



Talk Shows

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Thomas Sowell

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Talk shows began to fascinate me when I was a teenager, many years ago. The first was the old radio program, "The University of Chicago Roundtable." Over the years I also began to listen to "Meet the Press," and to watch David Susskind's television roundtable program, "Open End," and many others.

In more recent years, I can't bear to watch most of the talk shows on television, and on radio I listen only to Rush Limbaugh and a couple of others.

What has happened? Is it just my becoming ornery in my old age or have the programs themselves changed?

None of today's talk shows is like "Open End" or "The University of Chicago Roundtable," and "Meet the

Press" with Tim Russert is not like "Meet the Press" with Lawrence Spivak or Bill Monroe.

"The University of Chicago Roundtable" was in fact a roundtable discussion among people with different views interacting and so was "Open End." That format is virtually unknown today.

There are superficial resemblances but the substance is very different. What is most lacking is genuine interaction.

Usually either the hosts or the guests have predetermined positions on issues, and they are not about to change them.

Regardless of what the issue is, do not expect either a liberal or a conservative to say: "You know, I never

thought of it that way. I agree with you."

That could leave a lot of silence, unless somebody had another topic ready to go. More important, whoever went over to "the enemy" would lose his standing as a liberal or conservative.

The people around the University of Chicago roundtable had no such rigid ideological role to live up to, and neither did the guests around David Susskind on "Open End." They had different views in general but they didn't make their livings being dogmatic ideologues or political partisans.

The net result is that today the listener or viewer is not likely to get much interaction on issues. Instead, there are far more likely to be parallel and prepackaged talking points.

If either a guest or the host has a pointed question that cuts to the heart of the issue at hand, the first thing the person on the receiving end is likely to do is sidestep the question, saying something like "That's not the real issue" — and go back to expounding his prepackaged talking points.

All that you learn from watching these kinds of "debates" is how clever some people are, how fast on their feet, and how big a supply of rhetoric they have.

Some guests are masters at monopolizing the time.

And when the other side tries to get in a word edgewise, that brings an indignant "Let me finish!"

It takes a hard-nosed host to break up this kind of verbal logjam. But too many talk show hosts see no evil and hear no evil.

Radio talk shows are usually not that bad, mainly because most of the people who call in are not professional talkers and the host is, so he can usually keep them from running away.

Still, incoherent callers are seldom any great improvement over slick and slippery ones. You don't learn much from either.

What you learn from radio talk shows depends on how wide and how deep the knowledge of the talk show host is. Some of them — Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, G. Gordon Liddy and others — are right on top of things.

The only problem is when they allow some hyped caller to just ramble on and on. That is when it is time to turn to some FM music station, preferably one playing soothing music.

The best part of a radio talk show is usually a monologue by a well-informed host. Rush Limbaugh often lets a caller's comment or question serve simply as a point of departure for giving an explanation of his own about some issue of the day.

Sometimes a well-informed and articulate guest like Condoleezza Rice

or Alan Greenspan can provide some real insights to both the hosts and the audience. But these are the exceptions.

Usually the best roundtable programs on television are about sports. Probably that is because there are no predetermined positions or prepackaged partisan talking points.

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