We’re Not Losing the Culture Wars Anymore
Brian C. Anderson

The Left’s near monopoly over the institutions of opinion and information—which long allowed liberal opinion makers to sweep aside ideas and beliefs they disagreed with, as if they were beneath argument—is skidding to a startledly swift halt. The transformation has gone far beyond the rise of conservative talk radio, that, ever since Rush Limbaugh’s debut 15 years ago, has chipped away at the power of the New York Times, the networks, and the rest of the elite media to set the terms of the nation’s political and cultural debate. Almost overnight, three huge changes in communications have injected conservative ideas right into the heart of that debate. Though commentators have noted each of these changes separately, they haven’t sufficiently grasped how, taken together, they add up to a revolution: no longer can the Left keep conservative views out of the mainstream or dismiss them with bromide instead of argument. Everything has changed.

The first and most visible of these three seismic events: the advent of cable TV, especially Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News Channel. Since its 1996 launch, Fox News has provided what its visionary CEO Roger Ailes calls a “haven” for viewers fed up with the liberal bias of the news media—potentially a massive audience, since the mainstream media stand well to the American people’s left.

Watch Fox for just a few hours and you encounter a conservative presence unlike anything on TV. Where CBS and CNN would lead a news item about an impending execution with a candlelight vigil of death-penalty protesters, for instance, at Fox “it is de rigueur that we put in the lead why that person is being executed,” senior vice president for news John Moody noted a while back. Fox viewers will see Republican politicians and conservative pundits sought out for meaningful quotations, skepticism voiced about environmentalist doomsaying, religion treated with respect, pro-life views given airtime—and much else they’d never find on other networks.

Fox’s conservatism helps it scoop competitors on stories they get wrong or miss entirely because of liberal bias. In April 2002, for instance, the mainstream media rushed to report an Israeli “massacre” of Palestinian civilians in a refugee camp in the West Bank city of Jenin; Fox uniquely—and correctly, it turned out—treated the massacre charge with complete skepticism. “We try to avoid falling for the conventional liberal wisdom in journalistic circles—in this case the conventional wisdom ‘Israeli bad, Palestinian good,’” says daytime anchorman David Asman. “Too often ideology shapes the tendency to jump to a conclusion—something we try to be aware of in our own case, too.”

Nowhere does Fox differ more radically from the mainstream television and press than in its robustly pro-U.S. coverage of the War on Terror. After September 11, the American flag appeared everywhere, from the lapels of the anchormen to the corner of the screen. Ailes himself wrote to President Bush, urging him to strike back hard against al-Qaida. On-air personalities and reporters freely referred to “our” troops instead of “U.S. forces,” and Islamist “terrorists” and “evildoers” instead of “militants.” Such open displays of patriotism are anathema to today’s liberal journalists, who see “taking sides” as a betrayal of journalistic objectivity.

Asman demurs. For the free media to take sides against an enemy bent on eradicating the free society itself, he argues, isn’t unfair or culturally biased; it is the only possible logical and moral stance. And to call bin Ladin a “militant,” as Reuters does, is to betray the truth, not uphold it. “Terrorism is terrorism,” Asman says crisply. “We know what it is, and we know how to define it, just as our viewers know what it is. So we’re not going to play with them: when we see an act of terror, we’re going to call it terror.” On television news, anyway, Fox alone seemed to grasp this essential point from September 11 on. Says Asman: “CNN, MSNBC, the media generally were not declarative enough in calling a spade a spade.”

Fox’s very tone conveys its difference from the networks’ worldview. “Fox News lacks the sense of out-of-touch elitism that makes many Americans, whatever their politics, annoyed with the news media,” maintains media critic Gene Veith. “Fox reporters almost never condescend to viewers,” he observes. “The other networks do so all the time, peering down on the vulgar masses from social height (think Peter Jennings) or deigning to enlighten the public about things that only they understand (think Peter Arnett).” This tone doesn’t mark only Fox’s populist shows, like pugnacious superstar Bill O’Reilly’s. Even when Fox goes upscale, in Brit Hume’s urbane nightly Special Report, for example, the civility elevates rather than belittles the viewer. For Ailes, Fox’s anti-elitism is key. “There’s a whole country that elitists will never acknowledge,” he told the New York Times Magazine. “What people resent deeply out there are those in the ‘blue’ states thinking they’re smarter.”

