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The Father of ‘Talk Show Democracy’—On the Line with Larry King

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"Talk Show Democracy"
On the Line with Larry King

IN THE AFTERMATH of what surely was the most extraordinary presidential campaign ever for the American news media, the Larry King story—like the man himself—has taken on almost mythic proportions: Horatio Alger Makes Good. Real good.

Today, the mantle of media greatness rests easy on the self-described "Jewish kid from Brooklyn" in the wake of events that defined the "top banana of talk show hosts" as the undisputed kingmaker of the 1990s. Consider: During the presidential race, Ross Perot announced his candidacy (twice) on "Larry King Live"; after belittling the idea, an uncomfortable (and, finally, desperate) George Bush came on the show late in a losing campaign; and Bill Clinton, mindful of King's role in his victory, promised to be back every six months if he won.

Though self-effacing ("I'm just the interlocutor"), Larry King doesn't reject the label of Father of America's new "electronic democracy," a revolution that came of age, he acknowledges, with Perot's coy, on-air concession on Feb. 20, 1992, that he'd run for president if drafted. With that show, Larry King became an instant oracle, ranking second (after venerable sense-maker David Brinkley), Media Studies Center research found, among most frequently cited political pundits, while catching both grief from the traditional news media and loyalty of audiences and candidates.

"I don't get carried away with it," King told Journal Editor Edward Pease in an interview in King's CNN office in March. "I
mean, it’s wonderful to be a part of it—I’d be kidding you if I said I
don’t love the attention and the pay and the wonderful things it
brings you. And it’s wonderful to be in the middle of the hunt. . . .
But you got to watch that it doesn’t go to your head.”

In 1994, with the role of interactive shows like King’s well estab-
lished, Larry King reflects that what now is revered as “talk show
democracy” is just an idea whose time took a while to come—34
years, to be precise, which was how long ago King developed the for-
mat he still uses. His 1960 radio show, broadcast live from
Pumpernik’s Restaurant in Miami Beach, consisted of conversation
with both stars and “regular people.” That basic format became the
“Larry King Live” show that 400 million people listen to or watch
daily in 1994.

“I’m not doing anything different than I did 30-something years
ago,” King says. “Nothing. Before the Gore-Perot debate—someone
said, ‘Boy, you must be edgy.’ Why? I did two guys running for
Miami Beach mayor. I have had two guys punch each other. It’s
nothing new—there are just different characters. I’ve always been
inquiring. I’m doing the same thing I’ve always done except that now
the avenues are so much wider, direct communication is so much more powerful than it was when I was in Miami Beach.”

In a 1989 interview with Media Studies Journal, King said of talk radio: “Probably we’re a better barometer [of public opinion] in that the New York Times will print only the letters that it chooses to print.” Shows like his, King said, were “a national, electronic town meeting, a chance for the public to get together and speak out.”

Talk shows in general and Larry King’s in particular have not been without their critics in the 1990s; it isn’t difficult to make connections between public resentment of the traditional news media and the growing popularity of “alternatives.” In his 1993 book On the Line, responding to the sometimes whining criticism from the press that shows like his make it easy for public figures to circumvent the press and avoid the tough questions, King concedes that, “Talk show democracy’ is certainly not without risks or flaws. Our callers ask better, more serious questions than some in the press have given them credit for. But some candidates and their handlers still think of talk shows as a way to avoid tough press grillings. Talk shows should supplement the campaign press, not replace it. There’s room enough for everyone.”

It is King’s view that direct-access exchange between citizens and public figures—even presidents—is good for society and press alike. That vision of the American people speaking to one another over the air has become the electronic and political reality of the 1990s. And political leaders are joining in, as the Father of the Talk Show Democracy discussed in this interview evaluating the presidency in the new media age and his own part in it.

Media Studies Journal: You have had a major influence in developing the promise of the “electronic town meeting.” Would you talk about how you see this new form having affected the ways that Bill Clinton governs?

Larry King: Bill Clinton’s great strength is his ability to communicate via television, one on one. Reagan had that strength, but his was perceived completely differently: Reagan was your really nice uncle who was a good guy and made you feel good. Clinton is your really bright cousin who listens to you, cares about the family, relates
very well, calls, keeps in touch, is accessible. He's a nice guy. Got faults . . . we all have faults—for example, even the Whitewater thing. But he's extraordinarily likable. Even what we see as a little bit of a cad in him is kind of fun.

So, he will use to his advantage programs like “Larry King Live” and others. The more he communicates in an informal setting, the better.

