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Verbal Smackdown: Charles Adler and Canadian Talk Radio

For reasons I have never fully understood, televised wrestling events are enormously popular in Canada and the United States. Fans of wrestling programs appear to like the clearly defined heroes and villains, the extravagant costumes, and the outrageous posturing. It is as if they watch the over-the-top antics in the wrestling ring in suspended disbelief, aware that what they are seeing is a tightly rehearsed act but believing the dramatic storyline anyway. I am struck by the similarities between wrestling and commercial political talk radio in Canada. Talk radio also has clearly defined heroes and villains, pageantry, outrageous posturing, and high drama, and it attracts fans in much the same way that wrestling does. Using wrestling as a metaphor, I examine in this essay the rhetorical devices employed by Charles Adler, billed as Canada’s only national private-radio talk-show host.¹

I will argue that Adler creates, on a number of topics, a pan-Canadian viewpoint that is decidedly right-leaning, neo-conservative, and populist. This is important for many reasons. First, it becomes clear that talk radio in Canada is a medium from which Canadians receive political information. Moreover, the primary audience that listens to programs like Adler, Canadians over the age of thirty, is also the audience more likely to vote and participate in the political domain by donating time and, more importantly, money to
political parties. Thus, their opinions and viewpoints are important to politicians when determining policy initiatives and party platforms. As well, as demonstrated by the guests who have appeared on Adler’s program, the radio host is vetted by journalistic and political elites alike, including columnists, federal opposition party leaders, members of Parliament, and even the prime minister, all of whom have appeared on his program. Finally, there is considerable evidence that the type of journalism practised on Adler has a contagion effect in that his views are reinforcing and reinforced by other media outlets, including columnists writing for Canada’s major newspapers, political pundits appearing on TV news panels, and—more recently, with the announcement of the new “Fox news of the north”—Quebecor’s Sun Television, a station on which Adler now appears. Thus, Adler, along with his perspective, must be viewed as an agenda setter, selecting and framing central issues of the day for other political and journalistic elites.

In North America, professional wrestling has grown from a relatively minor sport to an extremely popular multi-million-dollar industry. According to Michael Atkinson, the mandate of wrestling is to entertain and excite audiences through contrivance and hyperbole. This echoes the mandate of commercial talk radio, which is to entertain and excite. As an insider working in talk radio explains, the purpose of commercial talk radio is to keep listeners thinking and interested, and it is clear that Charles Adler’s talk radio program meets those criteria.

There are other similarities to wrestling. Canada’s talk radio market, the metaphorical ring in which all the action takes place, is home to a cast of colourful characters who participate in this highly specialized medium. Moreover, Adler, as the headline act, works the ring with intricate and colourful arguments that punctuate his perspective on Canadian politics and public policy. While he is often the main event, he at times assumes the role of the referee, attempting to control his unruly radio guests. Adler also sometimes works as part of a tag team, building and expanding on his broadcast partner’s positions with creative and intricate verbal costuming, another similarity to wrestling. But it is the verbal smackdown, the ultimate take out, at which Adler is particularly skilled. He throws to the mat any perceived enemy of “Adler Nation’s” citizens (as he calls his listeners), leaving these opponents bloodied and beaten.
I begin by providing an overview of the “ring,” Canada’s talk radio market, and then move into the rhetorical devices Adler uses in his radio broadcasts. I analyze some of the discussions that have occurred on Adler’s programs, relying on podcasts found on the Charles Adler website (www.charlesadler.com) between October 2009 and February 2010.6 Podcasts such as these illustrate radio stations’ increasing recognition that the Web “holds promising opportunities as an outlet for programming content.”7 Placing program content on the Web solidifies “a station’s brand image and its programming in the minds of site visitors, resulting in increased audience retention.”8 These podcasts were chosen because they were, and still are, characteristic of Adler programs.

THE RING: CANADA’S RADIO MARKET

Like wrestling, the action of Canada’s talk radio environment takes place inside a ring within the Canadian media market. Political talk radio is among the “new media,” a format that includes the Internet, talk television, television news magazines, and electronic town hall meetings.9 The talk radio/information format is a popular one for AM stations coping with the desertion of music listeners in favour of FM radio, which, because of technological advances, now features superior sound quality.10 In 2009, in Canada, news/talk radio programs broadcast on privately owned stations captured 11.5 percent of the tuning shares of English-language radio, while Canada’s public information radio station, CBC Radio One, captured 9.4 percent.11 Talk or information radio stations are winners, regularly breaking the top three in the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement books.12

