

So he — we, fiction writers — won't (can't) dare try to use serious art to advance ideologies.³¹ The project would be like Menard's *Quixote*. People would either laugh or be embarrassed for us. Given this (and it is a given), who is to blame for the unseriousness of our serious fiction? The culture, the laughers? But they wouldn't (could not) laugh if a piece of morally passionate, passionately moral fiction was also ingenious and radiantly human fiction. But how to make it that? How — for a writer today, even a talented writer today — to get up the guts to even try? There are no formulas or guarantees. There are, however, models. Frank's books make one of them concrete and alive and terribly instructive.

1996

³¹ We will, of course, without hesitation use art to parody, ridicule, debunk, or criticize ideologies — but this is very different.

HOST

(1)

MR. JOHN ZIEGLER, thirty-seven, late of Louisville's WHAS, is now on the air, "Live and Local," from 10:00 PM to 1:00 AM every weeknight on Southern California's KFI, a 50,000-watt megastation whose hourly ID and sweeper, designed by the station's Imaging

FCC regulations require a station ID to be broadcast every hour. This ID comprises a station's call letters, band and frequency, and the radio market it's licensed to serve. Just about every serious commercial station (which KFI very much is) appends to its ID a sweeper, which is the little tagline by which the station wishes to be known. KABC, the other giant AM talk station in Los Angeles, deploys the entendre-rich "Where America Comes First." KFI's own main sweeper is "More *Stimulating* Talk Radio," but it's also got secondary sweepers that it uses to intro the half-hour news, traffic updates at seventeen and forty-six past the hour, and station promos. "Southern California's Newsroom," "The Radio Home of Fox News," and

"When You See News Break, Don't Try to Fix It Yourself — Leave That to Professionals" are the big three that KFI's running this spring. The content and sound of all IDs, sweepers, and promos are the responsibility of the station's Imaging department, apparently so named because they involve KFI's image in the LA market. Imaging is sort of the radio version of branding — the sweepers let KFI communicate its special personality and 'tude in a compressed way.

There are also separate, subsidiary taglines that KFI develops specially for its local programs. The main two they're using for the *John Ziegler Show* so far are "Live and Local" and "Hot, Fresh Talk Served Nightly."

department and featuring a gravelly basso whisper against licks from Ratt's '84 metal classic "Round and Round," is: "KFI AM-640, Los Angeles — More *Stimulating* Talk Radio." This is either the eighth or ninth host job that Mr. Ziegler's had in his talk radio career, and far and away the biggest. He moved out here to LA over Christmas — alone, towing a U-Haul — and found an apartment not far from KFI's studios, which are in an old part of the Koreatown district, near Wilshire Center.

The whisperer turns out to be one Chris Corley, a voiceover actor best known for movie trailers. Corley's C² Productions is based in Ft. Myers FL.

The *John Ziegler Show* is the first local, nonsyndicated late-night program that KFI has aired in a long time. It's something of a gamble for everyone involved. 10:00–1:00 qualifies as late at night in Southern California, where hardly anything reputable's open after nine.

It is currently right near the end of the program's second segment on the evening of May 11, 2004, shortly after Nicholas Berg's taped beheading by an al-Qaeda splinter in Iraq. Dressed, as is his custom, for golf, and wearing a white billed cap w/ corporate logo, Mr. Ziegler is seated by himself in the on-air studio, surrounded by monitors and sheaves of Internet printouts. He is trim, clean-shaven, and handsome in the bland way that top golfers and local

(By the standards of the US radio industry, this makes him almost movie-star gorgeous.)

TV newsmen tend to be. His eyes, which off-air are usually flat and unhappy, are alight now with passionate conviction. Only some of the studio's monitors concern Mr. Z.'s own program; the ones up near the ceiling take muted, closed-caption feeds from

Fox News, MSNBC, and what might be C-SPAN. To his big desk's upper left is a wall-mounted digital clock that counts down seconds. His computer monitors' displays also show the exact time.

Across the soundproof glass of the opposite wall, another monitor in the Airmix room is running an episode of *The Simpsons*, also muted, which both the board op and call screener are watching with half an eye.

Pendent in front of John Ziegler's face, attached to the same type of hinged, flexible stand as certain student desk lamps, is a Shure-brand broadcast microphone that is sheathed in a gray foam filtration sock to soften popped p's and hissed sibilants. It is into this microphone that the host speaks:

"And I'll tell you why — it's because we're *better* than they are."

A Georgetown BA in Government and Philosophy, scratch golfer, former TV sportscaster, possible world-class authority on the O.J. Simpson trial, and sometime contributor to MSNBC's *Scarborough Country*, Mr. Ziegler is referring here to America versus what he terms "the Arab world." It's near the end of his "churn," which is the industry term for a host's opening monologue, whose purpose is both to introduce a show's nightly topics and to get listeners emotionally stimulated enough that they're drawn into the program and don't switch away. More than any other mass medium, radio enjoys a captive audience — if only because so many of the listeners are driving — but in a major market there are dozens of AM stations to listen to, plus of course FM and satellite radio, and even a very seductive and successful station rarely gets more than a 5 or 6 percent audience share.

"We're not perfect, we suck a lot of the time, but we are *better* as a people, as a culture, and as a society than they are, and we need to recognize that, so that we can possibly even *begin* to deal with the evil that we are facing."

When he's impassioned, Mr. Z.'s voice rises and his arms wave around (which obviously only those in the Airmix room can see). He also fidgets, bobs slightly up and down in his executive desk chair, and weaves. Although he must stay seated and can't pace around the room, the host does not have to keep his mouth any set distance from the microphone, since the board op, 'Mondo Hernandez, can adjust his levels on the mixing board's channel 7 so that Mr. Z.'s volume always stays in range and never peaks or fades. 'Mondo, whose price for letting outside parties hang around Airmix is one large bag of cool-ranch Doritos per evening, is an

Prophet is the special OS for KFI's computer system — "like Windows for a radio station," according to Mr. Ziegler's producer.

immense twenty-one-year-old man with a ponytail, stony Meso-american features, and the placid, grandmotherly eyes common to giant mammals everywhere. Keeping the studio signal from peaking is one of 'Mondo's prime directives, along with making

sure that each of the program's scheduled commercial spots is loaded into Prophet and run at just the

right time, where-

"Analog" is slightly misleading, because in fact KFI's signal is digitized for transmission from the studio down to the transmitter facility in La Mirada, where it's then converted back to analog for broadcast. But it is true that AM signals are more limited, quality-wise, than FM. The FCC prohibits AM signal frequencies of more than 10,000 kilohertz, whereas FM signals get 15,000 kHz — mainly because the AM part of the electromagnetic spectrum is more crowded than the FM part.

'Mondo's lay explanation of what peaking is consists of pointing at the red area to the right of the two volumeters' bobbing needles on the mixing board: "It's when the needles go into the red." The overall mission, apparently, is to keep the volume and resonance of a host's voice high enough to be stimulating but not so high that they exceed the capacities of an AM analog signal or basic radio receiver. One reason why callers' voices sound so much less rich and authoritative than hosts' voices on talk radio is that it is harder to keep telephone voices from peaking.

upon he must confirm that the ad has run as scheduled in the special Airmix log he signs each page of, so that the station can bill advertisers for their spots. 'Mondo, who started out two years ago as an unpaid intern and now earns ten dollars an hour, works 7:00–1:00 on weeknights and also board-ops KFI's special cooking show on Sunday mornings.

Another reason is mike processing, which evens and fills out the host's voice, removing raspy or metallic tones, and occurs automatically in Airmix. There's no such processing for callers' voices.

In the unlikely event of further interest, here is a simplified version of the technical path taken by Mr. Z.'s voice during broadcast: Through channel 7 of 'Mondo's board and the wall of processors, levelers, and compressors in Airmix, through the Eventide BD-980 delayer and Aphex compellor in KFI's master control room, through a duo of Moseley 6000-series digital encoders and to the microwave transmitter on the roof, whence it is beamed at 951.5 MHz to the repeater-site antenna on Briarcrest Peak in the Hollywood Hills, then beamed from the repeater at 943.5 MHz to KFI's forties-era transmitter in Orange County, where its signal is decoded by more Moseley 6000s, further processed and modulated and brought up to maximum legal frequency, and pumped up KFI's 757-foot main antenna, whose 50,000 watts cost \$6,000 a month in electricity and cause phones in a five-mile radius to play ghostly KFI voices whenever the weather's just right.

As long as he's kept under forty hours a week, which he somehow always just barely is, the station is not obliged to provide 'Mondo with employee benefits.

The Nick Berg beheading and its Internet video compose what is known around KFI as a "Monster," meaning a story that has both high news value and tremendous emotional voltage. As is SOP in political talk radio, the emotions most readily accessed are anger, outrage, indignation, fear, despair, disgust, contempt, and a certain kind of apocalyptic glee,¹ all of which the Nick Berg thing's got in spades. Mr. Ziegler, whose program is in only its fourth month at KFI, has been fortunate in that 2004 has already been chock-full of Monsters — Saddam's capture, the Abu Ghraib scandal, the Scott Peterson murder trial, the Greg Haidl gang-rape trial, and preliminary hearings in the rape trial of Kobe Bryant. But tonight is the most angry, indignant, disgusted, and impassioned that Mr. Z.'s

Here is a sample bit of "What the *John Ziegler Show* Is All About," a long editorial intro to the program that Mr. Ziegler delivered snippets of over his first several nights in January:

The underlying premise of the *John Ziegler Show* is that, thanks to its socialistic leanings, incompetent media, eroding moral foundation, aging demographics, and undereducated masses, the United States, as we know it, is doomed. In my view, we don't know how much longer we still have to enjoy it, so we shouldn't waste precious moments constantly worrying or complaining about it. However, because not everyone in this country is yet convinced of this seemingly obvious reality, the show does see merit in pointing out or documenting the demise of our nation and will take great pains to do so. And because most everyone can agree that there is value in attempting to delay the sinking of the *Titanic* as long as possible, whenever feasible the *John Ziegler Show* will attempt to do its part to plug whatever holes in the ship it can. With that said, the show realizes that, no matter how successful it (or anyone else) may be in slowing the downfall of our society, the final outcome is still pretty much inevitable, so we might as well have a good time watching the place fall to pieces.

Be advised that the intro's stilted, term-paperish language, which looks kind of awful in print, is a great deal more effective when the spiel is delivered out loud — the stiffness gives it a slight air of self-mockery that keeps you from being totally sure just how seriously John Ziegler takes what he's saying. Meaning he gets to have it both ways. This half-pretend pretension, which is ingenious in all sorts of ways, was pioneered in talk radio by Rush Limbaugh, although with Limbaugh the semi-self-mockery is more tonal than syntactic.

gotten on-air so far, and the consensus in Airmix is that it's resulting in some absolutely first-rate talk radio.

John Ziegler, who is a talk radio host of unflagging industry, broad general knowledge, mordant wit, and extreme conviction, makes rather a specialty of media criticism. One object of his disgust and contempt in the churn so far has been the US networks' spineless, patronizing decision not to air the Berg videotape and thus to deny Americans "a true and accurate view of the barbarity, the utter *depravity*, of these people." Even more outrageous, to Mr. Z., is the mainstream media's lack of outrage about Berg's taped murder versus all that same media's hand-wringing and invective over the recent photos of alleged prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, which he views as a clear indication of the deluded, blame-America-first mentality of the US press. It is an associated contrast between Americans' mortified response to the Abu Ghraib photos and reports of the Arab world's phlegmatic reaction to the Berg video that leads to his churn's climax, which is that we are plainly, unambiguously better than the Arab world — whereupon John Ziegler invites listeners to respond if they are so moved, repeats the special mnemonic KFI call-in number, and breaks for the :30 news and ads, on time to the second, as 'Mondo takes ISDN feed from Airwatch and the program's associate producer and call screener, Vince Nicholas — twenty-six and hiply bald — pushes back from his console and raises both arms in congratulation, through the glass.

It goes without saying that there are all different kinds of stimulation. Depending on one's politics, sensitivities, and tastes in

ISDN, in which the *D* stands for "Digital," is basically a phone line of very high quality and expense. ISDN is the main way that stations take feed for syndicated programs from companies like Infinity Broadcasting, Premiere Radio Networks, etc. KFI has its own News department, but on nights and weekends it uses a service called Airwatch that provides off-hour news and traffic for stations in the LA area. When, at :17 and :46 every hour, Mr. Z. intros a report from "Alan LaGreen in the KFI Traffic Center," it's really Alan LaGreen of Airwatch, who's doing traffic reports for different stations at different times all hour and has to be very careful to give the right call letters for the Traffic Center he's supposedly reporting from.

argumentation, it is not hard to think of objections to John Ziegler's climactic claim, or at least of some urgent requests for clarification. Like: Exactly what and whom does "the Arab world" refer to? And why are a few editorials and televised man-on-the-street interviews sufficient to represent the attitude and character of a whole diverse region? And why is al-Jazeera's showing of the Berg video so awful if Mr. Z. has just castigated the US networks for *not* showing it? Plus, of course, what is "better" supposed to mean here? More moral? More diffident about our immorality? Is it not, in our own history, pretty easy to find some Berg-level atrocities committed by US nationals, or agencies, or even governments, and approved by much of our populace? Or perhaps this: Leaving aside whether John Ziegler's assertions are true or coherent, is it even remotely helpful or productive to make huge, sweeping claims about some other region's/culture's inferiority to us? What possible effect can such remarks have except to incite hatred? Aren't they sort of irresponsible?

It is true that no one on either side of the studio's thick window expresses or even alludes to any of these objections. But this is not because Mr. Z.'s support staff is stupid, or hateful, or even necessarily on board with sweeping jingoistic claims. It is because they understand the particular codes and imperatives of large-market talk radio. 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. That is not to say that the host would not defend his "We're better" — strenuously — or that he does not believe it's true. It is to say that he has exactly

It is maybe more significant that not one of the listeners who call in tonight and wait on hold for ten, twenty, or in one case forty-plus minutes to respond to John Ziegler has any problem with his assertions of Arab inferiority. And this is not (unlike Rush's call-screening protocols) just a matter of whom Vince and Mr. Z. allow on the air. Vince's screening conversations with callers are clearly audible in the Airmix room — even the ones who don't get through agree; or, if they disagree, it's that they don't think the comparison goes far enough.

one on-air job, and that is to be stimulating. An obvious point, but it's one that's often overlooked by people who complain about propaganda, misinformation, and irresponsibility in commercial talk radio. Whatever else they are, the above-type objections to "We're better than the Arab world" are calls to accountability. They

See, e.g., Mr. John Kobylt, of KFI's top-rated afternoon *John & Ken Show*, in a recent *LA Times* profile: "The truth is, we do everything for ratings. Yes, that's our job. I can show you the contract. . . . This is not *Meet the Press*. It's not the *Jim Lehrer NewsHour*."

are the sorts of criticisms one might make of, say, a journalist, someone whose job description includes being responsible about what he says in public. And KFI's John Ziegler is not a journalist — he is an entertainer. Or maybe it's better to say that he is part of

Or you could call it atavistic, a throwback to the days before Joseph Pulitzer started warning everyone that "A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself." The truth is that what we think of as objectivity in journalism has been a standard since only the 1900s, and mainly in the US. Have a look at some European dailies sometime.

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,

KFI management's explanation of "stimulating" is apposite, if a bit slippery. Following is an excerpted transcript of a mid-May Q&A with Ms. Robin Bertolucci, the station's intelligent, highly successful, and sort of hypnotically intimidating Program Director. (The haphazard start is because the interviewing skills behind the Q parts are marginal; the excerpt gets more interesting as it goes along.)

Q: Is there some compact way to describe KFI's programming philosophy?

A: "What we call ourselves is 'More *Stimulating* Talk Radio.'"

Q: Pretty much got that part already.

A: "That is the slogan that we try to express every minute on the air. Of being stimulating. Being informative, being entertaining, being energetic, being dynamic . . . The way we do it is a marriage of information and stimulating entertainment."

Q: What exactly is it that makes information entertaining?

A: "It's attitudinal, it's emotional."

Q: Can you explain this attitudinal component?

A: "I think '*stimulating*' really sums it up. It's what we really try to do."

Q: [Strangled frustration-noises.]

A: "Look, our station logo is in orange and black, and white — it's a stark, aggressive look. I think that typifies it. The attitude. A little in-your-face. We're not . . . stodgy."

and responsibility that make trying to tell the truth such a drag for everyone involved. It is a frightening industry, though not for any of the simple reasons most critics give.

