

Discordant Voices

A Survey of Conservative and Liberal Commentators

By Jim Lichtman

With analysis by Jamie O'Boyle, Senior Analyst,
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September 18, 2010

“A great many people think they are thinking
when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”
– Edward R. Murrow

Introduction

In the introduction to his 1996 study, *Radio Priest*, about the rise and fall of populist demagogue Charles Coughlin, Donald Warren points to political commentator Walter Lippmann’s book, *Public Opinion*, (1922), where the journalist “...argued that modern mass communication created ‘pseudo environments’ that thwarted the ability of the average citizen to make political judgments based on facts.”

Eighty-eight years later we are inundated with instant information from a variety of political commentators thanks to 24/7 cable television, the Internet, *Facebook* alerts, and *Tweets*.

But how reliable is the information that comes from these commentators; individuals whose opinions, influence and public appeal seem to be growing particularly during, what many have called, the worst recession since *The Great Depression*. Does the public listen to these individuals for news, analysis, opinion or is it all just entertainment? Whom do they trust the most and how important are the facts they put forth?

For the past year, I’ve been watching, listening and reading a variety of both liberal and conservative commentators for a planned e-Book review from an ethical perspective. That’s to come. During my research, however, I wanted to get some sense of what people listen, watch and read on their own regarding many of these commentators.

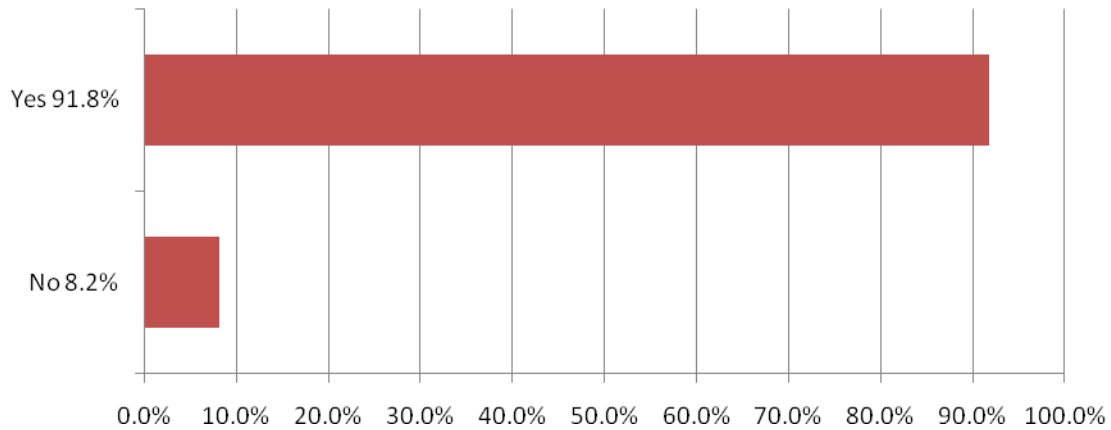
With the help of Senior Analyst Jamie O’Boyle of *The Center for Cultural Studies and Analysis*, I drafted an informal poll and posted it online.

One-hundred-thirty-eight individuals responded to the Conservative survey; one-hundred-four responded to the Liberal version. Adjustments were made to both surveys with respect to total responses and political identification in order to reflect a more balanced assessment. Some percentages may not total 100% due to those who skipped some questions.

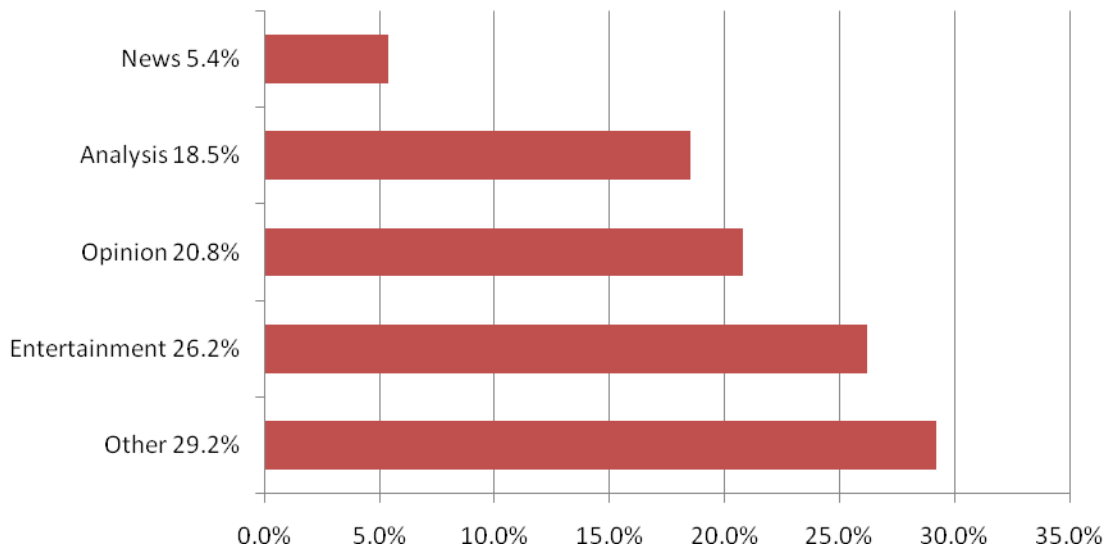
However, according to analysis from *The Center for Cultural Studies*, the results are probably a reasonable reflection of the public’s thoughts and attitudes about those commentators that were polled.

