AMERICAN HATE RADIO

How A Powerful Outlet For Democratic Discourse Has Deteriorated Into Hate, Racism And Extremism

A report by the National Hispanic Media Coalition

January 2012
“[Blacks are] 12 percent of the population. Who the hell cares [if they are heard]?”

KFI AM’s The Rush Limbaugh Show¹

“[Mexicans] bring their third-world habits and foul our life.”

KFI AM’s The John and Ken Show²

“So, if we … really enforce our borders and get into euthanasia, for example … and get rid of, let’s say, Armenians…”

KFI AM’s The Bill Handel Show³

Introduction

A century ago, the U.S. military began using radio waves to communicate. In the 1920s, commercial radio emerged to inform and entertain the public. And, despite various innovations that, upon their inceptions, seemed to threaten radio’s viability – film, television, the Internet – even today radio remains the primary way that people consume media, as it reaches 93% percent of Americans each week.⁴ In the 1990s, the news-talk format grew,⁵ and it is now the predominant radio format with almost 1,800 dedicated stations nationwide.⁶

On its face, this is a positive development: news and debate are essential components of this country’s democracy. Indeed, historian and former Federal Communications Commission (“FCC”) Commissioner Michael J. Copps put it best when he said that “the future of our country’s media is an issue that goes to the heart of our democracy. A well-informed electorate is the premise and prerequisite of functioning self-government.”⁷

Presumably, more news and talk radio would further that goal. Yet something sinister and decidedly un-American is happening over many of this country’s public airwaves.

This report sheds light on the prevalence and the dangers of American hate radio. Specifically, it chronicles how hate groups and hate crimes have spiked while hate radio’s popularity and reach have risen. Finally, it examines a microcosm of the prevalence of hate radio, synthesizing hundreds of consumer complaints to the FCC against one station in Southern California, Clear Channel Radio’s KFI AM 640.⁸
The Prevalence And Dangers Of Hate Radio

NHMC has produced significant evidence – in its Petition for Inquiry on Hate Speech in Media, its Comment on the Future of Media and Information Needs of Communities in a Digital Age, and in other documents – that hate against vulnerable groups is pervasive over radio. Since the production of those documents, a 2011 study has found significant incidences of hate speech on radio news-talk programming. The study examined thirty- to forty-minute segments of three popular radio programs:

The Lou Dobbs Show: Mr. Independent,
nationally syndicated by the United Stations Radio Networks

The Savage Nation,
produced at KFMB 760 AM and nationally syndicated by Talk Radio Network

The John & Ken Show,
on Clear Channel Radio’s KFI AM 640, Los Angeles.

In just these three short segments, researchers identified 148 instances of speech targeting a vulnerable group or its supporters, forty-two unsubstantiated claims, thirteen instances of divisive language, and 101 indexical terms related to political nativism. The report noted the particularly troubling nature of unsubstantiated claims on news-talk radio, given that this radio format generally presents information from a journalistic framework that is often associated with fact-based news commentary and expert-driven interviews on topical issues. Finally, the report observed that the recent rise in hate crimes could be an effect of highly volatile news-talk programming.

Hate Radio – Influencing Behaviors And Psychologically Damaging Its Targets

Extensive research exists on the harmful effects of hate speech in media. In a 1993 report, combining the most recent evidence available at that time, the federal government recognized that some people use “telecommunications to convey messages of hate and bigotry that create a hostile environment in which hate crimes may occur,” and that “[i]n some instances, such activities appear to be part of an ongoing strategy to foment violence and unrest.” Further reports and studies have emerged on this topic in the intervening years, demonstrating that hate speech influences society’s behaviors and perceptions, and causes severe psychological damage to its victims, especially teens and children.