Distributed over two walls of KFI's broadcast studio, behind the monitors and clocks, are a dozen promotional KFI posters, all in the station's eye-catching Halloween colors against the sweeper's bright white. On each poster, the word "Stimulating" is both italicized and underscored. Except for the door and soundproof window, the entire studio is lined in acoustic tile with strange Pol-

KFI has large billboards at traffic nodes all over metro Los Angeles with the same general look and feel, although the billboards often carry both the sweeper and extra tag phrases: "Raving Infomaniacs," "The Death of Ignorance," "The Straight Poop," and (against a military-camouflage background) "Intelligence Briefings."

lockian patterns of tiny holes. Much of the tile is grayed and decaying, and the carpet's no color at all; KFI has been in this facility for nearly thirty years and will soon be moving out. Both the studio and Airmix are kept chilly because of all the electronics. The overhead

lights are old inset fluorescents, the kind with the slight flutter to them; nothing casts any sort of shadow. On one of the studio walls is also pinned the special set of playing cards distributed for last year's invasion of Iraq, these now with hand-drawn Xs over the faces of those Baathists captured or killed so far. The great

L-shaped table that Mr. Z. sits at nearly fills the little room; it's got so many coats

The Airmix room's analogue to the cards is a bumper sticker next to the producer's station:
WHO WOULD THE FRENCH VOTE FOR?
— AMERICANS FOR BUSH

of brown paint on it that the tabletop looks slightly humped. At the L's base is another Shure microphone, used by Ken Chiampou of 3:00–7:00's *John & Ken*, its hinged stand now partly folded up so that the mike hangs like a wilted flower. The oddest thing about the studio is a strong scent of decaying bananas, as if many cast-off peels or even whole bananas were rotting in the room's wastebaskets, none of which look to have been emptied anytime recently.

(He never leaves his chair during breaks, for example, not even to use the restroom.)

Mr. Ziegler, who has his ascetic side, drinks only bottled water in the studio, and absolutely never snacks, so there is no way he is the source of the banana smell.

It is worth considering the strange media landscape in which political talk radio is a salient. Never before have there been so many different national news sources — different now in terms of both medium and ideology. Major newspapers from anywhere are available online; there are the broadcast networks plus public TV, cable's CNN, Fox News, CNBC, et al., print and Web magazines, Internet bulletin boards, *The Daily Show*, e-mail newsletters, blogs. All this is well-known; it's part of the Media Environment we live in. But there are some very odd prices and ironies here. One is that the increasing control of US mass media by a mere handful of corporations has created a situation of extreme fragmentation, a kaleidoscope of information options. Another is that the ever-increasing number of ideologically based news outlets creates pre-

Both on- and off-air, Mr. Ziegler avows that "the fragmentation [of US news media] is a big factor in the destruction of America. There's now so many places they [= politicians and public figures] can go, why go anyplace that's going to ask the real questions?"

cisely the kind of relativism that cultural conservatives decry, a kind of epistemic free-for-all in which "the truth" is wholly a matter of perspective and agenda. In

some respects all this variety is probably good, productive of difference and dialogue and so on. But it can also be confusing and stressful for the average citizen. Short of signing on to a particular mass ideology and patronizing only those partisan news sources that ratify what you want to believe,

(Again, though, it's not as if viciously partisan news is new, historically speaking — see, e.g., the battles between Hearst- and Pulitzer-controlled newspapers in the late 1800s.)

EDITORIAL ASIDE It's hard to understand Fox News tags like "Fair and Balanced," "No-Spin Zone," and "We Report, You Decide" as anything but dark jokes, ones that delight the channel's conservative audience precisely because their claims to objectivity so totally enrage liberals, whose own literal interpretation of the taglines then makes the left seem dim, humorless, and stodgy.

it is increasingly hard to determine which sources to pay attention to and how exactly to distinguish real information from spin.

EDITORIAL CONTENT Of course, this is assuming you believe that information and spin are different things — and one of the dangers of partisan news’s metastasis is the way it enables the conviction that the two aren’t really distinct at all. Such a conviction, if it becomes endemic, alters democratic discourse from a “battle of ideas” to a battle of sales pitches for ideas (assuming, again, that one chooses to distinguish ideas from pitches, or actual guilt/innocence from lawyers’ arguments, or binding commitments from the mere words “I promise,” and so on and so forth).

This fragmentation and confusion have helped give rise to what’s variously called the “meta-media” or “explaining industry.” Under most taxonomies, this category includes media critics for

news dailies, certain high-end magazines, panel shows like CNN’s *Reliable Sources*, media-watch blogs like instapundit.com and talkingpointsmemo.com, and a large percentage of political talk radio. It is no acci-

N.B.: In a recent and very astute political-culture study called *Sore Winners*, the *LA Weekly*’s John Powers comes at the problem from a slightly different angle: “Just as the proliferation of blurbs in movie ads has made all critics appear to be idiots or flacks, so the rabbitlike proliferation of news sources — many of them slipshod, understaffed, or insanely partisan — has inevitably devalued the authority of any individual source.”

dent that one of the signature lines Mr. Ziegler likes to deliver over his opening bumper music at :06 is “. . . the show where we take a look at the news of the day, we provide you the facts, and then we give you the truth.” For this is how much of 2004’s political talk radio understands its function: to explore the day’s news in a depth and detail that other media do not, and to interpret, analyze, and explain that news.

Granted, most political talk radio shows include non-news stuff, often personal elements designed to help develop a host’s on-air persona and heighten the listener’s sense of a relationship with a real person. On the *John Ziegler Show*, Mr. Z. often talks about his past jobs and personal travails, and has a periodic “Ask John Anything” feature whose title is self-explanatory. The modifier “political” is mostly meant to exclude certain kinds of specialty talk radio, such as Dave Ramsey’s syndicated program on personal finance, Kim Komando’s computer advice show, Dr. Dean Edell, Howard Stern, etc.

Which all sounds great, except of course

“explaining” the news really means editorializing, infusing the actual events of the day with the host’s own opinions. And here is

Quick sample intros: Mike Gallagher, a regular Fox News contributor whose program is syndicated by Salem Radio Network, has an upcoming book called *Surrounded by Idiots: Fighting Liberal Lunacy in America*. Neal Boortz, who's carried by Cox Radio Syndication and JRN, bills himself as "High Priest of the Church of the Painful Truth," and his recent ads in trade publications feature the quotation "How can we take airport security seriously until ethnic profiling is not only permitted, but *encouraged*?"

where the real controversy starts, because these opinions are, as just one person's opinions, exempt from strict journalistic standards of truthfulness, probity, etc., and yet they are often delivered by the talk radio host

not as opinions but as revealed truths, truths intentionally ignored or suppressed by a "mainstream media" that's "biased" in favor of liberal interests. This is, at any rate, the rhetorical template for Rush Limbaugh's program, on which most syndicated and large-market political talk radio is modeled, from ABC's Sean Hannity and Talk Radio Network's Laura Ingraham to G. G. Liddy, Rusty Humphries, Michael Medved, Mike Gallagher, Neal Boortz, Dennis

Prager, and, in many respects, Mr. John Ziegler.

PURELY INFORMATIVE It's true that there are, in some large markets and even syndication, a few political talk radio hosts who identify as moderate or liberal. The best known of these are probably Ed Schultz, Thom Hartmann, and Doug Stephan. But only a few, and only Stephan has anything close to a national audience. And the tribulations of Franken et al.'s Air

(whose show is really only semi-political)

America venture are well-known. The point is that it is neither inaccurate nor unfair to say that today's political talk radio is, in general, overwhelmingly conservative.

It is not that all these hosts are what Limbaugh's become and Hannity's been from the beginning: wholly owned subsidiaries of the Republican Party, far more interested in partisan politics than in any battle of ideas. But it's fair to say that all these other pro-

grams present the listener with the same basic problem as EIB and Hannitization, which is that they profess to be explaining and aiding interpretation by stripping away

(Just on general principles, Michael Savage is not going to be included or referred to in any way, ever.)

ideology but are in fact promulgating ideology, offering nothing more than

Mr. Z. identifies himself as a Libertarian, though he's not a registered member of the Libertarian Party because he feels they "can't get their act together," which he does not seem to intend as a witticism.

(and to the DNC, and to progressive PACs, and political scientists, and psephologists)

a particular political slant on the news, and claiming — as gifted spinners always claim — that it's not they but the Other

Side who are spinning and slanting and promoting an agenda. The result is to make whatever we decide to call “the news” even more diffuse and confusing — unless, again, the listener happens to share the hosts’ politics, in which case what political talk radio offers is just a detailed, stimulating confirmation of stuff that the listener already believes.

The numbers here are based on 2003 Arbitron weekly Cume figures for listeners 12+. (Explanations of the jargon are coming up.)

With some 1,400 US stations now broadcasting talk radio, with 14.5 million regular listeners to Limbaugh and 11 million to Hannity, 2.5 million each to Boortz and Gallagher, and well over a million each day to Liddy, Humphries, Medved, and Ingraham, part of what is so unsettling to liberals and moderates is that it's unclear whether (a) political talk radio is merely serving up right-wingers their daily ration of red meat, or (b) it's functioning as pro-

NON-EDITORIAL ASIDE One clear way that talk radio and conservative cable do affect politics: repetition. Which they're really, really good at. If a story, allegation, or factoid gets sufficiently hammered on in the conservative media, over and over and day after day, it is almost inevitable that the mainstream press will pick it up, if only because it eventually becomes real news that the conservative media is making such heavy weather of the item. In many cases, the “Conservative commentators are charging that . . .” part then drops off the item (if only because it's unsexy jot-and-tittle clutter compared to the charge itself), and the story takes on a life of its own.

paganda that causes undecided listeners to become more conservative because the hosts are such seductive polemicists, or (c)

both. It's known that talk radio played a big part in keeping the Whitewater and Lewinsky scandals alive

long enough to hamstring the Clinton presidency, and that hosts' steady iteration of exaggerated stories about Al Gore's supposed Internet-invention and *Love Story* claims did damage to his

candidacy. It's known that the vastly increased popularity of talk radio over the past decade coincides with the growth and mobilization of the GOP's right wing, with the proliferation of par-

That certain systemic vices of our mainstream press (e.g., laziness, cupidity) are partly responsible for the success of this tactic seems too obvious to belabor.

tisan media, with the alliance of neoconservatism and evangelical Christianity, and with what seems like the overnight disappearance

Forget the sixties: One would have to go back to Hamiltonian Federalists vs. Jeffersonian Democratic-Republicans c. 1800 to find this kind of bilateral venom.

of restraint, tolerance, and civility — even a pretense of mutual respect — in US political discourse. It's known that 58 percent of talk radio listeners earn more than \$50,000 a year, that 34 percent of those listeners over twenty-five are college graduates, and that political talk radio's audience is more likely to vote than people who listen to other kinds of radio formats. What's not known is what any of this really means.

(... though opinions abound, e.g.:)

One of the more plausible comprehensive theories is that political talk radio is one of several important “galvanizing venues” for the US right. This theory's upshot is that talk radio functions as a kind of electronic town hall meeting where passions can be inflamed and arguments honed under the loquacious tutelage of the hosts. What's compelling about this sort of explanation is not just its eschewal of simplistic paranoia about disinformation/agitprop (comparisons of Limbaugh and Hannity to Hitler and Goebbels are dumb, unhelpful, and easy for conservatives to make fun of), but the fact that it helps explain what is a deeper, much more vexing mystery for nonconservatives. This mystery is why the right is now where the real energy is in US political life, why the conservative message seems so much more straightforward and stimulating, why they're all having so much more goddamn *fun* than the left of the *Times* and *The Nation* and NPR and the DNC. It seems reasonable to say that political talk radio is part of either a fortuitous set of circumstances or a wildly successful strategy for bringing a large group of like-minded citizens together, uniting them in a coherent set of simple ideas, energizing them, and inciting them to political action. That the US left enjoyed this sort of energized coalescence in the 1960s and '70s but has (why not admit the truth?) nothing like it now is what lends many of the left's complaints about talk radio a bitter, whiny edge ... which edge the right has even more fun laughing at, and which the theory can also account for.

VERY EDITORIAL Is this the really maddening question for anyone else sitting out here watching it all? Why is conservatism so hot right now? What accounts for its populist draw? It can't just be 9/11; it predates 9/11. But since just when has the right been so energized? Has there really been some reactionary Silent Majority out there for decades, frustrated but atomized, waiting for an inciting spark? If so, was Ronald Reagan that spark? But there wasn't this kind of right-wing populist verve to the Reagan eighties. Did it start with Gingrich's rise to Speaker, or with the intoxicating hatred of all things Clinton? Or has the country as a whole just somehow moved so far right that hard-core conservatism now feeds, stormlike, on the hot vortical energy of the mainstream?

Or is it the opposite — that the US has moved so far and so fast toward cultural permissiveness that we've reached a kind of apsidal point? It might be instructive to try seeing things from the perspective of, say, a God-fearing

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hard-working rural-Midwestern military vet. It's not that hard. Imagine gazing through his eyes at the world of MTV and the content of video games, at the gross sexualization of children's fashions, at Janet Jackson flashing her aureole on what's supposed to be a holy day. Imagine you're him having to explain to your youngest what oral sex is and what it's got to do with a US president. Ads for penis enlargers and Hot Wet Sluts are popping up out of nowhere on your family's computer. Your kids' school is teaching them WWII and Vietnam in terms of Japanese internment and the horrors of My Lai. Homosexuals are demanding holy matrimony; your doctor's moving away because he can't afford the lawsuit insurance; illegal aliens want driver's licenses; Hollywood elites are bashing America and making millions from it; the president's ridiculed for reading his Bible; priests are diddling kids left and right. Shit, the country's been *directly attacked*, and people aren't supporting our commander in chief.

Assume for a moment that it's not silly to see things this man's way. What cogent, compelling, relevant message can the center and left offer him? Can we bear to admit that we've actually helped set him up to hear "We're *better* than they are" not as twisted and scary but as refreshing and redemptive and true? If so, then now what?



(In the real Midwest, this word is pronounced with a long *i*.)

"Spot load" is the industry term for the number of minutes per hour given over to commercials. The point of the main-text sentence is that a certain percentage of the spots that run on KFI from nine to noon are Rush's/PRN's commercials, and they are the ones who get paid by the advertisers. The exact percentages and distributions of local vs. syndicator's commercials are determined by what's called "the Clock," which is represented by a pie-shaped distribution chart that Ms. Bertolucci has on file but will show only a very quick glimpse of, since the spot-load apportionments for syndicated shows in major markets involve complex negotiations between the station and the syndicator, and KFI regards its syndicated Clocks as proprietary info — management doesn't want other stations to know what deals they've cut with PRN.

KFI AM-640 carries Rush Limbaugh's program every weekday, 9:00 AM to noon, via live ISDN feed from Premiere Radio Networks, which is one of the dozen syndication networks that own talk radio shows so popular that it's worth it for local stations to air them even though it costs the stations a portion of their spot load'. The same goes for Dr. Laura Schlessinger, who's based in Southern California and used to broadcast her syndicated show from KFI until the mid-nineties, when Premiere built its own LA facility and

In White Star Productions' *History of Talk Radio* video, available at better libraries everywhere, there is footage of Dr. Laura doing her show right here at KFI, although she's at a mike in what's now the Airmix room — which according to 'Mondo used to be the studio, with what's now the studio serving as Airmix. (Why they switched rooms is unclear, but transferring all the gear must

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have been a serious hassle.) In the video, the little gray digital clock propped up counting seconds on Dr. Laura's desk is the same one that now counts seconds on the wall to Mr. Ziegler's upper left in the studio — i.e., it's the very same clock — which not only is strangely thrilling but also further testifies to KFI's thriftiness about capital expenses.

was able to offer Schlessinger more sumptuous digs. Dr. Laura airs M–F from noon to 3:00 on KFI. Besides 7:00–10:00 PM's Phil Hendrie (another KFI host whose show went into national syndication, and who now has his own private dressing room and studio over at Premiere), the only other weekday syndication the station uses is *Coast to Coast with George Noory*, which covers and analyzes news of the paranormal throughout the wee hours.

Whatever the social effects of talk radio or the partisan agendas of certain hosts, it is a fallacy that political talk radio is motivated by ideology. It is not. Political talk radio is a business, and it is motivated by revenue. The conservatism that dominates today's AM airwaves does so because it generates high Arbitron ratings, high ad rates, and maximum profits.

The persistence of this fallacy among left-wing opponents of talk radio is extraordinary — it's actually one of the main premises behind the Air America launch. As summarized by *The Public Interest's* William G. Mayer, the usual claim here is that right-wing radio is "owned by large, profit-hungry corporations or wealthy, profit-driven individuals, who use their companies to push a conservative, pro-capitalist agenda." Mayer's analysis also identifies the gross economic illogic of this claim. Suppose that I am the conservative and rabidly capitalist owner of a radio company. I believe that free-market conservatism is Truth and that the US would be better off in every way if everybody were conservative. This, for me, makes conservatism a "public good" in the Intro Econ sense of the term — i.e., a conservative electorate is a public good in the same way that a clean environment or a healthy populace is a public good. And the same basic economics that explains corporate contributions to air pollution and obesity explains why my radio company has zero incentive to promote the public good of conservatism. Because the time and money my one company would spend trying to spread the Truth would yield (at best) only a tiny increase in the conservatism of the whole country — and yet the advantages of that increased conservatism would be shared by everyone, including my radio competitors, even though they wouldn't have put themselves out one bit to help shift public opinion. In other words, I alone would have paid for a benefit that my competition could also enjoy, free. All of which plainly would not be good business . . . which is why it is actually in my company's best interests to "under-invest" in promulgating ideology.

Coast to Coast used to start at 10:00 PM and run all through the night, which involved rebroadcasting certain hours of the show from 2:00 to 5:00 AM. KFI's big experiment this year began with moving Noory's program back to a 1:00 AM start and cutting the rebroadcast, leaving the 10:00–1:00 slot open for a Live and Local show.

