

wonder, then, that the populist university is less committed to traditional academic values than was its ancestor. Golding has worked for many years at Duke, an elite university less given to assuming the character of a high school on steroids than some of its less prestigious brethren. Therefore he may have had fewer occasions to observe this phenomenon than those of us who teach at institutions where neither endowments nor SAT scores are gilt-edged.

This cannot be the whole story, however, because it fails to account for the fact that speech is under duress not only at pseudo-universities and near-universities but especially at such bastions of academic excellence as Harvard, Berkeley, and, yes, Duke. Why should they have proven to be even more susceptible than the lesser lights to intrusions by the censors?

The explanation, I believe, has much to do with higher education taking on political and social tasks that compromise academic neutrality. The elite schools have been leaders in this trend. No longer content to improve society through the slow process of nurturing individual minds in the classroom and laboratory, they have turned instead to wholesale political engineering. Are racism and sexism continuing stains on the social fabric despite longstanding efforts to weaken through education the hold of prejudice? Then perhaps the urgency of the situation justifies enforced sensitivity sessions and official sanctions against those who express themselves in ways contrary to what the enlightened have declared to be social imperatives.

Nor is it merely coincidental that as affirmative action has waxed, defense of academic freedom has waned. In the past universities, like other institutions, were insufficiently open to women and people of color. Now they attempt to atone by actively recruiting students and faculty from traditionally under-represented groups. Centers and departments dedicated to Black/Women's/Gay-and-Lesbian Studies are established in which holding correct political attitudes is as important as excellence in scholarship. Corners are cut to achieve desired ends, most especially racially based quotas for admissions and

hiring. Although these are rarely publicized or even acknowledged by university administrators, the existence of differential standards and favored viewpoints is hardly a secret on campuses. That knowledge breeds cynicism and resentment among some and insecure defensiveness on the part of others.

As noted previously, universities are not dispensers of comfort and equanimity even when they function as they are meant to do, and taking on these extraneous missions exacerbates tensions. In order to keep the lid on their rapidly boiling pot, administrators decree from above the civility that their own policies have put at risk. Whatever peace is achieved is artificial and temporary. Above the surface or beneath it, the cycle of acrimony and

resentment continues. The world hasn't been rendered pure after all, and that corner of it covered in ivy has sacrificed its birthright.

Unfortunately there are none so stubborn as those inspired by idealistic visions. We probably have some time to wait until universities abandon exercises in self-mutilation and instead rededicate themselves to free inquiry. The highest compliment I can give *Free Speech on Campus* is to say that it may shorten that wait by a little. ♦

Contributing Editor Loren Lomasky (llomask@bgnet.bgsu.edu), a professor of philosophy at Bowling Green State University, is the co-author of Democracy and Decision (Cambridge University Press).

Inside Outsiders

Three media mavericks come to terms with success

By Steve Kurtz

Matt Drudge, Larry Elder, and Bill O'Reilly are all media figures who sell their politics through a mix of news and entertainment. While they may have different beliefs, one thing unites them: They define themselves defiantly as outsiders. Thumbing their noses at the "mainstream media," they claim to give you the truth you can't get elsewhere.

These "outsiders" have now published books at about the same time; all of their titles have spent weeks on *The New York Times'* nonfiction bestseller list. In fact, *The O'Reilly Factor* even reached the very top of that list. If the Establishment is trying to stifle their voices, it's doing a pretty bad job.

Which raises the question: Just what is this mainstream anyway? Who defines it? O'Reilly has his own nightly TV program, Elder has a drive-time talk radio show in a big market, and Drudge has his news Web site, all easily accessible and all with big audiences. With more and more choices out there, and a greater variety of viewpoints represented, it's tough to decide what's in the mainstream and what's

at the fringe.

Years ago, the story goes, there were fewer media options. You had only three TV networks and they told you what the news was. If *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* worked at it, they could

Drudge Manifesto, by Matt Drudge with Julia Phillips, New York: New American Library, 247 pages, \$22.95

The Ten Things You Can't Say in America, by Larry Elder, New York: St. Martin's Press, 354 pages, \$23.95

The O'Reilly Factor: The Good, the Bad, and the Completely Ridiculous in American Life, by Bill O'Reilly, New York: Broadway Books, 214 pages, \$23.00

bring down a president. This version of things is obviously too simple: There have always been numerous alternative sources of information, and numerous media cultures and subcultures. Still, it's clearly the case that media barons have less power to monopolize information and analysis than

they used to. (Critics of media mergers claim just the opposite, of course, even in the face of vastly expanding choice.)

ABC, CBS, and NBC used to command 90 percent of the prime-time TV audience; that number has been cut almost in half. Upstart networks like Fox, UPN, and WB have nibbled away at the broadcast audience, but it's cable that has smashed whatever hegemony the networks thought they had. Viewers are likely to find programming to match their tastes—including their taste for news—almost any time.

