

## The Rise of a Conservative Radio Juggernaut

Salem Media, which counts the conservative personalities Charlie Kirk and Sebastian Gorka among its radio hosts, has taken a pointed stance ahead of the midterm elections.



By Cecilia Kang and Tiffany Hsu

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In recent months, the conservative personalities Eric Metaxas, Sebastian Gorka and Charlie Kirk have used their nationally syndicated radio shows to discuss baseless claims of rigged voting machines, accuse election officials of corruption and espouse ballot fraud conspiracy theories.

Now, the three men are joining a live speaking tour that will take them across Arizona, Georgia, Pennsylvania and other battleground states to promote those views — and Republican candidates — ahead of the Nov. 8 midterm elections.

The radio hosts and their tour are united by a common backer: Salem Media Group, a publicly traded media company in Irving, Texas. Mr. Metaxas, Mr. Gorka and Mr. Kirk have contracts with the company, which is also hosting the Battleground Talkers trip. The tour features more than half a dozen other conservative media personalities as well, including Hugh Hewitt and Dennis Prager, who also have deals with Salem.

Created as a Christian radio network nearly 50 years ago by two brothers-in-law, Salem has quietly turned into a conservative media juggernaut as it increasingly takes an activist stance in the midterm elections. The company has publicly said it wants a strong turnout of conservative voters for Nov. 8, and its hosts have amplified the messages of conspiracy theorists, including misinformation about the voting process.

“The war for America’s soul is on the line,” Salem said in promotional materials for the tour. It added that the radio hosts were traveling to “influence those who are undecided.”

Salem, which has a market capitalization of nearly \$45 million, is smaller than audio competitors like Cumulus Media and iHeartMedia, as well as conservative media organizations such as Fox News. But it stands out for its blend of right-leaning politics and Christian content and its vast network of 100 radio stations and more than 3,000 affiliates, many of them reaching deep into parts of America that don’t engage with most mainstream media outlets.

Salem also operates dozens of religious and conservative websites, as well as podcasts, television news, book publishing and a social media influencer network. The company, which describes its news content as “the antidote to the mainstream media,” has said it reaches 11 million radio listeners.



Salem expanded into film this year by financing “2000 Mules,” a widely debunked but popular movie that claimed voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election. Charity Rachele for The New York Times

This year, it expanded into film by financing “2000 Mules,” a widely debunked but popular movie that claimed significant voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election. It was directed by Dinesh D’Souza, a conservative figure who has a deal with Salem, and features interviews with others who have shows on Salem. The company plans to publish a book version of the film this month.

The general public may not be familiar with Salem, “but their hosts are big names and they have huge reach, which makes them one of the most powerful forces in conservative media that hardly anyone knows about,” said Craig Aaron, president of Free Press, a nonprofit that fights misinformation and supports media competition.

Salem did not respond to requests for interviews. Phil Boyce, the company’s senior vice president of spoken word, said in a news release for the battleground states tour that “there has never been a more important midterm election than this one, and Salem is thrilled to be front and center, leading the charge.”

Mr. Metaxas, Mr. Prager, Mr. Kirk, Mr. Hewitt and Mr. D’Souza did not respond to requests for comment. In his response for comment, Mr. Gorka said The New York Times was “FAKENEWS fraud.”



Sebastian Gorka, a right-wing personality who has a radio show on Salem Media, had former President Donald J. Trump on his show this year. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

Salem has faced legal challenges as its hosts have discussed conspiracy theories about voter fraud. Eric Coomer, a former executive of Dominion Voting Systems, a maker of election technology, has filed lawsuits against Salem, Mr. Metaxas and several media outlets since 2020 for defamation after being accused on air of perpetuating voter fraud and joining the left-wing antifa movement.

Nicole Hemmer, a political historian at Vanderbilt University and author of “Messengers of Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics,” said Salem’s effect was far-reaching.

“They are using their many different properties for coordinated messaging to promote misinformation, which is undermining democracy,” she said.

Salem was started in 1974 with two tiny radio stations in North Carolina owned by two brothers-in-law, Edward G. Atsinger III and Stuart W. Epperson. Over time, they steadily added more stations across the country and sold blocks of airtime for sermons. Salem is now in most major radio markets.

The company went public in 1999 as the internet was rising. In its public offering prospectus, Salem said it would focus on acquiring digital platforms and cross-promoting content across its channels to attract new audiences.

