furtive means by which hegemonic forces undermined possibilities for democratic governance (Adorno 1955, 1991; Adorno and Horkhimer 1972; Gitlin 1980, 2001; Gramsci 1972; Habermas 1987, 1989, 1992, 1996; Herman and Chomsky 1988).

When not the subject of outright scorn or ridicule other research did not readily differentiate between different types of mass media. This caused scholars to overlook important ways that entertainment's political influence was unique vis-à-vis other forms of mediated political influence. After all journalism is clearly not entertainment, so why assume they operate through identical social mechanisms. This is true even if the two are increasingly understood as overlapping. In these instances mass media, including entertainment, was understood as being a function of other social processes. It was at best a secondary mechanisms through which more

important social dynamics operated. This meant media itself lacked autonomy to exercise influence, and was reduced to a static black box outputted means of socialization (Lazarsfeld 1940; Lazarsfeld and Katz 1955; Lazarsfeld and Stanton 1941; Katz 1957, 1959, 1968, 1989, 2001, 2002, 2009; Tilly 2004).

Later research oriented towards neo-institutional and field theory made significant advances in better formulating the relationship of media and politics, and commenting on the how this in turn structured and impacted influence. The literature developed dynamic models that stressed the importance of networked organizations responsible for the production and distribution of political entertainment, the institutional logic permeating the social environment within which they operate, and the audience that consumes what they produce to explain influence. They have additionally been able to connect the "field of entertainment" with other social fields like that of journalism or the political field. (Benson and Neveu 2005; Cardiff 1980; Corner 1991; Hartley 1996; Jacobs 2005, 2005, 2007; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Klatch 1998; Neveu 2005; Scannell 1991; Smith 2007; Tolson 1991).

This literature has also more pointedly commented on political entertainers. Several studies have focused on how some entertainers successfully transitioned into influential politicians dully elected or appointed to an official state office or position. They suggest that skills developed as entertainers carry political purchase. Where successfully harnessed competencies developed by public figures from the stage, studio, or booth translate effectively into political acumen (Perse and Powell 1985; Nordlund 1978; Alperstein 1991; Marshall 1997; Turner 2004; Weiskel 2005).[1]

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[1] It is important to note that these studies stress that the position of a political entertainer is a means to an end. The political entertainer has limited influence until they attain a political position.

Cultural sociology has also re-envisioned the role of mass media and entertainment as related to politics. This scholarship opened further possibilities for serious consideration of how entertainers impact politics. It consistently suggests that political entertainment, that genre of entertainment drawing its subject matters from discussion transpiring in the political public sphere, has a profound impact on national political discussion. It has the potential to steer outcomes independently of material structures. Some have fashioned semiotic and narrative research into a formidable sociological tool. Highlighting popular and engaging tropes like caricature, parody, burlesque, farce, and slapstick they argue political entertainment engrosses interlocutors in a tantalizing and appealing manner. Others have developed insightful studies suggesting that the influence of entertainers emerges from the distinct rhetorical forms used to conduct political discussion (Apple 2009; Baym 2005; Cao 2010; Morris 2009; Fox, Koloen and Sahin 2007; Gaines 2007). This they argue induces a greater propensity for emotional engagement that can be sublimated into political action.

Studies have demonstrated that political entertainment has led to higher levels of political knowledge and activity (not to mention higher levels of partisanship) on the part of audiences. The most important contribution of this research for the purposes of this study has been the conceptualization of the relationship between entertainment and politics as one structured by immaterial but autonomously impactful patterned systems of meaning. The type of discussion transpiring in the public sphere and its political ramifications for social life is in part attributed to the shaping power entertainment exercises through its uniquely expressive language. Invoking fun, play, and contingency while inverting norms associated with journalism, political entertainers captivate audiences by reimagining how the political world is publicly constructed and rendered

(Alexander 2006; Baym 2005; Fox, Koloen, and Sahin 2007; Jacobs 2003b, 2005, 2007; Jacobs and Wilde 2013 70; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jones 2012 a, b, Jones and Baym 2012 a, b).[2]

These insights opened the door for understanding political entertainers as cultural objects that impart influence. Generated in the field of entertainment they can be conceptualized as an embodied brand signifying easily identifiable politics and performance style. This conceptualization is adopted in this research. By considering the institutional context and field position occupied by political entertainers, and the cultural structures manifest in the iterative public exchanges political entertainments become part of, new understandings emerge as to how they come to steer public meaning and hence exercises some degree of influence. These help scholars better account for how political entertainers are able to exercise influence while not possessing, or are incapable of accessing, any form of compelling authority or political power legitimized by the state.

However, before further description of the specific case study to be used in empirical analysis, let alone a more detail account of the theoretical foundations for the project, it is important to further develop the typology of 'political entertainer'. What follows is a brief illustration of political entertainers operating in American politics who paved the way for those like the case study. By highlighting historical precedent this section will suggest that insights generated by studying Limbaugh are applicable elsewhere.

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[2] This research has also recognized the importance of material structure, but has provided further nuance. Drawing from neo-institutional and field theory they have asserted that political entertainment is personality centered, and the relationships of actors occupying positions with other actors both inside and outside the field of entertainment is crucial to understand. For instance, the host of a political entertainment programs dominate their respective programs, and the public persona of the host becomes an integral part of the performance itself.

A Fantastic Source of Political Influence - The Political Entertainer:

We do not need to look very hard to get a sense of who qualifies as a political entertainer, and how they are recognized as politically influential. Consider some headlines about political entertainer Jon Stewart. In spite of background in comedy journalists position him as a public political figure capable of steering things like national legislation. He has been featured in articles splashed across the front page major daily national newspapers with titles like "In 'Daily Show' Role on 9/11 Bill, Echoes of Murrow" (Carter and Stelter. December 16th 2010. New York Times. ; Kakutani. August 17 2008. New York Times.). This article claimed Stewart's public appeals and lobbying efforts were instrumental in breaking up the legislative logjam preventing the passage of bill designed to subsidize the cost of medical care for Ground Zero responders suffering aliments related to the September 11th attacks. [3] A comedian with the ability to get legislation through a dysfunctional legislative is impressive.

But don't just take the journalists' word for it. These articles quote high ranking government officials and powerful politicians as agreeing to the extent of influence exerted by Comedy Central's "fake news" host. Public praise from people like former Obama Administration Press Secretary, Robert Gibbs, and Charles Schumer (D-NY), one of the most powerful Democrats in the United States Senate, are regular features in these articles (Hernandez. December 23rd 2010.. The New York Times; Madison. December 21st 2010. CBS Evening News). It becomes increasingly apparent that along with his role as a comic stories such as these create and solidify an image of Stewart as a major national political actor. Incorporated by journalists into news and

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[3] The Zadroga Act, the 9/11 First Responder Health Care Bill discussed above, passed Congress on December 22nd 2010 and was signed into law on January 2nd 2011.

commentary figures like Stewart are regularly established as playing a significant role in national political affairs.

To stay with the example further journalists have also used Stewart as way to invoke reflexivity of their own public role. He has been constructed as acting as a distilled version of themselves. It is not uncommon for him to be treated as a well-respected member of their profession embodying journalism's highest ideals. From his position he reports news, reports on the news media, and acts an editorializing commentator on politics and journalism. Articles have been blunt with titles like, "Is Jon Stewart the Most Trusted Man in America?" (Kakutani. August 17, 2008 The New York Times).

He has also received praise after a now well-known example of media meta-commentary. In the fall of 2004 Stewart appeared as a guest on CNN's popular debate format program, Crossfire. Ostensibly there to promote the release of his award winning book, *America (the Book)*, Stewart took the opportunity to launch a polemic against the CNN program and others like it. During the broadcast he implored hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala to "stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America". Programs like Crossfire, Stewart contended, were political theater that debased public discussion. Hiding behind the veneer of objective news and well-reasoned critical commentary he argued that the shows were partisan yelling matches adding little value to public discussion and debate. If anything these shows perverted journalism, and undermined the potential of the political public sphere. For the Comedy Central host programs like Crossfire were anything but serious, and he analogized them as akin to "saying pro wrestling is a show about athletic competition" (Stewart. October 15 2004. CNN).

Yet, Stewart drew on his status a comedian when dealing with critiques. After his censorious missive one host of Crossfire, Tucker Carlson, retorted that when former Presidential

candidate John Kerry appeared on the Daily Show uncritical softball questions were posed. Stewart reminded Carlson that he was a comedian with a comedy program on a cable channel dedicated to comedy. By contrast Carlson and Begala had a program on one of the major cable news networks, and claimed the role of journalistic and political commentators. This is significant in that although he acts like a serious commentator critiquing the news, Stewart is in fact an entertainer who does not bear the same responsibilities as Carlson and Begala. For Stewart the onus of journalistic ethics rested on the latter. Stewart's appearance on Crossfire was consequential in that his critiques came as if he was speaking from inside the journalistic field, and those already positioned within seemed to incorporate him into journalism by holding him to particular standards. The take away is that he was initially constructed as a journalist even if the purpose of doing so was an attempt to portray him as a hypocrite.

Two reflections made by journalists express this. First, Stewart was labeled a comedian, but he was also considered the "most influential political commentator" in the United States (Editorial Desk. January 9 2005. New York Times). That is, his opinions on matters of public concern became an important and respected part of the ongoing commentary in the political public sphere. What he said mattered, and had consequence. Second, his commentary was understood as instrumental in raising an important critique of contemporary journalism. For instance, the appearance on Crossfire was broadly understood as a direct and overwhelming factor contributing to CNN's decision to cancel the program (de Moraes. October 19 2004.The Washington Post). He was understood as a new "cultural force" reverberating throughout the political public sphere, acting as the reflexive conscience of journalistic integrity (Barker. November 2 2004. USA Today; Bianculli. November 1 2004. Daily News). The question then arises as to how Stewart, a comedian holding no official position in the field of journalism or politics, is broadly understood as being

influential. The essence of this question, how an entertainer is so impactful in the political public sphere, lies at the heart of this dissertation.

However, Stewart or Limbaugh are far from the first. The roots of political entertainers and the recognition of their political influence draws from roots tied to the dawn of broadcast mass media. Political entertainers, these non-journalists and non-politicians, who emerged from positions occupied within the field of entertainment, and seemed to exert national political influence can be traced to at least the 'Golden Age' of broadcast radio that occurred over a two and half decade span beginning in the mid-1920s. Although roots could be traced even deeper this inchoate phase in the history of broadcast radio is important for the merger of politics and mass mediated entertainment.[4] Print journalists, preachers, and vaudevillians all converged on the new platform creating new spaces of interaction within the political public sphere (Barnouw 1966, 1968)[5]

The last category, vaudevillian, could draw least on political authority, yet they became influential none the less. Take for instance the case of Walter Winchell. Winchell brought the glamour and scandal of vaudeville to the nation, and in part contributed to the prominence of the role of celebrity in national dialogue. After lukewarm success on vaudeville circuits Winchell went on to become one of "the country's best-known, widely read *journalists* as well as its most *influential*" (Whitman. February 1 1972. New York Times emphasis added). During his nearly three decade long career in print, radio, and, briefly, television Winchell's style of politic gossip

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[4] In chapter two we will trace the roots of political entertainers a bit further back to the writings of Max Weber.

[5] Charles Coughlin, the "radio priest", broadcast for most of the 1930s and focused particularly on the relationship between the United States and the World Court, helping inspire a political movement that for a time posed a significant challenge to the political administration of FDR. Perhaps no single individual contributed more to the development of editorialized news than Ed Murrow, formerly a print journalist. Through his broadcasts on the events unfolding in Europe leading to the outbreak of the Second World War, he brought the chaotic world of international politics and interstate conflict into the living rooms of countless Americans. His ability to present the news accompanied by analysis cemented further the opinion making role of the media.

added dramatic flair to news and commentary. For example his phrases entered into the national lexicon. His signature greeting, "Good Evening, Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at Sea" was stamped upon the American zeitgeist. His support of Franklin Roosevelt, as well as his fervent anti-Nazi and anti-(American) isolationist positions were credited with convincing broad swaths of the American electorate that problems abroad were significant domestic threats. Even though the talk show host's relationship with Roy Cohn made Winchell a staunch apologist for Joseph McCarthy, ultimately leading to national ignominy, his impact on both "tabloid journalism…and *even* Establishment journalism – remains unquestioned" (Weinraub. November 18th 1998.New York Times. Emphasis added).

Despite connections to powerful politicians of the day Winchell had no claim to political authority himself, and therefore his influence must have emerged from elsewhere. Attributing his authority in the political public sphere as a derivative of his position as a journalist is not a convincing explanation either. To think of Winchell as a journalist, say as one would apply the label to his contemporaries like Ed Murrow, Eric Sevareid, or William Shirer, all of whom also began in print and moved to radio, would flatten important differences. Unlike the others Winchell drew on roots in entertainment rather than journalism, and became known for an ability to blend "hard news and opinion, gossip and gags into an irresponsible, if compelling, mélange" (Rich. New York Times. October 23rd 1994). Although his broadcasts (and columns) focused on the dominant topical items of the day they featured satire, hyperbole, turgid prose, and scathing humor. Combining a novel mix of politics and celebrity he captivated national audiences, and would leave a legacy as one of the most listened to (and read) political entertainers in American history (Barnouw 1966, 1968; Douglas 1999; Gabler 1995; Klurfeld 1976; Marquis 1984). As is often the

case with political entertainers Winchell's penchant for capturing public attention and steering public discussion were broadly recognized although not fully understood.

Winchell is a classic example of a political entertainer, and others like him still play an important role in national political discussion. In addition to his contemporaries such as Limbaugh and Stewart people like Stephen Colbert, Bill Maher, Glenn Beck, Keith Olbermann, and Don Imus are each seemingly imbued with some ability to command political influence, and steer public opinion while lacking political or journalistic authority. There are several resonant features between them. Each shares an ability to use their status as an entertainer as an admission card and shield in political discussion. On the one hand their position and connections allow them to bypass many traditional gatekeepers, and gain access to the political public sphere. On the other, when needed, their claims to being entertainers is also used to disavow responsibility or dismiss the implications for their utterances. After all their often self-reported objective is to retain an audience through amusement not objectivity. It is important for each to sell out live shows, satisfy audience and advertiser expectations, and be known for doing so. Being engaging and enjoyable takes precedence with political entertainers over veracity, and a capacity to be informative.

Political entertainers are also positioned within impressive institutionalized mass media platform with sizable audiences ranging into the millions. Moreover, they all are the corporeal fulcrums of nationally distributed mass media programs that take politics, although not exclusively, as a central topical matter. Political entertainers approach discussions about politics by culling news from other sources, and offering heavily editorialized opinions expressed in entertaining tropes. Additionally, in terms of media channels they are polysemic. Although they may primarily perform on one platform they often appear on others. It is also worth mentioning

that this type of public actor, as is the case with those specifically mentioned above, are often subjected to public scrutiny.

Despite great variation in ideology, style of presentation, and organizational context political entertainers noted for their influence possess these similar characteristics. In more precise terms, which will be further discussed in subsequent chapters, the analytical strands developed above point towards a conceptual typology of the political entertainer. These public actors are marked as such because of the respective field position(s) they occupy, the developmental trajectory of their careers, the substance of content they produced, their organizational platform, their degree of access to the political public sphere, and the recognition they receive from other relevant political and journalistic actors.

The sociological frameworks highlighted previously provide substantial resources for fleshing these features as to address the dynamics of political entertainers' influence. For instance, institutional and field scholarship helps account for the specific position a political entertainer occupies in social space, and mechanisms by which access to the political public sphere is granted. This framework suggests they are informed by a particular habitus developed through processes of socialization related to entertainment media (comedy, sports, or otherwise). While they share content with other public interlocutors in a topical sense unlike journalists, they are unbridled by norms of objectivity. They are story tellers seeking to invoke emotion through engaging and imaginative content. Moreover, the methods of conveyance are only bounded by the creativity of the political entertainer. In this way political entertainers have a wide range of latitude to a present public discussion, and the novelty they bring also contributes to creating and sustaining their access to the political public sphere. It is the relational social position of political entertainers in the

political public sphere that puts them in stark contrast with the role of others also in the political public sphere, like journalists, reinforcing further distinctions.

When combined with a political economy framework stressing organizational imperatives to generate profits a further detailed picture of a political entertainer develops. The organizational structures playing central roles in the production and distribution of content incentivize political entertainers to draw large audiences for the purpose of generating advertising revenue. Housed within the same media conglomerates as news producers, governing corporate bodies stress the promotion of synergistic content. This mechanism offers additional explanations as to how political entertainers access the public spaces of debate and discussion. For its part the political culture research stresses an ostensibly unique type of relationship political entertainers come to share with their audience. In addition to developing a stable commodity to be sold to advertisers, the political entertainer also takes on qualities of an opinion leader. A trusting audience is seen as one primed for political action.

Each of the analytical perspectives contributes to a picture of what a political entertainer is. While this will be further refined in subsequent chapters what these understandings of the political entertainer do not seem to consider head on is the expression of political influence despite a lack legitimate political authority. Further knowledge about political entertainers, and more pointedly the political influence they exert, would be helpful.

Fortunately, Cultural Sociology has made important contributions that can further refine a typological schematic of political entertainers vis-à-vis other types of participants in the political public sphere. If used, not only will sociological understandings of political entertainers expand, but this also opens the possibility for contributing to developing better models of the dynamics of political influence in a mediated public sphere. The next section will turn to the proposed subject

of such a case study, the conservative political talk radio host Rush Limbaugh, and explain why he is a good candidate for this research.

Rush Limbaugh the Political Entertainer – A Case Study:

For scholars interested in the dynamics of American political culture, political talk radio host Rush Limbaugh serves as a quintessential archetype of a political entertainer. The conservative provocateur readily fits into this group of public actors who have made considerable inroads into national political discussion. Like others he has professional roots in entertainment, and does not occupy a space or position guaranteeing access to state institutions as resources. Like other political entertainers he is not an elected official, has never been appointed to any government post, and has never been a formal ranking member of a political party. In fact, by his own admission, Limbaugh asserts he wears an "entertainer hat" (Limbaugh. March 16th 2012. The Rush Limbaugh Program). He has referred to himself as "just (an) entertainer on the radio", and periodically expresses surprise at the designation bestowed upon him as major national political player (Limbaugh. The Rush Limbaugh Program. March 8th 2012).

Yet, he is recognized for being political influential in the political public sphere. Others with stakes in the political field, like journalists, activists, and politicians, regard him as wielding influence. For instance he was lauded in ushering in significant shifts in the leadership structure in Washington. For his purported contributions to the "Republican Revolution" of the mid 1990s he was declared as an honorary member of the 104th Congress (Egan. January 1 1995. New York

Times).[6] Another instance of his political capital can be measured in the over two hundred mentions of his name in the Congressional Record over the past two decades (Government Printing Office transcript search of the Congressional Record 102st Congress (1991) – 112th Congress (2012)). Others seem to recognize that independent of any entertainment dispositions his political dexterity is highly regarded, and it can steer political outcomes.

In the late 1980s academics recognized Limbaugh as a pivotal and transformative figure in the history of talk radio crediting him for making an indelible mark upon the medium and genre. After local success in San Francisco Limbaugh's program began national syndication in 1988, and over the course of the next two decades he would come to dominate the format, and make "political talk radio a national concern" (Douglas 1999 308).[7] Within four years of national syndication Limbaugh was heard on over 500 stations gathering the largest group of daily listeners in talk radio history estimated between 12 and 20 million people per week. Three years thereafter the program would be carried on over 600 stations with audiences estimated more pointedly around 15 million regular listeners a week. At the time of writing broadcasts can be heard on terrestrial radio in all fifty states and the District of Columbia (and in many places on multiple stations). The program further spans time zones being broadcast internationally via the Armed Services Radio Network.[8] With the Internet the reach of his voice is ostensibly global.[9] In short, Limbaugh's program has

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[6] The Republican Revolution refers to the GOP election victories in the 1994 Congressional election. Republicans gained control of the Senate as well the House for the first time in 42 years, and many state level offices.

[7] After several gigs hosting sports and music programs across the nation, some of which with the stage name "Jeff Christie", Limbaugh entered talk radio on KFBK Sacramento. His path to national stardom began with his role as a replacement of controversial talk show host Morton Downey, Jr. in 1984. Somewhat ironic, Downey was fired from the station for a politically incorrect joke. Such jokes would become a regular feature on the Limbaugh program. http://www.newsreview.com/sacramento/living-under-limbaugh/content?oid=914298

[8] A full list of stations that carry Limbaugh in the United States can be found at http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/stations/all_stations/

[9] Although research is lacking in the area of Limbaugh's online presence his Facebook page has over 1.5 million connections (i.e. likes and follows), and over 400,000 on Twitter. At the time of writing there is an admittedly paltry 300 people connected with the talk show host via Google+.

garnered the largest continuous radio audience in American history (Barker 1998 a, b; Barker and Knight 2000; Bennett 2009; Douglas 1999; Hofstetter 1996; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Talkers Heavy Hundred 2000-2011).[10]

The business model of the program has also be noted as highly innovative. The program began at the time of convergence between national radio syndication and satellite technology. This allowed the business model structuring it to develop as it did, and it has served Limbaugh well placing his net worth as one of the highest amongst talk show hosts. Additionally, the programming (i.e. the organizational structure of how a broadcast is set to run in terms of material, segments, guests, etc.), advertising, and content structures of his broadcast set important benchmarks for talk radio (Douglas 1999; Mayer 2004).

More recently academics have displayed an intellectual curiosity concerning Limbaugh's role in national politics. His political influence is a core factor in a small but growing body of research. He is credited as a source of a particular conservative language, and his program is understood as an important node for the American political Right. In some form he "unofficially" fulfills important functions of a political party, shapes and organizes voters' preferences and actions, and steers national political outcomes. Given his audience size, connections to media and political elites, and entertaining way for carrying on political conversation Limbaugh has come to be understood by academics as politically influential.

Another important dimension of Limbaugh described in this scholarship point to how in certain instances his comments are picked up by others. Journalists, columnists, experts, and

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[10] The heavy hundreds lists that were not available from Talkers or secondary sources were provided courtesy of Robert Liggett Jr., partner of Liggett Holdings. The investment firm holds stakes in telecommunication companies specializing in radio, television, data, and print.

pundits regularly include Limbaugh in editorials and "hard" news. Articles and broadcasts report about his devoted and active audience, his sway over segments of the GOP leadership, his ability to speak on behalf of American Conservatives, and his knowledge on matters related to media and politics. In short, newspapers articles, television programs, and other radio broadcasts cover how his often polemic interjections into national discussion become folded in to the official public sphere (Apple 2009; Barker 1998 a, b; Douglas 1999; Harris, Mayer, Saulino, and Schiller 1996; Hofstetter 1996; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Jones 1998; Smith 2007).

Yet, an important area escaping the current academic literature on Limbaugh is one that would help bridge the gap between its subject matter, and broader questions concerning the relationship between politics, journalism, entertainment, and influence. Academics have paid sparse attention to fleshing out Limbaugh's presence in the texts produced by the journalistic field beyond noting he it is incorporated into them. Studying this in more depth provides an opportunity to flesh out *how* he is folded into national political discussion. This also allows for alternative conceptions of Limbaugh to be created. It opens the possibility to distinguish between Limbaugh as an *actor* in the political public sphere vis-à-vis his position as an *object* in the political public sphere. This is a largely unremarked upon mechanism through which this research asserts Limbaugh gains access to key sites of public discursive contestation and is influential over them. Studying Limbaugh with this distinction in mind would not only grow the aforementioned literature on his political import, but it would also complement current research by social scientists focused on the relationship between journalism, entertainment, and politics. While this dynamic will be explored over the course of this research we now turn to an illustrative instantiation of Limbaugh vacillating between actor and object in a story from the late 2000s.

<u>The Phony Solider and Political Influence – An Example of Limbaugh as Actor and Object:</u>

A seemingly innocuous *Associated Press* (AP) article appeared in a Seattle newspaper in the fall of 2007 reporting on a scandal involving several individuals falsely claiming veteran status for the purpose of acquiring federal benefits. The fraud cost the US Government nearly $1.4 million. The tone of the article suggested the deception was an unnecessary additional stressor set against a political context of two nationally divisive wars, and an unprecedented economic downturn.[11]

Two antagonists were designated in the article. On the one hand lackadaisical and overly bureaucratic federal administrators failed in the task of oversight. On the other unscrupulous and undeserving citizens took advantage of much needed social services. Several cases in the article highlighted the systemic nature of the problem, and stressed the moral deprivation of those committing the fraud. After the initial publication the story was covered by ABC during a September 24th broadcast of *World News with Charles Gibson*.[12] Although worthy of condemnation and capable of acting as a potential springboard for further discussion about important national matters, the story barely circulated, and where it did it had minimal traction. To borrow from Schudson, this story, at least initially, did not seem to "have legs".[13]

Yet, there was one place where the story *was* picked up, and seemed to galvanize attention. Two days after the ABC coverage Limbaugh tangentially broached the topic during his radio broadcast. He noted that one of the offenders cited, Jesse Macbeth, illegitimately received over

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[11] Associated Press. Sep 21, 2007.Komo News

[12] Charles Gibson & Brian Ross.. September 24th 2007. *ABC News*

[13] See Schudson (2011 pg. 174)

$10,000 in benefits, and had a long track record of misrepresenting himself in public. He often spoke publicly about his anti-war stance claiming authority because of his veteran status, ostensibly from serving in the Iraq War. Because he claimed to be solider Limbaugh reasoned that Macbeth believed his opinion carried weight in the formal and informal publics where discussion about the War transpired. Yet, Macbeth's status as a veteran was questionable at best.[14] According to Limbaugh the national news media had apparently long reported many of his comments without doing due diligence concerning the veracity of his claims of military service. The dishonest washout was a typical "poster boy for the anti-war left". For Limbaugh this reinforced for him that soldiers taking an anti-war stance should be treated with skepticism, and the "Mainstream" news media would report anything to suit its ideological cause.[15] In short, soldiers against war were probably lying about something, and Mainstream news was complicit.

Putting aside for a moment the critique of American journalism, a caller placed on air took exception with Limbaugh's characterizations of anti-war veterans. Claiming to be a Republican and a soldier, the caller vocalized sentiments of the anti-war movement; withdrawal from Iraq was a national imperative. He proudly served, but the military excursions were an unequivocal mistake. In turn, a subsequent caller also claiming a history of military service was placed on the air, and responded directly to the first caller's comments. The second caller articulated the position that withdrawal was not only a mistake it was tantamount to defeat, and in all likelihood the first caller was of the same ilk as Macbeth. The second caller used a strategy often employed in public discussion and the Limbaugh program. Instead of *engaging* the ideas of the first caller, he attempted to *disqualify* his legitimacy and therefore undercut the merit of his opinion. In doing so

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[14] Macbeth claimed to be an Army ranger who witnessed his unit engage in illegal acts against Iraqi civilians. In reality he was discharged from the Army while still in boot camp. He never stepped foot on Iraqi soil (Ross and Walter 2007).

[15] The idea of "mainstream" news media will be explored in more detail later.

the second caller reinforced the claims Limbaugh had made that any soldier with anti-war sentiments was disingenuous, and most likely motivated by a political agenda.

The second caller also touched upon another topic commonly featured on the Limbaugh program pointing to the shortcomings of "Mainstream" press. Limbaugh embraced the second caller's analysis interjecting that the liberally controlled press only speaks to "*phony* soldiers." Only the Mainstream Press would support withdrawal, and the public would only be exposed to these individuals because bias journalists "never talk to *real* soldiers." The refusal of the press to interview *"real* soldiers*"* was disappointing but not unexpected. Supporting instrumental political ends journalists create stories for the purpose of reinforcing Liberal distortions about the widespread unpopularity of the war. Obsequiously, the second caller agreed. *"If you talk to any real* soldier, and they're proud to serve… they understand their sacrifice and they're willing to sacrifice for the country.*"*

Following the call Limbaugh shifted to a monologue segment where the story of the "phony soldier" transitioned to focus on the Mainstream press. The lack of due diligence on the part of liberal reporters and commentators was a systemic failure indicative of larger issues plaguing the national news media. Limbaugh continued, "You probably haven't even heard about this. And, if you have, you haven't heard much about it. This doesn't fit the narrative and the template in the Drive-By Media and the Democrat Party as to who is a genuine war hero.*"* For the talk show host the dishonest soldier was a relatively banal detail. The *real* story was about the Mainstream media consistently producing dodgy reporting. This was simply an additional instance in a long line of examples of the press failing in its mission. The fact that the Mainstream news did not bother to research anything about Macbeth's biography was troubling to Limbaugh who stressed that the press either negligently overlooked basic facts that should have been caught, or the facts were

willfully omitted because they did not conform to a liberal narrative about US foreign policy. [16]

The rhetorical pivot was quick. An incompetent government agency became subtext, and the soldier in question acted as a mere symptom of a larger problem. Again, for Limbaugh the Mainstream news media were at fault and that was the *real* story. The press wanted to make a political point, and if it required supporting a fabrication so be it. He surmised his point before a commercial break telling listeners, "The truth for the left is fiction that serves their purpose." [17]

Much like the original story the conversation amongst the callers and Limbaugh as well as his following monologue initially went unnoticed in the press. However, it was almost immediately picked up by a Liberal leaning political observatory, Media Matters for America.[18] Within twenty-four hours the watchdog group distributed a press release condemning Limbaugh's comments about the "phony soldier." Limbaugh's discursive creation of congruence between anti-war soldiers and dishonest citizens posing as soldiers, they asserted, was insulting. It was calculating, self-serving, and deceptive, and his comments were an affront to all who serve. Dissenting from US foreign policy was an enshrined right, and soldiers still possessed the rights of citizens especially when not on active duty. In their opinion disparaging remarks about dissenting soldiers were unconscionable, and it was unethical to equate dissent with deceit.

However, Media Matters' press release communicated something more interesting and problematic for Limbaugh. The actual story of the fraud committed again became subtext for a narrative that ironically became common to both Media Matters and Limbaugh. Just at Limbaugh

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[16] This claim by Limbaugh could not be independently verified. In fact a LexisNexis search for Macbeth from the beginning of 2007 to the time he was mentioned on the Limbaugh program produced just over a dozen hits. ALL coverage, regardless of media outlet, exclusively focused on how Macbeth *had* publicly lied.

[17] All of the above quotes were taken from a transcript provided by Media Matters for America based upon the September 26th broadcast of Limbaugh's program. Any italicization represents emphasis added.

[18] For a discussion of "political observatories" see Schudson 2010.

criticized the Mainstream press for willful distortion Media Matters leveled the same claim against the talk show host. They substantiated their claim citing a discrepancy between the transcription of Limbaugh's conversation with callers and his following monologue posted on the program's website with their transcription of the recording of the program. This was not a minor detail. They alleged nearly a minute and a half of dialogue containing the "phony solider" reference was cut from the website transcript. Doing so, they argued, allowed Limbaugh's broad categorization of all anti-war soldiers as profane to be recast and sanitized, so it appeared he was speaking exclusively about Macbeth. This was an unabashed attempt to "cover up (Limbaugh's) recent characterization of service members who advocate U.S. withdrawal from Iraq*"* as phony *(*Media Matters 2007*).* Limbaugh, they claimed, was guilty of the very sins of misrepresentation and omission he so often leveled at the press. Again, Limbaugh not only reported his stated positions incorrectly, but he *willfully* distorted *his own words* to make a political point.

Shortly after the accusations of fraudulent editing the story was given new life. Borrowing again from Schudson the story grew "legs". The week following the press release from Media Matters Limbaugh's comments were featured in nearly two dozen instances throughout the national press. With coverage intensifying something else unexpected happened. As the story circulated throughout the official public sphere it was amplified, and became such a part of national discussion it commanded the attention of the US Senate. The story hit a crescendo of sorts as Majority leader Harry Reid (D-NV) addressed a publicly circulated letter of denunciation signed by 40 other Senate Democrats to Clear Channel CEO Mark Mays. The letter asked Limbaugh's syndicator to publicly rebuke the talk show host's vituperative accusations.[19] It is worth repeating

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[19] Despite pleas for bipartisan repudiation of the comments the letter was only signed by Senate Democrats.

that this happened only *after* coverage of Limbaugh's comments and Media Matters' response were featured with increasing regularity throughout the national press.

With the letter made public, Limbaugh relayed the story to his audience citing it as another example of the malfeasance of the Democratic leadership and their Mainstream News collaborators. The original anti-liberal/anti-press frame was recast to fit the developments of the story. Limbaugh claimed that instead of solving issues facing the country Democrats were picking a fight with an entertainer and private citizen. To further their goals they took his comments out of context to create a political story where none existed. He told his audience the controversy started to "blossom … in the Drive-By Media... So this is the anatomy of a smear, and this is how it starts…. Folks, I do not need, nor do you, lectures from liberals, Democrats, Drive-By Media people on whether or not they served in the military about supporting our troops*"*. What was transpiring was expected by the purportedly prescient Limbaugh, and should have been expected by his devoted listeners. [20]

The letter generated considerably more press attention than the initial fraud story, Limbaugh's comments, or Media Matters' complaints about the redacted posting. When Mays refused the request by Senate Democrats to censure Limbaugh, the host again interjected further steering the story towards a dramatic dénouement. Rather than let the letter fade into last week's headlines the talk show host upped the ante. With somewhat typical bravado Limbaugh auctioned the letter on EBay generating a little over four million dollars for a military related charity. [21]

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[20] Quotes of Limbaugh take from his radio program (Limbaugh. September 28th 2007. The Rush Limbaugh Radio Show).

[21]The Marine Corps-Law Enforcement Foundation, a charity providing scholarships to children whose parents died in service, received the proceeds. Limbaugh promised to match the winning bid from the Eugene B. Casey Foundation which raised $2.1 million (Tucker. October 20th 2007. Washington Post).

To sum, Limbaugh predictably adopted and pushed back against media and political scrutiny with frames typically espoused on his program. The story, Limbaugh said, was not *really* about *his* comments. It was about the perpetual conflict between Liberals and Conservatives. It started with accusations of omissions by the press for the purpose of bolstering an anti-war narrative. When Limbaugh "exposed" the distortions he became a target of Liberal media slander. The frame was further developed when Majority Leader Reid became involved. The Democratic leadership emerged from behind their Mainstream Media screen, and showed their true colors. Put another way, the press lied, Limbaugh pointed it out, and a bull's-eye was painted on him by vindictive liberals. At this point the differentiation between Media Matters, the Mainstream Press, and Democrats dissolved. A vast 'left wing conspiracy' was afoot. Conservatives, whose only fault was telling the truth, were under attack. Limbaugh remained resolute, and he urged others to stand with him.

From the time Senate Democrats crafted their letter to its auction nearly 80 articles or broadcasts were circulated throughout the press.[22] Over the course of the "phony soldier" story this worked out to an average of nearly two and half articles or broadcasts *per day* for an entire month. Moreover, these were articles and broadcasts placed Limbaugh squarely into the discussions and debates involving national political leaders. Looking beyond the seemingly incredible feat of a political entertainer with no state sanctioned authority effectively challenging (and some could argue besting) one of the most powerful Democrats in the federal government at the time, the sheer ubiquity of Limbaugh's presence in public discussion as a result of this story is significant in and of itself. It precisely this dynamic, Limbaugh's inclusion into public discussion

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[22] A LexisNexis search of the news publications and broadcast transcripts used in this research, described in further detail in chapter three, mentioning the evolving "Phony Soldier" story resulted in 74 hits. The time frame began October 2 (the date letter was sent) and ended November 1st (the date of letter's auction).

that will be the prominent focus of this research. As we will shortly see counting and recreating texts including Limbaugh will allow us to generate insight into his political influence that has remained unremarked upon to date.

Access and Recognition … or Something Else?

Although Limbaugh's program, audience, and political networks help him gain access to the political public sphere, does this in and of itself provide a full explanation of his political influence? I suggest it does not, and in the example just recounted his program, audience, and political networks cannot fully account for how the story played out, or why Limbaugh was such a force to contend with. An initial place to see why this position is taken is to look at other political entertainers that have similar programs, audiences, and networks, but are not regarded as being politically influential in the sense Limbaugh is.

A Lexis-Nexis search of the same time period and sources used in this project was conducted using a sample of other Conservative radio hosts consistently featured within the top 40 hosts in Talkers Magazine's "Heavy Hundred". They share several important attributes with Limbaugh that have been cited in other research as reasons for his political influence. Each currently hosts a Conservative talk radio program following a similar format of monologue and call-in. In addition all are nationally syndicated with sizable audiences. All have also had notable involvement in the entertainment industry, and they make regular contact with Right leaning politicians and political operatives.

Out of the top 40 hosts seven fit the criteria listed above. All seven produced a combined total of 284 hits.[23] For comparison, the same search parameters applied to Limbaugh produced

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[23] Glenn Beck (157), Dennis Miller (109), Todd Schmitt (0), Doug Stephen (0) Michael Medved (14) ,Phil Valentine (0), Dennis Prager (4)

over 500 hits.[24] The question then becomes, why is Limbaugh such a dominant force when these other Conservative political entertainers sharing strong affinities with him appear politically marginal by comparison? Each broadcasts to relatively large and presumably active conservative audiences exposed to similar content. Moreover, they have access to national airwaves, and ostensibly the political public sphere. If access and ideology, two mainstays of explanations for Limbaugh's influence, do not account for this variation with other Conservative political entertainers in terms influence, then what alternative explanations exist?

I propose several factors are at play. A predominant factor is that although many of these hosts speak *to* the political public sphere *responses* from others participating in discussion are markedly less. Consider the industry trade journal's respective rankings of Limbaugh, and inclusion into news and commentary vis-à-vis other Conservative talk show hosts who also emerged from backgrounds in entertainment. A major distinction is that Limbaugh was ubiquitously mentioned relative to the others.

A central claim the research here makes is that an unaccounted factor contributing to Limbaugh's influence on American politics rests on these very types of public conversation. His actions and position within fields oriented towards civil society are certainly important, but we need to account for how journalists, politicians, pundits, and others participating in the American political public sphere incorporate the talk show host into discussion and debate. By richly recreating the meanings associated with Limbaugh, as well as the types of discussions in which he appears, certain cultural dynamics of civil society contributing to his influence are revealed.

What will become clearer in subsequent chapters is that initial evidence supports the claim that by being included by the above mentioned 'other' discussants of the political public sphere

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[24] Methodology will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent chapter.

Limbaugh is integrated into important feedback loops in civil society. These contribute to the political enchantment of Limbaugh, and this plays an important role in his influence as a much as his action(s), respective field position(s), or supporting organizational structure(s). Because these feedback loops are largely outside his ability to steer, let alone control, these other explanations of Limbaugh's political impact can be bracketed out. While it would be a mistake to claim he has *no* influence on the feedback loops it is reasonable to assert that his influence produces diminishing returns the further away from the institutional space of his program the feedback loops carry him.[25]

Although extant explanations produce significant analytical purchase they minimize the fact that once Limbaugh accesses the political public sphere he has less control over what shape the subsequent conversation will take. Put another way, unlike his influence over the institutional space of his broadcast he cannot as readily cast an image of himself or his ideas in the political public sphere. This is a major point not considered in the literature concerned with Limbaugh. The press does more than legitimate him. Taking him up as an object of discussion the press *textualizes* the talk show host. More than reflective they are instrumental in *crafting* his public image using patterned meaning structures. In short, the press plays a significant, and as of yet uncommented upon, role in helping "create" Limbaugh as a cultural object in national political discussion.

As noted above, current academic research has highlighted many factors that no doubt contribute to Limbaugh's presence on the national political scene. It was also noted that at least one important dimension was elided. An important dynamic exists *between* Limbaugh and the press whereby his adoption as a cultural object in the news must be factored in to explain his

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[25] A loose analogy could be thought of in terms of solar energy. Consider the relative amount of energy reaching Earth from our Sun compared to the amount of energy reaching Neptune from the same source. The capacity of energy operates by an "inverse square law". A rudimentary description of this astronomical principle is that the further from the source of power the fainter impact the power imparts. For instance, on its brightest day of the year at noon, the time of greatest solar impact, Neptune may only see the equivalent of a "very deep twilight on Earth" (Jet propulsion Laboratory – NASA and the California Institute of Technology. July 22 2004. How Far? How Faint. .)

political influence. Much is known about Limbaugh's institutional position, and his organizational constraints. In addition, it has been pointed out that Limbaugh can be conceptualized as belonging to a specified class of public actors, the political entertainer. Research must now be further extended to account for additional factors that set Limbaugh apart from other conservative talk show hosts, and instead place him in a category of public actors sharing important attributes apart from ideology.

Politics and Political Entertainers - Analyzing Limbaugh and Influence in a Politically Mediated World – Looking Ahead:

The following chapter will accomplish several interrelated tasks. First, a general discussion of the political influence of political entertainers will be grounded in disciplinary debates. The relevant literature pertaining to the sociological frameworks dealing with political influence described above will then be further fleshed out. Particular attention will be afforded to how addressed sociological understandings of political influence and mass media. To the extent they exist, studies of Limbaugh will be contextualized within the frameworks to stress how studying Limbaugh resonates with broader sociological concerns extending well beyond the talk show host. Although each is useful in certain capacities the limitations of the models and their applicability in studying the talk show host will also be highlighted.

The literature review will be followed by a chapter focused on the methodological considerations of empirical research, and explore the data used for analysis. It will suggest that empirical analysis drawing from Cultural Sociology, specifically components of the existing scholarship on political entertainers and the public sphere, are best suited for the goals of this research. The chapter will include several brief examples to help clarify the point. This will set the

stage for later chapters to illuminate the dynamics of the influence of the talk show host not captured in current literature, and connect it to existing work being done on entertainment and politics by Cultural Sociologists.

After framing the analytical and empirical concerns of the dissertation the following two chapters will empirically capture Limbaugh's presence in the political public sphere by studying his inclusion in journalistic texts. The aim here will be to richly recreate Limbaugh in situ to best illustrate how Cultural Sociology is useful in highlighting patterns of meaning structures developed by the press that envelopes the talk show host in the political public sphere.

After the empirical work is presented a final chapter will discuss the implications of this research. Drawing on the empirical findings the dissertation will suggest that supplemental conceptualizations of Limbaugh's political influence are needed, and that his influence is not entirely of his or his benefactors' volition. 'His' influence is not reflected, but in part created through inclusion in national political discussion. How he is included in news and commentary will serve as introductory evidence in support of expanding how we think about his political influence. More broadly it will be asserted that the research here allows for inferences to other political entertainers suggesting their impact on the political public sphere operates through similar dynamics. In short the chapter will discuss the importance of this research not only for studying Limbaugh, but also broader sociological questions concerning the dynamics of political influences of political entertainers.

This last chapter will include a summarization of the major points and findings of this research reiterating that studying Limbaugh is a useful exercise for further contributing to a body of sociological literature devoted to studying political influence in the broadest sense, and to journalism, entertainment, and the political more pointedly. It will also offer suggestions on

correctives to the limitations of this research. The chapter closes with additional questions that might be asked those studying Limbaugh, and other political entertainers that might help formulate how the research here could be expanded.

The dissertation asserts that the way Limbaugh is incorporated into national news and commentary can reveal much about the dynamics of his influence in a politically mediated world. Alternative understandings of how a specific iconography is generated around Limbaugh will complement existing scholarship on the talk show host's influence, other political entertainers, and the dynamics of political influence in a mediated public sphere more generally. We will now turn our attention to the aforementioned sociological frameworks that allow these assertions to be analytically formulated.

Political Entertainers and Dynamics of Influence in a Mediated Political World:

Politics and political influence have always been of interest to sociologists. Some recently developed scholarship provides useful analytical tools to conceptualize dynamics of 'newer' manifestations of political influence operating in an increasingly complex and mediated political world. Moreover, some of this scholarship helps model how a particular type of a non-traditional extra-state political actor, the political entertainer, comes to exercise political influence. With this in mind it is the goal of this chapter to outline the theoretical resources best suited to provide robust sociological explanations of how political entertainers are integrated, and become integral in contemporary American politics by exploring the dynamics of their political influence.[26]

This chapter will begin with a review of classical sociological conceptions of political influence. It will note how initial formulations opened important avenues to develop current analytical models applicable to the research here. This will be followed by presenting the major orienting frameworks best suited to discussing important connections that will help illuminate our understanding of the dynamics of political influence of political entertainers generally, and Rush Limbaugh more specifically. This second section will be divided into four parts. Each details a distinct framework. Several major points will be highlighted. First, a critical analysis of how each framework conceptualizes politics, culture, influence, and their mediated interconnections will be presented. Next, research on Limbaugh sharing the strongest affinity with each framework will be reviewed. Embedding the talk show host into the frameworks will emphasize the utility of these models for approaching questions as to how political entertainers operate in national political life. Last, the limitations of each framework generally, and what remains unclear about Limbaugh

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[26] Much, although not all, of the literature that will be discussed in this chapter has applicability outside of the United States as well. This will not be dealt with here.

specifically, will be adumbrated. The goal is to provide a useful road map to better situate and guide empirical analysis by developing an interdisciplinary informed, but thoroughly sociological, analytical foundation.

Political Influence Outside of the State and Classical Sociology:

Questions about political influence have always been a central sociological concern, and Weber provides a useful starting point. He described 'politics' or 'the political' as the practice of "striving to share power *or* striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states *or* among groups within a state" (Weber 1948 78 emphasis added). The word "or" appearing twice is important. It implies that politics is informed by at least two forms of social force (e.g. power and influence), and that the expression of those forces transpires in multiple social spaces (i.e. politics 'happens' either between states or to those subject to the authority within a given state). The point is that this conceptualization of politics is not limited to the analysis of the power of the state although sociological traditional belies this fact.[27]

There is good reason to believe Weber was cognizant of the broader understanding of politics implied in his work. Although he is recognized for developing fundamental principles related to power and the state that are foundational to political sociology he also understood politics operates outside of this specific social institution. In his oft cited essay, "Politics as a Vocation"

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[27] At the center of Weber's analysis is a question still asked today: what is the nature of power? He was asking how is it that certain individuals or groups are able to exercise their will over the objections of others (Weber 1946 77-79) Weber was most concerned with how power and influence operated within the state, that is the institution granted a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical coercion. This set a general precedent in sociology where questions of power and influence were namely confined to the state and its related organizations, but these initial characterizations are more convention than canon (Dowes and Hughes 1972; Nash 2001, 2010; Orum 1983).

(1946) there are several markers. For instance he noted a distinction between the "professional" and "occasional" politician. The former could be a legislator, executive official, member of the judiciary, or party official elected or appointed to an officially recognized. Each was invested position invested with some claim to state power. However, it is important to consider the latter, particularly for the purposes of this dissertation. Weber described the "occasional" politician as public actors able to "*influence* the distribution of power within and between political structures" that do not intrinsically "live for" or "live off" of state institutions (Weber 1946 83-84 emphasis added).

Weber noted the importance of "occasional" politicians operating in the political world of 19th century England. The "Anglican parson, the school master, … the large landlords, (the) non-conformist preacher, … the postmaster, the blacksmith, the tailor, and the ropemaker" constituted examples of this distinct class of political actors. Although relatively removed from official state power the occasional politician had the ability, in Weber's estimation, to influence the actions of the state. For a reason sharing an intriguing affinity with many contemporary insights about political influence and mass media Weber suggested that these types of non-traditional extra-state actors exerted political influence because they occupied social positions with this common feature. It was their day to day interaction with non-elites that was of central importance.

While entertainers did not appear on his intellectual radar there was a special kind of occasional politician central to the research here that Weber noted as having a primary bearing on discussion. Their importance was also based in non-elite interaction outside of the state. To some extent he was interested in the 'journalist'. He wrote of a recursive relationship between the political institutions and the print media of the day. All shared an inclination to be amongst and "chat with people frequently" (Weber 1946 104).

He suspected the relationship would come to be an increasingly central focus of political sociology observing that professional politicians, like state officials or representatives, seeking to influence political affairs tried to do so by steering public discussion and debate. To accomplish this task the professional politician sought to influence the writings found in the pamphlets and broadsides of the era. The practitioners of journalism were therefore placed in a strong position as gatekeepers of access to the public. They acted as promoters of official information, and progenitors of seasoned public opinion. Because of this role journalists, or at least the closest contemporary equivalents, exerted pressure organizing the spaces of discussion and debate where public opinion developed. Through their writings (or what they didn't write) they exerted pressure on politicians and the public through the power of publication (Weber 1946, 1998).

Despite the potential check on the bureaucratizing power of the state Weber did not hold journalists (or journalism for that matter) in high esteem, and on at least one occasion referred to them as a substratum of "political publicists… (a) pariah cast" (Weber 1946 96). Yet, he did propose an ambitious study of this "new" and unique form of influence through refining sociological understandings of the relationship between journalism and the state. Weber insightfully chose to study the incipient advertising structure of the commercial based newspaper industry. He set out to research how the press could steer the dispositions and subjectivities of reading publics while being supported by material structures firmly situated within capitalism. Moreover, he wondered what degree of reflexivity, if any, could be expressed by journalists operating in such a context given stated claims to a public authority based on objective reporting and rational opinion. In what may have influenced research later conducted by the Frankfurt School and even Cultural Sociology, Weber asserted that the press engendered "conceptions of the

world" that influenced the state and citizen-audiences. He sought to understand this this dynamic given journalism's material constraints (Hennis 1998 108-109).

Unfortunately, a lack of funding prevented Weber's research on journalism and politics from developing past the proposal stage. Even so, Weber's prefatory comments about journalism and politics provide a useful starting point for developing insight into understanding the dynamics and influence of journalism and political entertainers. For one it presents evidence that Weber saw past the restrictions so many others subsequently placed on his work. Politics also occurs outside of the state, and does so in mass mediated ways. More specifically, it indicated that journalism is a key institution in this process. The ability to shape collective understandings and influence politics made it a relevant interest to political sociology despite Weber's admonishments in his evaluation of the profession. When his adumbrated comments on journalism are presented with his more extensive work on politics it is reasonable to cast the journalist as 'occasional' politician. With the expansion of mass media since his writing it is possible to specify a variety of mass media players besides journalists that would be useful. Extending Weber's analysis opens important doors for the research presented here.

Although Weber's work provides a useful starting point important limitations must be noted. First, there is a conflation of the institutional trajectory and goals of the press and the state in terms of political aims. Weber assumed both followed similar logics neglecting important internally generated differences responsible for organizing action within each. For him, both institutions operated in a political space rather than overlapping yet differentiated social spheres. Consequently, the ability of journalism to influence politics was limited to playing games dominated by the state. Journalists could refuse publication space to politicians, or write negatively

about them.[28] Journalism was never considered to operate in a dominant, let alone reciprocal, position in the relation to the state.

Another issue was that Weber's writings about journalism and political influence were limited to small terse sections in broad ranging writings, footnotes, and the aforementioned research proposal. In light of his prolific body of work comparatively little time was devoted to developing a more comprehensive understanding of the press, or its implications for politics. Ignoring the internal dynamics of journalism, its organizations, and its content in their own terms prevented Weber from seeing alternative ways the press developed and exercised influence. Moreover, Weber's scant attention to the press also meant that he glossed over the political qualities of other mediated cultural forms. For example the political dynamics associated with literature, visual art, music, or theater was not identifiable in his work reviewed here.

A third problematic issue existed that Weber's brilliance had no chance of overcoming. His proposal for studying the press was written in 1910, and the sociological titan passed away in 1920 (Hennis 1998). The only form of mass communication in existence at the time of his death apart from newspapers, was radio which was still in its infancy. It did not yet take the institutional form of broadcast media most would recognize today.[29] Weber was simply not alive to see the growth of modern mass media, and therefore he could not study their relationships with politics. The profession of journalism was still in the processes of re-ordering itself through the institutionalization of commercialization and professionalization, and popularly accessible mass mediated entertainment was just becoming available. Although his writings signaled a set of social positions and spaces that could conceivably connect politics, journalism, and entertainment, Weber

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[28] In the case of the latter they at times did so at professional, and at times legal, peril.

[29] Radio was originally conceived of as a point to point, rather than individual to mass medium. For further reading see Barnouw (1966) and; Douglas (1987, 1999).

wrote too early. It would take the development of more elaborate conceptual models, some of which drew on his work, to better model these relationships. It is to the more modern scholarship that we now turn our attention.

Framework One – Cultural Marxism and 'Instrumental' Political Influence:

Karl Marx's work highlighted the subservience of politics, and all social forms, to economic imperatives dominated by the logic of capitalism. He wrote relatively little about the relationship between politics and mass media, and commented even less about journalism or entertainment. The limited attention devoted to culture more generally would nonetheless set the conceptual stage for later scholars to draw on his models of political economy as foundational material.[30] The major advancement of these later Marxists would be to afford 'culture' a more prominent role in Marxian thought, and this in turn allowed them to more readily address the role of mass media in political life.

The writings of Antonio Gramsci provide a useful a starting point. The Italian scholar asserted that the capitalist order preserved itself through controlling not only the means of economic production, but also the means of cultural production. For him material domination is too blatant and fragile to sustain power by itself. Elite classes incorporated "cultural leadership" as to preserve the status quo through non-coercive measures. This was expressed by presenting a constructed vision of the social world aimed at appealing to non-elites. The articulation of a "hegemonic ideology" was taken up by non-elites as "spontaneous philosophy" that they

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[30] For some of Marx's most developed work in culture see "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon" (1852) and "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" in Capital (1867).

mistakenly understood as their own ideas. With cultural artifacts presented by elite producers inducing non-elites to think their support of the extant power dynamics of society was of their own volition the latter effectively gave "consent" to "the general direction imposed by the dominant fundamental group". Put another way, this meant that the subordinate classes were complicit in their own repression and domination, and that elites had discovered using ideas to influence others was a manageable and efficient approach to social control (Gramsci 1971 144-147).

However, hegemonic ideology was not directly communicated from elites to non-elites. Rather the relationship was mediated. A specialized type of social actor performed an integral role in the development, expression, and circulation of hegemonic ideology. "Organic intellectuals" guided the masses by translating the complexities and nuances of collective life into simplified and readily digestible forms. They were of the ranks of the non-elite, and therefore had a degree of credibility amongst the masses that elites lacked. He cited teachers, clergy, and journalists as part of this group. Through lectures, sermons, or news organic intellectuals helped elites make hegemonic ideology appear as common sense (Gramsci 1971 141-142, 149-151). It is important to take away two points. The first is that ideological positions that made social structure appear as natural were understood in a way that it was woven into the immediate lives of the non-elites. The second was that this process was facilitated by the actions of particular types of cultural producers.

Subsequent scholars expanded upon this research expressing interest in the relationship between the economy, technology, culture, and politics. They sharpened Gramsci's insights while incorporating elements from Weber's work to expand ideas about hegemony, ideology, and influence. An elite dominated "culture industry" producing both news and entertainment, created formulaic cultural commodities meant to stifle critical thinking and stultify a mass audience. Superficial content in movies, music, radio, television, and print were meant to titillate the

audience, but it was purposefully devoid of contradictions that, in the opinion of these scholars, would prompt revolutionary questions about the social order.

Theodor Adorno, one of the major figures in the research consortium known as the Frankfurt School, succinctly captured this sentiment writing that the perceived "conflict before the viewer and projected … upon the unresisting smoothly unfolding reel of film has already taken care that the conflicts are not conflicts at all" (Adorno 1997 72). The dominant expression of the culture industry was popular cultural artifacts stripped of immanent contradictions In the case of mass media content influenced the members of society to develop a subject position encouraging political apathy. This in turn contributed to naturalizing the social order reinforcing their subordination. The culture industry introduced industrialization and bureaucratization to cultural production, but the real goal was to indirectly stamp these processes on the audience. The cultural artifacts molded the audience as a standardized consumer that could be more readily factored into economic decision making (Adorno 1997, Adorno and Bernstein 2001; Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Benjamin 1936[1973]; Marcuse 1974).

Adorno and collaborator Max Horkhimer lamented that "films, radio, and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole in every part" with a purpose of creating a stable and quantifiable audience (Adorno 1991; Adorno and Horkheimer 1972 31). The atomized undifferentiated individual that the cultural industry ultimately sought to produce was made part of the process of consumption. They were automatons trained to be docile and predictable consumers, and in addition sought to facilitate the evisceration of their critical social consciousness (Adorno 1997, Adorno and Bernstein 2001; Adorno and Horkheimer 1972). At best their capacity of social action outside of consumption was limited to acting as an "examiner, but an absent minded one" ill-suited for political action (Benjamin 1936[1973]) 234).

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Later cultural Marxists extended these ideas even further refining models of the relationship between political economy, politics, and mass media. They developed more nuanced insight into how mass mediated influence shapes political outcomes. Mass media contributed to this process by distorting processes of political communication, and was particularly insidious because of its ubiquity. Creating specific symbolic representations of social reality allowed mass media to construct systems of social classifications creating hierarchies, defining boundaries, and forcing people to adopt identities designed with purposefully fabricated molds. The individual was "interpolated", or invoked, into pre-defined subject positions within an ideological framework. The position worked in the service of elites complimenting the coercive arms of the state, and thus helped socialize the masses to accept a dominant ideology (Althusser 1971).

Mass media also denatured the social spaces organizing the open and free exchange of ideas steering people away from productive public discussion and political action. The content of popular culture destabilized fundamental characteristics of the audiences' identity. No longer engaged in a civic capacity, the understanding of 'audience as citizens' gave way to the understanding of 'audience as consumers'. Far from organizing a place for political discussion and debate mass media and related policy came to regard the public "not as a democratic polity but simply as a mass of consumers" (McChesney 1999 77, 2004; Habermas 1973, 1981, 1989, 1996).

