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The New Contrás' Insurgence Against Legacy Media Is Only Getting Hotter

Starved of true intellectual debate by the likes of The New York Times' op-ed page, Americans are turning to a more interesting and more compelling alternative.

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When Glenn Greenwald announced he was departing The Intercept last week, he did it on Twitter and Substack. The infamously troublesome and fearlessly principled writer, who has in more than a decade of journalism earned respect from even his strongest critics, quit the media entity he co-founded out of frustration with an editorial process that wanted to silence him.

Greenwald's fury expressed on the No. 1 show on cable news the next evening, "Tucker Carlson Tonight," illustrated how turbulent and bizarre the ideological winds have become. Here was Greenwald, Edward Snowden's interlocutor, raining lightning bolts on the notoriously hawkish Fox News, speaking to an ex-Weekly Standard writer turned neocon critic, about how his publication — funded by eBay leftist Pierre Omidyar — refused to allow him any criticism of Joe Biden, and instead embraced the opinions of the same American Deep State Greenwald has constantly (and often justifiably) criticized.

Greenwald pointed out that the only article to reference the Hunter Biden story on the site he co-founded did so "very snidely and dismissively to say that no one should pay attention to it because it was Russian disinformation, and it cited a letter from John Brennan, James Clapper, and the rest of the goons from the CIA and the intelligence community asserting it. And worse still, that letter said we have no evidence that Russia is involved in any of this. The Intercept omitted that phrase."

It might be easy to dismiss Greenwald's move as just an eccentric journalist making a move — "There he goes off to his room to write that hit song, 'Alone in My Principles.'" Except Greenwald is not alone. He is now one of an ecosystem of rebellious thinkers who have removed themselves from corporate and non-profit media to strike out on their own, confident that their readers, fans, and even critics will follow them into a new galaxy. There, instead of subscribing to a glossy magazine with Jann Wenner's terrible five-star reviews of aging Boomer rockstars, you do the equivalent of buying Matt Taibbi a beer every month.

These are the new contrarians — call them the New Contrás for short, because the one thing they all have in common is refusing the wokeness that dominates legacy media, and has created a practically religious climate of insufferable identity politics. It is no accident that in the week

prior to ejecting himself, Greenwald appeared on the O.G. podcast, “The Joe Rogan Experience,” and with the newest dominant player on the block, Megyn Kelly. Rogan, Kelly, and Carlson represent media players who have moved beyond the traditional limits of cable and truly control their own product output — and in doing so, command more relevance than any of the newsreaders who operate within the world of the past.

In researching this story over the course of two months, we talked with dozens of members of this new cohort. Why they are embarking on this new — and simultaneously very old — approach to media is fascinating and jarring.

They show enormous potential in the market forces of small online transactions to support guerrilla media efforts, while also anticipating a media landscape in which legacy institutions must inevitably strike back against their rebellious new competitors. Nearly all of them anticipate an organized attempt by Big Tech to crush what they’re doing. But they are perhaps the only individuals employed within media today who seem genuinely happy about the choices they’ve made — which have proved more profitable, more fulfilling, and more influential than the decrepit institutions they used to inhabit.

The Emperor Has No Clothes

The Baby Boomer generation’s approach to being a “thought leader” was, as is typical for them, far more structured and inorganic than their lackadaisical nature might suggest. You needed a syndicated column in the papers, a paid commentary gig on a television program, a book or at least the semblance of a running book project (repurposing your thesis was acceptable but not ideal), and of course a sinecure at a major think tank, which primarily served as a place you could expense your meals and source fresh interns every summer for research and light harassment.

Some of the New Contrás have a few aspects of these: books, sinecures, paid gigs. But the vast majority do not. They reject the Boomer expectations for success and relevance, and offer their readers and listeners a different experience: more raw, more authentic, and more immediate. Their reactions don’t run through the multilayer filters of legacy media, something that will inevitably lead to attacks.

But then again, we’re talking about legacy media like The New York Times — a paper that put a Twitter-inspired rumor that the president of the United States was standing in front of a green screen in a video on their front page, in an article bylined by two of their most respected journalists, then disappeared it without ever acknowledging the change.

The most dangerous thing the New Contrás are willing to say is: The Emperor Has No Clothes.

And they say it regardless of the emperor. Most of the members of this cohort are no fans of Donald Trump, and their attitude toward Joe Biden wavers between grudging acceptance and an eyeroll emoji. The message they have to their listeners is longer-term than election cycles, and it represents in its fundamental form a liberalism of thought. They are in general anti-Marxist, anti-critical race theory, and anti-identity politics. And they see within the rise of this Great Awakening a real threat to the country.