The “fair and balanced” approach that Fox trumpets in its slogan is part of this iconoclastic tone, too. Sure, the anchor is almost always a conservative, but it’s clear he is striving to tell the truth, and there’s always a liberal on hand, too. By contrast, political consultant and Fox contributor Dick Morris notes, “The other networks offer just one point of view, which they claim is objective.” Not only does the Fox approach make clear that there is always more than one point of view, but it also puts the network’s liberal guests in the position of having to defend their views—something that almost never happens on other networks.

Viewers clearly like what they see. Fox’s ratings, already climbing since the station debuted in 1996, really began to rocket upward after the terrorist attack and blasted into orbit with Operation Iraqi Freedom. “In the Iraqi war,” Dick Morris explains, “the viewing audience truly saw how incredibly biased the other networks were: ‘Turkey did not let us through, the plan was flawed, we attacked with too few troops, our supply lines weren’t secure, the army would run out of rations and ammo, the Iraqis would use poison gas, the
oil wells would go up in flames, there would be street-to-street fighting in Baghdad, the museum lost its priceless artifacts to looters, and now we’re onto this new theme that ’Iraq is a quagmire’ and that there ‘aren’t any weapons of mass destruction’ and that ‘Bush lied’—and all the while, thanks in part to Fox News, Americans are seeing with their own eyes how much this is crazy spin. ”

The yawning gulf separating reality and the mainstream media during the war and its aftermath, Morris believes, “will kill the other networks in the immediate future—to Fox’s benefit.”

The numbers make clear just how stunning Fox’s rise has been. Starting with access to only 17 million homes (compared with CNN’s 70 million) in 1996, Fox could reach 65 million homes by 2001 and had already started to turn a profit. A year later, profits hit $70 million and are expected to double in 2003. Though CNN founder Ted Turner once boasted he’d “squish Murdoch like a bug,” Fox News has outpaced its chief cable news rival in the ratings since September 11 and now runs laps around it. This past June, Fox won a whopping 51 percent of the prime-time cable news audience—more than CNN, CNN Headline News, and MSNBC combined. The station’s powerhouse, The O’Reilly Factor, averages around 3 million viewers every night, and during Operation Iraqi Freedom the “No Spin Zone” drew as many as 7 million on a given night; CNN’s Larry King, once the king of cable, has slipped to 1.3 million nightly viewers. Cheery Fox and Friends has even edged out CBS’s Early Show in the ratings a few times, despite the fact that CBS is free, while Fox is available only on cable and satellite (and not every operator carries it). While the total viewership for ABC, CBS, and NBC news—more than 25 million—still dwarfs Fox’s viewers, the networks are hemorrhaging. CBS News just suffered its lousiest ratings period ever, down 600,000 viewers; 1.1 million fewer people watch the three network news programs today than 12 months ago.

Fox enjoys especially high numbers among advertiser-coveted 25- to 54-year-old viewers, and it is attracting even younger news junkies. As one CNN producer admits, Fox is “more in touch with the younger age group, not just the 25–54 demo, but probably the 18-year-olds.” Even more attractive to advertisers, Fox viewers watch 20 to 25 minutes before clicking away; CNN watchers stay only ten minutes. Fox’s typical viewer also makes more money on average—nearly $60,000 a year—than those of its main cable rivals.

Not only conservatives like what they see. A new Pew Research Center survey shows that, of the 22 percent of Americans who now get most of their news from Fox (compared with a combined 32 percent for the networks), only 46 percent call themselves “conservative,” only slightly higher than the 40 percent of CNN fans who do so. Fox is thus exposing many centrists (32 percent of Fox’s regular viewers) and liberals (18 percent) to conservative ideas and opinions they would not regularly find elsewhere in the television news—and some of those folks could be liking the conservative worldview as well as the professionalism of the staff and veracity of the programming.

The news isn’t the only place on cable where conservatives will feel at home. Lots of cable comedy, while not traditionally conservative, is fiercely anti-liberal, which as a practical matter often amounts nearly to the same thing. Take South Park, Comedy Central’s hit cartoon series, whose heroes are four crudely animated and impossibly foul-mouthed fourth-graders named Cartman, Kenny (until his demise), Kyle, and Stan. Now in its seventh season, South Park, with nearly 3 million viewers per episode, is Comedy Central’s highest-rated program.

Many conservatives have attacked South Park for its exuberant vulgarity, calling it “twisted,” “vile trash,” a “threat to our youth.” Such denunciations are misguided. Conservative critics should pay closer attention to what South Park so irreverently jeers at and mocks. As the show’s co-creator, 32-year-old Matt Stone, sums it up: “I hate conservatives, but I really fucking hate liberals.”

