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"Shock" Meets "Community Service": J.C. Corcoran at KMOX

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KMOX-AM in St. Louis hired J.C. Corcoran to try to update its sound. Corcoran and KMOX represented two contrasting styles in talk radio—"shock" and "Community service." These styles can be seen as reflecting two visions of America--a modernist vision of civic discourse and public participation, and a postmodernist vision in which distinctions have blurred between the public and private spheres and between news and entertainment. The authors qualitatively examine the talk on a program hosted by a "shockjock" on a respected news-talk radio station.

Talk radio has long been the focus of controversy. Some observers argue that it encourages vigorous political discussion and serves democratic interests (Jost, 1994; Rehm, 1993; Sifry & Cooper, 1995). But others say it promotes demagoguery and may even incite violence (Phillips, 1995). And some point to Howard Stern and "shock radio" as further evidence that the medium debases public discourse and produces disaffection and cynicism (Andersen, 1993; Kogan, 1995). Many fear that radio stations are forfeiting substantive public affairs programming to pursue ratings with so-called hot talk (Kurtz, 1996; Prato, 1993; Santiago, 1994).

This article examines the short lifespan of one program to explore the tensions and contradictions in talk radio. A respected news-talk station, KMOX-AM in St. Louis, hired a controversial host named J.C. Corcoran to try to update its sound. Corcoran and KMOX represented two contrasting styles or philosophies of talk radio— "shock and "community service." These styles can be seen as reflecting two visions of America—a modernist vision of civic discourse and public participation, and a postmodernist vision in which distinctions have blurred between the public and private spheres and between news and entertainment (Munson. 1993). J.C. Corcoran's tenure at KMOX thus provides insight into not only the complexities of talk radio, but also those of contemporary culture.

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INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

This article does not use the methodology of content or conversation analysis or of a formal case study. Instead, it uses a humanistic and critical approach in analyzing talk radio as discourse. This procedure follows the lead of others who advocate examining mass communication from a cultural studies perspective, drawing on close, qualitative readings of media texts (Carey, 1988: Newcomb, 1994: Pauly, 1991: Real, 1996; Schudson, 1995).

Levin (1987) and Munson (1993) have used this approach to study talk radio. Levin examines transcripts of Boston call-in programs and argues that talk radio appeals "to one part of its audience by affirming the power of positive thinking and the American Dream, and to another part by delegitimatizing that dream" (p. 24). He adds that for many, talk radio reflects "a profound sense that the gap between the American Dream and reality [has] become intolerable" (p. 3). Munson examines shows including the late Frank Rizzo's radio program in Philadelphia. He asserts that talk shows are a uniquely postmodem phenomenon belonging neither to the "separate public or private spheres conceived in modernity," but "somewhere between or beyond the two." They make "public spectacle of private passions even as the caller remains to a degree private." but they also make "private spectacle of *public* passions" (p. 152). As such, they represent a new kind of "cyberspatial neighborhood" for which we share collective responsibility (p. 156).

Real (1996) offers a useful discussion of how modernist rhetoric contrasts with that of postmodernism. In his words: "The 'modern' belief in permanent progress rooted in reason, science, and efficiency is giving way to the 'postmodem' belief that society's condition is one of superficiality, consumption, irony, and normlessness" (p. 232). Consensual values increasingly give way to fragmentation and relativism, and genuine, "real" experience gives way to simulation (pp. 238–239).

We can use an interpretive framework, building on Levin, Munson, and Real, and see talk radio as having a foot in both modernism and postmodernism. J.C. Corcoran at KMOX is a prime example. For years, KMOX had seemed to embody a firm belief in the American Dream and in traditional notions of the public sphere and the media's role in it. Corcoran, on the other hand, had built a career out of mocking those Same beliefs and notions. For many, KMOX's hiring of Corcoran contradicted everything that the station and its longtime manager, Robert Hyland, had sought to achieve.

