The Other Populist Media:
The Rise of The Prog-Left and the Decline of Legacy Media?

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This exploratory qualitative study utilizes a conceptual content analysis to better understand the prog-left media ecosystem. Prog-left media is short for the progressive left media in the U.S. The use of the term, "progressive" distinguishes them from the center left of the American political spectrum. We performed two rounds of coding on seven prog-left programs that appeared between June 2019 and January 2021. During the second cycle of coding, we used pattern coding to categorize the codes into themes: Guests, Neoliberalism, Professional Managerial Class, Elites and Elite Culture, and Mainstream Media. We then compiled these themes into four findings: the prog-left programs have diverse formats, but reoccurring guests; prog-left programming largely centers on critiques of neoliberalism; the prog-left programs frame U.S. political parties as anti-working class servants to wealthy elites; and the prog-left programming illuminates and denounces the influence of elite culture on U.S. institutions. This study contributes to the advancement of the application of media ecology theory in digital spaces, and provides a rich understanding for future research on the prog-left media ecosystem

"So the Bernie "revolution" was a dud and disappeared right in front of our very eyes, while spawning a new prog-left media ecosystem that is very profitable for a few key influencers…." began Yasha Levine's (2020) 2020 Christmas Eve diatribe about the burgeoning leftist media ecosystem. Prog-left is short for the progressive left media in the U.S. The use of the term "progressive" distinguishes them from the center left of the American political spectrum. Also known as the "Bernie Bros" or "dirtbag left" (Beauchamp, 2020), the prog-left media ecosystem includes an emerging set of personalities and programs that present themselves as a populist alternative to establishment liberal political discourse. These nascent media makers draw in a sizable audience that numbers in the thousands and sometimes millions with programs such as *"Rising," "Useful Idiots,"* and *"The Jimmy Dore Show."*

Much of the prog-left content is found on podcast platforms such as Spotify and iTunes. Podcasts are readily accessible digital files that contain audio and or video content (Haygood, 2007). Podcasts act as platforms for ideologies and views outside of mass media discourses (Baham & Higdon, 2021). Given their accessibility and diverse content, podcasts continue to grow in terms of popularity. Between 2018 and 2019, the amount of active podcast programs climbed from 550,000 to 750,000 (Whitner, 2021). Over half of Americans have listened to a podcast, and over one-third of Americans tune in regularly (Pew Research Center, 2019). Political podcasts, specifically, have witnessed an increase in popularity over the past several years. This is notably due to easy accessibility and aspects of entertainment associated with podcasts in comparison to radio, which can at times feel more impersonal to listeners (Boucher, 2017). In addition, political podcasts, including podcasts in the prog-left media ecosystem, have offered an environment to have thoughtful conversations, even across huge differences in beliefs, contributing even further to the growing popularity of the media subculture (Baham & Higdon, 2021; Locke, 2016).

Over the last five years, audiences have increasingly abandoned legacy media for digital sources (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017; Shearer, 2018; The Pew Research Center, 2015). For example, following the inauguration of President Biden, ratings for cable news plummeted with outlets such as *The New York Times*, MSNBC, and CNN losing a fifth, fourth, and half of their audience respectively (Bridge, G., 2021; Preston, K., 2021). Meanwhile, the portion of Americans who rely on social media and YouTube – both of which provide access to legacy and alternative news content (Napoli, 2019) - for their news has surpassed those who rely on newspapers (Shearer, 2018; Stocking, G., Van Kessel, P., Barthel, K., Eva Matsa, K., & Khuzam, M., 2020). This trend is also occurring among older generations (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017).

Online populist rhetoric has some influence on progressive political discourses. At the time Levine was writing, the prog-left media was drawing the attention of law makers for using populist rhetoric to call for a second round of stimulus checks to U.S. citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic (Picchi, 2020) as well as the halt of Nancy Pelosi's nomination to Speaker of the House in exchange for a vote on Medicare for All (McFall, 2021; Relman, 2020). In fact, prog-left programs often host lawmakers, such as U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders, U.S. House of Representatives member Ro Khanna, and State Senator and former Ohio State Senator Nina Turner. In addition to law makers, a plethora of intellectuals regularly appear on prog-left media programs, such as Cornel West, Thomas Frank, Adolph Reed, and Noam Chomsky.