Not for nothing has blogger and former New Republic editor Andrew Sullivan praised the show for being “the best antidote to PC culture we have.” South Park sharpens the iconoclastic, anti-PC edge of earlier cartoon shows like The Simpsons and King of the Hill, and spares no sensitivity. The show’s single black kid is called Token. One episode, “Cripple Fight,” concludes with a slugfest between the boys’ wheelchair-bound, cerebral-palsy-stricken friend Timmy and the obnoxious Jimmy, who wants to be South Park’s Number One “handi-capable” citizen (in his cringe-making PC locution). In another, “Rainforest Schmainforest,” the boys’ school sends them on a field trip to Costa Rica, led by an activist choir group, “Getting Gay with Kids,” which wants to raise youth awareness about “our vanishing rain forests.” Shown San José, Costa Rica’s capital, the boys are unimpressed:

Cartman [holding his nose]: Oh my God, it smells like ass out here!
Choir teacher: All right, that does it! Eric Cartman, you respect other cultures this instant.
Cartman: I wasn’t saying anything about their culture, I was just saying their city smells like ass.

But if the city is unpleasant, the rain forest itself is a nightmare: the boys get lost, wilt from the infernal heat, face deadly assaults from monstrous insects and a giant snake, run afoul of revolutionary banditos, and—worst of all—must endure the choir teacher’s New-Agey gushing: “Shh! Children! Let’s try to listen to what the rain forest tells us, and if we use our ears, she can tell us so many things.” By the horrifying trip’s end, the boys are desperate for civilization, and the choir teacher herself has come to despise the rain forest she once worshiped: “You go right ahead and blow down this whole fuckin’ thing,” she tells a construction worker.

The episode concludes with the choir’s new song:
Doo doo doo doo doo. Doo doo doo wa.
Getting Gay with Kids is here
To tell you things you might not like to hear.
You only fight these causes ’cause caring sells.
All you activists can go fuck yourselves.
As the disclaimer before each episode states, the show is so offensive “it should not be viewed by anyone.”

One of the contemporary Left’s most extreme (and, to conservatives, objectionable) strategies is its effort to draw the mantle of civil liberties over behavior once deemed criminal, pathological, or immoral, as a brilliant South Park episode featuring a visit to town by the North American Man-Boy Love Association—the ultra-radical activist group advocating gay sex with minors—satirizes:

NAMBLA leader [speaking at a group meeting, attended by the South Park kids]: Rights? Does anybody know their rights? You see, I’ve learned something today. Our forefathers came to this country because they believed in an idea. An idea called “freedom.” They wanted to live in a place where a group couldn’t be prosecuted for their beliefs. Where a person can live the way he chooses to live.

You see us as being perverted because we’re different from you. People are afraid of us, because they don’t understand. And sometimes it’s easier to persecute than to understand.

Kyle: Dude. You have sex with children.
NAMBLA leader: We are human. Most of us didn’t even choose to be attracted to young boys. We were born that way. We can’t help the way we are, and if you all can’t understand that, well, then, I guess you’ll just have to put us away.

Kyle [slowly, for emphasis]: Dude. You have sex with children.

Stan: Yeah. You know, we believe in equality for everybody, and tolerance, and all that gay stuff, but dude, fuck you.

Another episode—“Cherokee Hair Tampons”—ridicules multiculti sentimentality about holistic medicine and the “wisdom” of native cultures. Kyle suffers a potentially fatal kidney disorder, and his clueless parents try to cure it with “natural” Native American methods, leaving their son vomiting violently and approaching death’s door:

Kyle’s mom: Everything is going to be fine, Stan; we’re bringing in Kyle tomorrow to see the Native Americans personally.
Stan: Isn’t it possible that these Indians don’t know what they’re talking about?

Stan’s mom: You watch your mouth, Stanley. The Native Americans were raped of their land and resources by white people like us.

Stan: And that has something to do with their medicines because . . . ?

Stan’s mom: Enough, Stanley!

South Park regularly mocks left-wing celebrities who feel entitled to pontificate on how the nation should be run. In one of the most brutal parodies, made in just several days during the 2000 Florida recount fiasco, loudmouth Rosie O’Donnell sweeps into town to weigh in on a kindergarten election dispute involving her nephew. The boys’ teacher dresses her down:

People like you preach tolerance and open-mindedness all the time, but when it comes to middle America, you think we’re all evil and stupid country yokels who need your political enlightenment. Just because you’re on TV doesn’t mean you know crap about the government.”