While much of this scholarship began with work on mass media in a broad sense some came to emphasize the press and its relationship with politics more specifically. They suggested the general logic supporting the culture industries caused the press to change from a "vendor of recent news to a dealer in public opinion". They overwhelmingly articulated the "arcane policies of special interests", particularly that of advertisers diverting public attention firmly to non-public issues (Bucher in Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1975 54-55).

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Others saw journalism as politically influencing audiences by refracting content through a series of ideological filters amplifying statists and nationalistic sentiments. These inculcated and defended "the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups" vis-à-vis the interests of non-elites (Herman and Chomsky 1988 298). Political opposition to elites was rendered impotent with audiences "exposed to powerful persuasive messages from above." In turn elites "usurped enormous amounts of political power" and journalism became a useful tool to generate "support, compliance, and just plain confusion among the public" (Bennett in Herman and Chomsky 1988 30). Its ultimate purpose was the reinforcement and reproduction of elite interests at the expense of democratic norms (Albarran and Dimmik 1996; Hall 1978; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Klineberg 2007; McChesney 1999, 2004).

For example Hall (1978) noted the decidedly political dimensions of cultural representation in the news. He wrote about how the British press contributed to a moral panic over the specter of muggings in the 1970s diverting attention from economic problems and the policies of the elite or elite controlled conservative government in power at the time.[31] In another example a study of news and commentary focused on the September 11th attacks in the United States found that American media coverage tended to legitimize the official government narrative justifying the aggressive foreign policy pursued. After the invasion of Iraq by American led military forces failed to recover weapons of mass destruction, and the intelligence community failed to establish a link

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[31] However it should be noted that for Hall domination was never, and could never be, complete. Even though mass media could be used as a means of politically influencing cultural representations the very process by which mediated communication occurs the ability to resist is present. All media content must be encoded with meaning. Since elites produce most media content it is encoded to carry hegemonic ideology. Yet, encoding doesn't guarantee that those receiving the content will decode it in a way that the producer intended. For Hall, cultural codes are polysemic, that is there are many potential ways they can be read. This means that recipients are not passive, and are in actuality actively interpreting various readings of media content. In turn this implies that the systems of classification constructed by hegemonic ideology are subject to a variety of readings. They can be decoded in unintended or unexpected ways and this flexibility calls into question the effective reach of elite political influence through these means (Hall 1978, 1992).

between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, journalists deflected attention from these initial justifications for the war.[32] Instead they began to cite expanding democracy, or preempting further attacks, as policy rationales. The authors concluded that this was an attempt to mislead the American people to support a harmful elite foreign policy, and simultaneously obfuscate other issues connected to social inequality and the decline of the middle class (Perrucci and Wysong 2005). Other research proposed that news content also crafted ideological support of official positions and policies by casting those opposing them as unpatriotic. To further marginalize oppositional voices, elites crafted news and commentary linking contemporary objectors of government policy to myths propagated about other anti-war activists perpetrating disrespectful acts towards soldiers (Lembecke 2005). In all of this work a theme remains consistent. Elites set the public agenda and steer public opinion via journalism. This often expresses the official ideology adopted by the state that is in turn furnished the conditions necessary for political suppression, and stasis of the social hierarchy.

These scholars have also highlighted another ironic aspect of how this process supports the operating conditions of journalism. In their attempt to seek out information that would make them better informed citizens the audiences' collective patronage of mass media allowed them to be dominated by conglomerates that are ideologically aligned with elites, and seek profit maximization. This happens in two ways. First, the desire to create stable business environments necessitates the production of standardized cultural products making all mass media content into commodities. A sign of this is the integration existing between the business motivations of the conglomerates, and the objectives of political elites. The former seeks to cultivate close relationships with the latter in the hopes of exerting influence over the organizational environments

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[32] These were major claims around which the case for the policy was built.

within which they operate. These, they argued, led to outcomes like increased degree of market "freedom" and "reform". The concentration of holdings, hyper commercialization, and domination of regulatory agencies are some of the outcomes (Albarra and Dimmick 1996; Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Klineberg 2007; McChesney 1999, 2004; McCombs 1988; Picard 1998).

Empirical work has captured these dynamics as well. For instance a comparative and historical analysis concluded that news organizations regularly alter content in their quest to appropriate audiences, and increase advertising rates. It was noted that the amount of advertising revenue earned directly correlated with changes in content and programming (Curran 1986). Other work has looked at content, concentration of ownership, and profits. Research revealed that over the past two and a half decades there was increased concentration in ownership created monopolistic conditions (Picard 1988; Croteau and Hoynes 2007; McChesney 1999, 2004). Along with increased concentration in ownership, journalism is also increasingly integrated into media firms that produce entertainment. Profit motive and political influence aimed at organizing a degree of self-regulation are increasingly the underlying goals of both forms of mass media (Croteau and Hoynes 2007; Klineberg 2007).

The Marxian cultural frameworks emphasizing the role of political economy outlined above provide useful analytical tools for studying politics, mass media, and influence. Because of the powerful conceptualizations of the material constraints on media organizations that produce both news and commentary it is capable of modeling how news and entertainers both influence public discussion and politics. This can also be further specified to studying Limbaugh for the purpose of explaining explain the dynamics of his political influence, and role in national political discussion. Marxian inspired cultural analysis connects the talk show host to organizational

structures, and through this relationship explains how the talk show host is able to steer national political outcomes. The application of this framework to Limbaugh is where we now turn attention.

Limbaugh as an "Instrumental" Political Entertainer:

Although direct research on the talk show host himself is somewhat anemic from the cultural Marxist perspective he is frequently used as a heuristic device to clarify analytical models connecting multimedia conglomerates and political influence. In other words, while the scholarship has not studied Limbaugh with precision he has been used to illustrate the larger systemic forces steering the relationship between journalism, entertainment, and politics.

A central factor consider by this framework is the organizational structure supporting the Limbaugh program. Teasing out the contours of the multimedia conglomerate responsible for the material base for the program allows insight into understanding the talk show host's political influence. All parties involved with the production of the program, including Limbaugh, are motivated in large part to develop the most profitable broadcast space possible. The profit motive directs political action taken as well as informing content heard on air (Herman 1999; Mayer 2004 a, b).

To see how this works it is important to become acquainted with the organizational history of Limbaugh's program. Limbaugh's eponymous broadcast is a joint venture between the talk show host and Premier Radio, the largest syndicator of radio programming in the United States. Premier is in turn a wholly owned subsidiary of the largest media conglomerate in terrestrial radio, iHeartMedia.[33] Premier successfully sold the Limbaugh program to radio stations owned by its

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[33] iHeartCommunications, Inc. was formerly known as Clear Channel Communications.

former parent company Cumulus Media, the second largest media conglomerate in terrestrial radio. The program is carried on stations in multiple markets served by the two companies, and very often on their respective flagship stations.[34] Through the relationships with media conglomerates Limbaugh is also organizationally linked to venture capital firms possessing large holdings across many industries, vast connections to the world of politics, and a reservoir of potential advertisers through investors with stakes in non-media industries.[35]

The business model adopted by the program was novel in radio's history, and has since been adopted by talk shows hosts across media. Limbaugh is a partial owner of the program, and his percentage entitles him to sell advertising space independent from his syndicators or broadcasting stations. Not only did this allow him to retain all profits from a percentage of advertisers, it also meant he could exert a greater control over the content of his programs vis-à-vis talk show hosts lacking ownership stakes. Although corporate interests dominate Limbaugh's ownership affords him the capability to influence the direction of program with a relative degree of autonomy. As an owner he gets a say. It has served Limbaugh well placing his net worth as one of the highest amongst talk show hosts (Douglas 1999; Mayer 2004).[36]

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[34] In Chicago (#3) Limbaugh broadcasts on WLS-AM, a Cumulus station acquired through a buyout of Citadel Media, formerly the third largest radio conglomerate in the US. In Los Angeles (#2), the Limbaugh program airs on KFI, and in New York (#1) WABC. They are owned by iHeartMedia and Cumulus respectively. The stations on which Limbaugh is carried obtain their news content from Premier's subsidiary Fox News Radio, or ABC News Radio which is distributed by Cumulus.
As per recent negotiations Limbaugh ceased broadcast on WABC-NY on January 1st 2014 moving to WOR-NY a Cumulus station purchased by iHeartMedia (as Clear Channel) in the second half of 2012. WOR is the 4th ranked AM station in New York City, the nation's largest radio market. (September 2013 Portable People Meter *(Updated: 09-30-13* -   http://ratings.radio-online.com/cgi-bin/rol.exe/arb001)

[35] Clear Channel, now iHeartMedia, was purchased by Bain Capital, a private equity firm that has been involved in the finances of companies in the food, retail, media and communications, electronics, construction, and chemical industries. The firm also conducts business with other large venture capital firms and investment banks. Political connections are also apparent. For instance a major player in Bain's history was former Massachusetts Governor and former Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney (Ahrens (November 17th 2006) The Washington Post).

[36] Scholars drawing from this framework cite how Limbaugh's program was developed as a model for other talk based programming. For instance, Limbaugh's syndicator, Premier, features other prominent conservative political talk show hosts who, at one time or another, have become incorporated into national public discussion. Programs hosted by people like Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck have adopted Limbaugh's model. They too have consistently ranked as some of the most popular radio broadcasters in the country. They have been able to parlay their ratings, and organizational structures to move into other media. Moreover,

Beyond concentration of ownership this framework also looks at the very format of talk radio suggesting its technical dimensions helps further this dynamic of profitability. Although initial costs of production of this genre are high, as the format is labor intensive requiring researchers, production managers, programmers, and engineers, losses are quickly recouped. Once established talk radio programs tend to generate large stable audiences regularly engaged with the program making them promising consumers. In Limbaugh's case, when listeners tune in they tend to be involved with discussion meaning they are less likely to change stations. They do not use the radio program merely as background noise as is done with music. Engagement with the program means they are willing to stay with a station through a commercial break. Since an engaged listener becomes a fixed asset of sorts they are highly valuable to advertisers, and can be built into the economic calculations of producers. When combined with high ratings this translates into Limbaugh's (and his syndicator's) ability to demand higher price for advertising offsetting any sunk costs. Over the years advertising revenue yielded increased returns, and profit margins of the program have either remained stable or grew. With advertisers willing to pay premium prices to reach his audience Limbaugh's greatest strength is the ability to "rack up huge ratings" (Mayer 2004 92). With finances secure, and the resources of the media conglomerates at his disposal Limbaugh is free from many constraints allowing him to be ever more provocative. He can shape his content in efforts to reinforce this dynamic (Douglas 1999; Mayer 2004).

If more detailed studies were performed the framework developed from Cultural Marxism would most likely understand much of Limbaugh's political influence as a translation of his economic dynamism. Limbaugh's program is produced and transmitted at the intersection of

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hundreds of other political talkers, who are mostly conservative, have also drawn from Limbaugh's model (Douglas 1999; Mayer 2004; Premier Radio 2001; Talkers 200-2008).

several multimedia conglomerates that in turn nest him into the broader economic landscape. He is interconnected to non-media industries through a common financial apparatus, and generates profits for them in addition to himself and syndicators. Influence comes from the broad reach and deep pockets provided by this economic structure. This is reflected in the content of his program. It is in the program's self-interest to adopt certain ideological positions over others that are conducive to the continued benefit of the economic structure outlined above.

This in turn explains (or explains away) any specific instance of program content. Insistence on orthodox free market principles reflect the desires of the program's stakeholders rather than deeply held political conviction. They would hold that the program sells political infotainment reinforcing an ideology conducive to business interests. Although his positions are most often tendentious his primary purpose is still economic, and political polemics are effective at garnering large audiences that in turn make advertising space highly profitable. In short Limbaugh does not produce news or commentary for public discussion as much as he produces political entertainment to sell advertising space. His political influence exists, but it is tenuous. The extent he is able to exercise influence relies on his penchant for generating revenue (Chomsky 2006 on Charlie Rose hosted by Brian Leher; Douglas 1999; Herman 1999).

Limbaugh as an "Instrumental" Political Entertainer, and the Questions that Remain:

The political economy scholarship connects mass media concretely with political and economic structures, and builds a place for cultural production into the analysis of political influence. The programming (i.e. the organizational structure of how a broadcast is set to run in terms of material, segments, guests, etc.), advertising, and content structures of broadcast set

important benchmarks for talk radio. However, there are several drawbacks to this framework that should be noted when applying this to questions about the influence of Limbaugh or other political entertainers.

A logical extension of this framework suggests that Limbaugh cannot be easily separated from the material structures supporting his program, and his political influence is contingent upon his economic profitability. His business model and popularity are manifestations of otherwise hidden elite economic interests, and Limbaugh's influence, to the extent it exists, is not because of his political conviction or leadership qualities. Rather, it emanates from the organizations that dominate the production of his program. He is not quite a tool used to deploy closed political meaning aimed at maintaining the status quo, but he is close to one. To the extent *he* has influence appears to be traced to his partial ownership of the Rush Limbaugh show. Articulating a Conservative counterpoint to liberal views espoused elsewhere is little more than engaging political theater. But engaging theater, especially theater centered on purportedly false conflict, retains audiences. The real purpose of content is to corner markets, and create stable business environments, and the program works towards both goals (Chomsky 2006; Herman 1999; McChesney 1999; Peker 2011).

This implies Limbaugh is not so much a political authority, but rather is an adept conduit or, (more pejoratively) a useful instrument. He hosts an entertaining program, but his primary task is generating revenue while reinforcing ideological positions reflective of the program's benefactors.[37] In the end Limbaugh is only a concern to these scholars insofar as he is the public face of larger structural processes. In other words, there may not be much that is special about

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[37] Although as stated above it is important to restate he is also to some extent a conduit for his own interests too as an owner.

Limbaugh in and of himself. Moreover, the public impact of the content of his program is also inconsequential when considered exclusively. It is simply a translation of standardized content with Conservative flavoring, and any influence can be traced to the organizational structures supporting the program. In other words, it is not Limbaugh or his words that are important. Nor is the audience an active political force. Their significance is a function of their capacity as consumers. In the end, it is the sets of material hierarchies producing his show that best explain his access to and prominence in the official public sphere as a public authority.

Because market forces seem to be the main emphasis of this framework the instrumentalist approach does not account well for ideological variation. From this perspective it makes no difference whether Limbaugh is a Conservative or a Liberal. Whatever sells defines content. But it *is* important that Limbaugh is a Conservative rather than a Liberal. Political position and adopted ideology matter in ways not articulated. While in the grand scheme of political thought it is likely that American political Conservatives and Liberals share several core fundamental principles it is also clear that differences between the two are consequential. Whereas this framework is equipped to see the uniformity of content it is ill-suited to account for difference, particularly difference of this kind.

In the end Limbaugh's purported influence on national political discussion has little to do with Limbaugh. Discussions on the program are meant to attract and retain consumers through pre-digested political entertainment. The purpose is to generate profit, and reinforce support for a particular business environment. He may be interesting because of idiosyncrasies attached to his persona, but they too are stage props. Limbaugh is no doubt popular and successful, but these characteristics are quantified namely by ratings and revenue. Market forces propel and sustain Limbaugh on the national stage, and are responsible for perceptions of his political influence. What

political entertainers like Limbaugh espouse is little more than a reflection of recondite elite economic interests. Consequently, political entertainers including Limbaugh are potentially reduced to tools used to deliver ideological content with the latent purpose of profit maximization, and the political legitimization of favorable business environments. Any political content generated on Limbaugh, or by other political entertainers, is derived from the structural conditions under which it was produced. Their inclusion in journalism is one result of these market calculations, and serves little more than recirculation and further legitimization of elite ideals.

Taking this position opens the framework up to the criticism of overemphasizing the uniformity of political entertainers and their material conditions. When material conditions are seen as the exclusive sources of political influence Limbaugh, and political entertainers, are stripped of the independent capability to steer political outcomes. For them Limbaugh is no different from other Conservative talkers (or vice versa), let alone political entertainers. Yet, it does not provide an explanation of why Limbaugh succeeded where others have not.

This also carries implications for the audience of his program that resonate because of its relative silence on the matter. Cultural Marxist approaches fail to fully account for the voluntaristic capacities of the audience because the audience is studied after the fact if at all. They are stripped of the potential of civil qualities, and only seen as a mass of unreflective and uncritical consumers. The majority of listeners are stultified and marginalized citizens whose real value emerges from the attention they offer to Limbaugh's advertisers. In stressing their susceptibility to 'messages from above' their ability to discern and engage with content critically is largely underestimated. As we will see, it is important to consider the audience in alternative ways. In fact other analytical frameworks conceptualize the audience as an important causal factors concerning Limbaugh's

political influence. They are afforded a more politically active role, and have dimensions beyond that of a docile consumer.

A Cultural Marxists framework provide useful insight for thinking about dynamics of political influence in a mediated world. The connection of media content, political entertainers, and audiences to structural bases allows for a discussion of how Limbaugh, and those like him serve the interests of economic elites, and come to be understood as influential (even if by proxy). However, this comes at the expense of alternative conceptualizations of how content, networks, audiences, news coverage, and the host engender political influence with the capacity to shape political outcomes in other ways and to other ends. In other words there are more than profit motivated factors to consider. A different framework found within political sociology drawing from a "political culture" tradition offers important correctives to the shortcomings of the framework presented in this section. This is where we now turn out attention.[38]

Framework Two - Political Culture, Public Opinion, and 'Mediated' Political Influence:

The influence of political entertainers can be approached from alternative analytical perspectives. The one presented in this section emerged from a political sociology traceable in part to the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville. In the mid-1830s Tocqueville published *Democracy in America*, a book which noted the importance of shared values and free ubiquitous associational life along with public opinion sustaining what he understood to be the unique character of

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[38] The neo-Marxist framework adopted here is far from exhaustive, and should instead be thought of as one particular variant. It was constructed for its orientation towards factors pertinent to the research. Other forms of neo-Marxist thought not used here, for instance those more centrally focused on the social processes that legitimize political power and reproduce class relations, namely through elite competition, exhibit different types of utility when applied to other areas in political sociology (See Lachmann 2002, 2010).

American democracy. This framework moves away from the 'instrumentalist' position advocated by Cultural Marxists. While recognizing the importance of material bureaucratic structure, it stresses that elites are not necessarily integrated, and other interests besides economics drive action. It also restores some degree of agency to non-elites. Likewise it proposes a form of 'political culture' constituted by the attitudes, dispositions, and meanings that can contribute to or disrupt political institutions and activity. It is the social environment where "democracy and its discontents are at play", and actors look to capture public opinion and associational life (Goldfarb 2010 20). Out of the routines organized by political culture a stable democratic system forms and reproduces.

Talcott Parsons made a significant contribution to furthering sociological understandings of political influence building on these foundations. While not writing in direct response to Tocqueville, Parsons developed an intricate model of 'actions systems' to explain social stability in light of free will, which he hoped would in turn normatively explain the success of American democracy. Although he never made the leap to any conception of an explicit 'political culture' its closet corollary, the "cultural system", provided the repertoire of intersubjective knowledge, symbols, and ideas that made political and economic organization possible and sustainable.[39]

The primary social force operating in the cultural system was influence, and its function was fostering, maintaining, and steering communicative capacities that ordered social action and guided the orientation of social values. Parsons described influence as a "specialized language of communication…a generalized mechanism" through which "determination, *notably of change of opinions*, come about" (Parsons 1963 37-40 emphasis added).[40] This provided the basis for

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[39] The Cultural System is one of the major societal action systems specified in his work

[40] Key to Parsons's conceptualization of influence was its ability to guide action without resorting to coercion. The cultural system persuaded people to select certain actions over others rather than force compliance. It was subtle. People accepted and implemented

collective life, and myriad forms of associational action (Parsons 1959, 1951; Parsons and Shils 1962).

Other scholars followed Parsons, and the work produced in post-World War Two America further emphasizing certain cultural dimensions of American politics, capitalism, and democracy. The contours of the concept of *political culture* were further sculpted as scholars sought to address how culture comes to influence political action and processes. They came to formulate the concept as the context within which the general attitudes and dispositions indispensable for maintaining the "belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper" for society were generated sustained (Goldfarb 2012; Lipset 1959 86; Pye and Verba 1965). These scholars emphasized the normative and orienting role of political culture in sustaining or hindering democratic pluralism and free market economies (Berezin 1997; Goldfarb 2005, 2007, 2012; Lipset 1955, 1959, 1963, 1989, 1990, 1993; Pye 1972; Pye and Verba 1965; Somers 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Verba and Nie 1972).[41]

The political culture framework provides a constructive alternative to the 'instrumental' understanding of political influence. For one, they challenge the high degree of elite integration asserted by Cultural Marxists. Elites are not homogenous in thought or action, and even within a given political or economic system can be "differentiated regionally, ethnically, and culturally … (and are marked by) constant friction and competition" (Lipset 1955 182). They are not a unified whole, and contestation is endemic to political processes. Moments of transformation in political

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the values developed through the cultural system because they "felt it to be a 'good thing' … not because of the obligations he would violate through noncompliance" (Parsons 1963 48).

[41] Scholars during this period championed American liberal democracy, and sought to attribute its assent and durability to particular sets of norms, beliefs, values and attitudes. A particular constellation of these pillars present in American society supported the development of efficient liberal markets and economic modernization that in turn created conditions needed for democracy. Pace Cultural Marxism these scholars understood vibrant capitalism as necessary and desirable for political liberty.

culture marks a widening and fracturing of elite interests that carries significant impact on political outcomes.

Consequently, many of these scholars adopt the idea of pluralistic understandings of politics and political influence. For them multiple, and often competing, interests ok to shape political outcomes through ceaseless negation, and most often within the arena of the state. This framework has repeatedly noted the ability of political culture to sustain pluralistic values, and although all do not hold the same degree of influence no one individual or group dominates all others. It is the pluralistic characteristics and tensions within elite institutions that open opportunities for social change, but also contravene the assertion that elites monolithically act in the pursuit of unified interests (Dahl 1956, 1961; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Goldfarb 2007, 2012; Jessop 1991; Jessop et. al 1984, 1985; Lachmann 2002, 2010; Lipset 1955, 1959, 1963, 1989, 1990, 1993; Lichterman 2011).[42]

Second the framework puts forth a more nuanced role for non-state actors challenging ideas of non-elite political passivity. Those occupying positions outside of elite economic and political fields can potentially become actively involved in collective political action. Politicians are not the only group of social actors playing an important political role (Dahl 1956, 1961; Jordan 1993, 1998; Jordan et. al. 1992; Polsby 1971; Smith 1990). Taking this position helps this framework restore a degree of political agency to media audiences. Far from being 'injected' with elite ideology, audiences are critical and discerning. Even if elites could produce a uniform ideology the rational faculties and social networks of the audience neutralizes the potential "narcotizing

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[42] In a critique of Stuart Hall's work on the rise of Thatcherism, Jessop et. al (1984, 1985) argue that his idea of the unified "articulation of a new common sense" reinforcing a political ideology developed by elites and conveyed through mass media is overstated. Consequently a more detailed role of mass media in supporting the legitimation of Thatcherism cannot be fully addressed. They argue that Hall has over-generalized from media as a central point of ideological struggle to other social institutions that in fact operate via different logics. This is further complicated by the fact he also treats mass media as monolithic, and not does not consider that "a national press, nationwide radio and network television [are not necessarily] uniform" (Jessop et al 1984 38).

dysfunction" of mass media (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Parsons and White 1960 69-70). Audiences are not socially isolated, and non-elites gain the most political influence when organized into voluntary associations.

Not only do the non-elite associations foster solidarity amongst its members, they also allow groups to pool resources and coordinate political actions amplifying the potential influence they can exercise. Again, these associations are organized outside of the state, and this factor provides an additional degree of political autonomy from elites dominating official political institutions (Putnam 2000; Lipset 1955, 1993, 2000; Diamond and Marks 1992; Sander and Putnam 2010; Eliasoph 1998, 2013; Lichterman 2011; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Bellah 2003; Bellah et. al 2008).[43]

Several empirical studies have grounded various facets of the operations of political culture developed above. For instance some have captured how values and attitudes shape important collective expectations citizens come to have of what role government should play in daily life (Almond and Verba 1963). Other studies have connected attitudes to the degree and type of political and civic action performed by citizens (Lipset 1959). Political attitudes have also been correlated with voting, and studies have sought to demonstrate instances where political culture impacted voting preferences and political attitudes (Barker 1998a, 199b; Barker and Knight 2000;

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[43] Emphasis on studying voluntary associations gained considerable traction and brought together many of the important elements associated with current and past research on political culture. Studying associational life brought together the focus on meaningful social interaction as the meeting ground between politics and culture (Goldfarb 2012 20-25). Perhaps more than any other contemporary scholar Robert Putnam (2002) built on mid-century work making "social capital", that is the strength of the bonds fostering interdependence amongst members of a group, that builds in to 'trust'. The operationalization of 'trust' was measured through levels of participation in voluntary associations (Lichterman 2011 225-226; Putnam 2002). Participation in civic associations was important for several reasons. Within voluntary associations individuals developed skills for interacting with one another, and simultaneously built up a common repertoire of ideas informing those interactions. Moreover, the interaction of people within these groups allowed individuals to think of themselves collectively because of common interests, develop a language to describe their common interests as public issues, and acquire skills allowing them to access public spaces of discussion so the issues would make their ways into public debates. While members of participating in these associations are far from monolithic many "manage to agree on how to hold beliefs and present opinions in a group setting" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003 76).

Barker and Lawrence 2006; Hofstetter, Barker, et al 1999; Goldfarb 1996, 2007, 2012; Lipset 1959, 1963, 1994; Klapper 1968). Others have looked at how culture plays an important role in steering the platforms of candidates as well as the actions taken by their respective campaigns (Hyman and Sheatsely 1950). Still others researched how political culture was integral in allowing the diffusion of political messages from officials seeking to solicit some sort of beneficial political action on part of specific constituencies (Deutchmann and Danielson 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Trodahl and Van Dam 1965). Still others have revisited themes of political values in terms of material well-being linking economic structure and political systems (Inglehart 1997), as well as forms of gender inequality (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

The framework also adds an important actor, the "opinion leader", mediating the processes of influence between elites and non-elites. Political communication is channeled through an opinion leader occupying a key position in national political discussions. Researchers have attribute several key characteristics to opinion leaders. They are defined by an attentiveness and depth of knowledge concerning public issues (Lazarsfeld et. al 1944; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), broad regular consumption of, and reflection on, topical news and commentary (Scheufele and Shah 2000, 2006), and recognition from others as to possessing a specialized level of public knowledge and a predilection towards political activity (Chan and Misra 1990; Scheufele and Shah 2000, 2006; Weimann 1994). These factors contribute the most to the degree of an opinion leader's influence. They are important shapers of ideas, and are in turn capable of steering political opinion, worldviews, and actions.

Performing in the capacity of an "active gatekeeper and interpreter" rather than a passive conduit the opinion leader plays a large part in determining what content makes it to an audience as well as what form content takes (Katz 1987 30). Although elites may have specific intentions

as to the meanings of messages disseminated through mass media, it is the opinion leader who is better suited to steer reception because of their social capital with the audience. Scholars adopting this position have teased out the importance of opinion leaders in relation to voting, audience preferences for types of media content, and the use and value of that media content in people's day to day lives and political activities (Berelson et al 1954; Dickerson and Gentry 1983; Lazarsfeld 1940; Lazarsfeld et. al 1944; Liebes and Katz 1990; Liebes, Curran, and Katz 1998).[44]

Some have looked a bit more closely at the content opinion leaders share. This is important because scholars note that opinion leaders are generally instrumental in creating or popularizing political 'frames'. These refer to the "interpretive package(s)" serving to "mobilize collective identity" (Polletta and Jasper 2001 291). Frames weave seemingly disparate events and ideas into coherent stories that are then used to interpret complex multivalent issues (Melucci 1996; Polletta and Jasper 2001). The discursive constructs promulgate salient topics "highlighting a limited number of elements" about them while relegating others as less important (Smith 2007 30). They allow individuals and groups to embrace particular "criteria for assessment on the basis of … how quickly and automatically (the criteria for assessment) come to mind" (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 142). Frames create points of contact where encounters with movement members, the opposition, the unaffiliated, and political authorities occurs. They engender a sense of solidarity that in turn provides political cohesion for groups of individuals. Opinion leaders are able to draw

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[44] Fictional and entertaining forms of communication have also been included in this framework although to a lesser extent vis-à-vis news (Goldfarb 1996, 2007). For instance, several scholars studied interpretations of sitcoms and dramas created by audience groups, and the correlations to topical political issues like race or social experiences (Liebes and Katz 1990; Vidmar, N. and M. Rokeach 1973). Goldfarb (2006, 2007) documented how theater groups provided a foundational form of civic association that provided a place for political culture to develop with the result being the reconfiguration of state institutions. Regardless of specific subject studied all pointed to the critical political capabilities of the audience.

from, mold, and grant access to political culture via frames with the ultimate potential effect of promoting a sense of solidarity.[45]

These concepts are not only useful in a broad sense when studying political influence, but can also more specifically be applied to political entertainers. This perspective would suggest that this group, in some capacity, act as opinion leaders. Moreover, it suggests that the audience oriented to a given opinion leader are more cohesive and politically engaged that previously thought. It is therefore important to discuss more pointed empirical work suggesting how this is useful to understanding the relationship between Rush Limbaugh and his audience. In turn it can be applied to questions of the talk show host's political influence. These insights construct the former as an opinion leader disseminating frames to the latter that understands itself as a group. This is where we next turn our attention.

'Conservative' Political Culture and Limbaugh the Opinion Leader:

The Political Culture framework outlined in the above section provides useful ways to conceptualize the political influence of Limbaugh. Fortunately, some empirical work on Limbaugh, even if it does not always use the exact terminology above, resonates with the Political Culture framework. This carries two primary advantages over the application of a Cultural Marxists framework to the talk show host. First, Limbaugh can be modeled as an opinion leader

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[45] To be sure frames do not command ideas or choices. They do not tell people what to think, but rather "what to think about" while providing alternatives of "how to think" (Katz 1987 28). They can "solicit, coax, and secure" participation for political mobilization and collective action (Benford and Snow 2000; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Price, Tewksbury, and Powers 1997; Snow and Benford 1992; Snow et al. 1986 464-465). In other words, frames are mechanism of influence. They do not dictate action, but they do make particular understandings and particular courses of political action more tenable to citizens (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Goffman 1974; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Reese, Gandy Jr., and Grant 2001).

in so far as he crafts and circulates a potent political frame. In this way Limbaugh's autonomous political influence is stressed as an alternative to instrumental influence guided by an overwhelming economic logic. Second, the literature sheds some light on the effects of his 'leadership'. Analysis of the talk show hosts audience suggests listeners are more civically active, politically aware, and socially cohesive than that of an entertained mass of docile consumers.

One of Limbaugh's most important accomplishment as far as the empirical literature is concerned, is his application of a specific frame to the foundational myths of modern American Conservatism.[46] The "Limbaugh Message" imposes a readily recognizable interpretation of the politically potent "Reagan Narrative".[47] This has produced a common set of discursive reference points binding the "Narrative" to topical items presented on the program. The idiomatic packages on offer through the "Limbaugh Message" frame current events in a way that comports with the particular Conservative world view. Through "cognitive structures" are created allowing audiences to "absorb a cogent, coherent view of the political world" (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 237). The cohesive Conservative vocabulary is an important culture resource for developing a sense of solidarity. Grafted onto the "Reagan Narrative" it articulates a particular symbolic framework

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[46] The conservative resurgence that began in the late 1950s culminating in the election of 1980 marked a new period in American national politics. The Goldwater campaign, the establishment of groups like the Young Americans for Freedom, and the publication of journals like the *National Review* symbolically marked a new chapter in Conservative history. During the Nixon years cultural elements like religion and identity were added to the mix, and there was noteworthy regional political realignment. A pinnacle of sorts was reached with the election of Ronald Reagan where the Republican Party aligned libertarians with social, political, and economic Conservatives under one relatively cohesive political banner (Goldfarb 2012; Lachmann 2010; Lipset 1955; Klatch 1999; Smith 2007;).

[47] The Regan narrative is a cultural construct with several components. One suggests that Reagan's economic policies lifted America from the brink of failure that seemed inevitable during the 1970, and was instrumental in propelling the nation to prosperity during the 1980s. The conjunction of a booming economy and the concomitant buildup of the US military forces allowed Reagan to seemingly singlehandedly defeat the Soviet Union, ferment an American economic revolution and usher in a new American dawn. Reagan "changed the trajectory of America" (Obama in Goldfarb 2011 73; Smith 2007). His political performance inspired a vision of contemporary Conservatism and a generation of Conservative retinues that transformed American political culture. The regnant principles combined tradition, nativism, an unencumbered free market, and anti-Communism with a touch of implicit racism (the so-called Southern strategy) (Douglas 1999; Goldfarb 2011 75; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Klatch 1999; Lipset 1955; Smith 2007).

capable of shaping cultural dispositions. The "Limbaugh Message" frames a distinct politically driven partisan language used as "rhetorical ammunition" throughout the political public sphere. (Barker 1998a 280, 2000; Barker and Knight 2000).

The empirical work on Limbaugh sharing an affinity with the Political Culture framework goes further. Research also developed important insight into the composition of the audience capturing the effects of the "Limbaugh Message" on their action. They suggest that Limbaugh, and more specifically the content of his program, is an important cultural resource used by regular listeners to adopt pronounced ideological dispositions that are manifest as overwhelmingly Conservative, and induce high rates of participation in a broad range of political activity compared to the general public. Most importantly, these mechanisms provide the audience with a degree of self-identified social solidarity. Limbaugh is the charismatic opinion leader distilling news and commentary about contemporary American politics by for an audience through a specific Conservative frame (Barker 1998 a, b, 2000, 2002; Barker and Knight 2000; Barker and Lawrence 2006; Hofstetter 1996; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Jamieson, Cappella, and Turrow 1995; Owen 1993).

Scholarship in this area also notes important demographic markers of the audience to Limbaugh's program suggesting a degree of homogeneity that would reinforce a common identity and sense of civic solidarity. Several important characteristics distinguishing the Limbaugh audience from a broader American national public. An overwhelming majority of the audience, nearly 90%, are white, and about 61% of those who listen regularly are male.[48] Religious affiliation is a dominant feature with over half reporting weekly attendance of a religious service. They are

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[48] It should also be noted that the likelihood of male callers being heard on the program are disproportionately large (Douglas 1999; Jamieson, Cappella, and Turrow 1996)

also decidedly concentrated between the working and middle classes. Half report annual incomes between $20,000 and $50,000 a year. More than half have attained a bachelor's degree, and over a third reside in the "South".[49] These attributes are strikingly similar to the base of the contemporary Republican Party in the United States, and have been relatively consistent for nearly two decades (Barker 1998 a, b, 2000, 2002; Barker and Knight 2000; Jamieson, Cappella, and Turrow 1995; Owen 1993).

The scholars note something more remarkable. Not only does the audience seem to be socially similar, they also seem to be aware of it. They form an identifiable social-political network. With Limbaugh as an opinion leader the audience reports understanding themselves as a "community" or a "non-traditional social network" populated by "kindred spirits" linked through common participation in ritual listening culminating with like-minded political beliefs.[50] Political identification reinforces this point. About 70% of the audience identifies as Conservative while 61% consider themselves Republicans (Barker 1998a 261; Barker and Lawrence 2006; Hofstetter 1996; Jamieson and Cappella 2008).

Just as important as 'who' they are in the socio-political sense is what they 'do'. The audience tends to vocalize political attitudes more prominently than non-listeners. They tend to be more active in civil society with higher participation rates in terms of voting, campaigning, and membership in voluntary political associations. The scholarship suggests that the resoluteness of a particular listener's political ideology and action correlate directly with frequency and duration

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[49] The South for this scholarship includes Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Texas (Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Jamieson, Cappella, and Turrow 1996).

[50] While this is not regularly done in physical proximity there are instances where listeners listen together. Although not widely practiced there are instances where groups of listeners gather in "Rush Rooms". These are dedicated meeting places like diners or bars where they listen to the program together (Douglas 1999 314). In effect there is a more traditional enactment of a public sphere.

of listening to Limbaugh's program. Time tuned in corresponds with a "substantial change in attitudes" about public life and similar "in partisan and ideological identification" (Barker 1998a 282, 2002; Barker and Knight 2000; Hofstetter 1996).

One study merits special remarks for its ambition and foundational insight in researching Limbaugh's political influence. A 2006 study by Barker and Lawrence built upon existing work suggests voting preference is an important marker of Limbaugh's political influence political influence. The research asserts that the degree of audience reception corresponded with candidate preferences, and a high level of political activity, namely voting. It included audience research, and a content analysis of political issues discussed on the Limbaugh program comparing them to the coverage those issues through national news outlets. Methodologically speaking, it did a good job of combing a 'thin' content analysis of national news media and "nontraditional" media (e.g. partisan commentary exemplified by Limbaugh) coupled with convincing statistical and survey analysis of the audience's political preferences and knowledge about topical political affairs.[51] Research concluded that Limbaugh exerts influence with "direct" media effects upon the audience going so far as to contend that a subtle form of the "Hypodermic Needle" hypothesis of mass media at play (Barker and Lawrence 2006). The authors acknowledge that it is most suggestive during specific historical moments like elections, but this provocative conclusion is what sets their study apart from others covered so far within the framework. While this may be hinted at in other studies grouped here it is the only one to explicitly make this claim.

The Barker and Lawrence research presents factors pertinent to this dissertation in terms of what is needed to understand Limbaugh's political influence. It supports, albeit for different

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[51] The idea of a 'thin', as opposed to 'thick' content analysis will be discussed in the section on cultural sociology. Likewise, a rethinking of journalism and corresponding ideas (e.g. news, nontraditional, commentary, etc.) will be taken up in the subsequent section on field theory and neo-institutionalism.

reasons, one of the main analytical assertions presented: mass media plays an integral role in constituting and defining politics, and can therefore impact political influence. Capturing the relationship between media topics in the news, the content of the Limbaugh program, and the political attitudes and activities of listeners reveals important contours of his political influence. The "Limbaugh" scholarship falling within the broader "Political Culture" framework described here supports a model of Limbaugh as a charismatic opinion leader able to distill contemporary politics through an easily recognized conservative lens. It describes the dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence as emerging from unique Conservative content created and delivered by a mediated opinion leader to a politically active segment of the American citizenry.

As noted this framework presents several advantages over the Cultural Marxists perspective. For one, Limbaugh is far from a manifestation of furtive economic interests, and is more than a cog in a corporate media empire. Rather, he is an opinion leader exercising a degree of autonomy in national political discussion. Not bound by his small ownership percentage in the broadcast he freely modifies an important Conservative narrative in American political culture into a set of readily available frames with him determining the form they take. This is important because it means this framework is able to distinguish the material structure responsible for the production of the program from its ability to organize political attention and action because of internal dynamics.

The framework is also helpful in that it constructs a stronger understanding of the role played by the audience. In doing so a delimited active audience sharing an affinity of social and political characteristics comes together. They are engaged in public life more so than non-listeners, and because of this it is suggested that their impact on politics is disproportionately felt. Put another way, Limbaugh's influence emerges from his ability to frame current events in a way that

motivates an audience towards political action. It is the intersection of Limbaugh and audience that is most important for explaining dynamics of political influence. While the scholarship is ambivalent in terms of the impact on broadly democratic processes and institutions there is agreement that Limbaugh is an opinion leader that is integral in establishing a common cultural base of information through a Conservative frame around which Conservatives coalesce, and use as a spring board for political action.

Limbaugh as an Opinion Leader, and the Questions that Remain:

The Political Culture framework presented in this section is helpful for two primary reasons. It constructs a stronger understanding of the role played by the audience providing a sense of who they are, what they do, and, ostensibly, how they are formed in a type of civil association. The framework is also helpful in that it suggests that the common language put forth by Limbaugh frames the political world in patterned ways fostering a sense of solidarity amongst Conservative audience members while inspiring a high degree of political action. Limbaugh's influence is evident in the actions of an audience inspired by his words.

Despite the contributions made the Political Culture framework certain limitations of modeling the dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence in a mediated world still exist. First we should review some general comments about the framework. In analytical terms the conceptualization of culture and mass media engendered by this framework are potentially problematic. Culture is idealized yet conceptually underdeveloped. It is never teased out on its own terms. Put another way the Political Culture framework fails to provide richer detail as to what culture 'is' beyond connecting it loosely to 'norms' and 'values'. The 'stuff' of culture (e.g.

the texts, symbolic, and codes) is not analyzed in an independent fashion. It is repeatedly suggested that values, attitudes, and frames are taken to be self-evident factors in the dynamics of political influence, but these potentially powerful concepts operate within black boxes. Moreover correlations between frames, values, and political action are recorded, but are not fully explained. In not doing so the autonomous patterned logic structuring these cultural elements are absent making it difficult to bracket the effects of the non-cultural factors at play.

Consequently, the potential of concepts like 'Political Culture' suffer related deficiencies. It is asserted to exist, and understood as manifested in frames with noticeable effects on the political action of given receivers. However, a rich description of these dynamics that would bolster support for the position adopted here is never conducted. The descriptions of Political Culture remain relatively thin. It becomes a blank interface that is conceived as overly functional. Although they might not be economic in origin, culture stills seems to play the role of proxy for other social factors not accounted for (Kymlicka 2004a, b; Stratford, Armstrong, and Jaskolski 2003; Inglehart 1997). This provides an understanding of Political Culture that is in need of further description and explanation.

Goldfarb (1991, 2006, 2012) moves the closest within in this framework to both specifying Political Culture (what is lacking here), and capturing its effects in nuanced ways (what is more dutifully attended to). Yet, even Goldfarb's understanding of culture is less than satisfying. For one, in an American context, he reconstructs Political Culture in terms of historical development. He accounts for specific forms into which Political Culture manifests, but offers little into establishing how these forms are maintained. Furthermore, little is said concerning how Political Culture draws on meaning structure that are not ultimately reducible to historical factors, social structure, or individual action. Political Culture does not stand on its own in this analysis. It is built

on historical tensions that at their core continue to exist today, but are never connected to any larger meaning systems. Political Culture, as it is understood here, is couched in the diachronic, with little reflection on the importance of *s*ynchronicity.

This is related to a second issue with Goldfarb's analysis, and what it implies for the analytical purchase of further studying these topics. Although he uses the language of "meaning, symbol, and conception… the material of political culture" they serve primarily as a means to an end (Goldfarb 2012 29). Political dynamics steer culture while culture in turn "facilitates or undermines" politics (Goldfarb 2012 39). Although it occupies center stage in his analysis culture is only important politically to the extent that is its expression of, and acts as a lubricant for, political life. Culture cannot be understood as existing outside of these conditions. This prevents seeing how culture creates instead of reflecting or facilitating dynamics of political influence.

Developing an admittedly intriguing conceptual constellation drawn from a synthesis of Weber, Foucault, and Arendt, Goldfarb suggests that articulations of Political Culture and power overlap in a way illuminating how "authority is legitimated, how people come together, and how knowledge empowers" (Goldfarb 2012 33). At issue is the relationship between power and culture. The blended perspective uncritically assumes culture exists exclusively in the service of external power. Moreover, it is only empirically approachable through scrutinizing interaction, and produced only through social institutions for the ordering of populations. While Goldfarb connects culture to a specific conceptualization of power it unfortunately lacks a sufficient sense of cultural autonomy. We are still describing culture in terms of something other than itself. This is not resolutely negative. In fact it is necessary. The problem is that it is incomplete.

There are also other issues. The conceptualization of mass media, or more appropriately the lack thereof, prompts concerns. There is a need for further specificity. Scholarship developed

within this framework understands mass media as a differentiated institution circulating cultural content that contributes to the integrative function of the social system. Mass media is useful for "conferring status" by reinforcing some power dynamic that already exists. If true, mass media is a tool, and in of itself not special (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948; Parsons and White 1960).

Channels and formats need further nuance and contextualization. Actors occupy different positions across mass media, and employ different types of discursive structures that are not uniform in practice or effect. The Political Culture framework flattens out these important differences. Opinions leaders, for instance, can include political entertainers amongst their ranks. However, without further analysis it is difficult to tell whether political entertainers share qualities of other opinion leaders like politicians, journalists, community leaders, clergy, or if they are unique. Lacking this type of precision means important dynamics of Limbaugh's influence, as well as the influence of other political entertainers like him, remain obscured. In turn the effects of this type of influence are likewise muddied.

Built off of a "limited effects" paradigm, with the exception of Barker and Knight, mass media and its constituent players are understood as additive features subsumed within a broader category of "collective behavior". It is understood as supplementing other social processes and institutions rendering influence, with some notable exceptions, is indirect. Political entertainers engender a weak force that has a multiplier effect with the caveat that other social conditions are already in place. The media may amplify political dispositions, but only in so far as those dispositions already exist. Put another way, the media can prime, but the attitudes, values, and norms must be socialized, to a large extent, a priori (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1991; Katz 1987, 2001, 2009; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; McGuire 1986).

For instance some research argues that mass media was used effectively by social movements only after platforms had been established, and when direct appeals to legislative bodies and political parties prove proved fruitless (Goldfarb 2012 96-100; Scott 1990 140-145). Mass media was treated similarly as a harbinger of processes associated with globalization and the reflection and reinforcement of national identity rather than a producer of either (). At best it is an interface for politicians to be personally accessible and emotionally relatable to a broad and diverse public (Goldfarb 2012; Ignatieff 1994; Nash 2010; Street 2004). Little if any consideration is accorded to how mass media, let alone political entertainment, is independently and internally organized, or how the media can create or refract, rather than reflect, political culture.

The lack of attention to more fully theorizing mass media when it is brought into analysis is perhaps not surprising given the focus of sociology during the period when many of these scholars trained. With the rejection of a variety of mass society models mass media consequently became subsumed into studies of social networks and collective behavior. Additionally there seemed to be little interest to questions of how mass media helps organize national political discussion. Unfortunately, for many of these scholars' teachers mass media was culturally pedestrian, and not worthy of academic attention. These models approached media through other institutions and social processes, and restricted more nuanced evaluations about the operations of mass media (Jacobs 2003b, 2005, 2007). The dearth of sociological research on the mass media from the late 1950s through the mid-1980s was incidentally the same time that important studies of Political Culture, particularly American Political Culture, were developed.

Although much of the empirical work on Limbaugh cited above shares much with the Political Culture framework it is important to note that it too carries limitation resonating with the more general limitations outlined above. The literature about the talk show host sharing an affinity

with the Political Culture framework is hindered by a limited scope of analysis. Research focused on the show has relied heavily on audience studies suffering from small sample sizes or geographic isolation making the findings difficult to generalize (Barker 1998a, b, 2002; Barker and Knight 2000; Hofstetter 1996; Hofstetter, Barker, et. al 1999). Even those conducting studies on Limbaugh that have substantially increased sample size still lack certain methodological benefits because of data sources. In some cases data used was repurposed after the fact. It was not collected initially with Limbaugh in mind (Barker 1998a, b; Barker and Knight 2000).[52]

This model also suggests that Limbaugh is an opinion leader whose influence is expressed through the actions of his audience. The political activities and dispositions of the latter is predicated on what they hear from the talk show host. While this certainly might explain one mechanism of influence it certainly cannot account for it all. If Limbaugh's political influence is capable of shaping political outcomes through listener action, for instance voting, the impact is likely going to be localized. Let us assume the high estimates for regular Limbaugh listeners is somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty million people a week. Let us also assume they are all influenced by Limbaugh in the same way, and at the very least vote uniformly in mass. Even if this was the case, the audience comprises a relatively small percentage of the national electorate. This is compounded by geographical dispersion. While it is within reason to presume some voting districts may very well have a disproportionate amount of Limbaugh listeners constituting a majority this would be the exception rather than the rule. The ability of the audience to sway national or statewide elections is more modest than extant literature suggests. Even if the audience

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[52] In particular, the American National Election Survey was taken as a data source. This survey was not created with Limbaugh in mind. Although this does not mean insights concerning his political influence cannot be supported with this data it does mean that further tools are needed to supplement what has been found here. More "Limbaugh specific" data sets must be incorporated in analysis.

is directly influenced, the ability to translate influence into electoral outcomes requires alternative explanations.

For those taking a more resolute stance by proposing a form of the "Hypodermic Needle" hypothesis at work, myriad intervening effects are not taken into consideration. Correlations no doubt exist, and perhaps there is some degree of suggestive power Limbaugh exerts directly upon the audience, but if it exists it is only a part of a casual explanation. Other factors 'mediate' this relationship. The authors hint at this as they suggest that political priming is an activating agent rather than a means of value origination. Unfortunately they do not carry out this line of thinking further.

We also do not know enough about Limbaugh's relationship with the political public sphere and the field of journalism helping organize it. The political public sphere, the space of national discussion and debate, is iterative. To stay relevant to public discussion Limbaugh would of course speak about matters discussed in the Mainstream Press.[53] We know that subject matter on the radio broadcast generally corresponds to the subject matter of the Mainstream Press. But this information provides little indication of how Limbaugh is folded into national political discussion. Consequently we are brought no closer to modelling how he is imbricated, willingly or unwillingly, into the discussions and debates occurring throughout the political public sphere.

When these issues concerning Limbaugh and the mass media are raised we can see how this framework misses important aspects of Limbaugh's place and influence within American civil society. For instance, how can we distinguish between the effects of the "Limbaugh Message" on

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[53] This is not to say that the opinions and commentary on Limbaugh's program are not unique, or non-Mainstream produced content never makes its way into broadcast. It is to say topics present generally follow other Mainstream press organized discussion in the political public sphere.

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the audience from that of the Republican Party? Similarly, how can we tease out the feelings of solidarity based on the frame presented by the program from other possible linkages people with similar socio-demographic circumstance would share anyway? Using this framework we are not able to readily address these types of questions even if they were noted in research.

Two issues need to be considered when developing alternative models describing Limbaugh's political influence. One must focus on more nuanced overlapping connections Limbaugh shares with the audience, journalism, and politics. Conceptually tying them together within one conceptual framework opens the possibility of considering Limbaugh's political influence as working through mechanisms that are not limited to direct effects on the audience, and reflects his position within several social spaces.

A second interrelated consideration must focus on the treatment of content. More developed accounts of the commentary on the program, as it exists within broader institutional spaces beyond the program, should be considered. In other words, we must analyze content beyond what Limbaugh produces yet still involves the talk show host. To better understand the extent of his political influence we must recognize that Limbaugh's words are not just heard by his audience, or lost in the ether. Other, 'secondary' audiences, like journalists, also listen. They also 'talk' back in a way no Limbaugh audience member, including those that make it on air, can. We should know how they are connected to Limbaugh, and what they 'say' regarding the talk show host.

Recapping the Reviewed Frameworks:

Although stark differences clearly exist between the two frameworks discussed thus far some points of resonance should be noted. For one, in the broadest sense each recognizes the

distinction between influence and power. Both agree the former social force is aimed at voluntary compliance through the subtle and efficient steering of action through ideas. Both frameworks also imply that political entertainers, like Limbaugh, act as conduits and transmitters of political ideology. The degree of autonomy to create or alter ideology, and the ends towards which the ideology is directed varies yet each is capable of recognizing the social fact that there are political reverberations of Limbaugh's utterances.

The literature concerning political influence and Limbaugh thus far has provided important insights. The scholarship proves helpful for building models of Limbaugh's political influence and political entertainers more broadly. Put another way, both are important for better understanding the dynamics of political influence in a mediated world. Benefits notwithstanding there are shared limitations. They both do not account for important institutional or cultural elements that must be considered. To better understand the dynamics of influence in a mediated political world in which a political entertainer, like Limbaugh, is conceptualized as an "occasional politician" other sociological frameworks are needed. This is where we now turn our attention.

Framework Three - Neo-Institutionalism and Structural Theory: A 'Political Culture' Approach to Study Culture and Political Influence:

In this section two distinct but overlapping analytical frameworks will be synthetically presented. Points of resonance between the two that are useful in developing models of influence associated with political entertainers like Limbaugh will be highlighted. Both compliment the two approaches previously outlined while resolving some of the questions they left unanswered. When synthesized, the combined properties of this 'third' framework are able to account for how

Limbaugh, political organizations, media networks, and audiences are part of a Conservative mediated political network. In turn, this network exists within broader interconnected media and political social spaces. A new more intricate understanding of his political influence can emerge from this constellation of interrelated positions.

The first component of this blended framework draws from "neo-institutionalism". Beginning in the late 1970s organizational sociologists rethought the role of institutions in relation to individual and collective action. Neo-institutional scholarship grew out of work initially interested in the influence of economic institutions, but it expanded by looking at the organizations constituting markets. Interest was in part placed on how firms adopted similar forms and regularized exchange that aimed to minimized uncertainty. As the work evolved increasing consideration was placed on factors beyond economic decision making, and emphasis focused on how "actors and their interests are institutionally constructed" (DiMaggio and Powell 1991a 28).

This scholarship addressed questions about institutionally based influence pertinent to this dissertation. Neo-institutional scholars developed new analytical tools to describe the scope and degree of influence exercised through the interconnectedness between and within organizations. The scholarship underscored the important role of "organizational environments" described as the social contexts where the "taken-for-granted beliefs and widely promulgated rules that serve as templates" guide norms, and decision making processes. They asserted that these activities were "mapped into organizational forms". Organizational environments are in part structured by cultural dimensions that influence collective and individual action within institutions (Powell and DiMaggio 1991a 27-28; Scott 1991 181). The institutional logics in operation shape interests, determine available means to pursue goals, and certify events, practices, and organizational forms

as significant and legitimate (DiMaggio and Powell 1991b; Friedland and Alford 1991; Jepperson and Meyer 1991; Scott 1991).

Similarly the concept of organizational fields, the "key suppliers, resource and product consumers, and regulatory agencies … the totality of relevant actors" oriented towards the "production of a good or service" provided another important analytical tool to describe the degree of connectedness and structural equivalencies allowing patterned and regularized interaction (DiMaggio and Powell 1991b 64-64). The 'new' developments in institutional analysis allowed researchers to explore how differentiated social spaces are internally structured by organizational practices and shared meanings yet are compatible with others within shared environmental contexts (DiMaggio 1982 a, b, 1986, 1987 a, b; DiMaggio and Powell 1991 64-65; Friedland and Alford 1991; Jepperson 1991 150-157; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer, Scott, Strang 1987; Meyer, Strang, and Creighton 1988; Powell; Scott and Meyer 1991; Powell 1991).[54]

Dynamic institutional actions can also be modeled with this framework. Organizations change, remain the same, reproduce, and die. Throughout these organizational 'lifecycles' scholars noted that as differentiated individuals and organizations repeatedly interact under particular "environmental conditions" they come to resemble one another in important ways. This occurs at both micro and macro levels. Isomorphic processes shape how organizations optimize action in a given organizational environment (DiMaggio and Powell 1991a, b).[55]

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[54] Early institutional scholarship focused on rational-actor or functional models to explain the dynamics of organizations, that is how they changed, maintained, and made decisions (DiMaggio and Powell 1991).

[55] Isomorphic processes have been used to explain the strategic choices certain organizations make for advantage in an organizational environment (competitive isomorphism). Others focus on how organizations adopt forms for the purpose of attaining legitimacy, including political legitimacy (institutional isomorphism). In other instances organizations adopt forms to impose constraints on other organizations in an organizational environment (coercive-institutional), enact standardized organizational responses to contend with environmental uncertainty (mimetic-institutional), or structure the role of actors according to delimited professional norms (normative-institutional) (Powell and DiMaggio 1991b 64-71).

This suggests that differentiated organizations through, repeated interaction have the propensity to become thoroughly integrated. In doing organizations from different organizational fields develop interconnected elements within an "interrelated network of mutually supportive and antagonistic parts" (DiMaggio and Powell 1991a 28). The creation of these networks expands the breadth and scope of any particular organizational element. At a more micro level organizational environments provide an opportunity to "bypass" organizational structure permitting interactions between individual actors across space and time (Zucker 1991; Scott 1991 180). Moreover, they can channel what influence they have through institutional conduits previously unavailable, and in effect amplifying it (DiMaggio 1982 a, b, 1986, 1987 a, b; Scott 1991; Orru, Biggart, and Hamilton 1991; Galaskiewicz 1991; Powell and DiMaggio 1991).

Neo-institutionalism allows a more holistic approach to thinking about the relationship between entertainer, media industries, political organizations, and audiences. In turn the causal factors cited by the previous framework dealing with the material base of the content and ideology or the civil activities and associations of the audience can be better described in terms of institutional logics and organizational environments. They need not be mutually exclusive considerations. When teasing out the nuances of political influence the state, politicians, and parties are clearly important. This framework creates an attractive way for incorporating non-state actors and organizations into this type of political analysis. By sketching out multiple interlinked institutional connections this framework is resistant to different forms of one-dimensional determinism.

At this juncture let us briefly consider political entertainers further in light of the above. They are connected to several types of firms spanning different organizational environments with each operating according to several different institutional logics. Political entertainers may relate

to audiences economically as a marketer to a consumer while also relating to them politically as an opinion leader to a citizen. Political entertainers are materially supported by media corporations operating within regulatory, market, and organizational fields. There they are joined by state actors, civic associations, and others from mass media. All continually interact with one another. It is not an economic logic *or* a politically active audience. It is not advertising through politics *or* political opinion and myth-making. It is the way all are all interconnected through organizational environments supporting the influence of political entertainers. In this way the dynamics of influence exerted by them can be described in more nuanced and pluralistic ways.

