

The Hyperreality of a Failing Corporate Media System

by Andrew Hobbs and Peter Phillips

Hyperreality is the inability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Corporate media, Fox in particular, offers news that creates a hyperreality of real world problems and issues. Consumers of corporate television news—especially those whose understandings are framed primarily from that medium alone—are embedded in a state of excited delirium and knowinglessness.

Corporate Media hasn't acted as a cohesive, protective "fourth estate" in several decades, instead gilding lilies such as the Iraq war, torture and the true extent of Hurricane Katrina's devastation. Contemporary corporate news is best seen in a post-modern context of hyperreality. The news from US networks is based on the presentations of partially factual stories framed inside socio-emotional story lines that juxtapose "evil" with patriotism and Christian fervor. There are multiple examples of this, but we will examine two distinct cases.

The bias towards hyperreality inherent in modern media is so rampant, consumers only need turn on the TV to be exposed to the spin. Two notorious, controversial modern figures will be examined here to explain what we mean by a hyperreality of knowinglessness. News coverage of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and right-wing radio personality Rush Limbaugh are unique examples, primarily because of their perceived opposing views and their unapparent similarities. But they are similar in that both should have little operable relevance to American policy, at least domestically, as one is an entertainer and the other is the leader of another country. They both are media personalities as well: Limbaugh claims an audience of 20 million a week,¹ while Chavez hosts a telecast every Sunday through which he speaks to millions of people of Venezuela. Further, they are both strongly ideological in their pursuit of their beliefs, which seem diametrically opposed to each other.

Unfortunately, they both have ill-gotten relevance, ironically at least partially gleaned from the massive amount of attention turned to them

by their press adversaries. This allows an opportunity for analysis: what is the public consequence of attention, be it positive or negative?

THE EVILNESS OF HUGO CHAVEZ

Big business would be foolish to ignore the threat posed to their supply side paradigm in Venezuela, since the longer reaches of Chavez's influence may well extend to far wealthier economies. Should the people's revolution in Venezuela gain footholds elsewhere, it will be difficult for those same economic models to be argued against here in the US. If a country with resources like Venezuela's is able to offer programs and facilities of a certain quality, why can't the US, with its greater resource pool, repeat the success here? Since Chavez's social advances for the people in Venezuela run so drastically contrary to those avowed to the captains of industry in the US, any action Chavez takes is systematically vilified by the US corporate media.

Fox News has been the epicenter for demonizing Chavez. Fox is one of the largest media outlets in the US. The station features such luminaries as Glenn Beck, who once called Cindy Sheehan a "tragedy slut" and discussed murdering Michael Moore² on his program. Fox attack pieces on Chavez are uniform and systematic to the point of redundancy. In examining transcripts from Fox news regarding Chavez, we find a continued use of emotionally negative descriptive terms like authoritarian, strongman, socialist, cruel, sinister, radical, militant, and dictator. Chavez has repeatedly over the past decade been democratically elected by a vast majority of the people in Venezuela. However, the US corporate slant on Chavez is always the same predictable negative opposition filled with emotional slanders.

After Chavez used licensing laws to shut down RCTV in Caracas, possibly because the RCTV directors were heavily involved in the conspiracy to overthrow Chavez during the coup of 2002, Fox covered the incident as if censorship had been his motivation, pushing headlines such as "Protests in Venezuela Turn Ugly."³ The first sections of Fox's coverage were full of rubber bullets and tear gas; as the story dwindled, Fox continued to report unsubstantiated estimates of mass protesters and increasing authoritarianism. This is the essential structure to most any news on Chavez found in the US corporate media.

Unfortunately, Fox's coverage never really examines the origins of the

protests—as in, who are the people participating? Are they the same individuals who so violently opposed Chavez a few years prior? A poll in Venezuela conducted after the closing of RCTV actually indicated a broad ambivalence towards the closing, with some 70 percent of those polled opposed to shutting down the station; however, most people indicated it was because their favorite soap operas and other programming were being cancelled.⁴

Fox News and Glenn Beck seem adamant about tying Obama's administration to socialism. Chavez provides a convenient straw man through which to beat up on progressivism, socialism, and President Obama as well. In a February, 2009 in a TV piece entitled "Would You Vote for Hugo Chavez?,"⁵ Beck claimed that the US is "on a highway to socialism" as a result of our move to "nationali[ze] our banks." He then proposed that, with one more bank bailout, America could be ready for a Chavez presidency. Chavez has become, for Fox, a symbol of evil. The resulting emotional knowinglessness is being used to undermine the Obama presidency. Fox completely ignores the facts of the enormous bailouts—which had been supported by the previous Bush administration—such as those for Bear Stearns and AIG. It uses hyperreal slander to describe Chavez, linking these feelings to Obama in a purely emotional manner without using logic or facts.

