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Talk radio popular, controversial

Brian Womack
Oregon Daily Emerald

It's been blamed for everything from the Republican win-
nings in November to misinformation among the masses.

It's talk radio. And the contro-
versies surrounding it have been
matched only by its popularity.

Rush Limbaugh, the national-
ly-syndicated talk show host,
boasts an audience of 20 million
a week with five million listen-
ing every time he opens his
mouth to speak, according to Kit
Carson, Limbaugh's chief of
staff.

As the son of former President
Ronald Reagan, Mike Reagan
can boast being number one in
the Seattle market for the 25 to
54 age bracket when he gets
behind the mic for his national-
ly-syndicated show, he said.

However, most listeners
under the age of 25 don't listen
to the medium, yet there are
signs that it could be changing.

Talk radio is something typi-
cally listened to by the older
generation. A national survey of
the listeners of news/talk radio
released in 1991 by the Station
Resource Group said the median
age for a news/talk format sta-
tion was about 57.

The survey also found that
among 18 to 24-year-olds, about
5 percent listened to AM radio
as opposed to FM.

Alan Stavitsky, associate pro-
fessor of journalism at the Uni-
versity, said the AM dial, where
most talk stations are located,
has about one-fourth of the mar-
ket while the FM dial carries
about three-fourths of the mar-
ket.

The format for the shows are
aimed at older listeners which
draws in advertisers seeking
those audiences, Reagan said.

Jerry Allen, program director
at KPNW (1120 AM), said,
"Teenagers listen only to music
[on the FM dial]."

He added that as listeners
grow older, the number of lis-
teners increases.

Bill Gallagher, a politically
left of center radio host, said he
has noticed the same trend.
"People 18 to 30 are beer

**TALK
RADIO**

drinkers,
and [the
stations]
are sell-
ing
scotch."

He
said
when he
reads the
*Rolling
Stone* to

find out what younger readers
are thinking, he doesn't see too
many of the issues he discusses
on his show. However, the num-
ber of males listening to his
show in the younger age brack-
et are increasing somewhat.
About one-tenth of his audience
is college-age [18-24], he said.

Stavitsky said AM radio
hopes to draw younger listeners
by "cleaning up its technology
act." For example, stereo for the
AM band has cleared regulatory
approval, he said.

"They want you [younger lis-
teners]," Stavitsky said.

According to Reagan, the con-
trovery surrounding the subject
of talk radio has given rise to
higher number of listeners to his
show.

"They heard about the phe-
nomena of talk radio, tuned in
and stayed, if they liked it," he
said.

Contributing to this phenome-
na has been the criticism the
medium has received. Stavitsky
said because of talk radio's
reliance on entertainment, prob-
lems with inaccuracies can arise.

"The problem is that the sub-
ject matter [on the shows] is
public affairs in a sort of enter-
tainment program," he said.
"Frankly, a lot of opportunities
for inaccuracies arise. Some of
Rush's critics have been on him
for playing fast and loose with
the facts.

"You've got people who
aren't trained as journalists who
are dealing in public affairs," he
said. "Not to sound elitist, but
when you cross that line and
you're talking about public
affairs, you need to be responsi-
ble and accurate in your treat-
ment of that. Many talk hosts are
not."

"Entertainment is a factor of
the Rush Limbaugh program,"

Carson said. "A call on a talk
show is like a song." He said
good calls bring more listeners
in the same way popular songs
do.

"Rush has said if he is found
to be in error he will start off the
program [acknowledging it]," he
said. "He does not make things
up because he can't."

Also, he said that with the
thousands of hours that Lim-
baugh is on the air, inaccuracies
are bound to arise. He said that's
why he claims to be a few points
shy of 100 percent accurate.

Like many other radio talk
show hosts, Limbaugh is a con-
servative. In fact, about two-
thirds of the hosts are conserva-
tive, according to a May 26, *USA
Today* article.

Marvin Kalb, a Harvard pro-
fessor and former CBS reporter,
said several reasons account for
the move to the right in talk
radio.

"There is a shift throughout
the country to a less pro-govern-
ment attitude," Kalb said. "Con-
servatives tend to be less pro-
government. Talk show hosts
are conservative on that issue."

Kalb sees Limbaugh as impor-
tant to talk radio as well.

"The rise of Limbaugh made
many Limbaughs who hoped to
pattern his success," he said.
"They sounded like him
whether they believed it or not."

He said another reason is a ris-
ing distrust of the "mainstream
press" by both the public and
politicians. Politicians saw this
new alternative media, talk
radio, as a way to get their mes-
sage out.

Today, this medium contin-
ues to be a substantial forum for
voicing opinion although its
future is in question.

Gallagher sees talk radio's
popularity continuing to grow.
He said it may plateau for a
while, but will expand in its
popularity as more people enter
the older age bracket.

Allen disagrees, however.

"Talk radio is riding a high
right now," he said. "I don't
think it will always be this
strong though."

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