Radio has become a more lucrative business than most people know. Throughout most of the past decade, the industry's revenues have increased by more than 10 percent a year. The average cash-flow margin for major radio companies is now 40

(Plus it eliminated limits on the number of different markets a company could enter.)

percent, compared to more like 15 percent for large TV networks; and the mean price paid for a radio station has gone from eight to more than thirteen times cash flow. Some of this extreme

Clear Channel bought KFI — or rather the radio company that owned KFI — sometime around 2000. It's all a little fuzzy, because it appears that Clear Channel actually bought, or absorbed, the radio company that had just bought KFI from another radio company, or something like that.

profitability, and thus the structure of the industry, is due to the 1996 Federal Telecommunications Act, which allowed radio companies to acquire up to eight stations in a given market and to control as

much as 35 percent of a market's total ad revenues. The emergence of huge, dominant radio conglomerates like Clear Channel and Infinity is a direct consequence of the '96 Act (which the FCC, aided by the very conservative DC Court of Appeals, has lately tried to make even more permissive). And these radio conglomerates enjoy not just substantial economies of scale but almost unprecedented degrees of business integration.

KFI's local talk rival, KABC, is owned by Disney.

Example: Clear Channel Communications Inc. now owns KFI¹ AM-640, plus two other AM stations and five FMs in the Los

Angeles market. It also owns Premiere Radio Networks. It also turns out to own the Airwatch news/traffic service.

It turns out that one of the reasons its old Koreatown studios are such a latrine is that KFI's getting ready to move very soon to a gleaming new complex in Burbank that will house five of Clear Channel's stations and allow them to share a lot of cutting-edge technical equipment and software. Some of the reasons for the consolidation involve AM radio's complex, incremental move from analog to digital broadcast, a move that's a lot more economical if stations can be made to share equipment. The Burbank hub facility will also feature a new and improved mega-Prophet OS that all five stations can use and share files on, which for KFI means convenient real-time access to all sorts of new preloaded bumper music and sound effects and bites.

And it designs and manufactures Prophet, the KFI operating system, which is state-of-the-art and much too expensive for most independent stations. All told, Clear Channel currently owns some 1,200 radio sta-

As the board op, 'Mondo Hernandez is also responsible for downloading and cueing up the sections of popular songs that intro the *John Ziegler Show* and background Mr. Z.'s voice when a new segment starts. Bumper music is, of course, a talk radio convention: Rush Limbaugh has a franchise on the Pretenders, and Sean Hannity always uses that horrific Martina McBride "Let freedom ring/Let the guilty pay" song. Mr. Z. favors a whole rotating set of classic rock hooks, but his current favorites are Van Halen's "Right Now" and a certain extra-jaunty part of the theme to *Pirates of the Caribbean*, because, according to 'Mondo, "They get John pumped." In case anyone else is curious, the answer to how talk radio gets to use copyrighted songs in its programs is BMI and ASCAP, which 'Mondo explains are the two big licensing entities that stations pay for the use of clients' music. He isn't sure what the acronyms stand for, but he does know that KFI uses BMI — or rather Clear Channel pays BMI a yearly fee that entitles it to unlimited use of the agency's inventory for all its stations, both talk and music. Hence another serious economy of scale for Clear Channel — it's unclear how small, independent stations manage the fees.

N.B.: Mr. Z. usually refers to himself as either "Zig" or "the Zigmeister," and has made a determined effort to get everybody at KFI to call him Zig, with only limited success so far.

(This, it turns out, is Broadcast Music Inc., which "collects fees on behalf of more than two hundred thousand artists worldwide.")

(Despite suspicions, amateur investigation produced no evidence that Clear Channel or any of its subsidiaries owns BMI.)

(This means that the negotiations between KFI and Premiere over the terms of syndication for Rush, Dr. Laura, et al. are actually negotiations between two parts of the same company, which either helps explain or renders even more mysterious KFI's reticence about detailing the Clocks for their PRN shows.)

tions nationwide, one of which happens to be Louisville Kentucky's WHAS, the AM talk station from which John Ziegler was fired, amid spectacular gossip and controversy, in August of '03. Which means that Mr. Ziegler now works in Los Angeles for the same company that just fired him in Louisville, such that his firing now appears — in retrospect, and considering the relative sizes of the Louisville and LA markets — to have been a promotion. All of which turns out to be a strange and revealing story about what a talk radio host's life is like.

(2)

For obvious reasons, critics of political talk radio concern themselves mainly with the programs' content. Talk station management, on the other hand, tends to think of content as a subset of personality, of how stimulating a given host is. As for the hosts — ask Mr. Ziegler off-air what makes him good at his job, and he'll shrug glumly and say "I'm not really all that talented. I've got passion, and I work really hard." Taken so for granted that nobody in the business seems aware of it is something that an outsider, sitting in Airmix and watching John Ziegler at the microphone, will notice right away.

"Passion" is a big word in the industry, and John Ziegler uses the word in connection with himself a lot. It appears to mean roughly the same as what Ms. Bertolucci calls "edginess" or "attitude."

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.

To appreciate these skills and some of the difficulties involved, you might wish to do an experiment. Try sitting alone in a room with a clock, turning on a tape recorder, and starting to speak into

it. Speak about anything you want — with the proviso that your topic, and your opinions on it, must be of interest to some group of strangers who you imagine will be listening to the tape. Naturally, in order to be even minimally interesting, your remarks should be intelligible and their reasoning sequential — a listener will have to be able to follow the logic of what you're saying — which means

Part of the answer to why conservative talk radio works so well might be that extreme conservatism provides a fairly neat, clear, univocal template with which to organize one's opinions and responses to the world. The current term of approbation for this kind of template is "moral clarity."

that you will have to know enough about your topic to organize your statements in a coherent way. (But you cannot do much of this organizing beforehand; it has to occur at

the same time you're speaking.¹) Plus ideally what you're saying should be not just comprehensible and interesting but compelling, stimulating, which means that your remarks have to provoke and sustain some kind of emotional reaction in the listeners, which in turn will require you to construct some kind of identifiable persona for yourself — your comments will need to strike the listener as coming from an actual human being, someone with a real per-

It is, of course, much less difficult to arouse genuine anger, indignation, and outrage in people than it is to induce joy, satisfaction, fellow feeling, etc. The latter are fragile and complex, and what excites them varies a great deal from person to person, whereas anger et al. are more primal, universal, and easy to stimulate (as implied by expressions like "He really pushed my buttons").

sonality and real feelings about whatever it is you're discussing. And

This, too: Consider the special intimacy of talk radio. It's usually listened to solo — radio is the most solitary of broadcast media. And half-an-ear background listening is much more common with music formats than with talk. This is a human being speaking to you, with a pro-caliber voice, eloquently and with passion, in what feels like a one-to-one; it doesn't take long before you start to feel you know him. Which is why it's often such a shock when you see a real host, his face — you discover you've had a picture of this person in your head without knowing it, and it's always wrong. This dissonant shock is one reason why Rush and Dr. Laura, even with their huge built-in audiences, did not fare well on TV.

(as the industry is at pains to remind advertisers)

it gets trickier: You're trying to communicate in real time with someone you cannot see or hear responses from; and though you're communicating in speech, your remarks cannot have any of the fragmentary, repetitive, garbled qualities of real interhuman speech, or speech's ticcy unconscious "umm"s or "you know"s, or false starts or stutters or long pauses while you try to think of how to phrase what you want to say. You're also, of course, denied the physical inflections that are so much a part of spoken English — the facial expressions, changes in posture, and symphony of little gestures that accompany and buttress real talking. Everything unspoken about you, your topic, and how you feel about it has to be conveyed through pitch, volume, tone, and pacing. The pacing is especially important: It can't be too slow, since that's low-energy and dull, but it can't be too rushed or it'll sound like babbling. And so you have somehow to keep all these different imperatives and strictures in mind at the same time, while also filling exactly, say, eleven minutes, with no dead air and no going over, such that at 10:46 you have

The exact-timing thing is actually a little less urgent for a host who's got the resources of Clear Channel behind him. This is because in KFI's Airmix room, nestled third from the bottom in one of the two eight-foot stacks of processing gear to the left of 'Mondo's mixing board, is an Akai DD1000 Magneto optical disk recorder, known less formally as a "Cashbox." What this is is a sound compressor, which exploits the fact that even a live studio program is — because of the FCC-mandated seven-second delay — taped. Here is how 'Mondo, in exchange for certain vending-machine comestibles, explains the Cashbox: "All the shows are supposed to start at six past. But if they put more spots in the log, or say like if traffic goes long, now we're all of a sudden starting at seven past or something. The Cashbox can take a . . . twenty-minute segment and turn it into a nineteen." It does this by using computerized sound processing to eliminate pauses and periodically accelerate Mr. Z.'s delivery just a bit. The trick is that the Cashbox can compress sound so artfully that you don't hear the speed-up, at least not in a nineteen-for-twenty exchange ("You get down to eighteen it's risky, or down around seventeen you can definitely hear it"). So if things are running a little over, 'Mondo has to use the Cashbox — very deftly, via controls that look really complicated — in order to make sure that the Clock's adhered to and Airwatch breaks, promos, and ad spots all run as specified. A gathering suspicion as to why the Akai DD1000 is called the Cashbox occasions a Q: Does the station ever press 'Mondo or other board ops to use the Cashbox and compress shows in order to make room for additional ads? A: "Not really. What they'll do is just put an extra spot or two in the log, and then I've just got to do the best I can."

wound things up neatly and are in a position to say “KFI is the station with the most frequent traffic reports — Alan LaGreen is in the

The only elocutionary problem Mr. Z. ever exhibits is a habit of confusing the words “censure” and “censor.”

KFI Traffic Center” (which, to be honest, Mr. Z. sometimes leaves himself only three or even two seconds for and has to say extremely fast, which he can always

do without a flub). So then, ready: Go.

It’s no joke. See for example the *John Ziegler Show*’s producer, Emiliano Limon, who broke in at KFI as a weekend overnight host before moving across the glass:

“What’s amazing is that when you get new people who think that they can do a talk radio program, you watch them for the first time. By three minutes into it, they have that look on their face like, ‘Oh my God, I’ve got ten minutes left, what am I going to say?’ And that’s what happened to me a lot. So you end up talking about yourself [which, for complex philosophical reasons, the producer disapproves of], or you end up yammering.” Emiliano is a large, very calm and competent man in his mid-thirties who either wears the same black *LA Times* T-shirt every day or owns a whole closetful of them. He was pulled off other duties to help launch KFI’s experimental Live and Local evening show, an assignment that obviously involves working closely with Mr. Z., which Emiliano seems to accept as his karmic punishment for being so unflappable and easy to get along with. He laughs more than everyone else at KFI put together.

“I remember one time, I just broke after five minutes, I was just done, and they were going ‘Hey, what are you doing, you have another ten minutes!’ And I was like, ‘I don’t know what else to say!’ And that’s what happens. For those people who think ‘Oh, I could do talk radio,’ well, there’s more to it. A lot of people can’t take it once they get that taste of, you know, ‘Geez, I gotta fill all this time *and* sound interesting?’

“Then, as you keep on doing it over the days, there’s something that becomes absolutely clear to you. You’re not really acting on the radio. It’s *you*. If no one really responds and the ratings aren’t good, it means they don’t like *you*.” Which is worth keeping very much in mind.

* * *

Another much-bruited theory about ideology and talk radio is exemplified by stuff like the following, which is © 2002 by the *New Statesman*: “Why is talk radio so overwhelmingly right-wing? [It’s] because those on the left are prone to be inclusive, tolerant and reflective, qualities that make for a boring radio show.” Assuming that one accepts this very generous characterization of the left, the big question becomes just why tolerance and reflection make for “boring radio.” An unstated

There are elements at KFI, of whom Emiliano Limon is one, who believe that people listen to their station primarily to be informed (details forthcoming).

premise behind the theory, though, is that the main reason its audience listens to political talk radio is for entertainment, excitement — and yet it’s far from clear why this is so. The same *New Statesman* article includes a supporting bite from an industry source: “Lefties cannot cut it because talk radio is the World Wrestling Foundation with ideas.” Notice that the analogy here reveals, or depends on, some further assumptions about talk radio’s audience, assumptions that are (given the sorts of people who tend to like pro wrestling) pretty unflattering.

Certain random statistical facts about talk radio listeners were tossed around above; they were contextless because they *are* contextless. Arbitron Inc. and some of its satellites can help measure how many are listening for how long and when, and they provide some rough age data and demographic specs. A lot of the rest is guesswork, and Program Directors don’t like to talk about it.

From outside, though, one of the best clues to how a radio station understands its audience is spots. Which commercials it runs, and when, indicate how the station is pitching its listeners’ tastes and receptivities to sponsors. In how often particular spots are repeated lie clues

For instance, one has only to listen to *Coast to Coast w/ Noory*’s ads for gold as a hedge against hyperinflation, special emergency radios you can hand-crank in case of extended power failure, miracle weight-loss formulas, online dating services, etc., to understand that KFI and the syndicator regard this show’s audience as basically frightened, credulous, and desperate.

to the length of time the station thinks people are listening, to how attentive it thinks they are, etc. Specific example: Just from its spot

(ad-wise, a lucrative triad indeed)

load, we can deduce that KFI trusts its audience to sit still for an extraordinary amount of advertising. An average hour of the *John Ziegler Show* consists of four program segments: :06–:17, :23–:30, :37–:46, and :53–:00, or thirty-four minutes of Mr. Z. actually talking. Since KFI’s newscasts are never more than ninety seconds, and since quarterly traffic reports are always bracketed by live-read spots for Traffic Center sponsors, that makes each hour at least 40

UNALLOYED INFORMATION A live read is when a host or newscaster reads the ad copy himself on-air. They’re sort of a radio tradition, but the degree to which KFI weaves live reads into its programming represents a whole new dimension in broadcast marketing. Live-read spots are more expensive for advertisers, especially the longer, more detailed ones read by the programs’ hosts, since these ads (a) can sound at first like an actual talk segment and (b) draw on the personal appeal and credibility of the host. And the spots themselves are often clearly set up to exploit these features — see for instance John Kobylt’s live read for LA’s Cuning Dental Group during afternoons’ *John & Ken*: “Have you noticed how bad the teeth are of all the contestants in these reality shows? I saw some of this the other day. Discolored, chipped, misshaped, misaligned, rotted-out teeth, missing teeth, not to mention the bleeding, oozing, pus-y gums. You go to Cuning Dental Group, they’ll take all your gross teeth and in one or two visits fix them and give you a bright shiny smile. . . .”

Even more expensive than live reads are what’s called “endorsements,” which are when a host describes, in ecstatically favorable terms, his own personal experience with a product or service. Examples here include Phil Hendrie’s weight loss on Cortislim, John Kobylt’s “better than 20-20” laser-surgery outcome with Saddleback Eye Center, and Mr. Bill Handel’s frustrations with various dial-up ISPs before discovering DSL Extreme. These ads, which are KFI’s most powerful device for exploiting the intimacy and trust of the listener-host relationship, also result in special “endorsement fees” paid directly to the host. Kobylt, Hendrie, and Handel each do regular endorsements for half a dozen different advertisers. John Ziegler, on the other hand, has yet to do any live reads or endorsements at KFI. His explanations for this tend to vary. Sometimes Mr. Z. calls endorsements “disgusting” and says “The majority of talk show hosts in this country are complete and total whores.” At other times he’ll intimate that he’s had feelers, but that none of the products/services he’s been offered are ones that would “do my image much good.” KFI management has declined to comment on the new host’s endorsement situation, but it seems pretty clear that, in this market, John Ziegler hasn’t yet built the kind of long-term affection and credibility that can be sold.

(It’s unclear how one spells the adjectival form of “pus,” though it sounds okay on-air.)

KFI’s Handel, whose 5:00–9:00 AM show is an LA institution in morning drive, describes his program as “in-your-face, informational, with a lot of racial humor.”

percent ads; the percentage is even higher if you count sweepers for the station and promos for other KFI shows. And this is the load just on a local program, one for which the Clock doesn't have to be split with a syndicator.

It's not that KFI's unaware of the dangers here. Station management reads its mail, and, as Emiliano Limon puts it, "If there's one complaint listeners always have, it's the spot load." But the only important issue is whether all the complaints translate into actual

A talk radio marketing consultant at Cleveland's McVay Media explains crushing spot loads and a proliferation of live reads and endorsements in terms of three phenomena: (1) "Consolidation — and the ambitious revenue goals necessary to service debt that owners incurred when they paid for [all] their [many] stations"; (2) "Technology brought new competition — radio is under the gun from MP3 downloads, XM and Sirius, [etc.]"; (3) "Attention spans got *lots* shorter." The solution: "We're developing ways to embed advertiser brand and content into radio programming."

listener behavior. KFI's spot load is an instance of the kind of multivariable maximization problem that MBA programs thrive on. It is obviously in the station's financial interests

to carry just as high a volume of ads as it can without hurting ratings — the moment listeners begin turning away from KFI because of too many commercials, the Arbitron numbers go down, the rates charged for ads have to be reduced, and profitability suffers.

But anything more specific is, again, guesswork. When asked about management's thinking here, or whether there's any particular formula KFI uses to figure out how high a spot load the market will bear, Ms. Bertolucci will only smile and shrug as if pleasantly stumped: "We have more commercials than

It's a little more complicated than that, really, because excessive spots can also affect ratings in less direct ways — mainly by lowering the quality of the programming. Industry analyst Michael Harrison, of *Talkers* magazine, complains that "the commercial breaks are so long today that it is hard for hosts to build upon where they left off. The whole audience could have changed. There is the tendency to go back to the beginning and re-set up the premise. . . . It makes it very difficult to do what long-form programming is supposed to do."

we've ever had, and our ratings are the best they've ever been."

