

Little-News, All-Talk, No-Thought Radio

*Some receive their ideological inspiration from bumper-stickers.
More sophisticated students are instructed by radio talk shows of various formats.*

W I L L I A M R . A L L E N

FOR MANY, the mouth is the most important part of the head. This is especially discouraging and disconcerting on the university campus and in broadcast journalism. Scholars and commentators are both in the thought-and-words business, with thought intended to precede words.

One of the fundamental functions of the academic faculty is to impress upon young scholars that, first, college kids initially know and can do little; second, that they can accomplish much by commitment to laborious, unglamorous effort in the vineyards; and, finally, that the rest of the community has little reason to take them seriously by refined criteria until they are well on their way to fulfilling substantial potential.

Unsurprisingly, few of the college clientele well receive and fully accept the harsh message of attaining professionalism through effective investment. But they are boys and girls. How about the men and women in television news? Surely, *they* are committed to producing and selling a product of sophistication.

Well, how sophisticated can be a reading of little more than headlines? Some stations try occasionally to camouflage superficiality by offering “commentary.” And the commentators sometimes stress their seriousness by removing the coat and loosening the tie or squinting the eyes and furrowing the brow. But what they present is intellectual garbage — little but bias and bombast, with no theory, no deductive line of thought, no measurement, no testing of hypotheses. And sometimes they let the cat escape the bag, ac-

William R. Allen, although a glamorous member of the UCLA Department of Economics, is mainly ignored by everyone except Pooh, his noble dog.

knowledging that they are peddlers of garbage. After all, one news director tells us, “commentary is by its very definition not supposed to be objective ...!”

All this nonsense is predictably associated with the political-type prattling which is virtually the sole content of TV news commentary, given by innocent people of no analytic credentials. But there is more to hard news than antics in city hall, the state Capital, and the Washington Beltway, and there is more to commentary than the poetry of politics.

To express an opinion calls for the bearing of a responsibility — a responsibility of dispassion, rigor of thought, and systematic survey of relevant information. So we might expect senior people in the broadcast business to have some awareness of the usefulness of the basic analytics and applied logic of the accomplished economist.

Alas, happy-talkers of the TV news set evince the sophistication of college freshmen with respect to what are the purposes and products of economics and what economists can — and cannot — do. Television commentary is mainly talk with little thought.

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One thing worse than no education in economics is bad education in economics. And bad education is to be found in many places in addition to classrooms. One source of terrible tutoring is the typical radio talk show.

With few notable exceptions, the circus ring-master of the interview and call-in programs is a crude, cocky, cheap-shot poseur of erudition and shrewdness

who loves to domineer and delude. He — or an Amazonian she — has an audience of innocents who are poorly prepared to protect themselves from professional charlatans and are seduced into supposing that they are participating in an intellectual exercise.

The representative talk show is ridiculous, if not reprehensible. It is unstructured, unfocused, diverted into dead-ends by questionable questions, with occasional relevant suggestions never followed up and productively pursued, requiring herky-jerky shooting from the hip by frustrated guests. In the incoherent format, the blind lead the sighted willy-nilly into alien territory and thickets of trivia while appalling the visiting analyst with uncongenial and unsophisticated shenanigans.

Genuine and seminal thought — posing pertinent questions and deducing useful answers, fruitfully applying theory and drawing on evidence, systematically and dispassionately diagnosing and prescribing — is not conducted with a format of 20-second responses to disconnected questions, with commercial breaks, promotions, and traffic reports absorbing more time than the substantive discussion.

A fellow economist and I were guests on such a show to discuss the worrisome state of the economy several years ago. We were given no opportunity to

give prepared opening statements or summary conclusions. Together, we had 20 minutes actually on the air on a program spread over more than 80 minutes. And the 20 minutes divided between us — all in response to naive questions and inane comments — could not be used effectively.

WHAT BITS of wisdom and nuggets of information did the audience hear? Well, the head of an automobile company was quoted approvingly saying that the situation was the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s — a contention manifestly untrue. It was suggested that the Depression was a result of inactivity of President Herbert Hoover — a contention manifestly untrue. It was contended that the savings-and-loan fiasco was the result simply of financial deregulation and thievery — a contention manifestly untrue. Indeed, the untruths and distortions and misplaced charges and poorly founded generalizations piled up as high as an elephant's eye.

Hope springs eternal. My friend and I went onto the show to help the cause of comprehension. Instead, the professors inadvertently became participants in prostitution. So much for all-talk, no-thought radio. DEF.

THE WORKING PRESS

The Role of the Press: Negligible

The Los Angeles mayoral election was determined by forces stronger than any word processor.

T I M W . F E R G U S O N

THE NATION'S second largest city will have a mayor governing from the left after a May runoff, but it can be said that the press played little part in that. Although the *Los*

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Angeles Times in a classic equivocation endorsed both ex-Speaker Antonio Villaraigosa and City Attorney James Hahn, this election was determined by forces stronger than any word processor. Villaraigosa had the backing of organized labor and its increasingly potent army of ethnic Latino wage earners, plus allied interest groups including the greens. Hahn was backed by