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An excerpt from his new book, *Shock Jocks: Hate Speech & Talk Radio*, published by Alternet Books

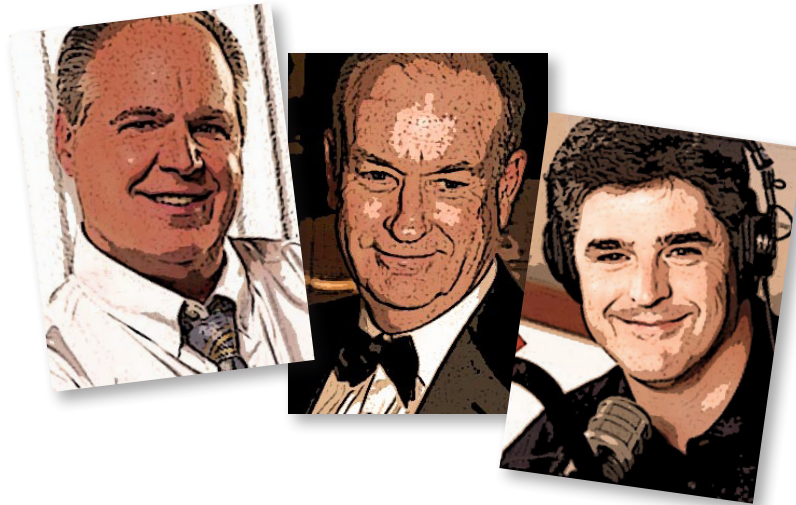
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RORY O'CONNOR – AMERICA, WE HAVE A PROBLEM



AMERICA, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

By Rory O'Connor

*An excerpt from his new book,
Shock Jocks, Hate Speech & Talk Radio*

Talk radio is running America. We have to deal with that problem. – Senator Trent Lott

Comedian and television talk show host Jon Stewart once said of the CNN program Crossfire, “It’s not so much that it’s bad, as it’s hurting America.” The same can be said of the highly politicized, overly partisan and often factually challenged world of news-and-opinion talk radio. Many top talk show hosts, from the recently-resurrected Don Imus to industry giants such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, regularly employ and promote hate speech aimed against women, minorities, homosexuals,

and foreigners over public airwaves, while simultaneously blurring the lines between entertainment, opinion, and journalism. Proclaiming that their antigay, antiwoman, and racially or ethnically charged remarks are merely meant as good-humored, inoffensive, and “politically incorrect” fun, these highly paid, hugely powerful, mostly male, and all-white “shock jocks” deliver one-sided, highly politicized versions of the news, influence our national conversation, and affect legislation on important social issues ranging from immigration to abortion. At the same time, they foster a climate of social acceptance of racist, sexist, homophobic and xenophobic language and hate speech – one that inevitably leads to tolerance of

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acts of hatred.

Shock jocks' use of hate speech under the guise of free speech is only part of the talk radio problem facing America. Our democratic dialogue is also being hindered by a huge ideological imbalance in the medium. Conservative viewpoints have long dominated talk radio, one of the most popular, influential, and intrinsically democratic media formats in America. Why? There are nearly as many answers to that question as there are respondents, but it's long been clear that, politically speaking, the news-and-opinion talk radio universe tips overwhelmingly to the right.

One recent study by the Center for American Progress and the media reform group Free Press—both avowedly liberal organizations—shows that more than 90 percent of the talk on the radio dial during weekdays is given over to conservative programming. According to the CAP/FP report, 257 news and talk stations owned by America's top five commercial station owners broadcast more than 2,570 hours of conservative talk each weekday. Only 254 hours are dedicated to progressive talk—resulting in a 10-to-1 dominance of conservatives over progressives.

As we shall see, this conservative control of the commercial radio news-talk genre is the result of a combination of factors—some historical, some political, some commercial, and some structural. But this right-wing air dominance arose in large part from years of relentless deregulation and concomitant consolidation, which vastly altered the industry's structure and allowed companies to acquire more stations, and thus increased

advertising revenue, in any given market. This abiding penchant for deregulation led to the emergence of a handful of large corporations that essentially control national radio programming distribution, including most of talk radio. The days of local owners who programmed for local audiences are gone; instead centralized behemoths like industry leader Clear Channel now own hundreds of individual stations and distribute similar syndicated fare to each. Although these companies license the use of the public airwaves, few make their programming decisions in the public interest. Left unchallenged, and generally sharing a worldview with those on the right (along with positions on important issues such as the environment, taxes, trade, etc.), executives focus instead on the corporations' own economic and political interests.