More analysis will follow in the e-Book. For now, here are the results.

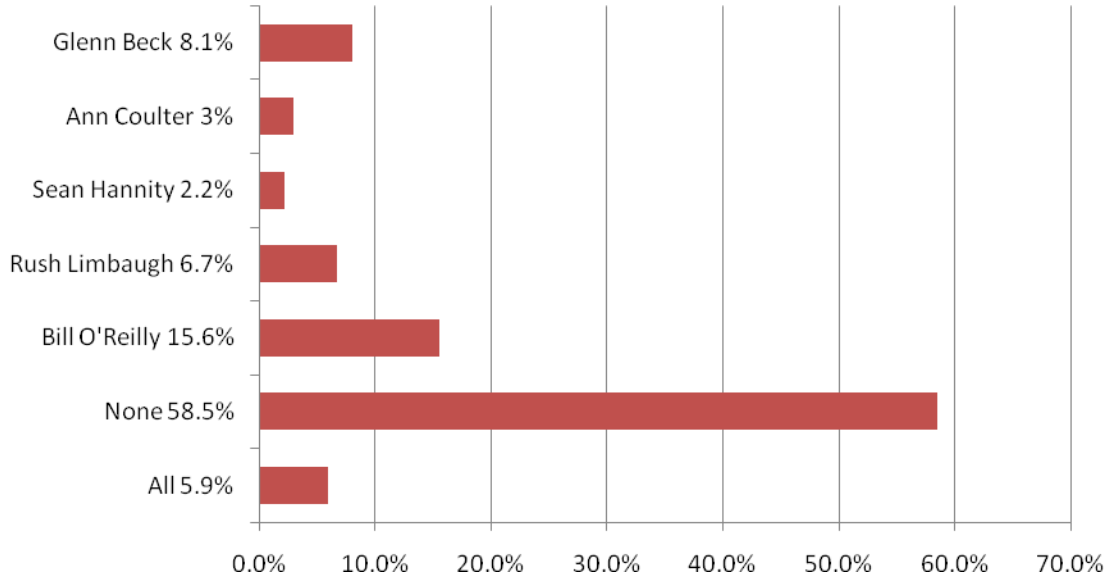
Have you ever listened to Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh or Bill O'Reilly?



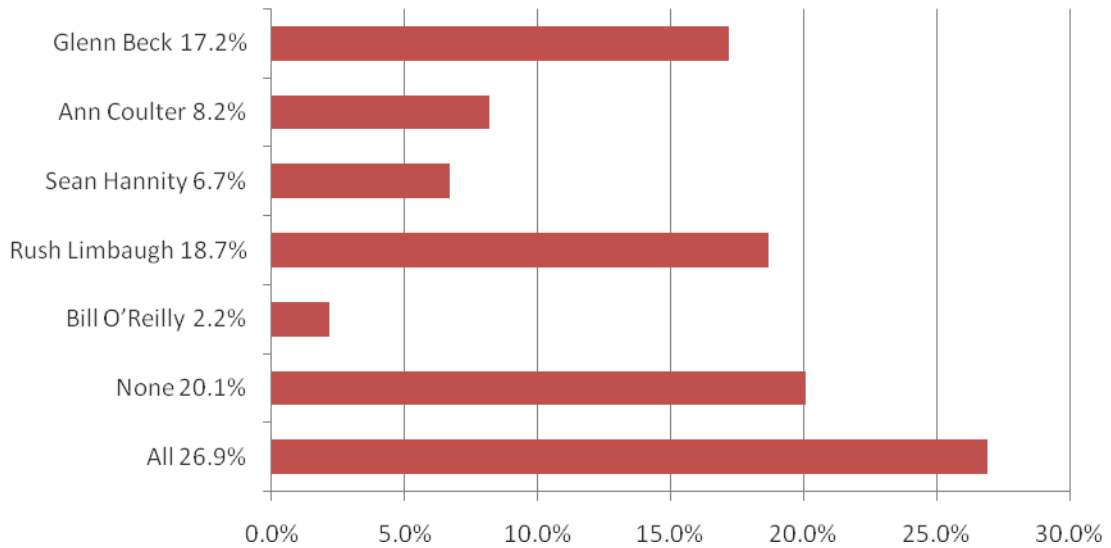
I listen to these commentators primarily for:



Who are you most likely to trust?