First came CNN, with around-the-clock coverage, international viewership, and such celebrities as Larry King and Bernard Shaw. MSNBC and Fox News now beckon viewers as well. (Indeed, CNN has recently laid off hundreds of employees, in part due to increased competition.) It was once said when Lyndon Johnson “lost” Walter Cronkite regarding the Vietnam War, he knew he’d lost the country too. It’s questionable if Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, and Dan Rather combined could match that impact today.

Fox News has grown to rival CNN. Its biggest star is Bill O’Reilly. He brags on his show whenever he beats Larry King’s ratings. If CNN is establishment, isn’t Bill O’Reilly?

O’Reilly is openly opinionated on the air. His book, *The O’Reilly Factor*, is a chance to explain his worldview at greater length. On the plus side, the book is like his show—fun, lively, and, as he loves to say, “pithy.” He writes like the journalist he is, keeping the story moving, sticking to the point. On the negative side, a book is not a TV show. On TV there’s never enough time, and O’Reilly sometimes writes like he’s got somewhere else to go. The chapters are all short, and the paragraphs are broken up by headings like “Talking Point” or “Bulletin” or “This Just In.” His overall approach is often scattershot, lighting on one subject, then the next, without going deeply into any.

O’Reilly says he’s a political independent, though he tends to skew conservative. Yet he starts off the book talking about class in America, and readers could be excused for thinking they’ve stumbled upon a socialist memoir from the 1920s. He goes into great detail describing the privileged people he met while he was

doing post-graduate work at Harvard (they sound unlike any Ivy Leaguers I’ve known), and he’s bubbling over with resentment. Here’s the message—O’Reilly, a working class guy, understands the problems of regular Americans, while the upper class is clueless. This populism leads him astray more than once. It makes O’Reilly think the “system is cleverly designed so that a lucky few will get rich and grab power.”

While “the system” may indeed be far from perfect, it actually allows quite a few people to get rich, many more to live comfortably, and gives the average person a fair amount of autonomy as well. Class may be on O’Reilly’s mind, but America isn’t

Fox News has grown to rival CNN. Its biggest star is Bill O’Reilly. He brags on his show whenever he beats Larry King’s ratings. If CNN is establishment, isn’t Bill O’Reilly?

about the Social Register (if it ever was). O’Reilly notes both Bush and Gore are children of privilege. True, but what about Clinton, Reagan, and Nixon?

O’Reilly’s approach to class leads him to a common misconception about politics: that politicians could solve our problems if they simply understood us better. As if they could wake up and realize—“Oh, you want higher pay, better health care, less crime?”—then pass some laws to make it so. It also leads O’Reilly to believe not only that he’s an outsider, but also to cherish this status—he won’t fall for the lies the mainstream accepts.

This Just In: Bill O’Reilly, you’re a rich celebrity with a Harvard degree—you can stop complaining.

Larry Elder (whom I’ve interviewed previously for this magazine; see “Elder Statesman,” April 1996) similarly wears his outsider status on his sleeve. The very title of his book, *The Ten Things You*

Can’t Say in America, flings down a gauntlet.

Elder’s radio show is heard in Los Angeles during afternoon drive time. The rise of talk radio over the last two decades has presented another challenge to the idea of an agenda-setting “mainstream.” Talk radio leans heavily in the conservative direction. It’s not entirely clear why, though the older, suburban, affluent, and white listener profile might be an explanation. Many figures in talk radio speak as if they’re balancing the mainstream media, but who’s balancing whom? Millions tune in talk radio every day. You can drive across the country and never be out of range of Rush Limbaugh or Dr. Laura.

Even though many of the issues Elder raises in his book are interesting—among the 10 things are the problem of illegitimacy, the oversold health care “crisis,” and the interchangeability of Democrats and Republicans—his striking title is more than a little vainglorious. Elder’s perch is KABC, the local radio station of one of the big three networks—the one owned by Disney. He also does a daily simulcast on KCAL-TV, and is the host of the Warner Bros. TV show, *The Moral Court*. He’s built a career on putting out his message. There’s apparently a sizable audience that either agrees with him or is at least willing to listen.

Though it has pretensions of scholarly rigor, with 18 pages of charts and 20 pages of notes, *Ten Things* is written in a popular style. Elder repeats favorite on-air phrases such as “toe-tag liberals” and “the fit hit the shan.” He makes plenty of good points (about, for example, decreasing white racism and minimum wage laws), but still skips around a lot and sometimes doesn’t take the final step in his arguments.