Another part of the talk radio problem is the clever and continual blurring of distinctions between news, opinion, and entertainment practiced by many leading talkers on the right. Sounding like journalists—while denying that they do—allows them to dodge responsibility for their provocative comments. It also inexorably leads to the dissolution of borders between fact, fiction, and fun, to the ultimate detriment of our democracy. We already live in an age of media scams and scandals, of fake news and sponsored opinion. Pretending that everything talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh say is just meaningless entertainment is but a convenient way to introduce false narratives, set up straw dogs like “illegal aliens” and “phony soldiers,” and in general demonize anyone the right sees as “the other.”

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How meaningless was it when Limbaugh led his self-described “dittoheads” to revolt against a sitting president and leaders of their own party, killing bipartisan immigration reform by glibly rebranding it “shamnesty”?

If such effective acts are merely entertainment, it will undoubtedly come as a surprise to their devoted audiences—yet most talk radio hosts are forthright in denying that they practice journalism. Interviews conducted for this book with talkers of differing backgrounds, pedigrees, and political persuasions yielded surprising unanimity. Cenk Uygur, host of the morning drive show *The Young Turks* on the progressive talk network Air America, bluntly stated, “I don’t think that any of us, Rush or Michael Savage or Randi Rhodes or me, are journalists, are bringing you the news.”

Uygur’s colleagues on both sides of the political divide echo his thoughts. Entertainment, period. It’s not about right wing or left wing,” said Stephanie Miller, host of a progressive program out of Los Angeles syndicated by Jones Radio Networks. “The minute that we think we’re a political movement, we’re dead.” Conservative talker Mike Gallagher, whose syndicated program attracts nearly 4 million listeners weekly, agreed. “We’re entertainers—not news, not journalists—broadcasters and entertainers with strong opinions. But our job is to entertain, to be funny, and to be compelling.”

Entertaining people with strong opinions about the news (without actually reporting or gathering any) sounds easy .. And on the face of it, hosting a talk radio program appears to be easy—so easy it seems anyone

can do it. No particular professional training, educational achievements, prior experience, or even character references are required (witness the recent return to radio of former Providence, Rhode Island, mayor Vincent “Buddy” Cianci Jr. following his release from federal custody after more than four years in prison for corruption). But while it may be true that anyone can do it, very few people can do it well.

In fact, being behind the microphone can sometimes be the “loneliest spot in the world,” as Los Angeles Times reporter William Lobdell discovered during a stint as a fill-in host for conservative talker Hugh Hewitt, whose show is picked up by more than 100 stations throughout the country. “You wouldn’t think being a talk radio show host would be all that tough; just read a few newspaper, magazine, and Web articles others have slaved to produce and then riff about them,” Lobdell wrote. “But here’s the hard part. It’s just you, your voice, and the microphone. You are giving a monologue in an empty studio. You can’t see your audience or sense their engagement. It felt like being locked in a sensory-deprivation chamber. “Time seemed to slow, the awful way it does during a car accident.”

Even worse, the technical aspects of hosting also “flummoxed” the reporter. “My producer kept barking instructions in my ear, messing up what little rhythm I had going. I had to put callers on the air, a seemingly simple task that resulted in several hang-ups with accompanying dial tones that made the air waves,” Lobdell re-

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called. “And I had to be constantly aware of the time, making sure the show broke away smoothly for commercial breaks and news (another failure). Though I was clearly a dead host talking, the callers and e-mailers, smelling blood, went after me with a disturbing glee.”

David Foster Wallace made a similar assessment in “Host,” a 1005 Harper’s Magazine profile of John Ziegler, another popular right-leaning radio talker. “Hosting talk radio is an exotic, high-pressure gig that not many people are fit for, and being truly good at it requires skills so specialized that many of them don’t have names,” Wallace noted. “The fact of the matter is that it is not John Ziegler’s job to be responsible, or nuanced, or to think about whether his on-air comments are productive or dangerous, or cogent, or even defensible ... he has exactly one on-air job, and that is to be stimulating.”

Wallace’s point, which is usually “overlooked by people who complain about propaganda, misinformation, and irresponsibility in commercial talk radio,” was precisely that Ziegler “is not a journalist – he is an entertainer.” The same is said of Limbaugh, the most popular and influential radio talker of all time, and of literally hundreds of his industry peers and descendants. Wallace added that Limbaugh, Ziegler, and their ilk are more properly viewed as “part of a peculiar, modern, and very popular type of news industry, one that manages to enjoy the authority and influence of journalism without the stodgy constraints of fairness, objectivity, and responsibility that make trying to tell the truth such a drag for

everyone involved.”

Despite the medium’s many current controversies and partisan political battles, and whether you choose to view it as entertainment or journalism, news or opinion, or all of the above, one fact is clear: Americans love to listen to talk radio. We also apparently love to talk back; every week, tens of millions of us engage in a robust, ongoing national conversation with our favored hosts on one of the most controversial niches in the ever-expanding modern media universe. By any measure—political, social, cultural, economic—talk radio is hot.