"COMMUNITY SERVICE': HYLAND AND KMOX

Hyland was born and raised in St. Louis. After working in sales for radio stations in Quincy (Illinois) and Chicago, he joined CBS-owned-and-operated KMOX in 1951 as national sales manager. There, he quickly worked his way up through the ranks, becoming general manager in 1955 and a network vice president four years later. Under Hyland, KMOX helped invent the news-talk format and dominated St. Louis radio. Through the 1980s, and long after FM radio had come to rule most other markets, the station remained number one in the local ratings by a large margin ("KMOX Head Hyland," 1992). Hyland espoused a community service philosophy of broadcasting. It reflected several key tenets of modernist thought, as Real (1996) would define them:

Consensus and community

KMOX dubbed itself the "Voice of St. Louis,' becoming what one observer called "the station of record" (Caesar, 1991 p. 1D) and what Hyland himself likened to a daily newspaper (McGuire, 1992). KMOX was the nation's first commercial radio station to endorse political candidates, do editorials, broadcast directly from a state legislature, and air programs linking callers from the Soviet Union with those from the U.S. ("KMOX Head Hyland," 1992). Not everything on the station was quite *so* serious minded; it was also well known for its comprehensive sports coverage. Yet Hyland said KMOX's primary mission was "to fulfill its potential for community service" and "meet the growing needs of adult listeners to be informed in our complex modern world" ("KMOX Turn," 1966, p. 100). It promoted public participation in the political process and appealed to "modernist consensus" as opposed to "postmodern fragmentation" (Real, 1996, p. 247).

Reason and expertise

Hyland asserted that KMOX's news-talk format centered "on the expert and his ability to impart information rather than on the host's ability to entertain with repartee" ("KMOX Turn," 1966, p. 100). The emphasis on expert advice and public service invoked what Munson (1993) terms the "modernist 'culture of expertise'" (p. 44), and what Real (1996) calls the "'modern' belief in reason, science, and efficiency" (p. 232). KMOX did feature hosts like Jack Carney and Anne Keefe who developed devoted followings. But they were known for affording listeners a relatively tolerant and civil forum for discussion with shows like "At Your Service." One writer said Keefe kept "conversation—on everything from baseball to Bosnia—polite and engaging," and treated others on the air "with an old-fashioned fair-mindedness" (Glastris, 1993, p. 15). In this way, KMOX reflected "a modest, basically polite, nonviolent tradition" of American rhetoric that has celebrated rationality (Lewin, 1987, p. 3).

Hard work and personal control

Hyland became legendary for his long hours and total command of KMOX. "All the programming and personnel decisions were his, even the hiring of the lowest-paid intern," said one employee. "His stamp was on everything. He was *so* tireless, *so* meticulous" (McGuire, 1992, p. 1C). Hyland resembled an old-time newspaper publisher who saw his publication as an extension of himself rather than as merely a corporate holding. He seemed to adhere to the puritan ethic that hard work will produce constant progress (Real, 1996, p. 239). KMOX sought to promote traditional values in its programming as well. In the 1990s, it was still airing the "Thought for the Day" by Richard Evans, a Mormon elder who had been dead for 20 years (McGuire, 1992).

Hyland remained in charge of KMOX until his death in 1992. One commentator noted that he had "bequeathed a station with a unique hold on the community and an identity known across the country, a station people aspired to work for" (Kramer, 1996, p. 30). But its ratings were sagging and its audience was aging. "In the age of Geraldo Rivera, Phil Donahue and Madonna, 'At Your Service' just doesn't cut it," said one local radio executive (Smith, 1993, p. 1F). New KMOX general manager Rod Zimmerman told his staff "it wouldn't be *so* bad if we did something to piss people off once in a while" (Hoffman, 1993, p. 19). In February 1993, he did something designed to do just that: He hired J.C. Corcoran.

"SHOCK: J.C. CORCORAN

Corcoran was considered a prime exponent of shock radio, featuring "deejays who specialize in stretching the boundaries of bad taste" (Goldstein, 1987, p. 3). He had worked for 10 stations in 10 cities in 11 years, and had left behind a "trail of firings and burned bridges" before coming to St. Louis in 1984 (Carroll, 1989, p. 1D). There, he attracted big ratings for two FM rock stations with a style that demonstrated many of the characteristics of postmodernism, as described by Munson (1993) and Real (1996).

