



INDEPENDENT

Does Dan Bongino have what it takes to be the new Rush Limbaugh?

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March 22, 2021

Despite the decline of newspapers and TV, conservative talk radio remains big business, writes [Andrew Buncombe](#)

The day after [Rush Limbaugh](#) died, fellow talk radio host [Dan Bongino](#) praised him in no uncertain terms.

On his own podcast, he described Limbaugh as the “Godfather”, saying he had been the creator of the kind of radio Bongino was now engaged in. “There have been relatively few people in the history of the republic who have had such a profound effect on the politics of the country as [Rush Limbaugh](#). He changed everything,” he said.

When he spoke to [Fox News](#), he was similarly expansive. “Rush Limbaugh invented the national conservative talk radio, he invented the game ... He was unique and will never be replaced, I mean, ever. He said talent was on loan from God. Well, today God has talent back, because you'll never see that again.”

Bongino appeared to be speaking from the heart back in February. And most commentators, both fans of Limbaugh, as well as some who loathed him, agreed upon the singular role he had occupied in the conservative talk radio universe.

Without Limbaugh there would have been no Bill O'Reilly, no Sean Hannity, probably no Fox News.

And even as he confronted lung cancer, he continued to work, broadcasting for three hours, five days a week, to up to 15m people.

In the vacuum created by Limbaugh's death at the age of 70, some are suggesting the 51-year-old Bongino, who served in both the New York City Police Department and the Secret Service, may be the best chance of trying to fill the slot.

Cumulus Media's Westwood One said that Bongino will from March 24 begin a three-hour show between 12pm-3pm eastern time, the same slot that Limbaugh had filled for decades.

“I'm excited to embrace the immense power of radio to connect with my listeners live for three hours every day,” Bongino, whose show will be heard in markets including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas and San Francisco, said in a statement. “This is an incredible privilege, and I pledge to honor the trailblazing work of those who came before me.”

Suzanne Grimes, Westwood One president, said: “Dan has been on a meteoric rise since his podcast launched in 2019, and we look forward to watching his star continue to rise.”

Nobody believes Bongino will have an easy job. To start, the environment he is inheriting is vastly different from the one Limbaugh helped create back in the 1980s, after Ronald Reagan in 1987 scrapped the Federal Communications Commission (FCC’s) “fairness doctrine”, which since 1949 had required broadcasters to dedicate equal time to both sides of an issue.

Broadcasters such as Limbaugh seized the challenge with ferocious energy, building a hugely profitable and influential business, pushing a right-wing conservative agenda that in no way found itself constrained by the need to stick to the facts.

Critics of the broadcaster say neither did he feel compelled to abide by most notions of civility or good taste. When he died, Limbaugh was accused of promoting racism, misogyny, homophobia and lots more.

A supporter of both Donald Trump and Trump’s claims that Barack Obama had not been born in Hawaii, he taunted liberals, “femi-nazis”, and others. He called a student who testified before Congress to call for health insurance to cover the cost of contraception “a slut”. He also likened Hillary Clinton’s daughter, Chelsea, to a dog, when she was just a teenager.

Others pointed out, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Limbaugh mocked people who had died from AIDS, and featured a recurring segment in which he read the names of those who had lost their lives, while playing songs such “Kiss Him Goodbye”, and “I Know I’ll Never Love This Way Again”.

Rush Limbaugh says latest wave of cancer treatment is 'kicking my a**'

Limbaugh’s show was syndicated to more than 600 markets through Premiere Networks, which has not announced future plans. Since Limbaugh’s death, the show has featured guest hosts and old tapes of the right wing celebrity.

Jennifer L Pozner, a media critic, the founder of Women In Media & News, and the author of *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV*, says Limbaugh was responsible for the “mainstreaming of hate on the radio and then, by proxy, the mainstreaming of hate in corporate media writ large”.

Pozner says she doubts anyone will fill the space Limbaugh occupied, largely because there is so much more media available – Facebook, YouTube, podcasts, cable television, numerous streaming services.

“Even TikTok is becoming its own thing, right? At first people thought TikTok was just kids dancing, [but] there’s also this whole sub-set of TikTok videos that are about political themes and news,” she tells *The Independent*.

She adds: “I don’t think there’s ever going to be the same kind of impact of one person, and one outlet. The way there was in the 60s, or in the 80s, where we had three major news networks on television, and a few voices that became primary on radio. And that was where we got our news. And that was where we got our commentary. It was also where we got our entertainment.”