I have no doubt that if this were the 1930s, Roosevelt would have been on our show a lot—fireside chats with Larry King. He would have taken it further and talked to the public. Clinton's willing to talk to the public. He is the most accessible president ever.

**MSJ:** Do you think the president gets away with more on shows like yours because he's so good on the air and can appear and sell his position pretty much without being challenged?

**Larry King:** You have to be good at that. But that same plus that allows him to go on and focus on himself also allows Whitewater to be the focus of the show this week. You got to pay the price of it.

**MSJ:** How is this immediate access of the public with news and news-makers changing how the traditional news media deal with the president?

**Larry King:** There's no “traditional” anymore. In fact, in a couple of years, we're going to be called traditional, and something new will have come along.

Communications is so informal today and so one-to-one: When I was a kid, the last thing I'd have dreamed of would have been talking to a president. I mean, forget it. But that's a distinct possibility today, that a Joe Citizen in Des Moines can talk to Bill Clinton. In fact, if his kid wanted to really work at it, he could make it happen, because Bill Clinton will be on phone-in shows and will continue to communicate that way.

We'll continue to have these kinds of forums. Now, Whitewater aside, it wouldn't shock me to see Hillary debate Robert Dole on the eve of the health care vote on “Larry King Live.” Gore and Perot proved that the new rules are that there are no rules anymore.
MSJ: Where does that leave the Washington Post, the New York Times, ABC, NBC?

Larry King: Someone said—and I don’t know if this is true—that today we have more input of information in a week than someone in 1930 had in a lifetime. The more the merrier. We’ve never been better informed. The more channels open to us—the more C-SPANs, the more CNNs—the better. There will still be a Washington Post. There will be op-ed pages. There will be critics. But today, the newspaper has a different role.

MSJ: What’s that?

Larry King: The difference today is that Clinton could make three key TV appearances. Let’s say he appears on “Larry King Live,” “Nightline” and the morning shows. Then there’s William Safire, two days later, on the op-ed page of the New York Times, telling you that he looked erratic. It’s meaningless to you, if he didn’t look erratic to you.

When I was a kid, all I had to go on was print: Time magazine told me what to think of Harry Truman—print was like the Bible to me. But now, all this competition forces the printed press to be better and smarter—the Los Angeles Times is 100 percent better than it was; the New York Times, infinitely more readable, a better paper, affected by television—the New York Times is doing graphics! The Washington Post is a better paper. So is the Chicago Tribune.

MSJ: So the “new media” are pushing newspapers to do a better and different job?

Larry King: Sure. I’m a crazy sports fan, but I don’t read game stories anymore. I saw the game. I saw the highlights on ESPN. So, the Washington Post tomorrow, in their story of the Bullets game, has got to give me something different. I saw the Clinton speech. How many times will you read the New York Times front-page piece on it?

MSJ: One feature of the “new media” is that these things will be available in full text, on the Internet, for instance.

Larry King: That’s what I’m saying—it keeps growing and growing and growing. We’re going to vote by phone. They say the
newspaper will be delivered from the television in your house and, I'm told, you'll get only the parts you want, what you want to see.

**MSJ:** So we'll be able to pick and choose which "Larry King" interviews to see, or which question Larry King asks.

**LARRY KING:** Or it will be in a box and you can hit a button and say, "The last time Clinton was on, what did he say?" And you'll punch that up. You'll direct your own sports because you'll have at home what the control room has.

**MSJ:** Are there other ways that you already see the "new media" changing the way public figures—especially the president—are perceived?

**LARRY KING:** There's something about this medium that can change you. Perot has not been the same since that night [Feb. 20, 1992, when he said he would run for president on King's show].

And Gore—I had a guy say to me today, "Wouldn't it be a great break for the Democratic Party if Clinton could resign? Because Gore's unbeatable."
Who would beat Gore? What Republican? Nobody. I don't think there's a Republican who can touch him. He's a loyal guy, he's bright, he's smart, he's easily the best vice president we've ever had. And a lot had to do with that night.

_MSJ: You mean when he debated Perot about NAFTA on your show?_  
_LARRY KING: Gore took on a giant. The odds were against him. They were 30 votes behind [in the Senate on NAFTA]. And he won. Things can change overnight._

You know, I'm 60. I wish I were 30 because, God, I'm right at the cutting edge of this. It's still strange to me, just to be a part of it, to have access to it and to be able to bring it forward. Especially since I'm not doing anything different than I did 30 years ago. I'm doing the same things I did in Miami Beach, except now the avenues are so much more open.