Led by President Hugo Chavez, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) gained over one and half million voters in the most recent elections November 23, 2008. Before the election of Hugo Chavez as president in 1998, college attendance was primarily for the rich in Venezuela. Today, over 1,800,000 students attend college, three times the rate ten years ago.

For the lowest-income two thirds of people in Venezuela, Hugo Chavez means health care, jobs, food, and security in neighborhoods where in many cases nothing but absolute poverty existed ten years ago. With unemployment below a US level, sharing the wealth has taken real meaning in Venezuela. Despite a 50 percent increase in the prices of food last year, local Mercals offer government subsidized cooking oil, corn meal, meat, and powdered milk at 30 to 50 percent discount. Additionally, there are now 3,500 local communal banks with a \$1.6 billion dollar budget offering neighborhood-based micro-financing loans for home improvements, small businesses, and personal emergencies.

In Venezuela, the corporate media are still owned by the elites. The five major TV networks, and nine of ten of the major newspapers, main-

tain an effort to undermine Chavez and the socialist revolution. Despite the corporate media bias and the continuing financial support to anti-Chavez opposition institutions from USAID and National Endowment for Democracy (\$20 million annually, paid for by US taxpayers), two-thirds of the people in Venezuela continue to support President Hugo Chavez and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Fox has no bounds to its obsession with Chavez. They have run stories about his rocky divorce and child custody struggles as well as his vocal contribution to an album by artists “engaged in the Bolivarian Revolution.” Barack Obama’s greeting of Chavez at the Organization of American States meeting, and its potential diplomatic consequences, warranted Fox commentary from Karl Rove, John Bolton, Former US Ambassador to the UN, *and* Beck.⁶

There is an abundant source of negative Chavez news found on the Associated Press (AP) wires as well. AP’s stories are often close to Fox’s assertion that Venezuela is a socialist petro-fiefdom.

Chavez isn’t without political moves; as any leader democratically elected multiple times would have to be heavy-handed to some degree. Unfortunately, only half the story is reported in the US. Again, the best example of partial reporting is the coverage of Chavez’s not renewing the broadcast license of RCTV in 2006, by exercising the Law on the Social Responsibility of Radio and Television. US reporting on this was completely myopic in nature.⁷ Had producers and executives of an American media outlet conspired against the US Government, they most certainly would have been dealt with in far stricter terms than those applied at RCTV. RCTV was allowed to broadcast for the remainder of their licensing period.

After the Constitutional Reforms of 2007, US corporate media outlets began claiming Chavez had inserted language into the constitution that could make him “President for life.” Again, this was a case of the truth being stretched. The changes had only included a reform that would have allowed a possible third term for Chavez. Other nations that do not have term limits at all include Germany, the UK, and Australia, yet none of these are labeled in the US media as “dictatorships.” That 2007 reform was ironically defeated, but a newer bill, removing term limits altogether, was passed in February of 2009.

The US corporate media doesn’t likely pose much difficulty to Chavez and his democratically elected agenda—he’s been winning elections since 1998. Moreover, what Chavez does in Venezuela has very little impact on policies and circumstances in the US. But the ongoing demo-

nization of Chavez allows for the perpetuation of a deeply embedded emotional hyperreality inside American public consciousness. A hyper-real Chavez is continually available for comparison with other contemporary issues.

US corporate media ignores many contemporary dictators. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who sits on the throne of an autocratic dictatorship under which women have essentially no rights, holds a perennial place on the “Parade’s World’s Worst Dictator” list,⁸ as does Hu Jintao, China’s President. Searches for each leader on Fox’s website returns a total of 806 and 888 results, respectively, from their entire database. The same search for Chavez—the democratically elected leader of a country with just three million more people than Saudi Arabia, but a fraction of China’s population—yields 2,743 pages. Saudi Arabia, home of Osama Bin Laden and fifteen of the alleged nineteen 9/11 hijackers, is portrayed as an ally to the US.