How often a particular spot can run over and over before listeners just can't stand it anymore is something

SEMI-EDITORIAL Even in formal, on-record, and very PR-savvy interviews, the language of KFI management is filled with little unconscious bits of jargon — "inventory" for the total number of ad minutes available, "product" for a given program, or (a favorite) "to monetize," which means to extract ad revenue from a given show — that let one know exactly where KFI's priorities lie. Granted, the station is a business, and broadcasting is not charity work. But given how intimate and relationship-driven talk radio is, it's disheartening when management's only term for KFI's listeners, again and again, is "market."

else no one will talk about, but the evidence suggests that KFI sees its audience as either very patient and tolerant or almost catatonically inattentive. Canned ads for local sponsors like Robbins Bros. Jewelers, Sit 'n Sleep Mattress, and the Power Auto Group play every couple hours, 24/7, until one knows every hitch and nuance. National saturation campaigns for products like Cortislim vary things somewhat by using both endorsements and canned spots.

CONSUMER ADVISORY As it happens, the latter two here are products of Berkeley Premium Nutraceuticals, an Ohio company with annual sales of more than \$100 million, as well as over 3,000 complaints to the BBB and the Attorney General's Office in its home state alone. Here's why. The radio ads say you can get a thirty-day free trial of Enzyte by calling a certain toll-free number. If you call, it turns out there's a \$4.90 S&H charge for the free month's supply, which the lady on the phone wants you to put on your credit card. If you acquiesce, the company then starts shipping you more Enzyte every month and auto-billing your card for at least \$35 each time, because it turns out that by taking the thirty-day trial you've signed up for Berkeley's "Automatic Purchase" program — which the operator neglected to mention. And calling Berkeley Nutraceuticals to get the automatic shipments and billings stopped usually doesn't work; they'll stop only if some kind of consumer agency sends a letter. It's the same with Altovis and its own "free trial." In short, the whole thing is one of those irksome, hassle-laden marketing scams, and KFI runs dozens of spots per day for Berkeley products. The degree to which the station is legally responsible for helping a company rip off members of its audience is, by FTC and FCC rules, nil. But it's hard not to see it as another indication of the station's true regard for its listeners.

↑ Pitches for caveat emptor-type nostrums like Avacor (for hair loss), Enzyte ("For natural male enhancement!"), and Altovis ("Helps

fight daily fatigue!") often repeat once an hour through the night. As of spring '04, though, the most frequent and concussive spots on KFI are for mortgage and home-refi companies. In just a few slumped, glazed hours of listening, a member of this station's audi-

FYI: Enzyte, which bills itself as a natural libido and virility enhancer (it also has all those "Smiling Bob & Grateful Wife" commercials on cable TV), contains tribulis terrestris, panax ginseng, ginkgo biloba, and a half dozen other innocuous herbal ingredients. The product costs Berkeley, in one pharmacologist's words, "nothing to make." But it's de facto legal to charge hundreds of dollars a year for it, and to advertise it as an OTC Viagra — the FDA doesn't regulate herbal meds unless people are actually falling over from taking them, and the Federal Trade Commission doesn't have anything like the staff to keep up with the advertising claims, so it's all basically an unregulated market.

ence can hear both canned and live-read ads for Green Light Financial, HMS Capital, Home Field Financial, Benchmark Lending. Over and over. Pacific Home Financial, Lenox National Lending, U.S. Mortgage Capital, Crestline Funding, Home Savings Mortgage, Advantix Lending. Reverse mortgages, negative amorti-

(Calls to KFI's Sales department re consumers' amply documented problems with Enzyte and Altovis were, as the journalists say, not returned.)

zation, adjustable rates, APR, FICO . . . where did all these firms come from? What were these guys doing five years ago?

Why is KFI's audience seen as so especially ripe and ready for refi? Betterloans.com, lendingtree.com, Union Bank of California, bethebroker.net, on and on and on.

Emiliano Limon's "It's *you*" seems true to an extent. But there is also the issue

(somewhat paradoxically)

of persona, meaning the on-air personality that a host adopts in order to heighten the sense of a real person behind the mike. It is, after all, unlikely that Rush Limbaugh always feels as jaunty and confident as he seems on the air, or that Howard Stern really is deeply fascinated by porn starlets every waking minute of the day. But it's not the same as outright acting. A host's persona, for the

most part, is probably more like the way we are all slightly different with some people than we are with others.

In some cases, though, the personas are more contrived and extreme. In the slot preceding Mr. Z.'s on KFI is the *Phil Hendrie Show*, which is actually a cruel and complicated kind of meta-talk radio. What happens every night on this program is that Phil Hendrie brings on some wildly offensive guest — a man who's leaving his wife because she's had a mastectomy, a Little League coach who advocates corporal punishment of players, a retired colonel who claims that females' only proper place in the military is as domestics and concubines for the officers — and first-time or casual listeners will call in and argue with the guests and (not surprisingly) get very angry and upset. Except the whole thing's a put-on. The guests are fake, their different voices done by Hendrie with the aid

(who really is a gifted mimic)

Apparently, one reason why Hendrie's show was perfect for national syndication was that the wider dissemination gave Hendrie a much larger pool of uninitiated listeners to call in and entertain the initiated listeners.

of mike processing and a first-rate board op, and the show's real entertainment is the callers, who don't know it's all a

gag — Hendrie's real audience, which is in on the joke, enjoys hearing these callers get more and more outraged and sputtery as the "guests" yank their chain. It's all a bit like the old *Candid Camera* if the joke perpetrated over and over on that show were con-

The overwhelming question, obviously, is why anyone would enjoy listening to people get fooled into becoming more and more offended and upset. To which there seems no good answer. At some point we have simply to bow our heads in acceptance of the fact that some Americans enjoy stuff that seems like it ought to make any right-thinking person want to open a vein. There are, after all, functional US adults who like evangelical television, the Home Shopping Network, and radio Muzak. It is the Democratic Adventure.

vincing somebody that a loved one had just died. So obviously Hendrie — whose show now draws an estimated one million listeners a week — lies on the outer frontier of radio persona.

A big part of John Ziegler's on-air persona, on the other hand, is that he doesn't have one. This could be just a function of all the time he's spent in the abattoir of small-market radio, but in Los Angeles it plays as a canny and sophisticated meta-radio move. Part of his January introduction to himself and his program is: "The key to the *John Ziegler Show* is that I am almost completely real. Nearly every show begins with the credo 'This is the show where the host says what he believes and believes what he says.' I do not make up my opinions or exaggerate my stories simply to stir the best debate on that particular broadcast."

Though Mr. Z. won't ever quite say so directly, his explicit I-have-no-persona persona helps to establish a contrast with weekday afternoons' John Kobylt, whose on-air voice is similar to Ziegler's in

National talk radio hosts like Limbaugh, Prager, Hendrie, Gallagher, et al. tend to have rich baritone radio voices that rarely peak, whereas today's KFI has opted for a local-host sound that's more like a slightly adenoidal second tenor. The voices of Kobylt, Bill Handel, Ken Chiampou, weekend host Wayne Resnick, and John Ziegler all share not only this tenor pitch but also a certain quality that is hard to describe except as sounding stressed, aggrieved, Type A: the Little Guy Who's Had It Up To Here. Kobylt's voice in particular has a snarling, dyspeptic, fed-up quality — a perfect aural analogue to the way drivers' faces look in jammed traffic — whereas Mr. Ziegler's tends to rise and fall more, often hitting extreme upper registers of outraged disbelief¹. Off-air, Mr. Z.'s speaking voice is nearly an octave lower than it sounds on his program, which is mysterious, since 'Mondo denies doing anything special to the on-air voice except maybe setting the default volume on the board's channel 7 a bit low because "John sort of likes to yell a lot." And Mr. Ziegler bristles at the suggestion that he, Kobylt, or Handel has anything like a high voice on the air: "It's just that we're passionate. Rush doesn't get all that passionate. You try being passionate and having a low voice."

pitch and timbre. Kobylt and his side-kick Ken Chiampou have a hugely

(as in if you listen to an upset person say "I can't believe it!")

popular show based around finding stories and causes that will make white, middle-class Californians feel angry and disgusted, then hammering away at these stories/causes day after day. Their personas are what the *LA Times* calls "brash" and Chiampou him-

CONTAINS EDITORIAL ELEMENTS It should be conceded that there is at least one real and refreshing journalistic advantage that bloggers, fringe-cable newsmen, and most talk radio hosts have over the mainstream media: They are neither the friends nor the peers of the public officials they cover. Why this is an advantage involves an issue that tends to get obscured by the endless fight over whether there's actually a "liberal bias" in the "elite" mainstream press. Whether one buys the bias thing or not, it is clear that leading media figures are part of a very different social and economic class than most of their audience. See, e.g., a snippet of Eric Alterman's recent *What Liberal Media?*:

No longer the working-class heroes of *The Front Page/His Gal Friday* lore, elite journalists in Washington and New York [and LA] are rock-solid members of the political and financial Establishment about whom they write. They dine at the same restaurants and take their vacations on the same Caribbean islands. . . . What's more, like the politicians, their jobs are not subject to export to China or Bangladesh [*sic*].

This is why the really potent partisan label for the *NYT/Time*/network-level press is not "liberal media" but "elite media" — because the label's true. And talk radio is very deliberately *not* part of this elite media. With the exception of Limbaugh and maybe Hannity, these hosts are not stars, or millionaires, or sophisticates. And a large part of their on-air persona is that they are of and for their audience — the Little Guy — and against corrupt incompetent pols and their "spokesholes," against smooth-talking lawyers and PC whiners and idiot bureaucrats, against illegal aliens clogging our highways and emergency rooms, paroled sex offenders living among us, punitive vehicle taxes, and stupid, self-righteous, agenda-laden laws against public smoking, SUV emissions, gun ownership, the right to watch the Nick Berg decapitation video over and over in slow motion, etc.

(discussed at some length below)

In other words, the talk host's persona and appeal are deeply, totally populist, and if it's all somewhat fake — if John Kobylt can shift a little too easily from the apoplectic Little Guy of his segments to the smooth corporate shill of his live reads — then that's just life in the big city.

self calls "rabid dogs," which latter KFI has developed into the promo line "The Junkyard Dogs of Talk Radio." What John & Ken really are is professional oiks. Their program is

(Except of course some of your more slippery right-wing commentators alter this to "elitist media," which sounds similar but is really a far more loaded and hateful term.)

credited with helping jump-start the '03 campaign to recall Governor Gray Davis, although they were equally disgusted by most of the candidates who wanted to replace him (q.v. Kobylt: "If there's anything I don't like more than politicians, it's those wormy little nerds

who act as campaign handlers and staff. . . . We just happened to on our own decide that Davis was a rotting stool that ought to be flushed"). In '02 they organized a parade of SUVs in Sacramento to protest stricter vehicle emissions laws; this year they spend at least an hour a day attacking various government officials and their "spokesholes" for failing to enforce immigration laws and trying to bullshit the citizens about it; and so on. But the *John & Ken Show's* real specialty is gruesome, high-profile California trials, which they often cover on-site, Kobylt eschewing all PC pussyfooting and legal niceties to speak his mind about defendants like 2002's David Westerfield and the current Scott Peterson, both "scumbags that are guilty as sin."¹ The point being that Mr. John Kobylt broadcasts in

an almost perpetual state of affronted rage; and, as more than one KFI staffer has ventured to observe off the record, it's improbable

Besides legendary stunts like tossing broccoli at "vegetable-head" jurors for taking too long to find Westerfield guilty, Kobylt is maybe best known for shouting "Come out, Scott! No one believes you! You can't hide!" at a window's silhouette as the *J&K Show* broadcast live from in front of Peterson's house, which scene got re-created in at least one recent TV movie about the Scott & Laci case.

that any middle-aged man could really go around this upset all the time and not drop dead. It's a persona, in other words, not exactly fabricated but certainly exaggerated . . . and of course it's also demagoguery of the most classic and unabashed sort.

The *John & Ken Show* pulls higher ratings in Southern California than the syndicated Rush and Dr. Laura, which is pretty much unheard of.

But it makes for stimulating and profitable talk radio. As of Arbitron's Winter '04 Book, KFI AM-640 has become the No. 1 talk station in the

(terms defined just below)

country, beating out New York's WABC in both Cume and AQH for the coveted 25–54 audience. KFI also now has the second-highest market share of any radio station in Los Angeles, trailing only FM hip-hop giant KPWR. In just one year, KFI has gone from being the eighteenth to the seventh top-billing station in the country, which

is part of why it received the 2003 News/Talk Station of the Year Award from *Radio and Records* magazine. Much of this success is attributed to Ms. Robin Bertolucci, the Program Director brought in from Denver shortly after Clear Channel acquired KFI, whom Mr. Z. describes as “a real superstar in the business right now.” From all reports, Ms. Bertolucci has done everything from re-designing the station’s ID and sweeper and sound and overall in-your-face vibe to helping established hosts fine-tune their personas and create a distinctively KFI-ish style and ’tude for their shows.

Every Wednesday afternoon, Ms. Bertolucci meets with John Ziegler to review the previous week and chat about how the show’s going. The Program Director’s large

In truth, just about everyone at KFI except Ms. B. refers to Arbitron as “Arbitraryon.” This is because it’s 100 percent diary-based, and diary surveys are notoriously iffy, since a lot of subjects neglect to fill out their diaries in real time (especially when they’re listening as they drive), tending instead to wait till the night before they’re due and then trying to do them from memory. Plus it’s widely held that certain ethnic minorities are chronically mis- or overrepresented in LA’s Books, evidently because Arbitron has a hard time recruiting these minorities as subjects, and when it lands a few it tends to stick with them week after week.

private office is located just off the KFI prep room (in which prep room Mr. Z’s own office is a small computer table with a crude homemade THIS AREA RESERVED FOR JOHN ZIEGLER sign taped to it). Ms. B. is soft-spoken, polite, unpretentious, and almost completely devoid of moving parts. Here is her on-record explanation of the Program Director’s role w/r/t the *John Ziegler Show*:

“It’s John’s show. He’s flying the airplane, a big 747. What I am, I’m the little person in the control tower. I have a different perspective —”

“I *have* no perspective!” Mr. Z. interrupts, with a loud laugh, from his seat before her desk.

“— which might be of value. Like, ‘You may want to pull up because you’re heading for a mountain.’” They both laugh. It’s an outrageous bit of understatement: Nine months ago John Ziegler’s career was rubble, and Ms. B. is the only reason he’s here, and she’s every inch his boss, and he’s nervous around her — which you can tell by the way he puts his long legs out and leans back in his chair

with his hands in his slacks' pockets and yawns a lot and tries to look exaggeratedly relaxed.

(Plus he omits to wear his golf cap in her office, and his hair shows evidence of recent combing.)

The use of some esoteric technical slang occasions a brief Q&A on how exactly Arbitron works while Mr. Z. joggles his sneaker impatiently. Then they go over the past week. Ms. B. gently chides the new host for not hitting the Greg Haidl trial harder, and for usually discussing the case in his show's second hour instead of the first. Her thrust: "It's a big story

In the Winter '04 Arbitron report, KFI's overall Share was 4.7, up from 4.2 for Fall '03. In a radio market as crowded as LA's, this kind of half-point jump in Share is a phenomenal achievement.

Arbitron Inc., a diary-based statistical sampling service, is more or less the Nielsen of US radio. The company puts out quarterly ratings reports for every significant market in the country. These reports, of which the one for LA is the size of a small telephone directory, are known in the business as "Books." Arbitron is a paid service: Radio stations must subscribe in order to be included, which they have to be, since the Arbitron Book is basically what determines the rates that can be charged to advertisers. There are all kinds of demographic breakdowns, but the major category for talk radio is Listeners Age 25-54. The measurements for determining how a given radio station is doing are Rating and Share, each of which is subcategorized in terms of Cume, AQH, and TSL. As Ms. B. explains it, a station's overall Rating answers the question "Out of the entire metro-LA population of c. 10,407,400, how many are listening to us?" whereas Share answers "Out of every hundred radios that are on, how many are tuned to our station?" The subcategorical "Cume" stands for Cumulative, "AQH" for Average Quarter Hour, and "TSL" for Time Spent Listening — all of which Ms. B. can explain by analogy to a party. Say KFI is a cocktail party: Cume is how many people came to your party, total. But guests come and go. So AQH is as if every fifteen minutes you had everyone at the party freeze and you counted them all, then averaged all these different counts at the evening's end. With TSL being how long the average guest stayed at your party.

Since Arbitron also generates average numbers for each three-hour period of the day, individual shows' performance can be measured and tracked over time. The *John Ziegler Show's* comparative Book so far looks like this:

JZS Winter '04 AQH Share = 2.9 vs. *Coast to Coast* Winter '03 AQH Share = 4.6
JZS Winter '04 AQH Rating = 0.1 vs. *Coast to Coast* Winter '03 AQH Rating = 0.2.