In commercial terms, although radio is one of the oldest forms of modern media, it is paradoxically still profitable. Despite competition from emerging technologies in recent years, the radio industry had a particularly prosperous year in 2005, posting its largest gain in advertising revenue since 1988, and in 2006, the 20 percent industry-wide profit margin was the third-highest in the last 40 years. Every year, this dean of electronic media continues to produce billions in annual revenue – more than \$20 billion overall, up from \$12 billion in 1996, the year the Clinton administration and Congress combined to produce the first major overhaul of telecommunications law in more than 60 years.

Talk radio is even hotter in sociopolitical and cultural terms; it sometimes seems as if whatever our leading talk show hosts are saying or doing ranks among the most important national topics of the day. In many cases the radio talkers are actually discuss-

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ing important national topics, such as race and ethnicity, and war and peace, but there seems equally to be a weird and growing national obsession over the politics, personalities, and piques of the many men and the few women who regularly harangue, cajole, insult, incite, inflame, delight, entertain, inform, and misinform us over the public airwaves.

Consider just a few of the numerous talk radio-related news events during the last half of 2007, for example. Rush Limbaugh consistently made fresh headlines while causing new controversies, even as he celebrated his program's 19th anniversary. Whether he was smearing a 12-year-old health care recipient, attacking antiwar service members as "phony soldiers" and "suicide bombers," being castigated on the floor of Congress for doing so, and then raising millions of dollars for children of "fallen Marines" by auctioning a letter denouncing him for his remarks, or simply contemplating the impending end of his probation for a narcotics arrest ("My five weeks in rehab at The Meadows were among the best times in my life," Limbaugh told the Palm Beach Post. "I would recommend it even to people who are not addicted"), the 24-hour news cycle seemed to be stuck on "All Rush, all the time." The first part of 2008 proved no different; Limbaugh's objections to Republican presidential candidate John McCain and his supposedly "liberal" stance on issues such as immigration and campaign finance reform resulted in massive attention from mainstream media outlets, which effectively promoted both his personality and his program.

Meanwhile, fellow top-rated, nationally syndicated talkers such as Bill O'Reilly and Michael Savage competed for public attention by endlessly indulging in outrage. O'Reilly first compared the progressive political Web site Daily Kos to the Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan, then expressed his amazement that a world famous Harlem restaurant "was exactly the same" as other restaurants in New York, "even though it's run by blacks." ("There wasn't one person ... who was screaming, 'MF- er, I want more iced tea,'" the racist radio ranter added.) Savage, who despite his base in liberal San Francisco veers further to the right than either O'Reilly or Limbaugh, was condemned unanimously by that city's board of supervisors for his use of "defamatory language" against immigrants. The resolution came in response to a broadcast in which Savage remarked of a group of students fasting in support of changes in immigration policy, "Let them fast until they starve to death. Then that solves the problem."

Such caustic comments by leading talk radio hosts, shocking as they may seem, were nothing new to their avid audiences, and the brouhaha they created was as usual quite positive for them and their ratings. In fact, talk radio hosts must be either extraordinarily unlucky or extremely untimely in their remarks to suffer any lasting negative consequences. Rarely, and then owing only to an unusual confluence of events, certain on-air statements are suddenly and mysteriously deemed "over the line" or "going too far." Representatives of the corpora-

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tions that license the airwaves to broadcast those remarks then roundly deplore them. Less frequently, and only when executives face prolonged public pressure and open advertiser revolt, do they first suspend and then occasionally (but hardly ever) actually dismiss the offender. Even then, the punishment never seems to last long.

Thus what happened to shock jock Don Imus after his notorious “nappy headed ho’s” insult to the Rutgers University women’s basketball team is just the exception that proves the rule ... and even Imus wasn’t banished from the airwaves for very long. The entire Imus affair (closely followed by the suspension of fellow shock jocks Opie and Anthony for making on-air sexually offensive “jokes” about Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, First Lady Laura Bush, and for good measure, the Queen of England) merely highlighted the fact that such controversial remarks and on-air forays into out-and-out racism, sexism, sacrilege, homophobia, and generalized bigotry are really the mother’s milk of talk radio. Far from being singular, Don Imus is actually the poster boy for all that is wrong with our most popular populist media.

Imus supporters regularly insist that none of what he or other shock jocks say really matters, since it supposedly “isn’t serious.” Can’t we all just lighten up and move on? Stop being so politically correct and humorless? If you don’t like what’s on the air, why not change the station or simply stop listening? But it’s not enough just to change the station. That station’s message is being broadcast daily by networks that reach tens of millions of listeners over airwaves that

are literally publicly owned—that belong, in other words, to all of us, including all the human beings who are regularly the butt of insults, including brillohead, dark meat, Mandingo, Uncle Ben, gook, chink, slanty-eyed bastard, queer, homo, ho, lesbo, gorilla, and pimp.