Fragmentation and superficiality

Shock radio came to the fore in an era of deregulation and increased competition for advertising revenue (Goldstein, 1987). Full-service stations like KMOX faced a fragmented marketplace dominated by FM music stations aiming at a younger audience. Shock jocks distinguished themselves from the competition with a breezy, coarse manner that made no pretense at encouraging political consensus or participation. Corcoran called people "fags" and the female manager of a rival station a "sleazy whore," read an ad for the Black Repertory Theater in an Amos and Andy accent, etc. A local critic called him "an irreverent rabble-rouser without a cause," adding that he had

"[n]o ideology. No politics he Cares to share. No desire to speak for a generation. Just a desire to shake things up a little, maybe for a laugh or two, maybe for publicity, maybe to get some girl in the sack (Ahrned, 1985. p. 7).

Irony and attitude

Although Corcoran made his name via insults, he insisted that "all I'm trying to do is be funny." He lamented that people failed to "distinguish between your show-biz persona and what you're like as a human being," adding that "off the air, I'm a very straight, boring homebody" (Goldstein, 1987, p. 3). Corcoran's "shocking" air talk thus relied heavily on "affect or attitude," which Munson (1993, p. 9) says is typical of postmodernism. According to Corcoran, it was not meant to be taken seriously; it was not "real." It displayed postmodern irony, simulation, and normlessness, representing a sardonic commentary on the modernist values that KMOX and Robert Hyland espoused. In fact, KMOX was one of Corcoran's favorite on-air targets. Most notoriously, he joked that KMOXs Jack Carney was *"so* ancient," he would "die any day now." Carney had a fatal heart attack barely a week later (Goldstein, 1987, p. 3).

Corporate control and "hired guns"

KMOX finally hired Corcoran after he was fired from his FM disk jockey job during a contract dispute. The move drew protests from many KMOX listeners and employees. Anne Keefe was the most outspoken. She hosted "At Your Service," which Corcoran had dubbed "At Your *Cervix*" before he came to KMOX (Hoffman, 1993, p. 1). "It's bad enough to be libelous about someone at a cocktail party," Keefe said of Cormran. "But to make your living at it is an entirely different matter." Corcoran, however, dismissed his earlier comments concerning the station as "entertainment. This is show business and never forget the word 'show'" (Holleman, 1993, p. 1A). He might have also stressed the word "business." Robert Hyland's command over KMOX had given way to increasing corporate pressure to maximize revenue, with the help of "hired guns" like Corcoran who were known for jumping from station to station. Real (1996) says such shifts are typical of postmodernism. Individual authority is supplanted by commodification, with corporations seeking economic profit in all areas of life.

The controversy over Corcoran's arrival at KMOX seemed to be a microcosm of broader struggles Within the radio industry and American culture. Many inside and outside KMOX thought the station was following the path of other media outlets that had sacrificed substance for sleaze in search of a younger audience. Just as Levin (1987) had argued that talk radio was giving way to political disenchantment, KMOXs idealized notions of community service seemed to be giving way to the pervasive, vulgar cynicism of contemporary popular culture (Gitlin, 1991; Kurtz, 1996).

Yet station manager Rod Zimmerman would say management was not "trying to make any wholesale changes"; it was just trying to "evolve" the station to meet changing times (Lerner, 1993, p. 1A). If Corcoran represented evolution, the station's established news-talk format represented continuity. One observer said Corcoran's task would be to "fashion a creative and spontaneous presentation over a seemingly rigid skeleton of news and information" (Hoffman, 1993, p. 1). That "rigid skeleton" had long been central *to* KMOXs community service model of radio. Listeners could count on hearing news, weather, sports, business, and traffic updates at regularly scheduled times during the day.

The stage was thus set for a potential clash—or rapprochement—between "shock" and "community service." Would KMOX succeed in its quest to "evolve" by moving more in the direction of entertainment without completely alienating its traditional audience? Would Corcoran affect his old "showbiz persona," or a new one that conformed more to KMOXs traditional format and mission?