Before turning to how this can be more pointedly applied in the case of Rush Limbaugh it is important to describe a complimentary analytical framework to be used in conjunction with neo-institutionalism. "Structural" theory developed in large part through the work of Pierre Bourdieu provides another set of analytical and methodological tools sharing an affinity with neo-institutionalism. It further refines models of political influence in a mediated world. Like neo-institutionalism it conceives of a differentiated social world. However it departs from neo-institutionalism in regards to what differentiation looks like, what foundational units should be analyzed, and as such offers an alternative model for examining the relationship between power and culture.[56]

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[56] There is considerable overlap between neo-institutional and structural theory. Both draw from Weber's concept of social differentiation and Durkheim's idea of culture as a structuring classification systems. Each makes cultural dynamics central to understanding operations of political influence across social environments. From these perspectives culture serves as a resource, a context, and a form of power. The conceptual language of 'field', which will be discussed shortly, shares much with 'organizational environment'. This opens new ways of understanding how "social-background effects are translated" into political influence (Swartz 1997 287).

Important differences between the two frameworks should also be noted. Three in particular standing out. First, Bourdieu's concept of field exists on a continuum that is more encompassing than "organizations fields" or "institutional orders" in that they can be both inter and intra organizational. This is analytically possible because all fields feature common structures or field 'homologies' that take specific forms in particular social circumstances (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997; Benson and Neveu 2005). Additionally all fields tend to share a boundary and be in some way oriented towards a "meta-field"; the "meta-field" or "field of power" instills the "organizing principle of differentiation and struggle throughout *all* fields (Swartz 1997 137 emphasis added).

Structural theory holds that individuals are always already set in a social structural position. The positions are in turn located in relation to other positions within specific social arenas of conflict, or fields. These distinct sets of "social universes" are defined by specific rules, values, and actor occupied positions. Those occupying dominant positions in a given field define value and exercise influence through "symbolic" force. Capital, the varied resources used to steer the rules of play governing action within the field, is deployed to create cultural distinction between actors occupying particular positions. The distinction is a justification to exercise power (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Seidman 2011; Swartz 1997).

Fields force analysts to "think relationally" as each share sets of structural homologies allowing high degrees of interaction between them as well as within them. They do not exist in

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A second point of distinction between Bourdieu and the neo-institutionalist are their respective evaluations of social interactions. For Bourdieu fields are spaces of conflicts. Within the constraint of the rules of the game participants in the field compete with one another over positions, and the acquisition of capital valued in the field. Actors within a given field gather and deploy material and symbolic resources to create or obtain power (Bourdieu 1977, 1984; 1993 Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997). While neo-Institutionalism also argues that symbolic or material resources are at stake the outcome of their acquisition and use are not necessarily competitive. In fact they can be cooperative resulting in homogeneity via isomorphic processes rather than differentiation and distinction. In fact, the literature suggests that organizations within fields tend to list towards homogeneity for a variety of factors ranging from environmental constraints to goal-oriented action (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Friedland and Alford 1991; Powell 1991; DiMaggio 1986, 1987; Scott 1991; Meyer and Scott 1991).

Another significant difference is the respective role of culture within both frameworks. For each culture plays a dynamic role operating at the level of both structure and actor. For Bourdieu culture comprises the symbolic systems existing as the foundation of interaction, but also as act as a source of domination. On the micro level culture is deployed via an actor's habitus, and on the macro level habitus is used to navigate a field. Through this process actors actively create and re-create symbolic stratifications leading to the specification of social distinctions. Culture exerts symbolic power or "representations of legitimacy (that) make the exercise and perpetuation of power" structured (Bourdieu and Passeron 1975 5; Swartz 1997 6-8). Culture is dynamic, pervasive, and is, in and of itself, a form of power. It is a self-reinforcing mechanism refracting the social world and implementing some form of discipline. This has replaced more coercive methods of violence, and rather perpetuates social structure through eliciting the consent from all actors within a field by establishing difference and distinction (Bourdieu 1979; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 111-113; Swartz 1997 82-88). Neo-institutionalism casts culture in a different light. Like Bourdieu it is an institutional dynamic that operates at the micro level and the macro level as well as both within and amongst organizations (Friedland and Alford 1991; Jepperson 1991; Jepperson and Meyer 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Zucker 1991). Yet, culture is limited to being "simply those rules, procedures, and goals without primary representation in formal organizations, and without monitoring and sanctioning by some "central" authority" (Jepperson 1991 150-151). Despite the assertion that it emerges out of interaction, culture acts as an "objective and external structure" or sets of symbolic systems shaping and informing organizational outcomes and forms (Scott 1991 165-.167; Meyer and Rowan 1977). On the micro level actors chose whether to conform or deviate, but appropriating and changing culture seems beyond their grasp (Scott and Meyer 1991; Zucker 1991). In the latter culture is important, but is a comparatively less provocative concept. It is not something to be wielded as much as it is something to be referenced.

isolation, and although they possess varying degrees of autonomy, the relationships between them are important to explore because of reciprocating forces. Fields are organized by two poles orienting lines of social force. An orthodox pole shapes the internal dynamics of a field from within. It sets rules as to what types of legitimate strategies exist to engage in the struggles defined for that field, what forms of capital are considered valuable, and outlines the hierarchical arrangements of positions within the field. This is useful when attempting to map influence within a field (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Swartz 1997).

However, fields never operate in isolation, and lines of force are also organized around a heterodox pole. This pole is ultimately shaped within a meta-field of power, the field to which all other fields orient. The object of the field of power is the acquisition of all forms of capital that are universally transferable to all other social fields. All fields are shaped by these struggles, and they internalize and replicate them in their own specific struggles (Swartz 1997 136). Through shared structural homologies multidimensional arrays of relationships linking institutions, organizations, and positions of one field to another can be modeled. In other words, homologous characteristics shared by fields suggests that actions transpiring in one have effects on others although those effects will always be mediated by the impacted field's internal dynamics (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 109-115; Swartz 1997 130 – 134).

The interrelation between three specific fields operating within the meta-field of power are directly relevant to the work presented in this dissertation. The "political field" is a delimited social field comprised of actors and positions concerning the administrative, organizational, legislative, and regulatory capacities of society.[57] This includes the state, legislatures, executive agencies and

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[57] At times Bourdieu has used the term "political field" as an alternative name for the meta-field of power as opposed to the more specific concept offered above. There is also considerable overlap between the use of the term "political field", in the restricted

departments, and political parties, as well as the actors occupying positions within each. The form of capital central to this field is "political" or "statist" capital whereby those occupying this space compete over the ability to consecrate social problems as targets of collective action effectively transforming them into public issues. It also permits the holder to impose collective definitions of justice and draw upon the resources and administrative capacities of the state to wield influence (Benson 2005; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 239-240; Swartz 1997; Bourdieu 1996; Darras 2005).

A second field important to consider for the research here is the "cultural field". This field consists of the related social network of positions occupied by producers and consumers of cultural goods and services. The cultural field encompasses subfields like the artistic field, the literary field, and the field of entertainment. Some actor occupied positions and organizations within the field of cultural production include artists, writers, entertainers, mass media companies, publishing houses, and galleries. Within the cultural field emphasis is placed on cultural and symbolic capital. Here struggles between relations of positions focus on the power to consecrate legitimate definitions and meanings attached to symbolic goods, and the ability to invoke credentials to substantiate some form of specialized knowledge. In doing so important distinctions are culturally made and institutionally enforced. This manifests in different forms of social stratification (Bourdieu 1993, 2005; Swartz 1997).

A final social arena to consider is the "journalistic field". This describes a field aimed at consecrating and legitimating public knowledge and public opinion. Even though it is considered "weak" compared to other fields the importance of journalism should not be understated. As arbiters of fact the journalistic field is an important "part of an ensemble of centrally located fields"

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sense, and the "bureaucratic field" (Swartz 1997 136-140). When referring to the "political field" here it is meant in the more restricted sense.

each competing for the right to "portray a legitimate version of the social world" (Benson and Neveu 2005 6). Editors, reporters, columnists, and commentators constitute some of the positions actors occupy within this field. Organizations like broadcast companies and newspaper publishers are situated in this space as well. The study of the field is mostly concerned with the power brokers in society, and this provides an ability to act as gatekeepers to important spaces in the political public sphere. Put another way, the subjects of journalism tend to be those actors and organizations possessing high degrees of capital in other fields. Journalists attempt to attach meaning to their subjects and either grant or deny access to political discussion and debate (Benson 2005; Benson and Neveu 2005; Bourdieu 1993, 2005; Champagne 2005; Durras 2005).

Interactivity and interconnectedness of fields are core dynamics in Structural theory. Although each field outlined above is autonomous they still exist in the same social universe. The fields "speak" to one another through actors occupying analogous positions within each. In doing so they exert and are shaped by one another's influence (Benson and Neveu 2005 6; Bourdieu 1993, 2005; Swartz 1997). This dynamic can be seen as operating in the field of journalism. As stated above it is said to be 'weakly' autonomous meaning it is generally dominated by rules and values emerging from fields. For instance it is dominated by the political field through regulators, lobbyists, and politicians. Not only can they advocate or shape important rules constraining journalism they are often the very subject of news and commentary. Political actors can grant or deny access to themselves or other resources throughout civil society. Moreover, journalism is also significantly impacted by the broader cultural field within which it is located. Journalistic outlets understood as respectable or trustworthy accumulate high degrees of cultural capital. Measured through such things as awards and commendations journalist seek to accumulate cultural capital as to be recognized as dominant within their field. At the same time economic considerations are

also important. Things like advertising revenue and market share are indicators economic capital (Benson 2005; Benson and Neveu 2005; Bourdieu 1993, 2005; Champagne 2005; Durras 2005).[58]

However, this does not mean the journalistic field has no power. As intimated above it can push back on the other fields outlined above in very real ways. Recent scholarship has been useful in highlighting this point. In a comparison between French and American political programs on television the influence of journalism on the political field was reflected by how the former exercises discretion in the selection of guests and as topics of discussion. Certain types of politicians with particular positions were invited as guests in the shows surveyed, while other types were relatively absent. This demonstrates, the authors contend, instances of journalists exerting influence over actors in the political field. They designate access to public discussion by granting or withholding access for politicians to appear in their reports, commentaries, or broadcasts. This plays an important role in journalists consecrating their authority to speak in public. Having such guests on the programs also provided journalists with legitimacy. The presence of powerful politicians on the programs or articles meant that they were important sites of discussions and debate. As a consequence the successful operators in the journalistic field authoritatively transmit information to broad and differentiated publics, and set agendas defining the range of topics transpiring in common conversation (Benson 2005; Benson and Neveu 2005; Darras 2005; Iyengar and Kinder 2010; Mermin 1997; Schudson 2011 22- 24).[59]

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[58] The economic field should also be mentioned. This refers to the market (free or centralized) enterprises aimed at the production of material goods and services organized for the purpose of accumulating economic capital. There is considerable overlap between the capital sought in the economic field, economic capital, with the dominant form of capital in the overarching field of power (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Benson and Neveu 2005).

[59] As an example when news items concerned with economic matters, particularly focused on the market, rose to prominence after the Crash of 2008, political discussion in the public sphere mirrored those very same discussions about various facets of the economy presented while others were ignored (Smith 2007).

Additional research on the relations between the fields of politics and journalism has been conducted within what scholars have named the American national "Space of Opinion". This describes the nexus of social spaces and "communicative connections" formed by the overlapping organizations and actors based within the fields of journalism and politics. As a more nuanced study of similar dynamics discussed in the research above this work highlighted the different types of speakers appearing in the Space of Opinion during designated time periods. The scholarship suggested that participants from the political and journalistic fields engage one another, and in turn the public, through idiosyncratic communicative styles that vary across different media formats with each portending important political effects. With each possessing different degrees of access to discussion as well as differing degrees of autonomy the contributors were able to make to ongoing discussion and debate varied (Jacobs and Townsley 2011 38-52). These practices and patterns were linked to the powerful authority claims used to influence discussion carried out in the political public sphere, and throughout civil society more broadly (Jacobs and Townsley 2011 11-15).[60]

The research on the "Space of Opinion" carries some important implications here. It creates a way to model how communicative and regulative political spaces are interconnected through a web of inter-institutional and inter-organizational ties. In turn it can situate this spaces within a delimited socio-historical context. For instance, the "Space of Opinion" traces roots to the interaction of journalistic and political institutions seeking to organize public discussion, while also acknowledging mediated politics as responding to shifting technological and market

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[60] Scholars note the differing rhetorical strategies and forms of presentation brought by different types of speakers varying across media channel. For instance TV hosts might employ an argumentative rhetorical posture made popular on political debate shows where success is at times defined by the vociferousness of a polemic rather than the merits of an idea. In other cases journalist may maintain a cooler voice of detached objectivity that is a normative dimension associated with the profession. Likewise politicians may speak for party or themselves while an academic draws on credentials to support an argument. Each adopts a unique strategy to assert authority in national political discussion (Jacobs and Townsley 2011 97 - 104).

conditions. This can be adopted to study the historical dynamics of mediated spaces adding to current knowledge. It can also take contemporary dynamics into account, and articulate currently changes in the "Space of Opinion" that have ramifications spilling over into politics (Jacobs and Townsley 2011).

There is nothing inherent within this model to prevent further extension for the purpose of probing deeper in other areas like the field of entertainment. The work on the "Space of Opinion" can be used to further situate the interactions between this fields in relation to journalism and politics while acknowledging its place within the larger field of power. Influence exerted by these types of actors within these social spaces are more thoroughly explained and conceptualized as multidimensional. Positions occupied by political entertainers can be linked through homology to similar positions in other fields.

This work has forged a path. Take entertainments influence on politics as an illustration. Although it suggests that entertainment currently represent a small group speakers in the American Space of Opinion, their numbers have been increasing. Speaking from a unique position they have provided a dynamic alternative voice to contemporary political discussion altering the trajectory of the political public sphere. They are growing more numerous, and as they are further incorporated into national political discussion their voices are becoming more influential (Grazian 2010; Hartley 1996, 2001; Jacobs and Townsley 2012; Jacobs and Wild 2013). Given entertainments historical relationship with political institutions, organizations, and practices, along with its (often understated) place in political sociology, this work has clearly highlighted reasons as to why it is beneficial to consider entertainment *alongside* journalism if a clearer and more robust understanding of mediated political influence is to emerge (Alexander and Jacobs 1998;

Bauman 2002, 2005, 2007; Jacobs 2003 a, b, 2005, 2007; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Warner 2005).

Entertainment's influence over journalism in addition to politics has been further specified through related scholarship as well. For instance, some note how the structure and content of news publications have come to increasingly take on characteristics associated with entertainment, and this is in part due to organization links between journalism and entertainment media. The material structures and technological platforms supporting the entertainment 'industry' are increasingly interconnected with the 'profession' of journalism. News organizations operated by the same media conglomerates that concurrently own entertainment media have increasingly become held to the expectations of latter in terms of profit margins and audience sizes. This has created changes in the business of news. Targeting a broad spectrum of segmented audiences, creating terse items emphasizing graphics and human interest topics, and maintaining an increasingly interactive web presence are all areas where news has come to look increasingly like entertainment (Jacobs 2003b, 2005). To put it another way, insight into the operations of the entertainment tell us something about the operations of the press (Bennet and Entman 2001; Delli-Carpini and Williams 2001; Hartley 1996, 2001; Grazian 2010; Jacobs 2003b, 2005).

In another sense it opens new analytical avenues to approach and model influence in relations to the actions of those occupying positions within the overlapping mediated political fields. For example journalists and politicians often take on personal and affable personas appearing regularly on talk show, variety shows, sitcoms, gossip columns, feature articles, and lifestyle pieces. They are consummate professionals in the limelight developing an individually stylized personality (i.e. a brand) that is evaluated in terms of an appeal to broad and largely anonymous audiences. Technical competencies, expertise, or experience are increasingly

considered in a secondary capacity (Baym 2005, 2010; Fox and Sahin 2007; Jacobs 2003b, 2005; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jones 2012 a, c, d).

Sociological research drawing from this work on media and politics has begun to flesh out how non-journalistic media are organized and interact within other fields shaping political discussion Concepts from the Neo-Institutional and Structural frameworks provide powerful analytical and empirical tools. Taken together both help build towards a "careful, balanced, and empirically grounded account of the ways in which television *entertainment* influences public sphere discussions" at the institutional level (Jacobs 2003b 113). With the two theoretical foundations of this framework laid out we now turn to ways they can be further specified for application in Limbaugh's case. In addition it becomes possible to ground what is arguably the most comprehensive research on the talk show host conducted to date in these broader sociological discussions. Although the work on Limbaugh does not use the terminology developed here strong points of resonance can be noted.

Limbaugh's Position as a Conservative Leader within a Mediated Political:

Synthesizing Neo-institutional and Structural theory is useful for linking the research concerns of this project with broader sociological discussion about political influence. It is capable of modeling the political influence of political entertainers by studying the position they occupy in overlapping fields relative to other actors in the political public sphere. It can also speak to the specific empirical case to be studied here. In fact, the most detailed and convincing scholarship on Rush Limbaugh to date resonates with the synthesized framework presented here, even if the particular sociological language is not used. The work suggests the talk show host occupies an

inter-institutional position at the juncture of several interconnected fields, and is able to exercise influence to a great extent because of his location. This section develops some of the major points of this empirical work to better illustrate how the talk show host leverages these positions and comes steers national political discussion.

A central resonant concept used in the empirical work is the "Conservative Echo Chamber". This can be thought of as *a* space of opinion, perhaps subsumed within *the* "Space of Opinion" described above, where actors and organizations identifying with or espousing Conservative sentiments orient towards a set of personalities, rhetorical frames, media organizations, and political networks. It is here that Conservative ideology is developed, incubated, communicated, and acted upon. In addition the Echo Chamber vets political figures, and plays an integral role in the organization, development, and maintenance of a cohesive Conservative political base.

Within the Echo Chamber Limbaugh occupies a unique, multidimensional, and powerful position defined by a constellation of relationships he shares with other actors and organizations across political and media fields, and this scholarship asserts, serves as a primary source of his influence. Although not officially part of the GOP the Echo Chamber acts as if it is the primary communicative institution of the Republican Party. In turn Limbaugh acts as one of its most prominent spokesperson. In turn this means Limbaugh is a de facto member of the Party if not one of its leaders while also being a major figure in a significant media network (Jamieson and Cappella 2008).

The material structure(s) supporting the program are instructive for describing where he is located in this mediated political space, and is a good place to start analysis. The talk show host holds positions within nested private media organizations responsible for the creation and

circulation of a broad range of news and entertainment products. While ownership may not be centrally structured the degree of ideological overlap permits important points of synergy. Information, ideological content, infrastructure, and actors are easy shared.

As an example iHeartMedia and Cumulus Media, major syndicators and broadcast station owners that distribute Limbaugh's program across the country, draw heavily upon the resources, particularly the news feeds, produced by Fox News. Moreover, they possess overlapping personnel. Similar sources are cited, and experts, guests, and hosts circulate between the Echo Chamber's affiliated media channels. Content also overlaps in these spaces. For instance, Conservative views articulated on Limbaugh's program are also found on the opinion shows broadcast by cable news networks as well as the op-ed pages and articles of print within the same networked structure. This promotes a high degree of intertextuality and intersubjectivity within the Echo Chamber, and for those who dominate it, positions them as formidable nodes of ideas and economic resources (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 45-55)

At first glance this may sound similar to how the Cultural Marxists described earlier in the chapter approached Limbaugh. However, this synthesized framework approach develops a robust model of the underlying organizational structures and their actions with important points of divergence. The framework here does not share the same assumptions and assertions about an integrated elite, the instrumental production of content, or deleterious effects on the audience. This means that the political influence of Limbaugh and his program cannot be explained away solely by invoking material structure as it is a necessary but not sufficient factor. The talk show hosts is not simply a cog reinforcing an elite institutional order obscuring social differences or sources of exploitation. Nor is he a placeholder for an all-encompassing elite ideology. He speaks autonomously, and it is his occupied institutional positions permitting this. This dynamic is

highlighted especially when Limbaugh's utterances are at cross purpose with organizations materially supporting the program. For instance, Limbaugh's political objectives do not always coincide with the interests of his syndicator. Provocative statements aimed rallying a political base might incite people towards political mobilization or drive up ratings, but might also cause sponsors to take their business elsewhere.[61]

The blending of Structural theory and Neo-institutionalism adds an additional structural tie beyond profit driven media organizations. It develops a stronger and more explicit model accounting for linkages between Limbaugh and political networks. Here Limbaugh is treated as an "unofficial" member, and for some a leader, in a very "official" political organization. By regularly communicating directly with the leadership as well as rank and file members of the Republican base he is cast as an important figure within a major American political organization. Unlike the Political Culture Framework that only accounts for Limbaugh's connection with the audience this framework extends the idea by conceptualizing a relationship between audience, the host, and the party where Limbaugh's influence flows in more than direction. He not only steers the political dispositions of the audience, but he can also set normative standards for the Republican Party (Jamieson and Campbell 1992; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Lee and Cappella 2001; Owen 1993).

This research goes further in specifying party functions performed by Limbaugh. More intriguing, the functions performed are decidedly cultural and connected with the content of his program. Limbaugh is instrumental in the canonization of a Conservative "language" internalized by a politically active "imagined" Conservative community of listeners. At the same time the Conservative "language" also acts as a constraining force on the GOP. The scholarship centered

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[61] E.g. Sandra Fluke.

on Limbaugh's role within the Conservative Echo Chamber is to perform several "party functions".

One "party function" Limbaugh performs is the codification of a common tongue for American political Conservatives. The political language constructed through his program symbolizes a normative Conservative vision of the world. With it the audience develops a sense of solidarity amongst themselves as well as with the Republican Party. It brings together the energy of an ideological movement with the organizational power of a political party. Specific frames engendered by Limbaugh articulate, and symbolically structure political events and actions. Content in the Echo Chamber is "reframed, reprioritized, and repositioned" to detail how Conservative principles and expectations are either being adhered to, or not being followed by both audience rank and file and Party leaders (Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Smith 2007).

However, the political Right is far from monolithic. As such Limbaugh's second "party function" is to cast the Conservative language he develops to accommodate different variants of Conservative ideology found throughout the Party base (i.e. social vs fiscal Conservative). Through clever oral legerdemain he most frequently articulates his Conservative language through creating an effigy of a non-Conservative "other" distinct from a presumed yet under defined Conservative "us". By constructing a common "enemy" Limbaugh engenders an important political boundary shaping and reinforcing political and social solidarity. The effect is twofold. On the one hand this creates a sense of community amongst politically likeminded individuals throughout the state and the civil society. On the other the under specification of what a Conservative actually is mollifies internal division on the political right (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). [62]

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[62] Also see Barker and Knight (2000) described in the previous section. This is important foundational work, but does not make the explicit connection to official political organizations as this framework does.

Listeners are exposed to detailed constructions of an odiously, omnipresent, and oppressive Liberal establishment dedicated to destroying a sacred Reaganesque vision of America. In the political field specific politicians are profaned as Liberals, and symbolically cast as undermining the vitality of American political culture.[63] Liberal institutional power emanates from a bloated, intrusive, and incompetent federal government which is antithetical to the purported founding principles normatively guiding the Republic. When he sets his attention to the media field Limbaugh constructs an image of interlocking media organizations propagandizing the American public to foster a sense of obsequiousness to "Liberal" elites and causes. The majority of focus is placed on inherent and insipid "Liberalness" of the press distinguished as the "Mainstream Press", "Mainstream News", or "Mainstream Media". The "Mainstream Press", dominated by Liberals, is overwhelmingly bias, conniving, and libelous. It is nothing more than a "Leftist house organ." Publishers, producers, reporters, and columnists are all Left leaning. Each actively conspires to advance mutual goals of maintaining a Liberal status quo, and continue generating a base of support for Liberal elites (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 146-149).[64]

A third party function performed by Limbaugh cited in the Echo Chamber literature also serves an indicator of political influence. Although much of his content is dedicated to creating a Liberal adversary he also demands GOP politicians justify their political actions and stances in

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[63] Limbaugh inculcates his audience with the premise that Liberal politicians and their supporters are interested in maintaining power at any cost. In doing so they dismiss citizens castigating them as unfit to participate in democratic politics. Consider the following comments Limbaugh relayed to his audience about Bill Clinton in 1994. Two years into Clinton's term most of Limbaugh's audience, if not all, knew that the person the talk show host was referring to occupied an extraordinarily powerful position, and in that position acted as a significant corrupting influence in American political culture. "Mr. Clinton's *deceitfulness* in campaigning as a moderate has been more than equaled by his *unabashed arrogance* in governing as a full-fledged liberal". Liberals, he continued, "thrive on a fundamental belief that the average American is an idiot – stupid, ignorant, uninformed, unintelligent, incapable of knowing what is good for him, what's good for society, what's right and what's wrong" (Limbaugh in Jamieson and Cappella 2008 61-65 emphasis added). Similar constructions of Liberals are ubiquitous on his broadcasts.

[64] It is claimed that the Mainstream Media shamelessly undermines Republicans and slanders Conservatives while ignoring any information damaging to Democrats or Liberal positions. In addition the Mainstream Press uncritically bolsters the image of Democratic political figures and policies, and is un-reflexive in terms of correcting this error even though they know they are culpable. As a result the Mainstream Press purifies Liberals by leaving them unmarked while polluting Conservatives by marking them in negative ways. Major organizations that serve as titular heads of the mainstream press will be introduced in chapter three.

line with his Conservativism. One way he does this is by vetting Republican candidates running for office. During vetting, whether for an incumbent or a new candidate seeking office, Limbaugh retells the "Reagan Narrative" colored by the "Limbaugh Message", and measures his subject of inquiry according to how they comport with the interpretation of the Conservative standard he articulates. It is noteworthy how the performance of this third party function compliments the others outlined above in one additional way. Overwhelmingly Limbaugh points out the shortcomings of GOP politicians and candidates. Extolling virtues is much less frequent. In doing so Limbaugh can maintain a position hostile to political elites generally while legitimizing specific ones for the audience (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 105-115).[65]

The synthesized framework presented here reveal insights about Limbaugh and his political influence that the other frameworks cannot. It provides a more holistic approach that integrates material structure, content, and relationships with elites and non-elites. This scholarship shows Limbaugh occupying positions in differentiated, but interconnected, organizations situated throughout the fields of media and politics. Through these positions he exercises influence through a communicative-cultural force. The rhetoric on his program helps define boundaries of the "Echo

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[65] For instance, during the 1996 Republican Presidential Primary Limbaugh savaged the aspirations of Pat Buchanan as he wholeheartedly endorsed rival Steve Forbes. He lambasted many of Buchanan's positions, and launched the ultimate insult comparing him to Bill Clinton. Limbaugh claimed the former Nixon advisor and Reagan Communications Director was "asking government to come in and protect your job" a Liberal practice anathema to Conservative free market ideals. Despite a political and private career spent championing the causes of the Right, disdain for Buchanan was deep. Limbaugh's affinity with the *Fortune 500* publisher's platform was based on the perception that he more strongly resonated with Conservative priorities vis-à-vis Buchannan's although the talk show host did not offer much in the way of specifics. Limbaugh seemed to take an anti-Buchannan rather than pro-Forbes stance (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 112-114).
The treatment of Buchanan during the 1996 Republican Primary seemed relatively mild compared with attacks on Arizona Senator John McCain during the 2000 Republican Presidential Primary. The talk show host delegitimized McCain connecting him to political institutions and actors loathed by Conservatives. McCain was vilified as the talk show host drew congruities between the Senator and Liberal political actors and policies. He considered McCain an apostate claiming his nomination would fracture the political right. He leveled a scathing insult at McCain telling his audience that the Liberal news media was "orgasmic" in their support of his campaign. If the Liberally biased news media liked McCain, Limbaugh reasoned, then the Senator should not be trusted. Even after McCain lost his presidential bid the talk show host continued to badger him claiming he was a closeted Democrat. He repeatedly aired a parody song by a Limbaugh enthusiast and sporadic contributor further driving a wedge between McCain and the Conservative base (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 113-115).

Chamber", while his position affords him the opportunity to use it to carry out important party functions. Despite being an entertainer not officially affiliated with a party the research on the Echo Chamber suggests he is a *political* figure able to exert influence outside the constraints of the ballot box.

While clearly an opinion leader Limbaugh comes to be an opinion leader for other opinion leaders throughout the overlapping fields upon which the Echo Chamber is constructed. He influences party elites, and shapes party principles while organizing a politically active listening community. Limbaugh incubates a tutelary Conservative discourse connecting party elites with a base tending the flame of the "Reagan Narrative" by pointing out what each is not or should not be. He is conceptualized as an important node connecting different social fields within which the organizational structure and operations of the GOP are situated and carried out.

The language he codifies, and the positions he occupies allow scholars to conclude that he performs political functions normally associated with ranking membership in a political party rather than that of an entertainer. This literature carefully develops a model that identifies the constellation of political, media, and civic positions held by Limbaugh that allow him to exert a potent form of political gravity. The scholarship places Limbaugh as a central figure in the Conservative Echo Chamber, and he is able to parlay his standing as a communicative figure into that of a de facto Conservative leader able to exercise influence over the Republican Party elites and non-elites.

Limbaugh's Position as a Conservative Leader within Mediated Political Fields – Unresolved Questions:

The synthesized framework furthers social scientific understandings of Limbaugh's political influence. It suggests that the talk show host simultaneously occupies several positions across the fields of media and politics. Leveraging his position within media conglomerates has allowed him to tap into a broad Conservative public. In turn these factors have contributed to his position as an unofficial communicative leader for a political party. Giving more credence to his content independent of material structure, these scholars suggest he sets normative ideological standards (often by invoking the negative) for the Right, builds a common language for Conservatives broadly used in political discussions, and evaluates GOP office holders (or candidates) as to their degree of adherence to Conservative principles. He is the voice of a valuable media space, and serves as an opinion leader to millions of listeners. He is an important political operative drawing upon the cultural and economic capital of media organizations and the social capital of his audience to reproduce his position and gain political capital. These factors all play roles in engendering his ability to steer political discussion and political outcomes.

One of the places this is most clearly seen is in Limbaugh's engagement with the "Mainstream Press". While it has already been pointed out that the Mainstream Press garners a great deal (of usually negative) attention on the program these scholars have also noted the frequency within which Limbaugh appears in the news and commentary of the Mainstream Press. During the mid-1990s mentions of Limbaugh in the top 50 US newspapers (measured by circulation) were collected and compared with the frequency of other prominent political and media figures. When compared to other political figures research found that Limbaugh was mentioned less frequently than former President Bill Clinton or former Vice-President Al Gore,

but was mentioned more frequently than former Senate Majority leader George Mitchell or former House Speaker Dick Armey. Compared to others actors from across the field of media, that included both entertainers and journalists, he ranked lower than the Late Show host David Letterman, but considerably higher than Nightline anchor Ted Koppel (Jamieson and Cappella 2007 158-159; Jamieson, Cappella, Turrow 1996).

In this regard the "Echo Chamber" scholars who share the most resonance with the blended analytical framework described above have brought attention to an important element of his political influence. In approaching questions about the frequency of Mainstream Press mentions of the talk show host they acknowledge the importance of his recognition in public discussion. For them the Mainstream Press legitimates and amplifies Limbaugh's influence. With this in mind they conclude Limbaugh is part of a national elite, and this is reflected in his presence amongst influential politicians and journalists in the Mainstream Press. This is certainly a large advance compared to the previously discussed frameworks in terms of modelling Limbaugh's place in the political public sphere. What Limbaugh says or does, his position within a network of media conglomerates, his active audience members, and his role in the GOP calls for press coverage. This in turn legitimates his influence.

Yet, these scholars assert that his authority and ability to steer political discussion precedes his presence in the official public sphere. I suggest this misses important dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence. The possibility that the press is a *source* of Limbaugh's political influence rather than only a *legitimizer* or *amplifier* is never considered. After all the press constructs and consecrates what is, or should be, considered important. Because the scholarship does not consider the "Mainstream Press" as being anything other than reflective it implies that his influence is

always already established. In other words, the work on the Echo Chamber suggests Limbaugh is influential *before* his engagement with the press.

If we are to understand Limbaugh's political influence, or that of political entertainers' more broadly, this is in need of redress.[66] I contend that this is only part of the story. Further analysis of Limbaugh's inclusion in the "Mainstream Press" provides a way to tease out the cultural dynamics of his political influence, but to do so other important facets of this relationship will need to be explored. Existing scholarship does not address in detail what the press actually writes and broadcasts when the talk show host is invoked. Data needs to be collected and analyzed in terms of the language that is built and circulated *about* and *around* him. The way he is textually constituted, or textualized, by the press is important. Even if inclusion in the "Mainstream Press" exclusively consecrates Limbaugh, which I argue it does not, it is nonetheless important to know how he is embedded into national political discussion.

We know what Limbaugh says and does. We know what fields he is a part of, and what organizational environments he is situated amongst. What current literature does not as readily capture is how other interlocutors in the political public sphere *present* him to a vastly broader audience comprised of multiple differentiated publics, and in doing so *construct* a public image of him. Addressing this concern can add insight into the existing literature concerning the political influence of the talk show host, and political entertainers more broadly. A fourth analytical framework that will be useful in discerning how the talk show host is textualized, and to what end this occurs, is where we now turn our attention.

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[66] This criticism comes with a caveat. My reading of the "Echo Chamber" outlined in this section, specifically the work of Jamieson and Cappella (2008), does not indicate that this is an analytical or empirical concern of their research.

Framework Four – The Meaning of Politics or the Politics of Meaning:

Cultural Sociology emerged in the latter decades of the 20th century, and analytically orients towards how patterned signs, symbols, and collective meaning are created and structured independently of other social forces according to an immaterial internal logic. Culture, systematic patterned systems of meanings, is not dependent on other social forces or structures nor are merely internalized sets of values. Rather it is comprised of a system of autonomously structured meaning integral to creating and maintaining the social order while also allowing contingency and play in action. Analytically decoupled from other social structures and forces, culture independently impacts social outcomes, and is comparable to "social structures of a more material kind" (Alexander 2010 388). This conceptualization of culture describes the "strong" program of Cultural Sociology. The analytical framework provides an alternative to the various "sociology of culture" frameworks which formerly dominated the sociological literature. Instead of culture being understood as a result of other material processes it is conceptualized as operating by its own internal logic that in turn exerts an autonomous cultural force on other, more material structures and actors (Alexander 1990, 1998, 2003, 2006, 2010; Alexander and Jacobs 1998; Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2912; Back et al 2012; Bauman 1999; Kane 1992; Jacobs 2000, 2003a, 2005, 2007; Smith 1991, 1998, 2005; Somers 1995).[67]

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[67] Concurrent changes in methodology emphasized the textual properties of social life, and suggested that this type of data is amendable to various hermeneutical qualities emphasizing the autonomous structuring power of culture. The development of this type of "structural hermeneutics" made systems of meaning central to analysis (Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012). This will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Cultural sociology provides the analytical resources to rethink political sociology, and build on a concept of 'cultural politics'. Perhaps most significant, it allows for the recognition that politics is "inherently symbolic – it is mired in meaning. … (and) conflict occurs over values and meanings rather than actual policy" (Back et al 2012 117).   The constitution, negotiation, reconfiguration, and dissolution of social solidarity are foundational concerns a sociology of cultural politics. Capturing the autonomous collective meanings that embed and enchant these processes are essential for understanding contemporary political life.

The remainder of this section further outlines these dynamics which will set the stage for empirical research. First the usefulness of a cultural sociology for teasing out a 'cultural politics' will be discussed. Here the importance of meaning making and the symbolic contestation will be highlighted as integral to contemporary politics. Next, a more explicit discussion of how mass media plays a role as a primary communicative institution nested within civil society will be further teased out. It will be described as a key institution facilitating the role of the political entertainer to take part in cultural politics. The section will then close with suggestions on how this might be usefully applied to the case study here.

Cultural Politics:

In this section a fourth analytical framework useful for studying the dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence will be discussed. This work draws upon insights developed by "Cultural Sociology", and is well suited to studying Limbaugh as a cultural object in press vis-à-vis the previously discussed frameworks. In doing so we can analytically support how symbolic elements presented in the public discussions of the talk show host contribute to and not just reflect

popular perceptions. Cultural Sociology has been used to study the public import of entertainers, and can also be readily extended to Limbaugh. Moreover, it helps better connect the research here to ongoing debates in political sociology. Let us now turn to some specifics.

An important concept for the politically focused scholarship of Cultural Sociology is "cultural politics". This conceptualizes the relationships and structures of power as particular "articulations" of patterned affective meaning that comes to be "partial(ly) fix(ed)" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001 113). Put another way cultural politics suggests that an integral dimension to politics and political processes is the interpretation of, and competition over, political meanings aimed at shaping power relations. Rather than drawing power from political economy, popular opinion, or positions tied together within inter-field networks political authority emerges from some form of "linguistic authority" (Baker 1990 5; Nash 2010 34-37). Actors, both individually and collectively, make sense of the political world, and in doing so attempt to steer it by defining the meaning structures "constitutive of our reality" (Nash 2010 30-31). Attention is shifted away from material structures or contexts, and towards the centrality of negotiations and contests over political meaning. This suggests that politics is at least in part structured by cultural dynamics that cannot be reduced to other social forces.

Culture does not only supplement political institutions or actions. It creates and steers political life. A variety of culturally defined "communicative encounters" are central actions to consider when studying questions invoking politics from this perspective (Cottle 2003, 2011 26, 2012). Collective meanings constructed and uttered by authorized speakers vying for the ability to create or define sets of symbols that undergird political discussion have strategic and organizational implications. The resultant dominant meaning structure have teeth in civil society and politics, and conflicts over the particulars of the articulations come to be "culturally defined

and to some degree institutionally enforced" (Alexander 2006 30; Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012; Back et. al 2010; Cottle 2003, 2006 2012; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Nash 2010).

The Civil Sphere and its Communicative Institutions:

A concept gaining traction in political and cultural sociology, the "Civil Sphere", is useful for the research here. The term describes the preeminent social arena where cultural politics takes place. It encompasses the sets of interconnected actors, practices, and institutions aimed at strengthening or weakening bonds of social solidarity. Within its boundaries a culturally based "civil power" is produced, and is aimed at influencing the "nonbureacratic top" of non-civil spheres, like the state. This becomes especially significant to sociologists interested in cultural politics because this is an example of political dynamics existing outside of the state yet still having the ability to influence state action (Alexander 2006).

The Civil Sphere is comprised of two sets of interrelated institutions. Regulative institutions seek access to state power through voting or legislating as to invoke its power of coercion. Legislatures, law, and political parties are all examples of differentiated regulative institutions capable of converting sentiments of solidarity into "government control" (Alexander 2006 71). On the other hand, communicative institutions organize public discussion and debate, evaluate the applications of the norms of solidarity and civic inclusion, and articulate cultural structures giving political experiences meaning. They are comprised of mass media organizations and the public sphere. In a less material sense public opinion and the social space where public opinion is debated also fall within this category (Alexander 2006 40-45). It is the latter set of institutions we are most interested in.

Influence, rather than coercion, is the primary social force of communicative institutions. The two primary sub-institutions within them are mass media and the public sphere. Both organize a "symbolic forum" where the "interpretive authority" over public events and ideas are at stake. Both types of communicative institutions work in tandem, and ultimately the degree of social solidarity across a complex and diffuse society is one variable impacted by the outcomes of activity occurring within. Through the complimentary social processes binding the communicative institutions an imagined community is structured allowing participants to understand themselves as a "public". They provide mechanisms through which all claiming a stake in the Civil Sphere can be evaluated in terms of worthiness of civic inclusion (Alexander 2006). Let us now take each in turn.

The public sphere describes the sets of practices and spaces of public discussion and debate between private individuals. This is where ideas come under public scrutiny, collective decisions are negotiated, and public opinion is formed. Through the public sphere the "public" challenges the authority of the state demanding the latter justify its actions. Since meaning, rather than expertise, experience, or policy lies at the heart of political life the political public sphere becomes an important location where cultural politics are practiced. "Publics", the constituent bodies populating the public sphere, make broad political conversation possible as they perform acts of communication where the role of 'reading' as a private activity is complimented with a public act of mediated discussion .This provides a social mechanism through which the public exerts influence on state power (Habermas 1989; Warner 2005 10-13; 55-57).

Recent scholarship has furthered refined understandings of the public sphere were made. Two points are noteworthy. First, challenges to the idea of a single unified public sphere. Instead it has been convincingly suggested that a plurality of public spheres exist, and exert authority in

varying degrees (Calhoun 1992 37; Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; Habermas 1996; Jacobs 2000, 2005; Ryan 1992; Warner 2005). It might be best to think of the relationships of public sphere as one that is fragmented but not fractured. Even though multiple public spheres exist they often orient towards a delimited number of more encompassing public spheres. Dominant and subordinate publics tend to insert themselves within a hegemonic "official" or "political" public sphere. The "political" public sphere serves as the gravitational center around which a "field of discursive connections" is created (Taylor 1992 229). The debates amongst and between the constellation of public spheres are aimed at fortifying or reconstituting access to state power along with defining and articulating public opinion (Alexander 2006; Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012; Jacobs 2003, 2005, 2007; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Taylor and Gutmann 1992).

A second related revision rethinks how debate is carried out within public spheres. Habermas developed a model of "Communicative Action" whereby logic and rationality ostensibly determine the merit of an argument. The most logical and rational articulation in a debate would dominate the public sphere. If free from distortion all participants would subsequently adopt this 'best' position because discussion and debate would invariably convince one of its soundness. Consensus inexorably emerges, and results in political emancipation and empowerment (Habermas 1981, 1989, 1996).

However, analytical positions in opposition to the theory of "Communication Action" have criticized it for being overly normative. Actually existing public spheres, both historical and contemporary, do not actually operate under such conditions despite normative commitments. Rather public spheres function as an "agonistic arena(s) for aesthetic politics and symbolic contestation" amongst a variety of engaged actors competing for civil power (Alexander 2006;

Alexander and Jacobs 1998; Back et. al 2012; Jacobs 2000 25, 2003, 2005, 2007, Nash 2010; Smith 2000).[68]

A second communicative institution of the civil sphere, mass media, works alongside the public sphere. The term signifies the processes, organizations, and technological platforms facilitating communication that reaches broad audiences across space and time.[69] A core insight about mass media developed by cultural sociology is the indispensable role it plays in narrating political life. It textualizes actors and events into patterned symbolic forms that are in turn built into broader narratives resonating with collective experiences. Mass media provides a key social interface allowing civic and associational life to interact with one another and the state. By constructing and re-constructing stories about national politics this institution is integral in developing a "strategic interplay of interests, values, knowledge and sources of authority and power" that is used to help organize public spheres (Long and Lui 2009 80). [70] As a result mass media acts as both a resource, and a public forum providing a common discursive base for ongoing iterative civic engagement (Alexander 2005; Jacobs 1996, 2000; Schudson 2011).

Cultural sociology has made the conceptualization of mass media more nuanced by placing it along a continuum between the poles of "chronicling" and "storytelling". The prominent genre located closest to the former is journalism. Here, as it was suggested in the third framework, authority is asserted based on the claim of accurately capturing political life by drawing upon truthful and objective information from a detached and neutral perspective. In this way "news" engenders a powerful form of "public knowledge" claiming to present the political world as it

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[68] The cultural structures comprising the contested symbolic systems will be described in more detail in the next chapter.

[69] Mass media does not HAVE to exclude platforms or technologies mediating interpersonal communication. For instance smart phones can be considered a technological platform for direct interpersonal or mass mediated communication.

[70] The aims of the research where the concept of "social interface" was drawn from was first developed and deployed in sociological and anthropological studies of rural development. See Arce, Alberto and Long (2000); Long (1984, 1989). Here the concept is being expanded beyond its original usage. It shares a resonance with Castells ideas about nodes in a 'network society'. See Castells (2000, 2008, 2011)

"actually is" rendering a "public construction of an expectation of a common shared world …

(and) experience" (Schudson 1978, 2009 5, 2011). This manner of influence may at first be more

subtle than the mechanisms specified by the other frameworks. Although it claims to chronicle

social life in an undistorted manner cultural structures pervading journalism construct and

interpretively represent, not just report, political action. Journalism creates relatively stable

cultural conventions drawn upon by actors, and folded in the discussions transpiring throughout

the political public sphere. Through the narratives created by journalism actors create the social

world. In doing so influence is exerted on social action and structure.[71]

Cultural sociology has also been at the forefront of developing new insight regarding the

other end of mass media's other 'conceptual pole', entertainment, making it quite germane to

political sociology. The re-evaluations of decades of mostly normative and negative research on

entertainment has led to scholarship highlighting entertainments' political significance and

influence upon institutions inside and outside of the civil sphere. Like journalism entertainment

creates stock representations of collective actors, institutions, and practices. However important

difference should be noted. Entertainment is not constrained by the same professional norms and

values applied to journalism. The symbolic forms generated by entertainment create constellations

of meaning with considerably more latitude compared to its journalistic counterpart. Unencumber

by a need to claim objectivity, realism, or detachment for its legitimacy entertainment provides a

sustained "flow of representations about ongoing social events and actors … (engendering) a much

greater cathartic impact on the self-understandings of civil society" vis-à-vis journalism

(Alexander 2006 74). In adopting real world concerns entertainment like film, novels, television,

radio programs, and performing arts create symbolic structures integral to the political public

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[71] More will be presented regarding the 'mechanism' by which this works in the following chapter.

sphere. Ongoing story arcs highlight engaging dramatic elements, develop multidimensional characters, and exercise artistic license around the same topical matter found in journalism. This allows entertainment to illuminate publicly relevant issues in novel ways (Alexander 2006; Alexander and Jacobs 1998; Jacobs 2003b, 2005, 2007, 2011; Warner 2005).[72]

There are other dimensions to the relationship between journalism and entertainment that are relevant to the research questions presented here. By dramatizing political life entertainment often attracts the attention of journalism, and how journalism addresses entertainment (and political entertainment more specifically) bears significant consequence for the political public sphere. More than focusing on similar content entertainment becomes the subject of news reports and opinion pieces. As entertainment becomes the object of serious reflection and critique throughout the journalistic field it increasingly becomes connected to other discussion transpiring throughout the political public sphere. Journalism moves beyond an exclusive evaluation of entertainment for its quality as entertainment, and folds it into broader discussion and debates about common political concerns.

The cultural dynamic existing between journalism and entertainment described above sheds additional light on the ability of the latter to exercise political influence. The introduction of

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[72] One of the more useful concepts drawn from this literature is the 'counter-factual' public sphere. This refers to entertainment focusing on 'serious' matters taken up in other spaces of the political public sphere. It creates fictional worlds where representations of reality draw upon the imaginative and figurative producing a broad range of rich signifiers that are fruitful at describing public life as well as providing tools to use in public encounters (See Jacobs 2003b, 2007). Copious examples exist. For example, Alexander devotes considerable attention to the way American novelists, film producers, actors and others in the field of cultural production were able to accomplish a task of social integration. They were effective at building a Jewish identity by developing social dramas inserted into American popular culture that aligned qualities of the religion with qualities of the 'primordial' American group. Professing a sacred affinity with the broader nation, and engendering iconographic characters into public life contributed to the incorporation of Jews into the American mainstream (Alexander 2003, 2006).

In another example cable movie channel HBO has made counter-factual public spheres a staple of its programing. *The Newsroom* and *Veep* are two recent examples of fictional renditions of American mass media and national politics while original movies like *Too Big to Fail*, *Recount,* and *Game Change* create highly dramatized accounts of major political and economic events from recent US history. Oliver Stone often directs films with plot lines set in tumultuous periods in American politics such as *W., Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK,* and *Nixon*. Movie streaming service and internet entertainment network Netflix adopted the BBC drama *House of Cards* for an American audience to critical acclaim. Comedy programs like *South Park*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and *the Boondocks* frequently take pressing political issues as subject matter as well. In turn, many of these spaces make their way into the purportedly 'more serious' discussions of journalism.

entertainment to the political public sphere via journalism exposes it to "communities of critics and other expert interpreters, whose interpretations and evaluations are published in high-profile media that shape the public understanding and reception" of politics (Jacobs and Wild 2013 74). Entwined in the political commentary and critique organized through journalism entertainment acquires public relevance adding to the "communicative infrastructure" of the political public sphere (Jacobs 2003, 2011 323; Jacobs and Townsley 2011).[73]

Entertainment programs have access to and impact the official spaces of political discussion. However, the ability to control how they are discussed, and hence public perceptions of their meaning in the political public sphere, is not completely within their control. To put this another way, research suggests that news reports and commentary about entertainment plays a significant role in shaping the very public understandings entertainment carries, and influences its political import.

For instance, recent studies by cultural sociologists of the Daily Show and the Colbert Report have made this point. Moving beyond an analysis of show content or influence on their respective audiences they have focused on how these programs have been folded in spaces of serious discussion in the political public sphere. The research has identified patterned narrative structures indicating a type of public commentary about the programs, and raises new and exciting questions concerning the implications for the political influence they exert. The authors find that narratives about these programs tend to reinforce prevailing cultural distinctions within the media field, namely that journalism and entertainment are indeed distinct and should remain so. While

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[73] An important part of this process is the formation of an 'aesthetic' public sphere. This describes the social action whereby journalism draws upon entertainment as subject matter applying judgment and critique. For example, when entertainment artifacts are featured in an 'arts' section of a newspaper or during an 'entertainment' segment of a news broadcast stories and columns ruminate upon its cultural and public significance (Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jacobs and Wild 2013).

the programs are often praised for satirical reflections on contemporary politics and journalism they are still treated as a secondary player in the political public sphere. This in and of itself is significant. Entertainment enters the world of political discussion and debate, but how it comes to be made publicly meaningful is contingent upon journalism (Jacobs and Wild 2013).

Cultural Sociology has much to offer for the study of entertainment, journalism, and the political public sphere where intersubjective patterned systems of meaning are at the center of analysis. A modest contribution is proposed here. In the following chapter a methodological program attentive to requirements of the "strong" program of Cultural Sociology will be developed, and applied to studying the political influence of Rush Limbaugh. By applying insights from this last framework described in this chapter to studying the dynamics of political influence associated with talk show hosts, more data will be generated to further evaluate the analytical purchase of Cultural Sociology's models of the Civil Sphere. In addition alternative explanations could be produced, and added to the extant literature focused on explaining Limbaugh's political influence. Further research can help increase the precision with which cultural sociology can illuminate the influences of political entertainment, and in turn more specifically connect them to political actions reverberating throughout civil society and the state.

Methods and Methodology:

This chapter outlines how an empirical research program drawn from Cultural Sociology will be applied to questions about the political influence of talk show host Rush Limbaugh. A general discussion of the core issues at the heart of empirical Cultural Sociology will start this chapter along with several examples of scholarship being applied to questions about political influence. It will be suggested that the Cultural Sociology framework provides the empirical tools necessary to expand upon a very important insight tangentially generated from the concept of the research that engendered the concept of the "Echo Chamber". It will also be noted that the methodological program will not only add knowledge to the research subject here, but will also help with further modeling the influence of political entertainers more broadly. This will be followed by a preliminary empirical analysis introducing the data that will be used for textual analysis. Reasons for how, when, and why it was collected will be presented. A section will then focus on design limitations that must be kept in mind before the findings here can take on broader significance.

Before moving forward it is important to briefly touch upon how the methodological approach adopted here can be used relative to the other frameworks presented. First, the methods used will allow for a critique of the first three frameworks. As noted earlier the Cultural Marxist, the Political Culture, and the 'Synthesized' frameworks share certain points of resonance. They look exclusively at Limbaugh's action(s) or position(s) as the primary generators of his 'influence'. Limbaugh's presence throughout the field of journalism seems to be a question either not taken up by these frameworks, or passed over so quickly that important clues concerning how his influence is created and sustained are overlooked. In doing so they either ignore or explain away at least one additional set of cultural forces and structures that play an important part generating and sustaining

his political influence. Highlighting features of a proxy measure, his ubiquity throughout the political public sphere, as captured in news and commentary, help make this case.

Second, the methods to be used will help further elaborate on the Cultural Sociology framework. More pointedly it will expand on the research in the subfield that has generated real insights concerning the relationship of entertainment, journalism, and politics. The methods called for here, which draw heavily from this type of research, do three things in this regard. For one, it will strengthen the framework by offering another case study to consider. It also expands the substantive topics that Cultural Sociologists have written about. As political talk radio, and radio more generally, have not received nearly the scholarly attention that other genres and mass media channels have this research is an attempt to address the absence. Extending this logic the research also contributes in a third way. It brings Limbaugh into this type of research, and offers a typology through which he is linked with other political entertainers.

Although it takes a different approach, the research presented here is cognizant of the contributions made with existing empirical work about the talk show host. The goal here is to expand the scope of these studies of American political life that cast Limbaugh as an important actor. Like the extant research the empirical work to follow draws on common data sources used throughout the "Limbaugh Scholarship", and carries particular resonance with the Neo – institutional/Structural and Cultural Politics frameworks. The academic literature and the political environment from which the data was collected are somewhat aligned. This helps make comparative analysis between the findings here and other work on Limbaugh easier to conduct. Moreover, keeping this in mind helps establish a common frame of reference through which the benefit of alternative perspectives might have the greatest impact.

Cultural Sociology – "Measuring" Meaning:

Like many other analytical frameworks Cultural Sociology is attentive to a core tension in sociological research between explanation and interpretation.[74] As such, it has entered into disciplinary debates concerning how methodological approaches should be applied in empirical research. To address these issues it draws on a variety of foundational scholarship to configure empirical tools.

Consider the following. Although the differences between Marxist, and Durkheimian scholarship regarding culture are stark there is a shared point of resonance in at least one respect. Both explain culture as a reflection or outcome of other social forces. For the Marxists culture was the marionette show elites created for the masses, so that the material forces pulling society's strings were effectively concealed in plain sight. Even with subsequent revision to core concepts cultural Marxists brought to light the importance of understanding the production of culture.

Structure functionalists, more closely following Durkheim, contended that culture is a social fact, and should be treated as a material thing capable of constraining individual and collective action. It also added the important understanding that culture served as a symbolic system of classification. Although this directed research to understand the importance of reception, culture itself could not be conceptualized independent of its function. In the latter case "what it did" was more important than "what it was". Whether explained as the production of social theater pacifying the 'capital-less' classes, or an under-theorized elemental social particle necessary for

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[74] For an interesting and detailed discussion of the dialectic between interpretation and explanation in sociology, and the social sciences more broadly, see Henderson (1993).

social cohesiveness, culture was seen by both as phenomenon tool (Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012 18-22; Reed 2012).

Work drawing more so from Weber offered an important alternative. His scholarship emerged from a decidedly more hermeneutical tradition stressing that no matter how instrumental or mechanistic 'puppets' and 'particles' may be, social action is, if nothing else, meaningful. Accordingly, the subjective understandings people ascribe to cultural artifacts steering and enchanting social action was at the heart of sociological analysis. For example Weber, in his seminal discussion of religion and economics, was not as concerned with religious doctrine as he was with how practitioners understood its significance, and incorporated it into social action. At some level he understood the centrality of meaning and understanding in even the most seemingly rational social contexts (i.e. capitalist economies). This would push sociologists further along the path to asserting that the empirical study of culture necessitates attention to internally patterned symbolic structures making social life meaningful. (Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012 18-22; Reed 2012).

The distinctions drawn between sociology's 'founders' concerning culture has had important consequences for empirical research. Those drawing more heavily from the social structural positions tended to develop research methods seeking to explain culture through non-cultural social elements often drawing upon a variety of research methods amenable to statistical analysis. For them culture was thought of as a manifestation of social structure or social force. On the other hand those adopting positions grounded in the meaning centered approach sought to empirically recreate the lived social experience of a subject of analysis. Several qualitative methods were adopted as well suited to these tasks.

Yet, both still sought a common goal. Each hoped to 'reveal' culture as something patterned, and able to be built into social scientific accounts of life. Taken together these debates created concepts, tools, and questions concerning social meaning and culture that Cultural Sociology would expand upon. For instance, some suggesting that a 'formalist' approach to modeling culture as shaped by material structures is proper and necessary. Others challenge this position and taking a non-formalist stance suggests that research methods attaching non-cultural structures to meaning inherently constrains understandings of the culture.

But must this necessarily be an 'either / or' type debate? While true that formal empirical models may bookend interpretive research they also potentially expand the scope of their explanatory power and generalizability. The "exogenous" factors linking culture to other social structures are always bound in reciprocating relationship with the "endogenous" factors comprising its internal structure. Far from obviating the hermeneutical impulse to capture constellations of iconic meaning comprising culture formal modeling functions as a force multiplier.[75] Each empirical iteration linking "exogenous" with "endogenous" factors seeks to "unpack the co-constitution of the cultural and the non-cultural" dimensions of social life. In other words, culture cannot be fully conceptualized without referencing the non-cultural. Although not complete on their own formal and non-formal analysis begin to piece together ways culture changes shape in relation to material structures and exigencies (Biernacki 2012; Mohr and Rawlings 2012 77).

Cultural Sociology suggests the purchase of a soft border between the different formalist and non-formalist traditions outlined above, and questions the wisdom of drawing an impermeable

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[75] There are four specific functions mentioned. Representation (compression); Heuristic (classification); Power (embodiment); Sociality (specialization). See Mohr and Rawlings 2012 73-74

boundary. Instead it describes how a reflexive hermeneutically sensitive empirical sociology can explain social action via different interpretive positions complimented by, not contingent upon, other social forces (Reed 2012). To better conceptualize this some have suggested the use of 'minimal' and 'maximal' interpretations. Minimal interpretations, conclusions drawn about empirical evidence presented, are pieced together to "report what happened". They call for the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and can be used to tentatively speculate the significance of a particular case being studied (Reed 2012 29). Minimal interpretations can be synthesized with culturally oriented theoretical frameworks to produce "maximal interpretations". In these instances culture is the common explanatory denominator. Maximal interpretations require the "mobilization of theory" rather than of a specific method. This implies that Cultural Sociology is empirically pluralistic so long as methodology both "aids the interpretation and reconstruction of meaning" (Reed 2012 34-37).