For example, his first chapter argues that “blacks are more racist than whites.” Assume that Elder is right that blacks are more likely than other groups to see life in America through the prism of race. Is this surprising? For one thing, race is not an issue blacks can easily ignore. Also, any marginalized group is likely to be more radical than the average—if you looked at the most marginalized whites in America they’d probably be saying and doing more outrageous things, too. For Elder’s claim to mean anything, he has to do more than cite examples and polls that demonstrate

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the phenomenon. He has to argue convincingly that not only are blacks more "racist" by conventional standards, but that it's inappropriate to their situation because it ends up hurting both them and others. Elder starts down this path at the end of the chapter but never carries it through.

Elder may be correct that he's saying things that are seldom voiced. While both major political parties sometimes use portions of the libertarian argument (adorned by the usual caveats and qualifications), Elder's full-throttle version (e.g., get rid of the War on Drugs) is rare. But just because you may not hear something doesn't mean you can't say it. Maybe it's hard to get these arguments out there, and maybe the opposition is well-organized, but all these views can be found if you look for them, and the people who make them aren't generally punished beyond verbal disagreement. Then again, perhaps Elder, who's been the target of boycotts, is more sensitive on this point than most.

Along with O'Reilly's viewers and Elder's listeners is another huge audience: Internet users. The Internet does, in fact, have the potential to revolutionize how we receive information. It may even change things more than radio or television did, by breaking the mainstream into thousands of rivulets. Once you get on the Internet, the hundreds of choices cable and radio offer immediately increase into millions. What's more, they can be both personalized and made interactive.

In his *Manifesto*, Internet pioneer Matt Drudge makes huge claims for his medium. (And he does see it as *his*—I don't think I caught a mention of any other Web site in his book.) He seems to think the revolution is already over and the Internet won. Drudge, of course, created *The Drudge Report* (www.drudgereport.com). It started with his emailing show biz tidbits to a select few from his PC in a tiny Hollywood apartment. His audience grew exponentially and the gossip got to be more about politics. In 1998, when he broke the stalled Monica Lewinsky story, he made his name. His Web site presently gets over half a billion visits a year.

Drudge doesn't need to worry about the time constraints of TV or radio. He can put up whatever he wants, whenever he

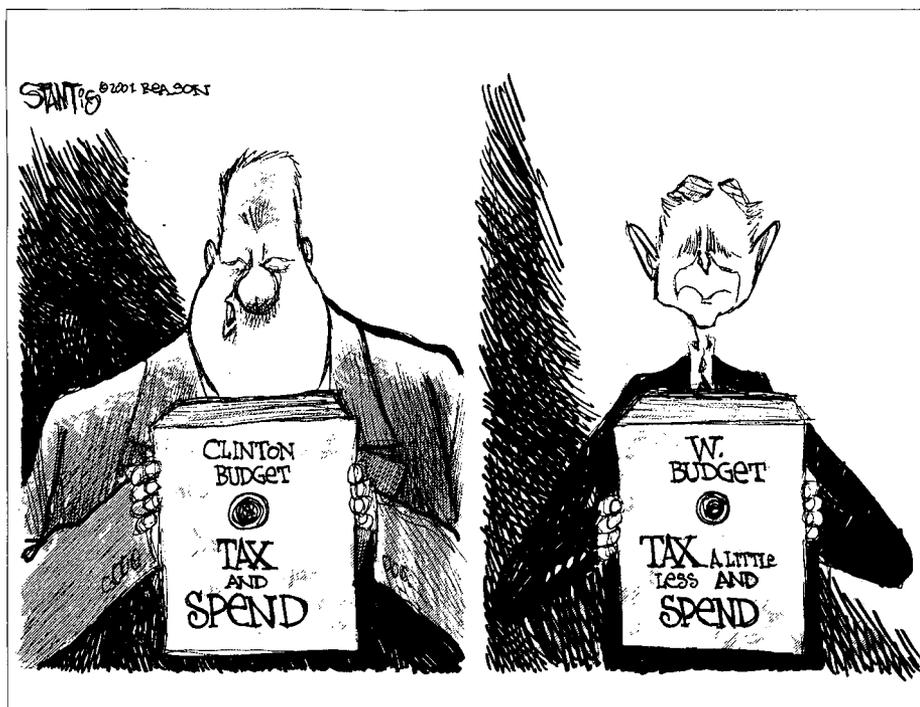
wants. At times, it seems his book tries to emulate this new world, going off in all directions at once. Drudge wants to be an updated Walter Winchell. As a result, he's created a book that's a weird mixture of film noir from the '40s, hipster language from the '50s, and Pop Art from the '60s. The book's layout includes different fonts, poetry, lists of diets, and pages with only the number zero. (Drudge keeps reminding us "it's the Zeroes"—most likely he's referring to the 2000s, but perhaps it's also an allusion to the 0s and 1s of computer language.)