METHOD

Corcoran went on the air in the 3-to-6 p.m. aflemoon drive slot on March 15, 1993. On May 28, he was fired. KMOX cited "philosophical differences in the direction of his program and the station in general" (Eardley & Berger, 1993, p. 1A). A recent article in the local press had quoted Corcoran as complaining that he was not getting enough air time during the last two hours of his show, and that if KMOXs managers did not "do what they told me they were going to do when they hired me, they're asking for trouble." He also called Anne Keefe "senile" (Lerner, 1993, p. 1A).

This study focused on the actual "text" of Corcoran's show, as listeners heard it on KMOX. (Corcoran's and KMOXs cooperation were not formally enlisted. The station's program director consented to speak for KMOX at the end of the study; Corcoran did not return phone calls.) Taping of the show began on March 22, a week afler Corcoran went on the air, and continued until May 24, just before he was fired. On several afternoons, baseball games preempted the program, and two shows were not taped due to equipment failure. The study thus drew on 35 of the 37 shows that actually aired during this period. Each taped show was transcribed and examined following Pauly's (1991) guidelines for qualitative mass communication research. Due to the nature of the methodology, the findings are not necessarily generalizable to other stations in other markets.

CORCORAN'S SHOW ON KMOX

Conciliation vs. provocation

The transcripts of Corcoran's show indicate that his on-air style was not always consistent. Sometimes he was conciliatory toward his critics. On March 29,

he echoed station management's assertions that KMOX was not changing so much as some feared:

For these 3 hours a day, we're just trying to do a few things a little bit differently. Not radically different; it's still going to fit into the overall profile of what *KMOX is* all about.... We're going to try to give something to everybody.

But other times, glimpses of Corcoran's old shock jock persona would emerge as he baited his detractors. He occasionally started his show by quoting from "hate mail," especially from older, longtime listeners. On March 30, he boasted that he took "great pride in being perhaps the one breath of fresh air" on KMOX and mocked the "professional letter writers out there who have no lives and really nothing better to do," telling them: "I think you know it's the '90s. I'm just not sure all of you know it's the *1990s.*"

Two days later, taunting turned to outright attack. Corcoran delivered a lengthy monologue berating a suburban newspaper that had published an anonymous letter criticizing KMOX for hiring him. He called the letter "the creepiest, meanest, most outrageous thing I think I've ever seen printed":

The fact that I am here is driving some people crazy; there are a lot *of* people who cannot handle it. So all they can try to do is dirty up what it is we try to do in here every day.... Who's right? The people who know me, or some *of* these ridiculous people with these axes to grind? Who's got the greater likelihood *of* being wrong? And don't flood the station with opinions *of* what you think about what I just said, because I really don't care what you think.

But a few days later, Corcoran was conciliatory again. He read a letter from a listener who had praised him for his attack on the newspaper by saying: "Go, J.C., go! You're back!" Corcoran thanked the listener, but then added:

Yeah, a lot of people thought that I was doing that because I wanted to sound like I sounded like in the old days, *yellin'* and screamin' at people, but that really wasn't the reason. I was really mad. Not any more, *though*—can't get mad about something stupid like that.

Corcoran's attempts to be even mildly provocative on KMOX could get him in trouble. The same day he distanced himself from his tirade against the newspaper (April **5),** he tried to do a phone interview with a Pennsylvania college student. The student had exercised what he said was his constitutional right to go nude in public. When Corcoran asked him about this, the student said: "Normally students wear shirts that say 'Fuck Constitutional Law,' in reference to a famous case in which a person was indicted for wearing a shirt that said 'Fuck the Draft.'" Corcoran responded: "This is going to be the shortest interview you ever had in your life." He then ended the conversation, calling the guest a "potty mouth" and apologizing to the listeners.