A central task of empirical Cultural Sociology is to develop working interpretive models of patterned symbolic meanings steering social action and shaping social structure. This emphasizes movement from minimal to maximal interpretations, and underscores the central importance of the "strong" program of Cultural Sociology. This methodological approach seeks to integrate cultural theory and methods by placing 'meaning making' at the center of sociological analysis.

The strong program draws heavily from the Weberian lineage while adding dimensions of semiotics and structural poetics resonant with Durkheimian ideas on the importance of symbolic systems of classification for social ordering and solidarity. A Geertzian thick description is used in the strong program to recreate social life as a rich readable text to which powerful linguistic based empirical tools can be brought to bear. Applying rules of language on extra-linguistic social

phenomena results in an ability to 'bracket-out' the non-symbolic elements of social life. Then the same tools can be used to develop maps of symbolic systems running through the captured instance of social life. The maps are then used to specify casual models concretely describing how culture autonomously influences other social processes and outcomes. The "strong" program of Cultural Sociology permits the analyst to tease out how symbolic inputs affect social action within specific socio-historic contexts (Alexander 2003, 2006; Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2011; Back et al 2011).[76]

'Structural hermeneutics' is one application of the "strong" program. It stresses drawing on symbolic codes and narrative as constitutive elements researchers use to interpret and explain various dimensions of social life. This set of tools has roots within the structural semiotics of Saussure (1986) and Levi-Strauss (1963, 1969, 1973) in that it is attentive to the structuring power of meaning, and its operation like a language. It suggests that relatively stable patterns of linked meaning lying below the surface of social phenomenon structure realities of social life. Research also incorporates scholars whose work commented on the story-like qualities of the patterned linked meanings, and drew on methods helpful in studying narrative, myth, and other hermeneutical constructs. Concepts like plot, genre, and character were added to the study of the paradigmatic level of a text, and were applied to explanations of social action (Barthes 1968, 1973, 1977, 1987; Frye 1971; Propp 1968). In addition structural hermeneutics highlights the importance of the reader who is the social actor on the receiving end of cultural artifacts. Ambiguities within any given text means interpretation of social life can be dynamic, fluid, and contrary to the intentions of an author. This opens the possibilities of contingency and play, and the ability of the

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[76] The ongoing dialogue between the "strong program" of Cultural Sociology and a variety of "weak" programs of the Sociology of Culture have created conditions of methodological plurality and flexibility in the sociological analysis of culture (See Alexander 2003; Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2011).

reader to (re)shape the author's message (Bakhtin 1981; Barthes 1967; Eco 1984). This scholarship broadly emphasizes that by studying the "grammar" of social meaning systems as one would study a literary text nuanced patterned symbolic structures, or cultural systems, impacting other social structures, as well as social outcomes, can emerge.

Structural hermeneutics, in varying forms, has contributed to Political Sociology in recent years. Scholars have used it in a several ways to analyze how culture structures influence important dynamics of political life. For instance the narration of events surrounding the kidnapping and assassination of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigade in 1978 invoked the deployment of social drama as important for crossing a national liminal threshold. Research looked at several types of mass media texts in terms of how they created an unfolding morality play steering interpretations of the abduction, and how it was important for rituals aimed at national healing after the murders (Turner 1974, 1977; Wagner-Pacifici 1986). Others suggested that collective narratives shared about war played an important role in shaping material forms of culture expressed in national monuments and commemorations. It was found that cultural artifacts reflected an expression of social ambivalence towards national identity and history (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991).

Other studies have linked narratives to community showing how representations of events shape both retrospective and contemporary understandings of identity. They have also shown ways that such representations constrain the range of possibilities for approaching and resolving social problems or redressing (or at least attempting to) rifts of social solidarity (Griswold 1992; Jacobs 1996, 2000). Narratives about religious and racial groups in the United States have been used to describe degrees and mechanisms of civil inclusion. The building of cultural forms specific to these groups into the popular culture of a national 'primordial' group fostered social solidarity,

and challenged socio-structural boundaries inhibiting inclusion (Alexander 2006). Still others have explored ways narratives about geo-political conflicts structured public opinion that in turn played a role steering foreign policy. What type and how "war stories" are told engendered radically different perceptions about conflict that in turn impacted subsequent courses of action (Smith 2005).

More recent studies have linked narrative and rhetoric to institutional features of mass media like format, content, and participants, and have connected them to Political Sociology. In one, types of rhetorical forms were used by discreet groups of speakers to organize democratic discussion and debate across news and commentary (Jacobs and Townsley 2011). In another, press accounts of the democratic potentials of entertainment programs were found to reinforce distinctions between the two (Jacobs and Wild 2013). A common theme in all is that culture is necessary to understanding contemporary political life, and it is the task of sociological research in this area to refine models of how culture can do so autonomously.

Structural Hermeneutics and Studying Limbaugh:

As suggest in previous chapters, Rush Limbaugh is broadly recognized in popular and academic literature as possessing significant degrees of influence throughout American political culture. Existing social scientific explanations providing insight into the dynamics of his influence, a political entertainer lacking official ties to state power, explain this in several ways.[77] Taken

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[77] Each were detailed in the previous chapter. One perspective conceptualizes Limbaugh as a mouth piece of elites. Supported by synergistic media corporations sharing affinities with political elites Limbaugh exists to disseminate content aimed at maximizing profit and instilling a particular brand of political ideology. Another theoretical framework suggests that Limbaugh acts as a charismatic Conservative opinion leader. His interpretive recounting of topical political items introduces ideas to an audience that in turn becomes political energized. Limbaugh's influence stems from his relatively socio-demographically homogenous audience converting his ideas into political action. A third analytical model attends to the talk show host's unique position between the political and media fields. Limbaugh acts as an unofficial political party leader. He is an important node in a Conservative network

together the extant literature, especially literature focused on the "Conservative Echo Chamber", implies Limbaugh's political influence *precedes* his engagement in public political discussion. In other words, scholars argue that the inclusion of the talk show host in national news and commentary is a *reflection* of an already established political power. The *frequency* of his presence in press accounts vis-à-vis other public figures serves as an important *indicator* of his political influence. Appearances in newspapers, news broadcasts, opinion columns, and magazine articles indicate the extent of his influence, and acts to reinforce and "enhance his prominence." In turn, this encourages further media attention which fortifies notions of his influence. Even cynical coverage contributes to this continual and self-reinforcing process (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 156-161).

The importance of this dynamic should not be understated, but a core contention raised in this dissertation is that the incorporation of Limbaugh into the news and commentary organizing the political public sphere is more than a reflection of Limbaugh's political influence. This is based on an important but underdeveloped aspect of Limbaugh's inclusion in the press. He certainly has access to these spaces of discussion, but he does not control how he is presented once in them. Limbaugh certainly controls discussion on his program, but beyond that his ability to control what is said in other spaces in the political public sphere is quite limited. In other words, Limbaugh has little sway over the discussion he is made part of as well as how his public representation(s) is (are) engendered by the press. While the Echo Chamber model is quite robust, when applied to mediated political spaces outside of its Conservative borders conceptual gaps emerge. In other

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encompassing media and political organizations operating within and between particular social fields. His immersion in particular social networks of mass media producers and personalities, political elites, and a fiercely dedicated and politically active audience serve to cement his position in national politics.

words, as analysis moves further away from the institutional space of the program something is lost in explanatory power.

The main reason for this is a lack of attention to the specificities of the journalistic content containing Limbaugh. With no analysis of *how* press accounts do the work of incorporating Limbaugh into public discussion the existing literature treats all inclusion as the same. At best this research produces a thin description of Limbaugh's presence in overlapping but differentiated mediated political spaces. It does not tease out the ways in which producers of news and commentary, actors over which Limbaugh's influence is relatively weak, incorporate him into press accounts. In doing so important details are missed. For instance, does variation exist in how he is described, or is there uniformity in presentation throughout the press? If there are differences amongst press accounts what are the distinct features serving to integrate him into a given text? Is he the main focus of a story, or a peripheral character? Is his character symbolically constructed in the same way, or are there differences amongst press outlets in terms of how his is built into texts given an editorial orientation? These are empirical questions that cannot readily be answered with the existing research.

Without answering these types of questions the picture of how Limbaugh is folded into national political discussion remains incomplete. In turn, this limits understanding of the dynamics of his political influence. Knowing the regularity of his recurrence in press accounts compared to others provides an important comparative measure with other public figures participating in the political public sphere. But frequency must be combined with more robust textual analysis to produce more fruitful maximal interpretations concerning the dynamics of his political influence. As the current explanations do not account for these factors other types of analysis become necessary. It is precisely at this juncture that structural hermeneutics sensitive to the requirements

of the strong program in Cultural Sociology provide useful methodological packages for empirically addressing these questions. In doing so they may potentially reveal new facets of Limbaugh's political influence. At the least, they contribute to better clarifying how Limbaugh is built into news and commentary.

The linguistic conventions used by journalists when incorporating Limbaugh into news and commentary can be conceptualized as generating their own social force. More robust understandings of press 'mentions', while not reducing them to some manifestation of political ideology, interest of media organizations or political elites, or expression of public opinion can be developed to demonstrate the role the autonomous structuring power of culture plays here. In other words this empirical approach allows researchers to understand the culture structures of the sampled texts autonomously from other forms of social structure.

A strong program approach allows for a 'deep' reading better able to tease out nuances like these not readily captured by the 'Echo Chamber' literature. Once conceptualized as autonomous social structures, and catalogued as symbolic 'maps', press mentions can be revisited, rethought, and tied to social practices and actors in new ways. The questions outlined earlier can be better addressed. The manner in which Limbaugh is embedded into news and commentary, not just the fact that he is embedded into news and commentary, can be further documented and studied. The cultural 'grammar' structuring press mentions can be built into models as a factor contributing to Limbaugh's political influence, and be understood as more than merely reflective.

In a more specific sense, a deep read of news and commentary containing Limbaugh allows for further comparison across 'types' of texts. Similarities and differences between ideologically resonant and dissonant media outlets can be compared. Stories within the Echo Chamber and non-Echo Chamber news media may or may not include Limbaugh in the same way, and the deep

reading envisioned here will produce enough detail to capture variations in the news and commentary collected. Frequencies of presence alone cannot answer important questions about how Limbaugh is presented in texts internal and external to the Echo Chamber. An Echo Chamber and non-Echo Chamber text may present the talk show host similarly or differently from one another. The methods described here are sensitive to these potential configurations of meaning.

This methodological approach fits well with the extant research on Limbaugh, and will expand upon underdeveloped insights produced elsewhere. It provides an important guide to further tease out dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence, and carries potential to shed further light on the influence of political entertainers more broadly. Using the Cultural Sociology literature reviewed in the last chapter this research asserts that how the press incorporates an object, corporeal or not, into discussion and debate shapes and steers public understandings and opinions about that object. This dynamic helps specify how that object is built into national politics, and to what ends. Questions concerning the variation of the content of mentions, as outlined above, are empirical questions. A strong program approach allows re-analysis of an important cultural dynamic alluded to by the 'Echo Chamber' literature, but not fully explored.

A structural hermeneutical empirical program built upon this analytical framework sets out to expand upon the important point alluded to in the 'Echo Chamber' literature, but not further developed. News and commentary serve as the central data source, and what follows is a description of how and why it was selected, collected, cleaned, and organized for further analysis. The outlets of journalism specified in empirical work produced by the 'Echo Chamber' scholars it will be used to develop working answers to questions of how Limbaugh is 'created' as an object of national political discussion.

In the next section a 'minimal' analysis will be offered to help quantify and clarify parameters of the data. This will be followed with an acknowledgement of important limitations of the data and research design at this point. This will set the stage for a comparatively 'maximal' qualitative analysis later.

Data Sources and Collection Period:

News and commentary from major media outlets comprised the corpus of texts, and were collected from print articles of major daily newspapers, periodicals oriented towards national political discussion, and cable and network television news transcripts. This data was collected using the LexisNexis database, and was guided by four specific concerns aimed at developing answers to the research questions outlined elsewhere. It was also designed to permit a degree of modularity for further empirical work.[78]

News and commentary needed to meet criteria related to the broad range or scope of distribution. Texts were only collected from nationally available sources. They were required to reach large geographically dispersed audiences with the reasonable expectation that citizens wishing to access the sources could do so irrespective of physical location in the US. This excludes distribution in digitized form, which can certainly be nationally (or internationally) accessed. However, this does not discount news appearing as broadcast or print *as well as* digital form. For instance, CNN broadcasts aired on television are also accessible on CNN's website. So long as texts were not *only* available online they were potential candidates for inclusion.[79]

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[78] For further notes on the benefits of modular data sources and empirical analysis see Jacobs and Townsley (2011 14-15).

[79] The reason for excluding Internet content was motivated because doing so would preserve empirical congruity with existing research concerning Limbaugh developed by Echo Chamber scholars. They did not include any online texts in their analysis of

A second parameter concerned the typical substance of content for a given news product. Content produced needed to unambiguously and regularly feature news and commentary of general national concern. This type of content need not be the exclusive focus of the source, but the source needed to be recognized as being a regular player in the political public sphere. Broadly united in terms of content the diversity of platforms along with overlapping topical focus strengthens the sociocultural model at the heart of analysis. The range of sources helped bracket-out institutional or ideological dynamics that vary across and between producers. This permitted comparison between a diverse array of texts communicating with each other and audiences in multiple ways while maintaining a focus on the same types of issues and ideas.

A third consideration sought the inclusion of sources as similar as possible to existing empirical work concerning Limbaugh's political influence, and amenable to current Cultural Sociology research pertaining to media and politics. In doing so comparative research with the extant literature on the talk show host can be conducted. Concurrently, since the same or similar sources have been used in other work produced by Cultural Sociologists studying media and politics the research conducted on Limbaugh here can join the fecund academic discussion. Put another way the data used for research can be extend to connect with prior work on Limbaugh, and also be incorporated into current Cultural Sociology research concerned with political entertainment and influence in national political discussion.

Limbaugh, and since their research provides the major point of comparison in this study it was best to keep frames of reference as similar as possible. There is one exception to this criterion that will be discussed later.

Regional affiliates of national (or international) news organizations were excluded. For one the reach outside local markets is most often offered online. The desire to exclude internet-only sources from analysis, which regional affiliates would ostensibly be for most of the country, is one reason. Another is the potential for redundancy in coverage. For instance, Gannett News publishes papers that are both regional and national, and have sections dedicated to national news. Yet, much of the national news found in in the local papers published by Gannett are pulled from national wire services appearing in national papers, or are drawn from its flagship paper *USA Today.*

Last, the sample drawn emphasized a delimited timeframe centered on a significant recurring event in American political culture. Using the time period provided an additional degree of content unification. A great deal of coverage was afforded to this event, and therefore mutually intersubjective and intertextual discussions between all of the sources further contributed to the comparative analysis. This is key in that texts used by and amongst publics "circulate through time" operating "from the temporality of the headline". Texts circulated at regular intervals allow participants to possess a reasonable expectation of where, how, and when they can receive news and engage in discussion (Warner 2005 97). While this does not guarantee continuity of topics (Bauman 2000) a consistent temporal settings set around a common event increases the possibility (Warner 2005).

To satisfy the first three criteria listed above texts were drawn from eleven different national news organizations. The corpus was comprised of three major daily national newspapers, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today. The New York Times is considered the dominant paper in the national news media. It is often set as the standard by which other news organizations compare themselves, and the paper's contents play a large role in shaping the public agenda. It is broadly followed by national politicians and the press corp. For its part the Washington Post is the newspaper of the nation's capital read by politicians and their respective acolytes. Along with the New York Times it is also a significant player in setting the itinerary of national political debate. USA Today's importance stems from its general reflectiveness more so than its journalistic contributions. While it's reporting is not typically compared to the other two papers mentioned above in terms of an agenda setting quality it does serve as a good proxy for local and regional newspapers across the country. Together, each consistently ranks amongst the most highly circulated national newspapers.

It was also important to draw sources from television journalism. NBC news was chosen as a source of broadcast network news. Out of the three broadcast networks NBC has held the largest audiences for nearly the past decade. Its evening news broadcast and weekend roundtable are important in shaping national political discussion. In addition content presented by the network corresponds to what is written in the papers. Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN account for the cable news networks included as data sources with the three dominating American television markets. The 24 hour broadcast format lends itself to producing large amounts of news and commentary, as well as a high degree of flexibility in how content is presented. When considering television sources together it should be noted that NBC and CNN present themselves as politically neutral in editorial tone. On the other hand, Fox News and MSNBC tout themselves as ideologically Conservative and Liberal, respectively. All also serve as an important connection between news and the culture industries more broadly because of linkages through corporate structure.

Four non-daily magazines were also incorporated to reflect long form journalism. Newsweek, the New Republic, The New Yorker, and National Review were all chosen because in some fashion each writes about national politics, possesses relatively large circulation sizes given the format, or garners important niche audiences. Newsweek had a circulation of nearly 1.6 million readers, and recently merged with news and commentary clearinghouse, The Daily Beast. Articles of differing ideological perspectives are presented, and the magazine is written for a general audience. While the New Republic had traditionally been a left leaning publication its editorial stance has skewed rightwards since the late 1970s resulting in a relatively neutral position. In addition to writing about politics its well renowned contributors also focus on issues related to the arts and culture with readership hovering around 53,000. The New Yorker caters to an elite clientele while focusing on issues concerning contemporary culture and politics. Its estimated

circulation is slightly over 1 million readers. Although not as politically influential as it might have

once been The New Yorker is an exemplar of Liberal long form journalism.[80] The National Review

is the standard bearer Conservative news magazine. It is a publication geared towards the base of

the GOP, and has played an important role in the history of modern contemporary American

Conservativism.[81]

Each outlet is part of the communicative infrastructure of American civil society. Taken

together as a pool of sources they nicely capture important spaces of discussion and debate in the

context of American national politics. Different forms of journalism, different producers, and

different channels of distribution are important to include in analysis because this guards against

any one of these dimensions being seen as more important than the rest. Moreover, content

between the sources are to a large degree intersubjective and intertextual. What is discussed in one

is likely to be covered in the others, and each feature cross referential material. It is also

worthwhile to mention that each has been incorporated as objects of study or data sources for a

vast array of social scientific research (Brinkley 2012; Dooley 2014; Jacobs 2000; Jacobs and

Townsley 2011; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Klatch 1999; Pew State of the News Media 2008-

2015; Schudson 2011; Smith 2007; Wright 2012).

A second reason these organizations were drawn upon as data sources stemmed from their

use in what is to date arguably the most comprehensive research on Limbaugh. As Jamieson and

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[80] All estimates for circulation size were compiled from data produced by the Audit Bureau of Circulations except for the New Republic. Figures on that magazine were taken from the 2009 edition of the State of the News Media published by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. When Newsweek ceased publication in 2013, it had one of the larger circulation sizes. Data before 2011 is not available for the New Republic or National Review. Also see Brinkley (2012); Dooley (2014); Wright (2012).

[81] It must be mentioned that National Review, a central publication pivotal in the development of modern Conservatism, is substituted with its online version, *National Review Online*. This was done due to the desire to include a Conservative outlet in addition to FOX News that was accessible through available databases. In this research the online version of National Review appears. A review of the printed version of the magazine against the online edition revealed a high degree of correspondence. The print and online versions can be reasonably substituted with one another. For more on the magazine's importance see Smith (2007) and Klatch (1999).

Cappella (2008) fleshed out their concept of the Conservative Echo Chamber their analysis included nearly all of the sources used here.[82] This allows for the empirical work, which will be presented below, to resonate with the work on Limbaugh conducted by other scholars. While these data sources will play a substantially different role in analysis here they still serve as an important point of contact with existing research.

In regards to the fourth criterion, temporality was established by pegging the collected texts to an important occurrence in American political culture, the US presidential election.[83] Coverage of elections tends to steer discussion within the political public sphere, and exert an agenda setting influence concerning public discussion. As one of the preeminent political, cultural, and media events in the United States presidential elections tend to 'prime' audiences to focus on national political matters.

More specifically, the 2008 Presidential Election was chosen as the reference point. While all presidential elections are important, this one was particularly remarkable. It was the first election since 1952 where neither an incumbent president nor vice-president were nominated, and women were major party contenders for the presidential and vice-presidential nomination. It was also the first time a non-White American won a major party nomination, and was subsequently elected president. In additional to the remarkable qualities of the candidates its duration was long with the first candidate announcing presidential aspirations nearly two years before the general election (Balz 2006).

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[82] Newsweek, The New Republic, and The New Yorker were not included in their work. They were added here to provide a counterpoint to the National Review. All other sources were incorporated into Jamieson's and Capella's (2008) work.

[83] Borrowing from Bauman, the election served as a peg, a common spectacle binding people for "for the duration of the scheduled (event)" (Bauman 2001 71). Peg events offer an "*experience* of belonging…the *experience* of community" (Bauman 2002 176). Where the election departs from Bauman's conceptualization this particular peg is not entirely 'liquid'. Rather it is deeply rooted in American political mythology. The election is an event engendering a contest of meanings about questions salient to collective political life (Alexander 2006; Bellah 2006).

The broader political climate also provided an intriguing context. Campaign spending by the executive committees of both major parties, their allied lobbying organizations, and the individual campaigns reached record highs.[84] Concurrently, the United States was in the midst of the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression, and was militarily engaged in multiple theaters in a global "War on Terrorism". This made an already antagonistic political contests more contentious.

The outcome of this particular election was a marked change in national leadership. After growing dissatisfaction with the Bush administration the American public overwhelmingly placed control of the federal government into Democratic hands. Besides capturing the White House with the largest percentage of the popular vote in decades, not to mention over twice as many Electoral votes as their rivals, Democrats also bolstered majorities in both Houses of Congress. The respective power of the two major parties unambiguously switched. This is significant for the research here because it means that if we take to heart the Echo Chamber literature's insistence on Limbaugh's role as a political operative it captures that he went from speaking with the majority to speaking from the opposition. The role of the talk show host, and the Echo Chamber more broadly, change dramatically. The major benefit is that this captures an important political transition taking place at the national level. In turn it opens the possibility to analyze whether shifts in national power dynamics correspond to any shift as to how Limbaugh is included in news and commentary.

Text collection started August 4th, 2008, and concluded February 3rd, 2009 providing a sampling time frame of six months. Starting three months before the election and ending three

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[84] See OpenSecrets.org. "Outside Spending" .www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/index.php

months after meant the corpus of texts was bookended by important national political events connected with the election. The first article collected for the sample was written a few weeks prior to the first major party convention while the last was recorded slightly more than a week after inauguration. With the period preceding and following the election a broad range of interconnected political events and discussions salient to American political culture were captured. This is important because beyond Limbaugh the discussions transpiring at this time carried "the power to disrupt…and to change" the organization of the official public sphere and alter the trajectory of political outcomes (Jacobs 2000 8).

Organizing and Cleaning Data:

The Lexis-Nexus database served as the primary search tool for data collection. Using the parameters described above, and searching for "Rush Limbaugh", the database produced 536 hits for the six month period. More precisely, the specific text string "Rush and Limbaugh" guided the search in the media organizations listed above within the specified time period. The Boolean connector "AND" ensured both terms were found within a text to guarantee it was indeed the talk radio show host producing a hit. Since the database is not case sensitive the first term can be found ubiquitously and imprecisely throughout the news appearing as a variety of parts of speech. Using the connector with the second term limited search returns while specifying the talk show host's complete name. This minimized chances of collecting texts featuring individuals sharing the given or surname.

A custom database was then constructed allowing the sampled texts to be organized and catalogued. This facilitated the method of textual analysis described above. Each text was assigned

a unique identifier, and then sorted into three categories. "Daily print" consisted of national newspapers (N-106). Broken down The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today had 54, 35, and 17 hits, respectively. "Non-daily print" included the magazines (N-48). Newsweek had seven hits, the New York Yorker and The New Republic produced four each, and National Review featured 33. The broadcast and cable news channels, labeled as "daily television" had a total of 380 hits. Distilled into specific networks Limbaugh was included on Fox News 87 times, CNN 190 times, MSNBC 81 times, and NBC 12 times.[85]

After this initial sort and descriptive categorization a second pass of the data was conducted to isolate parts of the texts empirically relevant to the project. That is to say, the texts were 'cleaned' so to only focus on the stories or segments including Limbaugh. For both newspapers and magazines this was relatively straight forward. Topics in print tended to focus on delimited thematic elements, and were unambiguously self-contained. In other words the story written tended to focus on a single overarching topic for the entirety of the article. Therefore all print stories were taken holistically. This was not the case for television, and isolating the portion of a given program including Limbaugh required considerably more work. Collected transcripts of broadcasts covered entire programs, and the talk show host most often was only present in a particular segment. The result is that the majority of a given transcript did not include Limbaugh in its entirety. Those segments without Limbaugh were discarded.[86]

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[85] After the initial sort, 'pedigree' information was added to each text. In addition to being labeled by organization and channel, other descriptors were noted. For both broadcast and print, the specific air or publication date, byline or anchor(s), and title of the segment or article were added to the database where available. For television the specific program and guests appearing were also recorded. With the printed texts the section of the publication and the edition were also logged.

[86] One theoretical justification used to comfortably eliminate the 'non-Limbaugh' portions of broadcast draws from Zygmunt Bauman's assertion that news media exhibits a tendency to "recycle the world as a succession of events…the order does not truly matter *since no casual connection or logic is implied*" (Bauman 2002 175 emphasis added). In other words what comes before and after a particular story does not necessarily offer a thematic relationship. However, this was taken with some caution considering the time frame within which data was collected. Although stories do not *necessarily* have to tie *directly* into one another the backdrop of the election did keep topicality relatively focused. With that said, Limbaugh was overwhelmingly *not* found throughout a program, and was nearly always limited to a particular segment.

The systematic elimination of superfluous texts required an initial reading of the broadcast transcripts in their entirety. Several textual cues facilitated proper cut off points. Illustrations are helpful. "Openings" like the introduction of guests or topics often signaled where a particular broadcast segment began. For instance a September 22nd broadcast of "The O'Reilly Factor" quoted the host as saying "Now for the top story tonight, a new poll by the Associated Press says one-third of white Democrats, one-third hold negative opinions about Black Americans. Barack Obama responded." (O'Reilly. O'Reilly Factor. Fox News. September 22nd 2008). In a discussion about the vice presidential selection process CNN anchor Heidi Collins indicated a switch to a new segment by introducing a guest rather than a topic. "Watching and waiting. Barack Obama expected to announce his choice for a running mate any day now. Decision day is also near for John McCain. With us to talk about the strategy behind all the speculation, Democratic analyst Hilary Rosen. Good morning to you, Hilary." (Collins. American Morning. CNN August 8th, 2008). Similarly, other cues marked the end of segments. A September 19th broadcast on Fox News concerning deceptive campaign advertisements ended a segment including Limbaugh with "So anyway, Rich, we could talk all night, no doubt, but I got to go…Thank you very much. Great having you here" (MacCallum. Fox News Watch. Fox News. September 9th 2008)... Other closings were equally pointed. During an August 21st broadcast of Larry King Live the host gave a preview of an upcoming story capping it pithily, "We'll be back with more. Don't go away" (King. Larry King Live. CNN August 21st, 2008). Noting contextual clues built into the structure of broadcasts distinguished beginnings and ends.[87]

After isolating Limbaugh throughout the corpus any reprints and rebroadcasts were then eliminated. Out of the original 534 sampled texts 89 were removed for this reason leaving a total

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[87] See Clayman in Scannell (1991).

of 449 for analysis. The remaining counts left CNN with 140 hits, Fox News with 77 hits, MSNBC with 78 hits, and NBC with 12 hits. The cleaned newspapers totals leveled at 51 for The New York Times, 30 for The Washington Post, and 14 for USA Today. For the magazine articles the elimination left all the totals described above the same with the exception of the National Review. One article was removed leaving decreasing the total hit count to 32. With the data now cleaned the stage was set for a 'minimal' analysis which in turn allowed for a 'maximal' strong program analysis. We now turn our attention to the former.

A Dual Axis "Minimal" Analysis - Moving Toward a Deep Reading:

A subsequent pass of the now cleaned, organized data revealed two further textual distinctions crucial to this project. Two "descriptive statistics" developed in conversation with previous literature on Limbaugh, and emphasized that more than frequency of inclusion must be noted to study the public impact of Limbaugh's appearances in the press. Viewing the text in this fashion reinforced possibilities for more thorough comparative analysis.

The first 'statistic' emphasized the salient role of ideology and position within mediated political institutions as factors for explaining his influence. A distinction was made between those texts emerging from the Conservative "Echo Chamber" and those produced by a purportedly Liberal "Mainstream Press". As the Echo Chamber literature made clear actors and organizations connected through resonant ideological dispositions, material structures, shared talent, and shared audiences constituted a distinct set of mediated political spaces. Invoking either calls forth particular sets of political parties, citizens, journalists, politicians, editorial stances, and ideological perspectives.

The research here sought to preserve the ideological division, but for differing reasons than the extant literature. Coding the spaces of production of the collected text as either "Echo Chamber" or "Mainstream Press" prepared the data for 'strong' program based textual analysis. Regardless of whether press content constitutes a reflection or a contributing factor of Limbaugh's influence we still need to know exactly what is being said and written. We also need to know from where content is being produced and disseminated. By separating content into these two categories later comparative analysis between and within these spaces becomes possible. We can compare along editorial, and arguably ideological, lines.

Fox News, the dominant outlet of the Echo Chamber, broadly mentioned in prior research, along with the National Review were classified as "Echo Chamber" texts. Together they constituted 109 texts. This was nearly one quarter of the sample.[88] The remaining sources produced the majority of the sample, and were categorized as the "Mainstream Press". All of the daily newspapers with the exception of USA Today, and all of the broadcast outlets were grouped using this term in large part to mirror the design of existing research on Limbaugh (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 x-xi, 104-151).[89] The remaining magazines were added to the Mainstream category as to incorporate long form journalism, and serve as a counterpoint to the National Review. Taken together there were 340 Mainstream texts constituting roughly three quarters of the corpus.

A second ''statistic' provides another crucial foundation for the type of textual analysis to be conducted here. All of the existing literature on the talk show host marks only presence or

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[88] The third major component of the Echo Chamber mentioned in existing literature is the Wall Street Journal, namely its editorial page was not included as a data source. However, this should not necessarily be seen as a problem as Jamieson and Cappella document strong points of congruency between the Journal's editorial page and the Echo Chamber texts featured here. In other words, by looking at other Echo Chamber texts we can draw reasonable inferences to the Journal in terms of content (2008). With that said limitations of *not* including the Wall Street Journal will be discussed in the final chapter.

[89] *USA Today* is a reasonable addition to the Mainstream Press grouping because of its national reach, large circulation size, organizational networks, generally centrist editorial positions, and its representativeness of local papers across the country

absence in a story. The degree or depth of his inclusion in news and commentary is not homogenous, and variation must be better accounted for. Research here asserts that when incorporated into news and commentary Limbaugh moves from exclusively being an "actor" engaged in political discussion to serving as an 'object' of discussion. The assertion permits the analyst to describe Limbaugh in symbolic terms helping to conceptualize his 'depth', 'degree', or 'level of involvement' in a given text.

To analytically ground this we can think of Limbaugh as a "function" of news and commentary. The term describes elements within narratives carrying "significance for the course of action". The talk show host acts as a "content unit", a vessel of meaning embedded in patterned ways structuring narratives he is a part of. Even though Limbaugh is "materially confined" the potential structuring reach of his textual articulations extend his corporality well "beyond the level of denotation" (Barthes 1968 88-104, 1977 245-246).

Two types of functions, described as "cardinal" and "catalyzer", are useful for capturing the degree of Limbaugh's inclusivity. Cardinal functions are "hinge-type" in that they separate parts of a story in integral ways. They are fundamental to narratives in that they create particular configurations of meaning between elements of a story. The function "initiates or resolves" ambiguity within a story. In other words, a story cannot unfold without cardinal functions. They are necessary for a narrative to be ordered and made meaningful. On the other hand, a catalyzer adds detail to a narrative, but its presence or absence does not alter the overarching trajectory of a story. Instead a catalyzer can be thought of as "trivial incidents or descriptions" coloring a narrative, but unlike cardinal functions they are not "consequential." In short they are not necessary for the logic of a story to develop. A story told without catalyzers might be bland, but the

establishment of a given narrative's meaning remains unproblematic without them (Barthes 1968 88-104, 1977 248-250).

These two types of functions can be used to further describe textual dimensions of Limbaugh not captured in current research. Reading through the sampled texts it was found that slightly more than ten percent used Limbaugh as a cardinal function. These stories were *about* Limbaugh, his program, or his audience. Without reference to these elements the entirety of a story would become unintelligible. Yet, the overwhelming majority of texts collected presented Limbaugh as a catalyzer where he is incorporated into news and commentary in a decidedly secondary fashion. In these instances the talk show host, the program, or the audience perform supporting roles. As catalyzers they may be important or only mentioned in passing, but in either case the story would still make sense regardless of presence. On these occasions, Limbaugh is ultimately a disposable element of a narrative. His inclusion is not necessary for a given text to retain meaning. This alone is an enormous distinction missed by the current literature studying the talk show host's political influence. Without this type of detailed textual analysis these dimensions would otherwise remain hidden.

Consider the following examples. During a broadcast segment of MSNBC's Countdown Limbaugh acted as like a cardinal function, and was the primary focus of the story. Shortly after the Presidential inauguration Keith Olbermann, the Countdown host, covered the reverberations from a set of indirect exchanges between President Obama and Limbaugh. The polemic rejoinders each leveled at the other spawned subsidiary discussions including one where a Liberal advocacy group, Americans United for Change, took the opportunity to run political radio ads positioning Limbaugh as a the de facto leader of the Republican Party. The ads were part of a concerted campaign designed to target moderate Republican senators in the hopes of linking them to the

more bombastic positions of the talk show host. Washington Post columnist EJ Dione said that although there was a downside of a group running such types of ads it made sense that they were trying to associate political rivals with "this very loud right-winger" who can easily stir the base, but "isn't very popular among moderate swing voters" (Olbermann. Countdown. MSNBC January 30th 2009). The potential toxicity of Limbaugh proved attractive to Liberals, and they hoped it would give them an edge in subsequent elections. Here we can see that Limbaugh is a necessary part of this story. Without his inclusion the story could not have been communicated in a way making sense.

In another example the secondary status of Limbaugh, here a catalyzer, can be readily discerned. During a November 13th edition of MSNBC's Hardball host Chris Matthews discussed the future of the Republican Party in the wake of the Obama victory with former Republican Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty. Both commented that the campaign underscored tensions within the GOP as the party showed signs of serious division with Moderate and Conservative wings fighting one another to shape its future. Both also attributed some of the internally fractious conflict to national systemic issues appearing to provoke trenchant, although arguably nonsensical, reactions that could compromise the party in the long run. For Matthews the "economy in this country has fallen between the cracks of two presidents" adding "we got people like Rush Limbaugh saying the recession is already his (Obama's) fault" (Matthews. Hardball. MSNBC November 13th 2008). Both agreed structural issues polarized elements within the Republican coalition resulting in provocative rhetoric. In regards to Limbaugh what can be unequivocally recognized from the broadcast segment is that the talk show host is not the primary focus of attention. More pointedly, he is not functionally necessary for the story to be told. Matthews and

Pawlenty could have very well covered the same ground leaving Limbaugh completely out of discussion.

Even at this preliminary point several initial empirical findings emerge. Over the sample period for the collected texts Limbaugh was uniquely introduced into public discussion 449 times. Initial analysis revealed that Limbaugh was the focus of discussion 12% of the time (N-52). For the overwhelming majority of the sample Limbaugh was built into news and commentary in a secondary manner in 88% of texts (N-397). When these metrics are cross tabulated with the ideological position of the space of production (e.g. Echo Chamber or Mainstream Press) an interesting pattern emerged. Despite ideologically divergence an affinity was shared between the "Echo Chamber" and "Mainstream Press" in the sample. In the former Limbaugh was a secondary function 88% of the time (N-96), and in the latter 89% of texts (N-301). In other words ideologically dissimilar mediated political networks incorporated Limbaugh into news and commentary in similar frequencies in terms of the degree of his involvement in a given story from the corpus. For both, the vast majority of instances where he was invoked the talk show host did not serve as an element necessary for a story to be communicated.

This reading at least initially suggests that most of the time the sampled texts regarded Limbaugh as a peripheral character in public political discussion. There are two implications important to note. First, the lack of ideological contrast suggests that rather than dissonance both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press may share an important feature when presenting Limbaugh. If we are seeking to understand dynamics of influence, and develop more nuanced understandings of how Limbaugh is woven into national political discussion it becomes necessary to develop a deeper understanding not reduced to an exclusively ideological base. A second implication of these preliminary findings question the extent or reach of his influence. If he was

overwhelmingly presented as a non-essential element in news and commentary, does this correspond to how influential he is compared to other possible roles he fulfills in public discussion? For instance, it opens up the possibility that his influence is an effect of a public understanding of him as an icon or placeholder of political meaning rather than a political actor.

The two dimensions described above, ideological space of inclusion and narrative depth, create an interface between cultural and non-cultural structures. These initial findings are important, and will supplement further textual analysis aimed at specifying the patterned symbolic structures inscribing Limbaugh with meaning. Organizing the data along these metrics is important because it provides useful descriptions for situating mentions of Limbaugh against a mediated political space while maintaining connections to extant research. However, before moving from this 'minimal' interpretation to a 'maximal' interpretation how narratives and signifiers were operationalized, and several limitations of the data should be noted.

Operationalization of the Narrative and Signifying Categories:

In establishing the categories of narratives and signifiers that will be explicitly teased out in the following chapters certain comments about operationalization should be noted. In other words it is important to specify how the categories teased out from the texts were established. While the thick description in the following chapters will highlight these elements in detail, it is necessary to discuss how they arose in the first place. First, we will focus on the operationalization of the narrative categories. We will then move to what textual clues were established in order to specify the semiotic categories that emerged from the collected data. In each the coding mechanism will be reviewed.

The four narrative categories which will be richly recreated from the text, and described in the next chapter consisted of those concerning partisan politics, political strategy, the role of mass media in political discussion, and the general tone of political discourse circulating throughout the political public sphere. Operationalizing these categories, that is developing the criteria by which they could be reasonably grouped as is, resulted from certain indicators from the text themselves. For one, the descriptive dimensions of plots along with the inference made by those involved with the production of the texts (e.g. the writes, anchors, or contributors) presented several justifications for allowing the grouping of texts as they appeared here. Whether they were newspaper articles and columns, writings in magazine, or broadcast transcripts those producing were relatively clear in the aim of what any particular story attempted to convey.

For instance a story concerned with the actions taken by political parties in the hopes of achieving some sort of instrumental ends were categorized within the narrative of 'political strategy'. Stories classified within this narrative category focused on highlighting maneuvers taken by parties to secure leads in polls, win elections, or navigate what necessary steps should be taken in order to govern (or resist actions of the party in power). A second narrative category focused on partisan politics. Here authors, anchors, reporters, and correspondents shifted attention away from who may or may not obtain a particular outcome. Rather elements within the stories were attentive to the dynamics between and within politic parties in so far as how the parties, including factions within parties related to one another. While there were certain instances of cooperation most of these stories highlighted how the two major political parties interacted within one another, as well as internally, emphasizing how these contestations affected the nature of the parties themselves. They were not necessarily focused on outcomes per say, but rather spoke of internal and external pressures that defined the relationships within and between the parties. In so far as outcomes were

concerned in this case speculation was offered as to what effects these pressures would have on the future of these political organization. The last two narrative categories, the state of the news media as a political institution and the tone of political discourse were more readily apparent. For better or worse these in the case of the former explicit attention was paid to how the media played a role in shaping political outcomes. To be clear this was not discussion concerning how politicians, parties, and citizens contributed to this process. Instead the focus was placed on how the news media either facilitated or hindered democratic processes, and lived up to or failed in its stated normative goals. Stories falling into the final narrative category were classified as such because they spoke of the role elites and non-elites played in engaging in political discussion. Evaluations were consistently made of whether or not the discussions transpiring throughout the public sphere, specifically the articulations of public opinion were beneficial or detrimental to the circulation of ideas throughout the civil sphere.

Signifiers were operationalized by looking at how Limbaugh was linked to other meaningful elements within a given text. This occurred by teasing out the semiotic chains within which Limbaugh was clearly connotated. Features in the text like associations with other public individuals (both political and not political), connections with ideas or forms of media, styles of questions posed to him, as well as his ruminations on those questions where the major criteria used to classify him was done here. Another feature noted was how he was invoked in terms of actions. To help establish what signifying categories Limbaugh should be placed in, action on his part was also noted. When Limbaugh said or did something, and this was underscored in a given text, this indicated a fit for a particular signifying categories over others. On the other hand, when Limbaugh's actions were not stressed classifying him with alternative signifying categories was more appropriate.

For the four signifying categories emerging from the corpus some more specific criteria would be helpful. Determination made in establishing Limbaugh as a political leader were most strongly indicated by his associations with other political leaders. At times, these relationships could be seen as cooperative while at other times they appeared antagonistic. In other words, Limbaugh's integration with political allies and adversaries who themselves were established politicians or political officials indicated some level of equivalency. If Limbaugh was interacting with these public figures, and more importantly, they were either interacting back or at least considering him amongst their ranks was a strong indicator of this category. This was especially true when no descriptors distinguishing Limbaugh from these public figures were made (e.g. Limbaugh was not specified as a political talk radio host, and was simply included with these other political players). The texts classifying him as an icon, what we shall shortly see as the most prominent category in the sampled data, was similar to the categorization as a leader in terms of association with a few important differences. Here he was not actively engaging with others, but rather was grouped with them to stand in for some political ideology, party, party faction, or form and genre of mass media. In these cases Limbaugh was the face of Conservatism or the GOP. In other cases he embodied particular forms of mass media. Instances where Limbaugh was classified as an expert drew from two sources. Similar to what has been described above, the talk show host was introduced into conversations where his opinion on the matter at hand were sought whether or not he possessed any standing in terms of experience or training to draw the conclusions he offered. He was asked to provide his opinion on a range of matters to provide a perspective to analyze a given topic. And as we saw with the other signifying categories listed above, associations were important too. When incorporated with individuals such as political operatives, economists, or policy experts having stronger claims to offer opinions for the purpose of analyzing political

happenings, Limbaugh's opinions (whether convincing or not) were afforded an opportunity to be considered on as equally valid. The least frequent signifying category mentioned, Limbaugh as the entertainer, results from two primary areas. Similar to the others he was associated with other entertainers who also speak on political matters. Grouped together with little distinction made between he and others in the field of entertainment this classification was convincing. While he produced engaging and captivating rhetoric, many commenters were quick to point out, with some drawing upon the talk show host's own words, his appeal emerged precisely from his ability to enthrall an audience for the purpose of pleasure seeking rather than an imperative to inform.

These criteria serves as the basis for why the categories developed in this dissertation emerged. Using these two sets of indicators, the narratives Limbaugh were made part of and the meanings Limbaugh were instilled with by the press, the textual dimensions measured here were convincing. Although using these as benchmarks to textually map Limbaugh, according to these classifications more work still needs to be done. A deeper recreation of how these are specifically articulated in the texts needs to be explicit.

Design Limitations:

Although this research constitutes a helpful exploratory springboard for understanding the dynamics of Limbaugh's influence in the political public sphere caution must be exercised before generalizing findings beyond the analysis here. Empirical analysis focuses on Limbaugh at one point in history. He is a single case being studied at a single instance, and this presents initial limitations in terms of further explaining his political influence.

There are three interrelated issues. For one, making any definitive statements about how Limbaugh is cast as a cultural object outside of this specific data set would prove problematic. It cannot be readily determined if the relationship between the institutional space of production and degree of immersion noted above would be the same if we studied Limbaugh during another time period or political events (e.g. a different election or a time of less organized national political activity). It would likewise be difficult to draw firm inferences about any subsequent deep reading of collected texts based on these distinctions for application elsewhere. If the foundation is flawed any further empirical analysis built upon it would not likely be valid nor reliable. With the relationship between institutional space and depth limited to a specific instance, any nuanced detail mined from the text must stay inexorably local. The possibility of an idiosyncratic presentation of Limbaugh cannot be ruled out without further research.

A second related limitation suggests caution should be exercised before applying any findings here to other political entertainers. If data and methods cannot conclude that this empirical instance of Limbaugh is like other empirical instances of Limbaugh it very well cannot make any definitive claims about other political entertainers. Although the theoretical framework presented by Cultural Sociology suggests that similar dynamics would likely be at play with others public actors sharing affinities with Limbaugh without conducting comparable empirical analysis any claim would be suppositional. The dynamics of political influence associated with other political entertainers need independent verification. Again, this research provides a useful springboard to that end. With that said, a more generalized model of the influence of political entertainers, and their role within national political discussion requires further study beyond the scope of this dissertation.

A third related limitation concerns the data set itself. On the one hand, the current data set is 'un-balanced'. Sampled data from sources designated as the Mainstream Press are considerably more numerous than the texts produced within the Echo Chamber. This raises the possibility of a skewed sampled. If ideology is important, more important than theory and initial analysis suggests, it is clear that one set of positions will be overrepresented. The lack of a major national and editorially Conservative leaning newspaper is the most apparent gap. A related issue with the data is the relatively small sample size. Slightly less than 550 texts were collected, and several dozen of those texts were excluded for not meeting important methodological criteria. While this affords an opportunity to be intimately immersed in the collected data there is not enough material to develop fully robust models without further data supplementation.

While the research presented here will expand the sociological understanding related to the dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence the scope of the data collected certainly restricts the generalizability of any findings here in terms of broad explanatory purchase. While these limitations may undercut its explanatory capacity this research is still useful and justified in terms of exploratory potential. [90]

Towards a "Maximal" Analysis of Limbaugh's Political Influence:

Given the stated limitations the next stage in a 'strong' program analysis of the data is the operationalization of the socio-cultural matrix consisting of the ideologically differentiated "institutional network" and "degree of immersion" as components of textual 'coordinates' mapping specific patterns of symbolic meanings present in the sampled texts including Limbaugh.

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[90] Correctives to these drawbacks will be discussed in the last chapter.

The subsequent chapter takes the data and methods outlined here, and further teases out the culturally defined 'coordinates' attached to the talk show host through a rich recreation of the sampled texts. Doing so will allow for the distillation of the symbolic dimensions of Limbaugh's presence in news and commentary.

After a careful deep reading of articles, columns, and broadcasts political signifiers structured by an autonomous cultural logic marking the talk show host as a textual object can be better delineated. Doing so would fill an important gap in current literature on the talk show host. Only then can broader questions concerning the dynamics of political influence more generally be revisited, and alternative explanations to account for Limbaugh's influence throughout the political public sphere can be offered. But first it is important to situate Limbaugh in the political 'moment'. This is where we being the next chapter.

Embedding Limbaugh in American Political Culture:

Scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of mediated discussion for understanding the nuances of American political life (as well as political life outside of the American context), and research in the area has grown significantly over the past thirty years. Studies of narratives involving the politics of race and religion (Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2000), foreign relations, government policy, and disasters (Cottle 2012; Smith 1994, 2005; Schwartz 2011; Alexander and Gao 2011), solidarity and civil society (Alexander 2006, 2010; Alexander and Smith 1993), and popular culture, journalism, and politics (Jacobs 2007; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jacobs and Wild 2013; Schudson 1978, 2005, 2011) have produced significant insight. The political stories are important in that they helped define and shape the cultural structures that impact political life (Alexander 2006; Alexander and Jacobs 1998; Alexander and Smith 1993, 1999; Bellah 1998, Bellah et. al 1985; Dayan & Katz 1992 1994; Goldfarb 2012; Jacobs 2000, 2003a, b, 2005; Smith and Phillips 2006). To sum, dense and textured language of news narratives are integral to political life.[91]

It is useful to consider this body of work when studying dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence. This chapter reports certain findings of the empirical program outlined in the previous chapter. The empirical research presented accomplishes two interrelated tasks. In what follows is a rendering of the national political climate at the time placing Limbaugh in the context of the

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[91] As discussed in the previous chapter structuralism, and particularly the work of Roland Barthes, was foundational to this project. To reiterate, narrative refers to the collection of plots and actors manifest in textual forms that attempt to convey the meaningfulness of an action or series of action. Narrative consists of not only the uttered or written word, but also a variety of other elements including "signifiers" and "functions". On the other hand a story refers to signified subject of a narrative. Put another way, "story" describes the subject(s) the narrative attempts to make meaningful, "whether real or fictitious" (Barthes 1968; 1977 75-85; Genette 1988 25).

2008 Presidential Election. Influenced from the abovementioned scholarship it will highlight the narratives organizing news and commentary found in the collected sample.

This will help fill in gaps in the existing literature on the talk show host. Although it has been noted that Limbaugh is present in political discussion well beyond his radio broadcast there has been little work done in actually specifying the content of the stories in which he appears. We know Limbaugh is drawn into news and commentary. It will be useful to analyze what discussions he is part of. While we cannot generalize this will begin to give us better understandings of Limbaugh's position outside of the Echo Chamber. Within the sampled text the contours of the political public sphere can be highlighted by mapping these stories. Having this information allows us to better identify important feedback loops connecting Limbaugh to the political public sphere, and provide an empirical base to offer alternative ideas of his political influence. With maps we can develop a picture of 'where' Limbaugh is located in the political public sphere, and move beyond the question of 'if' he is in the political public sphere.

The 2008 Election:

Elections tend to be a big deal. Their outcomes are clearly consequential for civil society and the state. Within ostensibly democratic societies elections normatively express the civil support for a party or candidate. Elections permit non-elite citizens to exercise power over the state, and to a degree alter its actions. Voting itself is a sacred political ritual permitting distinct type of social actor access to the civil power mounted atop the state bureaucracy. In other words, elections harness civil power to translate public opinion into state power (Alexander 2006; Bellah 1993; Schudson 1978; Taylor 1992).

US Presidential Elections are not an exception. And while all US Presidential elections are significant political events the 2008 Election that served as the context for this research presented several unique features. The residual impacts of the September 11th attacks, the divisive "War on Terror", the destruction and perceived abandonment of a major US city after a natural disaster, a calamitous economic crash, and still lingering bitterness concerning the 2000 Presidential Election constituted the general political environment leading into the fall of 2008. The litany of circumstances established pervasive narratives that in part shaped the topical discussions of the campaigns, as well as the transition period following the election. For instance, frames adopted by journalists and non-journalists speaking in the journalistic field drew from this foundation. The generally held the position that the election would set a dramatically new course for the country as it moved beyond these poignant political events was pervasively resonant throughout the press. Just as Reagan was popularly understood as ushering in a new era of national political consciousness after the 1980 election, the 2008 election would also prove, many suggested, to be a critical juncture in American politics.

Public opinion and public discussion organized through mass media expounded upon these topical currents. The communicative institutions primed the political atmosphere, and ubiquitously transposed these sentiments across news and commentary. This was true irrespective of political ideology even if the details differed. For the Right the election was a struggle to prevent America from following an ambiguously defined yet dangerous 'socialist' path. They pushed to reignite the mythic story of American exceptionalism as a guide to political actions adapted for the 21st century. For the Left the election was hoped to herald a time of change pushing towards greater economic parity, social justice, and a new more diplomatic international role for the United States. Regardless of ideological disposition there was a common element to both in that the nation was

seriously evaluating how the outcome would steer America moving forward. In other words, in terms of content covered and positions taken, the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press share this affinity. This was one way journalism contributed to developing collective narratives that craft the social identities of political players, and steered actions of civil associations and campaigns.

Within the sampled stories two temporal arcs constituted the overarching 'meta' subject that was the election and transition of power. The first can be bracketed between the party conventions and Election Day. During this time the immediacy of the pending presidential contest, unsurprisingly, dominated the news. It was the main event, and served as the backdrop against which nearly all of the stories collected for this time period were set against. Questions prior to November sought to discern what election outcome would come to fruition given several features of the political landscape at the time. The second focused on the transition of power, and the monumental changes the election results purportedly portended for the United States. This time frame ran from November 5th through Inauguration Day in late January. With the immediate political struggle of the election resolved, questions as to how the political landscape would be altered after the transition reverberated throughout the public sphere.

Within the bifurcated 'meta' narrative four distinct narratives emerged shaping the stories in the sampled text. They were ubiquitous appearing in both the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber, and all were linked to different dynamics associated with the operations of the communicative and regulative institutions of the civil sphere. Stories focused on the regulative institutions of the civil sphere discussed the structures and practices associated with established political organizations. The political strategies adopted by the campaigns and parties, and the resultant partisan politics the strategies influenced was regularly discussed. The other types of narratives dealt with topics tied more closely to the communicative institutions of the civil sphere.

News and commentary assessed the tone of civility (or lack thereof) in expressions of public opinion and the discussions of the political public sphere. In addition the sampled data suggested that these narratives evaluated the media. This in turn marks some degree of reflexivity which spilt into a general discussion of the discussion taking place in the political public sphere.

When the sample is considered as a whole stories about partisan politics were most numerous (N-172). This was followed by stories about political strategy (N-153), the state of the new media (N-87), and the tone of national political discourse (N-37). This translates into roughly 38%, 34%, 20%, and 8% of the sampled data, respectively. However an initial finding suggested that the frequency that any one narrative appeared in a sampled text seemed to correlate with the ideological disposition of the space of production. For instance in the Echo Chamber stories focused primarily on political strategy (N – 46) with the state of the media and partisan politics following (N-31 and N-27, respectively). Stories concerning the tone of discussion in the political public sphere were featured with the least frequency (N-5). For the Echo Chamber the thematic organization of stories appeared in roughly 9%, 7%, 7%, and 1%, respectively compared to the sample as a whole. The Mainstream Press presented the narratives in a different rank order compared to the Echo Chamber. Stories about partisan politics garnered the most attention (N-141) followed by stories about political strategy (N-109). Stories about journalism ranked next (N-58), with the quality of civil discussion last (N-32). Put another way the Mainstream News featured the same thematically organized stories 32%, 24%, 13%, and 7%, again respective to the corpus.

Even though these are preliminary findings, and should not be generalized beyond the sample, they complement previous research concerning Limbaugh in important ways. Like the extant literature it lends support to the assertion that the talk show host has a pronounced presence throughout the journalistic field both inside and outside the Echo Chamber. During the six month

period that the sample spanned he averaged roughly two and a half mentions a day. In the midst of a presidential election that is no small feat for someone lacking official political standing. Where this research begins to extend beyond the existing literature is that it adds additional detail as to what stories were being communicated when Limbaugh was included.

By teasing out the details of the stories we are be better positioned to situate Limbaugh into an actually existing socio-historical context. While existing literature notes his presence in the press in a general sense it says nothing of the particularities of the stories in which he is embedded. Without this information we lose an important sense of context when describing Limbaugh's presence and influence in the political public sphere. Knowing what types of stories Limbaugh is made part of helps analysts better locate his position within American political culture. We can see in the sample data that the talk show host's presence recurs within a delimited set of thematically organized narratives. This may mean that his ubiquity in national news and commentary circulating throughout the political public sphere might actually only occur in certain types of stories. Again, it is important to note that this cannot be generalized beyond the sample texts collected, but initial findings suggest it is worthy to pursue further.

To explore this dynamic additional work beyond organizing, categorizing, and counting texts is needed. If we are to further the ultimate goal of fleshing out dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence, and hopefully add some further insight into understanding dynamics of influence associated with political entertainers more generally, more detail must be mined from the data. More pointedly, a nuanced recreation of the stories are needed. The remainder of the chapter offers a thick description of the stories comprising the political milieu within which we find Limbaugh. This will help specify important elements of the communicative feedback loops

binding Limbaugh to national political discussion. We now turn to developing these narrative themes by reconstructing how the stories comprising drawn from the sampled text were presented.

Narrative 1 – The Analysis of Political Strategy:

Within the sampled texts many stories containing Limbaugh prominently emphasized "political strategy". These stories featured character driven plots where politicians, political operatives, and their affiliated political organizations (namely parties) engaged in a high stakes game for the control over the state, and influence over civil society. How they competed to occupy office, set the public agenda, define the normative commitments of the nation, and outline state policy were regularly highlighted. Stories occurring prior to November 4th underscored the strategies used by candidates and parties to secure office. With the election decided interest shifted to what would optimize the ability of politicians and parties to fortify positions for the power shifts the new administration and Congressional majorities would bring.

Although variation existed between the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press in terms of specific people, groups, or events these thematically organized stories appeared to draw upon fixed sets of meanings. Variation between the two political media networks was primarily limited to changing positions of protagonists and antagonists. There was little change in the overall message. Both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream press drew upon the same political language and cultural objects even if they used them idiosyncratically. Irrespective of the producer the stories tended to accentuate the negative dimension of the political intrigues covered although some seemed more resistant than others in specifying blame or responsibility.

Another interesting finding that emerged from the sampled data was a lack of variation in the stories respective to the degree of Limbaugh's inclusion. Regardless of his role as a primary or secondary function sampled texts showed little correlation with types of stories articulated. In other words stories about political strategy did not change much within similar ideological spaces respective to the degree to which Limbaugh was necessary for a story to be communicated intelligibly. This is important in that it raises questions concerning prior literature about Limbaugh's ability to influence the framing of particular debates. The data here forces us to ask questions about the degree to which Limbaugh can actually drive discussions in the political public sphere. If the depth of immersion does not correlate with a discernable shift in a stories' structure within a given text than he might not have as much influence over agenda setting as thought. To show what this looked like in the text examples will be helpful.