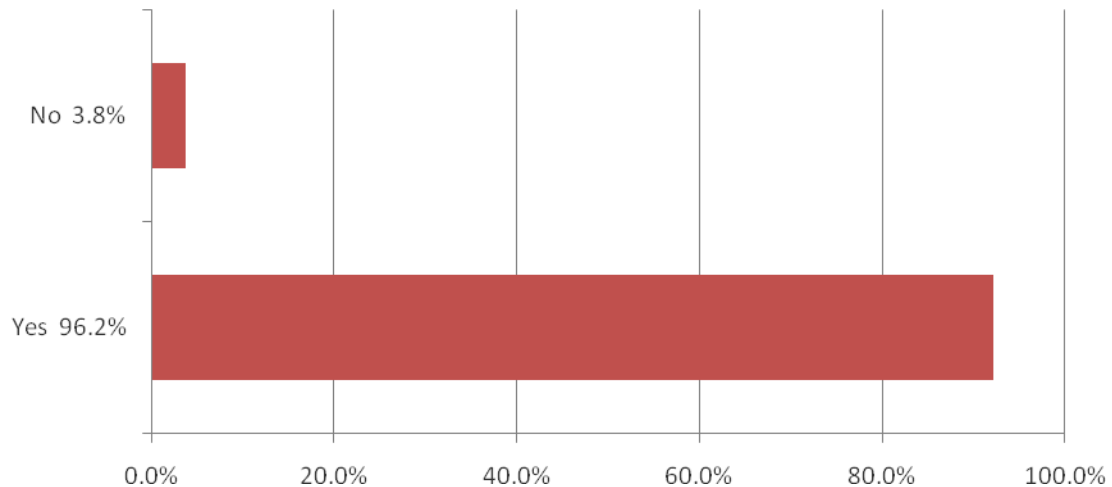
Who are you least likely to trust?



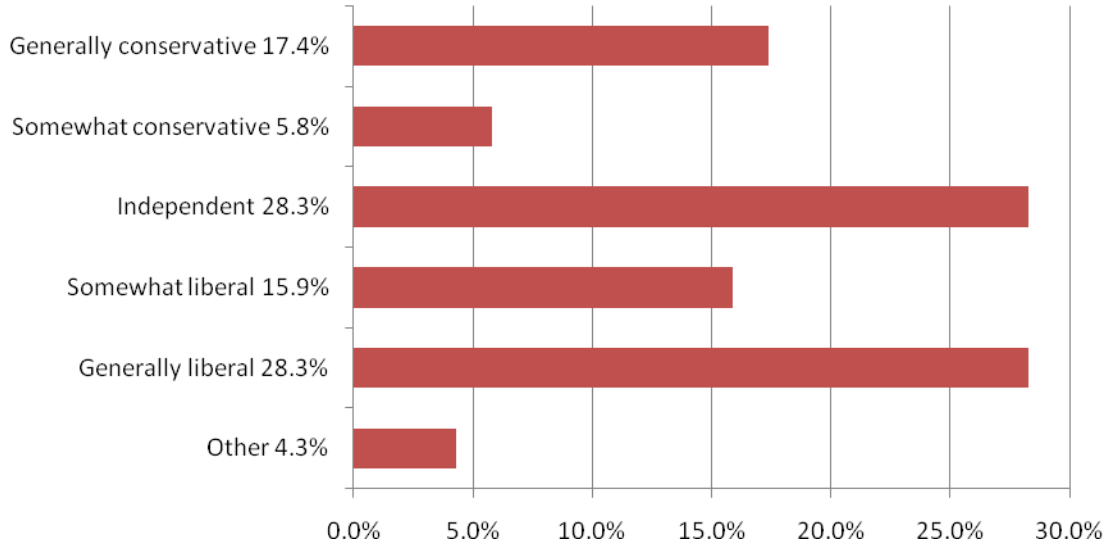
Do you feel that statements of facts from these commentators are:



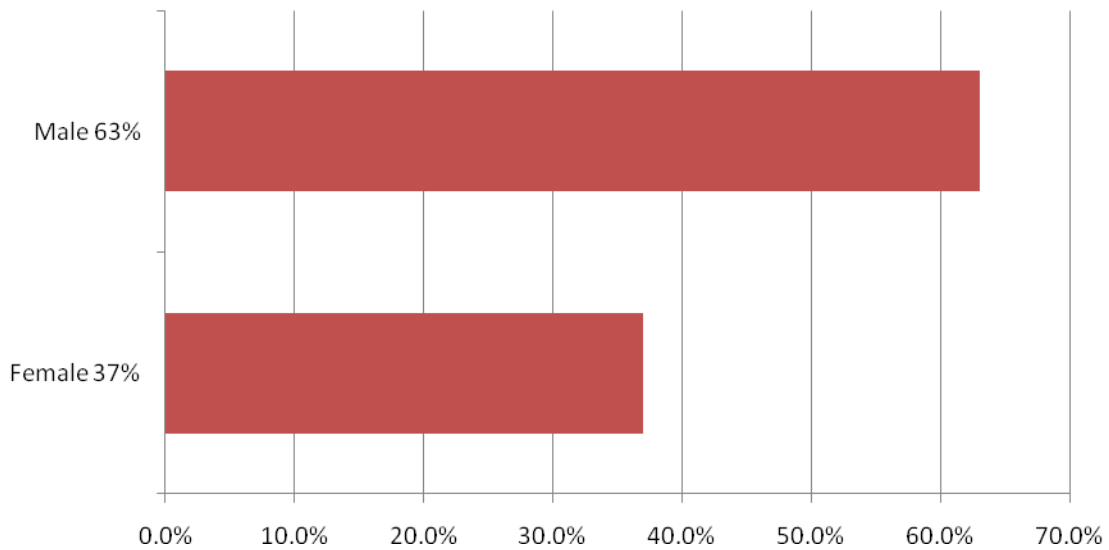
If factual errors occur, do you believe these commentators should make a correction?