The 2016 election season spurred an interest in online populist media ecosystems (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Krafft, P. M., & Donovan, J. (2020); Entman, & Usher, 2018; Wendling, 2018). However, the research largely focused on right-leaning populist media, which was associated with electoral outcomes in Great Britain, the United States, and the Philippines. Despite their access and influence on those in positions of power, equal attention was not paid to the prog-left media ecosystem. Given their growing size and influence since 2016, this exploratory qualitative study utilizes a conceptual content analysis of to better understand the prog-left media ecosystem.

Literature Review

Scholars utilize a media ecology lens to analyze media ecocsystems. The theoretical concepts of media ecology derive from the work of McLuhan (1964), but Postman (1970) provided the first definition: "Media ecology is the study of media as environments." By connecting Postman's definition to McLuhan's theoretical concepts, Nystrom (1973) formalized media ecology as a field of study. Since then, U.S. scholars have come to understand media ecology to be an interdisciplinary field that studies media environments (Islas & Bernal, 2016; Moran, 2017; Strate, 2004, 2006). Rather than individual processes or essences, media ecology scholars examine ecosystems which are the networked relations of humans and technology (Stephens, 2019).

In the digital age, scholars continue to utilize a media ecology lens for studying political and news media ecosystems (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Haw, 2020; Hopster, 2021). Entman and Usher (2018) examined the digital maturity of right and left-leaning media ecosystems, which refers to how effective they are at using platforms, analytics, algorithms, ideological media, and rogue actors to convince audiences to accept their socio-political information and frames. Entman and Usher (2018) concluded that right, not left-leaning, media ecosystems had reached digital maturity. This may explain why right-leaning populist media ecosystem have garnered substantial attention from scholars, (Krafft, P. M., & Donovan, J. (2020; Krafft, & Donovan, 2020; Entman & Usher, 2018; Wendling, 2018), but there has been a dearth of studies into left-leaning media ecosystems.

Further complicating the study of left-leaning populist news media ecosystems is confusion over the word *populism*, which is often misapplied in academic research and popular discourses (Gagnon, Beausoleil, Son, Arguelles, Chalaye & Johnston, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). The term "populism" originated as a descriptor of the late 19th century movements that coalesced around the multi-racial working class and farmer led political movement of the late 19th century (Frank, 2020). Frank (2020, p. 13) explains that

> from the very beginning, then, populism had two meanings. There is populism as its proponents understood it, mean a movement in which ordinary citizens demanded democratic economic reforms. And there is populism as its enemies characterized it: a dangerous movement of groundless resentment and which demagogues led the distributable.

The second definition was largely popularized by the famed historian Richard Hofstadter (1955) who claimed that populism was a form of irrational activism grounded in baseless conspiracies, profiteering, and nativism. Although Hofstadter's definition was largely panned at the time of its publication (Pollack, 1960), it continued to be used in academic literature (Frank, 2020; Salmela & von Scheve, 2018; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). Frank (2020) argued that the misappropriation of "populism" resulted from college educated elites who wanted to legitimize their position as the sole arbiter of progressive policy changes.

Scholars have found that although they share a rejection of elites, the political ideology of left and right-leaning brands of populism differ in where they place their ire. For example, leftleaning populists tend to be more focused on economics - seeking to create societal bonds to undermine the austerity policies of elites, while right-leaning populism is more focused on culture – utilizing divisive rhetoric and repressive measures against those they view as cultural elites (Finkelstein, 2017; Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). Schmuck and Hameleers' (2020) comparison of left- and right-leaning populist communication in digital spaces found that right-leaning populism exudes more negativity than left-leaning populism, and typically blames immigrants for societal ills. In contrast, left-leaning populism offers more positive messaging, but asserts that "elites" are responsible for societal problems (p. 1543). Although national populist right-leaning politicians rely on economic rhetoric, their messaging centers on a rejection of cultural elitism (Hawley & Hanania, 2020). Despite these differences, scholars have also found that populist messaging is highly emotional and oriented toward conflict (Fieschi & Heywood, 2006; Lonergan & Blythe, 2020; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020; Taggart, 2000).