South Park has satirized the sixties counterculture (Cartman has feverish nightmares about hippies, who “want to save the earth, but all they do is smoke pot and smell bad”); anti-big-business zealots (a “Harbucks” coffee chain opens in South Park, to initial resistance but eventual acclaim as everyone—including the local coffee house’s owners—admits its bean beats anything previously on offer in the town); sex ed in school (featuring “the Sexual Harassment Panda,” an outrageous classroom mascot); pro-choice extremists (Cartman’s mother decides she wants to abort him, despite the fact that he’s eight years old, relying on the “it’s my body” argument); hate-crime legislation, anti-discrimination lawsuits, gay scout leaders, and much more. Conservatives do not escape the show’s satirical sword—gun-toting rednecks and phony patriots have been among those slashed. But there should be no mistaking the deepest thrust of South Park’s politics.

That anti-liberal worldview dominates other cable comedy too. Also on Comedy Central is Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn, a new late-night chatfest where the conversation—on race, terrorism, war, and other topics—is anything but politically correct. The Brooklyn-born Quinn, a former anchor on Saturday Night Live’s “Weekend Update” and a Fox News fan, can be Rumsfeldesque in his comic riffs, like this one deriding excessive worries about avoiding civilian casualties in Iraq: “This war is so polite,” he grumbles.

“We used to be Semper Fi. Next, we’ll be dropping comment cards over Iraq saying ‘How did you hear about us?’ And ‘Would you say that we’re a country that goes to war sometimes, often, or never?’ ”

Then there’s Dennis Miller, another Saturday Night Live alum, whose 2003 HBO stand-up comedy special The Raw Feed relentlessly derides liberal shibboleths. In his stream-of-consciousness rants, whose cumulative effect gets audiences roaring with laughter, Miller blasts the teachers’ unions for opposing vouchers, complains about the sluggish work habits of government workers (“ironically, in our highly driven culture, it would appear the only people not interested in pushing the envelope are postal employees”), and attacks opponents of Alaskan oil-drilling for “playing the species card.”
Andrew Sullivan dubs the fans of all this cable-nurtured satire “South Park Republicans”—people who “believe we need a hard-ass foreign policy and are extremely skeptical of political correctness” but also are socially liberal on many issues, Sullivan explains. Such South Park Republicanism is a real trend among younger Americans, he observes: South Park’s typical viewer, for instance, is an advertiser-ideal 28.

Talk to right-leaning college students, and it’s clear that Sullivan is onto something. Arizona State undergrad Eric Spratling says the definition fits him and his Republican pals perfectly. “The label is really about rejecting the image of conservatives as uptight squares—crusty old men or nerdy kids in blue blazers. We might have long hair, smoke cigarettes, get drunk on weekends, have sex before marriage, watch R-rated movies, cuss like sailors—and also happen to be conservative, or at least libertarian.” Recent Stanford grad Craig Albrecht says most of his young Bush-supporter friends “absolutely cherish” South Park–style comedy “for its illumination of hypocrisy and stupidity in all spheres of life.” It just so happens, he adds, “that most hypocrisy and stupidity take place within the liberal camp.”

Further supporting Sullivan’s contention, Gavin McInnes, co-founder of Vice—a “punk-rock-capitalist” entertainment corporation that publishes the hipster bible Vice magazine, produces CDs and films, runs clothing stores, and claims (plausibly) to have been “deep inside the heads of 18–30s for the past 10 years”—spots “a new trend of young people tired of being lied to for the sake of the ‘greater good.’ ” Especially on military matters, McInnes believes, many twenty-somethings are disgusted with the Left. The knee-jerk Left’s days “are numbered,” McInnes tells The American Conservative. “They are slowly but surely being replaced with a new breed of kid that isn’t afraid to embrace conservatism.”

Polling data indicate that younger voters are indeed trending rightward—supporting the Iraq war by a wider majority than their elders, viewing school vouchers favorably, and accepting greater restrictions on abortion, such as parental-notification laws (though more accepting of homosexuality than older voters). Together with the Foxification of cable news, this new attitude among the young, reflected in the hippest cable comedy (and in cutting-edge cable dramas such as FX’s The Shield and HBO’s The Sopranos and Six Feet Under, which are unflinchingly honest about crime, race, sex, and faith, and avoid the saccharine liberal moralizing of much network entertainment), can only make Karl Rove happy.