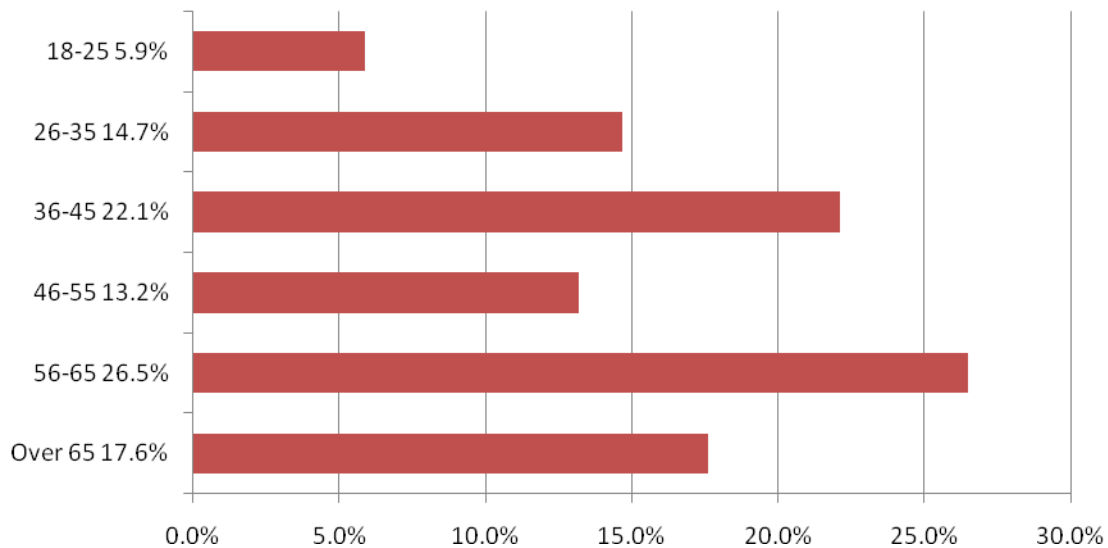
How would you identify yourself, politically?