Like its newspaper competitors, radio in Canada sustained losses in 2009. For the first time since 1993, private commercial broadcasters saw their generated revenues drop by 5.2 percent.13 Corus Entertainment, which is responsible for the Adler program, is one of the top three radio operators, accounting for 17 percent of the revenues in the English-language market and operating fifty radio stations across the country.14 Adler, heard in thirteen cities across the country, is billed as Canada’s only national talk-show host. As such, he offers a specifically pan-Canadian voice on political affairs in Canada. Because Adler runs in multiple venues, he has to present issues of interest to a national audience; his focus, therefore, is on the national agenda rather than the local
political story. One insider suggested that Adler chooses stories that interest all Canadians.15

The number of hours that Canadians spend listening to the radio has been declining as well. In 2008, the average number of hours each week that people spent tuned to radio was 17.7, down 1.4 hours since 2005, and people between the ages of 12 and 24 listened to radio even less. Those aged 35 and older listened to radio more often, with listening times increasing with age.16 This is perhaps not surprising. As the Canadian Media Research Consortium points out, “Canadians over 50 tend to be habitual consumers of news while those under 30 are more likely to check in with online news sources and to pick up a newspaper for a particular story or because they are in a particular location.”17

Detailed demographic information about Canada’s talk radio audience is unavailable; however, Statistics Canada does provide some comparative information. Given that young people—in particular, teenagers—are less likely to listen to radio, it is not surprising that the talk radio audience tends to consist of older consumers, with the percentage share of listeners increasing with age. Statistics also indicate that talk radio is more popular with men than women, at least up to the age of 65.18 In addition, one can infer that, because listening to talk radio requires a greater degree of attention than does listening to music stations, those who are alone in their homes or who spend much of their day in a vehicle are more likely to be relatively heavy users of talk radio. Indeed, conversations with producers of talk radio programs reveal that listeners are either tuning in from their vehicles or are working at home. Additional research is available about the American market. In 2008, Pew’s annual report on journalism indicated that 63 percent of “the ‘talk/personality’ audience was male.” The report also noted that “more than 36% of the talk audience is between 25 and 44 years old, compared with 22% in the news/talk/information grouping.”19

Despite the declining listening rates in Canada, radio remains an important source of information for Canadians, particularly for those living in rural locations. According to the Canadian Media Research Consortium, in 2008, 61 percent of Canadians spent at least some time listening to the radio, almost tied with the number of Canadians who said they had read a newspaper offline (62%).20 Moreover, newspapers and radio stations were virtually tied when respondents were asked how important various media were as sources of information.21 In an Ekos survey conducted during the 2008 federal election,
44 percent of Canadians polled said that they had relied “somewhat” on radio to inform themselves about the election. This compares to 49 percent who relied on traditional print media and 48 percent who relied on TV news. Radio is clearly still one of the top sources for news for many Canadians.

In the United States, extensive research on the impact and effect of political talk-show programs reveals that talk radio and, more specifically, political talk radio has both an agenda setting and framing function when it comes to politics and political opinion. However, its effect on the voting public has been contested. It is still not clear if listening to talk radio makes a person more politically active or if a person who is politically active is more likely to listen to talk radio. Clearly, though, politicians ignore its presence at their peril. Bill Clinton’s bid for the White House in 1992 aggressively enlisted new social media like political talk radio to engage voters. Given the audience shares and the political discussions on Canadian talk radio, political parties would be foolish if they did not regularly monitor these programs, both locally and nationally, to determine the “hot topics.”

There is some evidence that those who have a specific political leaning deliberately search out media outlets that share their perspectives. Natalie Jomini Stroud’s analysis of selective exposure of those seeking information yielded interesting results. As she asserts, “not everyone who seeks out political information from the media wants to find outlets with a congenial political perspective.” However, in the United States, a substantial percentage of the population seek out media that share their political predispositions. Jomini Stroud suggests that “political beliefs play an important role in determining where people turn for political information.” Furthermore, she issues a warning about the impact of this selective exposure on the non-commercial role of the press. As a “commercial enterprise, the media are subject to market pressures. If political partisanship is a viable segmentation strategy, news outlets may increasingly target their news towards consumers with specific political leanings.”

