

THE CRACKUP OF THE CHATTERING CLASS

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For almost four decades, I have given countless interviews to reporters and have appeared on thousands of television and radio shows. Most of the people I have met have been wonderful; others less so. Many have been fair, but increasingly many are not.

Those who work in the electronic media—radio and TV—and those who, like me (activists or academics) have had their career shaped in large part by it, are what constitute the chattering class. They make their living, directly or indirectly, by talking.

The chattering class is cracking up. Many have gone off the deep end, driven by ideology. They lie with abandon. They spin stories. They craft dishonest headlines. They deny the obvious. They distort. They sin by omission, failing to report newsworthy events. They are partisans posing as non-partisan observers. They are not to be trusted.

It wasn't always this way. There was a time when, allowing for important exceptions, most of those in the chattering class were professionals, content to offer a sober analysis of current events. They were honest. Today there are too many dishonest men and women in this line of work.

Technology has something to do with the change. When I was growing up, there were only a few broadcast TV channels and no cable shows. There was no internet. There was no social media. No one knew what a blogger was. The news cycle was not 24/7, as it is now. In other words, the competition today to get into the news, either as a host or a guest, is severe. It is this milieu that invites sensationalism.

Our culture has changed, too, and not for the better. The second book I wrote (while at The Heritage Foundation), *The New Freedom: Individualism and Collectivism in the Social Lives of Americans*, was an analysis of how radical individualism was disfiguring our society. This problem has only gotten worse. It is so much harder for Americans to come to a consensus today than ever before, so divided have we become.

The chattering class is more than a reflection of this environment: they helped to create it.

Social media has allowed everyone who has a half-baked opinion to sound off. The same is true of bloggers, those whose essays are posted on the internet. These people, who typically have no credentials and no expertise—in any field—are quick to lecture us on what should be done about every problem in society. (They love to bash me.)

There is a huge difference between an uninformed opinion and an informed one. It is the difference between rookies and pros. Yet social media and the blogosphere are dotted not only with uninformed opinions, they are loaded with advice that is downright dangerous.

These charlatans who opine have no background in their subject matter. Worse, they pass off their uninformed opinion as if it were factual. As the late Harvard professor and New York Senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, said, we are all entitled to our own opinion, but not to our own facts.

Then there are those who have credentials and expertise, such as reporters, but are unwilling to abide by the norms of their profession, traditionally understood. A reporter is not supposed to be a commentator: he is supposed to tell us the news, not interpret it. But today reporters can't seem to resist editorializing, telling us what to think.

In times past, when a reporter interviewed a politician who

said something that may have been untrue, he would seek out someone to interview who would offer a totally different perspective. Now the reporter quotes the politician, and then he immediately informs us that what he said was false. That is not his job. And it is particularly odious when only some politicians—this happens to Trump daily—are subjected to this kind of scrutiny while others get off scot-free.

We also have professional commentators, both conservative and liberal, who are quick to tell us how wrong some decision makers are, and how they would handle matters if they were in charge.

Typically, these members of the chattering class—late night talk-show hosts, cable-TV talk-show hosts, and college professors—have never run anything. They have never run an organization and have no idea what it is like to be pressured from both above and below, and from the right as well as the left. To top it off, they are increasingly arrogant and judgmental about matters they know nothing about.

Regarding this last point, a good example would be those who recently piled on Cardinal Dolan. He has to work laterally with Democrats and Republicans. He has to deal with those from below, parishioners, and with those from above, the pope. He must cooperate with his fellow bishops, make appointments, balance budgets, address tough issues, and meet with people he'd rather not meet with at all. This is the kind of balancing act that the chattering class never experience.

Be wary of those who have never run anything. Talk is cheap. Getting things done is exacting.