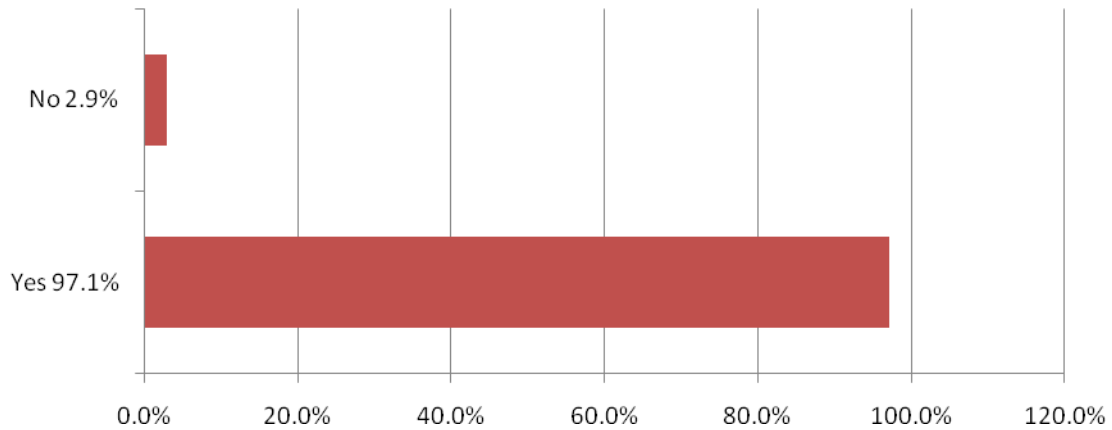
Gender



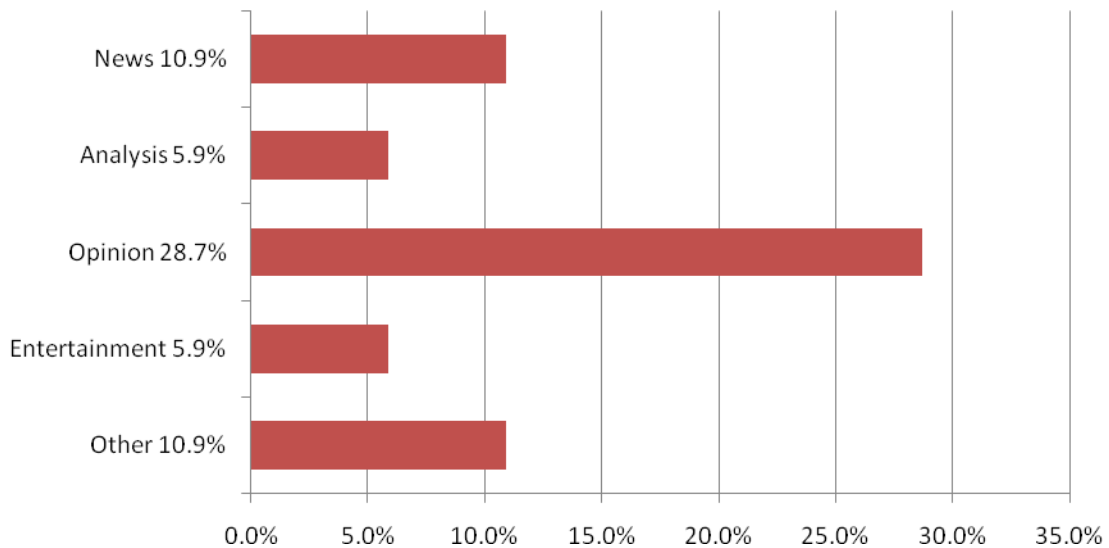
Age



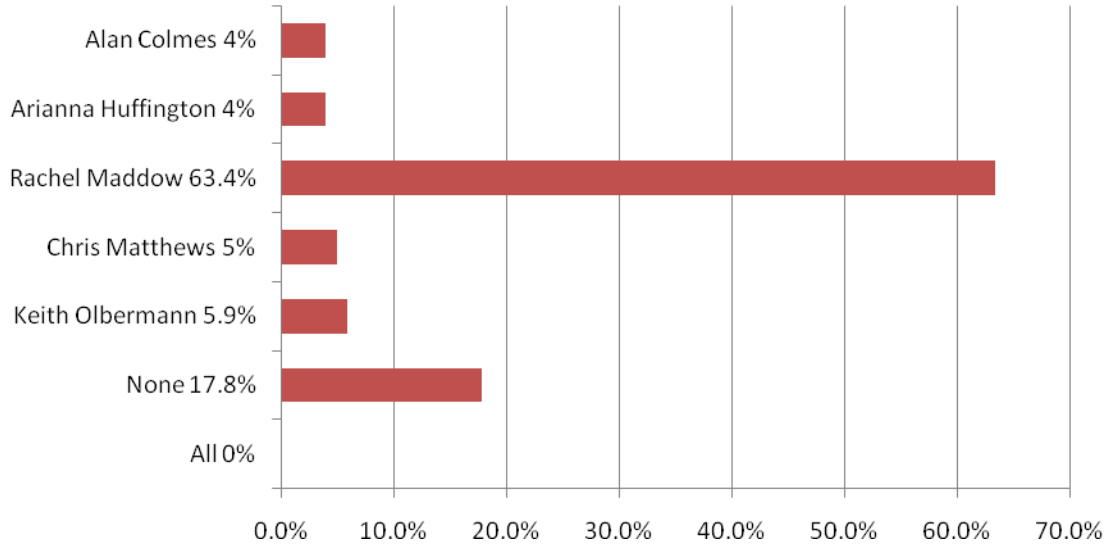
Have you ever listened to Alan Colmes, Arianna Huffington, Rachel Maddow, Chris Matthews or Keith Olbermann?



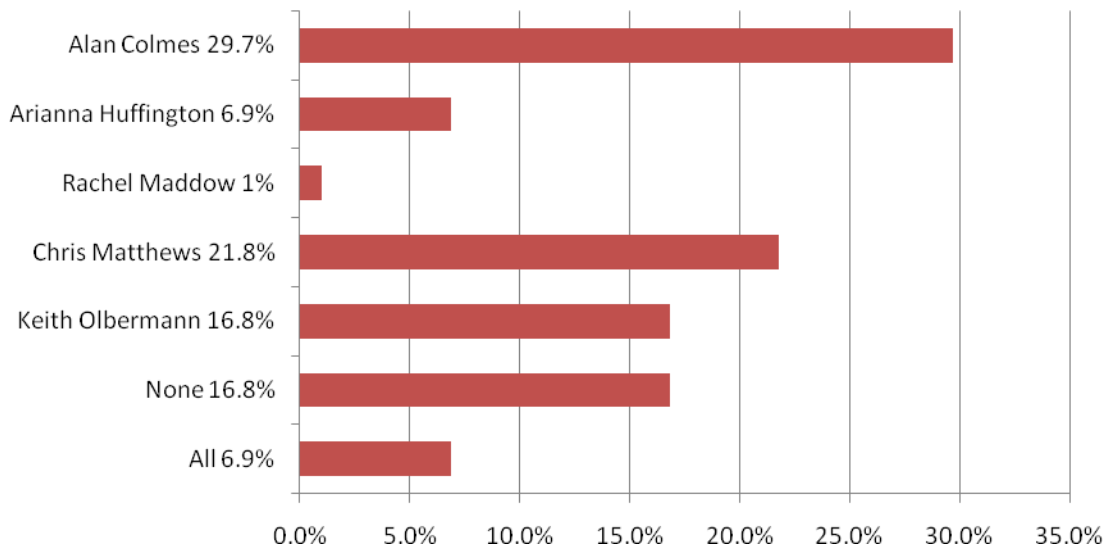
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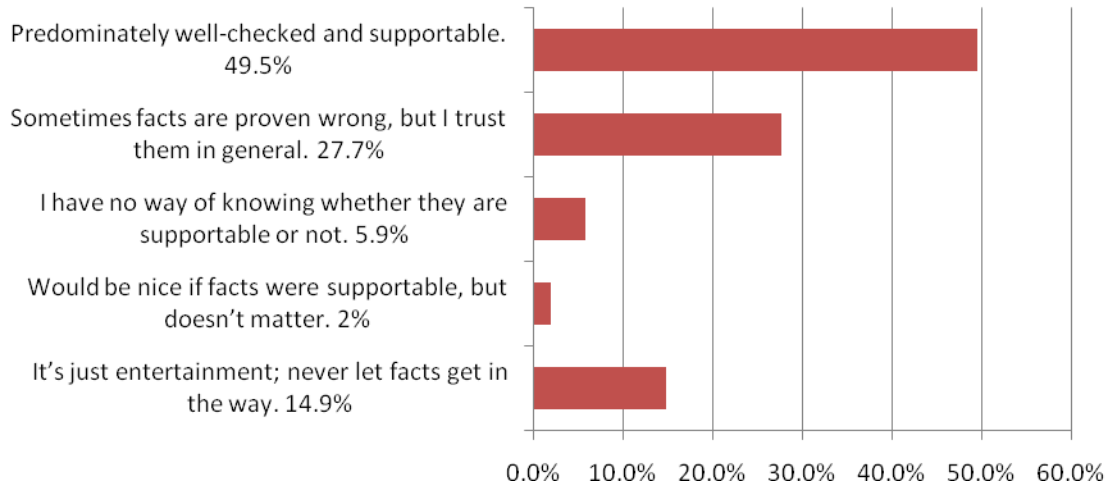
Who are you most likely to trust?