One week later (April 12), prior *to* an innocuous interview on home repair, Corcoran played a snippet of a Tim Allen comedy routine. In it, Allen joked that his nipples grew "rock hard" at the sight of power tools. Later on that day's program, Corcoran jeered at listeners who had called the station *to* complain about the joke. He told them to "get a life" and continually repeated the word nipple. Then Corcoran put a 16-year-old female caller on the air. She called him "ignorant and rude" and said he should "have more compassion for people that call you on the phone." Finally, near the end of the day's program, Corcoran announced: "I have been asked no longer to say what I will now have to refer to on the air as, believe it or not, the Kword. Oh, man! ... My spirit has been broken."

This testy encounter aside, Corcoran more oflen seemed to try to shun his "shock jock" reputation. In mid-May, two rival disk jockeys who had aimed frequent insults at Corcoran were fired by a competing station. They had called an African-American listener a "nigger" and aired a segment called "Who's the Jew?" In short, they had said things only slightly more extreme than what Corcoran had said on the air earlier in his career. But now Corcoran placed himself on a higher plane, while again urging his fans to ignore his critics:

There is so much hatred in this community right now with what happened on another radio station in the past couple *of* days. And I'm sitting here scratching my head saying, what in the world is going on?... There's a lot of people that try to mischaracterize what I do on the *air,* and that's their problem. You're listening right now, you've passed that, and you probably understand it. And *for* that we give you plenty of credit. (May *17)*

Information **vs.** entertainment

Corcoran apparently saw himself as simply providing entertainment. He interviewed celebrities like Burt Reynolds, Greg Kinnear, and Ted Nugent, guests one might see on a late night television program. Corcoran even began his show with David Letterman's theme music and a tongue-in-cheek voiceover ("From St. Louis-gateway to Branson—it's J.C. Corcoran on AM 1120, KMOX!"). At least in these ways, Corcoran did not appear to be that much changed from his shock-jock days, when he had declared that he was just trying to be funny. "I don't know where the idea comes in that the only way that talk radio can be done is for everybody to sit around and be dead serious," he told his listeners not long afler he started at KMOX:

If you would like to be dead serious, don't let me stop you. However, if you'd like to have some fun, listen to the show from 3 to 6, 'cause that's what we try to do.... Nobody says that you can't maybe *learn* something, find out some cool stuff from time to time, and also be entertained. (March *30)*

Once Corcoran went *so* far as to suggest that listeners were actually more interested in entertainment than in discussing public affairs, despite their protests to the contrary:

[You tell *us]* ooh, do authors, talk about the events of the day, get into that Time, Newsweek. Bosnia, Yeltsin kind of stuff. That's what the audience wants, ooh, that's *what* they'll love to listen to. And then we play *a* Polish *All-Stars* polka [and interview a man who keeps] llamas at his house, and the place goes crazy.... "Where did you get that Polish All-Stars song, huh? Where did it come from? Tell *me!"* (May *18)*

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that Corcoran generally avoided the political "hot talk found on other radio programs. The biggest news event that happened during his 10 weeks at KMOX was the burning of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. Corcoran had called David Koresh a "nut" a couple of times while the Waco standoff was still underway. On April 21, two days after it finally ended, he reacted to a letter from a listener criticizing *him* for being a pro-gun control liberal:

First of all, I don't consider myself a liberal; I consider myself a pragmatist—you know, conservative on some issues, liberal on *others.... I* don't think we're ever going to have a discussion here about the right to bear *arms,* or abortion, or any of that kind of stuff That kind of stuff has been beaten to death.

News vs. talk

Corcoran was as apt to direct negative comments at himself and his program as he was toward others. This was particularly apparent as he grappled with the demands of the tightly-structured format: "[With] a look at the roads, here's Kathy Hartley—who's probably not around yet, but I bet you if I waited about another, oh, 15, 20 seconds and killed and stalled—h boy, we're a well-oiled machine today!"

