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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: How MSNBC could compete with Fox News.

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BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor:

This is MARKETPLACE. I'm David Brancaccio.

Ever watch MSNBC? That Brian Williams guy isn't so bad, but who else do they got? The network is running behind Fox News and CNN, and The New York Times is reporting that the folks who own it, General Electric and Microsoft, want more viewers fast. Perhaps what they need is a Bill O'Reilly, the conservative commentator, who is doing for Fox what Rush Limbaugh did for AM talk radio. Business of media analyst Martin Kaplan, associate dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication, says MSNBC clearly needs something.

Mr. MARTIN KAPLAN (Associate Dean, USC Annenberg School for Communication): The something they're looking for is the same kind of oomph that makes Fox the number one cable news purveyor, which is to say ideological edge. And, interestingly, they don't seem to be looking for that edge from the left. It's the right that they're shopping for.

BRANCACCIO: Well, the right seems to be working for Fox.

Mr. KAPLAN: Of course, because the right is brilliant at what it does, and it has the advantage that all its arguments are simple and without shades of gray or complexity. The problem with the left and liberals or progressives, or whatever they've been mow-mowed into calling themselves these days, is that the answer to every question is, 'Well, we've got to look at all the different sides, and it's complicated.' The answer from the right to every question is, 'I know; you don't. And let's move on, buster.'

BRANCACCIO: Well, there's data that shows that journalists, as a population, skew liberal. You'd think that if MSNBC's looking for someone with edge to attract viewers, they'll find someone from the left to compete with an O'Reilly on the right.

Mr. KAPLAN: I don't think it matters if it were true; that journalists were consistently 100 percent in the Democratic Party. The truth is that the kind of material that makes it onto our airwaves does skew to the right. It's more entertaining. If you look at the content of talk radio, you have to have someone from the FBI to find somebody who's not on the right; the same thing is true on the Internet, and the same thing is largely true on those cable outlets, which are now trying to be lively and entertaining. And that's the problem. Entertainment comes from food fights. Entertainment does not come from looking at issues thoughtfully and finding common ground. Entertainment is polarizing, and the right is brilliant at polarizing. The poor left is saddled with the notion that we should all work together.

BRANCACCIO: Come on, Marty, in your heart of hearts, you must be wishing that the left, from your political perspective, could come up with a Rush Limbaugh from the left.

Mr. KAPLAN: If by what you mean is a demagogue, the answer is no. If by what you mean is somebody who can attract ears and eyeballs, absolutely. There has to be, in this grand country of ours, people who can stand up as, in these days, loyal opposition and not do it from the perspective of mealy-mouthedness. There has to be a way to say, 'No, you're wrong, and here's why,' and have a complex point of view and at the same time engage people and entertain them and keep them listening, so that advertisers will want to sponsor this stuff instead of the snooze-a-thons that public outlets, this one, of course, being excepted, are often purveying.

BRANCACCIO: Marty Kaplan, thank you very much.

Mr. KAPLAN: Thank you.

BRANCACCIO: Martin Kaplan is also director of the Normal Lear Center at USC.