Saagar Enjeti, the co-host of “Rising,” housed within the popular D.C. news organization The Hill, is a perfect example of this trend. “Rising” looks like a traditional morning show, but it isn’t. Enjeti is a critic of the traditional Zombie-Reagan Republicans, his co-host Krystal Ball a critic of Clintonian corporatist Democrats, and their guests run the gamut. Their show dominates on YouTube, and Rogan has sung their praises repeatedly — for good reason, as it presents a version of politics much closer to the truth than the long-in-tooth, red-team, blue-team cable shows.

“There’s actually a new hybrid model, which is evolving, which is kind of going to take the best parts of independence and the best part of institutions,” Enjeti said. “There’s a massive audience obviously, the Joe Rogan audience, and so many more, of disaffected people who are generally Gen X, younger or older millennials, who still care a lot about the news, and they still care a lot about politics. But they just despise the contemporary discourse that we understand here in D.C.”

That discourse has been dominated by many factions that have no real base in the country as a whole, particularly on foreign policy. Enjeti would prefer a more honest discourse that laid bare creators’ beliefs instead of adopting a faux balanced attitude.

“The highest readership in American history was whenever we had a burgeoning massive partisan news. That’s actually how most people got their news, when we had huge levels of literacy, and we even had huge levels of news consumption, of voter participation,” Enjeti said, criticizing the “fetishization of so-called objectivity journalism.”

“Places like the New York Times and the Washington Post and the mainstream media, which are carrying over their old veil of objectivity ... but they have to post crazy critical race theory, because that’s what their upper-middle-class white subscribers want to hear,” Enjeti said. “And that’s fine, it’s OK. Seriously. The part that bothers me is that they then claimed to be the arbiter of truth and the paper of record in the United States.”

The vast majority of “Rising” viewers are young, below the age of 30. They’re also the cohort most likely to turn to YouTube instead of cable news.

“I really hate doing cable,” Enjeti said. “I just hated doing these three-and-a-half-minute hits on a four-person panel. I always use this as an example: I was on a panel once about nationalism. I literally got to speak for like a minute and a half. And you just can’t talk about an American nationalist project in a minute and a half. You just can’t. And why should I, in the age of Joe Rogan? Why should I, in this age of three-hour media?”

Three-hour media? What a ludicrous concept. Who would listen to three hours of anything, especially if it’s just two people sitting at a table — a comedian actor and fighting commentator on one side and an eclectic guest on the other? But people do, because they have more capacity for discussion than legacy media think they do.

“This is not just a cultural trend,” Katie Herzog declares. “This is not just a response to the thread of cancellation and a way to make yourself uncancellable. ... It’s also a response to market forces.”

One of the most brilliant members of this new media ecosystem, Herzog has an innate sense for dry comedy and dirty jokes. Formerly a columnist for Seattle magazine *The Stranger*, she came under fire for various violations of transgender speech controls. With a round of layoffs, she embarked on a podcast venture called “Blocked and Reported” with the disturbingly tall Brooklyn journalist Jesse Singal. What she’ll tell you, on the record, is that this was the best professional move of her life: She’s making more than twice as much doing a podcast as she did at *The Stranger*.

“In some ways, it’s going back to an old system where it’s a patronage system,” Herzog said.

As American as fake boobs, shower beer, and fried chicken biscuits, the newsletter approach has its basis in the pamphleteers of yore as well as the openly political journalism of the founding age. For Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton, the idea that members of the media would not wear their views on their sleeves was absurd.

The New Contras have no such designs on a false sense of detachment. If you listen to Herzog’s podcast, you won’t just understand her opinion on political and trending topics, you’ll get it on everything from the weather of the Pacific Northwest to her sarcastic frustration as a lesbian married to a bisexual (“Tacos or hot dogs, just pick one”).

This authenticity also speaks to the closer bond between the patron and the creator. Legacy media miscalculated in thinking we wanted the pictures of the latest pop star and would settle for eight pages of Taibbi writing about Wall Street. It turned out many of us wanted Taibbi and didn’t really care about the soon-to-be-forgotten pop star.

“The amount of content you get for a Rolling Stone subscription versus Matt Taibbi’s newsletter, it’s not actually a good value compared to the old model,” Herzog said. But it is if what you care about is that content, not the glossy images.

Herzog worries about the attention places like Substack and Patreon will get in the next year for housing so many of the new contrarians. What about the potential of an alternative, funded by a sympathetic person from the tech world?

