

# HOST

BY DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

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Mr. John Ziegler, thirty-seven, late of Louisville's WHAS, is now on the air, "Live and Local," from 10:00 P.M. to 1:00 A.M. every week-night on southern California's KFI, a 50,000-watt megastation whose hourly **ID and Sweeper**, designed by the station's Imaging department and featuring a gravelly basso **whisper** against licks from Ratt's 1984 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 *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. Ten o'clock to one 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 downloads. He is trim, clean-shaven, and **handsome in the somewhat bland way** that top golfers and local 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 the 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 B.A. 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

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 **tag line** by which the station wishes to be known. KABC, the other giant AM talk station in Los Angeles, deploys the entendreich "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 tag lines that KFI develops specially for its local programs. The main two it's using for the *John Ziegler Show* so far are "Live and Local" and "Hot, Fresh Talk Served Nightly."

The whisperer turns out to be one Chris Corley, a voiceover actor best known for movie trailers. Corley's C<sup>2</sup> Productions is based in Fort Myers FL.

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

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'Mondo's lay explanation of what peaking 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.

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 the callers' voices.

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.

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

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.

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 five or six 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 Mr. Z.'s impassioned, his 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 immense twenty-one-year-old man with a ponytail, stony Mesoamerican 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, whereupon 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 Sundays. 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, 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 detention, the Abu Chraib 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 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 a particular specialty of media criticism. One object of his disgust and contempt in the churn so far has been the U.S. 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 U.S. 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 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 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 U.S. 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 name some Berg-level atrocities committed by U.S. 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 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 are the sort 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 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, 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.

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 and traffic reporters, but on nights and weekends it subscribes to an independent 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 ISDN 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.

KFI management's explanation of "stimulating" is apposite, if a bit slippery. Following is an excerpted transcript of a May 25 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."

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 News Hour*."

Or you could call it atavistic, a throwback. The truth is that what we think of as objectivity in journalism has been a standard since only the 1900s, and mainly in the United States. Have a look at some European dailies sometime.

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."

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

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

**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 tag lines makes the left seem dim, humorless, and stodgy.

**EDITORIAL ASIDE** Of course, this is assuming one believes 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).

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 Pollockian 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 the invasion of Iraq, these 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 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 peels or even whole bananas were rotting in the room's wastebaskets, none of which look to have been emptied anytime recently. Mr. Ziegler, who has his ascetic side, drinks only bottled water in the studio, and certainly 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 prices and ironies here. One is that the increasing control of U.S. mass media by a mere handful of corporations has—rather counterintuitively—created a situation of extreme fragmentation, a kaleidoscope of information options. Another is that the ever increasing number of ideological news outlets creates precisely 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, it is increasingly hard to determine which sources to pay attention to and how exactly to distinguish real information from spin.

This fragmentation and confusion have helped give rise to what's variously called the "meta-media" or "explaining industry." Under most classifications, 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 accident 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 contemporary 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.

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 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 press” 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.

KFI AM-640 carries Rush Limbaugh every weekday, 9:00 A.M. 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 was able to offer Schlessinger more-sumptuous digs. Dr. Laura airs M-F from noon to 3:00 on KFI, though her shows are canned and there’s no live feed. Besides 7:00–10:00 P.M.’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 KFI uses is *Coast to Coast With George Noory*, which covers and analyzes news of the paranormal throughout the wee hours.

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 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.

(whose show is really only semi-political)

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?”

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.

“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 9:00 to noon are Rush/PRN 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—it doesn’t want other stations to know what deals have been cut with PRN.

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.

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 40 percent, compared with 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 profitability, and thus the structure of the industry, is due to the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which allows 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 D.C. Court of

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 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.

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.

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.

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 jaunty part of the theme to *Pirates of the Caribbean*, because, according to 'Mondo, "they get John pumped."

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.

(Which means that the negotiations between KFI and PRN 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 its PRN shows.)

"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."

Part of the answer to why conservative talk radio works so well might be that extreme conservatism provides a 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."

It is, of course, much less difficult to arouse genuine anger, indignation, and outrage in people than it is real 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 pushes my buttons").

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.

Example: Clear Channel Communications Inc. now owns KFI AM-640, plus two other AM stations and five FMs in the Los Angeles market. It also owns Premiere Radio Networks. It also owns the Airwatch subscription news/traffic service. And it designs and manufactures Prophet, KFI's

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 stations 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 2003. 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.

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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. 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 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.) 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 personality and real feelings about whatever it is you're discussing. And it gets even 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 next. 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 will sound like babbling. And so you have somehow to keep all these different imperatives and structures 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 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 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.

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)

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 Air-watch 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."

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

An abiding question: Who exactly listens to political talk radio? 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.

For instance, one has only to listen to *Coast to Coast With George 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.

(ad-wise, a lucrative triad indeed)

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 is a great leap forward for 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 Cunning 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 will take all your gross teeth and in one or two visits fix them and give you a bright shiny smile."