Scholars have documented that hate speech influences society’s behaviors and perceptions. Indeed, one study has shown that “bias can be exacerbated or mitigated by the information environments we inhabit,” and that “consuming negative images can exacerbate implicit bias.” Recent history, demonstrates that the media can be harnessed to create an atmosphere of hate that legitimizes violence. In 1994, prior to the Rwandan genocide, radio proved a powerful tool to legitimate the killings. In language strikingly similar to that used by modern day American shock jocks, Rwandan perpetrators were able to validate their message to the masses. Hutu broadcasters used Rwandan radio to: refer to the Tutsi as inyenzi (cockroaches); remark on the inherent differences between Hutu and Tutsi; opine on the cleverness of the Tutsi in infiltration, their cruelty, and their cohesiveness; and to suggest that the Tutsi intended to restore past repression. This method of diatribe may be compared to much of
the anti-immigrant language used over the U.S. airwaves today.

Scholars have also noted the harmful mental and emotional effects that hate speech has on its victims. Because hate speech fosters feelings of inferiority, over time its cumulative impact may produce a society in which race will become “a badge of inferiority and justification for the denial of opportunity and equal treatment.” Victims of hate speech often suffer severe emotional and physiological distress. “Race-based stigmatization is...one of the most fruitful causes of human misery. Poverty can be eliminated – but skin color cannot.” Victims are attacked based on factors that they cannot alter. “The suffering [of a victim of hate speech]... may be aggravated by a consciousness of incurability and even blameworthiness, a self-reproaching which tends to leave the individual still more aware of his loneliness and unwantedness.”

Moreover, the negative images that hate speech creates can be internalized by targeted groups, shaping their identities. Researchers have noted that “accumulating evidence suggests that ethnopalulisms [or ethnic slurs] may serve as a general risk factor for psychological and somatic dysfunction,” as hate speech may influence health “through exclusion, leading to poverty, segregation into unhealthy environments, reduced access to health care, and employment and educational policies that discriminate against stigmatized groups.” In addition, statistics show that ethnic immigrant groups subjected to hate speech are more likely to commit suicide than other groups.

Not surprisingly, children and teenagers are the ones most acutely affected by hate speech. Indeed, it has long been of special concern that the media has a particularly strong influence on children and teenagers since they are not yet fully developed cognitively. Children of surprisingly young ages are shaped by images of race and gender in the media, as children as young as three understand concepts such as race and racism. One study conducted before President Obama took office, found that one in four children thought it was illegal for a woman or person of color to be president, while one in three attributed the lack of female or minority presidents to gender and racial bias. The study also found that one third of children thought members of the excluded groups lacked the skills necessary to hold the office of president, while others expressed the belief that prejudice informed the way adults voted.

**Hate Speech, Hate Groups And Hate Crimes – Their Simultaneous Spike**

As hate radio has escalated to a fever pitch, hate groups and hate crimes targeting vulnerable groups have climbed significantly.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (“SPLC”), there are 1,002 known hate groups operating across the country – including neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klansmen, white nationalists, neo-Confederates, racist skinheads, black separatists, border vigilantes and others. And their numbers are growing. Every U.S. state has at least one known hate group, and most states have many more than one. The number of hate groups in the U.S. has more than doubled since 2000. The five states with the most hate groups are California (68), Texas (59), Florida (49), New Jersey (47) and Mississippi (40). According to SPLC:

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This growth in extremism has been aided by mainstream media figures and politicians who have used their platforms to legitimate false propaganda about immigrants and other minorities and spread the kind of paranoid conspiracy theories on which militia groups thrive.

In 2009, the Department of Homeland Security (“DHS”) released an extremism assessment, reporting that extremists “have adopted the
immigration issue as a call to action, rallying point, and recruiting tool” and that “anti-immigration or strident pro-enforcement fervor has been directed against specific groups.” DHS found that this “has the potential to incite individuals or small groups toward violence.”

Between 2003 and 2007, anti-Latino hate crimes rose by over 40%. Last year alone, hate crimes against Latinos in California increased by nearly 50%. As SPLC reports, “[N]ational hate crime numbers are notoriously sketchy, providing only a rough indication of trends. However, many experts consider California particularly good at reporting hate crimes, so that state’s statistics are considered much more accurate than those in other states.”

While the numbers are artificially skewed across different states based on reporting deficiencies, SPLC also notes that the numbers change drastically depending on how the data is collected:

In a related study—based not on police reports but rather on questionnaires sent to a statistically representative sample of the population—the Department of Justice in June estimated there was an average of about 195,000 hate crime victimizations per year from 2003 to 2009. An earlier DOJ study using the same methodology, considered far more accurate than the hate crime statistics reported to the FBI each year, found an average of 210,000 hate crime victimizations each year between 2000 and 2003.