“Are you just making a new institution that will be vulnerable to attack because it will be funded probably through VC money like everything else?” Herzog said. “If people are giving us money and I say something that they disagree with, then there is that sort of danger, am I going to stop doing whatever because I’m afraid of pissing people off?”

Herzog has learned there is far less of a demand for paywalled content than you might expect — many people just back writers and thinkers because they like them, not because they want more material.

“Some number of people will support your work because they want the extra stuff, they want the bonus content,” Herzog said. “But there is probably an equal number of people who will never actually access the bonus content. They just want to give you money.”

Michael Malice, a New York-based author, intellectual, provocateur, and professional Twitter troll, asks for money all the time. A frequent guest on some of the most prominent podcasts, he

asks for it to make him do things that he would never want to do, such as read Kamala Harris's autobiography.

"If I told you 50 years ago, this was the situation — because you've got a bookshelf at the store, there's room for 30 books, right? So you got to have to pick the top 30. It would make sense to pick those 30 books from people who work for outlets who have a history of producing things of value," Malice said. "Now, bookshelves are infinite. There is literally no limit to the amount of books that you could sell at Amazon."

The point is that the barriers of old media don't make sense anymore. Articles shouldn't be constricted to artificial limits, any more than discussions. Opinions that make you feel unsafe belong in the public square as much as ones that stroke your sensibilities.

"There is an enormous cultural impetus among fans to support independent creators. On a daily basis, people throw me five bucks here, five bucks there, like tipping a waiter, whatever, because they see if you're doing your job, if you are pushing for values that they like, maybe they have a job, maybe they have family, they're not positioned to do it, you're not obligated to, but it is the right thing to do. My malice.locals.com pays for my rent," Malice said, referring to a platform begun by popular podcaster Dave Rubin.

Malice's advice for the wannabe in this space is straightforward: "First, find a podcast that you hate," Malice said. "This is how I became an author. Find a podcast that you hate and reverse engineer what they're doing wrong. If you are avoiding mistakes, you're already way ahead of the pack, number one. Two, have something original to say or say something unoriginal in an original way."

Be Brave, Call Bullshit

Shadi Hamid is one of the most interesting thinkers of his generation. Of those we talked to, he is the most traditionally vetted — author of multiple books, Oxford and Georgetown, sinecure at Brookings — yet he longs for the rebel life. Hamid is the sort of person The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg begs to write, the pieces he wishes he was allowed to by his insanely woke staff.

"I don't think it's necessarily that people like myself ... are turning our backs on traditional media outlets. But I think the bigger issue is that it would be very hard for The New York Times to hire me," Hamid said.

And why is that? Because Hamid rejects the basic agenda of the Great Awakening. Identity politics and critical race theory are frequent targets for criticism, and he repeatedly makes an effort to prod traditional, utterly secular journalists to understand the importance of religion in Americans' lives.

"If you're an aspiring reporter in the New York Times and you're still kind of relatively early on in your career, covering this stuff and actually showing that it's more complicated on the ground, you have to start watching your back because everyone knows the controversy that happened with the Tom Cotton stuff and Bari Weiss," Hamid said. "There are staff members who are keeping an eye out for people who 'incorrectly' contextualize the news."

“It reminds me a little bit at least of how people suppress their true beliefs in Middle Eastern contexts where I’ve spent a lot of time,” Hamid said. “This sense that you have to hide who you are, because if you say what you truly believe, there’ll be consequences.”

Hamid has begun a podcast and newsletter project, called “Wisdom of Crowds,” with colleague Damir Marusic, which he hopes will cut through this dominant trend.

“This is blogging but refashioned in a different format. But it essentially serves a similar purpose as what was going on in the early and mid-2000s,” Hamid said. “...I think a lot of us long for that period. I remember I used to love reading blogs. I had a whole blog roll, and that was how you started your day. ... And now you can’t even imagine that scenario of [Andrew] Sullivan and [Ta-Nehisi] Coates engaging with each other like they used to.”

For Hamid, a key aspect of the appeal of this new media genre is the ability to both be more open and to wrestle with views that make a large number of people uncomfortable, debating questions some think shouldn’t even be allowed in the public square.

“The protests have been a key turning point because I think that’s when it hit a lot of us that something had gone fundamentally wrong in the way we talk about big questions,” Hamid said, “and that people were suppressing what they believed to be true because of a fear of the mob.”

Kmele Foster, a nattily attired mercurial intellectual who loves setting conceptual bonfires and stargazing, is the co-founder of FreeThink, a media company that produces documentaries, and co-host of “The Fifth Column,” a podcast that is impossible to miss if you want to monitor this rising media phenomenon.

