

Resistance is fruitful: As politics gets increasingly polarized, much online media has become control-left, alt-right

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Resistance is fruitful

As politics gets increasingly polarized, much online media has become control-left, alt-right

By Chris Berthelot

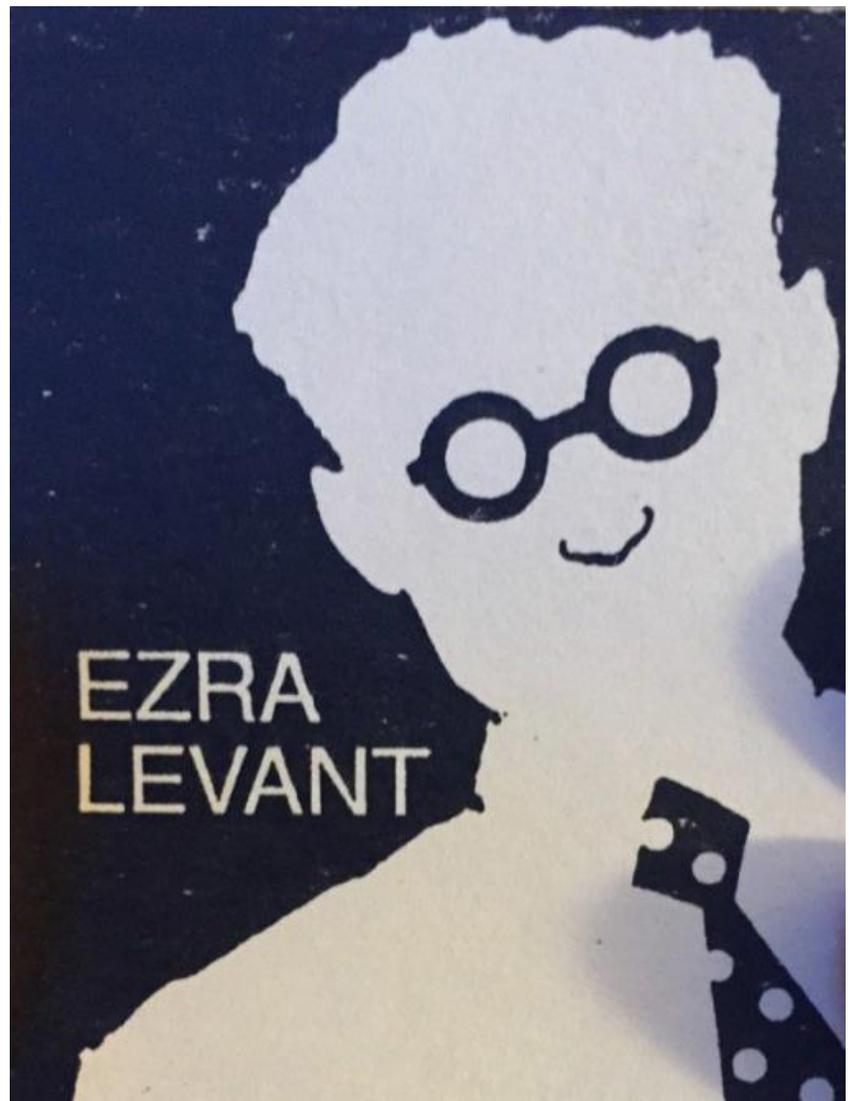
RADIO

SILENCE. This characterized my first encounter with *The Rebel Media*, the ultra-conservative, online media outlet and brainchild of conservative Canadian pundit Ezra Levant.

Most of my interview requests went unanswered or were rejected. This was odd considering the bombastic, in-your-face spirit of Levant and *Rebel* contributors such as Brian Lilley, Faith Goldy, Gavin McInnes and others.

In one of the few exchanges we had, Levant shut down any possibility for his staff to comment about *The*

Rebel and what it's like to work there: "I am the spokesman for our company."



Ezra Levant's business card from his time in law school shows an early tendency towards self-deprecating humour.

Indeed, Levant *is* the Voice of *The Rebel*. He even refers to himself as “The Rebel Commander,” on the website. But the question still remained: What is *The Rebel*? “We are an independent conservative voice, one of the only places to hear the other side of the story,” Levant says in an email exchange. “We break the collusion of the Media Party when it silences discussions about subjects like, for example, Syrian migrants.” Levant insists that the ‘Media Party’, his term for mainstream media, is deeply allied with the Liberal party.

But what is the content of this “independent, conservative voice” broadcast? News? Opinion? Activism?