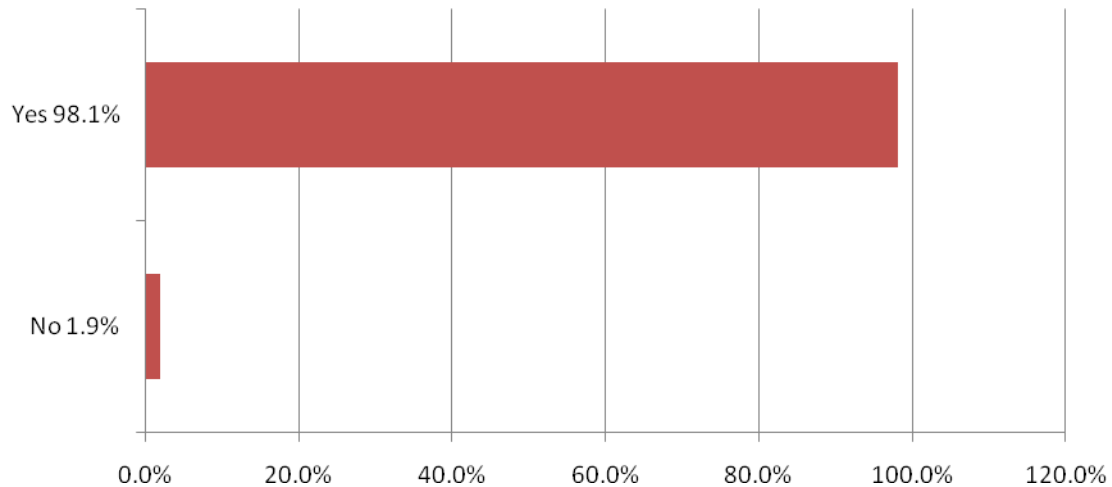
Who are you least likely to trust?