Data collected directly from individual victims tends to produce a more accurate measure of the incidence of hate crimes, as opposed to data dependent on police reports alone.

On September 1, 2011, John and Ken of Clear Channel Radio’s KFI AM crossed the line. The duo began disparaging immigrants and one immigrant rights activist in particular, Jorge-Mario Cabrera. They repeatedly read Cabrera’s personal cell phone number and encouraged their listeners to call him. Cabrera received almost 500 harassing and threatening calls. One individual called Cabrera over thirty times. Many of the callers referenced John and Ken and repeated their exact words, and then threatened his life and his physical safety. Here are some transcripts of actual calls received:

“What the fuck are you doing? Get the fuck out of our country? You need to fucking go back to Mexico and fix your shit over there. Get the hell out of the United States. This is nothing about racism...and if I ever see you’re ass I’m gonna kick it. Fuck you, you motherfucker, I hope somebody shoots your ass.”

“You illegal immigrant piece of shit, motherfucker. We will do everything to fight you motherfuckers until you’re all dead, you’re all motherfucking dead.”

“Hi this message is for Mr. Cabrera. Listen, you pile of garbage. I hope you get fucking cancer tomorrow and start to die. Your fucking motive is so fucked up. You need to pack your shit up and go back to wherever it is you came from. Nobody wants you here. You are invading the legal people that are in this country and ruining this country. I hope you choke on your own vomit. Better yet, I hope you’re hit by a fucking car crossing across the street, you fucking pile of shit.”

“You’re nothing but a fucking parasite. I fucking hate your kind. John and Ken fucking rock, baby.”
Clear Channel Radio’s KFI AM 640 – A Hate Radio Hotspot

FCC records indicate that, between 2008 and 2011, over 240 consumers filed complaints about KFI’s programming. 196 out of the 240 complaints, or 82%, specifically alleged hate speech or violent speech. All but a handful of these complaints were against shock jocks that continue to regularly pontificate on KFI’s airwaves. The following section summarizes some of the complaints that consumers have filed with the FCC in regards to KFI’s programming:

• A complaint filed in March 2008 alleged that Rush Limbaugh referred to Barack Obama as a “nigger.” The complaint stated, “I heard him literally shout this word on KFI AM 640 in Los Angeles, CA … I have to say, I was more than a little disappointed … to hear your commentator Rush Limbaugh make a veiled reference to Presidential candidate Barack Obama as ‘President Nigger’.”

• Many consumers filed complaints concerning a May 2009 airing of The Bill Handel Show. The complaints were based on the following conversation between Bill Handel and his co-host, Lara Hermanson, relating to the “Armenian” conversation aired earlier in May:

  Bill Handel: “You should be a saint yourself for caring for a group of people like that. What’s next? You want to get rid of the Irish and the Italians? Of course I do.”

  Lara Hermanson: “What the Turks started, Bill will finish.”

• A consumer complaint filed in August 2008 against The John and Ken Show claimed that “on the 4th day of the Democratic Convention … John & Ken were commenting on how they would like to see some ‘Skin head speed freaks’ take a shot at Barack Obama from the rafters at Invesco Field, the site of the Democratic Convention. This among other things said during the program is NOTHING LESS THAN HATE SPEECH!”

• In September 2009, one consumer complained, “It is blatant hate speech/hate crime for Rush Limbaugh to urge his listeners to support segregation of school children on school buses based on their race.”