In an “About” video on its YouTube channel, *The Rebel* identifies itself with all these terms. The video contains clips disputing feminism, insulting Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his wife, and condemning rape-culture protestors – all in the name of free speech. In fact, free speech and freedom of expression are held up as core values of *The Rebel* – and, by extension of Levant.

Yet the same voice that loudly and proudly calls Trudeau “the dumbest Prime Minister ever” and describes an unnamed interviewee as “talking a load of crap,” is remarkably reticent about talking about itself.

Home birth

THE REBEL was born on Valentine’s Day 2015 in Ezra Levant’s living room. It was conceived as a lifeboat for Levant, after the shutdown of the ultra-right wing Sun News Network, where he had been a marquee commentator since its founding. The day after the shutdown, Levant posted the aforementioned Rebel video on YouTube, detailing the reasons Sun News fell apart – and how *The Rebel* would continue the network’s work. Sun News Network wasn’t the first far-right media group in Canada. There have been several, and Levant seems to have been connected to them all.

His earliest involvement was in the 1970s, with *Alberta Report* – whose ranks also included the *Edmonton Journal's* Paula Simons and future *National Post* and *Maclean's* editor Ken Whyte.

The weekly regional news magazine was founded in 1973 by arch-conservative Ted Byfield, now the president of a Christian history society.

“What we thought of at the time as our society, our traditional values and so on, were under attack from the '60s generation, and were not being defended anywhere,” he says.



Ted Byfield could lay claim to the title of founding father of the Canadian right. (Courtesy Ted Byfield)

Byfield remembers Levant fondly.

“I know Ezra fairly well,” Byfield says. “Ezra for a long time seems to have been acting as the opposition. He’s very, very determined. He’s very, very intelligent. He’s a good showman, but he’s not frightened. And this makes quite a combination.”

After *The Report* went under in 2003, Levant stepped in to fill the void, a year later creating the *Western Standard*, a spiritual successor of Byfield’s various publications both in form and success; the magazine shut down its print edition in 2007, and continued to publish online until Levant sold what was left of it a short time later. Long a regular media presence as a political analyst and right-wing gadfly, he made the jump to TV full time, hosting *The Source*, a daily half-hour supper-time rant, when Sun News Network went on the air in 2011.

When the parent company, Quebecor, killed off Sun News Network after four years of abysmal ratings and low profits, Levant scooped up many of the survivors, staffing *The Rebel* with such SNN personalities as Brian Lilley, David Menzies and Faith Goldy. *The Rebel* got to work producing videos with titles like “Why Canadians Should Be Afraid of Sexist Ninjas” and “What Global Warming? Record Breaking Cold Frustrates Fear Mongers.” In the latter, Levant – wearing a vest in severe winter temperatures – argues that climate change is a hoax.

Joined by the likes of Lauren Southern and Gavin McInnes (co-founder of *Vice*), *The Rebel* also began creating what it calls “premium shows,” similar to SNN programs but only accessible by way of a paywall, and hosted by Levant and others.

Though *The Rebel* is young, Levant claims it has already become successful, something he attributes to a low-cost structure, and avoiding regulation by the federal broadcast regulator, the CRTC, by being exclusively online.

“We are growing constantly and now have 25 staff,” he says.

Fearless

THAT GROWTH hasn’t come without losses. Veteran journalist, author, and former SNN host Michael Coren, who had worked with and around Levant for several years, was the first big-name to abandon ship. Though conservative in cultural and religious views for most of his life, Coren recently adopted more liberal viewpoints on such topics as same-sex relationships.

“He called me and asked if I’d be involved,” Coren recalls. “I said, ‘You know, Ezra, I’m really not on brand anymore. I’ve moved away from this thing.’ And he said, ‘No, you know, we want diversity of opinion.’ I said ‘OK.’ And he said, ‘Also, we want people to be quite autonomous.’ ”



*The Rebel, and one of the first to leave.
(Courtesy Michael Coren)*

Soon after the phone call, Coren did a recording session with *The Rebel*, where he created videos that he describes as “mostly apolitical.” But when he later (in an act of autonomy) wrote an article in the *National Post* in favour of the sex education curriculum in Ontario, which was critical of the Christian Right, he received an urgent call from Levant.

“Ezra telephoned me and emailed me, and said, ‘We’ve just seen the piece in *National Post*.’ He said, ‘I think you’re confusing our area base or our supporters.’ So they had to drop me, which you know I expected. And I didn’t want to be with them anyway.

“In fact, as soon as it became clear what it was going to be, I couldn’t have been anyway.”