Those other elements of KMOX's format limited the time Corcoran had to talk on the air, as he would later complain. Although his program technically began at 3 p.m., one did not actually hear his voice until 3:15, after CBS news, local news, business news, sports, weather, and a public service announcement (telling people to wear seat belts, for example). Once Corcoran finally took to the air, he frequently had to stop talking to make way for additional program breaks. This sometimes produced incongruous moments. On the day of the "nipples" incident, Corcoran followed a sports update by insulting one of the listeners who had called to complain about his language. He then went to commercials for a local car dealer and bank. Afterward, he taunted the irate callers for a minute or two more, and then abruptly introduced the station traffic reporter who gave details of a multicar accident on the interstate.

After about a month on the air, Corcoran began to hint at his growing frustration with the constant breaks. He would often say sardonically: "My turn again already?" Once, after several interruptions, he said: "J.C. here. I thought I recognized that voice—I think it goes with this face." Another time, he referred to his program as "the Julie Niemann show, co-starring Kathy Hartley" (after the station's on-air market analyst and traffic reporter).

Whatever Corcoran's concerns were with the format, his clash with Anne Keefe finally ended his career at KMOX. Program director Tom Langmyer later said Corcoran had been fired for a "breach of company policy"—he had spoken "very vehemently about the other air talent, which wasn't very smart" (personal communication, May 4, 1994). Yet Keefe had spoken almost as harshly of Corcoran. On May 13, she appeared on a television program discussing the two St. Louis shock jocks who were about to be fired for their on-air racial invective. She said "she was surprised the issue received *so* much attention when Corcoran's sexist insults, aired through the 1980s, went almost unnoticed" (Lerner, 1993, p. 1A). The day following the broadcast of that program, Corcoran signed off his show on KMOX as follows:

Guess what happened today? We wrapped up 2 months [on the air], ***Did*** it while nobody was *lookin'.* And I just want to say thanks to everybody ***here*** at ***KMOX*** ... There are some people who aren't with the program. Two out of 60? Ain't bad. *Don't* buy into the poison that ***is*** being spread by one *or two* very *bitter,* hateful people.

Not long after, the interview in which Corcoran called Keefe "senile" was published, and he was fired.

DISCUSSION

A cultural studies approach seeks to understand media texts in the contexts in which they are produced and received. J.C. Corcoran's program on KMOX must be analyzed in the context of organizational and cultural constraints as well as what Munson (1993) terms the productive instability of talk shows. Such an analysis reveals no clear winners in the confrontation between "shock and "community service."

Media constraints

Professional communicators almost always work within organizational constraints that limit their individual influence over media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Such was the case with Corcoran. Although he could be termed a failed experiment for KMOX. the station did attract higher ratings with him in the short run (Lerner, 1993). But this was not due to shock talk; even if he had wanted to indulge in such talk, he had little time to do so. Not long afler KMOX hired Corcoran, the manager of a rival station said it would prove to be a "non-event" because Corcoran would be "handicapped" by KMOXs format: "He makes a comment, he takes a phone call, and it's all between tons of commercials, tons of weather reports and tons of traffic reports" (Smith, 1993, p. IF). This in fact turned out to be the case.

Corcoran's behavior was constrained in other ways. He had to confront informal rules compelling polite, civilized talk on the air, rules that he challenged at his peril (by saying the "N-word and telling callers to "get a life," for example). Differentcommunities have differentstandards; a full-fledged shock jock would not have jibed with KMOXs corporate style and the relatively conservative predilections of the St. Louis radio audience (Bell, 1982; Tichenor, Donahue, & Olien, 1980). Corcoran also had to work within the constraints of KMOXs organizational culture. Program director Tom Langmyer said Corcoran might have experienced some "culture shock" coming to KMOX, where instead of being the station's major personality, as he had been elsewhere, he was "just one of many stars" (personal communication, May 4, 1994). Corcoran's public attacks on fellow star Anne Keefe, a prominent representative of the station's established culture, sealed his fate.

"Productive Instability"

If the constraints on Corcoran seemed to favor modernist values, his program also exhibited many postmodern characteristics. To begin with, KMOXs format never had been devoted exclusively to community service. It always had contained entertainment elements, even with hosts like Anne Keefe. She had become a St. Louis radio fixture largely due to her ability to produce "engaging" talk (Glastris, 1993, p. 15). Munson (1993) says these elements—the blending of news and entertainment, the blurring of public and private as personal conversations are aired for all to hear-distinguish *a//*talk shows as postmodern phenomena, rife with irony and contradiction.