Canada’s talk radio market is a paltry one compared to the United States, which has over two hundred talk radio stations. Not surprisingly, given the large audience, US talk-show hosts are given celebrity status. Talkers, a magazine dedicated to the talk-show market, annually lists its Heavy Hundred: the top one hundred radio talk-show hosts in the country. Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck consistently make the top three, with each boasting
millions of weekly listeners. In 2008, Rush Limbaugh signed an eight-year, $400 million syndication deal; at that time, his show attracted nearly twenty million regular listeners every week on six hundred stations.\textsuperscript{28} According to an online business website, Glenn Beck has more than eight million weekly listeners on 350 radio stations across the United States; he has a five-year $50 million contract for his syndicated program.\textsuperscript{29} Clearly, there is no equivalent market in Canada for these levels of salary or celebrity status.

Canada has had its stars, albeit more modest ones than in the United States. However, information about commercial talk radio hosts, both past and present, is hard to come by, mainly because their presence on the air is both ephemeral and parochial. The market for talk radio remains limited, and there are no syndication deals similar to those enjoyed by Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck. Moreover, when Canadian talk-show hosts leave the market—either by their choice or the stations’—publicity is limited. Therefore, the following overview of the market cannot be construed as a complete list of radio talk shows in Canada but should instead be viewed an illustration of the range of hosts who have appeared over the years. One thing that they all seem to have in common is an interest in holding those in authority accountable. All of them have been described as avid commentators on news events in their community, and all gained reputations for asking thoughtful, if not tough, questions of politicians and others in positions of authority. Their styles, however, are vastly different.

One of Canada’s longest running radio talk-show hosts is Winnipeg’s Peter Warren, who worked for Adler’s station, CJOB, for twenty-eight years. Now living in Victoria and working independently on voice-over projects, Warren’s colourful career includes work as a columnist, investigative journalist, author, and talk-show host. In 1997, he won the Western Broadcasters Broadcaster of the Year Award for his work on his program \textit{Action Line}. As his website points out, “He has interviewed ten Canadian prime ministers head-to-head and had four escaped convicts give themselves up on-the-air. Former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once said that an interview with Warren ‘was worse than Question Period.’”\textsuperscript{30}

Vancouver’s Rafe Mair held court over the airwaves at CKNW for almost twenty years. Before he was turfed by the Corus station in 2003, Mair earned an estimated $300,000 a year and “delivered Canada’s largest local talk show audience—some 239,000 listeners.” As Ken Macqueen writes in \textit{Maclean’s},
Mair listeners were of the “wrong demographic” for advertisers and for that he was let go, but during his career, politicians, bureaucrats, media moguls, and environmentally unfriendly corporations were subject to a “Rafing,” a public tongue lashing by Mair and his audience.31 Jack Webster, who broadcast out of Vancouver, was another well-known and highly popular radio talk-show personality. Webster, with his memorable Glaswegian brogue, was a pioneer of this format when he began his talk radio career for CJOR in 1953. In 1979, he took his show to television, to BCTV, where he remained until his retirement in 1987. Webster died in 1999 but leaves as his legacy the Jack Webster Foundation, which promotes and recognizes the accomplishments of BC journalists with an annual Websters Awards Dinner.32 In Alberta, Ron Collister, working out of CJCA in Edmonton, was an extremely popular host who was slightly less fiery than Mair or Webster, but still a media icon in the Alberta capital. Collister, a former CBC journalist in Ottawa, left CJCA in the early 1990s, when the station changed ownership, and found a home on CHED, also a Corus station, where he continued to operate his style of reasonable debate. In 1995, Collister retired from CHED after forty years as a journalist and eighteen years on the air. During his final broadcast, former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Canadian writing icon Pierre Berton called to pay tribute. Collister died in 1997.33 Collister, Mair, and Webster were critical of those in positions of authority, and while they could be aggressive when needed, their style of talk was more muted than some of their more recently minted counterparts.

For example, at CHQR in Calgary, Dave Rutherford is known for his bombastic style. He has been working for CHQR for more than twenty years, and his program runs in Edmonton as well on CHQR’s sister station, CHED, which is part of the Corus Entertainment network. Rutherford is fiery, strongly opinionated, and clearly neo-conservative. There was little doubt of his support for Conservatives, particularly former Alberta Premier Ralph Klein. His on-air style mirrors the popular American-style talk radio, and he has built on his notoriety in Alberta to assume the role of political pundit on television and in newspapers. Toronto’s huge radio market has also seen many colourful and popular radio talk-show hosts. Ed Needham made a name for himself in this medium. Described as a no-nonsense, take-no-prisoners type of host, Needham worked out of CFRB, Toronto’s oldest radio station, in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1992, a complaint was filed with the Canadian Broadcast Standards
Council after Needham commented that “if you allow yourself to be sexually harassed, so you can keep your job, you deserve it” and that women, when harassed, should “quit … or take action … and quit your whining.” He also said, “If you wear a skirt with your bum sticking out and somebody makes a crack and you get upset, now who’s setting who up?” In the CBSC decision, Needham was found to have violated the code of ethics in relation to sex-role stereotyping. Called the “King of Rant Radio,” the 260-pound Needham was larger than life both physically and figuratively. A self-described “right-wing guy” and “a real conservative,” he was known for his direct attacks on feminists, calling the Ontario Women’s Directorate “fascistic fascist fascist feminists.” At the height of his career, he was pulling down $100,000 a year working on-air in the evenings for the most highly rated radio station in Toronto in the mid-1990s.