The Echo Chamber and Political Strategy:

The Echo Chamber was replete with news and commentary on the brilliance and pitfalls of the political strategy guiding political players towards electoral goals. Stories collected here also highlighted the potential propensity of particular courses of action to affect national governance when the new administration took office. These stories were relatively uniform in casting political protagonists and antagonists in predictable ways. This distinction was defined by positioning Democrats and Republicans in terms of opposing civil qualities. This mainly took the form of ascribing the motivations propelling each towards their respective goals. Democrats were profaned and caricatured while the GOP was left relatively unmarked. Regularized negative depictions of the Left created an air of cynicism towards nearly every action taken by Democrats. The occlusion of the Right short circuited potentials for the Echo Chamber to reflexively scrutinize their civil

regulative counterpart (i.e. the GOP), although there were some brief instance of nascent self-reflection.

Take for instance a late August editorial featured in the National Review by Editor Kathryn Jean Lopez. Written shortly after McCain and Obama participated in Pastor Rick Warren's "Civil Forum" Lopez noted how Obama galvanized the Democratic base solely through "weak and insulting answers about when life begins … and attacks on fact finding and truth-telling pro-lifers" (Lopez. No Joe. National Review Online. August 19th 2008).[92] On the other hand McCain was positioned as the true star of the forum. The Arizona Senator who historically had an uneasy relationship with the base of the GOP capitalized on the opportunity, and crafted a powerful counter image more in tune with Conservatives. This allowed him to develop a position ingratiating him with a crucial part of the GOP coalition.

Yet, Lopez felt these gains could easily be squandered. McCain could possibility lose the political capital he acquired by adopting a strategy that would undermine his "commitment to leading a pro-life administration" (Lopez. No Joe. National Review Online. August 19th 2008). Although cautiously optimistic because of his performance at the Forum she specifically worried McCain would run to the middle. Subtle hints from the campaign suggested he favored the selection of a pro-choice running mate.

To make matters worse he could very well select someone from outside of the GOP. Lopez believed that the most probable choice would be disaffected former Democrat, and longtime McCain colleague, Joseph Lieberman (I-CT). As appealing as a cross party ticket might seem, she

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[92]Also known as the "Faith Forum" the event was host by Pastor Rich Warren of the Evangelical megachurch, Saddleback Church. The Forum was important for both candidates. For one it was the first appearance either had made since they became the presumptive candidates of their respective parties. McCain wanted to make inroads with the Evangelical Conservative base of the GOP. Obama sought to gain exposure to a portion of the American electorate that had not generally been supportive of his campaign.

felt it was a sure fire way to re-alienate the base. In other words, McCain's rocky relationship with the base not tolerate Lieberman's social views. If McCain were to make this move, even if he believed going across the aisle was for the good of the country, Lopez, quoting Limbaugh, insisted he would "snatch defeat from the jaws of victory." Adopting her own voice once again she stated while bi-partisan ideals are fine if McCain cared "about winning, he won't pick Joe" (Lopez. No Joe. National Review Online. August 19th 2008). To do so would in essence constitute civil self-pollution.

In another instance a broadcast of the now defunct Hannity and Colmes airing about a month after Lopez's column devoted a segment to the strategy used by the Obama campaign to control the debate about immigration policy. His campaign released a video juxtaposing McCain's position concerning immigration with satirical comments made by Limbaugh during his program.[93] The commercial targeted Arizona voters, and was produced in Spanish to speak to the large Hispanic population of the state. The ad connected McCain's positons with Limbaugh's suggesting that a McCain presidency would be overly conservative and detrimental to Hispanics and their interests in the United States. The coveted voting demographic listed towards the Democrats, and while the Obama campaign did not think it could win Arizona they did calculate that it would be helpful to make McCain use resources in a state otherwise considered safe for the GOP.

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[93] The ad featured a comment Limbaugh had made on his program about "stupid and unskilled Mexicans" and that if they are not happy they should "shut your mouth or get out" (sic). This was followed by a narration about McCain. According to Hannity, Limbaugh was making a satirical comment on *Mexican*, not US, immigration policy in light of the development of NAFTA. During a September broadcast Limbaugh told the audience that the comment featured was also taken from 1994, and was completely out of context. (Limbaugh. The Rush Limbaugh Program. September 17 2008). Searching archives of the radio show supported this assertion.

The voice over of the ad was telling for Hannity. As it peppered McCain with language suggesting implicit racism, the Fox News host speculated strategic deception was aimed accomplishing a related purpose. He was explicit in elaborating how it was also a clear maneuver by Democrats designed to scare Spanish speaking Americans and immigrants using the "race card to smear a conservative" (i.e. Limbaugh), and falsely insinuate that McCain supported positions he had in fact never endorsed (Hannity. Hannity and Colmes. Fox News. September 19th 2008). Democrats sought to put McCain in a tough position. They primarily wanted to alienate McCain from the traditionally Democratic voting constituencies he sought to reach, and whose numbers as a percentage of the electorate were increasing.[94]

Conceding the potential effectiveness of this tactic Hannity stressed that the maneuver completely elided the fact that McCain and Limbaugh do not tend to show political viewpoints. A guest to the program, talk radio show host Phil Valentine, agreed. In an arguably less nuanced manner he added to Hannity's analysis suggesting that the ad was also a good way to go after the "illegal alien vote", a group that purportedly skirts election law to support Democrats (Valentine. Hannity and Colmes. Fox News. September 19th 2008).

A National Review article published the same day as the above Hannity broadcast featured similar narrative dimensions. Columnist and Conservative pundit Michelle Malkin also focused on the Spanish Language ad linking McCain and Limbaugh. She castigated it as an example of the Obama campaign using duplicitous and overly aggressive tactics in seeking power. The use of the strategy was far from isolated, but for her the purpose was not to put McCain in a tenuous position. Rather these maneuvers were aimed at "summoning his unhinged flock." Obama was using the

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[94] See Alba and Nee (2003); Denton and Massey (1998)

tactics, so that his irrational surrogate operatives were primed to fight. She implored Conservatives to guard themselves against the "shock troop campaign (comprised of a) bunch of angry Obama cultists… (that will) accuse you of racism…to keep the Mother Ship afloat" (Malkin. "Hounding Palin". National Review. September 19th 2008). Malkin's article pointed towards the pervasive impact of the duplicitous tactics used by Democrats to reach a desired political ends. Standing little chance of winning the White House on merit, the Obama campaign desired to inflame the passions of an irrational and excitable base in the hope that they would in turn overwhelm any opposition.

Typical of other news items focused on tactics and strategy no explicit mention of policy or positions are made. Rather Democrats and their sycophantic adherents are anti-civil not necessarily for what they believe, but for how they execute political action. Dishonest commercials and vituperative accusation were the only electoral tools available to them. They were deceitful, and only sought to stymie McCain even in his home state. In demonizing Conservatives with these lies Democrats were trying to drive Hispanics away from the GOP rather than meritoriously attracting them to their own party through their own ideas. Most troubling was that such actions seemed to be the only way they could rally the base of the Left.

While the majority of narratives about political strategy appearing within the Echo Chamber focused on actions leading up to the election several other instances sought to extrapolate what political conditions would look like under the new administration. Consider a January 26th Broadcast of Fox's Hannity. Earlier in the week Obama had explicitly incorporated Limbaugh into a speech given to GOP lawmakers. In short, the President told the caucus that if they expected to accomplish the work of government they could not take direction from people like Limbaugh. Hannity commented that it was unfair of the President to target a talk radio host who for all intents and purposes was a private citizen expressing his view. He told his audience that Obama's

comments were best understood as a cheap political ploy aimed at dividing Conservatives, and marginalizing an important voice that in large part defined "conservatism in this country" (Hannity. Fox's Hannity. Fox News January 26th 2009). Instead of tackling tough issues besetting the nation the new administration sought to engage in diversions and feckless trivialities as they attempted to consolidate power.

In a tangentially related post-election broadcast of Fox's Special Report with Bret Baier, Fox News anchor Chris Wallace recounted a discussion he had previously conducted on an earlier program. What had stood out for Wallace most prominently in the days leading to the inauguration was the cavalier, if not somewhat naïve, attitude adopted by the newly elected Commander-in-Chief. Occupying the Oval Office for less than two weeks Obama appeared to Wallace as "so utterly confident that he wears the mantle of the presidency lightly. He kids around. He talks a little trash…" (Wallace. Fox's Special Report with Bret Baier. Fox News. February 3rd 2009). He speculated Obama's performance was a response to his inability to control questions posed by journalists expressed skepticism about his model of leadership.

The swagger also reflected Obama's attempt to shift attention away from the initial setbacks besetting his administration. Adopting this attitude allowed him to sidestep questions about things like his comments concerning Limbaugh, his proposed stimulus package, and the scandal surrounding his original choice of Tom Daschle for Secretary of Health and Human Services. For Wallace, Obama's patronizing public persona was diversionary, and ultimately counterproductive. Not only would it not have the intended goal, the rhetorical strategy reflected poorly on his leadership qualities, and would hamper initiatives he hoped to pursue.

This painted an unflattering portrait of the new President, and his Democratic allies. It implied they were not serious nor qualified to execute their duties. The way they presented

themselves carried the underpinnings of arrogance, spoke to their character. They had no problem being vicious, nasty, or deceitful if it served their ends. They would attack anyone and anything that challenged their worldview. Repeating a similar theme to other examples mentioned earlier we once again see that these maneuvers pointed out the superficiality of the Left. There was no substance behind what they do apart from a naked pursuit of power.

The above examples provided variants of a similar narrative about political strategy. The stories presented are relatively uniform in so far as they commented on the Left's collectively shameful strategic maneuvers motivated by an insatiable lust for power. Democrats at the highest levels are willing to twist the truth to defame opponents, rile sophomoric supporters, and dodge pressing public issues all for the sake of winning elections and maintaining power.

However, this crass desire for political dominance, the commentators and journalists suggested, is ultimately counterproductive. In the end it only undermined any credibility of the inchoate administration, and reinforced a message that Democrats needed to weaken their rivals instead of building on the merits of their own beliefs. As we now turn to the Mainstream Press we will see how the very same stories about political strategy are presented. They follow similar dynamics, but the characters seem to play inverted roles.

The Mainstream Press and Political Strategy:

Similar stories about political strategy were also presented in the Mainstream Press where they constituted the second most frequently deployed narrative category. Similar to the Echo Chamber, the Mainstream Press news and commentary concerning political strategy oriented most often to the campaigns, and later to the actions of those primarily involved with the transition of

power after the election. Although there was resonance in that particular strategies were used for instrumental gain, the players seemingly occupied inverted roles. Here the political Right was brought unambiguously into discussion, and was often portrayed as acting in a less than admirable manner. While there was recognition that the Democrats participated in the same type of political games, there was more ambivalence in terms of judgment and evaluations.

Take for instance a late August editorial from the New York Times penned by Paul Krugman. The Princeton economist and longtime columnist noted the prominent use of character attacks this election cycle was indicative of a broader set of campaign strategies that have grown increasingly vicious since the 2004 Presidential election. In Krugman's estimation, the unfair and slanderous attacks then used against John Kerry, were being redoubled and redeployed against Obama.[95] Adopted as a euphemism for character attacks aimed at unfairly besmirching a political opponent, Krugman claimed that the GOP had become proficient at "swift boating".

As dishonest and cruel as the now favored campaign tactic was there was a silver lining. He agreed with other commentators who suggested Obama was ill-prepared to deal with these types of personal attacks on his own. What differed was his assessment that Democrats had responded in force by playing the same game of "politics of personal destruction", but did so by personifying the GOP as anti-civil rather than attacking McCain (Krugman. Accentuate the Negative. New York Times. August 25th 2008).

The tactic allowed Obama to effectively deal with the exigencies of the election in two important ways. First, the negative campaigning would not necessarily attack McCain's policy or

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[95] During the 2004 Presidential campaign Republican operatives had unabashedly sullied the character of John Kerry attacking the Massachusetts Senator's record in the armed force, and argued his wealth, not of his own making, made him out of touch with Americans. The "raw class envy played an important role in the attacks on Mr. Kerry, whom Limbaugh described repeatedly as a "gigolo" with a "sugar daddy wife," and G.O.P. supporters don't seem to have experienced any cognitive dissonance." (Krugman. Accentuate the Negative. August 25th 2008. New York Times)

character. In doing so Democrats could come across as somewhat magnanimous and deferential towards McCain. Yet, they could still tie McCain to the more Conservative elements in the GOP. The latter could be more easily and effectively criticized. In effect Obama would make this a "race between a Democrat and a Republican" which Krugman believed the former would handily win (Krugman. Accentuate the Negative. August 25th 2008. New York Times).

For a related but different reason, framing the election as one between Left and Right also communicated a level of maturity and restraint on the part of the Democrats to voters. The Republicans, who were the first to draw on the tactic, could not demonstrate similar qualities. They lacked substance in their political arguments, and therefore could not be elected on the merits of their ideas. The attacks indicated a failed first strike on the GOP's part. On the other hand Democrats demonstrated another advantage over the GOP. They harnessed the strategy developed by the GOP more effectively, and used it as a counter measure. The Democrats were focused and wisely strategic. This was an example of a proper response to a crass GOP. Moreover Democrats were defending themselves in a measured way against the latter's aggression. Although the tactics taken by the former might not measure up to lofty democratic ideals of open and honest spirited discussion it was a justifiable action given what they faced.

Again, instead of framing the election as a "contest of personalities rather than parties" as the GOP had done Democrats could treat McCain with a level of respect while slamming the political ideology he, willingly or not, represented. In this instance Krugman believed voters would be sympathetic and supportive of the 'negative' campaign waged by Democrats while simultaneously dismissive of the 'negative' campaign run by the GOP (Krugman. Accentuate the Negative. New York Times. August 25th 2008).

In another example of strategic considerations informing the campaigns Ruben Navarrette of USA Today suggested that McCain was the victim of circumstance. He was forced to deal with a difficult political situation not of his own making. As a long time Senator from a state with a sizable Latino population McCain was acutely aware that this constituency was becoming increasingly important in terms of national politics. As a long time Senator from a border state McCain was also cognizant of the sensitivity of immigration policy especially amongst the GOP's base. This was a problem.

As highlighted earlier many in Latino community wanted the government to pursue an immigration policy at odds with what was proposed by the base of the GOP. McCain attempted to steer a middle path asking prominent voices on the political Right to re-think positions on immigration, or at the very least tone down some of the more contentious and polemic points they were making as to not alienate an increasingly important group of voters. Despite his efforts Navarrette felt McCain had not been able to effectively steer discussion about the issue within his party. Although Democrats were equally responsible for the state of immigration at the time, McCain appeared to be pandering to the party base by not more forcefully contesting "loudmouths on Right-wing talk radio … (that) claimed credit for derailing comprehensive reform" (Navarrette. McCain, que paso? USA Today. October 28th 2008).

This in turn permitted the opening for the Obama campaign to run the aforementioned Spanish language ad linking McCain to Limbaugh precisely in the context of immigration policy. Democrats, Navarrette claimed, were able to easily elide their role in blocking immigration legislation, and place the blame solely on the GOP, and by extension, McCain.[96] For his part,

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[96] Democrats fearing protest from organized labor, an integral constituent group, subverted legislation tied to immigration policy regarding provisions for immigrant guest workers. Additionally, Senate Democrats, including then Senator Obama, included a

McCain was too weak to control the more radical elements of his party. The ad proved effective in that support for Obama amongst Latino voters surged. In response McCain released a second Spanish language ad hoping to "set the record straight" (Navarrette. McCain, que paso? USA Today. October 28th 2008). The attempt proved futile. Support for McCain amongst Latinos dropped. However, the bigger tragedy for Navarrette was that the negative campaigning had squandered an important opportunity to address an issue of central concern to Latino's specifically, and the American public more broadly.

Stories about political strategy reached a fever pitch in the days just prior to the election. During a November 1st airing of CNN's Election Countdown a panel of Right leaning commentators credited the tactical operations of Obama and his inner circle in this regard. They suggested Democrats developed a broadly appealing brand of liberalism attractive to people otherwise indifferent or leery of Left leaning politics. Stephen Debose of the Washington Times noted that years of hard work were coming to fruition and this strategy has proven "very difficult to counteract" by the GOP (Debose. Election Countdown. CNN. November 1st 2008). A former spokesperson for Governor Mitt Romney, Kevin Madden, agreed expressing a begrudging admiration of a move Obama had not created, but seemingly perfected. The Illinois Senator was adroit in claiming he was "above partisanship … then he automatically pivots to a partisan message". The "rhetorical gimmick" was attributed to his education and training in the often lambasted "Chicago" styled politics (Madden. Election Countdown. CNN. November 1st 2008).

Stephen Hayes of the Weekly Standard recounted an instance of this capability in practice during an Iowa town hall. A college student in camouflage raised a question about the second

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series of "poison pill" amendments guaranteeing legislation would never reach the President's desk " (Navarrette. McCain, que paso? USA Today. October 28th 2008).

amendment. Obama effectively parlayed the question on gun issues into one on street violence claiming the lives of inner city youth. In other words, he took a divisive question and recast it in a way that few would disagree with. Hayes remarked that Obama's answer to the question was "masterful…I think a lot of Americans, including you know second amendment types, would come away from that thinking (Obama) is not as bad as I thought" (Hayes. Election Countdown. CNN. November 1st 2008). As a parting note Hayes went on to bemoan the lack of any near comparison to effective campaigning on the political Right.

Despite them developing many of the campaign strategies the GOP seemed to be no match for Democrats in terms of using them effectively. The implication in the Mainstream Press stories above was that Republicans were on the defensive. The Left successfully used methods from the GOP's playbook, and Obama in particular seemed well poised to execute such a strategy. Moreover, there was general agreement that instead of using such strategies exclusively against McCain, Democrats were able to use it to exploit problematic issues being sorted out by various factions within the GOP concerning immigration. Navarrette's assessment expanded on what Krugman wrote, and the CNN segment implied. Yet, the real tragedy as crystallized by Navarrette was that an important conversation about immigration, ethnicity, and citizenship would most likely not take place. It seemed that for him there was a sense that where elephants (and donkeys) fight one should pity the grass.

These narratives occurred after the election as well. Similar to the Echo Chamber the Mainstream Press shifted attention after the 4th to what strategies President-Elect Obama would adopt for the purpose of furthering his policy agenda, and facilitating the transition to a federal government dominated by Democrats. During the aptly titled "Strategy Session" segment of

CNN's the Situation Room, host Wolf Blitzer was joined by Paul Begala and Bay Buchanan to discuss the pending transition between the outgoing and incoming administrations.[97]

Blitzer noted that Obama was drawing considerable political strength by re-entering a "campaign mode" to promote the economic stimulus package, his first major legislative proposal. The commentators suggested that the purpose behind adopting this approach was important because it was Obama's best chance to reach out to two important, and quite distinct, communities. He needed to make his case for his solution to American's pressing economic ailments to both voters and Congress, and a campaign style approach seemed to make the most sense. The commentators further agreed that convincing the latter was more pressing than convincing the former, but the former needed to be at least humored.

To achieve these ends Obama, Begala and Buchannan claimed, eschewed his desire to act as a Washington outsider. Even though both commentators advocated positions of two distinct political ideologies they agreed that the quick pivot to political insider was necessary. He assembled a dedicated core team of veteran political operatives that could make personal appeals to wavering politicians. Both agreed that such moves would serve the President well as he sought to implement his agenda. Begala told Blitzer that Obama had "the right people, he's got the right tools, he's got the right ideas", and if he combined these elements properly he would be able to effectively shepherd the legislation through Congress while also satiating the public. For instance Obama's dining "with a bunch of Conservatives" was "very wise". Even if this was only an attempt to maintain the façade of bipartisanship the political capital generated could put enough pressure on stalwart Conservatives in Congress to refrain from undercutting attempts at compromise

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[97] Begala is a Democratic strategist while Buchannan is a Republican strategist.

(Begala. The Situation Room. CNN. January 16th 2009). Buchannan, more skeptical of Obama's willingness or desire to govern across the aisle, nonetheless noted another smart maneuver. His consistent invocation of the 'people' was also indicative of an attempt to pressure members of his own Party who might be considering withholding their support. Letting elected Democrats know "who the boss is" was just as impressive (Buchannan. The Situation Room. CNN. January 16th 2009).

A similar discussion about political strategy was presented again in a February 2nd article in the Washington Post. Political reporter Chris Cillizza wrote that after no Republican supported Obama's economic recovery legislation the President's hopes for bipartisan governance appeared dashed. Instead of reconciliation Obama and the Democrats pushed back in a partisan manner. Going over the heads of Congress they went directly to the people with the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee coordinating a media blitz promoting the legislation. They specifically targeted several Republicans who had voted against its adoption in districts they felt were in play for the 2010 mid-term elections. Through "3 million emails and 100,000 phone calls into the [targeted] districts" Democrats positioned opponents of the legislation as fighting on the "side of Rush Limbaugh" instead of the people they purportedly represented (Cillizza. House Republicans' Stand Against Stimulus Provides Fodder For Democratic Ads. February 2nd 2009). Insisting that ideologically based GOP intransigence would make the economic situation worse, Cillizza suggested that if the outreach did not generate enough support to make the legislation popular Democrats hoped it would at least isolate GOP lawmakers making them vulnerable.

The sampled articles and broadcasts recreated here suggested an important narrative at play in the Mainstream Press that is similar on many points to that found in the sampled Echo Chamber texts. The former follows a similar temporal arc with campaign tactics stressed prior to the election,

and legislative posturing coming into focus after. Very little is said about substantive policy, or the ideas supporting them. Instead politicians and parties are seen as instrumentally acting. Although less overtly bellicose than their Conservative counterpart the Mainstream Press constructed a world where politics was a game for the cunning and adaptable.

In these stories Obama and the Democrats again were the major players, but unlike the Echo Chamber examples they were not symbolically polluted. They certainly employed ignoble tactics, but they did so only as a response to provocations from the Right. The strategies used by Democrats were a necessary, and as such a forgivable, political evil. Since they only used it in a second strike capacity the Left had a stronger potential to have their message resonate with voters vis-à-vis the message of the Right.

Even if this was not about taking a moral high ground the Democrats and Obama just seemed better at the political game. They were lauded for harnessing political strategy more effectively than their GOP counterparts. Democrats were better in leveraging mass media, connecting with voters, and steering discussion throughout the political public sphere. There seemed to be a certain level of admiration held for the Democrats. They were good at this game whereas the GOP seemed almost amateurish.

In stories centered on political strategy it was interesting how these dynamics conform to work done on the binary discourse and narrative of American civil society in both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press. It is important to note the minimal role played by those on the political Right in these stories. The Echo Chamber, the GOP, and Conservatives more generally are in positions where they are responding to something instigated by the Left. Reflexivity is either non-detectable or given with a caveat that ultimately exonerates the GOP of the consequences of their political actions. There are marginal attempts at purifying the Right, but more often it is the

Left that is polluted. For the Mainstream Press the roles were reversed. Here it was the Left that only acted in a defensive manner to the underhanded actions of the Right. Yet in both cases the narrative about political strategy held. Players simply changed roles.

Narrative 2 – Mass Media as a Political Institution:

A second narrative that emerged from the sampled data highlighted dynamics of the relationship between mass media and politics. Stories within this narrative group further emphasized how the relationship impacted the election, and subsequent transition of leadership. News and commentary offered evaluations of how well journalism adhered to truthfully reporting public matters. This is interesting because unlike the other narrative themes this one is the most reflexive. The sampled news and commentary critiqued how well journalists were contributing to public discussion by acting in accordance with normative professional standards. Questions about trustworthiness, accuracy, and hubris were raised.

Other claims were also made about the power of the press in terms of its ability to shape the political landscape. In these instances connections between particular media organizations and affiliated media personalities, with corresponding positions within the field of politics, were outlined. Reporters, commentators, and media organizations were interwoven into dense mediated political networks alongside politicians and political parties. Articles and broadcasts credited the interactions and interconnections between these elements as enormously consequential for the election.

Another feature noted in the texts related to the depth of Limbaugh's appearance. Like the narrative involving political strategy, ideological orientation of the producer rather than

Limbaugh's degree of immersion seemed to correlate with how a story was communicated. Echo Chamber organizations offered these stories more frequently relative to the Mainstream Press. Still, different media groups shared the general features of the narrative outlined above, but again the specific details varied in terms of who or what was placed in the position of protagonist and antagonist. As we saw in the last narrative group this narrative also did not vary when Limbaugh was a primary or secondary character. Regardless of his importance in any particular article or broadcast the specifics did not vary within an ideological group. In the context of the election the evaluations took on a heightened sense of importance. With calls for civic responsibility, and the expectation that journalists inform the electorate many judgments rendered, both media groups felt, were polemical. Sensitivity to these matters does suggested a degree of reflexivity on the part of journalists. We now turn to a rich description of how the narrative appeared in the sampled text.

The Echo Chamber - Mass Media and Politics:

The mass media as a 'political institution' narrative was the second most frequently featured set of stories in the sampled Echo Chamber texts. The style and content of news and commentary found here shared resonance with discourse commonly associated with the political Right. Stories often remarked on an uncomfortably close relationship between Democrats and the Mainstream Press. The latter, they suggested, readily disregards journalism's normative principles to serve the purposes of the political Left. The Mainstream Press willingly distorted the public record in the hopes of inducing public opinion sympathetic to Democratic causes and ideals. Moreover, they reported and commentated with an air of self-righteousness that also led them to abdicate their responsibility to present consequential information fairly to the public. In this way

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the Mainstream Press presented a fundamental threat to a democracy that rests upon an informed

citizenry.

Consider the following. An August 18th article in the National Review accused the

Mainstream Press of blatant bias in their treatment of a scandal involving then Democratic

candidate and South Carolina Senator, John Edwards.[98] Byron York commented on the dearth of

coverage when the story broke, and the subsequent lack of coverage on the attempted cover-up

allegedly directed by the Edwards' campaign. Many Mainstream journalists, York wrote, cited a

lack of evidence to report the story even as evidence mounted. He found these position thin, and

pointed out that the only organization devoting inches to the Edwards scandal was the National

Inquirer. Yet, even as the tabloid continued to publish more and more details the "big outlets -- the

Washington Post, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times, the

newsmagazines, the broadcast networks, the cable networks, everybody -- ignored it" (York. The

Secret History of John Edwards. National Review. August 18th 2008).

York's critique emphasized two points. On the one hand it was further evidence of the

Mainstream Press's liberal bias (although he did mention the Wall Street Journal). The blatant

refusal to report on a story that was steadily gaining plausibility showed how the Mainstream

would turn its back on truth when that truth could politically cripple a Democrat. The Mainstream

Press, it appeared, was more concerned with the image of a Liberal whose success was intertwined

with their own. The naked pursuit of power was compelling enough to overwhelm the obligation

to objectively report. The desire to help a Liberal overrode any other motivating factor.

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[98] Edwards was accused of engaging in an extramarital affair with a member of his campaign staff. The relationship produced a child, a staffer was used as a scapegoat, and campaign finances were diverted in an attempt to silence those with knowledge of the events. Exacerbating the situation was Elizabeth Edwards, the publicly beloved wife of John, who had been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer.

The silence of the press also spoke loudly for York for other reasons. He suggested that the non-reporting illuminated the vanity and elitism at the core of Mainstream Press. Because a national tabloid had scooped the story York argued the omission was an unsurprising "prissy media-elite reaction" from a pretentious Mainstream Press (York. The Secret History of John Edwards. National Review. August 18th 2008). Blind devotion to Liberals aside, the Mainstream Press refused to acknowledge the scandal, not because of the thinness of evidence, but because of where the story broke.

Another National Review columnist also wrote about the Mainstream Press acting obsequiously towards Democrats. In Jonah Goldberg's September 5th column he noted that the most fervent opponents of the recently nominated Sarah Palin were not the Obama campaign or even the Democratic Party. Rather the Mainstream Press was at the vanguard of the Liberal offensive relentlessly barraging the Alaskan Governor about politically irrelevant personal issues.

In the piece Goldberg cited comparisons Liberal reporters made connecting Palin to several tarnished politicians, and extremist political groups. Her mental state was repeatedly and unfairly compared to Thomas Eagleton, and political affiliations between her and the fringe Alaskan Independence Party were exaggerated.[99] Moreover, speculation swirled that Palin's newborn child was really birthed by her unwed daughter (Goldberg. "Palin Bashing Press Keeps Swinging and Missing". National Review. September 5th 2008). The attacks on Palin didn't surprise Goldberg in and of themselves. He expected an "Obamaphilic press corps" to viciously attack whoever was

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[99] Eagleton was a former Democratic Senator from Missouri, and VP nominee on the 1972 McGovern ticket. His notoriety stems from mental health issues which ultimately led him to be replaced on the ticket. The Alaskan Independence Party, as the name suggests, advocates for Alaskan independence from the United States. Palin's husband was a member.

deemed an opponent. Moreover, one should not be shocked when attacks turned personal with substantive criticism lacking.

With that said Goldberg felt the attacks spoke loudly about just how misguided the Mainstream Press was. The common trope of "Palin-as-liability" was nothing short of insolent, and predicated on matters lacking public relevancy. If anything it was a sign of desperation and fear that the she would help McCain carry the election. She brought excitement and support to the McCain campaign that was sorely needed, and in the process she became a lightning rod for derision from an ideologically driven press corps that unflinchingly supported the Left. This was simply another example of a biased press having political affiliations and aspirations that surpassed a commitment to objectivity and fairness. It ultimately demonstrated how little "they (the press) understand the American electorate" (Goldberg. "Palin Bashing Press Keeps Swinging and Missing". National Review. September 5th 2008).

Goldberg offered another reason why the Mainstream Press was doing this. The attacks were motivated by a narrower self-interest. Palin could very well nudge McCain over the tipping point that would bring the Conservative support needed to carry the election. Under a Republican administration the Mainstream Press would be marginalized, along with their Democrats compatriots. This cynical calculus meant they would go to any length to stymie her efforts, and in turn McCain's. Goldberg urged readers to dismiss such reports as fiction inspired by callousness.

The narrative of the more than cozy relationship between the Mainstream Press with Democrats continued after the election. Beyond blaming deceptive reporting as a major a reason for McCain losing the race Sean Hannity also suggested the Mainstream Press played an integral role in pushing the policy agenda of the new administration. As noted earlier, shortly after the inauguration President Obama met with GOP Congressional members to discuss policy proposals

as well as his thoughts about how he saw effective governance with the opposition as a partner materializing. During his meeting he entreated Congressional Republicans to tune out extremist voices, specifically naming Rush Limbaugh, if they were interested in conducting the business of the nation.

An initial lack of attention from the Mainstream Press about the comment served as the basis for a discussion during a late January broadcast of Fox's Hannity between the host and guest Bernard Goldberg. For both it made clear that Liberals, exemplified by Obama, could make outrageous and provocative statements, and not be held accountable for them by the press. Simply stated Liberals were "given cover by their friends in the press", and this led to a troubling development in modern politics. The Mainstream Press had moved beyond "media bias. They have taken the next step. This is … media activism" (Hannity. Hannity. Fox News. January 26th 2009).

Goldberg added that the blind support of the Liberal agenda carved an unprecedented role for journalism to "shape history" instead of report on it. In his estimation this made the American political landscape ostensibly less democratic (Goldberg. Hannity. Fox News. January 26th 2009).[100] Hannity closed the segment by arguing the press acted more like Obama's loudspeakers rather than impartial journalists. They effectively functioned as Presidential "press secretaries". With no firewalls between the Mainstream Press and the Democrats the 2008 Presidential Election marked "the year journalism died" (Hannity. Hannity. Fox News. January 26th 2009).

The above examples pointed towards a common polemical narrative about news and politics that circulated throughout the Echo Chamber texts drawn from the sample. The collected stories made no firm distinction between Democrats or the Mainstream Press. They were both

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[100] It is worth noting that Goldberg was on the show in part to promote his aptly titled book "*A Slobbering Love Affair: The True and Pathetic Story of the Torrid Romance Between Barack Obama and the Mainstream Media*"

different faces of the same Liberal power structure where the press performs the communicative functions of the party. The reinforcing institutions bind the fields of political and media in a way that imparts a deleterious impact on the political public sphere. Stories produced in these spaces undermined the ideals of democratic governance because the organizations responsible for producing news and commentary were willing to report distortions of extant political circumstances. In doing so they deliberately mislead voters to engender support for Liberal politics. Journalism's normative role as a political watchdog, a source of information, a fourth estate, or any sort of popular political counterbalance serving the needs of the public interest over those in power were markedly absent.

Somewhat ironic, in formulating these assessments the Echo Chamber seemed to construct an understanding of the Mainstream Press as a constituent part of a "Liberal" Echo Chamber. It is no surprise to those within the Conservative Echo Chamber that the Mainstream Press generally supports a Liberal political agenda. What was interesting was the magnitude of the impact such support would have. The Mainstream Press did more than merely provide favorable coverage. The news media won Obama's election, and those broadcasting or writing from within the Echo Chamber predicted that it would serve as a central power base throughout his presidency.

The stories also portrayed the Mainstream Media as an elitist institution independent of political connections. The sampled texts conveyed a strong message that the Mainstream Press unfairly assumed the role as arbiter of truth tellers, and in doing so relegated alternative media organizations offering differing perspectives (i.e. those with Conservative editorial stances) on topical events to isolation. They dismissed contributions of those not deemed to be of their ilk. This manifestation of symbolic violence rested on the façade of serious journalism. The

incredulous narcissism was clearly on display whenever the merits of a story are ignored because it emerged from outside of their ranks, or contradicted their message.

The Mainstream Press - Mass Media and Politics:

Like the Echo Chamber the Mainstream Press also featured a narrative about mass media emphasizing its place and function within contemporary American politics. The stories comprising the narrative here were the third most common in the sampled Mainstream Press texts. Similar to their Echo Chamber counterpart articles and broadcasts pointed to outrageous comments, and willful distortions of facts aimed at achieving political ends. They also agreed that failures of journalism existed, and were causing harm to American democracy.

The constellation of meanings were rearranged, and a point of sharp dissonance with the Echo Chamber emerged while general contours remained the same. The most significant difference was that those on the Right, not the Left, were responsible for the offenses against journalistic integrity. The actors and organizations constituting the Echo Chamber were symbolically polluted, and positioned as the harbingers of distorted political communication. There was also one additional subtle difference between the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber. Although it was limited, the former engaged in some reflective self-criticism, and this dynamic was not identified in any of the latter's sampled text.

Several examples are instructive. For instance, notice the difference in coverage about the aforementioned Edwards scandal in the Mainstream Press. A segment on The Verdict with Dan Abrams on MSNBC discussed the scandal in light of a comment Limbaugh had made concerning

Edwards' wife, Elizabeth. The talk radio host explained Edwards' decision to engage in the extramarital affair stemmed from his wife's "nagging him about it (her cancer), and he found somebody that did something with a mouth other than talk" (Limbaugh. Verdict with Dan Abrams. MSNBC. August 13th 2008). For host Dan Abrams this was indicative of typical practices within the Echo Chamber. While not defending Edwards he told his audience that this was a perfect example of how far Conservative media organizations were willing to go to attack Democrats. To them nothing was sacred.

Brad Blakeman, a former aide to President GW Bush agreed with Abrams that the statement was "indefensible", but offered an alternative account of motivations. Profit, not politics, were the cause. Blakeman told Abrams that the more Limbaugh is "outrageous, you know, the more he obviously gets paid" (Blakeman. Verdict with Dan Abrams. MSNBC. August 13th 2008). April Ryan, Washington bureau chief for American Urban radio Network concurred. Freed from obliging a voting constituency, and not constrained by journalism's professional norms Limbaugh's vested interest lay in his audience and advertisers. The provocative language translated into high ratings, and this kept those groups dedicated to the program happy. Right leaning media was in practice not concerned with politics as much as they were concerned with profitable entertainment (Ryan. Verdict with Dan Abrams. MSNBC. August 13th 2008).

What we see in this case is Limbaugh woven into the same type of story that followed the same plot points as one would find in the Echo Chamber. But it did so as a mirror image. It was the Right that acted in a contemptuous manner not the Left. They exploited a tragedy to smear a political opponent. Their instrumental actions were also claimed to have been motivated by a lust for power. Likewise, commentary on Democrats remained relatively slim. Even though the

Edwards' scandal was at the core of the story reflection on Mainstream coverage was absent, and only a critical reflection of the Echo Chamber was offered.

Take another example. During an October 1st broadcast of CNN's American Morning a discussion emerged about the upcoming Vice-Presidential debate, and whether Palin would be treated fairly. After the Alaskan Governor's recent difficulties in major network interviews there was widespread interest about how she would perform against Senator Joe Biden. The discussion turned to a claim circulating throughout the Echo Chamber concerning debate moderator and PBS News Hour host, Gwen Ifill. Those speaking from within the Conservative Echo Chamber feared she would act as all other Liberal journalists, and treat Palin unfairly. Conservative media further argued that Ifill had a vested business interest in supporting Democrats aside from to her political leanings. She was in the process of completing a book about Barack Obama, and they reasoned that what was good for his campaign was ostensibly good for sales. Given these factors they suggested Palin would be placed at a disadvantage before she ever approached the podium.

Host Rick Sanchez was joined by Washington Post columnist and media critic Howard Kurtz who unequivocally dismissed the accusations from the Echo Chamber. He told Sanchez that the claims leveled at her could be traced back to an opinion piece posted to the Conservative website *WorldNetDaily* about her upcoming book.[101] Kurtz charged that questions about her credibility were designed to "spin away in advance the results of the debate in which Governor Palin may or may not do well*"* (Kurtz. American Morning. CNN. October 1st 2008). In essence the Echo Chamber launched a preemptive media strike based on suspect opinion designed to mitigate the potential damage Palin's performance could cause the Republican ticket. The logic

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[101] Kurtz added that WorldNetDaily was a web site that "for 44.95, if you act now, is peddling a book called Audacity of Deceit: Obama's War on American values" (Kurtz. American Morning. CNN. October 1st 2008).

the Echo Chamber applied to the Mainstream Press was in fact a rouse. Creating an image of unwarranted persecution of Palin by the Mainstream Press aimed to effectively neutralize any potential legitimate criticism.

A similar story written by Kurtz the next day in the Washington Post dealt with the narrative with another story about the relationship between the Mainstream Press and Palin. Kurtz explored the catch word promoted by the McCain campaign and the Echo Chamber to describe purportedly bias actions by the Mainstream Press in there unfairness towards Palin captured with the phrase "gotcha journalism".[102] He conceded that at times the Mainstream Press treated Palin more like a celebrity as opposed to a politician. After all they were incentivized to do so as she had become a "bankable star" (Kurtz. GOP 'Gotcha Journalism' Charges Throw Spotlight on Debate. Washington Post. October 2nd 2008). Her name was a top search for several major newspapers, her internet presence was vastly greater than her running mate, and she had been extensively caricatured in the entertainment media (Kurtz. GOP 'Gotcha Journalism' Charges Throw Spotlight on Debate. Washington Post. October 2nd 2008).

Yet, the notion that she was being treated unfairly was laughable, and he outright dismissed the assertion as baseless. He understood the responses of Palin, McCain, and their Echo Chamber allies in light of the poor interviews. But as he suggested in the prior example this was another example of "the age-old technique of preemptive spin" rather than an ideologically based conspiracy concocted by Democrats, and executed by the Mainstream Press (Kurtz. GOP 'Gotcha

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[102] This described the claims being made by the political Right that Sarah Palin was being treated unfairly in the Mainstream Press most likely due to the latter's inherent political bias. The phrase became prominent after Palin performed poorly in an interview with Katie Couric where stilted and unsteady. Palin herself responded to questions about the interview on the Conservative talk radio show of Hugh Hewitt. Summing the position of her campaign she told Hewitt and his audience that her degree in journalism made her aware of "journalistic ethics" that were not being practices, and she accept that a Liberal media would "take those shots and those pop quizzes" (Palin quoted in Kurtz. GOP 'Gotcha Journalism' Charges Throw Spotlight on Debate. Washington Post. October 2nd 2008).

Journalism' Charges Throw Spotlight on Debate. Washington Post .October 2nd 2008). In fact the coverage of the Governor was largely fair. Palin was simply not prepared to deal with serious questions on national stage. Her undulating equivocations, and blaming of journalists for it only made that clearer. That was hardly the fault of the Mainstream Press.

Stories presented by the Mainstream Press in this sample about the news as a political institution generally followed two interwoven arcs. On the one hand the majority of stories were devoted to critiquing the Echo Chamber, particularly its purposeful sensationalism and provocation for economic and political ends. For the Mainstream Press the Echo Chamber acted instrumentally for their own purposes, and not for American citizens. They pointed to what they saw as clear instances of bias where those on the Right were painted in a good light whether warranted or not, with those on the Left being unfairly and uncritically dismissed.

The secondary related arc within this narrative can be understood as the Mainstream Press' creation of critical distance between itself and the Echo Chamber suggested that it was critical and even handed. This distinguished them from the sensationalistic and hyperbolic Echo Chamber. The former's reporting was serious whereas the latter's was fanciful. This prompted reflexive questions from the Mainstream Media about the degree to which they performed to these standards. Although the conclusions drawn were tepid at least it posed questions about itself to itself. This stood in sharp contrast to the Echo Chamber in that when they invoked this narrative their own role was absent from discussion.

The sampled data suggests that in certain instances Limbaugh is folded into a reflexive conversations about the political role and influence of journalism. It also featured a similar dynamic to the first narrative discussed above. The Echo Chamber and Mainstream Press seemed to draw from similar cultural repertoires. How each arranged the elements within the stories they

told varied. In addition there was a second resonant dynamic noted earlier. Regardless of Limbaugh's involvement it again appeared that the editorial stance of the producing organization drove the story more so than the talk show host.

The stories comprising this narrative theme in the sampled text contextualized Limbaugh within a discussion of the political public sphere resonant with previous literature on the talk show host. Extant research noted the importance of institutional connections between media and politics, and this provided an important conceptual foundation of the Echo Chamber.[103] This research reimagines the concept from a different angle. Instead of looking at journalism, politics, and Limbaugh through institutional linkages, organizational overlap, and degree of adherence to professional norms offered is a glimpse into the public commentary about these dynamics. This adds further information to the analysis of Limbaugh's political influence by describing the public impact of the mediated political networks he is a part of in addition to previously research organizational connections.

Narrative 3 – Dynamics of Partisan Politics:

A third type of narrative frame found in the sampled stories involved evaluations of the relationship between and within the two major American political parties. Throughout the sampled texts stories about partisan politics focused a great deal on internal divisions on the political Right. In its coverage, the Echo Chamber noted a distinction between the different factions making up the GOP coalition. How the conflict between the two played out would be instrumental in terms of the Party's future. For their part, the Mainstream Press offered a slightly different evaluation to

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[103] See Jamieson and Cappella (2008) and chapter two of the work here.

these types of stories. While they also ruminated upon internal divisions on the Right, they did not see the possibility for a rebuilding of the GOP in the short term. The intraparty struggles would only serve to hinder the GOPs political endeavors. Stories about partisan politics remained consistent both before and after the election in the Mainstream Press while those created in the Echo Chamber shifted emphasis after November 4th.

There are notable consistencies between this narrative, and the others mentioned above. First, both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press wove the narrative about partisan politics into the topical news items leading up to the election and the inauguration. Again, we see the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press enmeshed in the same environmental context. Another related similarity between this narrative category and the others is that despite the same context, events and actors were presented differently. Like the pattern seen with the other narratives, the Echo Chamber's and Mainstream Press' evaluations and ascriptions of characters and plots are different. As in the other cases discussion offered alternative evaluations of the political happening. They offered different views on the outcomes party dynamics would have on the election, the transition, and party future.

One final point of congruency with other narratives was related to how Limbaugh's penetration of any particular story impacted the form of what was communicated. While ideology clearly altered the constellation of symbols and elements communicating a story, Limbaugh's depth in the story did not appear to do the same. In other words, whether Limbaugh was necessary for stories about partisan politics or not did not seem to produce any discernable alteration within a given ideological media group. Again the stories are communicated in the same manner irrespective of Limbaugh's involvement it once again raises, questions about the influence of his actions on public discussion.

<u>The Echo Chamber and Partisan Politics:</u>

Narratives concerning partisan politics ranked third in terms of frequency inside the sampled Echo Chamber stories. The focus on partisan politics highlighted points of contention between the various factions comprising the GOP. There were two broad categories organizing these types of stories. Prior to the election stories of intraparty conflict between Conservatives and Moderates in the GOP dominated. After the election there was a shift to a reflection on the GOP loss, and a common reason offered was that the party was not Conservative enough. Yet the failure held open the possibility for a revitalization of the GOP if Conservative precepts were followed. Interestingly, the data suggested the relationship between the two factions of the GOP varied along with the type of conflict presented in the given story.

Take for example an August 12th broadcast of Fox's Hannity and Colmes. In a discussion with his somewhat nettlesome cohost, Hannity connected the internecine skirmishes pervasive through the GOP symbolically with the McCain candidacy. In particular he felt it would come to a head with the Arizona Senator's selection of a running mate, and the decision would heavily influence prospects for winning the election. McCain represented a wing of the Republican Party that for Hannity moved too far from foundational principles. He embodied the "establishment" faction of the GOP that had ignored the Conservative base. Although he was far from the host's first choice for a candidate he was the heir presumptive of the Party, and Hannity acknowledged that his choice would profoundly affect the influence of the Conservatives over party leadership. Hannity was cautiously optimistic as he noted a "new energy*"* emerging from base. Conservatives were becoming more active as the election drew closer. If the "Maverick" selected a Conservative it would infuse this energy into the campaign, and make the ticket stronger.

Bobby Jindal (R-LA) was the featured guest during the segment, and Hannity suggested that he embodied this energy. The Louisiana governor was described by the host as "new, creative, innovative, Conservative" offering "limited government ideas", and was" a potential savior of Reagan Conservatism" (Hannity. Hannity and Colmes. Fox News. August 12th 2008). Jindal expressed his flattery, but expounded on his support for the GOP's presumptive nominee while being careful to place distance between them as to keep his Conservative credentials. Jindal would of course speak on behalf of McCain, but it would come with a caveat. Still there had to be some compromise. He too suggested this might best be accomplished by the selection of a Conservative running mate.

Similar sentiments were more tendentiously echoed after the elections when Limbaugh appeared during a post-election segment of On the Record with Greta Van Susteren. Less than twenty four hours after the last poll closed the talk show host was asked to share his thoughts on post-election commentary from journalists and McCain aides suggesting Sarah Palin was primarily responsible for the GOP defeat. He scoffed. Far from the reason for defeat the Conservative Palin was the only reason the GOP was competitive. If anything *"McCain was the drag, she was the spark"* (Limbaugh. On the Record with Greta Van Susteren. Fox News. November 7th 2008). He resolutely believed the Alaskan Governor successfully mobilized a large portion of the GOP base that McCain could not have done on his own. Limbaugh further commented that the attacks on Palin were "reprehensible … (but) it's quite instructive" (Limbaugh. On the Record with Greta Van Susteren. Fox News. November 7th 2008). He surmised they were launched by the Mainstream Press comprised of Liberal sympathizers in league with McCain aides seeking to shift blame to her for the loss. The two groups would have gone after any person in Palin's place, but because

she proved to be such a formidable political actor Limbaugh was not surprised they redoubled their efforts.

With that said the talk show host's ultimate point was that the story about Palin's role in the electoral loss was part of a larger struggle playing out for control of the Republican Party. Limbaugh elaborated further asserting that McCain's loss was fortuitous in that it opened opportunities for the GOP to purify, and rebuild itself in a more Conservative images. The establishment Moderates responsible for nominating McCain were the "architects of this defeat." Palin represented a very real chance to excite the base. Even though the election was lost the energy might be enough to wrest control of the party from the Republican "frauds and pretenders" (Limbaugh. On the Record with Greta Van Susteren. Fox News. November 7th 2008). Electoral victories would follow the Conservative restoration.

These two examples represent the acknowledgment and reflection of an intraparty conflict between Conservative and Moderate factions within the GOP. The struggle over the vice-presidential nomination crystalized this all too important struggle. The electoral loss and failure to communicate with the country indicated that leadership had to be replaced. Yet, commentators held out some hope that the election served as a wakeup call. In a more positive light the electoral loss forced the party to move forward. To remain relevant the party needed to reassess priorities, principles, message, and organization to do this. The Conservative faction in the Party must regain control to avoid further damage and marginalization. As many of these sampled texts suggested it was encouraging that Conservatives supported by the party base would be the harbinger of change.

Closer to the inauguration the sample stories toned down direct talk of about intraparty conflicts. Attention shifted to focus primarily towards division between Republicans and Democrats. Take for example a January 29th segment of Fox's Special report with Bret Baier

concerning Obama's proposed American Reinvestment and Recover Act.[104] The panel joining

Baier professed split opinions on the prospects of the legislation given the current tone of the

relationship between the two parties. While Democrats could pass the legislation on their own any

hope for bi-partisan support was virtually non-existent. By pursuing their ideals of economic

reform they would squander any modicum of Republican cooperation. On the other hand, seeking

cross aisle collaboration certainly meant a compromise of Democratic ideals and campaign

promises. The panel agreed that the political climate was a difficult one for Obama to navigate.

The pending struggle between the parties over ARRA was a sign of things to come, and the gap

between them would only grow as time progressed.

Political columnist and commentator Charles Krauthammer saw the continued souring of

relations across the aisle as having a more sanguine impact, at least as far as the future prospects

for the GOP was concerned. A common adversary would help mend fractures that developed

within the GOP that had grown especially divisive towards the end of the Bush Administration.

The concurrent loss of the White House along significant losses in Congressional races meant that

Republicans could find common cause in resisting the initiatives of the Obama Administration and

Democrats in Congress. In turn the GOP would then have the ability to better "re-examine itself"

through a reaffirmation of core beliefs and principles pursued with a cooperative spirit

(Krauthammer. Special Report with Bret Baier. Fox News. January 29th 2009).

While the other commentators agreed with Krauthammer the lone voice of dissent was

articulated by Mort Kondrake. Unifying Republicans was good, but he warned that there would be

significant risks in overplaying resistance to Obama. The GOP's claims of authenticity would be

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[104] Referred to as or ARRA or "the Stimulus Plan."

compromised. Instead of sticking to principled obstruction of the President and Democrats at every turn, even when opposition ideas were palatable to the Republicans, would be seen as nothing more than a contemptible political maneuver. The power struggle within the party would come across as more important than the welfare of the American people. This would in turn reinforce a public perception that the Moderates voices gave up, and the GOP will stay "isolated, as they are now, down to the Rush Limbaugh base" (Kondrake. Special Report with Bret Baier. Fox News. January 29th 2009).

Stories emerging from the Echo Chamber highlighting intraparty conflicts exhibited certain general dynamics. They emphasized the rebirth or renewal of the Republican Party by means of purification. In these stories the Echo Chamber presented the recent history of the GOP as written by figures who significantly strayed from core Conservative values that normatively defined, they claimed, the Party's identity. Turing away from these tenets the GOP was overrun by Moderates whose leadership had led the Party to become increasingly indistinguishable from Democrats. Much of the news and commentary portrayed the election as a siren call to purify ideals and policy through a purge of Moderate leadership (also referred to as Establishment). The ineffective or 'not-satisfactorily-committed' elements within the GOP needed to step aside or be removed. Conservatives would then move in bringing a refreshing burst of energy and ideas. Re-establishing the sacredness of the Reagan Narrative new leaders, leaders like Jindal and Palin, would lead the GOP to a new dawn for American Conservatism.[105]

A second variant of the narrative appeared after the election. The more firebrand personalities in the Conservative movement stated that the GOP had turned away from its central

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[105] See chapter two for more on for Reagan Narrative. Also see Klatch (1999), Jamieson and Cappella (2008), and Smith (2007).

convictions, and this led to the Party's loss of political power. Ideas contrary to Conservative principles should be understood as hostile, and vigorously defended against regardless of unanticipated consequences. But with a focus on a common adversary, and removed from the leadership in both Congressional Chambers, a period of reform was imminent. Sharing common goals of reclaiming lost positions would engender unification between Conservatives and Moderates through cooperation if current GOP leadership was receptive to the demands of the former.

Mainstream News and Partisan Politics:

The Mainstream Press gave considerably more attention to partisan politics relative to its Conservative counterpart. In fact this narrative appeared in the highest frequency within the Liberal media cluster. What was immediately noticeable was the uniform focus on the intraparty conflict beleaguering the political Right. Tension between Democrats and Republicans were assumed as a given part of the political landscape, but specific attention towards interparty conflict was kept at a minimum. What set the Mainstream apart was the exclusive attention to the rift besetting Moderates and Conservatives within the GOP.

Consider an example from an August 16th New York Times article. Michael Lou wrote about how speculation concerning McCain's choice of a running mate was drawing considerable ire from Conservative factions within the GOP suspected the worst. Lou suggested they were convinced McCain would select a Moderate candidate effectively dismissing their positions concerning health care, abortion, and gun control. The writer emphasized just how visceral the mistrust was. Based on what was the mere conjecture that the former Massachusetts Governor Mitt

Romney would be a potential running mate Conservatives were in a near panic.[106] Although some "Conservative voices began to rally to Mr. Romney" they were doing so out of necessity. The vast majority of the base that included "a sizeable number of state-level activists have remained adamantly opposed" to the possible nominee (Luo. McCain-Romney Ticket? Some in the G.O.P. Shout 'No'. New York Times. August 16th 2008).

Another example from an August 20th broadcast of MSNBC's Hardball featured host Chris Matthews reporting that Rush Limbaugh had rung the "Conservative four-alarm bell" after rumors surfaced that McCain would select a Moderate as a running mate. There was even a possibility that number two position may ultimately not be filled by a Republican. Matthews recounted Limbaugh's analysis of the situation quoting the radio host as saying such a move would "effectively destroy the Republican Party, and push the Conservative movement into the bleachers" (Limbaugh quoted by Matthews. Hardball. MSNBC. August 20th 2008). The talk show host called for a hard tack to the Right, and an uncompromising attitude towards the vice-presidential selection. Bipartisanship was not the answer.

Matthews dismissed the claim with a somewhat flippant answer posing a rhetorical question. He asked "when was the last time you sat in the cheap seats, Rush?" (Matthews. Hardball. MSNBC. August 20th 2008). Despite the levity, Matthews was intrigued by what he saw as the serious underlying point. Matthews' opinion of the response to McCain's openness to the prospect of a non-party candidate spoke to how sharply the Right was divided. Perhaps Limbaugh's comments were excessive, and the GOP might not be teetering on the precipice of disaster. With that said it did indicate a real tension between Moderates and Conservatives that could very well

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[106] Although a Republican, Romney governed a decidedly blue state, implemented policies that were palatable to the Left, and hailed from a family of other GOP Moderates.

threaten McCain's presidential ambition. Even if the GOP increased support through incorporating more centrist ideas or people it seemed that Conservatives were willing to cut off the Party's nose to spite its face.

The factional in-fighting within the GOP spread to engulf those in the media, including journalists. One instance was crystalized in an article appearing in the September 22nd edition of the Washington Post. Former national affairs correspondent Howard Kurtz wrote about a dilemma columnist David Brooks was experiencing. The resident voice of the Right on the editorial pages of the New York Times, Brooks was known for his brand of tempered Conservatism. He had at times taken positions critical of the Right, and maintained a relatively respectful relationship with those on the Left. The election complicated his ability to seemingly navigate this political landscape, and it appeared his columns had increasingly alienated him from many in the GOP base.

Kurtz highlighted a particular column Brooks had written about what he saw as an increasingly patronizing attitude taken by many in the press towards Sarah Palin. He wrote that news media coverage of Palin had degenerated into little more than unwarranted attacks on her character in ways that were inconsequential to national politics. However, Brooks was quick to note that his defense of Palin was not an endorsement. Along with a small cadre of other Conservative commentators Brooks expressed serious doubt about the Alaskan Governor's qualifications, and was concerned by her tendency to sidestep discussion of critical issues, and instead offer hollow talking points. Worse she appeared to "compensate for her lack of experience with brashness and excessive divisiveness" (Brooks quoted by Kurtz. David Brooks, Rankling Folks Right and Left; Conservative Pundit Hears it From Both Sides. Washington Post. September 22 2008).

For Kurtz this position was precisely the type of ammunition used by Conservative figures to label Brooks as an establishment elitist out of touch with the GOP. Kurtz cited another example. Laura Ingraham said Brooks' comments concerning Palin missed a crucial point. While Ingraham admitted that she might not have "read all the books David Brooks has read" she knew Palin could "galvanize an electorate" (Kurtz. David Brooks, Rankling Folks Right and Left; Conservative Pundit Hears it From Both Sides. Washington Post. September 22 2008).

Subsequent comments Kurtz made was telling. He quoted that Limbaugh had told Brooks, via his radio broadcast, that Conservatives like him were "trying to save this party" while the ideas of those like Brooks compromised party integrity (Kurtz. David Brooks, Rankling Folks Right and Left; Conservative Pundit Hears it From Both Sides. Washington Post. September 22 2008). At the same time there was no succor from the Left. He was still being harangued for his support of the former administration and its policies. Still the point was clear.[107] A rift existed within the GOP, and those involved understood it as an existential threat. Brooks was caught in the middle, and for him there was no respite.

As the election drew close an October 24th Washington Post column made a similar point using more dramatic language. In a less than subtlety titled editorial, "Civil War on the Right", EJ Dionne wrote that this election cycle had exacerbated deep tensions already existing within the GOP. The pressure was such that a moment of major transformation became a real possibility. He

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[107] As the luster for Obama began to fade the story also showed Moderate, Conservatives, and Liberals still stood apart. Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne lambasted Brooks as "half-intellectual, half-'Saturday Night Live'" (Dionne quoted in Kurtz. David Brooks, Rankling Folks Right and Left; Conservative Pundit Hears it From Both Sides. Washington Post. September 22 2008). Some commentators reminded audiences of his stances during the Bush Administration with particular attention paid to tax policy and foreign military engagements. While their Conservative counterparts wanted to readily forget what Brooks' had championed, Liberals wanted his paper trail illuminated on the marquee of public discussion. Glenn Greenwald of Salon.com textualized Brooks as a "neocon apologist" pointing citing his columns during 2003 Invasion in Iraq. It was made clear that his measured Conservatism was still too Conservative" (Greenwald quoted in Kurtz. David Brooks, Rankling Folks Right and Left; Conservative Pundit Hears it From Both Sides. Washington Post. September 22 2008).

recounted McCain's shaky relationship with the Party base, and although Sarah Palin's selection at first mollified the division it did produce a different set of problematic circumstances. As some within the Party began to question McCain's wisdom with the number two selection the rifts between the factions quickly resurfaced with force. The center holding together Conservative and Moderates continued to falter. Republicans were "at each other's throats… (and the) critics of John McCain and the critics of Sarah Palin represent entirely different camps" (Dionne. 2008. Civil War on the Right. Washington Post. October 24th 2008).