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

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, Kobylt's "better than 20-20" laser-surgery outcome with Saddleback Eye Center, and Mr. Bill Handel's frustrations with 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.

Handel, whose KFI show is an LA institution in morning drive, describes his program as "in-your-face, informational, with a lot of racial humor."

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."

**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."

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 to the length of time the station thinks people are listening, how attentive it thinks they are, etc. Specific example: Just from its spot 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 percent ads; the percentage is 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 listener behavior. KFI's spot load is an instance of the kind of multivariable maximization problem that M.B.A. programs thrive on. It is obviously

in the station's financial interest 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 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 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

CONSUMER ADVISORY As it happens, these two 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

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 tribulus 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.

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 somehow 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 doesn't much help; often 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 schemes, and KFI runs dozens of spots per day for Berkeley products.

The degree to which the station is legally responsible for an advertiser's business practices is, by FTC and FCC rules, nil. But it's hard not to see KFI's relationship with Berkeley as another indication of the station's true regard for its listeners.

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

(somewhat paradoxically)

(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.

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. 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 ads on KFI are for mortgage and home-refi companies—Green Light Financial, HMS Capital, Home Field Financial, Benchmark Lending. Over and over. Pacific Home Financial, U.S. Mortgage Capital, Crestline Funding, Advantix Lending. Reverse mortgages, negative amortization, 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, on and on and on.

**E**miliano Limon's "It's *you*" seems true to an extent. But there is also the issue 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 a host's persona is not the same as outright acting. For the most part, it's 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, for instance, 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 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 convincing 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 may 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 pitch and timbre. Kobylt and his sidekick Ken Chiampou have a hugely popular show based around finding stories and causes that will make white, middle-class Californians feel angry and disgusted, and then hammering away at these stories/causes day after day. Their personas are what the *LA Times* calls "brash" and Chiampou himself 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 show is credited with helping jumpstart 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." The point is that John Kobylt broadcasts in an almost perpetual state of affronted

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 consistently 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

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

registers of outraged disbelief. Off-air, Mr. Z.'s speaking voice is nearly an octave lower than it sounds on his program, which is a bit mysterious, since Mondo denies doing anything special to the on-air voice except 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."

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 audiences. 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.

(Except some of your more slippery right-wing commentators use "elitist media," which sounds similar but is really a far more loaded term.)

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. 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.

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.

rage; and, as more than one KFI staffer has ventured to observe off the record, it's unlikely 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.

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 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 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 recent 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 redesigning 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 private office is located just off the KFI prep room (where Mr. Z.'s own office is a small computer table with a home-made THIS AREA RESERVED FOR JOHN ZIEGLER 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.

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 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

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

These are measurement categories in Arbitron Inc.'s Radio Market Reports, which reports come out four times a year and are known in the industry as "Books." In essence, Cume is the total measure of all listeners, and AQH (for "Average Quarter Hour") represents the mean number of listeners in any given fifteen-minute period.

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

In truth, just about everyone at KFI except Ms. B. refers to Arbitron as "Arbitraron." 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 over-represented in metro 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.

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 the police.

[meaning for 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.”]

Again, this sort of 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.

(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.)

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 P.D.’s endorsing his talking a lot about himself, which Emiliano Limon views as an antiquated, small-market approach that is not going to be very interesting to 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.

(famous “confrontational” talk hosts of the sixties)

several times—“All right. I see your point. All right”—and on tonight’s (i.e., May 19’s) program he does lead with and spend much of the first hour on the latest Haidl developments.

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 by either participant. This is doubtless one reason for KFI’s ratings éclat—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 teachers, revelations in the Peterson and Haidl trials, and developments in the Kobe Bryant and Michael Jackson cases. With respect to 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 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 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 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 separate 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, and now we’re trying to get a little 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.

(3)

If we’re willing to disregard the complicating precedents of Joe Pyne and Alan Burke, then the origins of contemporary political talk radio can be traced to three phenomena of the 1980s. The first of these involved AM music stations’ getting absolutely murdered by FM, which could broadcast music in stereo and 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 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 long-form program whose host more or less spoke for the other side. Weirdly enough, up through the mid-eighties it was usually the U.S. right that benefited most from the Doctrine.

Pioneer talk syndicator Ed McLaughlin, who managed San Francisco's KGO in the 1960s, recalls 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 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. □

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—bright, loquacious, witty, complexly authoritative—whose show's blend of news, entertainment, and partisan analysis became the model for legions of

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

(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 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].)

The crucial connection with the F.D.'s repeal was not Rush's show but that show's syndicatibility. 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.

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 air time to build his audience.

In truth, Rush'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 that "liberal press,"* which at the time was the only vector for their transmission. Because of his own talent and the popularity of his show, Rush was able to move partisan distrust for the mainstream "liberal media" into the mainstream itself.

**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 it has to patronize a special type of media to get the unbiased truth.

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

**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 U.S. realities that actually limit possibilities for some people.