In Ottawa, Lowell Green, who has been dubbed the “King of Talk Radio,” hosts a late-morning talk radio program on CFRA radio (owned by CTV). Green began broadcasting in 1966, and while he attempted politics and ran unsuccessfully as an Ontario Liberal candidate in a 1984 by-election, he returned to CFRA in 1993. According to his website, Green’s show has been “the top rated throughout Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec and one of the top rated talk shows in North America.” Green’s book May Day! May Day! calls for a halt to multiculturalism and a substantial reduction in the number of immigrants allowed into Canada, which suggests that despite his liberal affiliations, he too shares a right-wing viewpoint on the air.

The prototype of the Canadian talk-show host appears, then, to be a white male who is critical of authority and, certainly in more recent years, right-leaning ideologically. Those who have captured audiences and imaginations are seemingly unafraid to state their viewpoints in a controversial and flamboyant way. For them, being condemned as a tough interview would seem to be the highest accolade, since controversy is their ultimate goal.

THE MAIN EVENT: CHARLES ADLER

Broadcasting for Corus out of CJOB in Winnipeg and heard across the country, Charles Adler prides himself on being the “boss of talk,” and he is clearly the headliner in Canadian commercial talk radio. His radio program, Adler
on Line, is heard in Vancouver, Kamloops, Kelowna, Regina, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, London, Hamilton, Wingham, Toronto, and Cornwall. The three-hour show is broadcast live in the afternoon, but not all stations carry the entire three hours. For example, CKNW does not pick the program up live but instead broadcasts the show later in the day, from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. Vancouver time. Adler works alone or in conjunction with other guests in pontificating on the topic of the day, and those topics vary. His website directs users to podcasts of show segments on topics ranging from social and gender roles, including chivalry and dating after thirty-five, to business stories like the launch of the iPad, Toyota’s recall woes, and unemployment, to political stories about Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, and the late NDP leader Jack Layton.

Behind the scenes, Adler has a content producer who works out of Montreal and a technical producer based in Winnipeg at CJOB. He and his content producer, Stephanie Tsirgiotis, work as a team, sharing story ideas. Tsirgiotis, the “Queen of Groove,” books the guests. According to a radio insider, the purpose of programs like Adler on Line is to explore topics “that every Canadian will have an opinion on. Something they can talk about at the dinner table.”

Adler attempts to create an environment in which listeners are encouraged to participate. That he often sets himself as a contrarian in a world of politically correct media is demonstrated by his denigration of Peter Mansbridge and the CBC, which he suggests are supporters of the Liberal Party. According to Adler, the mainstream media, as typified by the CBC, are too politically correct. In one segment dealing with the issue of reverse racism, Adler asks his listeners if they think Peter Mansbridge would ever want to tackle this topic. By criticizing the CBC, Adler positions himself as the only media host who is really getting to the truth by going beyond the “politically correct” and saying what real Canadians are thinking. It is in this way that his program follows the lead of political talk radio programs in the United States, where his show is viewed as a rebellion against the demands of new civility and special interest groups. By taking on themes of political discourse and liberalism, talk radio hosts have the opportunity to attack “specific policies and oppos[e] leaders while using their position as a way to advance their own ideologies.”
Adler often relies on a tag-team approach to advance his arguments. By pairing himself with like-minded guests, his ideas and opinions are supported and built upon by others who agree with him. In this way, he performs what Peter Moss and Christine Higgins call an “enabling function,” in which the radio host “facilitates the making of meaning, by his guest, by means of the question he asks, but he does not actually contribute content to the text.” Adler controls and shapes the discourse completely and relies on other members of the media—in particular, columnists from English Canada’s newspapers who share his ideological perspective, including the Globe and Mail’s Matt Cook and the National Post’s Matt Gurney. David “The Menzoid” Menzies, a Toronto Sun columnist, has appeared on the show and suggested, among other things, that women who are menstruating should be required to wear a coloured ribbon so that men would take that as a signal to leave them alone. The ensuing discussion illustrates the modus operandi of the “tag team.” First, Adler took a step backwards and suggested that Menzies had gone too far. He then called on women to support or criticize the Menzoid’s argument. Adler specifically asked female callers to respond, suggesting that they are the only ones with the experience to do so. One caller, Jennifer, did just that. She said that the Menzoid was not too far off the mark because wearing the bracelet could signal to a woman’s husband that it was time “to leave me the heck alone.” Jennifer went even further, arguing that men should be required to wear a brown bracelet to let women know when they are “full of crap.” Adler laughed and told the audience, “She just set us up.” In this exchange, Adler acted as the ring’s referee, ensuring that each party—the Menzoid and the female callers—“played fair.” Much of this segment was filled with laughter, making it clear that Adler, his listeners, and Menzies were joking with each other and signalling to the listener that it was not to be taken seriously and was merely “a casual entertaining chat.” However, inherent in this casual discussion is a narrative of women as dangerous, mercurial, and unpredictable at certain times of the month. The joke is clear—true understanding between the sexes is impossible.