• Several complaints filed in January 2008 alleged that Rush Limbaugh referred to Barack Obama as a “spade” and Hillary Clinton as a “ho”.
  o One complaint stated, “[t] was obvious that he meant the terms in their most offensive meaning.”
  o Another complaint explained that Rush emphasized the derogatory words as he repeated them.
• A complaint submitted in December 2009 against The John and Ken Show alleged that one of the two co-hosts said that “when he was playing tennis some ‘stupid, illegal alien, leafblower guy’ had blown dust into their tennis game.” The complaint went on to state, “[T]he announcer (John or Ken) wanted to ‘pound him to a pulp with his racket.’ This is hate speech. The announcer suggests that because the worker was Hispanic he was an illegal alien…”

• In September 2011, a consumer complained about Tim Conway, Jr.’s program. The complaint stated that while discussing the DREAM Act, a caller “stated he was prepared to jump in his Suburban and run over Spicks. I attempted to call in and voice my opposition to KFI’s racist obscenities regarding DREAM Act. I was not accepted until I concurred with KFI’s racist rhetoric … Most every program and personality on KFI makes offending and discriminatory slanders about race, creed, color, national origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation, handicap, [and] disability. I have not in my life heard such bigotry as is broadcast on KFI.”

• A consumer complaint from March 2010 about The Bill Handel Show claimed: “This radio personality used the N word (N*GER) over the air describing The Congressional Black Caucus Members of the 111th Congress.”

• A consumer complaint submitted May 2010 alleged that Bill Handel said he refused second row tickets to a Lakers game because he did not want to sit next to a “svartze (…it is the word Jews and Germans use for Ni**er).”

• In August 2011, several people complained that, “John & Ken stated that listeners need to call California state legislators with ‘Latino surnames’ to voice opposition to [DREAM A]ct legislation. They constantly make mention of a ‘Mexican Caucus’ in the California senate. Though I do not support the [DREAM A]ct, John & Ken constantly misrepresent and slant facts often fabricating information creating a hyperbole of non factual situations. John & Ken are racist in their very core fiber and should be kept from the airwaves.”

• In October 2008, one consumer complained about the The Bill Handel Show stating, “… Bill Handel and his other … announcer said that EVERYDAY is a HIT A JEW DAY … PLEASE FIRE HIM.”

In addition to the consumer complaints detailed above, KFI has aired the following derogatory statements:

• In October 2010, Rush Limbaugh said: “But there is no equality. You cannot guarantee that any two people will end up the same and you can’t legislate it, and you can’t make it happen. You can try under the guise of ‘fairness’ … but some people are self-starters, and some people are born lazy, some people are born victims, some people are just born to be slaves….”

• In September 2011, on The John and Ken Show, one of the co-hosts stated: “We have a policy we don’t talk to Spanish TV. There is no good that could come out of that. Of course, we have no audience there … and they are widely absurd in their interpretation of the news, so there is no reason to participate. So you people from the Spanish TV stations, Univision, Telemundo, and whatever Channel 62 is, just stay in your offices don’t come and bother us. We are not talking to you. Ever. We only talk to English speaking stations that have legal residents as viewers … yeah non-Spanish speaking cameras … we don’t do special appearances for the illegal aliens.”
Getting Back To Civil Discourse

Radio voices are still immensely powerful in this country, and many broadcasters are using their airwaves to educate, entertain and inform their listeners. NHMC applauds those broadcasters. Others, however, have adopted hate as a profit model. The people of the United States do not have to stand idly by as some radio pundits trade hate for profits. Just as the First Amendment allows haters to speak, it also allows the majority of Americans, who find hate speech reprehensible, to speak out and demand a better, more accountable media. NHMC’s campaign against The John and Ken Show is just one example of community members raising their voices and demanding better use of the public airwaves. To learn more about NHMC’s work to free the airwaves from hate, and to find out what you can do to stop hate in your community, please visit NHMC’s website at http://www.nhmc.org.
Endnotes


2 YouTube Video, Take John and Ken Off the Air, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqSSMIBb3AM.


8 NHMC conducted extensive research on KFI AM 640 following The John and Ken Show’s transgressions against Jorge-Mario Cabrera. KFI AM 640 was therefore selected as an example of one hate radio hotbed, however, it is only one of hundreds of stations throughout the country that air similar programming.

9 See Petition for Inquiry on Hate Speech in Media of National Hispanic Media Coalition at 7-13 (filed Jan. 28, 2009) (undocketed) (illustrating the pervasive nature of hate speech in media, with numerous examples of hate speech that occurs across a range of media, including broadcast radio); Comment of National Hispanic Media Coalition et al., Future of Media and Information Needs of Communities in a Digital Age, GN Dkt. No. 10-25, filed May 7, 2010; NHMC White Paper: Hate Speech, Incitement and Hate Crimes in the U.S.: January 2004 – August 2011, available at http://www.nhmc.org/sites/default/files/Complete%20Hate%20Speech%20and%20Hate%20Crimes%20List%20June%202011_0.pdf.