He narrates his story as if he's the hero in a bad Raymond Chandler novel: "... hop into my red Metro Geo, whose balding tires squeal all the way home. Past Melrose. Santa Monica. Sunset. I twitch at the Bank of America on the southwest corner where I deposit my nickels and dimes. In the ten years I've lived here, I've related to these streets so many different ways. I've walked 'em. I've skate-boarded 'em. Bussed [sic] 'em. Limousined 'em. I've been chased, but most of the time I'm chasing around and down the boulevards I call home."

The eccentricities of this eclectic style aren't too bothersome when he tells us the origin of *The Drudge Report* or the backstage story of L'Affaire Lewinsky. But as the book devolves into a screed against our merged mass media, it doesn't wear well.

Moreover, his attack is overstated. The Internet hasn't taken over yet—people still get their news from television, radio, and papers, and the Internet is still mostly a supplement. In fact, a number of high-flying Internet content providers have crashed since Drudge's book came out. His mockery of the media and their many failings, his pronouncements that print and TV are dead, come across as braggadocio. (He believes his airing of Monicagate was one of the top 10 media events of the 20th century, along with the invention of television, Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now*, and Ted Turner's launch of CNN.)

Drudge may use slightly different tools, but he's in the same game as everyone else. He's broken stories that others wouldn't touch, and that's worth something, but his greatest claim to fame—Monica Lewinsky—wasn't original research, it was him releasing a piece that *Newsweek*, that most



mainstream of weeklies, was dithering over publishing. The Internet may afford chances for more and more information to be released (let the reader beware), but one source running a story that another sat on was common long before Matt Drudge bought his first calculator.

Perhaps the most salient difference between the likes of O'Reilly, Elder, and Drudge and the "mainstream" they vocally deride is one in prestige—or class, as O'Reilly would have it. But even that line is getting increasingly murky. Political leaders, authors, and others seem more than happy to appear on their shows. A few months ago, O'Reilly interviewed Elder. They bemoaned the fact the networks and other large outlets were ignoring them. But Elder had already been profiled some time before on *60 Minutes*, and would soon be on *Crossfire*, while O'Reilly would be interviewed on *Good Morning America* and *Charlie Rose* and profiled in *Newsweek*. Matt Drudge himself has been hired (and fired) by Fox and ABC.

So why do people enjoying such—dare I say it—mainstream success feel a need to portray themselves as outsiders? Part of the answer surely lies in the enduring appeal of such classic American figures as the Rebel and the Self-Made Man. America was born out of rebellion, and many of our popular public figures since—from Emer-

son to Twain to Mencken to James Dean—gained fame as individuals who were somehow outside the mainstream in one way or another. The idea of rebelling is safe enough today that Burger King had an ad campaign based on breaking the rules. Being called "mainstream" can be almost as bad as being called "politically correct"—it's more an accusation than a meaningful description.

In an American context, the Rebel and the Self-Made Man are particularly successful ways of presenting one's self. Work hard and please the customer, of course, but also create an image that you did it your way (another Burger King slogan). Sure, you could have taken the easy path, but you didn't just want to go along. This frame not only compliments the subject, but the audience, as well. They too are smart enough to see through conventional thought of the day.

O'Reilly, Elder, and Drudge did do it their way, at least to a certain extent. They kept at it and created niches for themselves. But here's the funny thing about rebels: Win enough battles and you become the establishment. Once that happens, it doesn't take long before some young Turks decide it's time to take you on. ®

Steve Kurtz (skz@mediaone.net) is a writer in Los Angeles.

Digital Dreaming



Here are moments from Donna Leishman's *redridinghood* (www.6amhoover.com), part of the most recent generation of interactive online narratives. Digital artists such as Leishman have been experimenting with the technology for over a decade, looking for ways to bring "readers" into their stories. Leishman, for example, portrays different states of mind of her main character in different frames. Other artists have achieved their own strik-

ing narrative advances.

But where, after all this innovation, is the audience? Interactivity remains a narrative novelty; digital storytelling, it seems, still has a number of aesthetic problems to resolve. Digital technology can eliminate cultural middlemen, but just how dispensable are storytellers and their control? Can these narratives ever escape a sense of game playing? Does active involvement prevent the kind of immersion that people may require of a story; that may in fact be the source of their pleasure?

Interactive narratives, like interac-

tive games, have so far worked best in convention-heavy settings, especially the gothic. (Think of *Myst*.) That raises some questions about traditional storytelling, particularly the extent of "game playing" in some of our most enduring—and convention heavy—genres. Aren't readers playing a sort of "Fool Me" when approaching mysteries, "Scare Me" with horror, "Move Me" with romance, etc.?

It may well be that a major achievement of digital interactivity will have been to more clearly reveal the hidden games of print and film.

—Charles Paul Freund