Bongino, who was born in New York, served with the city’s police’s force for four years during the mid-90s, at a time when Rudy Giuliani as mayor ordered a controversial attempt to reduce

crime, including the “stop and frisk” policies that were seen to unfairly discriminate against minorities.

He later served more than a decade with the Secret Service, from 1999 to 2011, a time that would become the topic of two books, 2013’s *Life Inside the Bubble; Why a Top-Ranked Secret Service Agent Walked Away from It All*, and 2016’s *The Fight: A Secret Service Agent's Inside Account of Security Failings and the Political Machine*.

In 2011, he left the service, in which he spent a number of years on its Presidential Protection Division when George W Bush and Barack Obama were president, to run for the US Senate from Maryland.

He lost that race, and two other bids to enter Congress, a 2014 bid to win a seat in the US House, and then in 2016 after he moved to Naples, Florida.

It was at that point he stepped up his efforts to become a bigger figure in the world of right wing media, and would appear on the shows of conservative favourites Sean Hannity and Mark Levin. He became a regular contributor to Fox News, and would also appear on outlier outfits such as Alex Jones’s InfoWars, now notorious for its promotion of false and dangerous conspiracy theories.

In addition to his own website, and podcast, his posts on Facebook are often widely read, along with the likes of Ben Shapiro, James O’Keefe and Charlie Kirk.

Last year, after Trump and others complained that social media companies were deliberately “hiding” conservative content by use of algorithms, Politico carried out an investigation with researchers at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London-based think tank that tracks online extremism. It found that “a small number of conservative users routinely outpace their liberal rivals and traditional news outlets in driving the online conversation”.

It also revealed that a Facebook post by Bongino in last August, claiming – falsely – that Black Lives Matter protesters had called for the murder of police officers in Washington DC, was shared more than 30,000 times, and received 141,000 other engagements such as comments and likes.

It said by comparison, the best-performing liberal post around the BLM movement, by actor DL Hughley, received one-quarter of the traction of Bongino’s.

While there is clearly a shift under way away from print and TV – a January 2021 survey by the Pew Research Centre found 86 per cent of Americans get some news via a smartphone, and 33 per cent get some news from Facebook – some voices caution we would be wrong to write off talk radio just yet.

Paul Matzko is author of *The Radio Right: How a Band of Broadcasters Took on the Federal Government and Built the Modern Conservative Movement*, and a fellow at the Cato Institute, a conservative think-tank.

He says certain things are true about the state of talk radio – its audience is in decline, the age of its average audience in the mid-60s, twice as old as the average listener to podcast, and it faces more challenges from other mediums than it ever has.

“Talk radio is an industry in decline ... no matter which way you parse it,” he says. Yet he says people may be overstating the pace at which it is losing influence.

“If you have 15 million listeners on a daily basis, three hours a day, five days a week –just one show – that was Rush Limbaugh. They still have millions and millions of people who are very dedicated, and it out-punches its weight.”

The most listened to radio programme after Limbaugh's is that of Sean Hannity, who also attracts 15m listeners, Mark Levin in the 7th slot with 11m, Glenn Beck in 8th with 10.5m, and in 10th place, Mike Gallagher with 8.5m.

Can Bongino fill the slot? “I have my doubts,” says Matzko.

One reason is the personalities. Limbaugh always sought to “entertain” his listeners, whereas Bongino has said his main intention is to “Own the Libs”, and upset liberals.

“There's a tonal and messaging difference,” he says.

Matzko says the person in the industry that most reminds him of Limbaugh’s ability to connect with listeners, is Joe Rogan, more of a libertarian than a conservative, but who interviews people from across the spectrum in a way Limbaugh did when he started out

“You can symbolise the difference between the two of them in that Rush Limbaugh was infamous for his love of cigars, whereas Joe Rogan infamously got Elon Musk to light up a blunt – that’s libertarian versus conservative symbolism there,” he says.

“But Joe Rogan, last I saw he has like 190, nearly 200 million monthly downloads. Rush Limbaugh has about 20 million in a weekly audience. So how those translate downloads to listens weekly versus monthly, I don’t know but it’s a lot of people.”^[1] Bongino is also going to face a challenge from others in the talk radio world.

Michael Harrison, publisher of *Talkers* magazine, a trade journal that has been called “the Bible of talk radio”, told the Associated Press that Dana Lesch and Erick Erickson are among other personalities being bandied about.

“There is no clear-cut favourite at this time,” Harrison says.

“It is generally accepted that no one can replace Rush Limbaugh, even Rush Limbaugh as a posthumous performer.”