THE GLORY OF RUSH LIMBAUGH

Rush Limbaugh has found himself in a position of far more influence than anybody except himself could ever believe. Anointed “boss” by both the press and the right-wing lawmakers who apologize to him after contradicting his ideology, Limbaugh has taken his continued popularity as mandate and continues to push his agenda.

Limbaugh has sharpened his attack since the 2008 election, as seen during a June 4, 2009 interview with Fox’s Sean Hannity.⁹ Hannity treated Limbaugh as something of a moral and constitutional authority, allowing him to conduct himself in an almost pastoral way, delivering dogmatic sermons on Americanism. Limbaugh maintained the position that Barack Obama’s efforts to restore the bruised economy are tantamount to socialism and fascism. Limbaugh joked, “Fidel Castro and I (Hugo Chavez), If we’re not careful, are going to end up to the right of Obama” in reference (though the context was not related) to General Motors becoming “Government Motors.” Limbaugh went on to say, “You can keep a chart here of who’s nationalizing more, Obama or Chavez . . . it’s probably neck and neck.”

Rush Limbaugh was in the middle of a storm of exchanges between the Democrat and Republican leadership during the early spring of 2009. White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel¹⁰ claimed that the

radio host is “the voice and the intellectual force and energy behind the Republican Party.” Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele says he has reached out to Rush Limbaugh to tell him he meant no offense when he referred to the popular conservative radio host as an “entertainer” whose show can be “incendiary.” “My intent was not to go after Rush—I have enormous respect for Rush Limbaugh,” Steele said. “I was maybe a little bit inarticulate. . . . There was no attempt on my part to diminish his voice or his leadership.”

Crooner Pat Boone¹¹ waxes poetic in a tribute piece: “Rush Limbaugh is a patriot. Pure and simple, a patriot. I see him in the select company of other patriots like Paul Revere, Thomas Paine and Ben Franklin. Thankfully, he hasn’t been asked to make a dying proclamation like Nathan Hale—“I regret that I have but one life to give for my country’—but I suspect he would, if it came to that.”

Conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly¹² further holds Rush to be a model citizen: “One secret to Limbaugh’s success is that he is not intimidated into appeasing the organized pressure groups that frighten so many others into platitudinous mush. He takes them all on: the radical feminists, the wacky environmentalists, the open-borders crowd, and even President George W. Bush’s deviation from conservatism.”

Rush Limbaugh is a man of Christian values—although which congregation he attends remains a question—and believes that America is nation founded upon Christian principals.



Born in 1951 to a prominent Missouri family, young Rush was a Boy Scout but never earned a single merit badge. Perhaps to placate his parents, Limbaugh enrolled for two semesters and a summer at Southern Missouri State University; His mother told biographer Paul Colford that he had “flunked everything,”¹³ unable to pass even a modern ballroom dancing class. His career during the 1970’s was primarily spent as a music station DJ, moving from station to station before taking a stint as director of promotions for the Kansas City Royals in 1979. Returning to the airwaves in 1984, it wasn’t until the Reagan administration repealed the fairness doctrine that Rush was able to hit his full stride.

How and when was it that he has gained this fluency, which he purports to possess, and how does it display itself? Consider Limbaugh’s May 14, 2008 commentary from his radio program concerning the Great Depression and his choice of adversaries to defame.¹⁴ The Straw Man, a favorite tactic of Rush’s, is deployed. He Google searches some terms trying to uncover popular hits explaining the Great Depression; his search yields, predictably, an academic paper titled “The Main Causes of the Great Depression” published in 1996. Rush systematically disassembles the paper like an angry professor, not so much refuting it as ridiculing it, finally concluding that it should be checked for plagiarism against the works of Karl Marx. He goes on to claim the author, Paul Gusmorino, is “exactly wrong” after saying, “I didn’t end up in college and have my mind polluted and brainwashed by a bunch of Marxist professors.” Unfortunately for Rush, neither had the piece’s author Gusmorino. Gusmorino, who is currently a Program Manager for Microsoft, was in tenth grade when he wrote the piece in 1996—hardly a Marxist political economy professor.