In a particularly interesting two-part segment called “Angry White Males,” Adler again relied on a tag-team combination, working in tandem with an anonymous listener who, through his email, sparked Adler’s interest in the topic. The main theme of the segment was that young men are not doing well
in university, so for some of these men, a better choice may be enrolling in the trades. Adler began the broadcast with an email from a trades worker in the Greater Toronto Area who complained that he is sick and tired of trades people being portrayed as buffoons, opining that union halls in the GTA are often dominated by specific ethnic groups who only hire from within their culture and ethnicity. It is within this context that Adler defaulted to populist scripts such as the notion that white men are unjustly disadvantaged by Canada’s multicultural ethic. As he pointed out in the broadcast, “The Human Rights Commission, when it comes to these sorts of things, is about always finding the white guys guilty of discriminating against minorities and never the other way around.” Adler then segued, without discussion, stating: “Lots of young guys are carrying a lot of anger around for a lot of reasons,” and from there, without an explanatory transition, he launched into a discussion about the explosion of guns and knives at parties attended by university-aged men. By speaking about multicultural hires, the Human Rights Commission, and male violence, in that order, Adler intimated that violence is a justifiable outcome of the “race wars” in Canada. He expressed sympathy with white men, particularly young white men, who may resort to violence, given that they have been denied a fair opportunity to participate in the job and academic market because of Canada’s multicultural practices.

In this segment, Adler relied on stereotypes to help his listeners make a number of argumentative jumps that presumably the listener is well equipped to make. The first is that honest working men are too often unfairly viewed as second-class citizens. The subtext is that white men are being unfairly treated and minorities are the ones holding them back. By extension, violence is the only natural outcome. Outrage at the treatment that good, working-class, white men are experiencing at the hands of special minority groups is similar to the outrage that Murray Levin documented in his study of talk radio in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States. Levin concluded that talk radio provided a discourse “preoccupied with emasculation” in which the natural world order was inverted. In other words, white men no longer were considered to have power. Instead, minorities and women had taken over.46

Using a tag-team approach, Adler builds on the ideas proffered by his audience and columnists. As a result, he entertains by playing off of the action inside the ring, building on the excitement and entertainment values, and then delivering his assessment with his rhetorical verbal posturing.
Wrestling Costumes and Verbal Posturing

Wrestlers’ extravagant costumes allow them to display their musculature, and in that same vein, Adler uses his verbal posturing as a way to demonstrate his own discursive musculature. Despite his position as a member of Canada’s media elite, he takes on the persona of the Everyman and he does it with great style. His ability to speak for, as he puts it, the “guy who buys his coffee from Tim Hortons” allows for an exploration of anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian views in opposition to the views of those he deems “Latte Lovers." Many of his past shows indicate that he is in the “Tim Horton guy’s” corner, speaking for the regular folk. For example, he began a segment titled “Ignatieff”: “In a cold, cold, red meat Canadian winter, the opposition granola is not selling.” In other words, Canada’s opposition political parties are not reflecting the harsh realities that real Canadians are facing.