Continued on next page →

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Which doesn't look all that good. But no one at KFI expects the new program to be a ratings hit right away; *Coast to Coast* is an established nighttime show with a loyal audience. "I'm committed to [Mr. Z.'s] show," Ms. Bertolucci says. (This is on a different day from the Wednesday confab.) "What I'm looking for is not insane ratings right off the get-go. The thing I am looking for is steady and incremental growth." Ms. B. also insists that dissatisfaction with *Coast to Coast*'s quarterly Book was not one of the reasons for moving the show back to deep overnights and going Live and Local from ten to one. That decision was driven by "other pressures," which Ms. B. declines to specify but very likely involve the Clock for *Coast to Coast* and the percentage of ad revenue that KFI had to cede to its syndicator. With a local show, all the spots are KFI's own.

Clearly, though, the *John Ziegler Show* is Ms. B.'s baby; it was she who sold top management on the *Coast to Coast* move, the Live and Local experiment, and the program's host. So

Q: What will be the consequences for you if the gamble doesn't pay off?

A: "You mean if the show doesn't work do I get fired?"

Q: [Nervous laughter.]

A: "I have a lot invested in the success of the show. It was a risk to take. But [quick cool smile] my fate is not solely linked to the success of any individual show."

Q: How long do you get to prove that Mr. Z.'s show can succeed? A year? Three years?

A: "Three years in this business is a long time. [Smiles now w/ a hint of sadness, or perhaps pity at Q's naïveté.] The business now is more impatient. When KFI started [meaning in its current talk format], it took eight or nine years before it got any traction. The business pressures as they are right now, there's a great impatience and need for success, and we don't have long periods of time to see if shows hit or miss. Radio's not as bad as TV yet — we don't have overnight ratings yet — but there's a lot of the same pressure."

Q: Why is there so much extra pressure now?

A: "The radio companies are bigger, the monetary pressures are greater, the companies are publicly traded. There are big, large corporations."

Q: So the odd thing here is that radio consolidation seems to up the pressure instead of reduce it — the competition is between fewer companies, but it's way fiercer competition.

A: "Well, the media live in the same business world that probably a lot of your magazine's readers live in, which is, you know, quarter by quarter, how are we doing, are we making our numbers. [Tiny ambiguous smile.] Maybe we've just become a more impatient society."

for us. It's got sex, it's got police, class issues, kids running amok, video, the courts, and who gets away with what. And it's in Orange County." When Mr. Ziegler (whose off-air method of showing annoyance or frustration is to sort of hang his head way over to one side) protests that both Bill Handel and John & Ken have already covered the story six ways from Sunday every day and there is no way for him to do anything fresh or stimulating with it, Ms. B. nods slowly and responds: "If we were KIIS-FM, and we had a new Christina Aguilera song, and they played it heavy on the morning show and the afternoon show, wouldn't you still play it on the evening show?" At which Mr. Z. sort of lolls his head from side to side several times — "All right. I see your point. All right" — and on tonight's (May 19) program he does lead with and spend much of the first hour on the latest Haidl developments.

(As you may have noticed, Ms. B. has a thing for analogies.)

In a week without a real Monster story like Abu Ghraib or Nick Berg, the what-to-hit-hard-first issue is subtended by a larger question, which is

There is a People Meter-brand overnight rating service now available for commercial radio, but evidently most stations and media buyers hate the idea — the whole current system is based around Arbitron.

whether the host should think of his program more as one

FOR THOSE OUTSIDE SOUTHERN CA
Haidl, the teenage son of an Orange County Asst. Sheriff, is accused, together with some chums, of gang-raping an unconscious girl at a party two or three years ago. Rocket scientists all, the perps had videotaped the whole thing and then managed to lose the tape, which eventually found its way to police.

three-hour show or as three one-hour shows. Mr. Z.'s prep and orchestration

tend to imply the former, but Ms. B. — citing certain Arbitron-supplement services' microdata on the whereabouts and TSL of the average 10:00–1:00 listener — quietly invites him to maybe think more in terms of three discrete broadcast hours, in which a certain amount of repetition might be all right. It's just something for him to consider, of course, offered from a different,

(meaning whether or not in the car)

noncockpit perspective, and Mr. Z. nods thoughtfully throughout. That evening, though, over a large restaurant steak, he is a great deal more voluble and sardonic on the (1×3) -vs.- (3×1)

Ascetic or no, Mr. Z.'s tastes in Q&A food are rather more expensive than 'Mondo's.

question: "She changes her fucking mind on that in every meeting. Rush does his show as one three-hour thing, and he does okay, I think you'd agree." And the host's response to the pilot-and-control-tower analogy as a way to explain Ms. Bertolucci's relationship to his show, as well as to an outsider's observation that Ms. B. seems both really smart and totally in Mr. Z.'s corner, is a worldly shrug over his ribeye: "She's the PD. She'll fuck me over if it's in her interests to."

By way of post-meeting analysis, it is worth noting that a certain assumption behind Ms. B.'s Christina Aguilera analogy — namely, that a criminal trial is every bit as much an entertainment product as a Top 40 song — was not questioned or even blinked at

Mr. Z.'s explanatory overview of his professional broadcasting life so far: "My ass is sore from being fucked by so many stations." (See also below.)

by either participant. This is, doubtless, one reason for KFI's recent success — the near total conflation of news and entertainment. It also explains why KFI's twice-hourly newscasts (which are always extremely short, and densely interwoven with station promos and live-read ads) concentrate so heavily on lurid, tabloidish stories. Post-Nick Berg, the station's newscasts in May and early June tend to lead with child-molestation charges against local clerics and

(= part of the same mid-May Q&A in which Ms. B. batted her interlocuter around like a pet's toy mouse w/r/t the meaning of "stimulating")

teachers, revelations in the Peterson and Haidl trials, and developments in the Kobe Bryant and

Michael Jackson cases. Respecting Ms. Bertolucci's on-record description of KFI's typical listener — "An information-seeking person that wants to know what's going on in the world and wants

Again, this claim seems a little tough to reconcile with the actual news that KFI concentrates on, but — as Mr. Z. himself once pointedly observed during a Q&A — interviewing somebody is not the same as arguing with him over every last little thing.

to be communicated to in an interesting, entertaining, stimulating sort of way” — it seems fair to observe that KFI provides

↑ a peculiar and very selective view of what’s going on in the world.

Ms. B.’s description turns out to be loaded in a number of ways. The role of news and information versus personal and persona-driven stuff on the *John Ziegler Show*, for example, is a matter that Mr. Z. and his producer see very differently. Emiliano Limon, who’s worked at the station for over a decade and believes he knows its

audience, sees “two distinct eras at KFI. The first was the opinion-driven, personal, here’s-my-take-on-things era. The second is the era we’re in

[meaning, again, at the station in its current talk format, which started sometime in the eighties. KFI itself has been on the air since 1922 — the “FI” actually stands for “Farm Information.”]

right now, putting the information first.” Emiliano refers to polls he’s seen indicating that most people in Southern California get their news from local TV newscasts and Jay Leno’s monologue on the *Tonight* show. “We go

(with whom Emiliano, from all indications, does not enjoy a very chummy or simpatico relationship, although he’s always a master of tact and circumspection on the subject of Mr. Z.)

on the presumption that the average driver, average listener, isn’t reading the news the way we are. We read *everything*.” In fact, this voracious news-reading is a big part of Emiliano’s job. He is, like most talk radio producers, a virtuoso on the Internet, and he combs through a daily list of sixty national papers, ’zines, and blogs, and he believes that his and KFI’s main function is to provide

“a kind of executive news summary” for busy listeners. In a different, nonprandial Q&A, though, Mr. Ziegler’s take on the idea of his show’s providing news is wholly different: “We’re trying to get away from that, actually. The original thought was that this would be mostly an informational show, but now we’re trying to get a little

The upshot here is that there's a sort of triangular dissonance about the *John Ziegler Show* and how best to stimulate LA listeners. From all available evidence, Robin Bertolucci wants the program to be mainly info-driven (according to KFI's particular definition of info), but she wants the information heavily editorialized and infused with 'tude and in-your-face energy. Mr. Ziegler interprets this as the PD's endorsing his talking a lot about himself, which Emiliano Limon views as an antiquated, small-market approach that is not going to interest people in Los Angeles, who tend to get more than their share of colorful personality and idiosyncratic opinion just in the course of their normal day. If Emiliano is right, then Mr. Z. may simply be too old-school and self-involved for KFI, or at least not yet aware of how different the appetites of a New York or LA market are from those of a Louisville or Raleigh.

↑ more toward personality" . . . which, since Mr. Z. makes a point of not having a special on-air persona, means more stuff about himself, John Ziegler — his experiences, his résumé, his political and cultural outlook and overall philosophy of life.

(who does tend to be the clearest and most persuasive person at KFI)

(3)

If we're willing to disregard the complicating precedents of Joe Pyne and Alan Burke, then the origins of contemporary

(famous "confrontational" talk hosts of the sixties)

political talk radio can be traced more or less directly to three phenomena of the 1980s.

(We're also premitting the fifties' Long John Nebel, inventor of the seven-second delay; plus of course the protofascist broadcasts of Fr. Charles Coughlin during the Depression.)

↓ The first of these involved AM music stations' getting absolutely murdered by FM, which could broadcast music in stereo and

As of 1981, there were around seventy-five news/talk radio stations in the US. There are now almost twenty times that.

allowed for much better fidelity on high and low notes.

The human voice, on the other hand, is mid-range and doesn't require high fidelity. The eighties' proliferation of talk formats on the AM band also provided new careers for some music deejays — e.g., Don

You'll doubtless recall the offset factoid about AM's 10,000 kHz vs. FM's 15,000 from page 278.

Imus, Morton Downey Jr. — whose chatty personas didn't fit well with FM's all-about-the-music ethos.

The second big factor was the repeal, late in Ronald Reagan's second term, of what was known as the Fairness Doctrine. This was a 1949 FCC rule designed to minimize any possible restrictions on free speech caused by limited access to broadcasting outlets. The idea was that, as one of the conditions for receiving an FCC broadcast license, a station had to "devote reasonable attention to the coverage of controversial issues of public importance," and consequently had to provide "reasonable, although not necessarily equal" opportunities for opposing sides to express their views. Because of the Fairness Doctrine, talk stations had to hire and program "symmetrically": If you had a three-hour program whose host's politics were on one side of the ideological spectrum, you had to have another program whose host more or less spoke for the other side. Weirdly enough, up through the mid-eighties it was usu-

KGO happens to be the station where Ms. Robin Bertolucci, fresh out of Cal-Berkeley, first broke into talk radio.

ally the US right that benefited most from the Doctrine. Pioneer talk syndicator Ed McLaughlin,

who managed San Francisco's KGO in the 1960s, recalls now that "I had more liberals on the air than I had conservatives or even moderates for that matter, and I had a hell of a time finding the other voice."

└─ The Fairness Doctrine's repeal was

This main-text ¶ contains editorial elements.

part of the sweeping deregulations of the Reagan era, which aimed to liberate all sorts of industries from government interference and allow them to compete freely in the marketplace. The old, Rooseveltian logic of the Doctrine had been that since the airwaves belonged to everyone, a license to profit from those airwaves conferred on the broadcast industry some special obligation to serve the public interest. Commercial radio broadcasting was not, in other words, originally conceived as just another for-profit industry; it was supposed to meet a higher standard of social responsibility.

After 1987, though, just another industry is pretty much what radio became, and its only real responsibility now is to attract and retain listeners in order to generate revenue. In other words, the sort of distinction explicitly drawn by FCC chairman Newton Minow in the 1960s, namely that between “the public interest” and “merely what interests the public,” no longer exists.

(except, obviously, for some restrictions on naughty language)

CONTAINS WHAT MIGHT BE PERCEIVED AS EDITORIAL ELEMENTS It seems only fair and balanced to observe, from the imagined perspective of a Neal Boortz or John Ziegler, that Minow’s old distinction reflected exactly the sort of controlling, condescending, nanny-state liberal attitude that makes government regulation such a bad idea. For how and why does a federal bureaucrat like Newton Minow get to decide what “the public interest” is? Why not respect the American people enough to let the public itself decide what interests it? Of course, this sort of objection depends on precisely the collapse of “the public interest” into “what happens to interest the public” that liberals object to. For the distinction between these two is *itself* liberal, as is the idea of a free press’s and broadcast media’s special responsibilities — “liberal” in the sense of being rooted in a professed concern for the common good over and above the preferences of individual citizens. The point is that the debate over things like the Fairness Doctrine and the proper responsibility of broadcasters quickly hits ideological bedrock on both sides.

DITTO (which does indeed entail government’s arrogating the power to decide what that common good is, it’s true. On the other hand, the idea is that at least government officials are elected, or appointed by elected representatives, and thus are somewhat accountable to the public they’re deciding for. What appears to drive liberals most crazy about the right’s conflation of “common good”/“public interest” with “what wins in the market” is the conviction that it’s all a scam, that what the deregulation of industries like broadcasting, health care, and energy really amounts to is the subordination of the public’s interests to the financial interests of large corporations. Which is, of course, all part of a very deep, serious national argument about the role and duties of government that America’s having with itself right now. It is an argument that’s not being plumbed at much depth on political talk radio, though — at least not the more legitimate, non-wacko claims of some on the left [a neglect that then strengthens liberal suspicions that all these conservative talk hosts are just spokesholes for their corporate masters . . . and around and around it all goes].)

(which there have been periodic attempts in Congress to resurrect)

The crucial connection with the FD's repeal was not Rush's show but that show's syndicatability. A station could now purchase and air three daily hours of Limbaugh without being committed to programming another three hours of Sierra Club or Urban League or something.

More or less on the heels of the Fairness Doctrine's repeal came the West Coast and then national syndication of *The Rush Limbaugh Show* through Mr. McLaughlin's EFM Media. Limbaugh is the

third great progenitor of today's political talk radio partly because he's a host of extraordinary, once-in-a-generation talent and charisma —

EFM Media, named for Edward F. McLaughlin, was a sort of Old Testament patriarch of modern syndication, although Mr. McL. tended to charge subscribing stations cash instead of splitting the Clock, because he wanted a low spot load that would give Rush maximum airtime to build his audience.

bright, loquacious, witty, complexly authoritative — whose show's blend of news, entertainment, and partisan analysis became the model for legions of imitators. But Rush was also the first great promulgator of the Mainstream Media's Liberal Bias idea. This

In truth, Limbaugh's disdain for the "liberal press" somewhat recalls good old Spiro Agnew's attacks on the Washington press corps (as in "nattering nabobs," "hopeless, hysterical hypochondriacs," etc.), with the crucial difference being that Agnew's charges always came off as thuggish and pathetic in the "liberal press," which at that time was the only vector for their transmission. Because of his own talent and the popularity of his show, Rush has been able to move partisan distrust for the "mainstream liberal media" into the mainstream itself.

turned out to be a brilliantly effective gambit, since the MMLB concept functioned simultaneously as a standard around which Rush's audience could rally, as an articulation of the need for a right-wing (i.e., unbiased) media, and as a mechanism by which any criticism

STRENUOUSLY NON-EDITORIAL So maybe Fox News's "Fair and Balanced" isn't meant just as a cynical joke. A partisan news source can plausibly deny being biased if it understands itself as basically a corrective — a balancing force — against the manifest bias of other news sources. Meaning that the whole back-and-forth argument over Fox News, too, devolves into a debate about whether the MMLB is real.

or refutation of conservative ideas could be dismissed (either as biased or as the product of indoctrination by biased media). Boiled way down, the MMLB thesis is

(although Fox et al.'s dependence, *raison d'être*-wise, on the same MMLB they spend so much time howling about does look a bit suspicious)

JUST CLEAR-EYED, DISPASSIONATE REASON Notwithstanding all sorts of interesting other explanations, the single biggest reason why left-wing talk radio experiments like Air America or the Ed Schultz program are not likely to succeed, at least not on a national level, is that their potential audience is just not dissatisfied enough with today's mainstream news sources to feel that they have to patronize a special type of media to get the unbiased truth.

able both to exploit and to perpetuate many conservatives' dissatisfaction with extant media sources — and it's this dissatisfaction that cements political talk radio's large and loyal audience.

In the best Rush Limbaugh tradition, Mr. Ziegler takes pride in his on-air sense of humor. His media criticism is often laced with wisecracks, and he likes to leaven his show's political and cultural analyses with timely ad-lib gags, such as "It's maybe a good thing that Catholics and Muslims don't tend to marry — if they had a kid, he'd grow up and then, what, abuse some child and then blow him up?" And he has a penchant for comic maxims ("Fifty percent of all marriages are confirmed failures, while the other fifty percent end in divorce"; "The female figure is the greatest known evidence that there might be a God, but the female psyche is an indication that this God has a very sick sense of humor") that he uses on the air and then catalogues as "Zieglerisms" on his KFI Website.