In the United States, the scholarship on populism has not spurred much scholarship into left-leaning populist media ecosystems. Researchers have largely focused on legacy left-leaning media outlets such as MSNBC, *Huffington Post,* and the *New York Times* (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Higdon, 2020). Because they focus on mainstream media and notions of liberalism, these studies do not discuss the prog-left. The prog-left media tends to operate outside of legacy media, and its personalities claim to have a different ideology than those in legacy media – an ideology rooted in populism. The research that has focused on left-leaning media users, does not include an analysis of the prog-left media ecosystem (Entman & Usher, 2018; Nagle, 2017; Sahly, Shao & Kwon, 2019). Our study seeks to begin the process of bringing clarity about the structure and content of the prog-left media ecosystem.

Methodology

This exploratory study seeks to better understand the prog-left media ecosystem, and to develop areas for future research to better understand its influence. We chose to utilize a media ecology lens because other scholarship has demonstrated its utility for analyzing political and news media ecosystems (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Entman & Usher 2018; Islas & Bernal, 2016; Haw, 2020; Hopster, 2021; Moran, 2017). Given the rapid changes of individual personalities, funding, programs, and content, there are limitations to this study. We are analyzing a slice of the prog-left media ecosystem, which is a small portion of the larger left-leaning media ecosystem, which, in turn, makes this an exploratory study. It is designed to provide guidance for further scholarship into this specific media ecosystem. Our study does offer a substantive overview of the prog-left media ecosystem and identifies key areas for future research.

The data came from an analysis of seven programs chosen from keyword searches on Apple Podcasts, Google, and YouTube. We looked for programs that used concepts, themes, and language identified in the scholarship on left-leaning populism in their episode descriptions and content titles such as economic and democratic reforms from the working class and ordinary citizens. To avoid obscure content, we did not review programs with less than one-thousand downloads or subscribers. In total, we considered about twenty-five programs and chose the most popular seven to analyze. We watched and listened to all of their episodes since June of 2019, and read their descriptions and host biographies.

The following seven prog-left podcasts were chosen for analysis: *Rolling Stone's* "The "Useful Idiots"" podcast, "The Katie Halper Show," *The Hill's* ""Rising"," "Krystal Kyle & Friends," "The Jimmy Dore Show," the "Bad Faith Podcast," and "Chapo Trap House." The hosts of the "Useful Idiots" podcast include journalist Matt Taibbi and Comedian and writer Katie Halper; "The Katie Halper Show" also hosted by Halper; *The Hill's* ""Rising"" is hosted by journalist Saagar Enjeti and former MSNBC host and House of Representatives candidate Krystal Ball; Ball and Kyle Kulini are the co-hosts of "Krystal Kyle & Friends"; comedian Jimmy Dore and his wife Stefane Zamorano co-host "The Jimmy Dore Show"; the National Press Secretary for the Bernie Sanders 2020 presidential campaign, Briahna Joy Gray is joined by "Chapo Trap House" journalist Virgil Texas to host the "Bad Faith Podcast"; and "Chapo Trap House" is hosted by Will Menaker, Matt Christman, Felix Biederman, Amber A'Lee Frost, and Virgil Texas.

 We employed a conceptual content analysis approach to the programs because it enabled us to identify the words and patterns that define the prog-left media ecosystem. We performed two cycles of coding on the seven programs on one to two episodes, depending upon what the media producers made available, per week from June 2019 through January 2021, to reveal the messages that audiences receive from populist left media. This resulted in coding for nearly 200 episodes of prog-left media programs. On the first cycle of coding, we collected 612 codes. We employed descriptive coding which provided topics for indexing and categorizing (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). During the second cycle of coding, we used pattern coding to categorize the codes into themes: Guests, Neoliberalism, Professional Managerial Class, Elites and Elite Culture, and Mainstream Media. We then compiled these themes into four findings:

Finding One: The Prog-Left Programs Have Diverse Formats, But Reoccurring Guests

Finding Two: Prog-Left Programming Largely Centers on Critiques of Neoliberalism

Finding Three: The Prog-Left Programs Frame America's Political Parties as Anti-Working Class Servants to Wealthy Elites

Finding Four: The Prog-Left Programming Illuminates and Denounces the Influence of Elite Culture on American Institutions

Findings

The content analysis of prog-left programs revealed that the hosts recognize a link between cultural hegemony and economic policy. They focus more attention on chiding left leaning individuals and organizations than those on the right. The content analysis revealed that as much as the hosts position themselves as advocates of populist policies, most of the programming is not focused on policy. Instead, the overwhelming majority of content focused on rejecting neoliberalism, legacy media, elite culture, and both political parties.

Finding One: The Prog-Left Programs Have Diverse Formats and Reoccurring Guests

Prog-left media offers diversity in the format of each program. Some programs are produced on a weekly basis and others are published daily. Some of them are podcasts, others are video streams, and some are both. Some are offered on a live stream while others are pre-recorded. Some episodes appear in their entirety while others are segmented. Some of the prog-left programs resemble traditional broadcast news programs, while others look like a live stream of friends having a conversation. Although the format and delivery of the programs differed widely, the programs shared a small pool of reoccurring guests.

In contrast to the often acrimonious discourse in legacy media, the prog-left media generally allow people with differing ideas to engage each other in a civil manner where they can find common ground. The programs host party strategists from both major political parties who rarely, if ever, argue on air. The same is true for writers from prog-left outlets, such as Ryan Grim of the *Huffington Post,* who appeared on these programs with right-leaning writers such as Rachel Bovard of The Heritage Foundation.

Beyond constructive dialogue, the prog-left media programs differ in their format and delivery. The "Useful Idiots" podcast is a weekly podcast that is published with a video stream. It mixes the journalistic insights of Matt Taibbi with the humor and commentary of Katie Halper. Their weekly program includes one guest, usually interviewed for about an hour, after four shorter segments that begin the program. The program's shorter segments often reflect four ideas: "Democrats suck," "Republicans suck," "isn't' that weird," and "isn't that terrible." The first two segments focus on news stories meant to justify derision toward the two major parties, and the latter two segments are usually sensational stories that seek to provoke laughter through jarring and gross stories.

The Hill's "Rising" is a daily morning show that publishes roughly eight five to ten-minute segments videos on YouTube each day. The hosts sit behind a desk like a traditional news program and offer audiences interviews, round-table discussions with guest panels, and "radars," which are opinion editorials from the hosts. Ball and Enjeti's "Rising" program seeks to provide both left- and right-leaning populist slants, an approach that is missing in the legacy media.

"The Jimmy Dore Show" and "The Katie Halper Show" are published sporadically. They rely on utilizing social media and YouTube to give audiences an hour or less notice that they are going to be stream a live broadcast. "The Jimmy Dore Show" sees comedian host Jimmy Dore perform a mix of live monologues and skits lampooning elite political culture, followed by interviews with guests and dialogue with his wife and co-host Stefane Zamorano, who also reads and responds to audience feedback live on air. In "The Katie Halper Show," Halper hosts live debates and

discussions that often mix humor, commentary, and scholarly analysis to pressing issues. Also published infrequently are segments of Briahna Joy Gray and Virgil Texas' "Bad Faith" podcast which offers commentary, interviews, and debates.

Although their formats differ, these programs share many of the same guests. The diverse set of prog-left guests share that they are rarely, if ever, interviewed on legacy media programs. Many of the individuals involved in the prog-left media space participated in the 2016 and 2020 Sanders' campaign, including Nina Turner, Briahna Joy Gray, David Sirota, and Faiz Shakir. Frequent guests include documentarians and journalists, including Gray, Sirotta, Shakir, Ryan Grim, Michael Moore, Abby Martin, Glenn Greenwald, and Aaron Matte.