Even when discussions are not on political topics, Adler challenges Canadian political elites. For example, he began his segment titled “Dating, Who Pays?” with this: “Ladies and gentlemen, you deserve a break today…. You deserve a break from unelected, unaccountable bodies like the Senate getting in the way of legislation that everybody wants, having to do with revolving door sentencing and all the rest, the crime and the crime.” This seems unrelated to dating, but it provides Adler with the opportunity to take a jab at those who are not the Everyman, the Liberal-appointed senators who at the time were dominating the upper chamber. By saying that his listeners deserve a break, Adler framed the actions of the Senate as antithetical to the values and interests of ordinary Canadians. Such discursive fulminations are an example of the elite-challenging aspect of talk radio. Furthermore, Adler’s message dissociates the Liberal elites from the people and, by extension, from common sense.

Adler hooks listeners by labelling his callers “Citizens of Adler Nation.” By doing this, he immediately creates a group dynamic and implicitly asserts that there is a homogeneity among his callers on politics and public policy. Within that dynamic, Adler is the “boss”—or more specifically, the "boss of talk.” For example, in a segment called “No Hyphen Canada,” which took aim at Canada’s multicultural policies, Adler managed to align himself against the policy of multiculturalism without actively marginalizing minorities: “It’s not about the minorities,” he said. “It’s about different people who want to run for government—right? Politicians pandering to some members of minority
groups and I really think that’s what keeps this hyphenated thing going. I—I don't perceive that there are millions and millions of individuals who are members of the so-called minority groups who are demanding hyphens.”

Adler did not aim to alienate his potential minority listeners. Instead, he condemned multiculturalism as a cynical attempt to grab votes. Most of his listeners are aware of the host’s own history of arriving in Canada as an immigrant child from Hungary. He relies upon this experience of escaping from Communist rule in his home country. The “epistemological populism” borne out by an assertion that “individual opinions based upon first-hand experience are much more reliable as a form of knowledge than those generated by theories and academic studies” allows him to assert himself as trustworthy, legitimate, and the possessor of the truth.50

Clearly, Adler does not demand a hyphen and he refuses to be pandered to. It is this personal experience that he returned to in a segment titled “Communism.” Adler summed up his view of his responsibility as a host: “Do the folks understand where I’m coming from? And then the more important question do I understand where they’re coming from? So look. I just can’t be the companion I want to be for you unless you get a chance to know who I am and sometimes that means taking a piece of my own life story and putting it right up there on the dashboard for you.” The alleged primacy of the experiential is evident here, and it supports Paul Saurette and Shane Gunster’s observation that Adler “effortlessly shifts back and forth between personal experiences (either one’s own or others) and broader social and political questions.”51

In that vein, Adler provides a moving piece on the issue of snobbery to underscore his Everyman status. “Snobs” began with Adler reading of a number of emails from people who were responding to an earlier email from a salesman who was derided by a colleague because he talked to the woman janitor. In his summation of the lengthy segment, Adler thanked one of his email listeners, another janitor in Vancouver, with this: “You make a lot of lives easier. Much easier. And you’ve made my life much easier because you’ve reminded me of a person who did the kind of thing you’re doing for many people over the years. Made their lives a lot more comfortable. It wasn’t always easy work but she made things easier for the people she worked for. Her bosses, her customers. Her name was Rose and it’s extremely personal [voice breaking].” That Rose is Adler’s mother is revealed in the second section of
this piece. By this declaration, Adler secured himself as one of the people, a man whose parents worked hard and did not expect much from the state but managed to make a home and a life in Canada—lessons he has clearly not forgotten.

Heroes and Villains: The Smackdown

The modern world of wrestling is a “morality play” that features “mighty heroes and monstrous villains.”\(^\text{52}\) In many ways, Adler adjudicates issues of morality, setting up easily identified heroes and despicable villains. Adler, like his wrestling counterparts, delivers the ultimate smackdown, a verbal undressing of those he deems to be unworthy. His articulation of clear winners and losers, heroes and villains, is evident in his unabashed support of Prime Minister Harper and his very clear opposition to former Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff.

In one segment, titled simply “Stephen Harper,” Adler provided the prime minister with an opportunity to discuss the initiatives of the Canadian government in responding to the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010 as part of a special broadcast to raise money for the Red Cross effort in Haiti. This segment opened with dramatic music and a series of short clips from government officials, including the prime minister, discussing responses to the disaster. Adler then had the prime minister on live. He was given full access to Harper, a prime minister well known for his control of the media.\(^\text{53}\) Harper was interviewed for over ten minutes about how the government was responding to the needs of Haitians following the earthquake.