There should of course be a place in our society, and on our airwaves, for those who play the part of court jester and alter ego, whose stock-in-trade is saying aloud those things others dare speak only in private or sotto voce. But there should also be a special burden placed on those using the public airwaves, one that calls for care and concern about the context in which they’re speaking. All of us, even the so-called “shock jocks” have a responsibility to act for the greater good, and talk radio shouldn’t be used as a vehicle to stir up old hatreds and divide us as a nation.

Many radio listeners want to believe that none of this loose talk actually hurts anyone—but most African Americans and women didn’t say “lighten up” or “move on” or “don’t be so politically correct” when Don Imus described the Rutgers University women’s basketball team in crude and cruel, racist and sexist terms. In a society where hate crimes are on the rise, and where nooses are still displayed as racial threats, hate speech doesn’t customarily elicit that reaction from the people most directly affected by it. But no one can afford to stand back and be neutral; it is incumbent on us all to take a stand and confront hate speech wherever and whenever it is heard. “People want to

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believe that it's 'just words' and that we as a society are past racism, past sexism, and the epidemic of violence against women," talk radio host Laura Flanders explained in the course of research for this book. "But we're not, so there is no neutral context for comments like that. It's real-life people putting real-life obstacles in front of each other. Let's not be afraid of that debate, to make those criticisms."

So who are America's leading talk show hosts, and what are they saying? What impact is the medium having on politics and culture, and on such real-world issues as immigration, taxation, and the ongoing occupation of Iraq? Is it fair to assume that "political" talk radio is largely motivated by ideology? Or is talk radio more properly understood as just a business, driven by revenue and profits? Do conservatives dominate today's airwaves because they generate high ratings and thus high advertising rates and profits, or because the corporations that distribute their programming benefit politically from doing so? How do the corporations that distribute and sponsor their programs decide who gets on and stays on the public airwaves? What are the progressive alternatives? Should we try to ensure that core journalistic values such as fairness, balance, and factual accuracy are reflected in what many say, after all is done and said, is an entertainment-driven medium? Or does such concern and intervention instead do harm to the principle of free speech, one of our most cherished and valuable rights?

More than any other mass medium, radio has a captive audience, in part because the majority of its members are listening in their cars during commute times. But in any given large market, those "captives" now enjoy the freedom of literally dozens of choices of what to listen to, ranging from AM stations to FM to podcasts to satellite radio. As a result, even the most successful talk radio station captures just 5 to 6 percent of the total listening audience. In these days of "narrow-casting," such a niche can still prove lucrative for both the talk show hosts and the corporations that distribute their programs. As a result, there's high demand for those few individuals who can actually deliver a sizable audience. With that audience comes influence and power, not only to comment on but also actually to effect events of importance to us all as citizens in a democracy.

An increasing number of Americans now agree with Senator Trent Lott and numerous other close industry observers and media watchdogs that the power and influence of America's leading radio talk show hosts is at best problematic and at its worst dangerous to democracy. Now that even Republican leaders (including President George W. Bush) have begun feeling the heat from right-wing talk radio, it's time for an objective, comprehensive look at the history, issues, and personalities behind this media and political phenomenon that attracts tens of millions of listeners and generates billions of dollars for its practitioners and their corporate overlords.

In turn both frightening and fascinating, talk radio occupies a peculiar place on the

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broadening spectrum of media choices. Although most mass media are increasingly controlled by a handful of corporations, never before have so many different news sources been so widely and readily accessible. Greater consolidation has paradoxically been paralleled by increased fragmentation and a seeming surfeit of news and information choices. Yet this increasing fragmentation has also resulted in an increasing number of ideological rather than objective or professional news outlets, “a kind of epistemic free-for-all in which ‘the truth’ is wholly a matter of perspective and agenda,” as David Foster Wallace elegantly phrased it. Although greater choice theoretically seems to be a societal good, in reality it has led us instead to an ever-greater reliance on partisan news sources that serve only to bear out what we already believe to be true. As a result, as Wallace noted, “it is increasingly hard to determine which sources to pay attention to and how exactly to distinguish real information from spin.”

And therein lies the true problem of talk

radio. Rush Limbaugh’s original but toxic mix of news, entertainment, and unbalanced analysis has become the national model, setting a much-imitated standard and initiating a race to the bottom. “The mainstream media is biased against us,” the right-wing talkers maintain; thus the need for unbiased (aka politically conservative) talk radio to restore the missing balance—mostly by dismissing as biased any other media that departs from the common talking points heard daily on talk radio. This solipsistic thesis simultaneously extends conservatives’ distrust of the so-called liberal media and exalts talk radio as the necessary antidote.