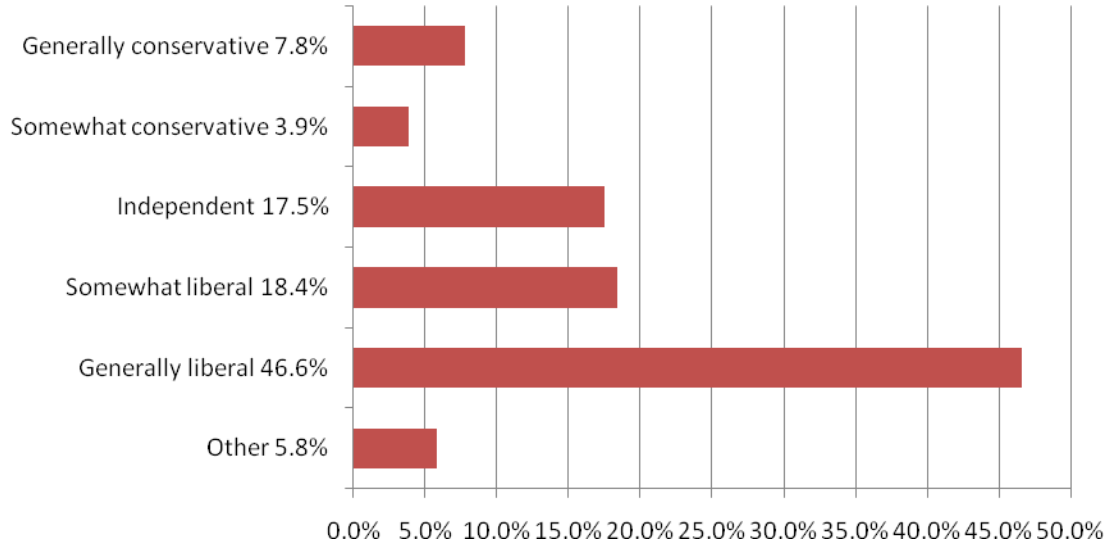
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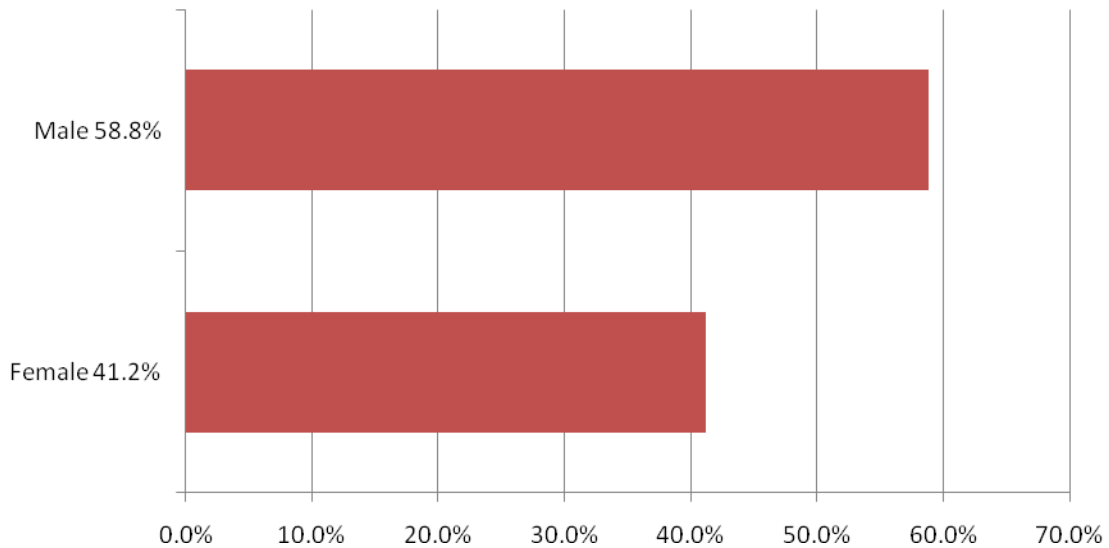
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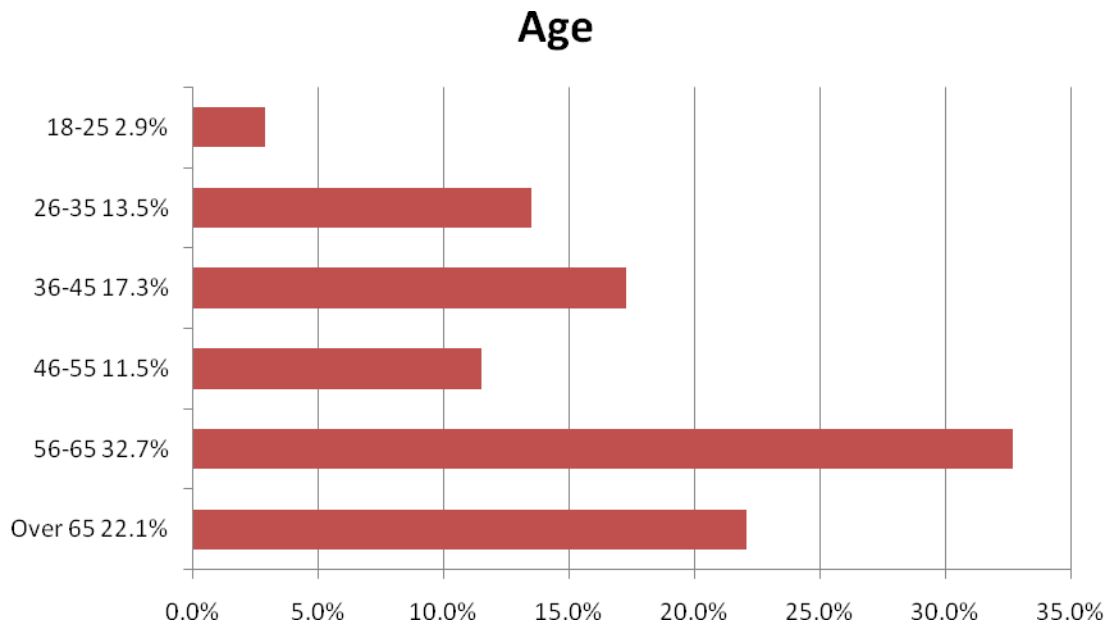


How would you identify yourself, politically?



Gender





Summary

With a majority of respondents aged 56-65, Liberal commentator Rachel Maddow received the highest individual “trust” marks at 63% overall; Alan Colmes received the lowest at 30%. Conservative Bill O’Reilly received the highest individual “trust” marks at 16%; Rush Limbaugh received the lowest numbers overall at 19%.

What is particularly striking from both surveys is that whether respondents believed that the statements made from these commentators were “predominately well-checked and supportable,” or consider them “just entertainment,” an overwhelming number (96% from the Conservative survey, 98% from the Liberal survey) believe that “if factual errors occur [all] should make a correction.”