Finding Two: Prog-Left Programming Largely Centers on Critiques of Neoliberalism

The selected prog-left media programs spend a great deal of time looking at the oppressive and exploitative nature of neoliberalism. Although the term has some ambiguity in prog-left media (and is often used interchangeably with such terms as: elites, professional managerial class, and Washington insiders), this study shows that the prog-left typically define neoliberals as individuals and organizations that create and defend wasteful bureaucracy, reward mediocrity, achieve privatization at the expense of the public good, perpetuate toxic forms of identity politics, and seek to empower "credentialed elites" at the expense of working people's material conditions. The prog-left claims that neoliberal polices have disproportionately impacted people of color, but that the class war by neoliberals transcends race. They see neoliberals as corrupt and greedy individuals who exploit identity to garner electoral support for policies and individuals that work against the interest of the voters.

The prog-left media programs problematize neoliberalism as a corrupt system that is oppresses, exploits, and divides working people. For example, on a December 2020 episode of "Bad Faith", hosts Briahna Joy Gray and Virgil Texas interviewed Professor Cornel West and scholar and public speaker Trisha Rose about how the class antagonism of neoliberalism. West referred to neoliberalism as a "corrupt" system that privileges "careerism" and "opportunism." A month earlier on the same program, activist and artist Killer Mike emphasized the class differences between neoliberals and the working people they govern by accusing neoliberals (using the "ivy towers" pejorative) of denying people what they are owed and maintaining oppressive practices such as the war on drugs.

The prog-left media argues that the weaponization of identity politics by neoliberals serves to marginalize the working class. An often-cited example in prog-left media is the anti-racism or implicit bias training hosted by Robin DiAngelo, the author of *White Fragility*. The lucrative contracts her anti-racist trainings engendered after the murder of George Floyd, which saw many prog-left media programs assume that DiAngelo is a grifter. For example, Krystal Ball chided DiAngelo for accepting lucrative corporate contracts to lecture the working class about their behavior and attitudes toward race. To Ball, DiAngelo's trainings empower corporate capitalism, which Ball views as a fundamental contributing factor to the persistence of racism in U.S. society, and shed its culpability by placing the blame for racism squarely on the backs of the some of the least powerful actors in U.S. society: the working class. Similarly, on a June 2020 episode of the "Chapo Trap House" podcast, the personalities noted that DiAngelo never discussed the power dynamics of having such trainings in the workplace. It was noted, "she never

mentioned that like this is a mandatory school assembly, where your employer is now being invited to interrogate the most intimate parts of your psyche and brain and experience?"

These sentiments were echoed by Taibbi of *"Useful Idiots"*, who compared DiAngelo's assessment of racial categories as monoliths to Nazi philosophies on race. For his part, Taibbi accused DiAngelo of stripping famous Black Americans, such as Jackie Robinson, of their talent and agency by narrowly attributing their success to the will of white men. Finally, Taibbi accused DiAngelo of legitimizing negative Black stereotypes, including one that Black people are incapable of arriving at a location on time by classifying them as cultural aspects whites needed to accept.

The prog-left media programs argue that working people of color see through the cynical racial antagonism of neoliberals, but middle-class people of color are blinded by their class privilege. On the "Bad Faith" podcast, West claimed that the Black middle-class leadership does not center poor or working Black people. Gray agreed referring to the Black middle-class as "captured." According to prog-left media hosts, the Black middle-class feels captured because they internalize neoliberal propaganda. They accuse neoliberal politicians of engaging in acts of "genuflecting" and "virtue signaling" that appeal to voters, but do not offer any substantive change to voters' material conditions. For example, the hosts of *"Rising"* and "Useful Idiots*"* eschewed Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi for ripping up a copy of then President Donald Trump's State of the Union Speech. The gesture was meant to show the DNC's disdain for Trump's erratic and dangerous behavior and rhetoric. However, Taibbi and Halper argued that this was not the case, because shortly thereafter, the DNC voted to authorize Trump's military authority. Similarly, the same hosts took the DNC to task for kneeling while wearing African Kente cloths to show their opposition to racism, rather than pass legislation directly targeted at the material conditions brought about by structural racism.