“People who are funny and insightful succeed in this space. People who push into the area where there is room to be surprised and shocked, but you can play within that world of outrage, and the closer to the line you get, the funnier it is,” Foster said. “The stated goals of the illiberals is a safe space for everyone — the same rules essentially a tinpot dictator would use — to shut down debate whenever it offends anyone.”

In “The Fifth Column” Patreon episodes — the ones that don’t descend into Vice reporter Michael Moynihan’s drunken impressions of Massholes and Matt Welch’s invocations of Gen X Euro punk incidents — readers deluge the hosts with messages about their experiences in wokeness. From mandatory seminars to HR incidents, it’s clear their listeners view just discussing these matters of race and politics as unacceptable for public discourse.

Foster’s response to this is simple: Be brave, call bullshit.

“The feedback our listeners share is that they feel uncomfortable. They let on that their politics or their beliefs are less popular in one setting and they fear the ramifications,” Foster said. “This is a new religion — the subjugation of the non-believer, the need to control and to crush those who will not be controlled.”

When the Tastemakers Have Bad Taste

Even for those who don't primarily play in politics, the trends toward creating your own self-sufficient platform are apparent. Andrew Schulz is perhaps the most innovative comedic voice in this regard. When executives didn't get the appeal of his confrontational brand of comedy, Schulz took to YouTube, pulling clips from shows and creating an approach designed to make viewers feel like they were present in the room.

"The tastemakers didn't have good taste," Schulz said.

The popularity of Schulz's work fed into the success of his "Flagrant 2" podcast, with co-host comedian Akaash Singh and a cast of hilarious characters with "flagrant takes" on the news of the moment — everything is on the table: race, sex, politics, and more. And their Patreon supporters — the "asshole army," as they call them — are eager for it.

"There was a frustration that we both had: We are funnier than where our careers are," Singh said. "Critics have a job to keep. They are a gatekeeper with the old frame. They could take a chance on us, but they don't want to lose that job."

"Comedy was in a really bad place recently, regarding MeToo and political correctness. I feel that if it is successful, it will prove this comedy has a marketplace," Schulz said. "All these corporations act all woke, but what they really want is the dollar."

"Financial freedom is key. The Patreon is financial freedom is there whenever the cancel crowd comes for us, and we know we can resist the crowd when they come for us," Singh said. "We don't want to have to dilute what we do."

Fears of the New Contras

Of course, that dilution might be impossible to avoid. Nearly everyone we spoke to for this article brought up an expectation that inevitably, they will be silenced. Perhaps borne out of experience in the world of traditional publications, the New Contras expect that inevitably, Google will demonetize their YouTube videos — as it has done regularly with the likes of Young Turk-turned-left-critic Dave Rubin — and that eventually their Substack and Patreon existence could become too controversial.

"That's my fear, [about] the sustainability of this model. At some point are people going to say: 'I just can't give \$60 a year to 14 different creators,'" Herzog said. "Then the other fear is that this is going to just create ever-narrower media bubbles. Because like the Tom Cotton column in The Times — I don't like Tom Cotton, I didn't agree with the piece — however, I'm glad that the New York Times published it because it forced the New York Times reader to, for a second, grapple with this idea. ... That won't happen if everybody is in their own little paid silo."

In all likelihood, that's the frame traditional media will take when they inevitably attack these newsletter authors as a creeping menace: Substack silos where dangerous misinformation grows and thrives, and a wilderness of error that leads people down dark paths that must be blocked before they do more damage.

The Boomer Model Is Dead

With the exception of Malice and Enjeti, most of these contrarian voices can be identified as anti-Trump. Unlike most of the centrist-liberal cohort, this has not prevented them from being interesting. For conservatives, the disruption of the Boomer media model is happening as well, but much more slowly. Sohrab Ahmari, arguably the most influential millennial voice in conservative media, who writes and curates voices at The New York Post, believes the danger of fracture is real but puts that reality at the foot of old media.

“There is a risk of ever more fracturing,” Ahmari said. “But if that’s the case, it’s the big boys who bear the blame, because they’ve become ever more niche and devoted to aggressive ideologies and out of touch with the actual American mainstream.”

Contrarianism is shaking up the right to a lesser degree than it is the country, in part because it would be so comforting to revert to a natural state, where think tanks, radio hosts, and the Jonah Goldbergs of the world go back to their cozy sinecures as domesticated opponents of the dominant leftist agenda.