What should make him positively giddy is the rise of the Internet, the second explosive change shaking liberal media dominance. It’s hard to overstate the impact that news and opinion websites like the Drudge Report, NewsMax, and Dow Jones’s OpinionJournal are having on politics and culture, as are current-event “blogs”—individual or group web diaries—like AndrewSullivan, InstaPundit, and “The Corner” department of NationalReviewOnline (NRO), where the editors and writers argue, joke around, and call attention to articles elsewhere on the web. This whole universe of web-based discussion has been dubbed the “blogosphere.”

While there are several fine left-of-center sites, the blogosphere currently tilts right, albeit idiosyncratically, reflecting the hard-topigeonhole politics of some leading bloggers. Like talk radio and Fox News, the right-leaning sites fill a market void. “Many bloggers felt shut out by institutions that have adopted—explicitly or implicitly—a left-wing orthodoxy,” says Erin O’Connor, whose blog, Critical Mass, exposes campus PC gobbledygook. The orthodox Left’s blame-America-first response to September 11 has also helped tilt the blogosphere rightward. “There were damned few noble responses to that cursed day from the ‘progressive’ part of the political spectrum,” avers Los Angeles–based blogger and journalist Matt Welch, “so untold thousands of people just started blogs, in anger,” Welch among them. “I was pushed into blogging on September 16, 2001, in direct response to reading five days’ worth of outrageous bullshit in the media from people like Noam Chomsky and Robert Jenson.”

For a frustrated citizen like Welch, it’s easy to get your ideas circulating on the Internet. Start-up costs for a blog are small, printing and mailing costs nonexistent. Few blogs make money, though, since advertisers are leery of the web and no one seems willing to pay to read anything on it.

The Internet’s most powerful effect has been to expand vastly the range of opinion—especially conservative opinion—at everyone’s fingertips. “The Internet helps break up the traditional cultural gatekeepers’ power to determine a) what’s important and b) the range of acceptable opinion,” says former Reason editor and libertarian blogger Virginia Postrel. InstaPundit’s Glenn Reynolds, a law professor at the University of Tennessee, agrees: “The main role of the Internet and blogosphere is to call the judgment of elites about what is news into question.”
The Drudge Report is a perfect case in point. Five years since Matt Drudge broke the Monica Lewinsky story, his news and gossip site has become an essential daily visit for political junkies, journalists, media types, and—with 1.4 billion hits in 2002—seemingly anyone with an Internet connection. The site features occasional newsworthy items investigated and written by Drudge, but mostly it’s an editorial filter, linking to stories on other small and large news and opinion sites—a filter that crucially exhibits no bias against the Right. (Drudge, a registered Republican, calls himself “a pro-life conservative who doesn’t want the government to tax me.”) The constantly updated cornucopia of information, culled from a vast number of global sources and e-mailed tips from across the political spectrum, says critic Camille Paglia, a Drudge enthusiast, point by contrast “the process of censorship that’s going on, the filtering of the news by established news organizations.” Other popular news-filter sites, including Lucianne and RealClearPolitics, perform a similar function.

In a different register, Arts & Letters Daily, a site devoted to intellectual journalism, is similarly ecumenical in what it links to, posting articles from publications as diverse as City Journal on the Right to the New Left Review. When Arts & Letters ran into financial trouble last year, both neo-conservative elder Norman Podhoretz and Nation columnist Eric Alterman rushed to its defense. Going from 300 page views a day in 1998 to more than 70,000 a day in 2003, and with many left-leaning readers (including a large number of academics), it has introduced a whole new audience to serious conservative thought.

Though not quite in Drudge’s league in readership, the top explicitly right-leaning sites, updated daily, have generated huge followings. Andrew Sullivan’s blog, launched in the late 90s, attracted 400,000 visitors this July. FrontPage, vigorously lambasting political correctness, the antiwar campaign, and other “progressive” follies, draws as many as 1.7 million visitors in a month. More than 1.4 million visitors landed on OpinionJournal this past March, when the liberation of Iraq began, most to read editor James Taranto’s “Best of the Web Today,” an incisive guide to and commentary on the day’s top Internet stories. NRO, featuring scores of new articles daily, averages slightly over 1 million a month—and over 2 million during the war. “More people read NRO than all the conservative magazines combined,” the site’s editor-at-large Jonah Goldberg marvels. The web’s interconnectivity—the fact that bloggers and news and opinion sites readily link to one another and comment on one another’s postings, forming a kind of twenty-first-century agora—amplifies and extends the influence of any site that catches the heavy hitters’ attention.