Rush Limbaugh inside the corporate media is a caricature of patriotism and Christian values. That he lacks factual understandings of socio-political circumstances doesn’t matter in a hyperreal corporate media system. Just the fact that he is openly discussed by both political parties sets forth a emotionally-based parody of specific issues and creates an excited delirium of knowinglessness.

WHAT’S THE SCORE HERE?

Michael Savage found himself banned from the UK¹⁵ after his tone was “allegedly fostering extremism or hatred,” citing his claim that the

“Qur’an . . . is a ‘book of hate.’” Yet in the US there are no such challenges of hate speakers like Limbaugh in the corporate media. The US as a society has seen an undeniable upswing in domestic extremism since the change of administrations. Individuals associated with right-wing groups or following traditionally right-leaning causes, such as gun control or abortion, have emerged in patterns of hate-based excited deliriums.

On the night of Obama’s inauguration, “self-proclaimed white supremacist” Keith Luke was arrested following an apparent multiple rape-homicide, which left two dead and a third severely injured and raped; all his victims were black. He had been planning to end the spree with a massacre at a local synagogue’s “Bingo Night.”

Three Pittsburgh Police officers paid with their lives for Richard Poplawski’s paranoid fear that the Obama administration was going to take his guns.

Dr. George Tiller, survivor of multiple attempts on his life already, was gunned down in his own church, serving as an usher for the Sunday, May 31, 2009 service.

Just ten days later, eighty-eight-year old white supremacist, James von Brunn, took the life of a security guard and injured others after he opened fire at the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. These are but the outliers that reflect a disturbing trend. Already, some are questioning the role the media may be playing.¹⁶ Perhaps it is not fair to blame corporate media for right-wing extremism, but an expanding knowinglessness is undoubtedly a contributing factor.

Without a context of factual understanding, Glenn Beck is able to say on national Fox television news that the shooting at the Holocaust Museum was openly supported by 9/11 truth people. Beck claimed¹⁷ that 9/11 truth proponents see James von Brunn as a “hero.” Beck’s statement is completely without factual merit and represents a hyperreal emotional slamming of a group already slanderously pre-labeled by the corporate media as conspiracy theorists. Beck continued his diatribe by further equating 9/11 truth with white supremacy and Al Qaeda, claiming that they all want to “destroy the country” (See Chapter Ten for an update on 9/11 issues).

Our cultural decline will continue as long as the spin that incites it is present. The consumer body itself will eventually decide that these messages are meaningless. The ongoing decline of confidence in US corporate media is already evidence of such a reversal of belief. This becomes apparent when news—as entertainment media—follows the

same paradigm as any media, which is highly cyclical and repetitious in nature: it loses appeal and the carrier eventually fails.

Meanwhile, many Americans are deeply imbedded in a state of excited delirium of knowinglessness. Reversing this tendency is a vital part of building media democracy. Only a vibrant independent news media based in rational factually-researched news can alleviate our crisis of hyperreality.

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Notes

1. "Limbaugh's Audience Size? It's Largely Up in the Air," *Washington Post*, March 7, 2009.
2. *The Glenn Beck Program*, August 15, 2005 and May 17, 2005, respectively.
3. See <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,275912,00.html>.
4. "Venezuela replaces opposition TV with state network," Reuters, May 28, 2007.
5. See <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,494065,00.html>
6. Fox News Contributors, "By Greeting Hugo Chavez, Is President Obama slighting US allies?" April 21, 2009.
7. "Coup Co-Conspirators as Free-Speech Martyrs," FAIR, May 25, 2007.
8. See <http://www.parade.com/dictators/2009/>
9. Fox News, "Rush Limbaugh on Hannity," June 4, 2009.
10. "Steele to Rush: I'm Sorry," *Politico*, March 2, 2009.
11. See <http://www.worldnetdaily.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=70559>.
12. See <http://www.wnd.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=71100>.
13. Paul D. Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story: Talent On Loan From God: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).
14. See www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_051408/content/01125111.guest.html
15. See <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2009/05/05/britain-banned-list050.html>
16. Errol Louis, "Connect the dots of hatred . . ." *New York Daily News*, June 14, 2009.
17. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUTATYaIZYI&feature=related>.