Adler’s tone with the prime minister was markedly different from the tone he has used with other guests. He was obviously deferential, calling him, rather formally, “Mr. Prime Minister.” Harper, by comparison, called Adler “Charles,” repeating his name several times. Since Adler is normally so flippant in dealing with those in authority, his deference suggests that the prime minister is the one person for whom he has respect. Conversely, the prime minister’s use of Adler’s first name leaves the listener with the impression not only that Harper is familiar with Adler and his work, but also that he recognizes Adler as a peer.

Much of the interview came across like a promotion for Canadian nationalism and pride. Adler’s first comment to the prime minister was about the

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generosity of the Canadian people in donating money to the Haitian relief efforts. He also played up the role of the Canadian Armed Forces:

**ADLER:** Prime Minister, we’re also hearing from some terrific number of our military and of course they’re all terrific, but we’re hearing from some of them who have done a couple of tours of duty already in Afghanistan. They just cannot get enough of public service and now some of these young men and women who have done so much time and so much important work in Afghanistan now want to contribute by going to Haiti.

**HARPER:** Well, you can never say enough about the people in the Canadian Forces. First of all, I can’t say enough about all the government officials involved in this from RCMP to development workers to the diplomats who are actually coordinating the effort, but as you know, particularly the Canadian Forces.

This exchange allowed the audience the opportunity to act as “eavesdroppers overhearing a cozy chat.” Also significant is the ideological function of the conversation, which suggests the importance of a strong military, the selflessness of the Canadian soldiers, and the efficiencies of government workers made possible by the Conservatives under Harper’s capable command.

In another segment, “Harper the Piano Man,” Adler portrayed Harper as “a control guy” not known to be trendy. But as he pointed out, Harper’s by now famous surprise appearance at a National Arts Centre gala in Ottawa in October 2009—a gathering that, according to Adler, was filled with Liberal supporters—allowed the prime minister to make the transformation from a “stiff” to a doting husband who was bravely performing live with the famous cellist, Yo-Yo Ma. This praise for Harper provided Adler with an opportunity to critique Ignatieff, who he claimed could never be cool enough to pull off such a manoeuvre. The language he used to describe Harper’s actions is the language of a fan: he gushed that “Steve’s” performance was impressive.

It is interesting that in this segment, Adler humanized Harper by focusing on the prime minister’s personal life. He suggested that Harper’s decision to play piano at the National Art Centre was nothing more than a husband doing a favour for his wife—the type of thing that many husbands do. In the Haiti interview, Adler provided Harper with the opportunity to talk about how the earthquake had affected his wife and family, thereby providing listeners with
an inside glimpse into a man who has been portrayed as stiff, difficult to read, and uncomfortable showing affection to his family. Harper therefore revealed the man he claims to be—an ordinary Canadian, a loving husband who is doing the right thing by his family and by his country.

Adler’s deferential treatment of Harper stood in stark contrast to his treatment of NDP leader Jack Layton, who was also given a rare (according to Adler) opportunity to speak on the program. Adler, in introducing Layton as his guest, began by saying that people have asked him if he had anything nice to say about his friend Jack Layton. He replied that the day Layton did something with which he agreed, he would invite him on the program, and the NDP’s decision to oppose the Harmonized Sales Tax, an attempt to rethink sales tax legislation in Canada, was apparently what prompted the invitation. While Adler called Stephen Harper “Mr. Prime Minister,” he called Layton “Jack” throughout the segment. He was also much more relaxed and informal in his interview, laughing with Layton and at times gently chiding him.

I could not find one segment in which Ignatieff was offered the same courtesy as Layton or Harper. Instead, Adler relied on news clips of the opposition leader or he interpreted Ignatieff’s political moves in a negative light. Moreover, he referred to Ignatieff by a number of somewhat insulting monikers, including “Iffy Iggy,” “the big-brained visiting professor,” “frat boy,” and “arrogant.”55 There is no indication of respect, no deference, and no collegiality in these labels. Adler characterized the Liberal leader as a political outsider, a foreigner who wants to infiltrate the Adler Nation. He is therefore not a “true” Canadian but a visiting professor from the United States, and it is clearly intimated that once his political term is completed, Ignatieff will return to the States, echoing the Conservative ad campaign “Just Visiting.”