Dionne invoked shorthand connecting the immediate issue with McCain and Palin to the broader context of the conflict. "Pro-Palin" Conservatives saw McCain as an establishment candidate that at best would champion compromised positions further weakening the Party. McCain supporters held that Palin was a dangerous populist ill equipped for national office. Her rhetoric would only serve to marginalize the GOP by reducing it to a fringe movement. Either way there was a clash of opinion.

Dionne appreciated McCain's dilemma. Hoping that his selection of Palin would signify an entente cordiale between the factions within the GOP it instead appeared that the Arizona Senator entered a Faustian bargain. Party elites were "happy to harvest the votes of devout Christians and gun owners" only to find the "cause of Edmund Burke, Leo Strauss, Robert Nisbet, and William F. Buckley Jr. is now in the hands of Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Sarah Palin. Reason has been overwhelmed by propaganda, ideas by slogans, learned manifestoes by direct-mail hit pieces" (sic) (Dionne. Civil War on the Right. Washington Post. October 24th 2008). Instead of strengthening the Party it appeared as if McCain had contributed to its hijacking by extreme fringe elements. Instead of bridging the ideological divide within the GOP the Palin gambit, perhaps unexpectedly, exacerbated it.

Circumstances after the election seemed to support Dionne's prognosis, and little change in stories were noted. During a January 28th segment of CNN's American Morning correspondent Alina Cho cited a story about Limbaugh and House GOP member Phil Gingrey (R-GA). Gingrey had been amongst a group of Republican lawmakers that met with Obama, and during this meeting the President singled out Limbaugh as a producer unproductive rhetoric. When Limbaugh responded by chastising the GOP leadership for timidity in dealing with Obama, Gingrey was the solitary House member to publicly rebuke Limbaugh's comments. He told Politico that Limbaugh had the luxury to "stand back and throw bricks" without being accountable to do "what is best for your people and your party" (Gingrey. American Morning. CNN. January 28th 2009).

In response Limbaugh attacked Gingrey. In his opinion Gingrey represented precisely the GOP leadership that lacked vision, and had proven completely ineffective in "battling the most Left wing agenda in modern history" (Limbaugh. American Morning. CNN. January 28th 2009). A deluge of critical phone calls, faxes, and emails flooded Gingrey's office. They were left by Conservatives who were ostensibly listeners of Limbaugh's program, and were acting at his direction. Gingrey promptly apologized to the talk show host telling CNN that as long as he held his seat he would "fight for and defend our sacred values… And on so many of these things, I see eye-to-eye with Rush Limbaugh." (Gingrey. American Morning. CNN. January 28th 2009). The division within the GOP was significant, and revealed where power appeared to be concentrated. Being a Moderate meant being polluted. Moreover, it appeared that the electoral loss amplified the conflict.

Stories about partisan politics appearing in the Mainstream Press primarily told a tale of a GOP in the midst of a crisis. Like the congruent stories appearing in the Echo Chamber these articles and broadcasts teased out internal tensions besieging the party. The McCain-Palin ticket

represented the hopes of the GOP before the election. The initial selection of the Alaskan Governor was a risky, but necessary, even if the move as the choice might have sacrificed some cross-party and independent support. It also seemed to have prompted several Moderates in the party to question their commitment to supporting the Republican candidates. Yet, it also appeared to help Conservatives rally around the national ticket. Strains between Moderates and Conservatives might have been inflamed, but the Party as a whole could tolerate if not enthusiastically embrace a McCain-Palin administration much better than they could an Obama-Biden White House. Although the Mainstream Press was skeptical it did acknowledge, almost until the election, that the move had as much potential to help the GOP in as it did to harm it.

With the election over the Mainstream Press took the near uniform position that the choice of Palin by McCain was ultimately unwise. In an immediate sense it had most likely contributed to the electoral loss. McCain supporters questioned his judgment as Palin proved to be a polarizing figure whose competency was regularly called into question. More importantly, the point was made that the loss was part of a larger issue facing the political right. It became clearer that the campaign patched over difference between Moderates and Conservatives, but did not fix them. Not only did the deep seated fissures crystalize they appeared starker than before the loss. For the Mainstream Press the split on the Right appeared to obstruct its ability to be politically functional let alone effective. Democrats and the Left were the least of the Republican problems. The intraparty fighting even made some question the future existence of the Party.

Like the other narratives discussed to this point, the narratives on partisan politics also had the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber draw from the same reservoir of meaning. While elements of stories were resonant their specific adaptation was not. This is consistent with the other narrative categories explored thus far. Within the Echo Chamber, Republican Moderates were

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polluted, and this was done by obfuscating their distinctions with Democrats. For many, they were no different. They had moved the Republican Party from core principles, and in doing so compromised its power. However, the solution to this problem was simple. Re-adopt more Conservative principles, and the party would thrive. The Mainstream Press saw the same rift, but seemed to suggest that the movement towards more centrist positions were all that kept the Republicans electricity competitive.

The internecine conflict suggested two outcomes, neither of which were particularly good for the GOP. When the dust settled it seemed that most agreed the Conservatives would drive the Republican Party further Right. The result of hard line positions could alienate many Moderates making center-right political positions untenable. For similar reasons the national political climate might become more polarized that in turn would stymie effective governing. The GOP might be seen as culpable if that happened.

Narrative 4 - Tone of Political Discourse:

The final thematic narrative emerging from the sampled text featuring Limbaugh centered on the tone of the discourse circulating throughout the official public sphere and its evaluation as to whether it was civil or bellicose. Judgments were made against normative standards bearing a resemblance to Habermas' ideal speech situation. Most evaluations in the news and commentary sampled suggested that public discussion failed to meet these types of expectations. Stories tended to underscore polemic rhetoric used by campaigns, political surrogates, and supports that detracted from open civil discussion. Both the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber raised questions as

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to whether this speech was potentially damaging to open democratic exchange thorough American civil society.

It should be noted that this narrative might better be categorized as a proto-category.[108] This type of narrative appeared with the smallest frequency, and as noted previously only constituted a small percentage of the sampled texts. Yet, it was included because the available data suggested it could be it could be a discreet category since it follows the general semiotic patterns seen so far with the other narratives outlined in this chapter. It was found in both the Echo Chamber and Mainstream Press. As with the other categories each communicated within the same intersubjective framework. In another sense the way communicated content was formulated varied ideologically, but only in regards to the arrangement of elements in a given story not the elements themselves. In other words, Echo Chamber and Mainstream Press told stories that were organized and evaluated differently, but still rested on the same fundamental discursive structure.

Echo Chamber and Political Discourse:

When the narrative appeared in the Echo Chamber it differentiated the temperament of the campaigns and respective supporters from the words uttered from either. Conceding that vitriolic rhetoric might be unproductive and provocative it was not necessarily detrimental to national political discussion. After all, politics is a heated and passionate affair. Perhaps it can be a bit mean spirited, but in the throes of an election cycle drawing to a close it was also invigorating and energizing. Such speech could encourage even higher levels of political engagement as it helped

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[108] Whether or not this category is indeed a proto-category or one in its own right could be verified or disconfirmed with further research. More will be said about this in the final chapter.

excite people about politics. Moreover, this type of public talk was not understood as ideologically specific. Since both the Left and Right engaged in it the overall negative effects were negligible. They further contended that the less extreme voices in each party would both eventually adopt similar positions in this regard, and conjointly denounce such talk if it were to approach a threshold where it could be potentially damaging.

An October 10th segment on Fox News's Special report with Brit Hume effectively captured the sentiment. A panel comprised of Fred Barnes, Mort Kondrake, and Charles Krauthammer all agreed that a recent rash of negative campaign ads had engendered unintended, but not necessarily negative, consequences. They specifically cited the Spanish language ads produced by the Obama campaign linking McCain and Limbaugh.[109] The panel asserted that deceptively pandering to groups, like Spanish speakers, was problematic, but they were quick to note that the ads' provocativeness captured broad attention. This was positive even if the ad was misleading. If Spanish speakers were initially introduced into public discussion through guile it would still ultimately expand the number of participants in public discussion. It could also potentially expose these individuals to alternative ideas instead of those perpetuated by Democrats. The panel concluded that Spanish speakers would not appreciate the ruse, and their support would move toward the GOP.

The panel also discussed speech and public commentary emerging from the Right. It appeared that a visceral and vicious language was surfacing at GOP campaign events. It was unfortunately not uncommon for audience outbursts at McCain and Palin rallies that made accusations of Obama being a closeted Muslim and Islamic terrorist. Racial epithets were also

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[109] This was discussed in more detail earlier in the chapter.

unsettlingly common, as were the several pronouncements to "kill [Obama], traitor, and all that stuff" (Kondrake. Special Report with Brit Hume. Fox. October 10 2008). The panel said that incendiary language of this kind was reprehensible, and could stifle post-election reconciliation. Yet, they also suggested valid points were implied. Although their explanations were not further parsed the panel expressed that there was legitimate concerns with Obama's connections to domestic terrorists and hate groups. More substantive and civil discussion was needed, but this was an understandable expression reflecting populist frustration and concerns.

In another example a January 8th broadcast of the O'Reilly Factor the host was joined by commentator and author Bernard Goldberg. They discussed the merits of using Obama's middle name, Hussein, when referring to him. O'Reilly expressed that there was something "ironic about having just gone to war with an enemy named Hussein, and they (Democrats) are running a guy whose middle name is Hussein" (Coulter. O'Reilly Factor. Fox News. January 7th 2009). They specifically cited comments Anne Coulter had made about being targeted for using the middle name. Perhaps uncouth both saw Coulter as a political satirist, and she was being judged by inappropriate standards. Coulter was simply emphasizing the same point O'Reilly noted.

Goldberg told O'Reilly that he preferred the style of "Bill Buckley, Brent Bozell, who I think is great, Charles Krauthammer, Rush Limbaugh" to the more abrasive style of Coulter, but she should be free to express her opinions however she deems best (Goldberg. O'Reilly Factor. Fox News. January 7th 2009). This was far from hate speech as some on the Left suggest. It did not cheapen or undermine public discourse as they claimed. It was a political polemic not veiled racism. Coulter got people excited, and the only real problem she had was her effectiveness at piercing the thin skin of oversensitive Liberals. This truly was much to do about nothing.

In the few instances where the quality of political discourse dominated discussion in the Echo Chamber there was an acknowledgement of a heightened level of seemingly caustic discussion, but any potential dangerous effects were overstated. With passions amplified because of the election people were primed by this language. If anything it promoted political action. This was most decidedly a positive outcome. Although the comments might be abrasive they were either grounded in concerns deserving of further exploration, or a legitimate instance of political lampoon. Public discussion may be offensive, but it would invariably help prompt legitimate political discussion ultimately benefiting American politics.

The Mainstream Press and Political Discourse:

Evaluations about the civility of political discourse also appeared in the Mainstream Press, and similar to the Echo Chamber was found least frequently in the sample. Additionally elements within the narratives tended to remain consistent regardless of Limbaugh's degree of inclusion. Beyond the similar plot points other congruencies with the Echo Chamber cease. Like the other narrative categories details shifted in relation to the space of ideological production. In this case the biggest difference was the magnitude and quality of the impact of agonistic speech. The Mainstream Press recognized that most political contests seem to unfailingly feature adversarial discourse, but there was something particularly troublesome about of the political discussion this election cycle. The rhetoric was overly acerbic and cruel. For them it was a portent of what was to come.

While guest hosting an October 12th installment of CNN's Reliable Sources Howard Kurtz noted something troubling on the campaign trail. He conceded that no political contest was free of

a "few yahoos and hecklers", but the commentary emerging from segments of electorate seemed qualitatively different (Kurtz. Reliable Sources. CNN. October 12th 2009). Caustic outburst at campaign events were becoming the rule rather than the exception. While this in and of itself was disconcerting what really troubled Kurtz was the campaigns' role, particularly McCain's, in fermenting conditions permitting the incendiary language. Through passive encouragement or willful indifference they failed to counter this troublesome development.

The panel joining Kurtz concurred that this type of behavior seemed to be more prevalent with the McCain supporters vis-à-vis Obama supporters. 20/20 correspondent Lynn Sherr suggested that the McCain camp was most likely hesitant to intercede because of the rocky relations the candidate had with the Conservative base. But McCain was starting to suffer consequences about the outbursts at the events they took attention from the more substantive matters McCain was campaigning on. The Arizona Senator seemed to devote increasing time to rebutting supports while trying not to alienate them.

She noted two instances from the past week where he was forced to respond to outlandish claims from those attending his rallies, and how this took him off message. In one instance a gentleman expressed concerns that Obama was affiliated with domestic terrorists to which McCain responded "he (Obama) is a decent person, and a person you (the person asking McCain the question) do not have to be scared of as President of the United States" (McCain in Kurtz. Reliable Sources. CNN. October 12th 2009). He was immediately met with boos and jeers from those in attendance. Roughly twenty minutes later a woman given the microphone expressed her mistrust for Obama claiming "he is not a …he is an Arab" (Unnamed woman in Kurtz. Reliable Sources. CNN. October 12th 2009). To a slightly bewildered McCain's credit, and Sherr's relief, he promptly grabbed the microphone. In no uncertain terms he told the woman she was utterly wrong.

To the correspondent McCain was losing the ability to define the message of his own campaign, and turning off independents. Sherr closed her vignette, by reinforcing that what troubled her most was that these instance were becoming the norm, and sometimes McCain had let similar comments like those above pass during other engagements. The story was about the language not the candidate's message. More important than the signs of his loss of control over the party was the unaddressed anger underscoring public talk (Sherr. Reliable Sources. CNN. October 12th 2009).

Kurtz did not dismiss the importance of McCain's rebuke, but again raised the central point of the segment. He questioned whether McCain and Palin were "stoking the anger", for whatever reason, to a point where it could provoke serious and uncontrollable reactions throughout civil society (Kurtz. Reliable Sources. CNN. October 12th 2009). Roger Simon of Politico asserted that there was truth to this fear citing comments made by Palin where she, not a supporter, accused Obama of being an unrepentant liar "palling around with terrorists" (Simon. Reliable Sources. CNN. October 12th 2009).[110] With candidates making such remarks Simon told the panel that crowds at rallies calling Obama a closeted Muslim or a terrorist should not be unexpected. The political discussion was purposefully and unwisely instigated by the campaign, and supporters were "only responding to what they have heard from the candidate's mouth" (Simon. Reliable Sources. CNN. October 12th 2009). This anger underscored a darker side of American populism that the McCain campaign seemed to be uncomfortably flirting with. The panel agreed that this would end badly, and would compound an already negative situation for an already polarized country. For them, the odds of reconciliation after the campaign decreased.

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[110] The remarks by Palin were first made the prior week at a campaign stop in Colorado.

The same substantive points were raised again during an October 21st edition of Keith Olbermann's "Special Comment" segment of his MSNBC program. True to form Olbermann was incensed. The McCain campaign has been "dressing up hatred in so-called Americanism", and while he expected some level of vile commentary he was taken aback by what he was witnessing. Those like "Governor Sarah Palin, Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann, McCain spokesperson Nancy Pfotenhaur, and Rush Limbaugh have revealed that there is a measurable portion of this country" that would go to any length to acquire power even if that meant poisoning democratic discussion and sowing irrational fear. He cited numerous occasions where the GOP was questioning the patriotism of the Democrats, and even went so far to slander a venerable Republican statesman when he broke ranks to support Obama (Olbermann. Countdown. MSNBC. October 21st 2008).

Disgusted, Olbermann understood this as politics at its worse. Savaging others as an un-American traitors because of their beliefs or non-support of McCain was not only wrong, but potentially dangerous. Irrespective of outcome Americans would have to come together as a nation after the election, and this posture threatened the dynamics of the democratic transfer of power followed by reconciliation. Olbermann rhetorically pleaded with the Arizona Senator, "…where are you? I disagree with you on virtually every major point of policy and practice. And yet I do not think of you as 'Anti-America'" (Olbermann. Countdown. MSNBC. October 21st 2008). Although he acknowledge that McCain was not personally engaging in this type of speech he still felt the Senator should be criticized for not renouncing it. Silence, in Olbermann's estimation, did not disavow him from this moral obligation. It was an indicator that McCain had either lost control of the party, or he was surreptitiously providing tacit approval (Olbermann. Countdown. October 21st 2008. MSNBC).

In an editorial penned the next day in the New York Times, Maureen Dowd explored the same lack of civility in political discussion. She expressed utter disbelief about the attacks launched from the Right against former Chair of the Joint Chiefs and Secretary of State, Colin Powell, for his endorsement of Barack Obama over John McCain. Even more incredulous were those claiming his endorsement was given for reasons other than the extensive explanation Powell provided during an interview. He summarized his feelings concerning rumors of Obama's faith and ethnicity, his lack of confidence in Palin, and the generally callous tone prevalent in much talk emanating from the GOP. Dowd stressed that Powell could not have been clearer in his reasoning. One may not agree with him, but to challenge his credibility was ridiculous.

Dowd then spoke of one particular instance that Powell said solidified the decision.[111] She wrote that Powell had a "have you no sense of decency" moment in reaction to the criticisms of the endorsement.[112] While Dowd wrote that it was a great relief to see such a prominent figure, and a Republican no less, "push back so clearly on ugly innuendos" the blowback he received was just as vile (Dowd. Move By a Crescent. New York Times. October 22nd, 2008). Although she thought his impassioned plea was more than reasonable regardless of the candidate supported, Powell, for doing no more than speaking his conscience, became a primary target of vitriol engendered by the Conservative factions of the GOP. While other Moderates in the party stood silently. Down concluded that the response of Conservatives to Powell was indicative of a larger

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[111] He described a picture of a woman sobbing at the headstone of Kareem Rashad Sultan Khan, a US Army corporal who had been killed in action in Iraq. The woman in the picture was Khan's mother.

[112] He endorse Obama for a number of reasons he clearly laid out. He publicly criticized the GOP leadership and a litany of its supporters for promoting the idea that being a Muslim and being American are mutually exclusive. Powell was further trouble when this was compounded by insinuation that Muslims are de facto anti-American if not full-fledged terrorists. He saw this poignantly illustrated with the common refrain from certain elements on the Right that claimed Obama is a closeted Muslim. Dowd quoted Powell's moving reflection. When posed the question he said the "correct answer is, he is not a Muslim. He's a Christian. He's always been a Christian. But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer's no. That's not America" (Powell in Dowd. Move by a Crescent. New York Times. October 22nd 2008).

unchecked anger that was now seething from the Right. More than the just the effects for governance after the election, Dowd was disturbed that this could contribute to the de facto erosion of open and free speech. Such attacks could potentially spawn a reluctance for those with differing opinions to engage one another openly (Dowd. Move By a Crescent. New York Times. October 22nd 2008).

One final example from a December 29th broadcast of CNN's American Morning was also an instructive story that highlighted this narrative. Host Kiran Chetry indicated that the negative political discourse produced by the political Right helped seal the GOP's fate regarding the election. For Chetry it also appeared that the Party had yet to learn this lesson. In support of the assertion she cited the campaign of John Bruce 'Chip' Saltsman who was running for the Chair of the Republican National Committee.[113] Normally this election would have generated little fanfare except Saltsman distributed a campaign mailer that include a Christmas CD with a track titled "Barack the Magic Negro."[114] While meant as a joke she noted that it wasn't "striking many as funny", and this included Republicans who thought it hurt the brand of the Party. Saltsman initially defended the song, but Chetry quoted outgoing RNC Chair Michael Duncan who had remarked he was "appalled", and this was another factor contributing to the GOP's inability to "reach out and bring more people into our party" (Duncan quoted by Chetry. American Morning. CNN. December 29th 2008).

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[113] Saltsman was the former national campaign manager for Mike Huckabee, and former Chair of the Tennessee Republican Party.

[114] The satirical song drew on Peter, Paul, and Mary's 'Puff the Magic Dragon'. The idea of a Magic Negro (or Magical Negro) was attributed to a sociologist, and found its way into a 2007 editorial in the Los Angeles Times by columnist David Ehrenstein. From there it was incorporated into the song by conservative political satirist Paul Shanklin, and played repeatedly on the Rush Limbaugh program since 2007.

Chetry was joined by journalist and commentator John Avalon who appreciated Duncan's admonishment of Saltsman, but still held that there was an underlying problem that was not adequately addressed. For him the GOP did not fully appreciate the gravity of the implied message. This was more than a branding issue. Rather it poignantly captured systemic issues besetting American politics. Karl Frisch of Media Matters crystalized the sentiment adding "this type of rhetoric, this type of hate speech and fear mongering, happens every day", and one need not look further than the Echo Chamber to witness it firsthand (Frisch. American Morning. CNN. December 29th 2008).

The general opinion from the panel was that this incident was more than a gaffe or a joke in poor taste. It was a symptom of a festering rottenness pervading the political public sphere. It drew out the worst in the nation, and reduced important political discussion to something uninspired and sophomoric. Without correction this would inexorably hollow out the pillars of open debate, and this meant dark clouds loomed on the horizon of American political culture.

Narratives about perceptions of civility in the public discussion appearing in the sample taken from the Mainstream Press were pessimistic about the impact it would have on American discourse. Unlike their Echo Chamber counterparts, they suggested little good would come out of the current manner by which Americans discussed politics with one another. If anything they offered a cautionary tale where after years of the Right stoking the flames raw emotion was starting to get the better of the GOP. Passionate debate had degraded into vituperative babble. The McCain campaign in particular was accused of being overly timid in not challenging surrogates and supporters to whom this type of speech was overwhelmingly attributed. The only silver lining of the Right's rhetoric was the hope that it was immanently flawed and ultimately self-defeating. With the increasingly acerbic public speech the GOP further exacerbated fractures within its ranks,

and turned off would-be supports. They hoped, perhaps somewhat naïvely, this fire would burn itself out.

The narrative about civility in the political public sphere, like all the other narratives discussed in this chapter, emphasized similar topical plot points in terms of characters and events across the Mainstream Press and Echo Chamber. Irrespective of the ideological disposition of the producing organizing the autonomous discourse at the heart of American civil society emerged in a patterned way. Also like the other narratives the major variation was the ascription of who or what was relegated as anti-civil. One variation was constructed in terms of what the Echo Chamber and Mainstream Press thought the effects of such speech would be. To the former benefits outweighed costs as more people purportedly became involved in the election. For the latter it threatened the ethos of open democratic exchange and political processes. It also appeared that Limbaugh's involvement in any particular story did not alter this dynamic. This again raises further evidence that must be reconciled with questions as to the host's casual role in steering national political discussion.

Narrative and Political Context:

While existing research has focused on structure or action to account for Limbaugh's political influence, the research here is more culturally oriented. Instead of emphasizing what Limbaugh does, or how he is positioned within a mediated political network, it highlighted how Limbaugh is made meaningful in national political discussion. The extant literature acknowledges Limbaugh's presence in the press, but does little to flesh out what forms it takes.

This chapter has added further insight in this regard by analyzing sampled news and commentary Limbaugh was made part of around the time of the 2008 US Presidential Election. In doing so we can better contextualize Limbaugh within the political public sphere noting the specific types of conversations, or discursive spaces, in which he appeared. Studying the cultural dimensions associated with Limbaugh in the political public sphere points to alterative dynamic social processes linking the talk show host to national political life. In turn, new ideas about the constitution and exercise of his influence can be explored.

After a deep reading of the sampled text interesting patterns began to emerge. It seemed that a delimited set of narratives organized stories including Limbaugh. More pointedly, four types of narratives emerged all dealing with important institutions of the American civil sphere. Some dealt with the regulative institutions and focused on the strategies and dynamics of political parties. Others focused more centrally on the communicative institutions of the civil sphere highlighting the role journalism plays as a political institution as well as the civility in the expression of public opinion. In both spaces similar events and actors were covered and analyzed. Common cultural material was drawn upon, and communicative exchange occurring amongst all parties was mutually intelligible.

Yet, two main points of divergence need to be noted. The first was frequency. Narratives appeared at different relative frequency in correlation with the ideological context in which it was produced. This means that although Limbaugh is presented in similar types of discussion in both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press they do occur in different rates. In addition, while the stories had common narrative elements they were evaluated differently between the two. Those textually constructed as protagonists in one story were antagonists in another when an ideological divide was crossed. Likewise events that were seen indicators of positive things to come were

understood elsewhere as negative omens. This suggests that the landscape of national political discussions in which Limbaugh appears in the sample is comprised of intertextual and intersubjective narratives that are thematically linked although not presented uniformly. The specific structuring and evaluation of a given story varied although the narratives organizing them were consistent. The Echo Chamber and the Mainstream press conveyed different interpretations of the same narratives at different rates.

The portion of the textual analysis presented here contributes a potentially revealing snapshot of the political talk show host within the context of the official public sphere. With Limbaugh textually 'located' in the political public sphere we gain a new vantage point to see that he is not only made part of public discussion, but that the discussion he is made part of features particular patterns. Further detail of his ubiquitous presence throughout the press, as noted in existing literature, is sharpened. He is not present in all political discussion. The evidence here suggests the possibility that he is embedded in specific types of discussions. In other words, he is not made part of, or given access to, all political conversations, but rather a more limited subset.

This is interesting because we see resonance in the types of stories he is included in across ideological settings where Limbaugh's influence is not likely the same (i.e. his influence in the Echo Chamber is different from that throughout the Mainstream Press especially when questions of audience and organizational affiliations are concerned). This opens another possibility that his actions, whether by virtue of his position or relationship with the audience, do not play as large of a role in structuring public discussion as previously thought. Despite what press coverage may or may not do for Limbaugh in terms of political legitimacy the analysis presented here helps better connect the talk show host to specific currents of conversations permeating the political public sphere. In doing so it sketches possible boundaries of his political influence.

While findings here are useful to raise additional questions it is important to caution against generalizing at this juncture given the restrictive sample size data is drawn from. Without additional data stretching across time and sources there is no definitive way to draw conclusions concerning the contours of news and commentary Limbaugh is made part of, the space where those texts are produced, and the effects on his political influence. We can certainly begin to develop a picture of this dynamic, but at this point any broad inferences made are speculative. Additional data may in fact reveal that the categories developed here are not stable at other times or in other spaces. In spite of what these findings potentially mean, they cannot be used to definitively speak beyond the collected data.

Research presented here offers additional layers of understanding regarding cultural factors contributing to Limbaugh's political influence. This chapter specified the webs of political stories he appeared in within the collected sampled. This expands current literature on the talk radio host as it tells us something new and more specific about how he is broadly included in the press by specifying how and where. Yet, this does not go far enough. To refer back to the terminology used previously we have asserted that Limbaugh is a cultural object taking form as a narrative 'function'. Knowing what the narratives are provides context, but this does not necessarily in and of itself tell us about the cultural object.

For a moment let us assume the assertions presented here are correct, and Limbaugh is folded into specific types of stories that feature variation of the position of a narrative depending on the ideology of the producing organization while not the narrative itself. Even with this knowledge we would still know very little about how the talk show host is actually constituted as a textual object within these stories. It is one thing to know where and in what types of narratives he is presented in the press. To be sure this is important. In addition it is also helpful to know that

the narratives indicate patterns that varied with the ideology of the producer yet still retained an affinity across mediated spaces. This would still leave us guessing as to how he is made meaningful.

Limbaugh's silhouette has certainly come into better focus throughout this chapter. We can better understand the political landscape he is set against, and with that better model ways the political environment in which he is embedded is important for understanding his political influence. But to better capture *how* he operates as a symbolic function within narratives circulating throughout the public sphere, and in turn develop alternative explanations of the dynamics of his political influence, further analysis is required. This is where we will now turn our attention.

Limbaugh as a Contested Cultural Object:

Existing explanations of Rush Limbaugh's political influence highlight his role as a charismatic Conservative opinion leader, and as a para-party official occupying an important position in the Conservative Echo Chamber. Existing research about the host further suggests that recognition of Limbaugh by the press, particularly outside of the Echo Chamber, supports the process of his political legitimization. Expanding upon this the research presented here offers an alternative, but not mutually exclusive, account. Rather than solely reflect and amplify Limbaugh' influence, the press contributes to symbolically establishing Limbaugh's political influence. Moreover, it does so according to a cultural logic largely beyond instrumental control. When understood as a cultural object as opposed to subject or participant, the press infuses Limbaugh with relatively fixed political meaning. The talk show host is presented as a political signifier, and is in turn inserted into important narrative feedback looks permeating the official public sphere.

The last chapter outlined the general narrative themes organizing the sampled news and commentary. This provided a sense of the political climate within which the stories were written, and therefore the political context he is embedded within. While we cannot generalize beyond the sample at this point the findings force us to consider that Limbaugh's presence throughout the press may be deep, but it is not necessarily broad. We also developed a sense of his centrality to the telling of particular stories. The evidence found in the sampled data suggested that he is more of a secondary function rather than a primary function in most instances. This is important because it supports the notion that Limbaugh's ability to drive public conversation may be more limited than previously thought.

Yet, if we are to further develop understandings of Limbaugh's political influence we need to dig deeper into the text. Knowing the context we can reasonably state that Limbaugh is part of

important discussions, but questions about how he is constituted, as opposed to where he is constituted, in the political public sphere remain. We can see Limbaugh's silhouette against the political landscape. We now need to detail what is within the shadowed outline of the talk host.

This chapter sets out to accomplish that task. A specific type of textual analysis drawing from Cultural Sociology provides the methodological tools to capture his public symbolic signification that is at least in part engendered by journalists and commentators in their writings and broadcasts. Instead of focusing on his action(s) or his position(s) this chapter will analyze how the press textually invests Limbaugh with meaning. Analysis will treat him as a cultural object woven into specific types of national conversations that carries meaning impressed upon it by something other than itself.

This chapter maps the dominant symbolic constructions of Limbaugh in the sampled texts. Understanding the talk show host as a constructed cultural object rather than as a mediated political actor opens alternative possibilities for thinking about his political influence. Moreover, this allows analysts to consider how the cultural structures shaping his influence do so in concrete ways. Whether he is taken up as the topic of discussion or casually interjected as a tangent the press engages in one expression cultural politics fastening chains of meaning to Limbaugh. His corporeal self is transformed into a set of political signifiers. The added information generated here will help make current research on the talk show host more robust. In addition to knowing who and where he is we can add the symbolic dimension of what he is. Findings can also potentially contribute to existing work on similar types of public figures (i.e. other political entertainers) embedded into the political public sphere.

Semiotic Chains:

This research asserts that Limbaugh is a cultural object serving as a narrative 'function' within stories generated from news and commentary circulating throughout the political public sphere. In this capacity his corporeal self is reconstituted as chains of symbolic meaning. This means the talk show host operates as a signifier as much as he acts as a sentient political actor. It is this symbolic dimension of the talk show host that is an important but understudied component of his political influence. Just as stories in the previous chapter colored the political context in which Limbaugh was found, these signifiers will color the talk show host himself.

Within the sample texts collected four patterned signifying chains consistently emerged. They were prominently featured throughout both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press. The way meaning was employed varied, but in a manner similar to what was previously found with the variation of narratives. He might be evaluated differently in the Echo Chamber compared to the Mainstream Press, but the signifiers were regularly invoked by both.

Within the sampled texts Limbaugh was signified as a political *icon*, a political *leader,* a political *expert,* and a political *entertainer.* When considering the sample as a whole each category constituted roughly 48%, 31%, 12%, and 8% of the sample texts, respectively. This is telling because it reveals something the extant literature comments on as an important self-reflexive action that Limbaugh draws on as a discursive shield. Although he consistently claims he is an (a political) entertainer his words seem to fall on deaf ears. The press appeared to articulate a different image of the talk show host despite his claims.

Another interesting finding emerged when the sample was segregated by ideology. The rank order of the frequency of the signifying categories did not vary between Mainstream Press

and the Echo Chamber. The former, when compared to the sample as a whole, described Limbaugh with iconography in 36% of occurrences, leadership in 22% of occurrences, expertise in 13% of occurrences, and as an entertainer in 4% of occurrences. When the Mainstream Press was analyzed independently these categories maintained the rank order appearing in 48%, 29%, 13%, and 10% of instances, respectively. Somewhat surprisingly, the Echo Chamber seemed to share this affinity with the Mainstream Press. When compared to the sample as a whole Limbaugh was treated as an icon in 11% of instances, a leader in 9% of instances, an expert in 4% of instances, and an entertainer in roughly 1% of instances. The same rank order appeared in Echo Chamber news and commentary with the category of icon comprising 44% of texts, leadership as 38% of texts, an expert as 15% of texts, and as an entertainer as 4% of texts.

So whether we consider the sampled texts as a whole or more narrowly within ideological groupings Limbaugh seemed to be invoked in similar patterned ways. With the important caveat that this was an extremely small sample size the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press looked similar in this regard. Again, the evaluations of Limbaugh's qualities in any one of these categories varied between the two journalistic spheres, but the ostensible ideology of the producer did not appear to alter the relative frequencies at which the categories were deployed. The same signifiers at the similar respective ranks appeared consistently throughout the sample. Moreover, the press seemed to cast Limbaugh as an entertainer most sparingly.

This should peak interest especially when taken in light of the existing research concerning Limbaugh. Previous scholarship rightfully points out how Limbaugh is treated more sympathetically within than Echo Chamber vis-à-vis the Mainstream Press.[115] For instance, it is

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[115] Jamieson and Cappella (2008) most forcefully make this point. See chapter two.

not unexpected that the former would evaluate Limbaugh as a 'good' leader with the latter declaring him a 'bad' leader. Similarly, it would be expected for the former to cast him as an icon of something positive while the latter does the opposite. What is missed in these accounts is the observational evidence that notes the same set of symbolic elements are ubiquitously used irrespective of ideology. Since the extant literature did not perform deeper reads of the news and commentary in which Limbaugh appears it does not pick up on the consistent use of symbolic elements tied to Limbaugh. The ubiquity of resonant signifying categories in the sample texts suggest that both ideological camps draw from the same discursive well as was the case with the shared narratives.

This is an important initial piece of evidence supporting the idea that cultural structures help define Limbaugh's political influence. In a loose analogy to Saussure's concepts of *langue and parole* the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber may configure articulations of the signifying categories differently (parole), but the discursive structure underpinning those utterances engender similar conventions and constraints on both (langue) independent of use. There is a consistency in terms of what Limbaugh 'is' that is autonomously structured and cannot be reduced to ideology, action, or position.

Differences in the respective rank of signifying category only emerged when the sample was further segregated by degree of inclusion.[116] Consider the Echo Chamber. When he was a primary object of a story Limbaugh was exclusively described in terms of political leadership, and this consisted of roughly 2% of total texts for the sample (9% compared to the Echo Chamber

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[116] As we discussed in chapter three the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' inclusion in a text is a description of whether Limbaugh as a cultural object was a 'cardinal' or 'catalyzer', both narrative functions. As a primary / cardinal function he is necessary for a story to be told. As a secondary / catalyzer function the story would be intelligible regardless of the inclusion of the talk show host.

alone). As there were no instances of icon, expert, or entertainer in Echo Chamber texts where he was a primary object, the frequencies at which Limbaugh was constituted as each are identical to the Echo Chamber frequencies listed above. This meant that Limbaugh as a leader moved position relative to other categories when functional depth was considered. Although this sample is too small to draw conclusions it has traces of a pattern we find elsewhere.

Analysis of the Mainstream Press revealed a similar pattern along with the benefit of comparatively more data. An alteration in the rank of signifying category stands out when the distinction is made between primary and secondary functionality. When a primary object in the Echo Chamber and compared to the sample as a whole leadership occurs roughly in 3% of texts, with icon and expert approximately 2%, and entertainer slightly over 1%. When looking at the same metric, but within the Mainstream Press the figures change slightly. Leadership constitutes 4% of the sample while all other categories represent approximately 2% of the collected texts. Still these are very small numbers, but we do see traces of a pattern emerge from the collected data.

While we still cannot generalize beyond the sample the pattern is bolstered by what is found in Mainstream Press and Echo Chamber stories incorporating Limbaugh as a secondary function. Compared to the whole sample rank order changes in the Echo Chamber when he is introduced in a secondary fashion to icon (34%), leader (19%), expert (8%), and entertainer (6%). The Mainstream holds this pattern when compared to the sampled as a whole with frequencies of 45%, 25%, 11%, and 8% respectively.

Stories produced in the Echo Chamber or the Mainstream Press featured a consistency in the application of symbolic categories. It seems as if the centrality of Limbaugh within a given story is related to a change in how he is made politically meaningful rather than ideology. In news and commentary where he is a primary figure leadership is the predominant category. When a

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secondary figure his ascription as an icon is most prominent. It is important to mention again that these ranks stay the same regardless of the ideological orientation of the producing organization, but vary along with his degree of inclusion.

While any findings are clearly limited by the small sample size the pattern beginning to take shape is noteworthy, and can be used as a spring board for further work. This is especially important since none of the existing literature on the host surveyed for this project asked any questions about the press texts themselves, and offered sparse research methodologies capable of making this type of distinction. Limbaugh's presence throughout the press is more nuanced and textured than the current work suggests. Without a deep read of the texts sensitive to this type of variation the similarities between the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber would remain hidden. By bringing this type of detail to the fore empirical observation can be made in a way suggested by the culturally based theoretical model developed in this research. The idea that cultural dimensions of the talk show host play a role in establishing, rather than reflecting, the dynamics of his political influence gains increasing traction. Because these processes happen largely outside of Limbaugh's control, we are forced to consider new avenues for studying the talk show with respect to his political influence.

Here the "strong" program of Cultural Sociology demonstrates it value usefulness. To fulfil the requirements set forth by the "strong" program a more detailed account of the mechanisms in the text are needed; the categories described above must be empirically recreated with a deep read to attain this goal. Doing so will help better identify how Limbaugh is constructed, woven into the official public sphere, and comes to be broadly regarded as politically influential in an American context. Again, this in turn will add to our understandings of why he is an important figure in American political culture, and perhaps allow comparisons to other political entertainers to be

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made. A detailed reconstruction of the autonomous cultural logic underpinning these four signifying categories will show how Limbaugh is 'made meaningful'. This is where we now turn our attention.

Limbaugh as a Political Leader:

Rush Limbaugh's ability to influence various political actors, processes, and debates is a central descriptor that emerged from the sampled text. His actions were stressed in press accounts in ways resonant with several analytical descriptions of power. These conceptualizations of his exercise of power shared an affinity with sociological definitions of power (Bierstedt 1974; Marger 1987; Mills 1956; Weber 1948).The talk show host is broadly credited throughout the sample as a legitimate political authority who can demand the right to be obeyed, and his 'actions' are capable of steering political outcomes.

In the broadest sense the talk show host has the political capital to compel the actions of others. He is credited with directing the political activities of his audiences, and at times political elites. Other accounts narrow this focus to highlight how Limbaugh places constraints on others, namely politicians, through threats of coercion or promises of positive inducements. He can provide support, or have his audience deluge a political actor with criticism. His ability to reward or punish as described by journalists also shares similarities with sociological work that has researched similar forms of political power (Galbraith 1983; Held 1972; Marger 1987; McIntosh 1972). Journalists also noted how Limbaugh's power drew from the networked connections linking him to prominent political and media actors and organizations. At times his position affords a status where clear distinctions from politicians is not detectable. News and commentary featuring this

dynamic came closest to extant work specifically aimed at studying Limbaugh's political power (Jamieson and Cappella 2008), but is discussed more generally elsewhere (Bauman 2001, 2005; Castells 2007, 2011).

In these ways the press built an image of Limbaugh as an actor that can rightfully demand others obey his directives, and one whose actions have important political ramifications. Although these attributes were common throughout all of the sampled text the particular configuration of meaning varied. While the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press share the sentiment that Limbaugh *is* a leader there are important distinctions made as to the kind, type, or effect of his leadership.

Leadership and the Echo Chamber:

Sample texts collected from the Conservative Echo Chamber casts Limbaugh as a *reluctant* leader pressed into service as the traditional political institutions of the Right failed. A modern Conservative Cincinnatus, the talk show host fortified and defended the integrity of the political Right and the Republican Party when the official leadership became ineffective or absent. Prior to the election his voice was understood as one bringing a fractured Party together. After the election he was purportedly one of the few forces keeping the Right from completely fragmenting. In these instance Limbaugh is more than a titular authority. Even when not at the vanguard, the host leads from the rear. His support is crucial to those seeking office, or those already holding office that would like to continue doing so.

Symbolically affixing this meaning was often accomplished by inserting Limbaugh into networks of political elite. Sampled newspapers, magazines, and television news and commentary

positioned Limbaugh alongside, and at times interchangeably with, prominent politicians and other leaders. An observer not familiar with American political culture might very easily mistake Limbaugh for a Senator or GOP official. Metaphorically surrounded by major political players Limbaugh is treated as 'one of them'. This is true for texts where Limbaugh is a primary cultural object as well as those where he fulfills a secondary function.

Attributions of Limbaugh's leadership was in part established by recounting those who publicly invoked or challenged him. Consider a January 26th broadcast of Fox's Hannity. Hannity commented on a speech given by President Obama to GOP lawmakers where the former beseeched the latter not to become beholden to people like Limbaugh. Ascribing a specific set of meanings to the President's comments Hannity lead the broadcast with "it's Obama versus Rush with the President telling the GOP to ignore Rush if they want to get anything done" (Hannity. Hannity. Fox News. January 26th 2009). Karen Hanretty, a political and media strategist and blogger with the *Hill.com* echoed his remarks. For her the take away from the President's speech to opposition lawmakers was somewhat paranoid. She then added that Obama must think Conservatives everywhere are "sitting at home with their little tinfoil hats, with their ham radios waiting, you know in the middle of the night for Rush, you know to beam his marching orders" (Hanretty. Hannity. Fox News. January 26th 2009).

To be sure the comments were tongue in cheek. Yet, the subtext created a textual position where Limbaugh performed as Obama's principle political adversary. This effectivity shut down alternative interpretations of the event, and highlighted the connection between Limbaugh and the President. Although the talk show host was only mentioned once by the President, this became the focal point of the exchange on Fox News. Obama's broader drive for bipartisanship was background. It was the perceived conflict between the two that mattered.

Both Hannity and Hanretty generated an image of Limbaugh as one taken seriously by major political players. If this were not the case, both seemed to reason, the President would have no need to single out the talk show host when speaking to the Republicans. In other words Limbaugh was an important leader because his primary rivals are powerful political leaders encouraging others not to follow the talk show hosts directives or example. Overly suspicious, they irrationally obsessed over the talk show host's influence, but in doing so intimated the extent of Limbaugh's political reach.

Similar dynamics were found elsewhere throughout the sampled Echo Chamber texts. The same day as Hannity's broadcast Jay Nordlinger of the *National Review* published an article also recognizing Limbaugh as an important leader on the political Right. He too constructed a textual image of Limbaugh as Obama's principal political rival in the opposition. For Nordlinger the President's comments were not all that peculiar. When set in a more expansive context it was clear to Nordlinger that Limbaugh had frequently been in this position.

Recounting Obama's endorsement from Colin Powell, he pointed out that Limbaugh was also singled out by name when the former Secretary of State explained why he crossed party lines. It was a clear sign for the writer that this indicated the abdication of Party leadership by those considered Republican institutional stalwarts. With a lack of endogenous GOP leadership the columnist asserted that Limbaugh was able to expand his role beyond the base. Leaders of both parties felt strong enough to speak directly about the talk show host, and this spoke volumes. The current dust up with Obama, especially when seen in light of past events, was "proof that Rush is the leader of the opposition" (Nordlinger. In Their Heads. National Review. January 26th 2009).

Other Echo Chamber texts offered additional examples of presenting Limbaugh as possessing leadership qualities and properties. They drew on similar mechanisms for establishing

him with this classification. His proximity to prominent politicians, whether rivals or allies, translated into an important marker of political influence. Emphasizing his contentious relationships with political opponents, and concurrent lack of GOP leadership these stories expanded upon cooperative associations between the talk show host and political leaders. If that was not possible they focused on his ability to dominate Republican politicians.

For example, Obama campaign spokesperson Robert Gibbs joined Chris Wallace during an August 24th airing of Fox News Sunday. While the discussion centered on the strategic maneuverings of the McCain and Obama campaigns Limbaugh was interjected into conversation when the specific topic turned to the vice-presidential candidate selection, particularly the GOP's. Gibbs spoke about McCain's seeming ambivalence about a running mate. According to the Obama spokesperson the self-labeled "maverick" claiming to put principle above party, despite his predilections to select a Moderate more reflective of his views, would not do so. Instead Gibbs insisted McCain would select a staunch Conservative as an act of contrition to the GOP base.

Of note was one of Gibbs's reasons as to why McCain would act in a calculating fashion rather than make a selection based on (his) principle(s). Telling Wallace that voters "turn on that radio in the afternoon and Rush Limbaugh commands 'John McCain, you're not going to pick a pro-choice vice president'", Gibbs conveyed that the Arizona Republican faced significant political pressure from the talk show host who could ostensibly direct large segments of the party to withhold support (Gibbs. Fox News Sunday August 24th 2008). Equally telling, Wallace offered no challenges or alternative explanations that might otherwise contradict Gibbs's claim. At the very least the Fox News anchor tacitly agreed that Limbaugh possessed enough political capital to pressure McCain into compliance.

Other sampled texts constructed Limbaugh's leadership more passively. In these instances this was not Limbaugh's direct actions, or the actions of others directed towards Limbaugh that were used to explain his political authority elsewhere. Rather it was his companionship with elites. A month after the Republican National Convention that made Gibbs' prediction look somewhat prescient, Mona Charen writing in the National Review offered another mechanism contributing to an understanding of Limbaugh's role as a Conservative power broker.

Charen focused on a speech given by Michelle Obama in Council Bluffs, Iowa where the future first lady commented on her fears about the corporeal danger she felt was directed towards her husband. She was scared because this kind of visceral anger was directed to other candidates. The trepidation, Obama claimed, was rooted in broader endemic national issues that have to do with identity, and global affairs. Charen quoted Obama as saying she was "tired of living in a country where every decision we've made over the last ten years…was because people told us we had to fear something" (Obama quoted in Charen. Michelle Obama's Fearful Vision. National Review Online. October 7th 2008).

Charen took exception with Obama's comments calling them "cynical". She retorted that Obama was a misguided and poor student of history. Sardonically she wrote, "Right, there was no unprovoked attack on American civilians killing thousands…There was just a concerted effort by Dick Cheney, Rush Limbaugh, and Donald Rumsfeld to make us fear people" (Charen. "Michelle Obama's Fearful Vision". National Review Online. October 7th 2008). Americans, she claimed, had good reason to be afraid. Moreover, over-sensitive Liberals must move past there misplaced outrage, and see the world for how it is.

Limbaugh's leadership is insinuated, but this time by his shared company rather than his adversarial relationships. Think of the discursive position in the text he occupies. He is named

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along with a sitting Vice-President and a former Secretary of Defense. As none were distinguished by title, nor was there any mention of role within the administration, there is little in the text itself to differentiate Limbaugh from high ranking officials working directly under the President. Even if his coupling with the specific politicians is arbitrary it is still powerful. These are individuals whose careers have spanned several administrations, and who have spent considerable time within the upper echelons of political elites. Even though Limbaugh is not a necessary part of this conversation in one sentence Charen establishes a semiotic equivalency between him, and two individuals whose influence over US politics is indisputable. Presupposing the primacy of the text, no information is provided to suggest Limbaugh is anything but an important national political leader.

Echo Chamber texts constructing Limbaugh as a leader of the political Right tended to do so in one of two ways. In one sense his leadership was qualified through his rivalries and entanglements with prominent politicians. He was presented as a tried and true political combatant important enough to be singled out. Although Democratic rivals were more frequently featured there are instances of an antagonistic relationship between Limbaugh and GOP officials and office holders. On the other hand, Limbaugh was also rendered as a leader through association with high ranking GOP politicians. These associations lacked the inimical features presented elsewhere, but still highlighted where in the political field Limbaugh is located in relation to powerful political officials. Although a direct naming of Limbaugh as a leader was not expressed his influential role was obliquely implied through discursively constructed relationships of correspondence.

Leadership and the Mainstream Press:

The sampled texts from the Mainstream Press also presented Limbaugh as holding an important, if unofficial, leadership position within the GOP. They too expounded on his connections with elites. Yet an important difference appeared between the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber. Far from a reluctant leader emerging at a time of need, the Mainstream Press painted the talk show host as acting with instrumental motivations, and his dominance on the right carried significant risk for the GOP as well as the nation as a whole. Although not necessarily malevolent Limbaugh was certainly portrayed as cunning and calculating. Far from begrudgingly filling a void in leadership the talk show host was opportunistic, and looking to impress his version of Conservatism upon the GOP regardless of its ultimate impact. In short, the quality of Limbaugh's leadership was understood differently.

In one example Democratic National Committee Communications Director Karen Finney and Republican strategist Ron Christie joined Chris Matthews on MSNBC's Hardball. A question was posed about the political purchase of politicians tagging Limbaugh as the "ringmaster of the Republican Party" (Matthews. Hardball. MSNBC. January 30th 2009). The question, in part inspired by Obama's speech to Republican Congressional leaders shortly after the inauguration, was indicative of a more general trend Matthews believed permeated the political public sphere. Politicians had elevated Limbaugh to a de facto political leader. Because it was expressed by dominant actors in the field as real the political capital Limbaugh possessed was real too. In turn how he used that political capital had consequences that could have vast ramifications for American politics.

Finney suggested that treating Limbaugh as a Republican leader was not a tactical move on the part of Democrats to foster bi-partisan support. Making the talk show host appear as an

extreme element Moderates should be wary of was not the path Democrats had taken to foster relationships across the aisle. Rather it was an acknowledgement of an already existing truth. The talk show host was already a leader on the right. She went on to note that a casual political observer might find it curious that in response to Obama's proposed stimulus package House Minority leader "Boehner and Rush Limbaugh said the same thing…there was a straight-line vote" (Finney. Hardball. MSNBC. January 30th 2009).

The GOP leadership and the talk show host were in sync. The strong resonance between the purportedly distinct Republican Party leadership and Limbaugh was manifested in action taking place on Capitol Hill. Christie extended Finney's assessment that Limbaugh's position as a 'legitimate yet unofficial' party leader was authentic. The strategist further suggested that this went beyond affinities with the GOP's leadership, and was evident in the action of the regular audience of his program. For him Limbaugh speaks on behalf of "tens of millions of Americans who are tired of President Obama" purportedly after the latter's first week in office (Christie. Hardball. MSNBC. January 30th 2009).

The radio host's authority rested on his role as a populist leader further supporting his position as a Republican elite. The image of Limbaugh was reinforced as Matthews recapped the two guests' statements concluding the conversation. Despite a lack of official standing Limbaugh was an important leader on the right, and Matthews captured the point when rhetorically asking Christie and Finney who they thought in the GOP is "playing the clarinet and who's playing the tuba? I would say that you (Finney and Christie) are agreeing that John Boehner is playing the clarinet, and Rush Limbaugh is playing the tuba" (Matthews. Hardball. MSNBC. January 30th 2009).

The orchestral metaphor is revealing. Clarinets are more plentiful, and have an extensive history in most symphonies. By comparison tubas are generally fewer in number, and are a relatively recent musical addition in such arrangements. Yet, they produce powerful tones, and uniquely contribute to the soundscape. The analogy suggests Boehner is no doubt important. But he is only one of the traditional leaders on the right whereas Limbaugh is a leader of a less traditional sort, and this allows him to stand out. As such the talk show host is indisputably recognized as a major political player exercising influence in away sharing important affinities with the GOP leadership. The reporters and commentators on the segments agreed on the assessment. A relative rank can even be discerned as he is symphonically imbricated with congressional leadership. He is a decision maker amongst decision makers, and a unique one at that.

Similar dynamics emerged in other stories even when Limbaugh played a relatively diminutive role. He was again described as an entrenched member of a ruling cadre steering the GOP. This is intimated as he is set as a peer amongst other GOP leaders, and party leaders are reportedly steered by his influence. Take a late August example from CNN's Newsroom. Anchor John Roberts was joined by several commentators discussing a widening gap between Moderate and Conservative wings of the GOP. McCain's campaign made it a priority to bridge the chasm. His selection of Sarah Palin as a running mate was a "bold" move aimed at satiating the Conservative base of the party that had a contentious history with McCain. Over the course of conversation Limbaugh's name was interjected as Robert's noted his "active role in trying to convince John McCain not to choose somebody like Joe Lieberman or Governor Ridge", two centrists whose names were circulated as possible running mates (Roberts. CNN Newsroom. CNN. August 29th 2008).

In this example even the passing inclusion bestows the sense that Limbaugh is a major political actor whose influence permeates the highest levels of the GOP. According to Roberts, Limbaugh's opinion mattered enough that the heir presumptive of the Republican Party considered it in his decision making process. There is a notable lacuna in specific terms of attribution about the *causes* of influence, but this omission might speak "louder" in silence. With the presumption of already existing power there is little need for the journalists to specifically challenge the assertion of his sway over McCain. Its existence is asserted, and it is later the selection of Palin was used as ex post facto evidence. The implication is that it is not necessary to explain his influence, but rather it is important to speculate on its effect. By not explaining 'why' or 'how' Limbaugh is politically important the question of 'if' he is in fact political influential is precluded from discussion.

This presumption was seen throughout the sampled text after the election as well. A January 14th Washington Post article was particularly telling. Limbaugh was instilled with an aura of leadership through a close association with politicians of the highest rank. In the waning days of his administration President Bush commemorated world leaders he considered supportive of his administration's policies and initiatives in a White House ceremony. Covering the event Manuel Roig-Franzia wrote that Bush addressed an audience that included "Rush Limbaugh, Vice President Cheney and a whole lot of "formers" – former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, and former Secretary of State Colin Powell" (Roig-Franzia. Bush Awards Medals of Freedom to Three Allies. The Washington Post. January 14th 2009).

This not atypical passage contained several striking features. For one, Limbaugh, a talk show host, was a guest of honor among international dignitaries and officials with long active

careers in high offices. No other non-government actors apart from Limbaugh were mentioned. The synchronic comparison also created an affinity between Limbaugh and these politicians. He is not distinguished from them in any discernable fashion. There is an essence of assumed naturalness in Limbaugh's grouping with these individuals.

As if his inclusion was not enough there is another important point to make about the order of presentation. Although the article was clearly not about Limbaugh, or American politicians for that matter, Roig-Franzia introduced the talk show host first. This is significant in that Limbaugh was positioned as a first among equals, so much so, he was introduced before the sitting Vice President. To an uninitiated reader there are no contextual clues suggesting Limbaugh is anything but an important political leader. For those reasonably more familiar with Limbaugh (e.g. Roig-Franzia) the lack of differentiation between him and the others is a de facto ascription of his political status.

Similar to the Echo Chamber the Mainstream Press frequently presented Limbaugh as a political leader in cases irrespective of his inclusion as an object of discussion. The main difference here is one of the quality and impact of leadership. Unsurprisingly Mainstream Press articles and broadcasts, highlighted with the examples above, listed towards the anti-civil side of American political discourse. The reluctant leader of the Echo Chamber transitions into a domineering, competitive, and strategically motivated political boss. When his motivations were elided the most distinct feature of his leadership is the imperceptibility of distinguishing rank difference between himself and powerful politicians.

Limbaugh's Leadership and the 2008 Election:

In the brief glimpse of the American political landscape during the 2008 presidential election captured in the sampled texts Rush Limbaugh was often presented as a political leader. News and commentary from both the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber drew upon the relationships between Limbaugh and national political elites to enchant the former as ostensibly one of the latter. The connections suggested the talk show host possesses stores of political and social capital giving him a form of public authority. This is also suggested as an important source of his influence in light of his lack of official standing. Opponents and allies alike recognize his sway over Conservatives, and his ability to leverage that capability to pressure others operatives in the political field.

Both the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber drew upon the same set of circumstances to craft this textual image of Limbaugh. While evaluations of quality differed both communicated his political authority by emphasizing his relationships with other national leaders. In some instances the connections were seen as antagonistic, and these moments were detailed. In others Limbaugh relationships to political leaders were considerably vaguer, but also relatively devoid of contention. Regardless, they all signified that Limbaugh was a leader not to be trifled with.

Variation within this narrative was seen across ideological divides. Although both the Echo Chamber and Mainstream Press stressed Limbaugh's leadership they differed on its quality and impact. Within the Echo Chamber Limbaugh acted as a leader of last resort steering the wayward back to the Conservative fold. His prominence on the national scene was due in large part to the ineffectiveness of official party leaders. At times he seemed to have acted as the key bulwark resisting Democrats. Moreover, the fact that Democratic leadership appeared to be fighting with Limbaugh more than GOP officials reinforced this image. In other instances journalists highlighted

his associations with key leaders on the Right. Limbaugh was indiscriminately inserted into a groups of Republican leaders where a clear differentiation of position is not ascertainable. In both cases Limbaugh is treated as a political leader that the GOP desperately needed for the party to stay committed to core principles.