So yes, America, we’ve got a problem. Talk radio is too valuable—and too political—to be left solely in the hands of shock jocks. How can we as a free society – one that loves to talk and to listen, and then to talk back—ensure that talk radio is finally opened up to as many voices as possible? How can we enshrine free speech as both an ideal and a reality on our publicly owned airwaves? CT

MILLIONS CAN BE WRONG

An interview with Rory O'Connor by **Mark Karlin** of Buzzflash.com

Many liberals dismiss the right-wing shock jocks with disdain. Rory O'Connor takes them seriously – and at their word. That is how he came to write this provocative book about the top ten purveyors of hate speech on the airwaves. BuzzFlash has been a big supporter of progressive radio, which is slowly but surely finding an audience. Meanwhile, however, we have a whole slew of right-wing beasts of the airwaves whipping up bigotry, intolerance, and hate. O'Connor explores their malicious and eroding impact on American society. Interview reproduced courtesy of www.buzzflash.com

Mark Karlin: Your book is *Shock Jocks, Hate Speech & Talk Radio, America's 10 Worst Hate Talkers and the Progressive Alternatives*. Let's start off with this as a devil's advocate. If you take someone like Michael Savage, or, Michael Weiner, he's got several million people listening to him. You and I and anyone who is probably reading this find him totally repulsive and obnoxious. But the owners of radio stations, will say: Hey, millions of listeners can't be wrong. What's your response to that?

Rory O'Connor: My response to that is that sometimes millions can be wrong. He's the third most listened-to shock jock out there, but I also would say to the owners who are distributing him that they must be concerned about their sponsors and the advertisers opting out of Savage's show as a result of the disgust on the part of some of his listeners and some of us who wish he would refrain from the type of vitriolic speech that he engages in.

I think, economically, there are reasons for the distributors to be concerned as well.

Karlin: Do you think someone like Savage actually believes what he's saying? He used to be a liberal, and now he just says outrageous things. I get the feeling sometimes when I read about what he says, that, like Ann Coulter, he premeditates these things to shock, and draw in more of an audience, to draw more publicity. How much is this him calculating that he can improve his paycheck by drawing the listeners, versus him really expressing a viewpoint?

Rory O'Connor: I'm not a psychologist and I don't even play one on TV, so I don't want to get into analyzing any individual. But I chose the title *Shock Jocks* with deliberation. I think that most, if not all, of these

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talk radio hosts regularly engage in trying to shock and to outrage. After all, it's a time-honored way in all sorts of media to break through the clutter that is out there. It's the "I can't believe he actually said that in public" factor.

It's certainly not limited to Savage. When Rush Limbaugh calls for or envisions a riot at the Democratic convention in Denver coming up in August, that's exactly the same sort of thing. Bill O'Reilly also engages in this on a regular basis. None of these people are stupid - they're very smart. And in some cases they're good at what they do. I think it's a safe supposition to think that they know precisely what they're doing, and in most cases, it's very deliberate.

Karlin: If we didn't have Savage, if we didn't have Limbaugh, if we didn't have Don Imus creating an audience and further coarsening the public arena, would the audiences be thinking these thoughts anyway?

O'Connor: That's a good question. I think they really are leading the audience. First of all, the audience for talk radio for people like Limbaugh and Savage is not a monolithic audience. I've actually spoken to a number of self-identified people on the left who say that they do listen to these shows on a regular basis. Some listen to monitor and then to counter what they're saying. Some listen for the shock value and entertainment value, to be amused. They think it's funny even though they don't subscribe to the beliefs. And there also is a large portion of the audience that is going to them because they believe that they are actually

getting news and they are getting factual information.

That's one of the real dangers that I attempt to highlight in the book. These guys are regularly blurring the lines between news, entertainment, information and opinion. In many cases, it is already difficult to tell the difference. So a lot of people go to Rush Limbaugh not just to hear hate speech, but to hear the news. The problem is they're getting a very toxic mix of news and opinion and jokes and entertainment and hate speech all swirling together. It's difficult to tell what is real and what is not.

Karlin: In a sense, America has gone through a period of time for the past fifty years where entertainment and corporate news and politics have really sort of merged. You have someone like Rush Limbaugh who says he considers himself an entertainer, and his goal is to keep his audience listening. There are obviously many radio broadcaster tricks of the trade to make sure people keep listening to your show. And Rush Limbaugh is the proof in the pudding – he has mastered this ability to keep people listening.