_MSJ: To get back to the White House and to this President—he communicates well, he won the election with his electronic town meeting approach._  
_LARRY KING: He's skilled at people-to-people._

_MSJ: Now that he's in office, now that he's governing the nation, how is that different from how he used the media during the campaign?_  
_LARRY KING: Well, he views it as always running. He loves it too: He likes campaigning. For Clinton, bad days are good days—that's what makes him a tough opponent. Anything can bring a president down, but he's not tormented by Whitewater, for example. He's not sitting up going, "Oh, Jesus." He's going to get up tomorrow morning and take them on. And his instincts are uncanny.

Gore told me he had the idea to debate Perot [on NAFTA] and called Clinton and said, "I've got an idea. You know, we're 30 votes down, Perot is obviously running with the ball. What if I challenge him? What if I went on 'Larry King' with him?" And Clinton said, "Go!"

They didn't send it to staff. They get bogged when they get into staff. He'd run a better show if he ran it himself. He's got very good instincts. He's extraordinarily likable. He's the opposite side of the [Rush] Limbaughs, the attackers every day, the [Sen. Al] D'Amatos.
They're appealing to a minority that just can't stand the fact that they're up against a guy who takes all the pounding.

Whitewater could change all that, but what's never going to change is the way Gore will be if Gore were president, if Dole were president. I don't think you could run for office today and not go on the "Larry King Lives" and the "Nightlines." You couldn't avoid that anymore.

MSJ: Perot talked about voting from your home.

LARRY KING: Probably soon you will vote from your home. There will be national referendums, there will be polling techniques, they will have computers where you're able to get public opinion immediately.

And you cannot diminish the overnight factor. Suppose there's a governor—who's the governor of North Dakota? I don't even know if he's a Republican, but let's assume that he's a Republican. Nobody knows him. I can give you a scenario in which he's going to be the presidential candidate of the Republican Party in '96.

Here's what happens: There's a prison riot in Fargo and the prisoners take over the prison. They want to meet with the governor. CNN's cameras go there, followed by CBS and NBC.

The governor lands in a helicopter and goes in alone. He's a handsome, good-looking guy, in his 40s—Gov. Dumont—and he walks into their prison. Four hours later he comes out. Interrupt all programming—he comes out with the prisoners. They surrender, and no one's hurt. The governor steps forward. He says, "They will be punished, but they've had some logical demands. And I've looked at crime inside there now, and I've got some things to say . . . ." And he's very forceful.

That's a Thursday. On Friday, he's on "Larry King Live" and "Nightline." Sunday, he's on "Meet the Press." The following Friday, he's leading in the polls. He's on the front cover of Time, the unknown favorite. Why? Because of television. Thirty years ago, if the New York Times had told me, "You know about this governor who landed in North Dakota . . . ." Now I'm going to see him land. And I'm going to see him go into the prison. And there might even be a camera in the prison—we'll watch him talk to the prisoners.
On the Line with Larry King

Let's put it on. He's president.

**MSJ:** *It couldn't have happened with print?*

**LARRY KING:** It couldn't have happened with print. It couldn't have happened with radio. It needs the dynamism of this—TV—in every home.

There's no illiteracy with television—everybody's hooked in. It still throws the people involved: We sit down with Clinton, and I get a call and say, "Auckland, New Zealand. Go ahead." And Clinton goes, "Wow!"

I run into more people who watch it—in Frankfurt, they watch it in the airport. Here's a true story I tell. It's funny, but it's true: I'm in Israel at the Wailing Wall, never been to Israel before. My mother never got to go. I'm Jewish, it was very emotional—me there with my brother. And there's the Wailing Wall, and they're praying and there's a rabbi davening, down on his knees, davening. I'm standing there and he looks up at me and says, "What's with Perot?"

Just one little moment showed me the whole world's watching. "What's with Perot?"

**MSJ:** *In a lot of ways, you invented this. You did it 30 years ago in Miami.*

**LARRY KING:** Others invented the use of telephones on television. But we made it a part of the program. Donahue took calls for 20 years, but some days he wouldn't take calls. For us, calls are always a part of this mix.