Mr. Z. can also, when time and the demands of prep permit, go long-form. In his program's final hour for May 22, he delivers a mock commencement address to the Class of 2004, a piece of prepared sit-down comedy that is worth excerpting, verbatim, as a sort of keyhole into the professional psyche of Mr. John Ziegler:

Class of 2004, congratulations on graduation. . . . I wish to let you in on a few secrets that those of you who are not completely brain-dead will eventually figure out on your own, but, if you listen to me, will save a lot of time and frustration. First of all, most of what you have been taught in your academic career is not true. I am not just talking

Again, this is all better, and arguably funnier, when delivered aloud in Mr. Z.'s distinctive way.

about the details of history that have been distorted to promote the liberal agenda of academia. I am also referring to the big-picture lessons of life as well. The sad truth is that, contrary to what most of you have been told, you *cannot* do or be anything you want.¹ The vast majority of you . . . will be absolutely miserable in whatever career

EDITORIAL QUIBBLE It's unclear just when in college Mr. Z. thinks students are taught that they can do or be anything. A good part of what he considers academia's leftist agenda, after all, consists in teaching kids about social and economic stratification, inequalities, uneven playing fields — all the US realities that actually limit possibilities for some people.

you choose or are forced to endure. You will most likely hate your boss because they will most likely be dumber than you think you are, and they will inevitably screw you at every chance they get. . . . The boss will not be the

only stupid person you encounter in life. The vast majority of people are *much, much* dumber than you have

(if conservatively disposed, please substitute "allegedly")

ever been led to believe. Never forget this. And just like people are far dumber than you have been led to believe, they are also *far* more dishonest than anyone is seemingly willing to admit to you. If you have any doubt as to whether someone is telling you the truth, it is a safe bet to assume that they are lying to you. . . . Do not trust anyone unless you have some sort of significant leverage over him or her and they *know* that you have that leverage over them. Unless this condition exists, anyone — and I mean *anyone* — can and probably will stab you in the back.

That is about one sixth of the address, and for the most part it speaks for itself.

One of many intriguing things about Mr. Ziegler, though, is the contrast

between his cynicism about backstabbing and the naked, seemingly self-destructive candor with which he'll discuss his life and career.

This candor becomes almost paradoxical in Q&As with an outside correspondent, a stranger

The best guess re Mr. Z.'s brutal on-record frankness is that either (a) the host's on- and off-air personas really are identical, or (b) he regards speaking to a magazine correspondent as just one more part of his job, which is to express himself in a maximally stimulating way (there was a tape recorder out, after all).

(for a magazine, moreover, that pretty much everyone around KFI regards as a chattering-class organ of the most elitist liberal kind)

whom Mr. Z. has no particular reason to trust at those times when he winces after saying something and asks that it be struck from the record. As it happens, however, nearly all of what follows is on-record stuff from an autobiographical timeline constructed by John Ziegler in late May '04, over yet another medium-rare steak. Especially interesting is the timeline's mixture of raw historical fact and passionate editorial opinion, which Mr. Z. blends so seamlessly that one really can believe he discerns no difference between them.

(Meaning he spoke while also eating, and watching a Lakers play-off game on a large-screen high-def TV, which latter was the only real condition he placed on the interview.)

1967–89: Mr. John Ziegler grows up in suburban Philadelphia, the elder son of a financial manager and a homemaker. All kinds of unsummarizable evidence indicates that Mr. Z. and his mother are very close. In 1984, he is named High School Golfer of the Year by the *Bucks County Courier Times*. He's also a three-year golf letterman at Georgetown, where his liberal arts studies turn out to be "a great way to prepare for a life of being unemployed, which I've done quite a bit of."

(especially the one at Raleigh's WLFL Fox 22 — "My boss there was the worst boss in the history of bosses")

1989–95: Mr. Z.'s original career is in local TV sports. He works for stations in and around Washington DC, in Steubenville OH, and finally in Raleigh NC. Though sports news is what he's wanted to do ever since he was a little boy, he hates the jobs: "The whole world of sports and local news is so disgusting . . . local TV news is half a step above prostitution."

1994–5: Both personally and professionally, this period constitutes a dark night of the soul for John Ziegler. Summer '94: O.J. Simpson's ex-wife is brutally murdered. Fall '94: Mr. Ziegler's mother is killed in a car crash. Winter '95: During his sportscast, Mr. Z. makes "an incredibly

tame joke about O.J. Simpson's lack of innocence" w/r/t his wife's murder, which draws protest from Raleigh's black community. John Ziegler is eventually fired from WLFL because the station "caved in to Political Correctness." The whole nasty incident marks the start of (a) Mr. Z.'s deep, complex hatred for all things PC, and (b) "my history with O.J." He falls into a deep funk, decides to give up sports broadcasting, "pretty much gave up on life, actually." Mr. Z. spends his days watching the Simpson trial on cable television, often sitting through repeat broadcasts of the coverage late at night; and when O.J. is finally acquitted, "I was nearly suicidal." Two psychiatrist golf buddies talk him into going on antidepressants, but much of the time O.J. is still all Mr. Ziegler can think and talk about. "It got so bad — you'll find this funny — at one point I was so depressed that it was my goal, assuming that he'd be acquitted and that [O.J.'s] Riviera Country Club wouldn't have the guts to kick him out, that I was going to become a caddy at Riviera, knock him off, and see whether or not [a certain lawyer Mr. Z. also played golf with, whose name is here omitted] could get me off on jury nullification. That's how obsessed I was." The lawyer/golfer/friend's reaction to this plan is not described.

?!

Late '95: Mr. Z. decides to give life and broadcasting another shot. Figuring that "maybe my controversial nature would work better on talk radio," he takes a job as a weekend fill-in host for a station in Fuquay-Varina NC — "the worst talk radio station on the planet . . . to call the station owner a redneck was insulting to rednecks" — only to be abruptly fired when the station switches to an automated Christian-music format.

Early '96: "I bought, actually *bought*, time on a Raleigh talk radio station" in order to start "putting together a Tape," although Mr. Z. is good enough on the air that they soon put him on as a paid

A Tape is sort of the radio/TV equivalent of an artist's portfolio.

host. What happens, though, is that this station uses a certain programming consultant, whose name is being omitted — “a pretty big name in the industry, who [however] is a *snake*, and, I believe, extremely overrated — and he at first really took a shine to me, and then told me, *told me*, to do a show on how I got fired from the TV job, and I did the show,” which evidently involves retelling the original tame O.J. joke, after which the herpetetic consultant stands idly by as the station informs Mr. Z. that “‘We’re done with you, no thank you,’ which was another blow.”

1996–7: Another radio consultant recommends Mr. Z. for a job at WWTN, a Nashville talk station, where he hosts an evening show that makes good Book and is largely hassle-free for several months. Of his brief career at WWTN, the

(the whole story of which is very involved and takes up almost half a microcassette)

host now believes that “I kind of self-destructed there, actually, in retrospect.

I got frustrated with management. I was right, but I was stupid as well.”

The trouble starts when Tiger Woods wins the 1997 Masters. As part of his commentary on the tournament, Mr. Z. posits on-air that

(whom the host reveres — a standing gag on his KFI program is that Mr. Z. is a deacon in the First Church of Tiger Woods)

Tiger constitutes living proof of the fact that “not all white people are racists.” His supporting argument is that “no white person would ever think of Tiger as a nigger,” because whites draw a mental distinction “between people who just happen to be black and people who act like niggers.” His reason for broadcasting the actual word “nigger”? “This all goes back to O.J. I hated the fact that the media treated viewers and listeners like children by saying ‘Mark Fuhrman used the N-word.’ I despised that, and I think it gives the word too much power. Plus there’s the whole hypocrisy of how black people can use it and white people can’t. I was young and naive and thought I could stand on principle.” As part of that principled stand, Mr. Z. soon redeploys the argument and the word


As Mr. Z. explains it, consultants work as freelance advisers to different stations’ Program Directors — “They sort of give the PD a cover if he hires somebody and it doesn’t work out.”

HOST

in a discussion of boxer Mike Tyson, whereupon he is fired, “even though there was very little listener reaction.” As Mr. Z. understands it, the reason for his dismissal is that “a single black employee complained,” and WWTN’s owner, “a lily-white company,” feared that it was vulnerable to a discrimination lawsuit.

1998–9: Mr. Z. works briefly as a morning fill-in at Nashville’s WLAC, whose studios are right across the street from the station that just fired him. From there, he is hired to do overnights at WWDB, an FM talk station in Philadelphia, his hometown. There are again auspicious beginnings . . . “except my boss, [the PD who hired him], is completely unstable and ends up punching out a consultant, and gets fired. At that point I’m totally screwed — I have nobody who’s got my back, and everybody’s out to get me.” Mr. Z. is suddenly fired to make room for syndicated raunchmeister Tom Leykis, then is quickly rehired when listener complaints get Leykis’s program taken off the air . . . then is refired a week later when the station juggles its schedule again. Mr. Z. on his time at WWDB: “I should have sued those bastards.”

FOR THOSE UNFAMILIAR WITH TOM LEYKIS
Imagine Howard Stern without the cleverness.



Q: So what exactly is the point of a host’s having a contract if the station can evidently just up and fire you whenever they feel like it? A: “The only thing a contract’s worth in radio is how much they’re going to pay you when they fire you. And if they fire you ‘For Cause,’ then they don’t have to pay you anything.”

2000: John Ziegler moves over to WIP, a famous Philadelphia sports-talk station. “I hated it, but I did pretty well. I can do sports, obviously, and it was also a big political year.” But there is both a general problem and a specific problem. The general problem is that “The boss there, [name omitted], is an evil, evil, evil, *evil* man. If God said ‘John, you get one person to kill for free,’ this would be the man I would kill. And I would make it brutally

painful.” The specific problem arises when “. . . Mike Tyson holds a press conference, and calls himself a nigger. And I can’t resist — I mean, here I’ve gotten fired in the past for using the word in relation to a person who

In the Q&A itself, Mr. Z. goes back and forth between actually using the N-word and merely referring to it as “the N-word,” without apparent pattern or design.

calls *himself* that now. I mean, my God. So I tell the story [of having used the word

and gotten fired for it] on the air, but I do not use the N-word — I *spell* the N-word, every single time, to cover my ass, and to also make a point of the absurdity of the whole thing. And we get one, *one* postcard, from a total lunatic black person — misspellings, just clearly a lunatic. And [Mr. Z.’s boss at WIP] calls me in and says ‘John, I think you’re a racist.’ Now, first of all, *this guy*

EDITORIAL OPINION This is obviously a high-voltage area to get into, but for what it’s worth, John Ziegler does not appear to be a racist as “racist” is generally understood. What he is is more like very, very insensitive — although Mr. Z. himself would despise that description, if only because “insensitive” is now such a PC shibboleth. Actually, though, it is in the very passion of his objection to terms like “insensitive,” “racist,” and “the N-word” that his real problem lies. Like many other post-Limbaugh hosts, John Ziegler seems unable to differentiate between (1) cowardly, hypocritical acquiescence to the tyranny of Political Correctness and (2) judicious, compassionate caution about using words that cause pain to large groups of human beings, especially when there are all sorts of less upsetting words that can be used. Even though there is plenty of stuff for reasonable people to dislike about Political Correctness as a dogma¹, there is also something creepy about the brutal, self-righteous glee with which Mr. Z. and other conservative hosts defy all PC conventions. If it causes you real pain to hear or see something, and I make it a point to inflict that thing on you merely because I object to your reasons for finding it painful, then there’s something wrong with my sense of proportion, or my recognition of your basic humanity, or both.

THIS, TOO (And let’s be real: Spelling out a hurtful word is no improvement. In some ways it’s worse than using the word outright, since spelling it could easily be seen as implying that the people who are upset by the word are also too dumb to spell it. What’s puzzling here is that Mr. Ziegler seems much too bright and self-aware not to understand this.)

(just one person’s opinion . . .)

is a racist, I mean he is a *real* racist. I am anything but a racist, but to be called that by *him* just made my blood boil. I mean, life's too short to be working overnights for this fucking bastard." A day or two later Mr. Z. is fired, For Cause, for spelling the N-word on-air.

Mr. Z. explains that he's referring here to the constant moving around and apartment-hunting and public controversy caused by the firings. His sense of grievance and loss seems genuine. But one should also keep in mind how vital, for political talk hosts in general, is this sense of embattled persecution — by the leftist mainstream press, by slick Democratic operatives, by liberal lunatics and identity politics and PC and rampant cynical pandering. All of which provides the constant conflict required for good narrative and stimulating radio. Not, in John Ziegler's case, that any of his anger and self-pity is contrived — but they can be totally real and still function as parts of the skill set he brings to his job.

Q: It sounds like you've got serious personal reasons for disliking Political Correctness. A: "Oh my God, yes. My whole life has been ruined by it. I've lost relationships, I can't get married, I can't have kids, all because of Political Correctness. I can't put anybody else through the crap I've been through. I can't do it."

2001: While writing freelance columns for the *Philadelphia Enquirer* and *Philadelphia Daily News*, Mr. Ziegler also gets work at a small twenty-four-hour Comcast cable TV network in Philly, where he's a writer and commentator on a prime-time issues-related talk show. Although Comcast is "an evil, evil, evil company, [which] created that network for the sole purpose of giving blowjobs to politicians who vote on Comcast legislation," Mr. Z. discovers that "I'm actually really good at talk TV. I was the best thing that ever happened to this show. I actually ended up winning an Emmy, which is ironic." His problem this time is that his show's executive

A corollary possibility: The reason why the world as interpreted by many hosts is one of such thoroughgoing selfishness and cynicism and fear is that these are qualities of the talk radio industry they are part of, and they (like professionals everywhere) tend to see their industry as a reflection of the real world.

producer, who is also the wife of a senior Comcast executive, “ends up falling in love with me. She’s a complete nut job and totally unprofessional . . . a very pretty lady on the air, but it takes her about three hours to look that way.” I think she was a

Mr. Z. is consistently cruel, both on and off the air, in his remarks about women. He seems unaware of it. There’s no clear way to explain why, but one senses that his mother’s death hurt him very deeply.

very lonely person — her husband was probably fucking around.” The whole thing ends up with Mr. Z. threatening to sue for sexual harassment and negotiating an out-of-court settlement with Comcast Inc.

!?

2002: John Ziegler is hired as the mid-morning host at Clear Channel’s WHAS in Louisville, which Arbitron lists as the fifty-fifth-largest radio market in the US. According to a local paper, the host’s “stormy thirteen-month tenure in Louisville was punctuated by intrigue, outrage, controversy and litigation.” According to John Ziegler, “the whole story would make a great movie — in fact my whole life would make a great movie, but this in particular would make a great movie.” Densely compressed synopsis: For several quarters, Mr. Z.’s program is a great success in Louisville: “I’m doing huge numbers — in one Book I got a fifteen Share, which is ridiculous.” He is also involved in a very public romance with one Darcie Divita, a former LA Lakers cheerleader who is part of a morning news show on the local Fox TV affiliate. The relationship is apparently Louisville’s version of Ben & J.Lo, and its end

Here, some of John Ziegler’s specific remarks about Darcie Divita are being excised at his request. It turns out that Ms. Divita is suing both the host and WHAS — Mr. Z.’s deposition is in a few weeks.

is not amicable.” In August ‘03, prompted by callers’ questions on his regular “Ask John Anything” feature, Mr. Z. makes certain on-air comments about Darcie

Divita’s breasts, underwear, genital grooming, and libido. Part of the enduring controversy over John Ziegler’s firing, which occurs a few days later, is exactly how much those comments and/or subsequent complaints from listeners and the Louisville media had to do with it. Mr. Z.

has a long list of reasons for believing that his PD was really just looking for an excuse to can him. As for all the complaints, the host remains bitter and perplexed: (1) “The comments I made about Darcie’s physical attributes were extremely positive in nature”; (2) “Darcie had, in the past, *volunteered* information about her cleavage on my program”; (3) “I’ve gone much further with other public figures without incident . . . I mocked [Kentucky Governor] Paul Patton for his inability to bring Tina Conner to orgasm, [and] no one from management ever even mentioned it to me.”

John Ziegler on why he thinks he was hired for the Live and Local job by KFI: “They needed somebody ‘available.’”¹ And on the corporate logic behind his hiring: “It’s among

(after what Ms. Bertolucci characterizes as “a really big search around the country”)

the most bizarre things I’ve ever been involved in. To simultaneously

be fired by Clear Channel and negotiate termination in a market where I had immense value and be courted by the same company in a market where I had no current value is beyond explicable.”

Mr. Z. on talk radio as a career: “This is a terrible business. I’d

love to quit this business.” On why, then, he accepted KFI’s offer: “My current contract would be by far the toughest for them to fire me of anyplace I’ve been.”

Mr. Z. explains the scare quotes around “available” as meaning that the experimental gig didn’t offer the sort of compensation that could lure a large-market host away from another station. He will describe his current KFI salary only as “in the low six figures.”

Mr. Z. on the single most challenging thing about hosting a talk radio program: “The hardest thing is choosing what to talk about, especially in this day and age. How in the world are you supposed to know what thirty or forty thousand nameless, faceless people want to hear you talk about? Plus you’re constantly editing yourself because of PC.” Q: With all respect, your show does not exactly seem, umm, hamstrung by PC delicacy. Can you think of any recent PC-type self-editing you’ve had to do regard-

INFORMATIVE + EDITORIAL Mr. Z.'s said this on the air, too, several times. So have John & Ken. It grates. On the surface, there's something ballsy and refreshing about someone who'll flatly state "I know the bastard's guilty," but this is only if you don't really think about it. The truth is that the hosts do *not* know whether Scott Peterson is guilty. Nor do they have any special inside dope on the crime or the prosecution's case — they know nothing that everybody else who watches the news doesn't know. They just happen to watch a whole, whole lot of news.