O'Connor: You're right. Let's give credit where credit is due. I have no difficulty telling you that Rush Limbaugh is a master entertainer. He is preeminent. He is the best at what he does. And, you know, in the book I quote people from the left, right and the center who acknowledge that. The Young Turks, for example, told me exactly that. My problem is not with Rush as an entertainer. It's Rush when he's not being an entertainer, when he claims to be enter-

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taining but he's actually engaging in this blurring of the lines and the boundaries, so it's not exactly ever clear what's news, what's entertainment, what's Rush's opinion or hate speech. It's all merged together in the listener's mind, and that's one of the big dangers in what they do. If he just stuck to entertaining, I would probably listen to Rush Limbaugh.

Karlin: Rush Limbaugh was one of the people that Dick Cheney turned to when he wanted to get his message out – one was Fox News and one was Rush Limbaugh. If I'm a listener, I assume if the Vice President of the United States is on this program, this is a serious program.

O'Connor: That's one of few places that he's given access to, so you would assume that.

Karlin: In a free society, how does one go about cleaning this up? The broadcasters say, well, we're making money. This is a First Amendment issue. If people want to listen to this, they have a right to listen to it. You and I would argue that people like Limbaugh and Savage and Coulter and Ingraham coarsen our public discourse. They really play to the worst and basest instincts of hate in people. Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity have portrayed people who disagreed with them as anti-American. And the hate, in large part, is directed at "them" – and the "them" is anyone from people opposed to the Iraq war, Democrats, feminists, Arabs. They're all the "them," and they are to be hated because they're anti-American. So they create this hate of anyone who's not

like them. But it's not clearly defined as to what being like them is.

O'Connor: Well, I what I would say is it's American to question, to get lots of different viewpoints, a diversity of information, and to make up your own mind. If anything, I would attack Dittoheads for being un-American themselves.

But there are lots of things that citizens can do to respond to hate radio. Most important is to simply recognize it when it happens, and to stand up and say this is unacceptable to me, and this is unacceptable in our country. It's certainly not acceptable on the airwaves that we own.

Now I do make a fairly big distinction between the public airwaves and satellite radio. If you choose to listen to Howard Stern or Opie and Anthony, and pay for it – it's not something that's publicly disseminated on airwaves that we own, and you have to get a license – that's a different kettle of fish. I certainly don't want to be in the business of censoring or getting involved in anybody's freedom to speak.

But I think that the answer is for the people who find the Limbaughs and Savages on the public airways to be objectionable to exercise their First Amendment rights such as the freedom of association. First and foremost, people need to recognize this and call people on it publicly. If that doesn't work, you go further, and take action. You organize boycotts or go to the meetings of corporations that are distributing this swill and profiting from it, and you say is this representative of you? If it is not, you should join us and speak out.

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This is exactly the behavior and coalition-building that will lead ultimately to Don Imus going from making a joke about “nappy-headed ‘hos” to being publicly shamed, first suspended, and finally fired. That wasn’t because CBS and NBC had a change of heart. It was because they were forced to by the combination of the listeners, consumers, advertisers and sponsors, and ultimately by their own employees, who stood up internally and said this is not something we can support as employees of General Electric/NBC. And that’s why ultimately Imus was taken off the air.

Is he back on the air? Of course he is. But I’ve been listening to him and it’s somewhat modified, although I did hear him recently referring to both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama as “pussies.” So he wasn’t entirely modified. But it is important to recognize that we can stand up, we can have an effect, and that we can have successes.

Karlin: You have a chapter in which you talk about the progressive alternatives, and this has been a passion for BuzzFlash. There are indeed quite a number of progressive talk-show hosts out there in addition to those with Air America. It’s becoming a larger universe, and many of these people are now crossing over into TV. Rachel Maddow is certainly, Stephanie Miller, Ed Schultz are all appearing, and others, on television. They represent a little beachhead against the Michael Savages and the Laura Ingrahams and the Ann Coulters. And they’re doing a good job of it.

And you’ve got great radio programs like Thom Hartmann and Mike Malloy and

Randi Rhodes and so forth. We’re really starting to see progressive radio establish itself. There’s been a growing audience for progressive radio. What do you make of the progressive radio counterpoint at this time?

O’Connor: Well, to steal some words from a great orator I listened to, my answer would be this is our time and this is our moment. I think we’re going to look back at this present time as the turning point – not only as the turning point when America turned its back on the war in Iraq and all the hateful years of the Bush-Cheney regime, but also when we turned our back on this corporate domination of the media in the airwaves, and the conservative domination of talk radio, and increasingly, as you said, of cable television.

And why is this happening? For a wide variety of reasons. There is a lot more talent now with more experience than they had before. They did networks. Let’s face it – as I detail in my book – Air America had lots and lots of problems. I think they’re starting to straighten out their ship. But the large corporations, the ones that present or control news shows – i.e., General Electric, for example – they see the handwriting on the commercial wall.