After balancing the numbers in terms of political ideology, the analysis from *The Center for Cultural Studies* reveals some interesting conclusions about the way we think.

Analysis of Lichtman Conservative/Liberal Commentator Survey

Jamie O'Boyle, Senior Analyst

The Center for Cultural Studies & Analysis

Methodology

Some minor adjustments were made in order to clarify the results. Stripping away the individuals who identified themselves as in the liberal camp from the Conservative survey eliminated “other” and “entertainment” as significant responses in Question #2, and moved “analysis” into the first position, “opinion” into the second position, and “news” into third. Removing the self-declared conservatives from the Liberal survey had the same result.

In other words, if the respondent of either survey tended to agree with the content, then these programs were considered analysis, opinion, or news. If the respondents generally disagreed with the content, then they considered these programs as entertainment or “other.”

This edit brought both surveys into alignment, with identical questions getting similar response patterns. This, in our analysis, signifies a high degree of confidence in the answers since, while the political content of these shows is in opposition, the need they fill in the audience, and the niche – mass customization – they fill in the marketplace of ideas is identical.

Mass Customization and the Media

The days of limited choice in news sources are long gone. In the post-WWII era, networks controlled a limited number of TV news programs and, like any commercial product, these programs were aimed at the middle of a standard deviation – the largest mass-market audience possible.

Today, interactive technologies, such as the Internet and social media like *Facebook* and *Twitter* allow customers to interact with a company and specify their unique requirements, from which responses are then created that best fit those needs. The details of the collaboration, whether generated by staff, third-party collaboration or some other intermediary, are invisible to the consumer.

Don't think of these programs in political terms, think of them as products in an evolving consumer universe. For example, for more than half a century, Americans drank Coca-Cola. In the 1960s, their choices expanded to Coca-Cola and Diet Coke, and that held for the next 25 years. Today we have Coca-Cola, Caffeine-Free Coca-Cola, Diet Coke Caffeine-Free, Coca-Cola Cherry, Coca-Cola Zero, Coca-Cola Vanilla, etc.

The same principle applies to media products. We once had a single mainstream product with three major network competitors competing for the mainstream market, just as Coca-Cola, Pepsi,

and RC competed in the Cola Market. Cable TV is the current medium of choice for consumers looking to find meaning and validate their worldview.

Confirmation Bias and Memory

The human brain is a meaning-seeking device. Although Western culture has a strong bias towards the importance of conscious “rational” thought, over 90% of our decisions are made at an unconscious level. Thanks to brain imaging, we now know that, when the brain inputs data, the emotional centers light up first (what does this mean to me?), followed by the logic centers (what do I do with it?). To a very large degree, this means that “facts” are what people use to validate decisions already made at an unconscious level.

One of the outcomes of this process is a *confirmation bias* – the tendency of our brain to easily accept information compatible with what we already know and – more importantly – minimize information that contradicts what we already know, *even if what we “know” isn’t true*.

The unconscious weighing of information is one of the reasons it is so difficult to change people’s minds using logic. The information goes in but the importance the brain allots to each bit minimizes the effect of negative data while weighting more heavily the bits that already fit their preconceptions and worldview.

This is a principal reason why people don’t recall that commentators have given them information that was proven to be false. Their unconscious brain simply diminished its importance in favor of some other bit of information, and even the little that did get through faded rapidly from memory.

Conclusions

Once you strip out the self-identified liberals from the conservative survey, the answers to both surveys are almost identical. The audience sees these politically-focused cable shows primarily as analysis and commentary, followed by news.

The popular perception of a journalist is someone who reports on events, issues, and trends to a broad audience. By this standard the audience considers these people as journalists and holds them to the same standards as those in other media. That is, they believe that the facts presented on these programs are generally supportable and they overwhelmingly believe that errors in fact should be corrected. The fact that their unconscious confirmation bias minimizes contrary information operates at a level well below their conscious horizon.

We looked at these programs, not in political terms, but in terms of what important audience need they fill. As such, the explosive growth of commentary programming today is most likely a regression to the mean – reverting back to the historical norm of information flow for the U.S.A.

While younger and middle-aged adults have grown up in a period of media consolidation (multiple media providing identical news from the same source), the historical norm for America has been one of many competing outlets searching out the news and putting their own interpretation on the results. Newspapers were once this medium.

Today, cable TV and the internet have opened up new venues for the return of a very old American dynamic of competing voices battling for mind share.

The value of these programs for those seeking meaning and resolution – their primary audience according to this survey – is both in validating their worldview and giving them some feeling of community and control in a rapidly-changing world. The value of these programs to society is that they raise issues – often uncomfortable issues – and they force the rest of us to deal with them. We understand that statement has an American cultural bias towards freedom of speech and the marketplace of ideas. You might not like what the other guy says, the way he says it, or the fact that you can't believe anyone would be dumb enough to believe it, but that's your bias speaking, not his.

The growth and influence of commentary programming on TV makes for a political landscape that is messy, frustrating, and often mean-spirited. It challenges – and often mocks – our deeply-held beliefs. It makes us angry. It forces us to deal with issues we'd rather not, and revisit issues we thought were resolved.

But then, that's also a pretty fair description of America.

* * *

Questions/ Comments –

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