From the perspective of the Mainstream Press Limbaugh was not stepping into a vacuum. While his contemptuous relationship with Democrats was recognized these articles and broadcasts seemed more interested in highlighting Limbaugh's connections with other Republicans. If anything he used his podium to hamper efforts of Moderate in an attempt to refashion the GOP in a more Conservative image. Journalists also noted Limbaugh's shrewdness in these maneuvers. His ability to exploit a cleavage in the Republican coalition allowed him to draw authority from the Conservative base to pressure party leadership when needed. Some GOP leaders had evidently internalized this. Whether it was the selection of a running mate or a vote on national economic policy Republican elites appeared to capitulate to his demands. The Mainstream Press and Echo Chamber crafted a public image of Limbaugh as a leader, albeit a different type of leader.

Current social scientific literature on the talk show host stresses his leadership qualities, but explains its dynamics as the result of connections to political and media networks, and active political audiences. The extent of journalism's involvement is to reflect and legitimize these factors. Here leadership is developed discursively, and those factors, while present, are re-imagined as elements built into narratives circulating throughout news and commentary. Moreover, the press contributes to the creation of this understanding. The research here does not contravene the findings of the extant analysis, but does suggests that other components to his leadership exist. Limbaugh may very well be, or act as, a leader, but by only studying this important cultural pillar of his leadership is absent. The importance is amplified in that the cultural

forces operate mostly outside of Limbaugh's control. This potential insight compliments existing

literature on the talk show host by developing an explanation of his leadership through a symbolic

process.

Also of note is the frequency of occurrence of this particular signifier. For the Echo

Chamber the invocation of signifying chains connoting leadership were the second most frequently

category used in the sample. Interestingly, the same pattern held in the Mainstream Press. Like its

counterpart, it also deployed the leadership category second in terms of overall frequency. This is

important to consider because it indicates another point of departure from the current research

about the talk show host. Much of the research talks about Limbaugh's political influence as solely

attributed to his exercise of leadership. With that said, the predominant signifying category

ascribed to Limbaugh by both the Echo Chamber and Mainstream Press texts collected in this

sample suggested that public understandings of Limbaugh conceptualize him as something other

than a leader. This next signifying category is where we now turn our attention.

Limbaugh as a Political Icon:

One of the central issues introduced in this work is that much of the extant literature does

not engage thoroughly enough with the press texts including Limbaugh, and therefore misses

important dimensions of his political influence. Although we cannot generalize beyond this sample

at this point Limbaugh was not presented as a leader, or even an actor, the majority of the time.

This merits further discussion since it was unexpected to find this in the corpus given what we

currently know. Within the sample Limbaugh was invoked by the press as a leader about 30% of

the time. Putting that another way, nearly 70% of the sampled text were comprised of instances where Limbaugh was described in alternative ways.

The most common frame constituting nearly half of the sampled texts constructed Limbaugh as the symbolic embodiment, or *icon*, of the American political Right. In a very really sense the talk show host is recomposed in the press as a reified instantiation of political meaning. Limbaugh the individual is transformed in this process into Limbaugh the political emblem. He is modeled into a symbolic form resonant with concepts developed by sociologists studying religion and politics. In many of the collected texts Limbaugh was presented as something akin to a "ritual implement engraved with abstract totemic designs" (Bellah 2006 152). He was invoked as a type of American political shorthand. The sample suggested that his name pointed towards or stood in for particular constellations of political ideas, practices, fields, and collectives.

There were three major ways through which Limbaugh was portrayed as a political symbol in the sampled text. First, Limbaugh was described as the archetype of what a political talk radio commentator should be. Limbaugh became the common reference for political talk radio in the United States. Second, the sampled texts reinforced work done by Jamieson and Cappella (2008), but with a twist. Although it was clear that Limbaugh was an instrumental part of a Conservative Echo Chamber he also signified it. In other words, there was an emphasis on how he represented the mediated political institution. Third, Limbaugh is used as a reference to a broader confluence of political ideology and party. He comes to represent a particular faction or segment of the coalition constituting the Republican Party. These three dimensions created a constellation of signification through which Limbaugh became a commonly used and intersubjectivity understood political symbol. These three interpretive schema were common to both the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber.

Iconography and the Echo Chamber:

Within the Echo Chamber the textual construction of Limbaugh as an icon in the first two senses listed above appeared in several instances. In an October National Review column editor Kathryn Jean Lopez ruminated on the news media's (i.e. Mainstream Press's) treatment of John McCain after his selection of Sarah Palin as a running mate. What happened was clear. In order to undercut the powerful Conservative message and enthusiasm Lopez insisted the Alaskan Governor brought to the ticket the press, that had traditionally gotten on relatively well with him, turned on McCain. Invariably the problem of bias would cloud national discussion as negative opinion of the Republican ticket was passed off as reported fact. There would be few places for voters to receive objective news.

Luckily, there were some alternative media spaces that could push back. One was the program hosted by Limbaugh, the "one-man alternative to the mainstream press" where a more balanced assessment of the McCain campaign, and politics more generally, would indeed be found (Lopez. McCain vs. the Media. National Review. October 2nd 2008). In this instance Limbaugh was described as a certain type of media platform. Furthermore, this platform ostensibly puts forth information voters could trust, and would hence allow them to make knowledgeable electoral decisions. Being compared in this way engendered an image of the talk show host as symbolizing an ideologically cohesive media platform.

During a January 26th edition of Fox's Hannity the anchor posited that the return of the Fairness Doctrine was all but certain. The broadcast addressed the potential negative impacts that the policy would bring. Joining Hannity was regular Fox News contributor Bernie Goldberg who

explained to the host that the Obama administration would most likely use the measure as a powerful political weapon aimed at silencing the opposition. It would be a legislative gift delivered by a sycophantic Congress controlled by Democrats who deified Obama. One leading voice within the Echo Chamber, Rush Limbaugh, would have a particularly large target pointed on his back, and would serve as its whipping boy. Even though the legislation was not aimed at "you (Hannity) or Rush personally" it was certainly aimed to neutralize what "you and Rush represent", the heart of American Conservative media (Goldberg. Hannity. Fox News. January 26th 2009).

During a broadcast of Hannity's program two days later the same topic about the Echo Chamber and the Fairness Doctrine arose again. The most popular voices on the Right, the "Conservative media personalities like Rush Limbaugh, the great one, Mark Levin, and little old me" would be effectively forced from the air. In turn these individuals would just be the beginning. If anything the targeting of the Conservatives hosts with the use of the Fairness Doctrine was a spring board Democrats would use to launch a broader attack on the American political Right. In addition the tactic would gin up contributions by supporters since alternative information would no longer be available. This would in turn be used to expand the base of Democratic political power (Hannity. Hannity. Fox News. January 26th 2009).

In a similarly themed article appearing in the National Review Peter Ferrara argued that the Fairness Doctrine would weaken the important role of oppositional voices. He referred back to Obama's speech to Congressional Republicans. Obama's singling out of Limbaugh was merely the opening salvos in what he convinced would be a showdown over the re-adoption of the Fairness Doctrine. For Ferrara the specific invocation of Limbaugh by Obama revealed the latter's "thinking about talk radio … (and) indicates how much trouble Obama thinks talk radio is for his agenda, which may mean that his interest in using the Fairness Doctrine to shut it down will be

high" (Ferrara. The Constitutional Right to Listen. National Review. January 28th 2009). [117] We again see how Limbaugh stands in for the media channels talking, format, and opposition.

Limbaugh was used as a signifier in a similar fashion elsewhere. Consider a January 31st edition of Fox's News Watch where a panel discussion began with a focus on President Obama and the talk show host indirectly trading bards. The story was then placed in the broader context revolving around the Obama's attempts to reach out to Republican members of Congress upon his assumption of office. The panel reasoned Limbaugh was a target for the President because of what he represents. Limbaugh was the face of "the Conservative media", and apparently was perceived as a greater threat to the administration than Congressional Republicans. Contributor Jim Pinkerton continued by citing Limbaugh as the one of the "smartest, most articulate voices" of world of Conservative media. He serves as a standard for all other talkers to be compared to. The conversation pivoted to the possibility that the administration would reinstate the Fairness Doctrine effectively silencing him, and those like him. By focusing on Limbaugh, Obama showed his intentions. It was becoming more clear that the President hoped to push some "sort of local content provision for talk radio … doing their best to diabolize...the people who are walking the plank" for the Conservative media (Pinkerton. Fox News Watch. Fox News. January 31st 2009).

The above broadcasts and columns taken from the sampled text shared a clear common resonance, and exemplify the textualization of Limbaugh as an icon for Political Talk Radio, and the Conservative Echo Chamber. He embodied a set of politically oriented media organizations. The name of talk show host took on qualities of a neologism analogous to 'Xerox' being used as a synonym for 'photocopy'. Limbaugh was a reification of the Echo Chamber. He, was an icon

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[117] To date this has failed to materialize in any significant way, legislatively or from executive order.

used interchangeably with right leaning media institutions. A homology between the talk show host, and Conservative media was established.

This drives at the heart of what the Echo Chamber most frequently associated with Limbaugh. Other symbolic associations in this subset of the sampled text were muted. Put another way, the Echo Chamber generally used the talk show host as an icon of itself. What we do not see is the widespread application of Limbaugh as representative of other political facets beyond the communicative institutions of the political Right. As we will shortly see, Limbaugh's iconography is still dominant in the Mainstream Press, but it is applied more broadly.

Iconography and the Mainstream Press:

The Mainstream Press also textually constructed Limbaugh as a political icon. Like the Echo Chamber it is also the most prevalent of the signifying categories found in the sample. While both share an affinity for constructing the talk show host as a vessel of political meaning more often than a corporeal actor a difference emerged in the sampled Mainstream Press texts. Whereas the Echo Chamber constructed the host exclusively as a signifier for Conservative media or talk radio the Mainstream Press offered other connotations. It added a distinctly political dimension not found in the Echo Chamber. In particular the Mainstream Press texts sampled used Limbaugh as a signifier for a particular faction of the GOP that professed a specific type of Conservative ideology. Moreover, the Mainstream Press was less than hopeful about the impact this faction would have on the future of the GOP and American politics more generally.

Consider the following use of Limbaugh as an icon from a January 28th taping of MSNBC's 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The segment focused on Obama's and Limbaugh's indirect verbal

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joust set off by the President's comments to Republican leaders. The segment tied in a related heated exchange between Limbaugh and Congressman Phil Gingrey (R-GA).[118] Hosts David Schuster and Chris Matthews quipped that both instances were important because they demonstrated Limbaugh's influence. They noted the power of political talk radio, particularly his ability to engender an active conservative audience. Shuster still specifically pointed out how Limbaugh was a symbol for the Echo Chamber using language similar to those visited in the previous section. For him Limbaugh was the boldest and most recognizable of the "voices of the Conservative movement's conscience" (Shuster. 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. MSNBC. January 28th 2009). He is a Conservative siren.

The connotations associated with Limbaugh as an icon expanded in other texts sampled from the Mainstream Press. Again, he became more than the personification of a media institutions. Limbaugh came to be an icon for the Conservative wing of the GOP. Consider an instance from an October 9th broadcast of MSNBC's Countdown. Commenting on the purportedly growing rifts within the GOP NBC contributor and chief political correspondent of Newsweek, Howard Fineman, told host Keith Olbermann about two varieties of Republican he understood as competing for dominance of the Party. On the one hand there were the "'Georgetown cocktail party set', the cherry sippers, if you will, the George Wills, the David Frums" while on the other there were the "red-meat-on-the-open-pit kind like Rush Limbaugh" (Fineman. Countdown. MSNBC. October 9th 2008).

Fineman was hardly alone in deploying Limbaugh metonymically. During a Thanksgiving weekend edition of the Chris Matthews Show NBC Washington Bureau Chief Mark Whitaker was

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[118] See chapter 4 for an elaboration of the event to the extent it involved Gingrey.

featured in a discussion about the Republican resistance to nearly all Democratic initiatives proposed by the President-Elect. He suggested that a nation weary of economic crisis and Middle Eastern wars were discouraged that attempts at collective solutions were seemingly undermined by a faction of the GOP. While party moderates seemed prepared to work across the aisle, and facilitate the legislative process during the transition of administrations they were prohibited from effective political action by the Conservative base. Congressional members in "what you might call the Rush Limbaugh wing of the Republican Party" seemed poised to stymie legislative progress at all junctures (Whitaker. The Chris Matthews Show. NBC News. November 30th 2008).

The above examples are indicative of the collection of stories that emerged from the sampled Mainstream Press texts where Limbaugh was constructed as a symbol for Conservative elements of the Republican coalition rather than an actor actively steering it. His actions were clearly still important, but what mattered most in these examples was that he was its public visage. Limbaugh was an avatar of the Conservative base of the GOP. The Mainstream Press constructed him as a referent for its most contentious elements that struggled with party Moderates as much as Democrats. Limbaugh was compared with leading thinkers on the Right who were likewise used to encapsulate the other side of the intragroup power struggle. Limbaugh represented a populist, aggressive, petulant, and, for some ultimately self-defeating, faction in the GOP compared to Moderate Republicans.

Other examples reinforced similar iconic associations. During a January 30th broadcast of MSNBC's 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue David Shuster speculated that the political outreach to the GOP from the Obama administration could alternatively be understood as a calculated maneuver aimed at further exacerbating rifts inside of the Republican Party. Obama's comments about the talk show host in particular were an indication Democrats were "eager for Rush Limbaugh to be

the face of the (Republican) party" (Shuster. 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. MSNBC. January 30th 2008). The only concrete action in this particular broadcast is on the part of the Democrats, not Limbaugh. It was the association between Limbaugh's presumably extreme positions, and the internal strife besetting the Republican Party taking center stage. Shuster made other allusions supporting Limbaugh's emblematic status. Beyond Obama's pleas to Congressional Republicans other Democrats followed suit in other press engagements where they too attempted to "paint the picture Republican Party as being Rush Limbaugh" (Shuster. 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. MSNBC. January 30th 2008).

The above quote is particularly notable for two key words. The first is the idea of 'painting' Limbaugh as if he were a picture. The statement does not convey a sentiment of interest on the part of Democrats concerning Limbaugh's actions. Yet they do seem concerned with developing a public image of him, and in turn linking the image to a restive, uncompromising, and obstructionist faction of the GOP. After all a picture is a visual representation of a creator's attempt to craft some message for a later receiver through a visual medium. A picture may be of a person, but it is not a person in and of itself. [119] Second, Democratic attempts to transfigure Limbaugh into "being" or existing as the "face" of the Republican Party is also instructive. Powerful symbolism is at play as this is one example of a person becoming a banner of a political organization. Limbaugh was dissociated from his individual self, and his name, so the Democrats hoped, would signify the elements of the GOP responsible for the intransigence they feel the opposition is practicing.

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[119] This is true even if the message is 'there is no message' (ala René Magritte's Trahison des Images)

In a subsequent segment of the same broadcast this theme appeared again. Here Limbaugh, in a discussion of the future of the GOP, was juxtaposed with newly elected national chair Michael Steele. Joining Schuster for this part of the program was former Congressional Harold Ford, Jr. (D-TN). Reinforcing his understanding of the political strategy of Democrats attempting to reinforce wedges between different factions within the GOP he added that Limbaugh and Steele "represent two different aspects and dimensions of the Republican Party. The question that many Republicans (will confront in the 2010 midterm elections is) … who will represent, which face, which voice, which message will be the predominant one?" (Ford, Jr.. 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. MSNBC. January 30th 2008).

Although Steele, an elected GOP leader, was being compared with Limbaugh, the comments imparted a heavy sense of symbolism in that their actions were not stressed. Rather it was important Ford communicated that these two individuals "represent" a different "face", "voice", and "message" competing for dominance. To reiterate this is not a discussion about political action. It is about the meaning given to Limbaugh to help identify the ideology of the segments seeking control of the GOP.

Unlike existing literature commenting on Limbaugh's political influence the take away from this group of sampled text is that in these instances the Mainstream Press suggested the talk show host was an icon. He did not necessarily do things, but he did represent things. The Mainstream Press is where Limbaugh arguably has the least amount of control over what is most often communicated about him. Yet, it is precisely here that he was regularly heralded as a banner of the Conservative base of the GOP. Importantly, this appeared to emerge from forces well beyond his control as the talk show host cannot dictate the writings and utterances of journalists and commentators.

An "Iconic" Limbaugh:

Sampled news and commentary partially capturing the American political environment in the fall of 2008 incorporated Limbaugh into national public discussion in an important way largely unremarked upon in the existing literature. Both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press invoked Limbaugh's name as an 'acoustic image' signifying several principle components of American political culture. In this way it was not Limbaugh's actions that were necessarily important. Rather, Limbaugh was textually designed to instantiate types and forms of civil institutions. Borrowing from Durkheim, Limbaugh became a ubiquitous political sigil that was the "product of a collective elaboration" (Durkheim 1912 434).

In this sense action and networks are not the source of his political authority. The basis of his influence rests in what he symbolizes. Metaphor, allegory, and simile created equivalences between Limbaugh to specific Conservative elements part of American civil society. While variation existed between the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press it differed from the type of variation observed in the previous section on leadership. There was a different emphasis on just what type of civil institution Limbaugh best characterized, and was less concerned with whether any of his actions were positive or negative.

Within the Echo Chamber the talk show host was described as an incarnation of two interrelated dimensions of communicative institutions of the civil sphere. On the one hand Limbaugh embodied political talk radio. He defined the genre, and in large part continued to serve as its most recognizable brand. This was true in regards the broad adoption of the model of his

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program, as well as the particular flavor of politics it featured. In a more expanded sense Limbaugh was also the personification of the Echo Chamber within which much of political talk radio exists. He and his program were said to be crucial pillars in the mediated political network. Limbaugh was a manifestation of these communicative spaces. The ultimate impact of his presence in national political discussion is reflective of this construct. He represented the spaces of engagement of lively political discussion.

The Mainstream Press conceptualized Limbaugh symbolically too. Here the press equated Limbaugh more so with regulative civil institutions rather than communicative ones. Instead of portraying him as talk radio, or even the Echo Chamber, Limbaugh was reified as the Conservative base of the Republican Party. The Mainstream Press used Limbaugh as an encapsulation of this political faction, and juxtaposed him with signifiers of Moderate Republicans and Democrats. Various political rivalries and power struggles were represented with the talk show host denoting the specific types of political ideologies and organizations. News and commentary inserted him to anthropomorphize the totality Conservatives battling non-Conservative both inside and outside of the Republican Party. He was a voice or a face of the Conservative movement, and a wing of the GOP. Limbaugh the person took on immaterial political qualities making him an important symbolic vessel of American Conservatism.

The sampled text from the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber anchored to the 2008 Presidential elections both drew upon Limbaugh as an important political icon. Each differed on exactly what the icon was designed to reference, but textually constructed the talk show host as some type of civil institution none the less. Whether a communicative institution like a media network or a regulative institution like a political party Limbaugh's influence was tied to what he

represented rather than what he did. Each cast Limbaugh as something immaterial yet political powerful.

Two important things need to be noted. The first is the ubiquity of this signifying category's presence, and the discursive mechanisms supporting it irrespective of ideology. The construction of Limbaugh as a political icon occurred most frequently throughout the sample. This was true for both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press. When Limbaugh was included in news and commentary both sculpted him as a political metonym. In other words, when the talk show host was introduced into public discussion captured in the sample he was most often used as a vehicle to communicate some more nuanced set of ideas or events. In addition, we can further understand Limbaugh as a type of political cultural synecdoche. The press collectively uses his name to invoke political talk radio, the Echo Chamber, and the Conservative base of the GOP. Limbaugh is clearly imbricated within them all.

Something else also stands out, and this prompts us to reconsider the data in light of existing literature on the talk show host and his associated political influence. The idiomatic use of Limbaugh throughout the sample as a political symbol shifts attention away from his actions. Whereas extant literature has almost universally reflected upon the importance of Limbaugh's actions, the data collected here suggests the press may very well construct the meaning of his political influence another way. The most prominently featured signifying category in the sample text illustrated Limbaugh not as a political actor, but as something more ethereal.

Limbaugh as a Political Expert:

A third signifying chain emerging from the sample texts discursively rendered Limbaugh as a political expert. It is helpful to specify what is meant by the term as used here. Political experts are public actors possessing or claiming to possess some sort of institutionally legitimized and specialized knowledge that offers a unique vantage point from which to analyze and critique topical happenings throughout the political public sphere. They are widely recognized as being relied upon as stores of specialized erudition that clarify complicated matters pertaining to political practices and institutions. They are expected to demystify the political world. In doing so they are understood as playing a role in shaping it, or at least translating between those actors and organizations with some stake in the social fields of action comprising it (Bauman 2002, 2003, 2005; Beck 1992; Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1990).

However, expert knowledge is not simply accepted at face value, and when making claims experts are open to being publicly challenged. When credibility is called into question expert opinions can be treated sardonically by other official voices in the public sphere. The outcome of these challenges carry the potential effect opposite of what a given expert ostensibly hoped to accomplish. They run the risk of misinterpretation, or leave their statements subjected to mistaken assessments (Giddens 1990 82-84). If so any future analysis is potentially compromised, and the expert is more susceptible to dismissive ridicule. Limbaugh is credited with possessing, or accused of feigning specialized knowledge about media and politics. The press's constructs resonate with current literature on Limbaugh to the extent it recognized an ability to share specialized commentary on the "minor and major events of political and social life", and to have those pronouncements accepted as legitimate (Jamieson and Cappella 2008 230).

When brought into press accounts in this way Limbaugh distills and assesses political events. What is interesting about Limbaugh's case vis-à-vis other experts is his qualifications for

dispensing expert opinion. Limbaugh's biography would belie any notion that his expertise comes from institutional training in the academic world. It does however reinforce a narrative of a pragmatic instruction in the radio industry. A high school graduate with little more than a year of undergraduate education he initially entered into the world of radio as a music DJ and a sports commentator in the 1970s.[120] It was not until the mid-1980s that he began broadcasting in the world of political talk radio, and it would take until the end of the decade for his radio program to become nationally syndicated. The two decades that would follow made him a unique addition to national political discussion. These facts should not be construed by any means as discrediting the value of his opinions, or his place in national discussion. It is merely to point out the criterion which allows the press to consider Limbaugh as an expert rests on a unique standard. His expertise arises from his place as the most popular political talk radio personality in the country, and his informal, but pragmatic, training in broadcast.

With this background a convincing argument can be proposed that Limbaugh can rightfully be understood as an expert of sorts regarding the media. He has had nearly thirty years of experience on national talk radio which cannot and should not be discounted. Politics is different. It is reasonable to assume that Limbaugh has developed his expertise namely from his relatively long engagement with politically oriented discussion which has brought him into contact with political actors, organizations, and ideas. But as we will shortly see Limbaugh's expertise is a double edged sword. While in certain spaces in the political public sphere it is accepted as conservative gospel in others the talk show host's expertise is challenged. Yet, in all instances his opinions receive serious consideration.

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[120] Paul D. Colford. *The Rush Limbaugh Story: Talent on Loan from God: An Unauthorized Biography.* New York. St. Martin's Press, 1993 Rush is Always Right." USA Weekend, 24 – January 26, 1992, p. 7

Expertise and the Echo Chamber:

Like the other categories discussed so far there are specific mechanisms used to position Limbaugh as an expert. Take for example a September 4th broadcast of Fox's On the Record with Greta Van Susteren. Broadcasting from the Republican National Convention in Saint Paul she conducted three interviews designed to explore the implications of the events for the upcoming election. In the opening to the program Limbaugh was introduced. He was followed by political consultant Karl Rove, who was in turn followed by Former House Speaker, and now political consultant, Newt Gingrich.[121]

Even before moving to the interview we see an interesting dynamic unfolding. Limbaugh is set against other public figures who were also called upon to provide political expertise, but are situated in different places in the political field. While the expertise of Rove and Gingrich are drawn from different wells they are both within the field of politics. They are not certainly not political entertainers in the sense applied to Limbaugh throughout this research. It is also important to note the order of introduction. Even though Limbaugh lacks Rove's years of advisement experience in Texan and national politics, or Gingrich's academic training or years in government he was still introduced first. Similar to the textual mechanisms used to establish leadership, he is again a first amongst equals.

Unlike the other expert guests Limbaugh did not possess experience as a political operative, politician, or pundit. Although he had extensive experience in political talk radio resulting in an impressive audience in terms of size and activity, the one qualifier Van Susteren offered when

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[121] In the broadcast Limbaugh's actual interview was sandwiched between Rove's and Gingrich's

introducing him, his expertise was the thinnest amongst the three. There were questions about media where one can reasonably assume he possessed some specialized knowledge, but even those touched on subjects outside of his professional purview. They dealt with normative features of political journalism, something he speaks to from a position external to journalism.

It is also important to look at the conversation itself for further evidence. What was unique to this signifying category and exemplified here was the latitude Limbaugh was given throughout the interview. Van Susteren's appeared to abdicate any pretense of critically facilitating a discussion. It is less important to consider how Limbaugh responded, and instead emphasize the implications of Van Susteren's questions. For instance, querying, "Rush, what do you think of (McCain's) speech tonight?", as well as seeking his opinion concerning "the public treatment, at least the media treatment, of Governor Palin in the past couple of days" engendered an expectation that the talk show could provide authoritative rather than conjectural answers. Questions were not limited to the GOP or the Convention. Susteren also asked him if he thought Obama's selection of Biden as a running mate was a "good strategic choice" (Van Susteren. On the Record with Greta Van Susteren. Fox News. September 4th 2008). The Fox host performed the limited role of choosing terse and open ended questions affording the radio host relatively free rein to loquaciously answer.

Despite a lack of political credentials Limbaugh was offered a spot during primetime on a major cable news network. More pointedly Van Susteren's iterative exchange with the talk show host indicated an expectation regarding his expertise. She retroactively justified it by asking him his thoughts on matters where he lacked experience. He is called upon to provide insight into the happenings related to the Convention, something he has only known as a party outsider. Van Susteren's silence also signifies. Between readings of the mise-en-scène and actions of the

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convention, the association with other guests, as well as how questions were posed implied an expert status. Never once are his credentials or previous declarations called into question let alone critiqued.

Another instance where this dynamic occurred was during a January 21st broadcast of Fox News's Hannity. The host asked Limbaugh to comment on the newly inaugurated President Obama's prior voting records in both the Illinois and US Senates, as well as purported relationships with "past radicals" (Hannity. Hannity. Fox News. January 21st 2009.). Hannity also asked him other questions concerning the implications of Obama's proposed policies. Limbaugh predicted their imminent failure because of the utter lack of Conservative principles in the pending legislation. The television host then asked Limbaugh to comment on the "cult-like personality or you use the term 'messiah, the anointed one' … this Obama worship syndrome" purportedly pervasive on the Left (Hannity. Hannity. Fox News. January 21st 2009).

Just as with the Van Susteren program, Limbaugh's appearance on Hannity further suggested that the Echo Chamber treats Limbaugh as a credible political expert. In this example Hannity again opened the floor to Limbaugh, so what is often dialogue on the program took the form of a monologue. The broad latitude afforded the guest offered ample opportunity for prolix responses. Hannity let Limbaugh speak without once challenging or critically reflecting any of the assertions he made in his analysis. He simply accepted the claims made at face value. By parsing these out of the sampled text it appeared that Limbaugh's expertise was cobbled together.[122]

For another example consider a column by CNBC host and WABC commentator, Larry Kudlow in a January edition of National Review. Kudlow castigated Obama's stimulus package

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[122] Hannity did however offer something unique that was not found on Van Susteren's program. He asked Limbaugh to comment on his own past comments. If anything, Limbaugh should at least be an expert on his own words.

that had recently passed in the Congress without any Republican support. Given his background as a government and private economist prior to his role as a commentator it is not surprising that Kudlow would write about these matters, offer his opinions on them, and have that come across as credible, if not agreeable, to others. To reinforce what a terrible idea the stimulus was, how broadly it was hated, and what harm it would bring the economy he drew upon a variety of sources that included opinions of economists, sitting politicians who had participated in the vote, pollsters studying public opinion on the matter, and curiously Limbaugh (Kudlow. Shelve the Stimulus. National Review. January 29th 2009).

In the sea of experts that included presidential economic advisors, Federal Reserve board members, and academics the talk show rounded out authoritative sources of knowledge on these matters with Limbaugh. He referenced a column the radio host had written in the Wall Street Journal. The somewhat tongue-in-cheek suggestion of the proposed "Limbaugh Plan" was that the total amount of the stimulus bill should be split along the proportions of the popular vote in the past presidential election. Kudlow was amused, but conceded it was not practical. Yet, Kudlow agreed and defended Limbaugh's "clever idea" as something that can be extrapolated from, and built into tax policy (Kudlow. Shelve the Stimulus. National Review. January 29th 2009).

Again, elements in the text support this reading. Not once was Limbaugh differentiated from the other experts featured here. Interestingly he was the only person throughout the entirety of the article to not be introduced with a title making it easier to assert his qualifications. While not confirming his standing as an economic expert of any stripe it is also not questioned. Surrounded by experts, Limbaugh was seamlessly woven into the discussion on the economy and economic policy.

In the preceding examples the talk show host was effectively constructed as a political expert through a variety of overlapping cultural mechanisms that articulated his meaning in the sampled texts. The Echo Chamber casted Limbaugh as authority capable of providing illuminating opinion on topical matters of American politics. Although comparisons with others were still present he was generally provided with considerable latitude to speak on myriad topics some of which fell outside of his professional purview. When featured in the broadcasts Limbaugh seems to have performed dutifully as an expert, but without the others, as well as scripts followed, this would be problematic. In print this dynamic also worked much like it did with the other signifying chains. Limbaugh was often embedded with others who could more reasonably claim expertise concerning a given subject. Yet, Limbaugh was juxtaposed with experts by other experts.

Once occupying the position Limbaugh ideas were qualified as good or helpful. But his background, past record of analysis, and foundational assumptions and orientations were never questioned. He and his ideas are taken at face value, and they were used to spurn further discussion. Commentators introduce Limbaugh's political assessments without asking critical questions, and lack of context is common also through this group of Echo Chamber texts. Short-circuiting a discussion on whether or not he is, or should be, an expert the Echo Chamber's textual indicators suggested Limbaugh is an expert in some capacity.

Expertise and the Mainstream Press:

The casting of Limbaugh as an expert took a considerably less sanguine tone in the Mainstream Press vis-à-vis the Echo Chamber. Emphasis was not placed on the expertise he dispensed, but rather his motivations for doing so. A perception of insincerity shadowed many of his remarks, and his antagonistic demeanor undercut points he publicly made. Yet, many times

after pointing out these problematic issues his ideas were still analyzed in a somewhat serious manner. In other words, after describing how his expertise was suspect because of his perceived intentions and actions, as well as an erroneous (and at times purportedly irrational) understanding of political matters, Mainstream Press stories considered the merits of his ideas nonetheless. Even though he may be criticized Limbaugh was still discursively treated as an expert.

Take for example a January 30th broadcast of CNN's now defunct Campbell Brown: No Bias, No Bull. The host began the segment with "This quote from, Rush Limbaugh today that's getting a lot of attention, The Wall Street Journal: 'Tax cuts are the surest and quickest way to create permanent jobs. We know that when tax rates are cut in a recession, it brings an economy back.'" (Limbaugh. No Bias No Bull. CNN. January 30th 2009). Senior Business Correspondent Ali Velshi commented on remarks Limbaugh made concerning economic policy aimed at mitigating the effects of the Great Recession. In response to Obama's campaign promise to let the "Bush" tax cuts expire for the top five percent of income earners Limbaugh called for across the board tax cuts with the most dramatic applied to businesses and high income earners. Velshi acknowledged the talk show host was a leading proponent of this general sentiment towards this form of taxation, but he challenged its practicality. He concluded that Limbaugh's economic proposal would not sufficiently help the ailing economy. Limbaugh in turn lambasted Velshi as an "incompetent" and a "pretend" business reporter during one of his subsequent radio broadcasts (Limbaugh. No Bias No Bull. CNN. January 30th 2009).

Brown invited Velshi back on the program to respond. Two utterances that closed the segment are integral to the establishment of Limbaugh's expertise in this instance. Brown said that Limbaugh might very well be making a "legitimate case" about the tax cuts, but the "histrionics and name calling" detracted from a useful public debate (Brown. No Bias No Bull. CNN. January

30th 2009). The comments questioned Limbaugh's rationality, and suggested he seemed to be acting on emotion. Yet, her contention ultimately stemmed from the polemic dramatics he used, and not from the substance of the position. The implication was that if he simply got past the ad hominem his expert opinion would be taken in a more serious manner.

A subsequent set of statements made by Velshi reinforced the merits of Limbaugh's 'tax plan', and hence his expert opinion. He made several points about the technical limitations of Limbaugh's economic suggestions. He also situated Limbaugh's arguments in historical context, and suggested that they may have been applicable to other economic downturns. What transpired at the time was a unique economic crisis, and therefore the same rules could not be applied. Still, Velshi never questioned Limbaugh validity to authoritatively speak on economic matters. This contributed to the tacit recognition of Limbaugh's legitimacy for speaking about such topics. The talk show host's ideas were not the problem, and they were treated as carrying merit. Velshi's biggest critique, along with Brown, was that Limbaugh needed to alter his presentation.

Other stories in the Mainstream Press offered markedly less derision of his expertise, and when it was present it was communicated in more subtle ways. The primary impact of the change in tone meant that Limbaugh's comments should be at least be taken under consideration. Despite some of his more radical claims his political assessments should be included in political debate. In fact, in many instance it was Limbaugh's commentary and critique that offered a spring board for further conversation.

Take another example from an August 19th broadcast of the Situation Room. Anchor Wolf Blitzer began a segment by playing a clip of a comment Limbaugh made concerning the "Civil Forum on the Presidency" also known as the "Faith Forum" that both candidates had participated

in.[123] Reflecting upon the meeting Limbaugh suggested McCain stood at crossroad in terms of hot button issues raised, particularly abortion and same sex marriage. He went further saying the Arizona Republican could choose a moderate as a running mate (i.e. prochoice and relatively accepting of some official status for same sex relationships), but this would "obliterate all the success and all the progress" he had made with the Conservative base as a result of his performance during the Forum (Limbaugh. The Situation Room. CNN. August 19th 2008).

Blitzer was joined by Michael Gerson of the Washington Post and the Council on Foreign Relations who agreed with Limbaugh. He too thought McCain had earned some "political capital with…pro-life conservatives, and … (that could be) very easily squandered with the wrong choice (of running mate)" (Gerson. The Situation Room. CNN. August 19th 2008). Another guest, USA Today Washington Bureau Chief Susan Page, echoed Gerson and Limbaugh. If McCain chose a moderate it would "cost him a lot in terms of enthusiasm of the people he really needs" to win the election (Page. The Situation Room. CNN. August 19th 2008).

The segment is revealing for several reasons. To start, Blitzer drew on Limbaugh's unfiltered opinion to prompt a larger discussion about the importance of social issues, and the potential pitfalls facing McCain in his selection of running mate. Blitzer did not critically assess Limbaugh's comments instead taking them 'as is'. In doing so Limbaugh's opinion was validated. More importantly, two credentialed guests brought on the program not only accepted the talk show host's opinion, but in their expert opinion they agreed. They explained why the argument was rational. This created a situation where there is little to differentiate the talk show host from other

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[123] See Chapter Four for details on the event.

experts, either by association or views introduced. Those with specialized knowledge for analyzing politics established in more traditional forums offered the same insight as the talk show host.

Consider another example. Shortly after Obama's inauguration Chris Matthews hosted a segment on economic policy with specific focus on TARP and Obama's supplemental ARRA.[124] Congressional members Phil Gingrey (R-GA) and Robert Wexler (D-Florida) were guests during the broadcast promoting predictable stances along party lines.[125] After presenting their respective opinions on how the legislation would work (or not work) Matthews asked both members about comments made by Limbaugh where the talk show host suggested that Obama's proposal was politically, rather than economically, motivated. Paraphrasing from an interview Limbaugh gave in National Review, Matthews said that the aim of the economic package was to engender support for the Democrats by "exempting the people at the economic lower end from paying any federal taxes for decades to come" (Matthews. Hardball. MSNBC. January 26th 2009). Both Representatives stated they disagreed with Limbaugh's comments, and it was not the case that the legislation was a masked political ploy aimed at ensuring party loyalty.

The exchange created an additional understanding of the importance of Limbaugh's public opinions. In this highly charged environment two sitting members of Congress having a discussion on a complicated set of economic policies took time to respond to Limbaugh's viewpoints on the legislation. They took time to parse his analysis, and never once questioned his expert opinion let alone the legitimacy of his presence in the conversation at all. To viewers Limbaugh was recognized as offering analysis that civil leaders would consider even if they disagreed.

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[124] TARP – Trouble Assets Relief Program; ARRA – American Reinvestment and Recovery Act.

[125] For Wexler the package was a necessary combination of spending and tax relief that would address many of the simultaneous crises facing the nation. Supporting spending cuts Gingrey worried that spending in the plan was considerably too high, and tax credits would go to individuals who do not currently pay under the existing tax system rather than going to those who do. For him the package would not do enough to effectively stimulate the economy.

Another instance emerged when former first son, Ron Regan, joined anchor Kiran Chetry during a December 2nd broadcast of CNN's American Morning. The topic the two discussed centered on Obama's selections for cabinet posts. During the campaign the President elect championed bi-partisanship. After the election he said the composition of his cabinet reflected his willingness to work 'across the aisle'.[126]

Chetry played a small clip from Limbaugh's radio program where he gave his take on Obama's motivation for the appointments. For him it was an intriguing move of political cunning. Notably, the selection of Hilary Clinton was on the one hand a tithing to the party establishment yet simultaneously an effective way to neutralize a potential Democratic rival. Chetry asked Reagan if there was purchase in "Rush Limbaugh's argument that this is really a Machiavellian move" (Chetry. American Morning. CNN. December 2nd 2008). Reagan flippantly replied that sometimes it "seems everything is his idea sometimes. But the reality of it is…it was a brilliant move" (Reagan. American Morning. CNN. December 2nd 2008).

This particular instance follows similar patterns as those adumbrated above. Cherty prompted conversations on Limbaugh's comments that are specific assessments and evaluations of political actions and policies. The guest, who is also a political talk radio host, affirmed the substance, if not the originality, of Limbaugh's statements. He in effect said that Limbaugh is correct in suggesting the President is filling appointments for his political advantage. Throughout the remainder of the segment no other specialized opinions on the matter were introduced. Another point of resonance this shared with other examples mentioned in this section was the lack of

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[126] Many Republicans were pleasantly surprised that Obama's cabinet was bi-partisan, and comprised of established political figures. It was his Democratic base that expressed the most skepticism about his selection which included former Bush official, Robert Gates, Democratic Party stalwart, Hillary Clinton, and former Federal Reserve official, Tim Geithner.

discussion concerning Limbaugh's qualifications for making his statements. Additionally, there was no interrogation as to how Limbaugh drew the conclusions.

In the sampled Mainstream Press texts Limbaugh's expertise was presented as an important part of discussion. It may be challenged, but sharp ridicule is blunted. The talk show host was treated as a legitimate expert whose opinions are valid although perhaps disagreeable. The foundations of his knowledge were noticeably missing as was accounts of the formulation of his reasoning. However, with few exceptions, there did not appear to be instances in the sample stories of trying to undermine or challenge Limbaugh's opinions. His statements were considered, and evaluated by others who have stronger claims to specialized knowledge pertinent to the topical public discussion. In short, these texts take positions that may diverge from Limbaugh's assessments, but they do not seem to discount his standing as a political expert in making them.

An "Expert" Limbaugh:

Some of the news and commentary mentioning Rush Limbaugh sampled during the time period immediately preceding and following the 2008 election presented the talk show host as a political expert. He was described in both the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber as a possessor and professor of specialized and professional knowledge relevant to national political discussions. Reporters and commentators imparted an understanding of the talk show host where he was amongst the voices demystifying complex and often obfuscated political happenings. His ruminations about policy, motivations of politicians, and the cadence of public opinion are the accepted object of his analysis. The sampled text from both the Mainstream Press and Echo Chamber incorporated Limbaugh as a source of germane information suited to dissect a mediated

political world. While all do not necessarily agree with his prognostication there seems to be general agreement that his opinions are at least worthy of reflection.

There are important dynamics shared by the Mainstream Press and Echo Chamber regarding how Limbaugh is textually constructed as an expert. Both discursively qualified him as an expert by associating him with other credentialed experts. At times Limbaugh was cast with others who can be reasonably regarded as having experience or knowledge pertinent to discussion. Little effort was made to distinguish between each contributing party. His opinions were given and evaluated alongside the others. Both the Mainstream Press and the Echo Chamber also had other experts reflect upon Limbaugh's assessments and analysis. Even if they took divergent positions those with specialized knowledge diverted time and energy to respond to the talk show host's expert contributions.

Another important point of resonance between the two mediated political networks was something about which both were silent. In the instances where Limbaugh was invoked as an expert there was a marked absence of offering how or why the talk show host qualified as such in the first place. Whether his analysis were accepted at face value or challenged Limbaugh's standing to make these types of public assertions never became the subject of debate. There was no apparent bar to the designation of expert, no application of minimum standards, or discussion of credentials. For all intents and purposes Limbaugh's expertise was presupposed. There was no attempt to explain its basis, and there was a noticeable lack of voices raising any challenges. Even his more tongue in cheek statements were described as having some underlying value.

Existing research suggests that Limbaugh is in part an expert in the eyes of his audience. Researchers report that the audience treats Limbaugh as an opinion leader who interprets current events as well as the Conservative ethos (Barker 1998a, b, 2002; Barker and Knight 2000;

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Hofstetter 1996; Hofstetter, Barker, et. al 1999). Yet, similar to journalists the research does not offer an explanation of Limbaugh's expertise outside of his role as an opinion leader. Again, expertise is a social designation rather than an ascribed status. This research presents Limbaugh as an expert in a way this is similar to findings presented in the extant literature, but a different explanation as to why is offered. If the cultural framework is used we can begin to discuss how different interpretive communities struggle over the right to define him as an expert.

A point of departure from existing literature is what the data here suggested about the intensity and dispersion of the recognition of his expertise. If in fact the press reflects Limbaugh's already established attributes, and his expert evaluations are a central component of his attributes, then it is curious why there was relatively limited use of this signifying category by the press in the sampled text. Compared to the signifying categories inferring Limbaugh's leadership or evoking his symbolic qualities commentary insinuating his expertise was found in relatively short supply. The extant literature would suggest more coverage of this category should be found in the data. If we understand news and commentary playing a productive role in establishing Limbaugh as an expert of sorts, the literature providing the analytical frame of this research opens the possibility that current conclusions drawn about his expertise need to be revisited.

Limbaugh as a Political Entertainer:

A fourth signifying category also emerged from the sample. Even with a limited frequency of appearance in the sample this chain of signification is still important to note. Much like the other signifying categories it appeared in regularized patterned ways within both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press. Recognition across the ideological divide meant that there were traces of

evidence supporting the inclusion of these texts as a distinct category. Also the application of the signifier varied with similar conceptual language in both mediated political networks.

While we classify Limbaugh as a political entertainer, and had outlined what was meant by this term in a preceding chapter it is worth noting how here this falls into the broader category of 'celebrity'. The ascription of 'celebrity' is important for several reasons in national discussion. Those who have been revered (or reviled) throughout history have fallen under several classifications. Today those who are considered famous or infamous are often attached to the idea of celebrity who is a "person who is known for his well-knownness (sic)" (Boorstin quoted in Bauman 2005 49). Celebrities are qualitatively different from other types of actors with a salient feature of being widely familiar across vast social networks. But this is not necessarily accompanied by reasons why apart from an "abundance of their images and the frequency with which their names are mentioned in public broadcasts…[C]elebrities are on everybody's tongue" (Bauman 2005 49).

The attribution of celebrity does not disqualify Limbaugh from *also* being constructed as a political leader, an ideological icon, or a policy expert. It simply adds that Limbaugh has been treated in this sample as someone *known* for entertainment. The specific sub-category of political entertainer set against the backdrop of celebrity further links the empirical work to the analytical grounding of this research as well as the extant scholarship on the talk show host. This dissertation contends that understanding the dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence is tied in part to his position as a political entertainer. This is in turn, to an extent, borne within the current literature where he is seen as "primarily an entertainer"; he like other political talk hosts are usually publicly seen as individuals to "note and gossip over – rather than serious political commentators deserving of careful examination" (Jamieson, Cappella, and Turrow 1996 37). This work recognizes the

importance of Limbaugh occupying an interstitial space where entertainment, news, and politics overlaps that has been highlighted elsewhere pointing out the folly of excluding those like Limbaugh from political analysis (Jamieson, Cappella, and Turrow 1996; Jamieson and Cappella 2007).

Yet, while academics may regard this quality of Limbaugh important it seems to generally miss the attention of the press. The concept of the political entertainer, fleshed out in a previous chapter, is the major analytical construct used here although it is not used in the same exact way in these specific instances in the sampled data. By analytically positioning Limbaugh as a political entertainer the talk show host could be brought into important sociological debates about politics, culture, and media. The concept of a 'political entertainer' used by the press in the sampled texts suggest something more restrictive. Here, 'political entertainer' is used to signify Limbaugh's position as one afforded a certain latitude that would not be the same for other public speakers, and cases of directed outrage against him can be dismissed. With a primary obligation to retain an audience, and keep it entertained all other non-entertainment obligations are treated as secondary. As understood in this section, publicity, fame, and attention are what the entertainer seeks. Political influence is a residual effect at best. Although this may provide a metaphorical shield when a political entertainer interjects something controversial into public discussion, the same designation can always be used against them. In a more cynical light the political entertainer can become the focal point of a cautionary tale, and worthy of derision.[127]

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[127] We should also mention different articulations about celebrities. The role that celebrity plays in contemporary national discussion has become more nuanced. The role of celebrity in the public sphere is continuously negotiated (Bauman 2003; Jacobs 2011). Those qualified as such have considerable latitude in their public actions, and celebrity can be used to "bypass" fields of discussion, and the processes that support them. In other words traditional gatekeepers can be circumvented (Benson 1999 474; Jacobs 2003). The press's construction of Limbaugh as celebrity does not trivialize his role in the political public sphere. It merely adds another dimension that allows for a more robust image of how the media interfaces with notable public individuals.

Political Entertainment and the Echo Chamber:

The designation of Limbaugh as a political entertainer within the Echo Chamber took form as a set of caveats to his actions in the political public sphere. Often it was used as a shield to deflect criticism of the talk show host particularly when he broadcasts something perceived as inflammatory. Provocative or sensationalist utterances are explained away by invoking this symbolic dimension of the talk show host. In turn, attempts to make Limbaugh seem irrational or foolish can likewise be discounted as credible. Criticism of Limbaugh are a distraction at best, and at worst a deliberate organized attack on a private citizen whose goal it is to entertain.

Take the September 29th broadcast of Fox's America's Election Headquarters as illustrative. Anchor Martha MacCallum invited Democratic strategist Rich Masters on the program to discuss the accuracy and wisdom of a Spanish language ad released by the Obama campaign the attacking immigration policy of John McCain. While both agreed that the ad was deceptive Masters asserted that it was unfair to include Limbaugh in the ad. Apart from the talk show host's begrudging embrace of McCain as the general election progressed Masters said that Limbaugh is fair game because of his widespread popularity. Limbaugh is "an entertainer and has been, a successful entertainer", and in this capacity he is a public figure (Masters. America's Election Headquarters. Fox News. September 29th 2008).

MacCallum agreed with Masters that Limbaugh participates in political discussion, but noted he does so through comedy. The utterances taken from talk show host featured in the ad was "parody" which he often uses on his program. It is not a question that he is being used as much as it a question of whether it was being done fairly (MacCallum. America's Election Headquarters. Fox News. September 29th 2008).

During a January 26th broadcast of Fox News's Hannity concerning the "Fairness Doctrine", the details of which were discussed earlier, discussion featured a similar construction of Limbaugh as a political entertainer. Hannity was joined by former Communications Director of the Republican National Committee, Karen Hannretty, and author and comedian Jim Norton. For both guests the President was wasting time, and pursuing this legislation was disconcerting. To them it suggested the Obama was irrationally lashing out, and trying to silence those who disagree.

Hanretty thought it was "bizarre that he's giving so much credence to – you know, Limbaugh (who) himself says, 'Look, I'm not a journalist, you know, I'm an entertainer'" (Hanretty. Hannity. Fox News. January 26th 2009). Norton concurred that this was an attempt by liberals, who like spoiled and feckless children, wanted to mute any who criticized them. Liberals wanted to "shut Opie and Anthony down. They want to go after Imus. (Now) They want to go after Rush." This was incredible to Norton. Liberals "have become such whining babies… who cares what Rush Limbaugh says" politically as he is there to entertain. In short, Liberals should pay attention to politics, and leave the entertainment to audience judgments (Norton. "Hannity". Fox News. January 26th 2009). [128]

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[128] There is an interesting tangential story where Hannity had previously criticized the Opie and Anthony Show, a show where Norton was a regular fixture. While here the Fox broadcaster was sympathetic at other times he has been hostile to the shock jock program. The eponymous hosts were dismissed from WAAF-Boston after falsely reporting as part of an April Fool's joke that Boston Mayor Thomas Menino perished in a plane crash (Adelson. On-Air Prank Earns Pair A Shot at Radio Big Time. New York Times. August 13th 1998). Their second expulsion from the air resulted from a contest run during the summer of 2002, the third annual "Sex for Sam" contest. The contest encouraged participants to document themselves engaging in sexual acts at various New York City landmarks. After a pair of contestants were caught by security guards having sex in a vestibule in St. Patrick Cathedral the Catholic League lobbied for the revocation of the license for WNEW-New York, and pressured its parent company, Infinity Broadcasting, to fire the hosts. While the license was not revoked, Infinity acquiesced and the two were taken off the air (McConnell. Infinity to FCC: We Won't Pay Fine". Broadcasting Cable. November 24th 2003).
In both cases Opie and Anthony's employers, not the FCC (or any governmental agency), were responsible for their termination. Hannity was EXPLICITLY aware of this situation. During a September 2004 broadcast of his radio program, Hannity spoke of the incident with both Opie and Anthony. Hannity asked, "when did you realize that what you did was stupid", which he later followed with "it's not about free speech what happened in your case". This seems to somewhat undermine Hannity's assertion in the above January 26th broadcast that when alternative voices are taken off of the air it is due to restrictive government regulations (Hannity. The Sean Hannity Program. Captured from Marrion Calvado - http://il.youtube.com/user/MarrionCalvado. September 22nd 2004).

The two segments are typical of the few Echo Chamber texts constructing the talk show host as an entertainer. Hosts and contributors to the programs went as far to paraphrase Limbaugh's own words that make self-referential claims that he is in fact a political entertainer. Tellingly, both programs, used 'Limbaugh as entertainer' as an affirmative defense to explain away the legitimacy of using Limbaugh as a target in political discussion. In the first example Limbaugh was portrayed as unfairly singled out, despite his public standing as an entertainer, because the Obama and other Democrats failed to understand the humor so often used on his show. For instance, the comments on immigration the talk show host had made were incorporated into the ad while they were originally uttered in jest. Making these types of satirical comments is what he has done for years. His parody was erroneously taken as fact, and that was not his responsibility to address. The real criticism should be made of the Obama and others for wasting time attacking an entertainer rather than sticking to the issues.

In the second case he was specifically lumped with other "shock jocks" who are known for crude humor that at times is applied to political issues. Not only was his status as an entertainer not challenged, some of the guests, entertainers themselves, associated Limbaugh with other entertainers and entertainment programs. Doing so fostered a public image of Limbaugh as an entertainer who happens to focus on politics. In the end these examples suggest he is an entertainer, and what he says should always be considered with this in mind. Not only does this provide him cover, unlike the other symbolic categories, it appears as the only one that delves into his background, at least in terms of professional radio experience.

Political Entertainment and the Mainstream Press:

Limbaugh was also cast as an entertainer in several sampled texts with the Mainstream Press, but the connotations were markedly different. Whereas Echo Chamber texts textualized Limbaugh as an entertainer to dismiss aspersion leveled at him the Mainstream Press was more critical. Signifiers constructing him as a political entertainer were used to both discredit and undermine his legitimacy as a credible participant in the political public sphere. His opinions and actions are those of a provocative jester, and the irrationality and duplicity of his statements should be highlighted. Authority can be undercut, and an entertainer begins to look more like a jester or fool "portraying ineptness or stupidity" (Klapp 1948 141).[129]

In an example after the election Limbaugh's 'bi-partisan' stimulus plan was the focus of a segment on a January 29th edition of MSNBC's Hardball.[130] There was sense of incredulity by the participants that the plan, despite its farcical nature, was gaining traction in political discussion. Roger Simon, Chief Political Columnist for Politico saw it a perk of the "the perfect job … whatever he suggests is entertainment" meaning he could speak for the purpose of being provocative. If anything the proposal was a "good read", and carried a satirical message and not serious policy (Simon. Hardball. MSNBC. January 29th 2009).

In another example from the MSNBC program, *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, Limbaugh's comments about his less than amicable wishes and expectations for the new President were explained away by Pat Buchannan. While the commentator and former politician conceded that

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[129] Another conceptualization of the *jester* exists in sociological research, and is worth mentioning for its contrast to how it is being used here. In another sense the jester surreptitiously introduces wisdom from the vantage point of the non-authorized, excluded, or ironic. The jester is effectively able to circumvent established power potentially engendering "reflexivity and tolerance" (Jacobs and Smith 1998 76). To be sure this alternative definition is in no way inferior to the first, but rather less aptly describes dynamics expressed in the sample.

[130] The "Limbaugh" stimulus plan, explored earlier, was his call to split the Obama stimulus plan to reflect the percentage of the population who supported each respective candidates in the popular vote.

the comments he had made hoping for the failure of the Obama administration were "mildly disrespectful" he also implored that Limbaugh "is basically an entertainer." They were certainly incendiary statements, but they were used to bolster ratings, nothing more (Buchannan. 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. MSNBC. January 26th 2009). Buchannan articulated this point clearly. Even though his comments can be construed as offensive they must be understood as coming from a popular radio entertainer, and the exigencies of advertiser based entertainment.

Still other examples from the sample construct Limbaugh as an entertainer differently. A statement made by AJ Hammer, host of CNN's aptly named Showbiz Tonight, discussed the annual list of the "10 Most Fascinating People" put out by Barbara Walters. He used it to symbolically structure the talk show host as an entertainer. The CNN host told his audience that Walters "didn't only choose celebrities for her 10 most fascinating. She also chose politicians", and he went to mention Sarah Palin and Barack Obama specifically (Hammer. Showbiz Tonight. CNN. December 5th 2008). Although Limbaugh was on the list he was not considered grouped with Palin and Obama. Rather, he was lumped with other groups of celebrities on a television program catering to entertainment news. This strongly impressed an image of Limbaugh as a popular entertainer (Hammer. Showbiz Tonight. CNN. December 5th 2008).

In another example from a brief "What's on Today" blurb in the December 4th Arts and Culture section of the New York Times Kathryn Shattuck was more explicit in teasing out the connections. She wrote that the list produced by Walters included "the actors Will Smith, Tom Cruise, Tina Fey, and Frank Langella; the political commentator Rush Limbaugh; the singer Miley Cyrus; and the Olympic gold medalist Michael Phelps" *(*Shattuck. What's On Today. New York Times December 4th 2008). Although credited as a "political commentator" Limbaugh is textually

embedded within a cavalcade of entertainers.[131] Obama and Palin were once again designated as politicians. Similar to other examples where he is in the company of political heavyweights the designation of entertainer sticks when he is surrounded by those with robust connections to Hollywood and the music industry, and differentiated from politicians.

A final example of this type of symbolic articulation found in the sampled Mainstream texts occurred in another Culture Desk article featured in the New York Times. Instead of celebrity lists Edward Wyatt wrote about parallels between shifting political attitudes about US foreign policy, and the portrayal of those shifts in popular fiction. Two weeks before the Obama inauguration Wyatt asked a pressing question that was no doubt on the minds of many: "Can Jack Bauer make it in the age of Obama?"[132] On the heels of the Abu Ghraib scandal the creators of "*24*" were told by military officials that the program was contributing to the lowering of soldiers' inhibitions about straying from official rules of engagement.[133] One of the reasons Wyatt gave for why a fictional show had grown to a point of garnering the attention of the military was because of some of its exponents from the world of popular culture. He wrote that over the past several years "the creators of "24" have bragged that it has drawn accolades from fans like Rush Limbaugh and Barbara Streisand (Wyatt. New Era in Politics, New Focus for '24'. The New York Times. January 8th 2009). Limbaugh's inclusion here demonstrated that a popular television program had received support from entertainers across the ideological spectrum.

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[131] The exception in terms of entertainer being Michael Phelps. However, describing him as an Olympic gold medalist is rather specific vis-à-vis the less descript "political commentator".

[132] Bauer, the protagonists of Fox's primetime political drama "*24*", had an uncertain future under the incoming administration. The counterterrorism agent played by Keifer Sutherland became a modern folk hero during the Bush years because of his approach to those who would harm America. He was very willing to dispense with the niceties of due process in order to bring unrepentant terrorist to justice; justice often meant the receiving end of Bauer's fists.

[133] At the start of the program's seventh season Bauer testified before a fictional Senate committee reflecting a growing disjuncture between public opinion and the execution of the War on Terrorism. See Jacobs and Jacobs and Wild (2013) on the 'counter-factual' public sphere.

Although the Mainstream Press sampled here treated Limbaugh as an entertainer the least frequently they still incorporated him into stories in this manner enough that it should qualify as at least a proto-category. The Mainstream Press highlighted his entertainment qualities not to completely disqualify his contributions to public discussion, but to attach a modest caveat to some of his inclusion in public discussion. Because he is considered an entertainer the opinions he puts on offer should be met with some level of skepticism. When done they bolster this image by explicitly calling him an entertainer, and qualifying why he is good at what he does. In other cases they associated him with other entertainers positioning him outside of the political and journalistic fields. When this signifying category was used he was understood as being grounded in the field of popular entertainment.