This country has made a profound shift, and it’s not just a political shift. It’s a very, very deep cultural shift. I believe that progressives are well positioned if not leading the way to benefit from that shift. The large corporations are really not rigidly ideological. There are some confluences, of course, between the corporate agenda and the con-

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servative political agenda. But the corporate agenda can shift with the political winds. I predict that that's what we're going to see happening in the next four to eight years on the media front, as well.

Karlin: Well, indirectly the hate radio benefits the corporate world as a whole because one of the key things that the top ten hate shock jocks that you profile do is create scapegoats for what's wrong in America. In other words, if you're working-class white, which became an issue obviously in the Democratic primary, instead of blaming corporations for off-shoring the jobs or for closing down your factory, you hate Mexican immigrants. You hate Arabs. You hate women who want equal rights. It's a way of diverting attention from the class divisions in America, an increasing distance between the very wealthy and the very poor. The shock jocks don't attribute any problems that we have in America to the increasing disparity of wealth.

O'Connor: Even on the Democratic and the liberal side, I found that there's still a great reluctance of confronting the class issue. Even in this long primary season, there's been a lot of talk about race in America, there's a lot of discussion about sexism in America. We need to have those discussions. But the last great taboo in America is to actually speak about the inequity in wealth and in income, to speak about these class distinctions. I'm not so certain that's going to happen any time soon.

But I do think we're just coming out of a period of eight years of the most rigor-

ous scapegoating. I personally come out of a working-class background. My father was a construction worker in Queens. He voted for Nixon, a Reagan Democrat. I grew up with firefighters and police officers. When I talk to them now, I'm finding that they are tired of blaming scapegoats and having nothing in their lives change for the better. They're realizing that no amount of blaming so-called illegal aliens is going to solve their problems, is going to make their son not be shot in Iraq, is going to pay their health care bill or whatever example you'd want to pull out.

I think that this country is really on the cusp of a great turning. And it's about turning of our self-interest, partially, whether it's on the part of the large corporations or on the part of the Working-class people have been following leaders who led them down a dead end road. They're realizing that they, in fact, have been played for fools and suckers, and they're not going to put up with it anymore. It's no longer enough for them to blame the "ragheads," the "illegals," or whatever.

Karlin: What is it about radio that has such an intimate voice? If you're listening to someone like Rush, and you have a certain outlook of scapegoating and blaming others, at the core, they fundamentally view themselves as victims.

O'Connor: Exactly.

Karlin: At the same time, they talk about this country being virile and strong and empire-building. What is it about radio that

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enables people to listen in sort of a setting of intimacy? Radio is certainly a more intimate medium than television.

O'Connor: It's one of the most intimate media of all. Years ago, I was doing political commentary in Boston. People would come up to me, and say, oh, I loved your commentary last week. I heard it in the shower. Or I was walking through the mall last week, and I heard Imus' voice. What happens with radio is it kind of sneaks up on you. You don't sit down in front of it as you do with the TV, and turn it on, and attempt to control it with that remote. You're stuck in traffic listening.

So it seeps in, I believe, on a subliminal, almost subconscious level. But good radio is going to bring you up to a conscious level. It's extremely intimate. It's almost as if someone is whispering in your ear. That's the power of it.

Twenty years ago, when this whole shock jock movement had its beginning, AM radio was an outmoded, almost discarded media. But there's still AM radio in automobiles, and it does have an incredible intimacy that I would say is unmatched by any other medium that I can think of. That's its value. That's why progressives cannot cede its territory to the conservatives.

It's often been said that the conservatives got talk radio and the progressives got the Internet. But I don't think you can walk away from talk radio. It is a very powerful medium and it continues to be a medium with millions of hours and tens of millions of listeners who are actively engaged. It's an important battleground.

One other point about victimization – yes, this whole movement was born out of a feeling of outsiders, exclusion, victimization. Rush and the others who followed him succeeded, in part, because he was giving voice to people who felt voiceless and disenfranchised. It's important to recognize that. But his audience of thirteen and a half million people every week are not all horrible, hateful, racist people. They are largely people who are looking for information that they can trust, who feel, as many of us on the progressive side do, distrust of the mainstream media – what we call the corporate media, and they call the drive-by media. We share certain aspects of our analysis.

The real question is, how do we grapple with that under-served audience of people who feel like they've been voiceless – and how do we get them real news and information so that they can then go and make informed decisions on their own to the benefit of our democracy?

Also, it's not really about right or left. There are some really good, really rational conservative talkers out there – a guy like Mike Dowd, for example – I have a lot of respect for because he's a rational individual. He opposed the immigration reform bill. He met with President Bush along with others. He told him it was a mistake. He was going to go after him. But reasonable people can disagree in the political sphere. So this is not some liberal hit job.

