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My Favorite Blowhard



By Marty Kaplan

I owe Keith Olbermann for enabling me to identify with Bill O'Reilly's fans.

I know: Oh, the irony. Countdown with Keith Olbermann and The O'Reilly Factor battled in the same time slot. Except when O'Reilly had Jon Stewart as a guest, it's hard to imagine two audiences more different. O'Reilly won Countdown's Worst Person in the World award so often, it might as well have been called the Bill-O, after Olbermann's snarkname for him. Olbermann mercilessly mimicked O'Reilly's voice. (He mimicked his boss Rupert Murdoch's voice, too, though it sounded more like a pirate's parrot than an Australian-born media mogul.) Fox News producer Andrea Mackris's sexual harassment suit against O'Reilly provided Olbermann a steady stream of material, as did the ambush tactics of his producers. Plus there's an ideological light year between the progressive Olbermann and the conservative O'Reilly, though "pinhead" and "liar" are more like labels they'd use for each other.

So with Countdown now off the air, it wouldn't be surprising if there's a jig being danced in Factorville. What is surprising is how being an Olbermann fanboy makes it easier for me to imagine how anyone could love O'Reilly. Opposites can sometimes be more alike than it's comfortable to admit.

No, I'm not falling for the moral equivalence fallacy. Sentence for sentence, the accuracy of the two shows — the content that can be objectively graded true or false — was far from similar. Olbermann was by no means error-free, but he respected facts; O'Reilly, not so much. Saying so does not make me a partisan, unless reality, as Stephen Colbert said, has a liberal bias. It's a safe bet that O'Reilly's audience holds the opposite view of the shows' comparative pants-on-fire scores, but I'm not ceding an inch of this ground. That O'Reilly's people and Olbermann's are equally passionate about their guy's veracity has nothing to do with objective reality.

But it's no fallacy to find equivalence in their vanity.

Keith, like Bill-O, is a blowhard. They are both splendidly full of themselves, pompous pontificators, preeners. Their outrage is manifestly authentic - "only an entertainer," a duck blind where Rush hides when it's convenient, doesn't apply to them - but when something pisses them off, they just can't help themselves from puffing up like a blowfish.

It took me a while to get past Olbermann's ego. "How can you watch this guy?," my son asked me, years ago, and the best I could muster was, If you focus on what he's actually saying, it kind of makes up for how

much he loves himself for saying it.

Sometimes, as in the “Worst Person” segment, it was fun to see him play a caricature of Keith; we were all in on it. But when it came to the “Good night and good luck” tag appropriated from Edward R. Murrow, and the hagiographic camerawork of the “Special Comment” segments, and the stentorian flourishes that even Robert Byrd couldn’t get away with at the end, it was Olbermann’s unalloyed sincerity that made him hard to take. His moral indignation thrilled me; what infuriated him, infuriated me. I just wish he’d had a lighter foot on the rhetorical organ music, and that the register of his tone had ranged more widely than Elijah to Jeremiah.

Of course O’Reilly is just as over the top, and as with Olbermann most of the time, there’s no whiff of performance or artifice; you don’t wonder whether, when the studio lights go out, he can slough off his persona the way you know Stephen Colbert can. That’s what makes me think I can slip into the skin of O’Reilly’s audience. If I didn’t believe that an egomaniac like Keith Olbermann could nevertheless be an effective champion of my team’s values, I could never imagine how anyone on the other team could get past Bill O’Reilly’s insufferability.

I suppose there’s also the possibility that O’Reilly and Olbermann are loved not despite their infatuation with their own righteousness, but because of it. That’s not my take, but I can see how their no-doubt-zone authority could be attractive. Again, I’m not saying they’re twins in truthiness. There’s a difference between bombast and bulls**t. But it’s likely that for some of their fans, the certainty that these guys radiate is a political aphrodisiac.

I’m grateful that Keith Olbermann offered the first TV alternative to Fox News besides CNN’s anemic “we’ll have to leave it there.” He demonstrated that polemical journalism could still be journalism. He provided venues for guests like Ezra Klein and Josh Marshall whose intelligence broke the Punch & Judy template of cable news. He proved that there’s an audience avid for hosts like Rachel Maddow — Rachel Maddow! — and Lawrence O’Donnell. He became a punching-bag for Democrats who wished that the base would please shut up, and for Beltway journalists who fetishize Access and Seriousness, and he just didn’t care.

It’s easy to believe that having Keith Olbermann as an employee was no walk in the park for MSNBC. For the length of his run there, I imagine that his network, like his admirers, learned to deal with his difficulty. That’s just how it sometimes is with these outsized personalities; it’s part of the package. With Countdown off the air, I’m no more likely to watch Bill O’Reilly than I ever was. But I do feel an unexpected kinship with his audience - maybe not the ones who love him as much as they love Sarah Palin, but the ones who realize they’re indulging the crazy uncle in him, like the fans of Keith Olbermann who never let his being a blowhard be a deal-breaker.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.

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