The motto of *The Rebel Media* is “Fearless,” an apparent demonstration of the website’s mindset. However, the revoking of Coren’s membership for antagonizing the Christian Right argues otherwise.

Fighting for freedoms

IN THE first video under the *Rebel* label, Levant gave what he called a “eulogy” for his former employer, and argued that he and Sun News Network had produced real news stories, unlike established media like *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*. An example, he said, was where he and Sun News showed the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons of Mohammed while reporting on the shootings in the *Hebdo* offices. Showing these comics caused an outcry among Muslims, because they consisted of satirical likenesses of the Prophet Mohammed. Some of the first *Rebel* videos also showed these cartoons, something Levant defended as acts of free speech and “real news.”

Kathleen Smith, a prominent blogger and political commentator in Edmonton, begs to differ.



Blogger Kathleen Smith says Levant needs to decide whether he's a journalist or not.

“If you’re going to call yourself journalists,” she says, “then you must, at some point, be willing to take on the ethical requirements of journalists.”

There’s no question that *The Rebel* makes some people in power uneasy. In 2016, reporters for the website were banned, then quickly unbanned, from covering Alberta government press briefings in February, and then, in October, from covering the United Nations Convention of the Parties to discuss global climate change in Marrakech, Morocco.

Both bans were the result of the

question of what sort of media group *The Rebel* is. The Alberta Government argued that it did not consider the website a “journalistic source,” but reversed the ban days later, after an uproar in the media.

UN spokesman Nicholas Nuttall told The Canadian Press that his agency held a similar view of *The Rebel* – that it was an advocacy group and not a news organization.

“We had never heard of *Rebel Media* before,” he was quoted as saying. “But we looked at their website and, to be honest, they seemed to be in the bracket of being something of a one-person band espousing an individual’s view of the world rather than being a serious media operation.”

As mentioned, Levant has denied climate change. But he argued that his *Rebel* contributors should be allowed into the convention, and that the website falls under the tradition of freedom of the press. The ban was overturned, after Levant had urged the federal government to go to bat for *The Rebel*, and Environment Minister Catherine McKenna appealed to the UN to reconsider.

In both bans, Canadian journalists overwhelmingly sided with *Rebel*, arguing that it had the same rights and privileges as any other news organization. What is surprising (or

perhaps unsurprising at this point) was that Levant and *Rebel* continued to demean Canadian journalists and Liberal government officials on the website and on social media. For example, in its announcement of the overturning of the UN ban, it commented that “even Canada’s environment minister grudgingly asked (the UN) to stop being so much like Iran.”

Then, Levant tweeted in November that “most Canadian journalists work for the government themselves, so they don’t criticize government judges. Unlike the vigorous U.K. press.”

Accompanying the tweet was a photo of a front page from the sensationalist British tabloid, *The Sun*.

Referring to Levant’s argument in 2014 that he never called himself a journalist, “Unfortunately what we’ve seen with *Rebel Media*,” Edmonton blogger Smith says, “and to a certain extent with Mr. Levant is: ‘We’re not journalists, so we don’t have to have any integrity. We’re journalists; let us into your event.’

“They can’t have it both ways,”

What is most striking about the bans isn’t the commentary from the news media, or from government leaders and spokespeople. Rather, it was the effect the bans had on Levant. Despite his merciless criticism of Prime Minister Trudeau, when the website was banned from the UN conference, he appealed to Trudeau to “stand up for Canadian values like freedom of the press at the UN.”

Reflection

THE REBEL sent three correspondents to Marrakesh for the United Nations convention and has also planned to cover another UN convention in India, which it calls the “Nanny State” conference. Levant has also planned an upcoming *Rebel Cruise*, on which audience members can interact with their favourite website personalities.

Yet throughout all of this, there still seems to be a tension between *The Rebel’s* words and its actions.

A recent example is an opinion piece by Alberta bureau chief, Sheila Gunn Reid, which ran on CBC.ca Nov. 7. Reid, who went to Marrakech, discussed her views on the UN ban and the topic of freedom of the press. What makes this ironic is that Levant, Reid and *The Rebel* have railed against the publicly-funded CBC since the website's inception.

The Rebel is a media outlet torn between punditry and journalism, between being a critic and a beneficiary of its opponents, and between being loud in its convictions and ideas, and silent when questioned or confronted.

"There's this idea that freedom of expression guarantees you an audience," Smith says. "That it protects you from the consequences of the words that you use and the words you say to other people."

Smith pauses, letting that hang in the air for a moment.

"And it doesn't."