Karlin: We have an award called the BuzzFlash Media Putz of the Week, which readers nominate. They're generally Fox re-

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porters or anchors, or one of the ten right-wing hate hosts you've profiled. I feel it is important to consider that so much of what is said is said in a premeditated way for shock value. Ann Coulter says things to be outrageous. She says Timothy McVeigh picked the wrong target. He should have blown up the *New York Times* building. I'm paraphrasing. I also recall her saying that she thought Bill Clinton was a latent homosexual. She was picking her words for shock value, you got the feeling. It runs so counter-intuitive to Bill Clinton's reputation that there's no basis for it. It's just for shock value.

O'Connor: Sure.

Karlin: Chris Matthews said to her, so you're saying Bill Clinton is a latent homosexual. And she said yes. So she's trying to get publicity. There's no other explanation for it.

O'Connor: That's my point. How many times do they put this woman on The Today Show? And then Matt Lauer goes, oh, my God, you can't be really saying this. But please come back tomorrow and say some more of it.

Why? Not only does it boost the ratings of the Today Show, but that little quote also gets disseminated by NBC over the Internet. People come to their website. The buzz begins here. It's covered on NBC Nightly News. And everybody says, oh, my God, did you hear latest outrage by Ann Coulter? So, of course, it's a symbiotic relationship between the mainstream media and the shock jocks and the Ann Coulters of the

world to scratch each other's back in order to sell more product. Coulter sells books. General Electric sells more ads. It works for all of them. But it's not working for our society.

Karlin: There's a word we use on BuzzFlash for a lot of the right-wing hate radio and Fox News, which is demagoguery. But we as human beings obviously have two sides to us. We have our good instincts, that are supportive of other people and inclusive of other people, and we have our most base instincts that go back to our Neanderthal past of being tribal, of killing outsiders, of hating or fearing them.

O'Connor: The reptilian brain.

Karlin: The reptilian brain. It's us against them. And demagoguery obviously played a role during World War II and World War I. It was used by all sides in a way, with propaganda to elicit an emotional response to the other, to "them," to the outsiders. That seems to me to essentially define right-wing radio today. The shock jocks basically say they – the "them" – are hateful. "They're" trying to destroy America. It's about the enemy within – the Democrats. Ann Coulter says this quite frequently – the Democrats are, by their very nature, un-American or anti-American. If you're not of the same mind as Ann Coulter or Rush Limbaugh or Michael Savage, you're like a cancer upon America.

O'Connor: That's why I wrote the book. I had been blogging a lot about this because.

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What I found was I was getting a lot of comments on progressive sites where I post, and often it was to the effect of, why don't you just lighten up? Why are you being so politically correct, Rory? It's just a joke. It's just entertainment.

Moreover, other people would push back even harder and say that was an act of censorship and they thought I should be an advocate for free speech. Why was I trying to shut down the free speech of these people? If I didn't like it, I should just change the channel.

Frankly, what moved me to write the book was my own shock at that type of response from my audience and the progressive side. There were a lot of people who didn't know or didn't care, and smirked about my talking about the public airwaves – that we own these airwaves and I'm not going to put up with it as an owner.

Some people are saying, you make too much of this. He did it once and he apologized. Why do you keep victimizing him? I say we've got a real problem here in America. Ironically, I begin the book by quoting two fairly disparate people. One is Senator Trent Lott, who said that talk radio is ruining America and we have to deal with that problem. And the other is Jon Stewart, who said the CNN program "Crossfire" was hurting America.

I wrote this book because I felt that this is hurting America. I have two sons who

are teenagers, and they look at this stuff. They come to me and say, Dad, what do you make of this? They often end up playing devil's advocate and parrot back some of the media responses. So it's personal for me.

I didn't want to feel I left a legacy for my children of this sort of hateful talk. You stand up and say, look, not in my country. I'm not going to stand here and be silent while you go and dehumanize everyone who disagrees with you.

The reason for that is I've been a journalist for thirty years. I've covered not only this country, a lot of other countries. I've seen what's happened in other countries when the media was used for hateful purposes, and when people didn't stand up. I don't think it's too great a stretch to look at how radio was used in Rwanda where genocide resulted in 800,000 people's deaths.

There's a slippery slope there. Anyone who does truly care about this country can stand up and just say that this is not acceptable. We're not going to put up with it. We're going to do everything we can to call it out and to stop it. That's what led me to write the book.

And I'm going to keep on writing about this. Every time these guys come up with crap, I'm going to call them on it and say it's crap. And I hope the audience will join with me. I think more and more people are coming to the same realization. CT

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