Ideology aside, this may be the most striking thing about talk radio personalities: They are the most media-saturated Americans of all. The prep these hosts do for every show consists largely of sitting there absorbing huge quantities of mass-media news and analysis and opinion . . . then of using the Internet to access still more media.¹ Some of the results of this are

(See below.)

less ironic than surreal. John Ziegler, for instance, is so steeped in news coverage of the Peterson trial that he appears to forget that the news is inevitably partial and skewed, that there might be crucial elements of the case that are not available for public consumption. He forgets that you simply can't believe everything you see and hear and read in the press. Given the axioms of conservative talk radio and Mr. Z.'s own acuity as a media critic, this seems like a very strange thing to forget.

ing, say, this year's lurid trials? Haidl, Bryant, Jackson? Scott Peterson? A: "I'm not that interested in the Peterson story because I know he's guilty. . . . Frankly, though, I think one of the areas of the Kobe [Bryant] case that hasn't been fully talked about is the fact that, as a six-foot-eight black guy, I think most people probably presume Kobe is hung like a horse, and that that, apparently, could have been vital to the injuries that the woman allegedly incurred. And I've alluded to that on the air, but you have to be careful — as soon as you enter an area like that, red and yellow lights start going off in your brain. You start thinking, 'How can I phrase this in a way that won't get me in trouble but still allows me to tell the truth?'"¹

* * *

Compared with many talk radio hosts, John Ziegler is unusually polite to on-air callers. Which is to say that he doesn't yell at them, call them names, or hang up while they're speaking, although he does get frustrated with some calls. But there are good and bad

kinds of frustration, stimulation-wise. Hence the delicate art of call screening. The screener's little switchboard and computer console are here in the Airmix room, right up next to the studio window.

JZS producer Emiliano Limon: "There are two types of callers.

'Mondo Hernandez confirms on-record that Vince's screener-voice sounds like someone talking around a huge bong hit.

You've got your hard-core talk radio callers, who just like hearing themselves on-air" — these listeners will sometimes vary the first names and home cities they give

the screener, trying to disguise the fact that they've been calling in night after night — "and then there are the ones who just, for whatever reason, respond to the topic." Of these latter, a certain percentage are wackos, but some wackos actually make good on-air callers. Assoc. prod. and screener Vince Nicholas: "The trick is knowing what kooks to get rid of and what to let through. People that are kooky on a particular issue — some of these Zig likes; he can bust on

Vince (who is either a deep professional admirer or a titanic suck-up) states several times that John Ziegler is excellent with callers, dutifully referring to him each time as "Zig."

them and have fun with them. He likes it."

RATHER LESS EDITORIAL THAN IT MIGHT BE Thus we need to add colored lights and warnings about potential trouble to the list of stuff the professional hosts's brain must hold and sift while the on-air talk proceeds apace. But of course there is also the professed imperative of "telling the truth." Again, let's try to put aside issues of ideology, of people's various sensitivities, and of the medical realities of rape. It may be the sheer amount of tactical on-air calculation required of a host that keeps Mr. Z. from considering an obvious question: Is "the truth" the same as a coarse racial stereotype that may be on some of his listeners' minds? Would it not be closer to the real truth simply to ignore such a stereotype? Or would ignoring this stereotype smack too much of stodgy hypocrisy or PC hand-wringing? Maybe the real journalism-vs.-talk-radio conflict isn't about "responsibility" so much as it is about the specific sorts of truths one feels responsible to.

Vince isn't rude or brusque with the callers he screens out; he simply becomes more and more laconic and stoned-sounding over the headset as the person rants on, and finally just says "Whoa, gotta go." Especially obnoxious

and persistent callers can be placed on Hold at the screener's switchboard, locking up their phone until Vince decides to let them go. Those whom the screener lets through enter a different, computerized Hold system in which eight callers at a time can be kept queued up and waiting, each designated on Mr. Z.'s monitor by a different colored box displaying a first name, city, one-sentence summary of the caller's thesis, and the elapsed time waiting. The host chooses, cafeteria-style, from this array.

In his selections, Mr. Z. has an observable preference for female callers. Emiliano's explanation: "Since political talk radio is so white male-driven, it's good to get female voices in there." It turns out that this is an industry convention — the roughly 50-50 gender mix of callers one hears on most talk radio is because screeners admit a much higher percentage of female callers to the system.

One of the last things that Emiliano Limon always does before
airtime is to use the station's NexGen Audio Editing System to load
various recorded sound bites from the
day's broadcast news onto a Prophet file
that goes with the "Cut Sheet." This is a numbered list of bites avail-

(a Clear Channel product)

NexGen displays a Richterish-looking sound wave, of which all different sizes of individual bits can be highlighted and erased in order to tighten the pacing and compress the sound bite. It's different from 'Mondo's Cashbox, which tightens things automatically according to preset specs; using NexGen requires true artistry. Emiliano knows the distinctive vocal wave patterns of George W. Bush, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and certain others well enough that he can recognize them on the screen without any sound or ID. He is so good at using NexGen that he manages to make the whole high-stress Cut Sheet thing look dull.

able for tonight's
John Ziegler Show, of
which both Mr. Z.
and 'Mondo get a
copy. Each bite must
be precisely timed. It
is an intricate, exact-
ing process of edit-
ing and compilation,
during which Mr. Z.
often drums his fin-

gers and looks pointedly at his watch as the producer ignores him

and always very slowly and placidly edits and compresses and loads and has the Cut Sheet ready at the very last second. Emiliano is the sort of extremely chilled-out person who can seem to be leaning back at his station with his feet up on the Airmix table even when he isn't leaning back at all. He's wearing the *LA Times* shirt again. His own view on listener calls is that they are "overrated in talk radio," that they're rarely cogent or stimulating, but that hosts tend to be "overconcerned with taking calls and whether people are calling. Consider: This is the only type of live performance with absolutely no feedback from the audience. It's natural for the host to key in on the only real-time response he can get, which is the calls. It takes a long time with a host to get him to forget about the calls, to realize the calls have very little to do with the wider audience."

Please note that the producer manages to be interesting and authoritative while presenting all this as merely opinion. He does not, for example, ever use the word "know," even though it's an established fact that only around 0.1 percent of talk radio listeners ever call in to a program.

Vince, meanwhile, is busy at the screener's station. A lady with a heavy accent keeps calling in to say that she has vital information: A Czech newspaper has revealed that John Kerry is actually a Jew, that his grandfather changed his distinctively Jewish surname, and that this fact is being suppressed in the US media and must be exposed. Vince finally tries putting her on punitive Hold, but her line's light goes out, which signifies that the lady has a cell phone and has disengaged by simply turning it off. Meaning that she can call back again as much as she likes, and that Vince is going to have get actively rude. 'Mondo's great mild eyes rise from the log: "*Puto*, man, what's that about?" Vince, very flat and bored: "Kerry's a Jew." Emiliano: "Another big advent is the

'Mondo and Vince clearly enjoy each other, exchanging "*puto*" and "*chilango*" with brotherly ease. When Vince takes a couple days off, it becomes difficult to get 'Mondo to say anything about anything, Doritos or no.

cell phone. Before cells, you got mostly homebound invalids calling in. [Laughs.] Now you get the driving invalid.”

(4)

Historically, the two greatest ratings periods ever for KFI AM-640 have been the Gray Davis gubernatorial recall and the O.J. Simp-

Q [based on seeing some awfully high minute-counts in some people’s colored boxes on Vince’s display]: How long will callers wait to get on the air?

Emiliano Limon: “We get some who’ll wait for the whole show. [Laughs.] If they’re driving, what else do they have to do?”

Q: If a drunk driver calls in, do you have to notify the police or something?

A: “Well, this is why screening is tricky. You’ll get, say, somebody calling in saying they’re going to commit suicide — sometimes you have to refer the call. But sometimes you’re getting pranked. Keep in mind, we’re in an area with a lot of actors and actresses anxious to practice their craft. [Now his feet really are up on the table.] I remember we had Ross Perot call in one time, it sounded just like him, and actually he really was due to be on the show but not for an hour, and now he’s calling saying he needs to be on right now because of a schedule change. Very convincing, sounded just like him, and I had to go ‘Uh, Mr. Perot, what’s the name of your assistant press liaison?’ Because I’d just talked to her a couple days prior. And he’s [doing vocal impression]: ‘Listen here, you all going to put me on the air or not?’ And I’m: ‘Umm, Mr. Perot, if you understand the question, please answer the question.’ And he hangs up. [Laughs.] But you would have *sworn* this was Ross Perot.”

son trial. Now, in early June ’04, the tenth anniversary of the Ron Goldman–Nicole Brown Simpson murders is approaching, and O.J. starts to pop up once again on the cultural radar. And Mr. John Ziegler happens to be more passionate about the O.J. Simpson thing than maybe any other single issue, and feels that he “know[s] more about the

Some of his personal reasons for this have been made clear. But the Simpson case also rings a lot of professional cherries for Mr. Ziegler as a host: sports, celebrity, race, racism, PC and the “race card,” the legal profession, the US justice system, sex, misogyny, miscegenation, and a lack of shame and personal accountability that Mr. Z. sees as just plain evil.

case than anyone not directly involved,” and is able to be almost unbearably stimulating about O.J. Simpson and the utter indubitability of his guilt. And the confluence of the murders’ anniversary, the case’s tabloid importance to the nation and business importance to KFI, and its deep personal resonance for Mr. Z. helps produce what at first looks like the absolute Monster talk radio story of the month.

On June 3, in the third segment of the *John Ziegler Show*’s second hour, after lengthy discussions of the O.J. anniversary and the Michael Jackson case, Mr. Z. takes a phone call from one “Daryl in Temecula,” an African-American gentleman who is “absolutely astounded they let a Klansman on the radio this time of night.” The call, which lasts seven minutes and eighteen seconds and runs well over the :46 break,¹ ends with John Ziegler telling the audience “That’s as angry as I’ve ever gotten in the history of my career”; and Vince Nicholas, looking awed and spent at his screener’s station, pronounces the whole thing “some of the best talk radio I ever heard.”

This annoys Alan LaGreen of Airwatch enough to cause him to snap at 'Mondo on an off-air channel (mainly because Alan LaGreen now ends up having to be the KFI Traffic Center during an interval in which he's supposed to be the Traffic Center for some country station); plus it pushes 'Mondo's skills with the Cashbox right to their limit in the hour's segment four.

Certain portions of the call are untranscribable because they consist mainly of Daryl and Mr. Z. trying to talk over each other. Daryl’s core points appear to be (1) that Mr. Z. seems to spend all his time talking about black men like Kobe and O.J. and Michael Jackson — “Don’t white people commit crimes?” — and (2) that O.J. was, after all, found innocent in a court of law, and yet Mr. Z. keeps “going on about ‘He’s guilty, he’s guilty —’”

“He *is*,” the host inserts.

Daryl: “He was acquitted, wasn’t he?”

“That makes no difference as to whether or not he did it.”¹

“O.J., Kobe: You just thrive on these black guys.”

It turns out to be impossible, off the air, to Q&A Mr. Ziegler about his certainty re O.J.’s guilt. Bring up anything that might sound like reservations, and Mr. Z. won’t say a word — he’ll just angle his head way over to the side and look at you as if he can’t tell whether you’re trying to jerk him around or you’re simply out of your mind.

It is here that Mr. Z. begins to pick up steam. “Oh yeah, Daryl, right, I’m a racist. As a matter of fact, I often say ‘You know what? I just wish another black guy would commit a crime

It’s different if you ask about O.J. Simpson *l’homme*, or about specific details of his personality and marriage and lifestyle and golf game and horrible crimes. For instance, John Ziegler has a detailed and fairly plausible-sounding theory about O.J.’s motive for the murders, which boils down to Simpson’s jealous rage over his ex-wife’s having slept with Mr. Marcus Allen, a former Heisman Trophy winner and current NFL star. Mr. Z. can defend this theory with an unreproducibly long index of facts, names, and media citations, all of which you can ask him about if you keep your face and tone neutral and simply write down what he says without appearing to quibble or object or in any way question the host’s authority on the subject.

(as of ’94)

because I hate black people so much.”

Daryl: “I think you do have more to talk about on black guys; I think that’s more

‘news’” . . . which actually would be kind of an interesting point to explore, or at least address; but Mr. Z. is now stimulated:

(For instance, you cannot ask something like whether Nicole’s liaison with Marcus Allen is a documented fact or just part of Mr. Z.’s personal theory — this will immediately terminate the Q&A.)

“As a matter of fact, Daryl, oftentimes when we go through who’s committed the crimes, there are times when the white people who control the media, we get together and go ‘Oh, we can’t talk about that one, because that was a white guy.’ This is all a big conspiracy, Daryl. Except, to be serious for a second, Daryl, what really upsets me, assuming you’re a black guy, is that you ought to be *ten* times more pissed off at O.J. Simpson than I am, because you know why?”

Daryl: “You can’t tell me how I should feel. As a forty-year-old black man, I’ve seen racism for forty years.”

Mr. Z. is starting to move his upper body back and forth excitedly in his chair. “I bet you have. I bet you have. And here’s why you ought to be pissed off: Because, out of all the black guys who

In case memories of the trial have dimmed, Mr. Z. is referring here to the defense team’s famous playing of the race card, the suggestion that the LAPD wanted to frame O.J. because he was a miscegenating black, etc.

deserved to get a benefit of the doubt because of the history of racism, which is real in this country, and which is insidious, the one guy — *the one guy* — who gets the benefit of

all of that pain and suffering over a hundred years of history in this country is the one guy who deserves it less than anybody else, who sold his race out, who tried to talk white, who only had white friends, who had his ass kissed all over the place because he decided he

TINY EDITORIAL CORRECTION Umm, four hundred?

John Ziegler is now screeching — except that’s not quite the right word. Pitch and volume have both risen (‘Mondo’s at the channel 7 controls trying to forestall peaking), but his tone is meant to connote a mix of incredulity and outrage, with the same ragged edge to his stressed syllables as — no kidding — Jackson’s and Sharpton’s. Daryl of Temecula, meantime, has been silenced by the sheer passion of the host’s soliloquy . . . and we should note that Daryl really has stopped speaking; it’s not that Mr. Z. has turned off the volume on the caller’s line (which is within his power, and which some talk radio hosts do a lot, but Mr. Z. does not treat callers this way).

wasn’t really a black guy, who was the first person in the history of this country ever accepted by white America, who was actually able

(voice breaking a bit here)

to do commercial endorsements because he pretended to be white, and *that’s the guy? That’s the guy?*

That’s the guy who gets the benefit of that history, and that doesn’t piss you off, *that doesn’t piss you off?*” And then an abrupt

Mr. Z. means first *black* person — he’s now so impassioned he’s skipping words. It never once sounds like babbling, though.

decrecendo: “Daryl, I can assure you that the last thing I am is racist on this.¹ This is the last guy who should benefit.”

EDITORIAL OPINION Again, it’s nothing so simple as that he doth protest too much; but it would be less discomfiting if Mr. Z. didn’t feel he could so totally *assure* Daryl of this — i.e., if Mr. Z. weren’t so certain that his views are untainted by racism.² Not to mention that the assurance resonates strangely against all the host’s vented spleen about a black man’s “selling out his race” by “pretending to be white.”

Not, again, that Mr. Z. wears a pointy hood — but he seems weirdly unconscious of the fact that Simpson’s ostensible betrayal of his race is something that only a member of that race really has

(Is it wimpy or white-guiltish to believe that we’re all at least a little bit racist in some of our attitudes or beliefs, or at any rate that it’s not totally impossible that we are?)

the right³ to get angry about. No? If a white person gets angry about a black person’s “pretending to be white,” doesn’t the anger come off far less as

(Better than “the right” here might be “the rhetorical authority.”)

sympathy with the person’s betrayed race than as antipathy for somebody who’s trying to crash a party he doesn’t

belong at? (Or is Mr. Z. actually to be admired here for not giving a damn about how his anger comes off, for not buying into any of that it’s-okay-for-a-black-person-to-say-it-but-not-okay-for-a-white-person stuff? And if so, why is it that his “selling out”-complaints seem creepy and obtuse instead of admirable [although, of course, how his complaints “seem” might simply depend on the politics and sensitivities of the individual listener (such that the whole thing becomes not so much stimulating as exhausting)]?)

* * *

And then June 4, the night following the Daryl interchange, turns out to be a climactic whirlwind of production challenges, logistical brinksmanship, meta-media outrage, Simpsonian minutia, and Monster-grade stimulation. As is SOP, it starts around 7:00 PM⁴ in

KFI’s large central prep room, which is where all the local hosts and their producers come in early to prepare for their shows.

The standard of professionalism in talk radio is one hour of prep for each hour on the air. But Mr. Ziegler, whose specialty in media criticism entails extra-massive daily consumption of Internet and cable news, professes to be “pretty much always prepping,” at least during the times he’s not asleep (3:00–10:00 AM) or playing golf (which since he’s moved to LA he does just about every day, quite possibly by himself — all he’ll say about it is “I have no life here”).

