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Shock Jocks and their Legacy: Introduction

Joy Elizabeth Hayes and Sharon Zechowski

What is the current status of shock radio and what legacies has it left for U.S. media culture in the 21st century? The four articles included here argue that while the format seems to have declined since its peak in the 1990s, it continues to flourish in a new “political shock” format and in the broader sexualization or “Sternification” of mainstream culture. Articles by Joy Elizabeth Hayes, Dana Gravesen and Sharon Zechowski focus on shock jock Howard Stern, while articles by Zack Stiegler and Michael R. Kramer examine the cases of Michael Savage and Don Imus respectively. Together, these contributors examine the theoretical, legal, political and discursive dimensions of shock radio as it has transformed over the last two decades.

Despite its significance in the history of U.S. radio broadcasting and culture more broadly, shock radio has received little scholarly attention, with the exception of important work by Susan Douglas (1999), Robert Hilliard and Michael Keith (2007), and a handful of other scholars. While the shock jock format is most strongly associated with Howard Stern, other national and regional practitioners include Don Imus, Oppie and Anthony, Bubba the Love Sponge, Mancow Muller, and Tom Likus. Shock jocks drew on a long tradition of intimate and aggressive talk over the radio and attracted largely male audiences with self-consciously vulgar jokes, racist and sexist commentary, and talk about sex, bodily functions, culture and politics (Douglas, 1999). Stern and other shock jocks exemplified a rejection of respectable, middle-class masculinity and a celebration of an uninhibited “boy-man” identity (Cross, 2008, p. 6; Douglas, 1999).

The emergence of shock – and talk radio more broadly – in the 1980s was the product of a major reorganization and reinvention of radio broadcasting in the post-war period (Douglas, 1999). In fact, the explosion of talk radio was not just an American phenomenon, but a global process tied to large-scale changes such as the spread of automobiles, mobile phones, and the rise of large urban centers with ever-growing commute times. In the U.S. context, a number of economic, political, and social factors also influenced the rise of talk and shock radio. Along with a general sense of political alienation and economic dislocation that drew audiences to radio talk, Douglas identifies a backlash against the feminist movement as key to the explosion of “macho populism” on the air (Douglas, 1999, p. 293).

Douglas also points to technological and regulatory changes that fed the rise of talk radio. In particular, the use of satellite technology for program distribution reduced the cost of talk programming and encouraged national syndication (Douglas, 1999). At the same time, deregulation, culminating in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, both reflected and encouraged industry concentration (Fairchild, 1999). Industry concentration created radio conglomerates like Infinity Broadcasting (now CBS Radio) that nurtured the political talk and shock jock genres as profitable formats for national syndication (Soley, 2007).

Between the mid-1980s and mid-2000s, shock jocks drew large audiences in major U.S. radio markets. By 2010, however – when talk radio finally beat out country to become the nation’s most popular radio format – most shock jocks had left radio for satellite broadcasting, the Internet, and other media (Hayes & Gravesen, 2013). Despite the central role that shock jocks played in the talk radio revolution, they ultimately

became victims not only of the FCC, but of their own success in normalizing their once-shocking radio content.

As these collected essays suggest, shock radio both reflected and promoted a media culture increasingly comfortable with explicit sexual content and bodily functions that were once considered indecent and beyond the pale. How and why did shock radio act as a cultural bellwether over the last twenty years? How did mainstream media respond to shock radio, and how did shock jocks transition to satellite radio, the Internet and other media? What is the face of shock radio in the 2010s, and what is left for shock radio to do in the current environment? The following studies answer these questions and reflect on the legacy of shock radio for contemporary media practices, and for our broader cultural and political landscape.

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