11 Id. at 2.

12 Id. at 4. (finding that “[j]ust over two-thirds of targeted statements focused on undocumented immigrants and Latinos (73 of 117), including 4 of 28 instances related to people of color in public office. Averaged on a per program basis, Latinos (both citizen and undocumented) represented 91 percent (43 of 47, including those in public office) of the targeted vulnerable groups on The Lou Dobbs Show, 43 percent (15 of 35) on The Savage Nation, and 43 percent (15 of 35) on The John & Ken Show. The figure for The John & Ken Show is actually higher, since 34 percent (12 of 35) of the targeted statements in this broadcast segment focused on the residents of “South L.A.” (South Central Los Angeles), an area that is roughly 55 percent Latino and 41 percent African American.”).

13 Id. at 6.

14 Id. at 7.

15 Id. at 9.
16 Id. at 10.
17 Id. at 1. (noting that “[n]ationally, hate crimes against Latinos, when compared with hate crimes against other racial/ethnic groups, have risen at the highest rate, with a 25 percent increase between 2004 and 2008 (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2004, 2008). This increase may be linked to the media generated negative discourse against immigrants that has been prevalent on the airwaves. In a 2007 national survey, about 64 percent of U.S. Latinos reported that the immigration debate had negatively impacted their lives, while 78 percent reported feeling that discrimination remained a problem affecting their community (Pew Hispanic Center 2007). “).


20 Id.

21 ALISON DESFORGES, LEAVE NONE TO TELL THE STORY: GENOCIDE IN RWANDA 190-192 (Human Rights Watch 1999).

22 Id. at 54 n.34.


24 Mari J. Matsuda, Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim’s Story, in WORDS THAT WOUND: CRITICAL RACE THEORY, ASSASSINATE SPEECH, AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT 24 (Charles R. Lawrence & Richard Delgado eds.1993); see also Id. at 26 (citing Gordon W. Allport, The Nature of Prejudice 461-78 (1954); Harry H.L. Kitano, RACE RELATIONS 113-14 (1974); Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh & Lawrence D. Bobo, Racial Attitudes in America 137 (1985)).


26 Id. (citing Oliver Cromwell Cox, CASTE, CLASS AND RACE 383 (1948)).


28 Id. at 346. The study was controlled for ethnic group size and the suicide rates in their countries of origin.


31 See Rebecca S. Bitler et al., The Politics of Race and Gender: Children’s Perceptions of Discrimination and the U.S. Presidency, 8 ANALYSES OF SOCIAL ISSUES AND PUBLIC POLICY 83 (2008) (discussing a team of researchers at the Gender and Racial Attitudes Lab at the University of Texas Austin who interviewed 205 children between the ages of five and ten. They questioned the children about their knowledge and beliefs of U.S. presidents).

32 Id. at 106.


35 SPLC Hate Map, supra note 33.


37 SPLC Hate Map, supra note 34.
SPLC Hate and Extremism, supra note 36.


Id.

Id.

Letter from Kurt Schroeder, Deputy Chief, Consumer Policy Division, Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau, to Jessica Gonzalez, Vice President, Policy & Legal Affairs, National Hispanic Media Coalition (Oct. 24, 2011) (on file with the National Hispanic Media Coalition) (“FOIA No. 2011-573”).


Id.

KingofdaWackos, Rush Limbaugh: Some People Are Just Born to be Slaves, YOUTUBE (Oct. 20, 2010), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6cL4HbUc00.

The John and Ken Show (KFI Radio Broadcast Sept. 8, 2011).
Available at

http://www.nhmc.org/hateradio
Our Mission:
NHMC educates and influences media corporations on the importance of including U.S. Latinos at all levels of employment. It challenges media that carelessly exploit negative Latino stereotypes. It scrutinizes and opines on media and telecommunications policy issues before the Federal Communications Commission and in Congress.

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