In 2006, Salem bought the conservative political website Townhall.com; other deals for conservative sites followed, including HotAir, Twitchy and PJ Media. It purchased a publishing company, Eagle Publishing, in 2014 in a deal that included RedState, a conservative blog, and Regnery, a publisher with conservative authors like Ann Coulter and Laura Ingraham. Regnery said last year that it was “proud to stand in the breach” with Senator Josh Hawley, Republican of Missouri, when it agreed to print his book after Simon & Schuster dropped the title in the wake of the Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

This summer, Salem said it had added a podcast hosted by two “culture warriors,” Rob McCoy and Bryce Eddy of the talk show “Liberty Station.” In January, the company awarded its Culture Warrior of the Year award to Ron DeSantis, the Republican governor of Florida, who has made a point of goading liberals.

More recently, Salem has promoted to advertisers its “360-degree deals,” meaning that it can amplify messages across radio, podcasts, books, film and websites.



Salem has said it is “thrilled to be front and center, leading the charge” in next month’s midterm elections. Rebecca Noble for The New York Times

Politics were not new to Salem’s founders. Mr. Epperson unsuccessfully ran for Congress in 1984 and 1986 as a Republican. Mr. Atsinger contributed to Republican candidates like George W. Bush and Larry Elder, a Salem radio host who mounted a failed campaign in the California governor’s recall election last year. In Washington, Salem fought to remove regulatory hurdles that complicated its acquisition spree.

At the beginning of the year, Mr. Atsinger stepped down as Salem’s chief executive and became chairman, succeeding Mr. Epperson, who took on the title of chairman emeritus.

Salem’s executives largely stayed out of editorial decisions — until the Trump administration, said Ben Howe, a former employee of RedState; Craig Silverman, a former Salem radio commentator in Denver; and a third former employee, who declined to be identified for fear of retaliation.

In July 2017, Salem held an event at the White House, and several radio hosts interviewed top Trump administration officials. At a Salem reception at the Capitol the next day, the Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell, and the House Republican leader, Kevin McCarthy, gave speeches.

“There was a lot of closeness,” said Mr. Silverman, who attended the events. “McConnell and McCarthy praised Salem, and vice versa. It felt like some sort of team effort.”

In April 2018, Salem’s RedState blog fired several employees who had been vocal critics of Mr. Trump. The site’s unofficial slogan had long been “Take on the left. Clean up the right,” said Mr. Howe, a writer for the site who was one of those fired. “But one to two years into office, everything changed. It was like it was no longer good for business to be critical of Trump.”

Mr. Silverman said his radio show was cut off in November 2019 as he excoriated Mr. Trump over accusations that the president had pressured Ukraine to investigate Joseph R. Biden Jr., then a Democratic presidential candidate, by withholding aid to the country. Mr. Silverman said he was then fired.



“The political environment has never been as interesting and as heated and intense as it is right now,” David Santrella, Salem’s chief executive, said on a recent earnings call. Business Wire, via Associated Press

Salem said in press reports at the time that such dismissals were not politically motivated, explaining that it had fired the RedState employees because of financial considerations and Mr. Silverman because he had appeared on non-Salem shows. Mr. Silverman said those appearances were allowed under his contract.

As Mr. Trump’s term wound down, Salem ran into financial pressure. In 2019, the company said four board members, including two of the co-founders’ sons, had resigned because “Salem has faced several unique financial headwinds and we are looking for ways to cut costs while not impacting revenue.” Both sons have since returned to the board.

In May 2020, the company moved to eliminate new hiring, suspend its dividend, reduce head count, cut pay and request discounts from vendors, blaming the pandemic for forcing it to conserve cash. It reported \$11.2 million in forgiven loans from the government’s Paycheck Protection Program.

But Salem’s finances have improved since then. Its net income rose to \$41.5 million in 2021 from a loss in 2020, while revenue increased to \$258.2 million from \$236.2 million a year earlier.

Salem’s political platforms are a bright spot. On an earnings call in August, Salem executives said that so far this year, political advertisers had spent nearly twice as much on Salem platforms as they did over the same period in the presidential election year of 2020, which had been the “biggest political year ever.” David Santrella, the chief executive, has predicted that “hot button” issues like abortion would probably boost ad revenue.

“The political environment has never been as interesting and as heated and intense as it is right now,” he said.

Kitty Bennett contributed research.