To the prog-left media hosts, these constitute acts of political theatre that are offered in place of substantive policy measures aimed at reducing inequities. On a November 2020 episode of *"Bad Faith*,*"* Gray hosted Killer Mike to discuss the ways in which the racial inclusiveness promised by neoliberals is believed by their perpetuation of racist structures and patterns that serve to solidify rather than chip-away at racism in the United States.

Mike explained that "what progressives are going to have to start fighting for beyond fighting for everyone to progress, is to specifically deal with the issues of abandonment that we have from a party we have given over 90 percent of loyalty to for the last 57 years." He went on to argue that neoliberals in the Democratic Party misrepresented their agenda by feigning praise for women of color who delivered the party's electoral victory in 2020 and who were ignored when it came to actual power and legislation. Rather than echo dominant narratives about how one political party combats and the other ignores inequities, the discourses on *"Bad Faith*"* and other prog-left programs problematize neoliberalism as the bi-partisan ideology that prevents material gains from working and poor people in American democracy.

Finding Three: The Prog-Left Programs Frame America's Political Parties as Anti-Working Class Servants to Wealthy Elites

The prog-left media programs lampooned and critiqued both the Democratic and Republican Party (GOP) for fostering division as a means to maintain class inequities. Prog-left media interpret the Republican Party as a xenophobic, white supremacist party of patriarchs and plutocrats. Rather than continuously remind their liberal audience of this frame, the prog-left focused audience attention on the faux liberalism of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) who they viewed as corrupt and feckless. This is interesting given that the DNC is closer to prog-left media personalities ideology than the Republican Party.

The prog-left media programs assume that both parties exist to serve wealthy elites. This is achieved in part by making never realized promises of materials gains for the electorate in exchange for votes. For example, in January of 2021 the hosts of "Krysta, Kyle & Friends" argued that then president-elect Joe Biden promised $2000 stimulus check to voters in Georgia – a state where his party succeeded in winning two U.S. Senate seats which gave the DNC to control the U.S. Congress. However, he only fought for and passed a $1400 check to voters. In addition to false promises, the prog-left media argue that neoliberals serve donors by keeping the electorate divided. Also in early 2021, the hosts of "The Bad Faith Podcast" mused that the DNC claims that the people who voted for Donald Trump to be President of the United States in 2016 and 2020 are evil people who can never be convinced to support progressive policy. The finality of this argument, according to the hosts, served to stifle any effort at achieving a broad progressive coalition.

The prog-left media programs also contend that the political parties serve wealthy elites by feigning policy blockades. Figures such as Krystal Ball and guests such as Glenn Greenwald explained that when they were DNC voters, they believed that the party wanted to pass progressive legislation, but failed to do so due to the obstructionist tactics of conservatives in Washington, D.C. However, after years of working in journalism and politics, Ball and Greenwald came to believe that the members of the DNC were essentially bribed with campaign donations and sought-after DNC positions to act as feckless politicians who hinder rather than enable progressive policies. Some, such as Ball, go even further, arguing that the DNC prefers the GOP to be the majority power in Washington because it results in increased campaign donations, and they can further blame the GOP for the abeyance of discourse about progressive policy in Congress.

The prog-left media personalities argue that rather than use popular policy that addresses the material wellbeing of the citizenry to attract voters, the DNC engages in vapid acts of "genuflecting" and "virtue signaling." For example, the hosts of "Rising" and "Useful Idiots" eschewed Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi for ripping up a copy of then President Trump's State of the Union speech. The gesture was meant to show the DNC's disdain for Trump's erratic and dangerous behavior and rhetoric. However, Taibbi and Halper argued that this was not the case because shortly thereafter the DNC voted to authorize Trump's military authority. Similarly, as mentioned previously, the same hosts took the DNC to task for kneeling while wearing African Kente cloths to show their opposition to racism, rather than pass legislation directly targeted at the material conditions brought about by structural racism.

