

Let's Talk About It

Talk radio's take on K–12 education

BY MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

This past June, with the immigration reform bill under attack from the Republican Party's conservative base, Senate Minority Whip Trent Lott complained that "talk radio is running the country." Judging by current trends, he might be right. According to a 2006 study by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 20 percent of Americans regularly listen to political call-in shows, up from 13 percent in 1996. Seventeen percent report listening regularly to National Public Radio, up four points from 1996. Meanwhile, newspaper audiences are shrinking, with daily readership down 10 points from 1996 to 2006, from 50 percent to 40 percent of the population.

This shift could have big implications for public policy debates, including those regarding education. A segment on the *Rush Limbaugh Show* (the nation's most popular, with 13.5 million weekly listeners) apparently reaches more people than an op-ed in the *New York Times* (with a daily print circulation of 1.1 million, and a monthly online readership of 12 million). Of course, this assumes that radio shows talk about education. But do they?

The short answer is yes, but not much. Consider *Rush*. Its online archives only allow searches going back a month, so my summer research intern scoured the July 2007 programs for any discussion of K–12 education. The topic came up a paltry five times, versus hours of airtime for the Iraq war and immigration.

Limbaugh's treatment of education was mostly as you might expect, with several segments focused on "culture wars" issues rather than weighty policy debates. For instance, one day he interviewed a 13-year-old who doubts that global warming is man-made, even though his teacher taught him that it is; another day the host ranted about Democrats' support for sex education for kindergartners.

Still, some of his monologues hinted at core education debates. For example, a teacher called in to argue that we shouldn't try to produce a nation of "Einsteins," that we'll always need bricklayers and so forth. Limbaugh responded, "A lot of people that are out laying bricks or whatever the manual labor you're talking about, building roads and so forth, a lot of them got decent math scores when they were in school. It was required. It was called well-rounded education."

On the same day, he ridiculed the Pittsburgh school system for dropping the word "Public" from its name. "Let me tell you people in Pittsburgh something. It has nothing to do with what you call it! Gee! It's called results! You just have to marvel at bureaucrats in the way they tackle a problem—they don't fix the problem. They fix a name—that may get rid of the bad image—but it doesn't fix the problem."

And on another day, he attacked Hillary Clinton's preschool proposal: "Now, what you have to remember about this, she's saying that the government should take

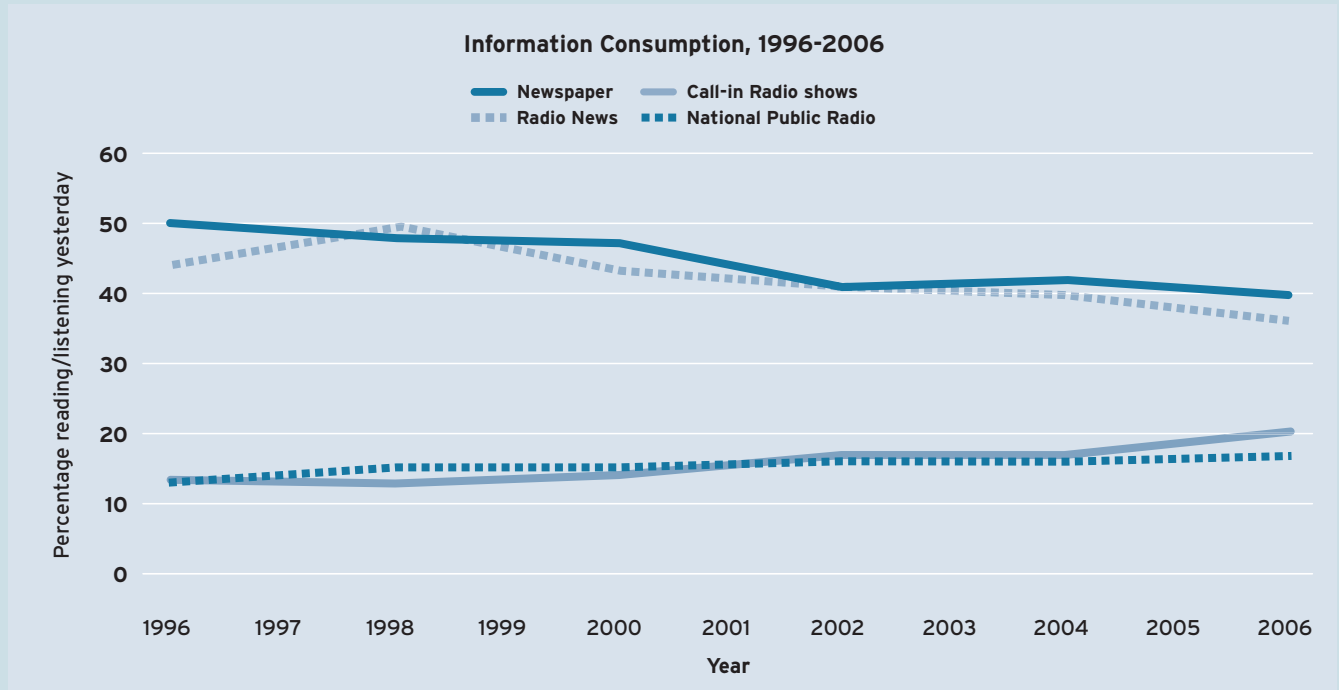
over small, independent preschools. What are small, independent preschools? They are independent and private businesses. A preschool is a private business. You send your kid to a preschool that's not part of the state education system, and you're paying for it, you obviously know you're sending your kid to a private business. Hillary Clinton wants to come in and essentially nationalize them all, under state control. I'm telling you, these people, if they get power, if they win the White House, the first thing that they're going to do is go after and outlaw home schooling. It's going to happen so fast it will curl your hair."

How does this compare to the other side of the dial—and the other side of the ideological spectrum—on National Public Radio? Consider Neal Conan's *Talk of the Nation*, the most popular call-in news show on NPR. Including comments

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Talkin' Trends (Figure 1)

Over the past decade, talk radio and National Public Radio listeners increased as consumption of more traditional news sources declined.



SOURCE: Pew Research Center for People and the Press

from listeners, it handled education just eight times during July 2007, hardly better than *Rush*.

Most surprisingly, its coverage wasn't terribly different. Examining shows from August 2006 to July 2007, we spotted a handful that would appeal to policy wonks (such as one on mayoral control, and another on the "future of science education"). But most of its education segments focused on hot-button kitchen-table issues. Contemplate these titles of *Talk of the Nation* shows: "Unhooked' Author Warns Against 'Hooking Up'"; "Does Zero Tolerance Make Sense for Toy Guns?"; Schools and Childhood Obesity"; and "Parent Sues School Over Student's Poor Grades."

What's the lesson? While talk radio rarely wades into the minutiae of education policymaking—in part because education isn't high on the public's agenda right now—

those of us concerned with school reform ignore this medium at our peril. All policies, to stand the test of time, must connect with a citizenry's core values, and these values are increasingly reflected (and shaped) by talk radio. Limbaugh might not mention "universal proficiency," and Conan might not take up "persistently dangerous schools," but by discussing a bricklayer's need to know math, or the appropriate discipline for students bringing toy guns to school, they are laying the foundation for the policy debates we wonks find so riveting. ■

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