Limbaugh the Entertainer:

The analysis of sampled text presented here suggested that Limbaugh is connected to the world of politics, but as an outsider to fields of politics and journalism. He is grounded in the field of entertainment. More than simply providing him access to mediated political discussion the designation of entertainer allowed Limbaugh to be shielded from his provocative comments. In these examples the press articulated Limbaugh first and foremost as talk radio show host that is more readily situated with individuals from Hollywood vis-à-vis Washington. While not acting on behalf of a party or signifying a political idea Limbaugh as 'entertainer' can still cause reverberations throughout national discussion. His notability is a function of his ability to broadcast a successful radio program, and this captures the attention of the press.

Although least frequently described this way when compared to other signifying categories drawn from the sample both the Echo Chamber and Mainstream Press recognized Limbaugh as a

political entertainer. Again, the particular constellation of meaning associated with this category varies between the two ideological media spaces in terms of application, but the core cultural structure remains the same. Although his subject matter may focus on politics, he is positioned, in these cases, within the entertainment field. As an entertainer Limbaugh is afforded certain latitude in his comments that would not be acceptable for politicians, experts, or other types of public speakers.

In these instances the press recognizes that Limbaugh's primary concern as an entertainer is to keep his audience engaged. Limbaugh espouses highly charged and cheeky language because that is what people tune into his program to hear. His audience is his constituency, and his responsibility is to entertain them. It is a fool's errand to take any of his comments too seriously since, after all, he is an entertainer. All other obligations are secondary. These findings should not be considered a surprise nor regarded as particularly original. Demonstrating how the press textualized Limbaugh as an entertainer offers further support of previously drawn conclusions elsewhere about his position at the border of entertainment and politics (Jamieson, Cappella, Turrow 1996 37-40, Jamieson and Cappella 2008 156-161), but further vets the designation in public discussion.

Limbaugh as a Signified Cultural Object:

This chapter recreated common patterned ways Limbaugh is constructed into a set of signifiers within the sampled text. The thick descriptions of how he was presented in news and commentary suggested that he is a polysemic signifier taking several distinct symbolic forms that vary in how associated meanings becomes partially fixed to him. Resonance of the symbolic classifications used in both the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press support this claim,

although the specific application of a given signifying category varied. Ideology seems to color evaluations, but the sampled news and commentary universally presented Limbaugh in patterned and consistent ways that fell into one of the four signifying categories outlined above.

This is important because it allows research to move beyond the existing scholarship that looks at the news as a proxy for Limbaugh's legitimacy as a public figure, but does not go further in teasing out specific ways these texts 'create' a public image of the talk show host. The press does not just reflect; it refracts, and interprets. Unlike previous research this analysis only focused on the talk show host as a textualized symbolic marker. With this approach we can better conceptualize Limbaugh as a cultural object. More pointedly, we can think about him as a symbolic narrative function in stories circulating throughout the political public sphere.

While any conclusions drawn here are only preliminary, and cannot yet be applied outside this sample three things should be noted. First, the sampled news and commentary included Limbaugh into stories in ways that linked him to delimited signifying chains through description, critique, and association. Second, the symbolic categories used are ubiquitous and patterned in the sample. As stated above ideology may color how a particular symbolic constellation is configured, but the well of meaning drawn from is common to all of the organizations sampled. He may be sacred or profaned, but the designated symbolic category is common. Third, and perhaps most intriguing, is that the categories used by the press to paint a public picture of the talk show host resonates to a degree with how extant academic literature portrays the talk show host, and accounts for his political influence. The question of whether journalists are being influenced by academic literature, Limbaugh, or creating cultural structures interpedently with of the two former sources arise is something to be further pursued.

In the end the empirical analysis described in this chapter provided data supporting an assertion that Limbaugh is not only an actor in the political public sphere. When the press includes Limbaugh in news and commentary they take an active role of transforming him into a cultural object that serves as a function in political narratives. Both the Mainstream News and the Echo Chamber appear to organize and circulate homologous understandings of the talk show host, and this carries ramifications for thinking about ways his political influence is engendered and exercised. When the signifying categories are understood in light of the prominent narratives found within the sample new ways for explaining Limbaugh's political influence as at least in part culturally based become possible. Developing this idea further, and commenting on its significance is where we turn our attention in the next chapter.

A "Cultural" Model of Limbaugh – a Review and Discussion of the Findings:

The primary aim of the research presented here was to further social scientific understandings of how political entertainers, public figures lacking traditional political authority, wield influence throughout a mediated political public sphere. Several analytical frameworks have been used to develop models of political entertainers' influence, and were discussed in detail in previous chapters. Some sought to explain influence as the result of the social structural positions occupied. One variant makes attributions to the underlying media organizations responsible for producing content. The extent of a political entertainer's influence reflects an ability to generate revenue for underwriters. Another important structural position highlighted by scholars focuses on the mediated figure's ability to act as opinion leaders informing and civically activating citizen-audiences. The ability to steer the audience converts into political influence. A more nuanced understanding highlighted the importance of their position at the intersection of the fields of entertainment, journalism, and politics. Existing at the intersection of political parties, and media conglomerates provides important access and legitimizes participation in the political public sphere.

As illuminating as these analytical frameworks are they miss an important dynamic contributing to a political entertainer's influence. Not taken under consideration is the role public discussion plays in fixing, rather than reflecting, meaning structures associated with political entertainers. This dissertation has argued that discussion in the political public sphere, articulated

through news and commentary, may not be sufficient, but is a necessary factor to consider as a *source* of influence. Cultural Sociology offered a unique way to further research concerning these dynamics. It has been adopted elsewhere to advance social scientific understandings of how political entertainers are folded into the political public sphere, and was applied to a particular case study here.

The findings of the research presented here support earlier ideas drawn from the Cultural Sociology framework concerning dynamics of political talk show host Rush Limbaugh's political influence. The data points to the existence of relatively stable cultural structures present in the sampled news and commentary into which Limbaugh was incorporated. These structure were used to make Limbaugh publicly meaningful. Although and their configuration varied with ideology and embedded-ness patterns emerged that appeared consistent. Through the very process of being part of the narration of American political life Limbaugh became 'nested' in the very stories he often conveys to his audience. What was needed, and what was offered from the research here, was an account of how Limbaugh fits into American politics as a cultural object, rather than an actor, defined by these cultural structures. This opened the potential of alternative explanations for Limbaugh's influence, and drove home the point that his influence is not totally of his own making.

Consider the following loose analogy. Imagine Limbaugh was an airplane flying during a cloudless day, and the shadow cast on the ground below was taken as his influence. The extant literature looks at the shadow on the ground, and attributes its form and function to the shape and position of the plane. What it fails to address is how the shadow is affected by the milieu in which the plane flies. Prior literature does not recognize that the position of the 'sun' matters. From different angles it casts different light, in our case political signifiers, altering the shape of the shadow. In addition, a shadow also changes shape as it passes over different types of terrain, or

what can be analogized as distinct political narratives. What was needed was a set of tools to explore these unremarked upon components shaping the 'shadow'.

The research presented here found a suitable set of tools, and generated important data by using them to this end. An alternative understanding of how the shadow is shaped becomes possible. Perhaps the biggest lesson this stressed in regards to the other frameworks was the need to re-orient the vantage point from which to study this particular topic. This was accomplished here by taking a clear interest in Limbaugh's influence, but decentering his corporeal self from analysis. This is something that has not been done in previous research concerning the talk show host.

Drawing from Cultural Sociology, the research presented here set out to crystalize the centrality of cultural structures as a causal factor in establishing a political entertainer's political influence, and hoped to add to sociological debates focused on American political culture. It moved towards this by 'mapping' types of public discussions political entertainers are a part of while simultaneously teasing out how those discussions come to make them meaningful. This allows us to consider the importance of cultural structures rendered through news and commentary while bracketing out instrumental action or organizational/network connections. Here we see cultural politics at play.

Political talk radio show host Rush Limbaugh was selected to serve as a case study to further explore this subject. Besides noteworthy biographical factors, multidisciplinary social scientific study of Limbaugh has situated him in research relating to American political culture. Likewise, a dearth of research within the more specific sub-discipline of Cultural Sociology regarding Limbaugh presented an opportunity to offer something new. The research here moved away from conceptualizing Limbaugh as a political actor, or an occupier of a particular field

position like extant literature suggests. With these attributes bracketed the research here conceptualized Limbaugh as a cultural object whose public meaning is largely shaped through cultural politics, largely through processes outside of his control.

Despite limitations preventing generalizing from this research its exploratory insights allow for several ideas to be considered. For one it allows us to re-evaluate Limbaugh's role in sociological discussions about politics and civil society. In another way it proposes a typology to better connect him to other ostensibly influential political entertainers. Empirically the research adds new information to existing work on the political talk show host by using methodologies that to date have not been applied to him. On the one hand it sampled instances of Limbaugh's presence in news and commentary within the context of a major event in American political culture finding that he was made part of a delimited set of narratives circulating throughout the public sphere. It also found that within the sampled text he was made meaningful in a delimited set of ways through patterned attachment to symbolic chains of signification.

This chapter reviews and discusses the findings from this research, uses them to conceptualize how we think of Limbaugh as a political entertainer, and develops a preliminary model for how his discursive creation in the press can be used to account for, at least in part, his political influence in the official public sphere. It will revisit an empirical instance used earlier to demonstrate the application of the model. The possible implications of the research for the talk show host, and political entertainers more generally, will likewise be discussed. Moreover, it will propose that the findings also allow us to imagine the symbolic Limbaugh as a focal point of an alternative political public sphere. It will then conclude by noting certain qualifications and limitations of this research. This will be followed by suggestions for possible correctives, and questions that should be taken up in further research.

A Matrix of Meaning:

This dissertation proposed a cultural model of Limbaugh's political influence. It suggested news and commentary across the ideological spectrum critically and reflexively render a powerful, public, and multidimensional image of the radio host. When taken up in public discussion Limbaugh is effectively transformed into a cultural object rather than a political actor. More pointedly, he is in effect a transmogrified 'political emblem'. It is the image of the host rather than the host himself that takes primacy. Cultural structures comprised of signifying chains and narrative themes, what I will refer to as "textual clusters", help create his public significance, and in doing so help create dynamics of influence. Limbaugh as an emblem is the meta- category under which all of the more specific signifying categories outlined in previous chapters fall.

Limbaugh is built into the continuous stream of political discussion organizing his public perception. Coverage in the press is not only a reflection of his already established influence. This has been an overlooked possibility for a causal mechanism. What is most notable is that this happens largely outside of Limbaugh's control. He is not solely responsible for his political influence nor are his audience or networks. This does not contradict other models of Limbaugh's political influence. It adds further insight by suggesting the relationship between Limbaugh and the press is more bidirectional than previously thought.

The new analytical foundation for studying Limbaugh proposed here also required a different set of methodological tools. Since the press received little direct attention in the existing research about the talk show host it was made central to analysis here. News and commentary served as the 'lens' through which Limbaugh was viewed, and served as the primary data source.

The hermeneutical and culturally sensitive approach was a useful way to capture the broader public conversations that Limbaugh was part of while bracketing his actions or networks.

Semiotic and narrative analysis specified protocols for empirical work. Drawing out textual properties of news and commentary, and analyzing them helped create a 'map' of how Limbaugh is included in public discussion for the sampled text. The empirical analysis developed here stood in sharp contrast to extant research by de-centering Limbaugh, and most importantly, seeing him as a cultural object vis-à-vis an actor. Taking seriously the preponderance of his presence in the press, something established in other studies, this dissertation mined content, and richly recreated how Limbaugh is woven into news and commentary.

The Limitations of Action:

Existing literature on Limbaugh all share an important quality. Although some of the literature provides a more convincing model of Limbaugh's political influence compared to others, in some capacity, all understand Limbaugh as a political actor whose actions and positions are consequential. Each shares an emphasis on what Limbaugh does; action is at the center of analysis. The most extensive research highlights the central role Limbaugh plays in the Conservative "Echo Chamber". The institutionally connected media and political organizations link him in important ways to the GOP where he acts in the capacity of an unofficial leader.

Despite the sagacity of these models, particularly the Echo Chamber model, an important dimension of Limbaugh's political influence is still missing. However, the existing literature left us with an important clue. It recognized that journalism played some role in his political influence, but this insight was not further mined. In the extant literature news and commentary played a role

in legitimizing an *a priori influence.* This implies that how he is made meaningful through news and commentary is of secondary importance, and consequently the content of news and commentary is of secondary importance. It never asks what he means, and in not doing so ignores major cultural factor contributing to his political influence.

Work generated by Cultural Sociologists concerned with civil society suggest we need to know more about the dynamics of communicative encounters if we are to understand dynamics of political power and influence. This would include the need to know what Limbaugh says and does. This is something accomplished nicely with the existing research. But without going further and studying the ruminations of the very field to which Limbaugh is speaking we only have half of a communicative encounter. To rely solely on the existing literature would send half of an important communicative feedback loop, cultural structures helping sustain the civil sphere, into a black box. The work here brings us a step closer to sketching the half of the feedback loop currently obscured. We know what Limbaugh says to the public sphere. We need to know what the public sphere, through the press, says back. It is not enough to infer what lies outside of the lamp post's illumination. This demanded stepping into the dark.

This research stresses the importance of the hitherto unremarked emblematic dimension of Limbaugh that is an important factor contributing to his political influence. It has argued Limbaugh lacks any significant control over his imaging in the press, and the ability to fix public meaning mostly resides with reporters and columnists. Moreover, in the sample texts it appeared news and commentary did not randomly incorporate Limbaugh into stories. Rather he appeared in patterned ways. In addition there were consistent and limited ways he was made meaningful in the texts. Narratives communicated through collected stories placed Limbaugh in particular types of public debates, and cast him in particular ways.

These findings support an explanation that dynamics of Limbaugh's political influence are at least in part shaped by factors well beyond his control. While he certainly has access to the journalistic and political fields he lacks the ability to steer what particular variation of his emblematic self is presented. In this respect Limbaugh, the actor sitting behind the radio microphone, stands in as a reified condensation of political meanings. This in turn enchants the political talk show host in the political public sphere. As much as he is an actor Limbaugh is also sculpted into a cultural object with totemic qualities.

It was the purpose of this research to mine through the data other scholarship focused on Limbaugh neglected to explore further. For different reasons and to different ends the social sciences know the relationship between journalism and politics is important. It would be impossible for the scholars of the other frameworks to not consider this in their research. It seems likely they were aware as much analysis remotely interested in Limbaugh seemed to note that he makes widespread appearance throughout the field of journalism. Put another way, all of the existing literature at least touches upon Limbaugh's ubiquitous presence throughout the press. Moreover, they all point to coverage as an after effect of an already established influence. It is curious that this connection was not more thoroughly developed. Even the most comprehensive research to date, that concerning the Echo Chamber, remarked upon this dynamic, but then quickly passed over it.[134]

With support from Cultural Sociology the analytical and empirical work presented here pursued the disregarded insight from prior 'Limbaugh' scholarship. This proved fruitful. It is important to reiterate what a large role news and commentary about Limbaugh, rather than material

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[134] The additional fact that extant literature notes that the relationship between journalism and politics is perhaps the most featured topic on Limbaugh's show makes it is even more curious that they did not explore further.

generated by him, plays in these processes. Studying them is necessary for gaining a comprehensive understanding of his public meaning and his place in national political life. By systematically analyzing data existing scholarship glossed over evidence reinforcing the call to re-conceptualize our understandings of the dynamics of Limbaugh's influence becomes more convincing. Limbaugh's actions in the political and journalistic fields are no more important than what he comes to mean in both. Without the cultural structures I suspect that the range of his political steering abilities would be drastically reduced. His presence in the press is not merely an act of legitimization. Rather it is an example of cultural politics that inscribes meaning onto the talk show host that diffuses throughout the political public sphere. With this new emblematic dimension of Limbaugh illuminated current social scientific understandings of him as exclusively an actor can, and should, be revisited. The research here began mapping the emblematic dimensions, and we can now move on to discussing the dominant clusters found in further detail.

Revisiting data and findings:

The deep reading conducted in empirical analysis revealed that while Limbaugh was frequently featured in the sampled text it occurred in specific ways. Sets of signifiers were used to describe the talk show host, and this created a delimited set of public articulations of Limbaugh. Four signifying categories were regularly presented with each communicating distinct public understandings of the talk show host. Similarly the data also revealed that Limbaugh was incorporated consistently into different narratives. The narratives informed specific stories, and each 'introduced' Limbaugh to particular conversations taking place in the political public sphere.

When the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press were compared along with primary and secondary inclusion of Limbaugh particular textual clusters seemed to dominate discussion. The data suggested that the clusters (i.e. the intersection of signifier and narrative that 'write' Limbaugh into the political public sphere as an emblem), co-varied in relation to the ideological position of the institution producing the news and commentary. In other words, the material structures responsible for granting access for Limbaugh to enter the political public sphere tended to predominantly invoke particular textual clusters. This shed further light on the interplay between institutional dimensions of Limbaugh and his program (e.g. occupied position in the political and media fields within their respective organizations), and the cultural structures built into the public discussions incorporating the talk show host as a cultural object.

The clusters played an important role in limiting the range of interpretations and evaluations made of Limbaugh in national political discussion. In stories where Limbaugh was a required element, or a cardinal function, he was most frequently textualized as a leader. In stories where he was constituted in a secondary fashion, or as a catalyzer, he tended to be constructed as an icon. This was true regardless of ideological position. However, in news and commentary created within the Echo Chamber political strategy was the most common narrative. The Mainstream Press placed Limbaugh predominantly into stories about partisanship. In other words, the degree of immersion correlated with how Limbaugh was signified while the ideological position of a text's producer mattered in terms of what types of discussions included Limbaugh. With the information developed over the last two chapters we can highlight what textual cluster was the most ubiquitous. These most frequently used clusters symbolically structured Limbaugh in a patterned way. This supports the claim that Limbaugh's presence in journalism may be deep, but is perhaps not as broad as previously thought. The symbolic constellations created by the

clusters seem to be structured and bounded. It is important to reiterate these constructions are engendered by forces outside of Limbaugh's control.

Further specification is instructive. Data suggested stories within the Echo Chamber, irrespective of the degree of inclusion overwhelmingly emphasized political strategy. Stories told about the maneuvers taken by politicians and parties to secure elections, as well as the methods used to prepare for a transition of power. Regardless of Limbaugh's immersion in a story people tuning into the sampled programing or articles from Echo Chamber media organizations would most frequently be exposed to this kind of story. In other words, when Limbaugh was mentioned those watching Fox News or reading the National Review would most likely come across the talk show host in stories about political strategy. On the other hand signifiers were not consistent within the Echo Chamber. The variation of the signifiers most prominently found within the Echo Chamber corresponded with the degree of immersion. When Limbaugh was the primary focus and required for a story to make sense he was most often positioned as a leader, or possessor of leadership qualities and authority. In those texts where he was secondary, by far more numerous, he was most frequently constructed as an icon. This dynamic operated consistently throughout the sample.

The sampled Mainstream Press texts shared interesting dynamics with their Echo Chamber counterparts. How Limbaugh was signified, and what narrative those signifiers were part of followed a similar pattern. The signifiers in the dominant textual clusters varied in relation to Limbaugh's depth in a given story while the narrative persisted irrespective of immersion. Like the Echo Chamber, when Limbaugh was a primary element in the Mainstream Press he was also treated as a political leader. Likewise, in stories where he was a catalyzer the signifiers shifted to those of a political icon. Where the Mainstream Press diverged from the Echo Chamber was in

regards to the dominant narrative. Here, partisan politics was emphasized. Yet, within the media group the narrative remained consistent.

This section described how the textual qualities associated with Limbaugh by the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press enchant Limbaugh with meaning, and by allowing analysts to reposition him as a cultural object, new insight into his influence can be developed. What is interesting about this is the degree of affinity throughout the sampled press. Under particular sets of conditions the press describes the talk show host in similar ways. The press also appears relatively uniform in that it kept stories consistent within an ideological space. While the stories highlighted different narratives, the narratives were stable within the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press. This too supports ideas of patterned cultural structures at play.

While clearly recognizing the importance of his instrumental actions and the organizational capacities of supporting material structure, this research suggests that Limbaugh's influence also results from cultural structures. He embodies specific sets of political meanings that intersect with particular sets of political stories in patterned ways. In turn Limbaugh as a politically mediated cultural object, or what I have broadly referred to as a "political emblem" is a factor that must be considered when thinking about his political influence.

Re-Reading the Phony Soldier with Limbaugh as Emblem:

To see this analysis applied in another context let us revisit the "Phony Soldier" story discussed in the first chapter, and pay attention to how the press characterized Limbaugh with the patterned cultural structures in mind. Applying the model proposed here we can more easily identify 'Limbaugh the object' as comprised of textual clusters. Although the texts in the Phony

Soldier story were drawn from a very small sample that should make us hesitant about generalizing, there are points of resonance with the findings developed over the previous few chapters that should be noted. How he is characterized and the type of stories he is inserted to follow the pattern described above. The same variations seen in chapters four and five resonate with elements found in the re-assessment of the 'Phony Soldier' story.

Consider the following adumbrated reconstruction of the "Phony Solider" story where the structural hermeneutical model used to analyze Limbaugh in previous chapters is applied. The story the Echo Chamber told was one of misguided Democratic machinations catching up with them. The toll was particular severe on the leadership, and Harry Reid was a prime example of a politician engaged in desperate and calculated moves to compensate for faltering approval ratings. More pointedly, before he joined the fracas surrounding the Phony Solider story Reid's approval ratings were lower than "Bush, Rush Limbaugh and everybody else." The talk show host was situated amongst the ranks of important political leaders, and for a Fox panel it was clear that Reid responded to Limbaugh's comments because of the latter's political "clout" (Barnes. The Beltway Boys. Fox News. October 20th 2007). In the end Limbaugh's skill allowed him to outflank "his rivals" capped with a masterstroke of "brilliant political jujitsu" in the auctioning of the letter from Reid for charity. Limbaugh's response to the Democrats was a cunning display of political adroitness, and effectively threw Democrats off balance (Lowry. The Big Story with John Gibson. Fox News. October 19th 2007).

The Mainstream Press stories covered the same set of events, but the focus was on partisan politics as compared to the Echo Chamber story about political strategy. Examples from the news stories produced during the unfolding saga are instructive. Tucker Carlson quipped that the arc of the story took the form of a "high-pitched scream match between Limbaugh and many of the pillars

of Democratic leadership" (Carlson. Tucker. MSNBC. October 3rd 2007). An editorial in The New York Times expressed that Limbaugh's salacious comments were part of a broader struggle motivated by partisanship where dogmatic loyalty to party rather than beneficial compromise governance took precedent. Paul Krugman saw the partisan fracture as an indication that a new order was taking shape within the GOP as Neocons and Conservatives would dominate Moderates. He too wrote Limbaugh into his column as a leader. The blatant "lack of empathy (for anti-war veterans) shown by Mr. Limbaugh, Mr. Kristol, and yes, Mr. Bush is genuine, not feigned" (Krugman. Conservatives are Such Jokers. The New York Times. October 5th 2007).[135] Whether fighting the Democratic leadership or being associated with leaders of the GOP, Limbaugh stood at the vanguard of partisan struggles.

The model developed throughout this research, and used in a brief 're-analysis' of a story preceding the sampled data by nearly a year suggests that similar textual clusters may be present beyond the texts studied here. Much like what was found in previous chapters this story seemed feature similar mechanisms (e.g. textual association with others) to establish meaning. All of the "Phony Soldier" stories feature Limbaugh as a cardinal function. This stands to reason given the plot of the story. As suggested by the model the Echo Chamber and the Mainstream Press emphasized Limbaugh's qualities as a leader through both adversarial and cooperative affiliations with other political principals. The signifying category corresponded to the degree of inclusion. Again, narratives differed when presented in the Echo Chamber compared to the Mainstream

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[135] Kristol at the Time was editor of The Weekly Standard, so arguably a 'leader' of Conservative newsmagazine. His time with the Bush (41) administration as the Vice President's Chief of Staff, along with the editorial's context, supports the designation of this role.

Press. The former presented stories about political strategy whereas the latter focused on partisan politics.[136]

This example appeared to follow a model similar to the one observed in the previous chapters. In turn, further support for the model is generated. Limbaugh was able gain access to spaces of public debate. But once there, how he was defined, and what context he was presented in seemed to resonate with the textual clusters found elsewhere in this research. Although he was actively participating in the unfolding discussion he also became a character in the story. He was not only a person, but also a symbolic vessel meaning something. Limbaugh, the political talk show host was articulated as Limbaugh the Conservative leader.

Implications of Findings:

To date most research on the political dimensions of political talk radio, and Rush Limbaugh more specifically, have been addressed outside of sociology. Speaking about radio broadcasting in a broad sense scholarship from historians have dutifully captured dynamics of the medium at specific historical junctures allowing it to be woven into narratives of American political history (Barnouw 1966, 1968; Douglas 1999; Hagen 2002; McCourt 2002; Vaillant 2002). Other contributions made by scholars of American and cultural studies along with political scientists have revealed important insight into the content of radio, and its potential for engendering a politically active audience (Apostolidis 2002; Barker 1998a 1998b, 2002; Hilmes 2002; Loviglio 2002; Lacey 2002; McCracken 2002). As noted in previous chapters, the richest

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[136] While the Mainstream Press texts analyzed in the previous two chapters focused on intra-party conflict the focus here was on inter party conflict. One reason might be due to the Bush administration still occupying the White House muting division from within the GOP. The split between Conservatives and Moderates intensified as it came time to select a new leader for the Party to run against Democrats in upcoming elections.

work on the political dynamics of radio have emerged from Communications Scholars that hold his content and position occupied generate influence (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Hofstetter 1996; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Keith 2002; Mitchell 2002; Rothenbuhler 2002; Scannell 1991).

The most important contribution made by this research was the mapping of journalism's presentation of Limbaugh in the sampled texts. Doing so allowed the generation of an alternative model of Limbaugh's political influence. All previous studies considering Limbaugh's relationship with the press either gave attention to his relationship with other likeminded Conservative political-media networks, or if considering the press in a broader sense, seem to emphasize a legitimizing force. To my knowledge this study was the first to incorporate and analyze data to support the claim that while the press might not be an exclusive antecedent to Limbaugh's political power it is necessary in establishing it. A major finding of the research presented here, that in turn spurs further questions, is that Limbaugh is encoded through his inclusion in news and commentary as an important political emblem in American political culture.

The sampled press data supported the existence of relatively fixed cultural structures defining Limbaugh that also inserted him into particular public discussion. This constitutes an important part of the feedback loop tying Limbaugh to the political public sphere. Moreover, this seems to correlate with structural features of the sampled texts (i.e. ideological position of the space of publication, and degree of immersion in the text). Knowing something about what media producer invokes him, and how involved he is in a given story may indicate what signifiers and narratives are most likely associated with him. This property may also be commutative. Knowing what meanings are attached to Limbaugh and what narratives he is a part of can potentially clue

us into to the degree to which he is made part of a story as well as the ideological affiliation of the producer.

The research that has dominated the study of Limbaugh to date can now be complimented by data supporting the assertion that autonomous cultural structures also shape his public image, and in turn his influence. There is now greater latitude to suggest the cultural factors work in tandem with other factors derived from other explanations. Yet, in giving primacy to cultural explanations one of the more important implications is that to at least some extent Limbaugh's influence is not really his at all. The public image and the types of discussion into which he is integrated are organized outside of his, or his patrons, ability to control. Whatever power Limbaugh exercises in national politics might therefore be contingent on the competing voices in the political public sphere that incorporate him into print and broadcast.

If this is the case it seems the press, the same press he spends a good deal of time lambasting during nearly all broadcasts, organizes and disseminates cultural structure helping shape the extent of his influence. Instead of his political influence as something of his own design, a major factor to consider is the steering influence of the press. If in the press renders Limbaugh's image and place in public discussion, dynamics of power can now be analyzed from outside of his program gazing inward in addition to seeing from inside his program looking outward, as developed in the extant research.

Understanding Limbaugh as a multidimensional political emblem invoked in patterned ways is significant. It opens the possibility that Limbaugh's influence is not completely a result of his action. He has the quality of a "ritual implement" articulated by other public sphere

interlocutors. He is transformed into a political marker.[137] In turn, the emblematic qualities create the conditions where Limbaugh becomes sublimated into a broader "iconic consciousness" of American political culture.[138]

As a consequence there are two important ways the emblematic properties intersect with other social dynamics carried by more material structures. The first is a re-evaluation of Limbaugh as a specific type of public actor. The second is reimagining Limbaugh's relationship with the political public sphere. The properties described here prompt us to 're-think' Limbaugh's relationship to, and place within, American political culture. The findings generated from mapping the cultural structures hold implications deserving of further sociological attention. We will now take each in turn.

Breaking with current literature on Limbaugh an interesting dynamic suggested by the empirical research here suggests that conservations in the political public sphere do not talk about the talk show host (let alone with him) nearly as much as they use him to mobilize political meaning. In other words, when it comes to Limbaugh and political public sphere it seems that he doesn't 'do' nearly as much as he 'means'. This further reinforces a reconceptualization of Limbaugh as a cultural object or political text. Limbaugh carries particular political 'meaning' under specific conditions. Limbaugh is spoken 'with' as opposed to spoken 'to'; he is invoked, but not necessarily addressed.

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[137] Ritual implements see Bellah 2006 152

[138] The idea of iconic consciousness in part describes symbolic dimensions communicating social meanings. This concept is important because it allows actors "understanding without knowing" the meaning and value connected to certain material forms (Alexander 2010 11).

Limbaugh, Talk Radio, and Political Entertainers:

Chapter two discussed that a major focus of Cultural Sociology centers on the relationship between politics and mass media. The work presented here modestly expanded this literature in two ways. First, this research has used a case study to supplement work being conducted on exploring dynamics of influence exercised by non-traditional political actors throughout the political public sphere. The research here offers further empirical evidence supporting insights developed by Cultural Sociologists that have studied how entertainers lacking institutionalized political power become important participants in the political public sphere to a degree that they are able to seemingly steer political outcomes. Second, the research expands on the models developed from Cultural Sociology by incorporating an important political entertainer operating in a genre on a channel that as of yet have not been extensively researched with in the sub-discipline.

Research about political entertainers put forth analytical and empirical tools to model political influence. Collectively it suggests this type of actor is culturally and structurally differentiated from other interlocutors present in the political public sphere. They dominate their platforms with their personalities rather than credentials. Since they occupy nonpolitical positions outside of the fields of journalism political entertainers draw on resources from the entertainment field to participate in the political public sphere. This allows for the circumvention of the gatekeepers and institutional constraints others in public discussion often face. Things like professional norms or voting constituencies are generally not a concern for political entertainers. Far from offering trivialities scholars have noted that political entertainers introduce additional capacities to public political discussion by broadening the range of "discursive complexity" used in the political public sphere. They introduce innovative, intriguing, and engaging means of

presentation along with new modes of audience interaction (Baym 2005; Jacobs 2003b, 2005, 2007; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jones 2012 a, b, c, d).

Research increasingly suggests that the steering capabilities of political entertainers rests in part on *how* they are included in public discussion and debate (Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Jacobs and Wild 2013). It has stressed that it is critical to capture how the press incorporates them into stories circulating throughout the political public sphere. Studying the dynamics of interaction in light of existing political environments, which this dissertation has also done, further illuminates the "public nature of the programs, and the way that the meanings and effects of the programs are themselves shaped by the collective discussion taking place… (in) the mediated deliberation of the public sphere" (Jacobs and Wild 2013 72). The arguments and data presented here suggest Limbaugh qualifies as a political entertainer, and the dynamics highlighted by sociologists elsewhere apply in his case. With this research one of the most prominent and currently active political entertainers can now be better integrated into comparative analysis with other political entertainers. This is important because we can now use this designation of political entertainer to explain Limbaugh's political influence despite his lack of political authority in a way not previously examined, and connect him with academic discussion that to date has not included him in analysis.

Limbaugh and the Political Public Sphere:

A broad swath of research in contemporary Political and Cultural Sociology exists in dialogue with Habermas's concept of the public sphere. Shortly after the English translation of his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962, 1989), sociologists set to modify the concept from its original formulation (Calhoun 1992). Cultural Sociology has placed

increasing emphasis on the hermeneutical, symbolic, and discursive dimensions of the public sphere, and this lends itself to further incorporation of interdisciplinary studies of mass media. Scholarship suggests that mediated public spheres make meaning a central concern of public life, and demonstrates how "cultural texts from the life-world impact political action" (Alexander 2006; Alexander and Jacobs 1998; Calhoun 1992; Crossley and Roberts 2004; Hartley 2001; Jacobs 2003a, 2003b, 2007; Jacobs and Wild 2013; Schudson 2005, 2011; Warner 2005). However, this scholarship has never specifically considered Limbaugh (nor talk radio) as an object of analysis despite his ubiquity in national politics. Conversely those who have studied the talk show host (and talk radio) do not necessarily address the concerns of Political and Cultural Sociology. In this way analysis of Limbaugh's place and function within the official public sphere has missed key points.

The empirical data presented here coupled with the analytical models previous reviewed allow an entirely new understandings of Limbaugh in relation to the political public sphere. Because of the emblematic qualities we can reimagine Limbaugh as a symbolic nexus of a Conservative alternative or counter-public.[139] He symbolically marks its boundaries, practices, and

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[139] The normative position that the public sphere was open and inclusive has been one of the most appealing characteristics of the concept, but has also served as a source prominent and consistent criticism. In fact some claim that the utility of the concept was undercut by its very attempt at universality. Envisioning a single overarching public Habermas, it is argued, mistook the bourgeois public sphere to be 'the' public sphere, and was not attentive to alternative places of discussion and debate where the excluded had more of a voice. Responding to the conceptual lacunas left by Habermas, scholars have theorized and empirically articulated the existence of multiple public spheres oriented to a variety of social issues and identities. They contend that a multiplicity of public spheres exist each acting as places of discussion for a variety of publics organized around a principle of particularity rather than universality. The pluralistic "alternative" public spheres are often populated by definable groups with specific interests. Empirical accounts have lent support to the idea showing that publics have organized around factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, political affiliation, recreation, and not just a reified concept of a "universal" private individual. The consequences of these analytical and empirical moves resulted in a conception of the public sphere as bifurcated between an overarching 'official' and many 'alternative' public spheres. (Alexander 2006; Calhoun 1992; Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; Habermas 1996; Jacobs 2000, 2003a; Ryan 1992; Schudson 2002; Warner 2005).
As scholars critiqued Habermas for claims of universality it became clear that certain spaces of discussion were not only separate, but were comprised of individuals who were socially unequal. More than just 'alternative' to 'official' publics, certain publics have been characterized as 'subaltern'. Exemplified by the feminist and black publics in the twentieth century United States the idea of a subaltern public suggests concerted discussion by those considered socially subordinate or dominated. The formations of these types of publics were reactions to a lack of participatory parity in the 'official' public sphere. Subaltern publics are important for at least two primary reasons. First, subaltern publics allow those excluded from the official public sphere to develop their own identity, and have debates defined by their own rules. This allows for an internal focus creating a space for "withdrawal and

structures. Since this research argues that Limbaugh takes on textual qualities, these properties permit us to think of him and his program as a central 'text' calling the Conservative public into being. 'Reading' Limbaugh as a text fulfils what Warner calls the only "entry condition demanded by a public" (Warner 2005 62). Limbaugh is what is 'read', and he acts as an intersubjective reservoir of meaning that discursively structures the alterative public sphere. When people tune into his program they are afforded a sense of belonging in an active and autonomous space of discussion that is symbolically established.

Yet, the program is not hermetically sealed. When taken up by the 'listening' press (Conservative, Liberal, or otherwise), and by extension their audiences, a feedback loop is generated whereby the 'Limbaugh' centered Conservative counter-public is folded within the broader political public sphere. This is a major mechanism through which it engages with other publics. Far from being politically isolated or marginalized, a claim Conservatives often make, the Limbaugh-centric Conservative counter-public is a regular part of broader political discussions.

Limbaugh's emblematic presence in the press makes him and the public he represents accessible to those the broader political public sphere. The textualized Limbaugh becomes known to those parts of national political discussion not directly connected to the show, or the Conservative counter-public. In turn, associated meaning are filtered back into the Conservative

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regroupment". Second, subaltern publics are focused outwards acting as launching points for "agitational activity" (Fraser 1992 124). Subordinate groups use alternative publics to monitor dominant and official spaces of discussion. They can then develop strategies that challenge their exclusion from dominant publics (Fraser 1992; Jacobs 1996, 2000; Warner 2005). They provide "a space of self-representation" allowing its participants to create "common…solidarities (and also) arguments which might effectively engage" others that dominate civil society (Jacobs 2000 21). While 'Limbaugh's' Conservative-counter public claims to be and shares some affinities with the concept, it can hardly be called subaltern. This is a central reason for refereeing to it as a counter public rather than a subaltern public. Those that comprise it do not comfortably qualify as subordinate in American political culture.

counter-public, and this constitutes an important part of the feedback loop connecting it with the broader political public sphere.

Significance for Limbaugh:

The reconceptualization of how Limbaugh is emblematically constituted in the press, is part of a specific cohort of public actors, and is a symbolic locus of a Conservative counter-public are significant because they suggests a different way to think about Limbaugh's political influence. Extant research suggests that through a combination of audience, networks, and media and political organizations Limbaugh steers national political outcomes.

We must now consider that the talk show host's political influence cannot be totally of his own design, and it at least in part exists from the inclusion of Limbaugh in the field of journalism. Invoking him in certain ways within particular stories symbolically imbricates him in major national political debates. The press plays an integral role in conjuring the very manifestations of the talk show hosts political influence. In fact, it can be suggested that his ability to steer political outcomes are in some way contingent upon the manner in which he is constructed in the press. As Limbaugh becomes increasingly entrenched in American political culture his 'emblematic self' informs the actions he can and cannot exercise through his own volition. This is a major re-evaluation of his political influence.

The collective conversation, not discreet participants, inscribe Limbaugh with public meaning(s). Because his image is constructed through a symbolic contestations between different media organizations defining him is beyond the ability for a single actor or organization to control. This is an important mechanism because it implies that the *meaning* of Limbaugh's political

influence is engendered and supported on a national scale outside the institutional spaces where he ostensibly would exercise the most agentic control. Moreover, it is a cooperative endeavor. While far from a living political fiction, Limbaugh is to some extent a malleable political truth.[140]

This section provided additional formulations for scholars studying Limbaugh, and the dynamics of political influence he exercises that should be considered. It rethought and extended analysis of him by conceptualizing him as a political entertainer. It also reimagined his role in constituting a key orienting text of a Conservative counter-public, and highlighted a key feature of feedback loops connecting both he and the counter-public to the political public sphere. The next section focuses on a modest contribution that this work adds to a growing body of work on media and politics in Cultural Sociology.

Significance of the Findings for Limbaugh and Beyond:

Beyond Limbaugh the research presented here also makes several humble yet noteworthy contributions to the sociology more broadly. For one it introduces radio and Limbaugh as central objects of analysis to Cultural Sociology. This is important because Cultural Sociology has added significantly to sociological studies on the media and politics, yet it has been relatively quiet when the specific channel under consideration is radio. To date there has been a dearth of research in the sub-field compared to other disciplines. Given its history in American political culture, and the interwoven connections with other mass media, radio studies are an area that should be incorporated in the growing body of political media studies within Cultural Sociology. Sociology's

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[140] While Limbaugh comes to be part of a discussion existing well outside the purview of his program through press inclusion, the analytical frame work cautions that this should not be taken as the press creating the patterned discourses. The cultural structures deployed by the press act are autonomously guided, and are not subject to unilateral alteration by any particular interlocutor.

brief flirtation with channel during the 1930s and 1940s provides precedent. There is little reason why radio (and perhaps now podcasts), and the personalities associated with it, should not make a resurgence as objects of study.

For all of the contributions Cultural Sociology has made to understanding the dynamic intersection of politics and media it has concentrated primary on print, television, and increasingly the internet as objects of research (Alexander 2003, 2006; Alexander and Jacobs 1998; Jacobs 2003a, 2007; Jacobs and Townsley 2012; Jacobs and Wild 2013). To the extent radio has been included it has been sparingly peppered throughout research. Radio is positioned at the periphery of Cultural Sociology's gaze. With a rich history that significantly impacted communication technologies, politics, and programing models that followed radio deserves more than secondary attention. To be clear it is not more important than any other media channel, but to further understand the broader media field it must play a more important part. This study is another incremental step towards that end.[141]

A related contribution made by the research presented here also relates to the benefits of using Cultural Sociology to approach Limbaugh. Questions about specific topics (e.g. Limbaugh and political talk radio), and the implications they portend for broader topics (e.g. media, politics, and influence) studied in this dissertation have been researched from a variety of disciplinary perspectives as intimated above. Just as Cultural Sociology benefits from the continual broadening and deepening of the range of topics it studies, other disciplines and sub-disciplines will benefit

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[141] Consider how the material development and engineering advancements associated with radio are part of a broader historical arc sharing important instances of resonance with other developments across media channels. Print, radio, and television (and now the internet) exist within overlapping markets and regulatory environments. Many are part of interlocking organizational structures with shared personalities occupying multiple positions across channels. The formats found on radio compliment other media. Many of them have been adopted to television and the internet. A common emphasis on the political public sphere provides another connection. Rather than a space of competition print, broadcast, and digital media are tied together through overlap in coverage and commentary. Teasing out the similarities and shared spaces existing between radio and other media channels reinforces how the former should be included in the discussions of media and politics along with the latter.

from exposure to Culture Sociology. To put this another way, using Cultural Sociology to study these topics forces dialogue with other subfields and disciplines interested in these topics further. After all, the birth and continued vitality of Cultural Sociology rests upon intensive interaction between itself and alternative analytical perspectives and disciplinary paradigms. The plurality of ideas enrich all participants. This research further adds a small piece to the ongoing disciplinary exchange.

Another contribution made by the research here is the addition of further evidence supporting current findings of Cultural Sociology regarding communicative institutions of civil society, namely journalism and the public sphere. Research suggests journalism draws on cultural structures to organize spaces of public discussion and debate. Cultural Sociology has been instrumental in developing models to compliment the more material explanations accounting for the ways journalism creates and helps sustain important aspects of the political reality we experience. It is an integral component within feedback loops connecting differentiated publics to the official public sphere. The dissertation modestly contributes by adding further evidence to understanding the political culture of journalism, and the influence it imparts.

It is important to pause and reflect on what these findings might tell us about media and journalism in another sense. A major recurring social scientific discussion about mass media deals with concepts about its relationship with the political field, namely its ability to generate new, or channel already existing, influence. While research here can in no way conclusively resolve such a debate it does add another account that calls for more attention to these intellectual pursuits. With that said the findings here support a notion that mass media, and journalism in particular, do more than amplify. Irrespective of the interaction with other social forces the work done here echoes the sentiment that the influence of mass media must not, and indeed cannot, be reduced or explained

away. To put this in different terms, media does not reflect, but rather refracts. Mass media creates, and circulates a symbolic power operating independently, or, if alongside of other social forces, as a force multiplier.

As this process takes places in specific types of mediated spaces, say journalism, institutional constraints create specific forms that are important to consider. Professional norms and standards, organizational structures, and actors might limit the form and extent of influence news and commentary exert, but the influence is still identifiable. The work here supports the idea that journalism plays a central role in autonomously contributing to and supporting feedback loops mediating flows of force between civil society and the state. Concomitantly, this means a culturally informed mechanism provides a communicative base for the application and exchange of civil power and state power.

As it organizes discussion in the political public sphere journalism incorporates objects, material or immaterial, that come to act as symbolic tokens. The cultural objects act as discreet information clusters allowing a transfer of particular species of capital across a range of fields. They operate by removing "social relations from the immediacy of context", hence their transferability, and in turn create conditions for "providing … expectations" of their potential influence (Giddens 1990 21-23). To use a metaphor from computing if journalism can be thought of as a network the cultural objects (in our case Limbaugh) act loosely as the TCP/IP packets that 'do the work' of data communication. Like other digital information the packets, like the cultural objects, can be produced, reproduced, and circulated while still retaining potency without regards to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that generate or handle them at any particular juncture. It is the collective endeavor that is important.

Tokens exist and operate independently of the particular signifying object. This is why, in the case of someone like Limbaugh, the 'token' Limbaugh can possess and exert influence irrespective of the influence of the 'corporeal' Limbaugh. If this were not the case Limbaugh's influence would likely extend no further than the ears of his attentive audience. The extent to which even his audience's collective political power existed would likewise be attenuated. Without journalism the Limbaugh 'token' may very well never have been generated, and without that token inserted into the feedback loops of civil exchange the extent of his influence may have been relegated to the back end of a Heavy Hundreds Talker magazine list (if that).

The findings support the reconceptualization of Rush Limbaugh as a symbolic token. Also referred to as an 'emblematic' or 'iconic' Limbaugh this construction of the talk show host is likely to be found elsewhere throughout the political public sphere. The initial clue to look for would be actors operating in the political public sphere whose purported influence seems to outstrip the specifications of their official authority. For one we have seen it with Limbaugh in the empirical work conducted in this research. In the data reviewed in chapters four and five along with the less systematic but heuristically important "Phony Solider" story we can trace the dividing line between a moderately influential embodied Limbaugh with what this research claims is an influential disembodied iconic Limbaugh.

If we briefly turn our attention to fiction we can see the emblematic Limbaugh being starkly reconstituted. While he sat behind a gold colored microphone fictional talk radio host Birch Barlow recounted how infamous Simpsons character Sideshow Bob was "another intelligent Conservative here railroaded by our Liberal criminal justice system." In perhaps a lesser known work of fiction Limbaugh served as a loose basis for Conservative pundit Norman Arbuthnot in Stacy Title's 1996 political satire *The Last Supper*. An episode of Seth Macfarlane's *Family Guy* had Limbaugh (who

voiced himself) also invoked many of the symbolic dimensions previously discussed. One of the program's main characters confronted Limbaugh at a book signing to castigated him. Limbaugh respectfully asked whether the character read any of his books. The character, Brian Griffin, responded "... well, no I haven't. But I have read things other people have written about things you have written, and I do not approve of the things I have read from others about the things they've read from you. I do not approve, not one bit, sir." In each cases Limbaugh inspired the writing of the character, but the crafting of the character resonates with his iconic self. Loosely sharing something with Bauldrillard's simulacra the shows copied and had characters respond to his public image, a copy created from representations, not necessarily the corporeal Limbaugh.

A final fictional example is particularly germane, and worth pausing for. A cold opening for an episode of Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* focused on the 2008 US Presidential election featured a man yelling from what appeared to be a radio booth with the cutline "Dick O'Rushballs – Conservative Talk Show Host". He along with Reverend Jerimiah Wright, then candidate McCain, and then candidate Obama were all featured offering humorous but sophistic attacks at the show's protagonist, Huey Freeman. In addition to being positioned alongside of these headlining names from the 2008 election the entire sequence was narrated by an investigative journalist as part of a television newsmagazine production. During the shot the narrator voices over, "Republicans tried linking Obama with ten year old domestic terrorist Huey Freeman after discovering the two were MySpace friends". While the narrator spoke the shot slowly zoomed in on a newspaper clearly showing a profile shot of Huey that dissolves into Obama's MySpace page where Huey's face appears in the soon to be President's friend list. The next speaking character in the sequence is the Limbaugh-esque "O'Rushballs" who rhetorically asked the counterfactual public of Woodcrest if Huey and Obama "leave each other glitter comments? The public has a

right to know!" This was done *before either* Obama's or McCain's fictional doppelgangers were presented to speak. The very dynamic identified in this research was replicated in a fictional setting.

It is reasonable to expect a similar dynamic is at play with others, particularly other political entertainers. Beyond Limbaugh we have briefly touched upon others whose iconic selves allow access and convey influence in the political public sphere despite a lack of official political standing. For instance, we described reactions to those like Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart in earlier chapters. Of course further empirical investigation is needed, but findings here and ongoing research from Cultural Sociology suggest that this is a worthwhile path to pursue.

But why stop with icons that have a correspondence with sentient beings? Casual listening to contemporary debates about genetically modified organisms (GMOs), gluten, and marijuana give the impression of similar cultural forces at play. What they come to mean in public discourse takes on more importance than what they actually are. It is even conceivable to move beyond material objects, sentient or not. It is possible that ideas also take on these emblematic qualities. Iconic dimensions of things like police-community relations, same sex intimate relationships, and even movie plots can also become something other than themselves, and carry publicly consequential connoted meaning.

One thing all share is that they are constructed as cultural objects cast, recast, and inserted, in patterned ways throughout the political public sphere. They are then drawn upon by interlocutors, even by those very things the object present themselves as (e.g. Limbaugh the person can invoke Limbaugh the emblem). By comparison the latter is certainly not bounded by the same constraints as the former, and in many real ways can prove to be more influential.

I argue that it is the symbolic construction and subsequent narration of the cultural objects throughout the journalistic field that augments whatever the object originally was with a new aura of importance. Journalism plays a significant role in inscribing these objects with meaning, and, along with other social forces, draws on dynamics highlighted here contributing to processes of collective social illumination.

Research has revealed that how entertainers are presented by journalists, experts, and politicians shapes their public meaning and significance. This dissertation uses this set of concepts to sketch a typology to help differentiate a particular type of actor, the political entertainer, and provides further support to the Cultural Sociology research being conducting in this area. By studying dynamics related to the meaning and positions they occupy in the fields of entertainer, journalism, and politics potential insight into dynamics of power in a mediated political world are offered.

Limitations and Correctives:

The research presented here employed Cultural Sociology as a useful analytical and empirical framework for studying the relationships between entertainment, journalism, and politics. More pointedly, it used insight to study dynamics of political influence exercised by entertainers lacking traditional political authority. Even more precisely, it studied how one political entertainer, Rush Limbaugh, is covered in the press, and suggested this process is generative rather than exclusively augmentative of his political influence. In relation to Limbaugh, former research understood the function of the press as one of the legitimization of influence. The research here suggests the press is crucial for the creation of influence because of an ability to 'fix' his public

meaning. However it is important to note that this research is decidedly exploratory. Although it has created a rudimentary model to capture how news and commentary shape Limbaugh's political influence several limitations must be considered.

An initial shortcoming of this research is that it only presented a single case study at a single instance. The data maybe informative, but it is still only based off a single snapshot. Generalizing the efficacy of the "emblematic" dimensions of Limbaugh, let alone political entertainers, as a significant component of political influence in a general sense should be treated cautiously. The research here is an important stepping stone, but the applicability of the findings in terms of developing a firm model of culturally structured influence, and an equally firm typology of political entertainers, is premature at this point.

One way this shortcoming can be addressed is through further comparative analysis. The methodology used here can be adapted to study other political entertainers. Doing so would conceivably capture the cultural construction of political entertainers that can then be built into subsequent analysis. Comparative analysis would be further bolstered if the set of political entertainers to be studied include Limbaugh's predecessors as well as his contemporaries. Researching a set of political entertainers spanning channel, format, and time would move scholarship closer to developing a more generalizable explanatory model that could better account for the dynamics of political entertainers' influence. Doing so would either help increase the validity of this analysis, or refute the claims made here.

A second, and related, limitation of the study presented here concerns time. This is in no small part due to a lack of historical depth regarding the sampled data. The empirical research conducted here was oriented towards one major political event. This was useful as a launch pad, but without making comparisons across time it is difficult to gauge if there is something temporally

unique that skewed findings. Expanding the data set of Limbaugh's press inclusions to cover other time periods would help determine if the emblematic dimensions outlined here are consistently patterned, or if other factors present during this particular presidential election more likely shaped the findings. For example, if patterns remained consistent over multiple elections or during non-election periods that would indicate support for the durability of the textual clusters identified here.

A third limitation of this research has to do with the breadth of sources used to create the data set. There is a pressing need for a more 'balanced' sample in terms of the ideological dispositions of news and commentary producers. Sampled data from sources designated as the Mainstream Press are considerably more numerous than those from the Echo Chamber. The most glaring drawback was the lack of a national newspaper with a Conservative leaning editorial stance. Some editorially Conservative newspapers considered for inclusion presented challenges. One problem was the distribution area. The major drawback was that many candidate papers were regionally concentrated, and not marketed to a national general audience. Compared to the papers used to comprise the Mainstream Press portion of the sample many contenders were geographically limited.[142] A second issue preventing other candidate Conservative papers from being included in the data set for the Echo Chamber were small circulation sizes. Although they might be distributed nationally circulation volume seemed nominal, and this limited their usefulness for constructing a 'national' data set.[143]

There are a few correctives that would go a long way to 'balancing' the corpus. Any subsequent research of the variety presented here would be remiss to exclude the Wall Street

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[142] For instance, the New York Daily News does have a Conservative editorial page, and a large circulation size. The major drawback is its regional concentration.

[143] As an example, the Washington Times was considered for inclusion, but industry trade groups have reported a limited circulation size.

Journal. It is a major national newspaper of record read by elites, and others participating in the political public sphere. Moreover, it is the most widely circulated paper in the United States.[144] As it was pointed out in the preceding chapters, existing research on Limbaugh has also highlighted the institutional connections he shares with the paper. The Journal's editorial page is considered an integral part of the Echo Chamber, and it simultaneously provides a bridge to the Mainstream News via its news sections. Including the Wall Street Journal could generate a clearer image of how the Conservative counter-public works. Unfortunately, the paper was not included here because of access limitations. Only abstracts from the Wall Street Journal were available in accessible databases, and the costs of access through other means was prohibitive.

Exploring alternative possibilities for access to the Wall Street Journal's archives could be pursued. For one, applying to small grants would help defray costs of access. It might also be helpful to reach out to professional and personal contacts the author has developed with employees of the paper. If access to Wall Street Journal should remain problematic other work-arounds exist. As an alternative several Conservative leaning regional papers could be combined to form a composite source. If aggregate content and circulation are comparable to a national newspaper organization this could constitute a 'single' print source within the Echo Chamber. Done carefully and systematically a collection of regional conservative papers could serves as a national 'index'.

An additional limitation of the research here is a lack of more substantial quantitative analysis. To the relatively meager extent it exists it is descriptive and preliminary. Certain deficiencies outlined above limited the purchase of further quantitative analysis at this specific juncture. If the sample size was increased to include other political entertainers, additional sources

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[144] Pew State of the News Media 2014.

of media, or a longitudinal data set more refined descriptive, and more powerful inferential, statistical tools could be used to reveal further insights not captured here. More robust explanatory models could be produced. Luckily, if the above suggestions are implemented this methodological approach could be built into analysis with relative ease.

Closing:

This chapter examined the significance and the implications of the qualitative analysis described in the previous two chapters. The research here explored questions about influence, mass media, and politics. This dissertation mapped cultural dimensions of an archetypical political talk radio host as they appeared in national political discussion. It adopted a program derived from Cultural Sociology to highlight dynamics of influence associated with public actors lacking traditional sources of political authority. More specifically it offered an analytical model to address how a political entertainer can come to be understood as politically consequential.

Conducting analysis within the parameters of the 'strong program' the research added to interdisciplinary "Limbaugh studies" that have not yet benefited from Political and Cultural Sociology. More than a reflective or legitimizing institution as other analytical frameworks suggest, analysis here suggested the press is an active participant in creating Limbaugh as an intersubjective referent built into limited sets of intertextual national political discussion. It is the institutional space where cultural structures are fastened to Limbaugh, and where perceptions of his influence emerge. This is an important and understudied foundation of his standing as an influential public figure.

To this end it selected a political entertainer, Rush Limbaugh, who had been studied somewhat extensively outside of Cultural Sociology as a case study. This dissertation developed an important alternative model to the extant literature concerned with the dynamics of political influence wielded by Rush Limbaugh. Much of the existing literature attributed his ability to steer politics to his charisma, a politically active audience, or the position he occupies at the intersection of political and media organizations. The research here offered a cultural model suggesting factors outside of Limbaugh's or his benefactors' direct or indirect action also contribute to his influence.

Journalistic inclusion must be conceptualized as a causal factor. Findings presented here re-conceptualized the role the press plays in these processes. In doing so it added to existing research by considering alternative mechanisms that engender Limbaugh as politically influential. Drawing on insights from Cultural and Political Sociology, in this instance journalism appears to be considerably more active in creating and fixing meaning associated with Limbaugh than previously thought. Unlike existing research on the talk show host this dissertation holds that the press does more than reflect his already existing political influence. To reiterate, it plays a significant role in 'creating' his political influence. Without the conditioning of public understandings of the political talk show host via the press this research speculates his influence would be considerably diminished.

Journalism textualizes Limbaugh within systems of meaning that position him as a cultural objects within specific discussion circulating throughout the political public sphere. This in turn implies that the talk show host's ability to steer politics through his own actions is more limited than previous research suggests. In a slightly ironic sense, the constantly and consistently excoriated press, namely the Mainstream Press, is in practice a major component in establishing Limbaugh's political influence.

There is little doubt that Limbaugh's ostensibly authoritative position emerges from factors related to his actions, but the explanations aimed at capturing the dynamics of his political influence miss how journalism plays a role in engendering, and not just echoing, his national political status and prestige. The dissertation re-imaged Limbaugh's inclusion in the press as not only a reflection of political influence, but also a source of it. To do so a new understanding of *who* Limbaugh is was complimented by an idea of *what* Limbaugh means in the political public sphere. In turn this insight can be used as a spring board for further analyzing how political entertainers more generally come to be regarded as influential. Concurrently new knowledge can be contributed to the social scientific analysis of the ever dynamic and complex relationship between media and politics.

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