It’s not just the large numbers of readers that these sites attract that is so significant for the conservative cause; it’s also who those readers are. Just as Fox News is pulling in a younger viewership, who will reshape the politics of the future, so these conservative sites are proving particularly popular with younger readers. “They think: ‘If it’s not on the web, it doesn’t exist,’” says Goldberg. FrontPage’s web traffic shoots up dramatically during the school year, as lots of college students log on.

Equally important, these sites draw the attention of journalists. “Everyone who deals in media—and they’re not all ideologues on the Left—is reading the Internet all the time,” says FrontPage editor David Horowitz. “Michael,” who co-authors the 2blowhards culture-and-politics blog as an avocation while working full time for a major left-leaning national news organization (he uses a pseudonym because his bosses wouldn’t like the blog’s not-so-liberal opinions), reports: “I notice the younger people on staff in particular are aware of blogs—and that a lot of local newspapers seem to have people who stay on top of blogs, too.” The Internet’s power, observes Mickey Kaus, the former New Republic writer whose Kausfiles blog has become indispensable reading for anyone interested in politics, “is due primarily to its influence over professional journalists, who then influence the public.” Judges Andrew Sullivan: “I think I have just as much ability to inject an idea or an argument into the national debate through my blog as I did through The New Republic.”

Almost daily, stories that originate on the web make their way into print or onto TV or radio. Fox and Rush Limbaugh, for instance, often pick up stories from FrontPage and OpinionJournal—especially those on the antiwar Left. Fox News’s Sean Hannity surfs the net up to eight hours a day, searching sites like Drudge and the hard-right news site WorldNetDaily for stories to cover. Phrases introduced in the blogosphere now “percolate out into the real world with amazing rapidity,” InstaPundit’s Glenn Reynolds recently noted. For example, the day after the humor blog ScrappleFace coined the term “Axis of Weasel” to satirize the antiwar alliance of Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder, the New York Post used it as a headline, talk radio and CNN and Fox News repeated it, and it soon made its way into French and German media.

The speed with which Internet sites can post new material is one source of their influence. No sooner has the latest Paul Krugman New York Times column attacking the Bush administration appeared, for example, than the “Krugman Truth Squad”—a collective of conservative economic analysts—will post an article on NRO exposing the economist’s myriad mistakes, distortions, and evasions. Earlier this year, the Truth Squad caught Krugman comparing the cost of Bush’s tax cuts over ten years with the one-year wage boost associated with the new employment it would create, so as to make the tax reductions seem insanely large for the small benefit they’d bring—a laughably ignorant mistake or, more likely, a deliberate attempt to mislead in order to discredit Bush. The discomfiture of web critics has caused Krugman has forced him to respond on his own website, offering various lame rationales for his errors, and denouncing the Truth Squad’s Donald Luskin as his “stalker-in-chief.”

The timeliness of web publication also means that right from the start a wealth of conservative opinion is circulating about any new development—often before the New York Times and the Washington Post get a chance to weigh in. A blog or opinion site “can have an influence on elite opinion before the conventional wisdom among elites congeals,” notes Nick Schulz, editor of Tech Central Station, a site that covers technology and public policy. A case in point is the blogosphere “storm” (a ferocious burst of online
argument, with site linking to site) that made a big issue out of the Democrats’ unseemly transformation of Senator Paul Wellstone’s funeral into a naked political rally, forcing the mainstream media to cover the story, which in turn created outrage that ultimately may have cost the Dems Wellstone’s seat in the 2002 election. Blogosphere outrage over Republican senator Trent Lott’s comments that seemed to praise segregation at one time Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party, led by NRO and other conservative sites keen to liberate modern conservatism from any vestige of racism and to make the GOP a champion of black advancement, shaped the mainstream media’s coverage of that controversy, too—helping to push Lott from his perch as majority leader.

Debunking liberal humbug is one of the web’s most powerful political effects: bloggers call it the Internet’s “bullshit-detector” role. The New York Times has been the Number One target of the B.S. detectors—especially during the reign of deposed executive editor and liberal ideologue Howell Raines. “Only, say, five years ago, the editors of the New York Times had much more power than they have today,” Andrew Sullivan points out. “They could spin stories with gentle liberal bias, and only a few eyes would roll.” If they made an egregious error, they could bury the correction later. The Internet makes such bias and evasion harder—maybe impossible—to pull off. It was the blogosphere that revealed Enron-bashing Krugman’s former ties to Enron, showed how the paper twisted its polls to further a liberal agenda, exposed how it used its front page to place Henry Kissinger falsely in the anti–Iraq war camp, and then, as the war got under way, portrayed it as harshly as possible.