**MSJ:** *And, almost by accident, you proved how powerful it was with the Perot interview. Imitation may be the most sincere form of flattery, and you've got imitators all over the place, but do you ever look at them and say to yourself, "What hath I wrought?" How does that make you feel?*

**LARRY KING:** That's fine. I like the business. I like to see more people in it. I see youngsters coming along, doing it. I'll be leaving radio in October, I think, pretty sure. And I'd love to see some really young energetic guy come along and be "the next Larry King." That's always nice to hear.
I like the impact we made in talk radio—we began the first national talk radio show, and now everybody's got a talk radio show. I'm very proud of it.

**MSJ:** Interviewing a politician is different from an interview with an entertainer. When you're dealing with a political figure . . .

**Larry King:** Although there's a sameness to it. For example, Michael Keaton comes on my show to talk about his movie. It's the same as Bill Clinton talking about his health plan: "Vote for me, this health plan is good for you." Or, "This movie you will like."

You vote for Keaton by putting down seven bucks. You vote for Clinton by calling your congressman. They're both selling. I'm asking questions. There's not that much of a difference.

**MSJ:** Do you have any reservations about being the bully pulpit, being the soapbox for any of the people—entertainers or politicians—who come on your show?

**Larry King:** No. We ask good questions, we're not there to kill them, we're not there to softball them. I ask the best questions I can. I always saw myself as the style section.

**MSJ:** You've said, "I don't consider myself a journalist, but journalism results from what I do."

**Larry King:** Right. I never was the front page. I'm not a journalist *per se.* I don't go cover the fire, but I like to ask questions of the firemen. To report on the fire does not whet my appetite. But to get that fireman to talk about how he feels . . .

**MSJ:** What about the critics, though, *who* . . .

**Larry King:** Talk about softballing . . .

**MSJ:** Right.

**Larry King:** You know, I've never understood that. What is a softball question? I just am me and I'm doing the same thing I've done all these years, which is being intensely curious . . . For example, the postmaster general is on tonight—I don't care who he slept with last night. If there's a scandal about him in the paper today, I'll ask about it. But I'm going to learn a lot more by getting *his* percep-
tion of it than by talking about my perception of it. What whets my appetite is not, what paper did Bill Clinton sign 10 years ago to put a down payment on Whitewater. What really fascinates me is, how does he feel tonight? That fascinates me more.

We need the guys who ask, “What did you sign 10 years ago?” But from my point of view, that’s one way not to get an answer. The best question is, “What’s going on?” If Clinton sat down with me tonight, I’d ask, “What’s going on?” Then I get his perspective, not mine. His.

MSJ: How do you view the traditional media’s response to that approach, and to the “new media” generally, which includes Larry King?

LARRY KING: Well, I don’t know why, but some seem to be jealous—some aren’t at all. One of the problems with the old media is, for example, the press conference. If you’re used to good one-on-ones, a press conference is boring. They’re too all over the place. They [reporters] don’t follow up each other; each one has his own agenda. But here, you’re just dealing with my question, you know, there’s no
group agenda. They may feel that we ran an end run around them, but we didn’t do anything they wouldn’t do.

MSJ: *Eleanor Clift of Newsweek has written a piece for this Journal in which she talks about Bill Clinton going to alternative media, and the White House press corps retaliating with what she calls “unrelievedly negative coverage” of the president. What about that?*

LARRY KING: Well, Eleanor probably believes that they feel left out, so they’re going to get even by attacking. But the whole White House press corps could hate Clinton, and if he goes on somewhere tonight and he’s effective, he’s bypassed them.

I don’t have that sense of my own personal importance. “Larry King Live” is an important *show*, but I want to be here tomorrow night. I’m not important tonight—[my guest] is important tonight. What he says is important.

MSJ: *So, if Clinton can go around the White House press corps and get his message out effectively . . .*

LARRY KING: I don’t know if it’s going around. I mean, what made them—or anyone—the be-all and end-all? What if I started getting angry and saying, “Hey, Clinton, you called a press conference today, why didn’t you come to me?”

MSJ: *Are they irrelevant?*

LARRY KING: No, no one’s irrelevant. We’re all part of the mix. But there’s no Walter Winchell anymore, there’s no make-or-break guy. David Broder can’t make, he can’t break. Larry King can’t make, he can’t break. Sure, there are more Larry Kings now than there were, so the David Broders have to take a little bit of a step back—the pie is more cut up. There are so many more viewers, more channels. You know, when Jackie Gleason went off the air, he had a 29 [share]. Bill Cosby never reached 29. The world changed.

So nobody is irrelevant. On the other hand, nobody’s the ultimate authority, either, anymore.