Ryan Williams, the young think tank head of the Claremont Institute — a California-based organization of Harry Jaffa Straussians whose influence has exploded in the Trump era — believes the relatively ancient nature of the think tank model cannot adapt to the moment.

“We are still in the midst of the greatest intergenerational wealth transfer in the history of the world,” Williams said. “The Boomers continue to fund and maintain these institutions regardless of their relevance.”

“The think tanks are able in their public communications to their huge group of smallish donors and to their major donors sending the message that they are on top of the pressing issues of the day, such as these identity politics issues. Donor marketing operation is fairly good at taking small aspects and claiming they’re actually doing this stuff,” Williams said.

Williams compares how little think tanks have actually accomplished for reforming higher education with the work of Reason’s Robby Soave, the intrepid libertarian reporter who has been a thorn in the side of Title IX kangaroo courts and academic foolishness of all varieties.

“The Robby Soaves of the world don’t have immediate access to sources of funding. The donor world wants to support people like him, but there’s not a direct line of access — there’s a gatekeeper aspect that matters a great deal. They have no access to this network of funders,” Williams said. “And a lot of these donors have been giving to these places for decades. It’s a mix of affinity and sunk costs. Now donors have seen that a lot of places are fundraising operations masquerading as think tanks, and that’s resulting in a lot of reconsiderations.”

Spencer Klavan, an associate editor at Claremont and host of the “Young Heretics” podcast, thinks these institutions will have to adapt to a new media reality where relevance isn’t determined by your sinecure.

“Over time, institutional centers today will crumble, but we need to set up our own in order to support people who are willing to reconsider our presuppositions, including whether Ibram X.

Kendi is a harmless academic or Robin DiAngelo is a ridiculous person,” Klavan said. “The onus can’t all be on the talent to make this a sustainable revolution.”

“Boomer institutions that can be persuaded should be sharing their resources and supporting these new voices. This is not a safe era. Things are so terribly unsettled, you could pour your money into these old institutions and they would fail,” Klavan said. “The good answer has not been raised up yet. Why doesn’t Tim Pool have more support? Why doesn’t Andy Ngo? So many people are out there doing incredible work. There are no other reporters in America! Why are institutions afraid to support them?”

The Cato Institute’s Ilya Shapiro represents one example of a shift in the way younger intellectuals make their mark in an era of media disruption. A legal scholar at a libertarian think tank is not typically someone you would expect to be bouncing from podcast to social media engagement to a hearing on Capitol Hill, but that’s the new model.

“The democratization and the lowering of barriers of entry to influence making media is critical here,” Shapiro said. “Before the internet, you needed to have some form of institutional support. No one would read your white paper, no congressman would meet with you, you couldn’t enter the media so easily. Now you can do all those things.”

At Cato, Emily Ekins’s work as a pollster focuses on tracking the phenomena of cancellation and fear as such trends dominate the minds not just of those engaged in media creation, but normal citizens as well.

“Humans aren’t built to be treated like they are by the internet. Research says you can tell a lot more about people’s politics by the news they consume than by what they tell you in a survey. People consume news more for entertainment value rather than something informative. Who they’re listening to, who they’re willing to pay five bucks to in order to read their stuff, says a lot about who they value and where their heart lies,” Ekins said. “The people who espouse views that are deemed ‘unacceptable’ — who says they’re unacceptable? The market doesn’t. The company has to fire these people because they’re unacceptable to the marketplace.”

“Most people don’t actually really want to fire people for their ideas,” Ekins said. “But some people aren’t like that. They want to punish their political opponents, and they are the loudest ones. This tiny, far-left end of the political spectrum — they believe they own everything and they own the debate.”

What might be developing is a media landscape that allows for a greater depth of engagement, but also requires more work from consumers. Knowing which podcasts to subscribe to, whose newsletter is worth the dime, and who will bring you the knowledge you won’t find in traditional sources takes effort. But a sizable portion of Americans want to do exactly that. Starved of true intellectual debate by the likes of The New York Times’ op-ed page, they are turning to a more interesting and more compelling alternative.

“After 2016, it seemed like the media class should have realized in that moment, after the results of the election, that echo chambers and media silos are a really big problem,” Herzog said. “Half of the country was just so shocked by the results of the election that my response to that was to

really go out of my way and start to engage conservatives and just follow conservatives and read conservatives ... something I'd never done before, because I realized that if you were flabbergasted by this result, then you don't know what's going on in the country."

That's what these consumers want to know, and so long as the Boomer model fails to answer it, they'll be following Homer Simpson's lead.