The prep room, which station management sometimes refers to as the production office, is more or less the nerve center of KFI, a large, complexly shaped space perimetered with battered little canted desks and hutches and two-drawer file cabinets supporting tabletops of composite planking. There are beat-up computers and pieces of sound equipment and funny Scotch-taped bits of office humor (such as, e.g., pictures with staffers' heads Photoshopped onto tabloid celebrities' bodies). Like the studio and Airmix, the

prep room is also a DPH-grade mess: Half the overhead fluorescents are either out or flickering nauseously, and the gray carpet crunches underfoot,

There is also another large TV in the prep room, this one wired to a TiVo digital recording system so that anything from the day's cable news can be tagged, copied, and loaded into NexGen and Prophet. The TV gets only one channel at a time, but apparently certain cable stuff can also be accessed on one of the prep room computers by a producer who knows what he's doing.

and the wastebaskets are all towering fire hazards, and many of the tabletops are piled with old books and newspapers. Plus there

Examples of volumes pulled at random from the tabletops' clutter: Dwight Nichols's *God's Plans for Your Finances*, the Hoover Institution's *Education and Capitalism: How Overcoming Our Fear of Markets and Economics Can Improve America's Schools*, and Louis Barajas's *The Latino Journey to Financial Greatness*.

are a great many USPS mail containers (the cloudy-plastic ones that say **FEDERAL PROPERTY** and list penalties for unauthorized use) stacked up at various points all over the room, filled with various old

tapes, VHS cassettes, cast-off clothing, hats, nonsequential sheets of paper — it's unclear whether all this is stuff that's being thrown out, or moved to the new facility, or what. One window, which is hot to the touch, over-

One example of the ways in which the prep room's condition is actually kind of entertaining: On the wall over the TiVo television is a standard newsroom row of clocks for different parts of the world — Jerusalem, London, Karachi, Kabul, Tokyo. Except most of the clocks' batteries are low, and the times are way off. Instead of replacing the batteries, someone has put a very precise homemade sign under each clock: "LONDON, ENGLAND: + 8 HOURS," "TOKYO, JAPAN: + 17 HOURS" . . . which of course renders the clocks themselves pointless.

looks KFI's gated parking lot and security booth and the office of a Korean podiatrist across the street.

Overall, the layout and myriad tactical functions of the prep room are too complicated to try to describe this late in the game. At one end, it gives onto the KFI newsroom, which is a whole galaxy unto itself. At the other, comparatively uncluttered end is a set of thick, distinguished-looking doors leading off into the offices of the Station Manager, Director of Marketing & Promotions, Program Director, and so on, with also a semiattached former closet for the PD's assistant, a very kindly and eccentric lady who's been at KFI for over twenty years and wears a high-tech headset that one begins, only over time, to suspect isn't really connected to anything.

(who's usually long gone by the time the JZS staff starts prepping)

There are three main challenges facing tonight's *John Ziegler Show*. One is that Emiliano Limon is off on certain personal business that he doesn't want described, and therefore Mr. Vince Nicholas is soloing as producer for the very first time. Another is that last night's on-air exchange with Daryl of Temecula is the type of intensely stimulating talk radio event that cries out for repetition and commentary; Mr. Z. wants to rerun certain snippets of the call in a very precise order so that he can use them as jumping-off points for detailing his own "history with O.J." and explaining why he's so incandescently passionate about the case.

The third difficulty is that Simpson's big anniversary Q&A with Ms. Katie Couric is airing tonight on NBC's *Dateline*, and the cuts

There's a strong oral subtheme to John Ziegler's distaste for these tenth-anniversary tête-à-têtes. When a Fox promo comes on for Greta Van Susteren's own O.J. interview, Mr. Z. repeatedly shouts in a deep announcer voice: "Monday at ten: Greta sucks O.J.'s cock!" making everyone in the prep room nervous because they're not sure whether or how hard they should laugh.

and discussions of the Daryl call are going to have to be interwoven with excerpts from what Mr. Z. refers to several times as "Katie's blow-job interview." An additional complication is

that *Dateline* airs in Los Angeles from 8:00 to 10:00 PM, and it has also now run teasers for stories on the health hazards of the Atkins Diet and the dangerously lax security in US hotels. Assuming that *Dateline* waits and does the O.J. interview last (which it is clearly in the program's business interests to do), then the interview's bits will have to be recorded off TiVo, edited on NexGen, loaded onto Prophet, and queued up for the Cut Sheet all very quickly, since Mr. Z.'s opening segment starts at 10:06 and it's hard to fiddle with logistics once his show's under way.

Thus Vince spends 7:00–8:00 working two side-by-side computers, trying simultane-

"You're going to need to kick some ass tonight, bud," Mr. Z. tells Vince as he highlights bites in a transcript of Daryl's call, eliciting something close to a salute.

ously to assemble the cuts from last night's call, load an MSNBC interview with Nicole Brown Simpson's sister directly into NexGen, and track down a Web transcript of tonight's *Dateline* (which on the East Coast has already aired) so that he and Mr. Z. can choose and record bites from the Couric thing in real time. 'Mondo, who is back board-opping the ISDN feed of 7:00–10:00's *Phil Hendrie Show*, nevertheless comes in from Airmix several times to stand behind Vince at the terminals, ostensibly to see what's going on but really to lend moral support. 'Mondo's shadow takes up almost half the prep room's east wall.

John Ziegler, who is understandably quite keyed up, spends a lot of the pre-*Dateline* time standing around with an extremely pretty News department intern named Kyra, watching the MSNBC exchange with half an eye while doing his trademark stress-relieving thing of holding two golf balls and trying to align the dimples so that one ball stays balanced atop the other. He is

Nobody ever ribs Mr. Z. about the manual golf ball thing vis-à-vis, say, Captain Queeg's famous ball bearings. It is not that he wouldn't get the allusion; Mr. Z. is just not the sort of person one kids around with this way. After one mid-May appearance on *Scarborough Country* re some San Diego schoolteachers getting suspended for showing the Nick Berg decapitation video in class, a certain unnamed person tried joshing around with him, in an offhand and light-hearted way, about a supposed very small facial tic that had kept appearing unbeknownst to John Ziegler whenever he'd used the phrase "wussification of America" on-camera; and Mr. Z. was, let's just say, unamused, and gave the person a look that chilled him to the marrow.

wearing a horizontally striped green-and-white golf shirt, neatly pressed black shorts, and gleaming New Balance sneakers. He keeps saying he cannot *believe* they're even giving Simpson airtime. No one points out that his shock seems a bit naive given the business realities of network TV news, realities about which John Ziegler is normally very savvy and cynical. Kyra does venture to observe, quietly, that the Simpson thing draws even bigger ratings than today's Scott Peterson, who —

"Don't even compare the two," Mr. Z. cuts her off. "O.J.'s just in his own world in terms of arrogance."

The designated *JZS* intern, meanwhile, is at the prep room's *John & Ken Show* computer, (a UC-Irvine undergrad, name omitted) working (in Vince's stead)

on a comic review feature called "What Have We Learned This Week?," which is normally a Friday standard but which there may or may not be time for tonight. At 7:45 PM it is still 90 degrees out, and smoggy. The windows' light makes people look greenish in the areas where the room's fluorescents are low. A large spread of take-out chicken sits uneaten

and expensively congealing. Mr. Z.'s intern spends nearly an hour composing

(negotiated ahead of time with Vince as the price for letting a mute, unobtrusive outside party observe tonight's prep)

'Mondo eventually starts taking plates of food back into Airmix with him.

a mock poem to Ms. Amber Frey, the mistress to whom Scott Peterson

allegedly read romantic verse over the phone. The poem's final version, which is "Roses are red,/Violets are blue./If I find out you're pregnant,/I'll drown your ass, too," takes such a long time because of confusions about just how to conjugate "drown" as a future contingent.

"And to top it off," Mr. Z. is telling Kyra as her smile becomes

(meaning the Bundy Drive crime scene, which Mr. Z. has evidently walked every inch of)

brittle and she starts trying to edge away, "to top it off, he leaves Nicole's body in a place where the most likely people to find it are his *children*. It's just a fluke that couple found her. I don't know if you've ever walked by there, but it's really dark at night, and they

were in a, like [gesturing, one golf ball in each hand], cave formation out at the front.”

Sure enough, *Dateline* runs the anti-Atkins story first. For reasons involving laser printers and a special editing room off the on-air news cubicle, there’s suddenly a lot of running back and forth.

’Mondo can neither confirm nor deny whether these supposedly outraged uninitiated callers are maybe *themselves* fakes, just more disembodied voices that Hendrie and his staff are creating, and thus whether maybe the real dupes are us, the initiated audience, for believing that the callers are genuine dupes. ’Mondo has not, he confesses, ever considered this possibility, but he agrees that it would constitute “a serious mind-fuck” for KFI listeners.

In Airmix, ’Mondo is eating Koo Koo Roo’s chicken while watching *Punk’d*, an MTV show where friends of young celebrities collude with the producers to make the celebrities think they’re in terrible legal trouble. ’Mondo is very careful about eating anywhere near the mixing board. It’s always around 60 degrees in this room. On the board’s channel 6 and the overhead speakers, Phil Hendrie is pretending to mediate between apoplectic callers and a man who’s filing sexual-harassment charges against female coworkers who’ve gotten breast implants. For unknown reasons, a waist-high pile of disconnected computer keyboards has appeared in the Airmix room’s north corner, just across the wall from KFI’s Imaging studio, whose door is always double-locked.

It is only right and proper that John Ziegler gets the spot directly in front of the prep room’s TV, with everyone else’s office chairs sort of fanned out to either side behind him. Seated back on his tailbone with his legs out and ankles crossed, Mr. Z. is able simultaneously to watch *Dateline*’s are-you-in-danger-at-luxury-hotels segment, to hear and help rearrange Vince’s cuts from the MSNBC exchange, and to highlight those parts of the O.J.–Katie Couric transcript that he wants to make absolutely

(which Vince was able to find online, but which had to be specially reconfigured and printed in order to restore the original line breaks and transcript format of, this being one cause of all the running around between 8:00 and 8:30, as well as another reason why it took the JZS intern so long to finish his quatrain, which he is even now fidgeting in his chair and trying to decide on just the right moment to show to Mr. Z.)

sure to have Vince load from TiVo into Prophet when the greedy bastards at *Dateline* finally deign to air the interview. It must be said, too, that Vince is an impressive surprise as a producer — he's a veritable blur of all-business competence and technical savvy. There are none of Emiliano's stoic shrugs, *sotto* wisecracks, or passive-aggressive languor. Nor, tonight, is Vince's own slackerish stoner persona anywhere in view. It's the same type of change as when you place a fish back in the water and it seems to turn electric in your hand. Watching Vince and the host work so well as a team induces the night's first strange premonitory jolt: Emiliano's days are numbered.

The broadcast studio is strange when no one's in here. Through the soundproof window, 'Mondo's head looks small and far-away as he works

Sure enough, within just weeks Emiliano Limon will have left KFI for a job at New York's WCBS.

his levels. It seems like a lonely, cloistered place in which to try to be passionate about the world. Mr. Z.'s padded host chair is old and lists slightly to port; it's the same chair that John Kobylt sits in, and

(It is a medical commonplace that bananas are good for ulcers.)

mornings' Bill Handel, and maybe even Dr. Laura back in the day. The studio wastebaskets have been

emptied, but the banana scent still lingers. It might simply be that John and/or Ken eats a lot of bananas during afternoon drive. All the studio's television monitors are on, though none is tuned to NBC. On the Fox News monitor up over the digital clock, Sean Hannity and Susan Estrich are rerunning the Iowa Caucuses clip of Howard Dean screaming at the start of his concession speech. They play the scream over and over. Ms. Estrich is evidently filling in on *Hannity and Colmes*. "They have hatred for George W. Bush, but they don't have ideas," Sean Hannity says. "Where are the ideas on the left? Where is the thinking liberal?" Susan Estrich says, "I don't know. I don't have a full-time job on TV, so I can't tell you."

All multi-tasking ends when *Dateline*, after two teases and an extra-long spot break, finally commences the interview segment. It

is Katie Couric and O.J. Simpson and Simpson's attorney in a living room that may or may not be real. One tends to forget how unusually, screen-fillingly large O.J.'s head is.

Vince's broad back is to the TV and everyone around it as he uploads real-time TiVo feed into NexGen and edits per his host's written specs.

Mr. Ziegler is now angled forward with his elbows on his knees and his fingers steepled just under his nose. Although he does, every so often, let loose with a "Katie Couric *sucks!*" or "Katie Couric should be fucking *shot!*," for the most part a person seated on the host's far flank has to watch his upper face — his right eye's and nostril's dilations — to discern when Mr. Z.'s reacting strongly or thinking about how he'll respond to some specific bit of Simpson's "sociopathic BS" when it's his turn to talk.

It's odd: If you've spent some time watching him perform in the studio, you can predict just what John Ziegler will look like, how his head and arms will move and eyes fill with life as he says certain things it's all but sure he'll say on-air tonight, such as "I have some very, very strong opinions about how this interview was conducted," and "Katie Couric is a disgrace to journalism everywhere," and that O.J.'s self-presentation was "delusional and arrogant beyond all belief," and that the original trial jury was "a collection of absolute nimrods," and that to believe in Simpson's innocence, as Ms. Couric says a poll shows some 70 percent of African-Americans still do, "you have to be either crazy, deluded, or stupid — there are no other explanations."

All of this John Ziegler will and does say on his program . . . although what no one in the prep room now can know is that tonight's second-hour Airwatch flash on the imminent death of Ronald W. Reagan will cut short Mr. Z.'s analysis and require a total, on-the-fly change of both subject and mood.

(who is in so many ways the efficient cause, ideologically and statutorily, of today's partisan media, and whose passing will turn out to be June's true Monster . . .)

To be fair, though, there truly are some dubious, unsettling things about the *Dateline* interview, such as for instance that NBC

The only bit of genuine fun is during the interview's first commercial break, when the opening ad is for Hertz — *Hertz*, of O.J.-running-through-airports-spots fame — and Mr. Z. throws his head back and asks if he's really seeing what he's seeing. Even Vince turns around in his chair to look. Hertz's placement of an ad here is a brilliant, disgusting, unforgettable piece of meta-metamedia marketing. It's impossible not to laugh . . . and yet Mr. Z. doesn't. (Neither do the room's two interns, though that's only because they're too young to get the meta-reference.)

has acceded to O.J. Simpson's "No Editing" condition for appearing, which used to be a total taboo for serious news organizations. Or that O.J. gets to sit there looking cheery and unguarded even

COULD BE PERCEIVED AS PARTLY EDITORIAL On the other hand, lamentable or no, this looks to be just another consequence of fragmentation/competition in the news industry, where mere access to newsmakers becomes the prize to bid for. Consider it from NBC's point of view: Had *Dateline* refused to cede editorial control, some other news show would have granted it and snagged O.J. for prime time. After all, since journalistic integrity is pretty clearly another "public good," simple business logic dictates that NBC underinvest in that integrity and do whatever's necessary to get O.J. onto *Dateline* for its advertisers. It's the good old Free Market in action.

(given, of course, that broadcast news is now understood as just a for-profit business like any other)

though he has his lawyer almost in his lap; or that most of Katie Couric's questions turn out to be Larry King-size fluffballs; or that O.J. Simpson responds to one of her few substantive questions — about 1994's eerie,

slow-motion Bronco chase and its bearing on how O.J.'s case is still perceived — by harping on the fact that the chase "never ever, in three trials that I had, it never came up," as if that had anything to do with whatever his behavior in the Bronco really signified (and at which non-answer, and Ms. Couric's failure to press or follow up, Mr. Z. moans and smears his hand up and down over his face). Or that O.J.'s cheerful expression never changes when Katie Couric, leaning forward and speaking with a delicacy that's either decent or obscene, inquires whether his children ever ask him about the

EDITORIALIZING, OR JUST STATING THE OBVIOUS? Plus of course there's the creepy question of why O.J. Simpson is doing a murder-anniversary TV interview at all. What does he possibly stand to gain from sitting there on-camera and letting tens of millions of people search his big face for guilt or remorse? Why subject himself to America's ghoulish fascination? And make no mistake — it is fascinating. The interview and face are riveting television entertainment. It's almost impossible to look away, or not to feel that special kind of guilty excitement in the worst, most greedy and indecent parts of yourself. You can really feel it: This is why drivers slow down to gape at accidents, why reporters put mikes in the faces of bereaved relatives, why the Haidl gang-rape trial is a hit single that merits heavy play, why the cruelest forms of reality TV and tabloid news and talk radio generate such numbers. But that doesn't mean the fascination is good, or even feels good. Aren't there parts of ourselves that are just better left unfed? If it's true that there are, and that we sometimes choose what we wish we wouldn't, then there is a very serious unanswered question at the heart of KFI's sweeper: "More *Stimulating*" of what?

JUST THE SORT OF PARALYTIC DITHERING THAT MAKES THE MORAL CLARITY OF
"WE'RE BETTER THAN THEY ARE" SO APPEALING

Is this not a crucial part of Minow's old distinction between what interests us and what's truly in our interests — that there are parts of people that we should choose, as a community, not to cater to and gratify and strengthen?

But what if it's good sound business to cater to those parts? Then what? Government regulation? Of which industries, by exactly whom, and based on what criteria? And what about the First Amendment?

For instance, it's troubling that her delivery is that of someone who's choosing her words with great care, when clearly the words have already been chosen and the question scripted. Which would seem to mean she's acting.

crime. And when someone in the arc of chairs around John Ziegler says, almost to himself, that the one pure thing to hope for here is that Simpson's kids believe he's innocent, Mr. Z. gives a snort of reply and states, very flatly, "They know, and he knows they know, that he did it." To which, in KFI's prep room, the best response would probably be compassion, empathy. Because one can almost feel it: what a bleak and merciless world this host lives in — believes, nay, knows for an absolute *fact* he lives in. I'll take doubt.

(It goes without saying that this is just one person's opinion.)

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