It’s safe to say that the blogosphere cost Raines his job. When the story broke about Times reporter and Raines favorite Jayson Blair’s outrageous fabrications in the paper’s pages, Sullivan, Kaus, Drudge, blogger-reporter Seth Mnookin, and other web writers kept it alive, creating pressure for other media, including television, to cover it. When disgruntled Times staffers began to leak damning information about Raines’s high-handed management style to Jim Romensko’s influential media-news site Poynter, the end was near. Kausfile’s “Howell Raines-O-Meter,” gauging the probability of the editor’s downfall, was up barely a day or two when Raines stepped down. “The outcome would have been different without the Internet,” Kaus rightly says. The Times’s new ombudsman acknowledged the point: “We’re not happy that blogs became the forum for our dirty linen, but somebody had to wash it and it got washed.”

But the Blair affair was more final straw than primary cause of Raines’s fall. Unremitting Internet-led criticism and mockery of the editor’s front-page partisanship had already severely tarnished the Times’s reputation. It may take the Times a while to restore readers’ trust: a new Rasmussen poll shows that fewer than half of Americans believe that the paper reliably conveys the truth (while 72 percent find Fox News reliable); circulation is down 5 percent since March 2002.

Other liberal media giants have taken notice. In May, the Los Angeles Times’s top editor, John Carroll, fired an e-mail to his troops warning that the paper was suffering from “the perception and the occasional reality that the Times is a liberal, ‘politically correct’ newspaper.” In the new era of heightened web scrutiny, Carroll was arguing, you can’t just dismiss conservative views but must take them seriously. By the recent recall vote, though, the lesson had evaporated.

The third big change breaking the liberal media stranglehold is taking place in book publishing. Conservative authors long had trouble getting their books released, with only Regnery Books, the Free Press, and Basic Books regularly releasing conservative titles. But following editorial changes during the 1990s, Basic and the Free Press published far fewer conservative-leaning titles, leaving Regnery pretty much alone.

No more. Nowadays, publishers are falling over themselves to bring conservative books to a mainstream audience. “Between now and December,” Publishers Weekly wrote in July, “scores of books on conservative topics will be published by houses large and small—the most ever produced in a single season. Already, 2003 has been a banner year for such books, with at least one and often two conservative titles hitting PW’s best-seller list each week.” Joining Regnery in releasing mass-market right-leaning books are two new imprints from superpower publishers, Random House’s Crown Forum and an as-yet-untitled Penguin series.

These imprints will publish mostly Ann Coulter–style polemics—one of Crown Forum’s current releases, for example, is James Hirsen’s The Left Coast, a take-no-prisoners attack on Hollywood liberals. But higher-brow conservative books will pour forth over the next six months from Peter Collier’s Encounter Books, Ivan R. Dee (publisher of City Journal books), the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (it’s releasing Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s Russia in Collapse, the Nobel Prize–winner’s first book in English in nearly a decade), Yale University Press, Lexington Books, and Spence Books. Other top imprints—from HarperCollins to the University of Chicago Press—are also publishing books that flout liberal orthodoxy. And Bookspan, which runs the Book-of-the-Month Club, has announced a new conservative book club, headed by a former National Review literary editor.

It’s no exaggeration to describe this surge of conservative publishing as a paradigm shift. “It would have been unthinkable ten years ago that mainstream publishers would embrace this trend,” acknowledges Doubleday editor and author Adam Bellow, who got his start in editing in 1988 at the Free Press, where he and his boss, the late Erwin Glikes, encountered “a tremendous amount of marketplace and institutional resistance” in pushing conservative titles. “There was no conspiracy,” avers Crown Forum publisher Steve Ross. “We were culturally isolated on this island of Manhattan, and people tend to publish to people of like mind.”
Ross believes that September 11 shook up the publishing world and made it less reflexively liberal. And in fact, many new conservative titles concern the War on Terror. But what really overcame the big New York publishers’ liberal prejudices is the oodles of money Washington-based Regnery was making. “We’ve had a string of best-sellers that is probably unmatched in publishing,” Regnery president Marji Ross points out. “We publish 20 to 25 titles a year, and we’ve had 16 books on the New York Times best-seller list over the last four years—including Bernard Goldberg’s Bias, which spent seven weeks at Number One.”

Now, complains a critic in the liberal webzine Salon, he’s “uncomfortably juvenile,” exhibiting “the sort of simplistic, reactionary ideologically neutral Book TV. “A Q & A on NRO sells books very, very well,” Collier explains. “It’s comparable to a major newspaper review.”