MSJ: *Former GOP Chairman Rich Bond once told you that people are*
paying attention to the media differently now. He said, “They are so alienated from the national establishments of conventional media and conventional politics that they would believe more what was said on a ‘Larry King’ show than they would believe what George Will said on ‘David Brinkley.’” And you wrote in your book that many in the press feel that way, that the press feels you are “treading on their turf.” Can you talk more about that?

**LARRY KING:** CNN has a great image with the audience. While Brinkley’s wonderful, he also has [George] Will and [Sam] Donaldson, both of whom have images—their negatives are as high as their positives. They’re both outstanding personalities, but they have negatives, baggage with the public.

I don’t think we skew much negative. We have a good show—it’s lively, it moves right along, people call in. It also is a very good visual show. . . . Something’s happening and I love doing it, and that comes though. I love David, but there are some Sundays he looks like he couldn’t care less.

**MSJ:** There’s a cartoon by Don Wright in your book of two Colonial-era guys in frock coats standing on a cloud and looking down. One of them says, “That’s just the way it happened, Mr. Jefferson. From the Federalist Papers to ‘Larry King Live.’” Do you see yourself as inheriting the mantle of the Founding Fathers?

**LARRY KING:** What we don’t know is, what fascinates me is how Lincoln would have done? If Lincoln were on the show tonight, how would he have handled the call from the Southern state that seceded—“Let’s go to calls. Nashville? . . .”

**MSJ:** And what would he have said?

**LARRY KING:** He could have been too witty for his own good. He had a high sing-song voice. . . . Imagine the media at Gettysburg: “OK, we’re all there, we’re going live. There’s a crowd—dolly in.” He speaks for a minute and eight seconds—and that’s it.

Imagine what happens: “Call Schneider! We need analysis!”

Then we have some analysis. The first guy would say, “What is this ‘Four score . . .’? What does that mean? ‘Four score’? Why didn’t
he say 87? He should just talk to the regular guy, because that’s the trouble with Abe—he talks above the heads of people. . . ."

And definitely there would have been a critic who would have said, “Boy, was he right when he said, ‘People will little note nor long remember what was said here. . . .’ Abe, you hit it on the head.”

They would have had a field day.

**MSJ:** And what about the Founding Fathers?

**Larry King:** Jefferson, who was shy, kind of introverted: “Who is this woman, Tom? Black woman, mistress,” they’d want to know. “Who is this woman?”

Imagine Ben Franklin, with “Hard Copy” following him to Paris? All over. Film of Ben Franklin in Paris? “Exclusive, tonight at 5:00, Mrs. Franklin speaks out on ‘Inside Edition’. . . .” I mean, they were just as raucous—it’s just that they didn’t have television.

Today, if we had a July 4th Declaration of Independence, it still would have been signed, let’s say, in Philadelphia. But all the signers would have been on all of the shows the next three nights, putting a spin on it: “Hancock, how come your name’s so big? Are you plugging the insurance company? What do you mean by ‘When, in the course of human events,’ . . .”?

And try to picture the wacko right-wing talk show host on the Declaration of Independence—he’d have gone berserk: “Who are these people? Revolutionaries, mercenaries, violating the king? ‘When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary . . .’—it’s a promotion of violence. They’re saying the same thing that Farrakhan is saying. Dress up as Indians and throw tea—they’re Harbor cowards! . . .”

**MSJ:** One last question: Look ahead for us. If the 1992 campaign represents the first coming of age of the electronic democracy and the ascendancy of the “new media,” then where do you see it going next? Is this really going to be an electronic democracy? Will it be a push-button democracy?

**Larry King:** My bet is that we’re going more toward that. With satellites, you don’t have to be in this room—you can talk to any guest anywhere. The truest thing Perot said was early on, when he asked, “What do we have ambassadors for?” We’ve got fax machines,
On the Line with Larry King

phones. What does an ambassador do? Relays a message. I can get the message much faster now, and there will be more speed, quicker information.

Now, I can't predict what will follow the fax—something even faster . . .

MSJ: Interactive communications, Max Headroom—two-way video?
LARRY KING: That's right around the corner. I hope I'm around to see it. I think it's going to be exciting, but part of it is not forecastable. I couldn't have forecast what we're doing now 10 years ago.

MSJ: Will the American public be as well served?
LARRY KING: Absolutely. There may be a lot of speed, there may be too much information too quickly. But we're always better served—the more you know, the better. Always. I think we'll be very well served.

MSJ: Thank you.
LARRY KING: Hey, great working with you.