Although the prog-left media personalities seem to agree that the DNC is not a progressive party, there is a schism regarding how to respond. In 2021, Jimmy Dore allied with Ball and others to engaged in a "force the vote campaign" that called upon prog-media supported progressives in the U.S. Congress refuse to support Pelosi as Speaker of the House unless Pelosi guaranteed a vote on Medicare for All. The campaign questioned and opposed by other left-prog media figures such as journalist Ryan Grim and the host of the talk show *Secular Talk*, Kyle Kulinski. Similarly, in the months prior to the 2020 presidential election, on an episode of the "Bad Faith" podcast, host Briahna Joy Gray, disagreed with American linguist and activist, Noam Chomsky, arguing that progressives should not vote for Biden until they get concessions. Dore went further, arguing that a third party needed to be created until it took enough votes away to destroy one of the existing parties.

Finding Four: The Prog-Left Programming Illuminates and Denounces the Influence of Elite Culture on American Institutions

The prog-left media programs' critique of legacy media centers on their concern that the cultural hegemony by media and political elites has legitimized economic policies that worsen the material conditions for poor and working people. In their estimation, the messaging of elite media serves neoliberal ideologies by exacerbating racial, gendered, and cultural divisions among the working class. Possibly more than anyone else in the left-prog media ecosystem, Matt Taibbi of *"Useful Idiots"* has sought to explain why legacy media seek to divide rather than inform the citizenry. Taibbi contends that the communist versus capitalist lens that legacy news media relied upon since its inception was replaced with Democrats versus Republicans after the conclusion of the Cold War. Taibbi asserts that as the advent of cable and the internet fragmented audiences by the 1990s, the long-standing strategy of legacy media to maximize their audience was no longer viable. In response, each media outlet sought to attract a loyal audience demographic with lauding praise for their political party of choice and antipathy for the opposition political party. Taibbi notes this was not a sinister plot by the elites in legacy media, rather it was a strategy for maximizing revenue.

They contend that the political capital that neoliberals garner from the divisive lens of legacy media helps strengthen and conceal their commitment to the bi-partisan policies that work against the interests of the working class which they refer to as "the Washington consensus." On "Rising", Ball and Enjeti discuss contemporary stories to illustrate where left and right-leaning populism overlap. They view this as more productive than the politically divisive corporate media which they see as portraying all issues through delusional and divisive lens. They contend that the legacy media incorrectly introduce all issues as having a right and left interpretation despite the consensus held by the political parties on a list of issues. Ball and Enjeti argue that both parties share an ideology, known as the "Washington Consensus," when it comes to economics, trade, military, and similar policies. However, Ball and Enjeti contend that legacy media often ignores the Washington Consensus because it does not fit into the left versus right binary lens of analysis. The prog-left media ecosystem claims to provide a more grounded analysis of the news than legacy media. Future scholarship needs to investigate if the prog-left space will become yet another fragmented space that critiques news media and elites but never moves into journalism or an actual movement.

Prog-left media personalities interpret the legacy news media's coverage of Trump's presidency as epitomizing their narrow elite lens. Many in populist left media, but especially historian, writer, and frequent expert commentator in the podcasting space, Thomas Frank, argued that Trump's populist rhetoric proved successful because the DNC defended the status quo at a time when people were disenchanted with the system. Although his rhetoric was empty, it revealed voters' desire for a more aggressive federal government that served their needs. Prog-left media programs contend that the voters' rejection of the elite status-quo in 2016 did not result in self-reflection, let alone a change in policy, from elites; but that instead, elites remained obstinate and fabricated the notion of Russian intervention in the election, not voter apathy concerning the Democratic Party, as a boogeyman to blame for their loss and Trump's electoral victory. Rather than adopt policies to attract Trump voters, prog-left media programs claim that the post-2016 DNC's strategy was one that exaggerated the behaviors and attitudes of Trump to scare voters away from supporting him. In fact, some prog-left media programs accuse the DNC leaning legacy media – such as CNN, MSNBC, and *The New York Times* – as cynically portraying President Trump as an authoritarian rather than a buffoon in order to garner ratings and political capital for the DNC. Sam Moyn echoed this sentiment on a January 2021 episode of the Katie Halper Show:

> We can't just read half the news in our analysis of the Trump administration. Some of us have been arguing throughout that the amazing thing was in a sense how weak he turned out to be. That's not fascism. At least of any kind that we've seen in the past and even January 6 which Jason and others are taking to be the great confirmation event, I think more vividly illustrates how weak a man he is. So, even before the riot broke out he'd lost his alliance with Mitch McConnell and Mike Pence, who had resolved to end his you know imaginative or symbolic insurrection before the real one took place.