Such ironies and contradictions abounded in Corcoran's program on KMOX. His attempts at humor ran cheek by jowl with reports of traffic accidents. He had been hired to attract a younger and presumably more jaded audience, but a 16-year-old scolded him for being rude and disrespectful. He interviewed a nudist college student for laughs; when the student attempted a serious discussion of free speech, Corcoran cut him off by calling him a "potty mouth." Listeners urged Corcoran to talk about "the Bosnia. Yeltsin

kind of stuff," but they responded more enthusiastically to a polka record and an interview about llamas. Corcoran angrily attacked a newspaper that had criticized him; when a listener subsequently praised him for being "back to his old self, he demurred by saying this time he was *really* mad—not just "yellin' and screamin'" as in the old days.

These examples illustrate the "productive instability" of the talk format (Munson, 1993, p. 63). A talk host does not necessarily maintain a stable on-air persona. Like Corcoran, the host may be alternately combative and conciliatory, tweaking authority one moment and sanctimoniously upholding it the next, and showing glimpses of 'real" emotion in the midst of putting on an act. Other participants on the program may challenge the host, even with his or her complicity; like Corcoran, the host may put an angry caller on the air or read from "hate mail."

These other participants on talk shows do not necessarily adhere to expected roles, either. Guests and callers may say things that are wholly unanticipated, forcing a host to improvise. A program may fluctuate between information and entertainment and between scripted news and spontaneous talk. Raucous banter may be juxtaposed with sober reports of death and injury and reminders to buckle up. It is in these ways that a talk show's instability is "productive"; the show can "vary, adapt, appropriate, incorporate, and simulate," and hence thrive in a postmodern image economy (Munson, 1993, p. 62).

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to go beyond simplistic celebrations or condemnations of talk radio as democracy in action or demagoguery run amok. Critical readings of individual programs can provide a richer perspective on the contradictory influences that mold talk shows and the contradictory visions of America that they incorporate. Meaning is always contested on such programs, with the forces of propriety and civic virtue pitted against those of vulgarity and social dissolution. The result, as Levin (1987) has noted, is that talk radio simultaneously upholds and debunks the American Dream. The many ironies and incongruities in J.C. Corcoran's program on KMOX poignantly reflect the ironies and incongruities of our culture as modernist ideals struggle to survive in an age of postmodern cynicism.

If talk radio represents a constant battle over meaning, the stakes in that battle are growing higher for media corporations. The result seems to be that propriety and civic virtue are increasingly compromised. One example is KMOX in the years following Corcoran's firing. While Corcoran returned to FM rock radio in St. Louis and prospered, KMOX continued to grapple with a dwindling ratings lead over its competition. The station began airing Rush Limbaugh. That helped the ratings, but led some to complain that the station

was sacrificing its unique identity for syndicated conservative "hot talk — that is, it was sounding more and more like any other talk radio station. Then Westinghouse took over CBS and ordered KMOX to double its operating margin from 22 percent to more than 40 percent. The station imposed layoffs; other longtime staff members defected to a rival local talk station. By then, some still pointed to KMOX's hiring of Corcoran as one of the first in a series of missteps that had eroded Robert Hyland's legacy (Kramer, 1996).

But then in many ways, Hyland had it easy. He did not have to confront dramatically increased competition for listeners and advertising dollars coming not just from talk radio but talk television. He did not have to confront CBS's decline and its takeover by a corporation that ordered a doubling of profits. In such a climate, the lofty goal Hyland had outlined for KMOX in 1966—"to fulfill its potential for community service" and "meet the growing needs of adult listeners to be informed — sounded almost quaint. And a "host's ability to entertain with repartee" ("KMOX Turn," 1966, p. 100) seemed ever more paramount, the most profitable way to survive. In the story of J.C. Corcoran and KMOX. one must ask whether Corcoran will have the last laugh.

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