

**THE BLOG**

Either Imus Goes, Or Gonzales Goes

By Marty Kaplan

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The most important thing to know about Don Imus is that he's a cash cow for Viacom and General Electric. Or was, until his advertisers began peeling away. The only reason that shock jocks are on the air in the first place is that people pay attention to them. They - we - lend our ears and eyeballs to Imus and his ilk because their outrageousness amuses us. A merely curmudgeonly cowboy would not pull big numbers, and neither the political class nor the punditocracy would return his bookers' calls. What makes the powerful kiss his ring, and what makes people tune in, is how badboy - how rude, disrespectful, licking-the-razor - Imus is. Clearly, large audiences like to gasp at what he gets away with, and CBS and NBC have been champs at spinning those OMG's into ka-ching.

The same could be said of the envelope-pushing by Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Michael Savage and the dozens of other circus acts in the infotainment freak show. Their *effect* may be to debase discourse, inflame prejudice, sow ignorance, exculpate criminality, incite rancor, ruin reputations, and stoke the right-wing base - but their effect is not their job. Their *job* is to make money for the corporations that employ them. We may revile them for being Rove's toadies, but we're chumps if we ignore how relentlessly the companies that employ them monetize their noxious shtick.

Those conglomerates are not in the news business, or the public interest business, or the patriotism business. They're in the profit business. Imus, Idol - it's all "product" to them, content for the pipeline, means toward Nielsen ends, grist for the Arbitron mill. Yes, good, thoughtful, creative people work there, too, but it's the feces-flingers who rack up the really big numbers, the kind that command the priciest ad buys.

Outrage artists will say whatever they can, until they can't. For the last couple of decades, the It words among programmers have been *edge* and *attitude*. The desired demo - the 18-to-34s - is said to love irreverence. Sometimes it's brilliant (South Park), sometimes it's pathetic (the Ho-man), but the media companies could care less about the critical kudos or social opprobrium that may come with the terrain. As long as the government fines are tolerable, as long as the advertisers covet those consumers, there's no civic storm they can't weather.

The next best thing to the outrage demo is the meta-outrage demo. People are as avid for coverage of Imus's groveling, and of the journalistic fraternity's granting him absolution, as they are to hear his ho-talk. As long as this freak show, or the one in the Bahamas, or the next one, slouching towards Burbank, waiting to born, captures and

holds the audience's attention, there's no need to give Alberto Gonzales more than cursory coverage, no need to interrupt our *gambling-in-Casablanca!* sanctimony with details of the silent coup that has abrogated the Constitution.

Imagine if the audience's appetite for outrage extended to the dying of American democracy. Imagine if media bosses believed that we're insatiable for information about the Republican attempt to rig the '08 election by politicizing the Justice Department and prosecuting phony voter fraud. Imagine if the same kind of blanket coverage that's currently conferred on loopy astronauts, bratty rehaboholics, and, yes, outrageously slandered basketball teams, were afforded instead to the slow-motion fascism now on the move in America. Would we watch it the same Pavlovian way we watch tits, twits and tornadoes?

Media executives think not. They believe the jury is in on that one. They don't believe that we're addicted to junk news and shock jocks because it's the only diet they've offered us; they think the market for civically useful information is simply saturated. They don't think that because they're just tools of the vast right-wing conspiracy (though some, like Fox, have made that their market niche), or just because it serves their economic self-interest (though the tax cuts and wealth transfers whose consequences they've declined to cover have benefited them handsomely). No, they air what they air, and cover what they cover, as a capitalist service *to us*. Us, in the form of our mutual funds, our pension funds, our IRAs and 401(k)s, our collective American existence as Wall Street. Entertainment is exquisitely sensitive to demand. As long as we demand quarterly growth in profits more aggressively than we demand real news, the clowns will always get more airtime than the fifth column of hacks who have penetrated the halls of Justice.

UPDATE WEDS 4:15 PM PDT: NBC News President Steve Capus told David Gregory on "Hardball" that MSNBC has dropped its simulcast of Imus not because sponsor after sponsor has bailed, but because thousands of emails from NBC News employees convinced Capus that "there should not be any room for this sort of conversation and dialogue on our air.... This is not about advertising dollars. This is about trust, it's about reputation, it's about doing what's right." I'll take him at his word. If honor and shame can drive programming decisions as decisively as Nielsens and ad dollars, maybe there's a way to convince media executives that the venom of Coulter et al is just as toxic to their corporate reputation, and just as unacceptable to Americans, as Imus's ho-talk.

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