One accusation at the heart of the prog-left media programs is that Trump is a symptom of the failure of the DNC to avoid the exigencies that prog-left media programs are focused upon. The prog-left programs also accuse elites in media and government of co-opting progressive rhetoric to marginalize and ostracize the poor and working class. For example, Katie Halper and Briahna Joy Gray coined the phrase "woke washing" to describe the process by which political candidates' anti-progressive views and policies are ignored in favor of their marginalized identity. The prog-left concept is that progressives cannot critique the policy because it will be conflated with critiquing the identity of the person advocating it. Halper mocks this phenomenon with a "woke button" that she presses on *"Useful Idiots,"* which results in a segment of the Wham! song, "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go" to play for a perceived violation of this narrow definition of wokeness. Similarly, in late 2019, Jimmy Dore mocked the ways in which discourses about women shattering the glass ceiling were distracting from female politicians who maintain the status quo. Dore lampooned the legacy media for framing the appointment of former CIA director Gina Haspel as a story of gender equality when she was a critical part of the effort to cover up the CIA's participation in torture. Dore exclaimed that "torturer Gina Haspel broke through the glass ceiling to become the director of the CIA and picked up one of the glass shards and started torturing people."

Discussion and Conclusion

Our exploratory study contributes to the advancement of the application of media ecology theory in digital spaces. The study reveals that the prog-left media ecosystem problematizes elitism as a force negatively shaping politics, media, and sense of identity. The prog-left personalities consider themselves as the progenitors of a paradigm shift that seeks to develop new narratives counter to the elite messaging. This approach seems to be predicated on an effort to bridge the partisan divide through class politics.

Our research also contributed to understanding the nature of tribal politics. The prog-left media ecosystem's emphasis on critiquing the DNC more than the GOP is illustrative of Longren and Blythe's (2020) contention that the populist anger in Western politics is reminiscent of sports fans' tribal mentality. A tribal mentality sees participants more concerned with regulating the other members of their tribe than attacking the other tribe.

This exploratory study illuminates areas for more research. Media effects scholars should investigate the influence of the prog-left programs on audiences. Given the discourses about policy and activism in the programs, scholars should see what influence, if any, prog-left media programs have on social movements. Scholars also could consider the prog-left media space as holding a potential starting point for a new field of scholarship focused on developing a language for discussing elites. As part of our research, we came across an interview with Thomas Frank where he argued that the American public has no language or field of scholarship dedicated to studying elites. He cited two examples: the elite predictions about North American Free Trade Agreement (N.A.F.TA.) and the failed 2016 Hillary Clinton Presidential Campaign, which was run by the most promising from the elite class. Frank claimed that the lack of discourse and curiosity about elite culture prevents the people from recognizing (let alone discussing) elite failure with any level of competency. Frank's contention deserves further research, and scholars should investigate if prog-left media spaces offer a starting point for developing discourses that highlight elite culture and failures.

Similarly, more research can be done to determine the editorial decision process of the prog-left media ecosystem. There have been decades of research on the editorial process and problems associated with legacy media. In particular, scholars have centered their attention on the ways in which corporate funding shapes the reporting from legacy media. Scholars could investigate the editorial process with special attention paid to how media sponsors and crowdsourcing may shape the messaging in these spaces. It seems as though crowdsourcing is developing into the main mode of revenue for the prog-left media programs. As we go to publication, the hosts of "Rising" and "Useful Idiots" have moved from *The Hill* and *Rolling Stone* respectively to a subscriber model on *Breaking Points* and *Substack*. The remaining programs offer additional content or early access to content to users to who subscribe with monthly donations. Scholars could analyze the influence of these shifting models in the context of the declining interest in legacy media with special attention to how media sponsors such as *The Hill* and *Rolling Stone* or crowdsourcing may shape the messaging in these spaces.

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