Amazon itself is another boon to conservatives, since the Internet giant betrays no ideological bias in selling books. Nor do big chain bookstores like Wal-Mart and Barnes & Noble, where Bill O’Reilly books pile up right next to Michael Moore’s latest loony-left rant. “The rise of Amazon and the chain stores has been tremendously liberating for conservatives, because these stores are very much product-oriented businesses,” observes David Horowitz. “The independent bookstores are all controlled by leftists, and they’re totalitarians—they will not display conservative books, or if they do, they’ll hide them in the back.”

Amazon’s Reader Reviews feature—where readers can post their opinions on books they’ve read and rate them—has helped diminish the authority of elite cultural guardians, too, by creating a truly democratic marketplace of ideas. “I don’t think there’s ever been a similar review medium—a really broad-based consumers’ guide for culture,” says 2blowhards blogger Michael. “I’ve read some stuff on Amazon that’s been as good as anything I’ve read in the real press.”

All these remarkable, brand-new transformations have sent the Left reeling. Fox News especially is driving liberals wild. Former vice president Al Gore likens Fox to an evil right-wing “fifth column,” and he yearns to set up a left-wing competitor, as if a left-wing media didn’t already exist. Comedian and activist Al Franken’s new book Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them is one long jeremiad against Fox. Washington Post media critic Tom Shales calls Fox a “propaganda mill.”

The Columbia Journalism School’s Todd Gitlin worries that Fox “emboldens the right wing to feel justified and confident they can promote their policies.” “There’s room for conservative talk radio on television,” allows CNN anchor Aaron Brown, the very embodiment of the elite journalist with, in Roger Ailes’s salty phrase, “a pick up their ass.” “But I don’t think anyone ought to pretend it’s the New York Times or CNN,” Brown sniffs.

But it’s not just Fox: liberals have been pooh-poohing all of these developments. Dennis Miller used to be the hippest joker around. Now, complains a critic in the liberal webzine Salon, he’s “uncomfortably juvenile,” exhibiting “the sort of simplistic, reactionary American stance that gives us a bad reputation around the world.” The Boston Globe’s Alex Beam dismisses the blogosphere with liberal hauteur: “Welcome to Blogistan, the Internet-based journalistic medium where no thought goes unpublished, no long-out-of-print book goes unhawked, and no fellow ‘blogger,’ no matter how outrage, goes unpraised.”

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There’s another reason that conservative books are selling: the emergence of conservative talk radio, cable TV, and the Internet. This “right-wing media circuit,” as Publishers Weekly describes it, reaches millions of potential readers and thus makes the traditional gatekeepers of ideas—above all, the New York Times Book Review and the New York Review of Books, publications that rarely deign to review conservative titles—increasingly irrelevant in winning an audience for a book.

Ask publisher Peter Collier. After only three years in business, his Encounter Books will make $3 million in profits this year, he says—not bad for an imprint specializing in serious works of history, culture, and political analysis aimed at both conservatives and open-minded liberals. Several Encounter titles have sold in the 35,000 range, and a Bill Kristol–edited volume laying out reasons for war in Iraq has sold over 60,000 copies. Instead of worrying about high-profile reviews in the media mainstream—“I’ve had God knows how many books published by now, and maybe three reviews in the New York Times Book Review,” laughs Collier—Encounter sells books by getting its authors discussed on the Internet and interviewed on talk radio, Fox News, and C-Span’s ideologically neutral Book TV. “A Q & A on NRO sells books very, very well,” Collier explains. “It’s comparable to a major newspaper review.”

A bold Drudge Report headline will move far more copies than even good newspaper reviews, claims Regnery’s Marji Ross. A book discussed on Andrew Sullivan will briefly blast up the Amazon.com best-seller list—even hitting the top five.
despair over the new conservative media that have “cohered to form a dazzlingly efficient delivery system that swamps liberal efforts to get their ideas out.”

Here’s what’s likely to happen in the years ahead. Think of the mainstream liberal media as one sphere and the conservative media as another. The liberal sphere, which less than a decade ago was still the media, is still much bigger than the non-liberal one. But the non-liberal sphere is expanding, encroaching into the liberal sphere, which is both shrinking and breaking up into much smaller sectarian spheres— one for blacks, one for Hispanics, one for feminists, and so on.

It’s hard to imagine that this development won’t result in a broader national debate—and a more conservative America.