In a long piece titled “Why Is Ignatieff Shooting?” broadcast when Canada was potentially on the verge of yet another federal election because of an anticipated non-confidence motion, Adler read an open letter he had written to the opposition leader. He called Ignatieff an “unreliable character” and suggested that he was falling short of Canadians’ expectations:

Ordinary Canadians are expecting that the dude who’s been touted as their big brain with the big heart with the big, big database of phone numbers and email addresses that includes members of Barack Obama’s inner circle—these poor salts are expecting a vision, a show, an attitude, a vibe, a feeling of change in the
northern air. A change in the economic spring after a very long and dark and
dark economic winter. Who can blame them? Michael, you talked incessantly
about the PM giving you a report card on what his government is doing about
infrastructure, the deficit, EI, isotopes, it goes on and on. But what have you
been doing?

The juxtaposition of the ordinary against the elitist, the working man against
the political inner circle in the United States was deliberate and effective, and
emphasized Ignatieff’s outsider status. Adler summed up Ignatieff’s effec-
tiveness by giving him a letter grade of C-, suggesting that he was a light-
weight and calling into question his establishment attachments and Harvard
training.

The final blow to the mat occurred in the last minutes of the segment.
Adler opined: “Those members of the general public—remember, the ones
who don’t read the reviews of your books and don’t pretend to read the
book—can read you pretty well at this point, Michael. You’re the guy who
will jump on or jump off any little red wagon that’s moving.” The red wagon,
of course, is the Liberal party: Adler was intimating that Ignatieff’s tenure as
leader is temporary and opportunistic. He continued by saying that if Ignatieff
wanted to commit political suicide, he should not get his “pathetic DNA on the
prime minister’s Harry Rosen suit.” This comparison was an interesting one.
Harper was clearly being depicted as a member of the elite because he dresses
in expensive suits. But Adler went further by suggesting that Ignatieff was a
morally weakened leader who was not up to the job.

Conclusions

While several studies originating in the United States discuss the power of
talk radio, few studies have examined exactly how talk radio operates, par-
ticularly in Canada. As Saurette and Gunster argue, talk radio is limited in
that it does not promote real debate but instead naturalizes “certain politi-
cal and policy conclusions” while dismissing others as “worthy of ridicule.”56
Adler’s approach is to provide the context of interpretation on the topic of
the day. Indeed, his heavy-handed treatment of Ignatieff and his somewhat
uneven interview with Layton reveal where his political allegiances lie. While
he may claim that he is on the forefront of breaking news, for the most part he
is merely a news commentator: like other members of the new social media, he relies on the mainstream media for information. In this respect, Adler and talk radio in Canada can only be viewed as reactive rather than as cutting edge or innovative.

Moreover, Adler’s clearly articulated views on who is the hero and who is the villain support a normative populist view that suggests how things should be. There is little room for those who do not share that view, including feminists and “special interest” groups. As Saurette and Gunster suggest, there is no space for alternative viewpoints. Adler’s program is very much a show in which “nobody ever changes their mind or demonstrates any willingness to recognize, accommodate or learn from those with differing perspectives.” Indeed, Adler is great on talk, and not so great on “listening and thinking.”

Adler uses talk radio as his wrestling ring and his Canadian audience as his devoted fans, listening as he and his tag team slam to the mat anyone with whom they do not agree. It is not clear whether these fans buy into his message, but it is clear that the match has been carefully crafted to keep them entertained and to narrow the parameters of political discourse in this country. In an era of declining revenues, traditional media, including radio, are facing serious challenges in maintaining and building audiences. Presumably, then, Adler and his “smackdowns” will be with us for as long as they are profitable for the radio station, leaving limited room for alternative voices in Canadian private talk radio.

NOTES

1 Adler is not truly national, as he does not broadcast in the Atlantic provinces; however, he is still the only private radio talk-show host who is heard in multiple markets.
5 Radio insider, email interview with Shannon Sampert, February 16, 2009. The interviewee, whose remarks are also cited in nn. 15 and 40, prefers to remain anonymous.
6 Adler’s website has since been updated, and the podcasts have been taken down. They are also no longer available on iTunes. The segments I downloaded were titled “Adler 2,”


Ibid., 371.


Indeed, when I worked in the 1990s with the opposition party in Alberta, we regularly monitored talk radio stations for hot-button topics and attempted to offer our leader as a potential guest to offer an alternative perspective.


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31 Ken MacQueen, “In Like a Lion, Out Like a Lion,” Maclean’s, June 23, 2003, 29.
44 This exchange took place in a segment titled “Adler 2.”
46 Murray Levin, quoted in Douglas, “Letting the Boys Be Boys,” 491.
47 These remarks are from the “Ignatieff” segment.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 201.
55 The quotations are from “Friday Rant, October 30.”
56 Saurette and Gunster, “Ears Wide Shut,” 211.
57 Ibid., 214.