(if conservatively disposed, please substitute "allegedly")

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).

imitators. But he was also the first great promulgator of the Mainstream Media's Liberal Bias idea. This turned out to be a brilliantly effective rhetorical move, since the MMLB concept functioned simultaneously as a standard around which Rush's audience could rally, as an articulation of the need for right-wing (i.e., unbiased) media, and as a mechanism by which any criticism 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 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.

**I**n 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 Web site.

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 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. The vast majority of you ... will be absolutely miserable in whatever career 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 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 deep 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 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 from an autobiographical time-line volunteered by John Ziegler in late May '04 over a very large medium-rare steak. Especially interesting is the time-line'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.

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

(while both eating and watching a Lakers playoff game on a large-screen high-def TV, which latter was the only condition he placed on the interview)

1967–1989: 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.”

1989–1995: 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.”

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

1994–1995: 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 some 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 O.J. 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 1995: 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 1996: “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 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 herpetoc consultant stands idly by as the station informs Mr. Z. that “We're done with you, no thank you,” which was another blow.”

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

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

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

(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)

For those unfamiliar with Tom Leykis: Imagine Howard Stern without the cleverness.

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.

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 several less upsetting words that can be used. Even

(just one person’s opinion ...)

though there is plenty of stuff for reasonable people to dislike about Political Correctness as a dogma, 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 painful 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.)

1996–1997: 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 host now feels 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 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 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 parent, “a lily-white company,” feared that it was “very vulnerable” to a discrimination lawsuit.

1998–1999: 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 home town. There are again auspicious beginnings ... “except my boss, [the P.D. 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.”

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 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* 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.

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 Inquirer* 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." There are, however, serious and irresolvable problems with a female producer on the show, the full story of which you are going to be spared (mainly because of legal worries).

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 U.S. 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 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 Ms. 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 P.D. was really just looking for an excuse to can him. As for all the complaints, Mr. Z. 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." And on the corporate logic behind his hiring: "It's among 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 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.

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.

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 scheduled for summer '04.

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

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 describes his current KFI salary as "in the low six figures."

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. 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

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.”

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

NexGen (a Clear Channel product) 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 pre-set 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.

’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.

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.”

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 cooks 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 them and have fun with them. He likes it.”

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 says, “Whoa, gotta go.” Especially obnoxious and persistent callers can be placed on Hold at the screener’s switchboard, locking up their phones 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 total 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 available 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, exacting process of editing and compilation, during which Mr. Z. often drums his fingers 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 all that 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.”

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 U.S. 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 to get actively rude. ’Mondo’s great mild eyes rise from the board: “*Puto*, man, what’s that about?” Vince, very flat and bored: “Kerry’s a Jew.” Emiliano: “Another big advent is the cell phone. Before cells you got mostly homebound invalids calling in. [Laughs] Now you get the driving invalid.”

Historically, the two greatest ratings periods ever for KFI AM-640 have been the Gray Davis gubernatorial recall and the O.J. Simpson 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 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**, ends with John Ziegler’s 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.”

Some 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.”**

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

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, 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.

“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 *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

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

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.

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 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’s different if you ask about O.J. Simpson *l’homme*, or about specific details of his psyche 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 (as of ‘94) NFL star. Mr. Z. can defend this theory with an unreproducible 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.

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

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.

**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 the 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).

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

(voice breaking a bit here)

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 decrescendo: “Daryl, I can assure you that the last thing I am is racist on this. 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.

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.

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 impossible that we are?

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 the right 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 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)]?)

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

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 A.M.) 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”).

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.

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*.

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 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 to do commercial endorsements because he

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 minutiae, and Monster-grade stimulation. As is SOP, it starts around 7:00 P.M. in KFI’s large central prep room, which is where all the local hosts and their producers come in to prepare for their shows.

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 (e.g., pictures with staffers’ heads Photoshopped onto tabloid celebrities’ bodies). Like the studio and Airmix, the prep room is also a D.P.H.-grade mess: half the overhead fluorescents are either out or flickering nauseously, and the gray carpet crunches underfoot, and the waste-

baskets are all towering fire hazards, and many of the tabletops are piled with old books and newspapers. One window, which is hot to the touch, overlooks 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 on to 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 semi-attached former closet for the P.D.'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.

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 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 blowjob interview." An additional complication is that *Dateline* airs in Los Angeles from 8:00 to 10:00 P.M., and it has also now run teasers for stories on the health hazards of the Atkins diet and the dangerously lax security in U.S. hotels. Assuming that *Dateline* waits and does the O.J. interview last (which it is clearly in the program's interests to do), then the interview's highlights 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 simultaneously 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 room's east wall.

John Ziegler, who is understandably quite keyed up, spends some 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 wearing a horizontally striped green-and-white golf shirt, neatly pressed black shorts, and gleaming New Balance sneakers. He keeps saying that he cannot *believe* they're even giving Simpson air time. 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, 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 P.M. it is still 90° out, and smoggy. The windows' light makes people

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

"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 very close to a salute.

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 had tried joshing around with him, in an off-hand and lighthearted 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.

(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 UC-Irvine undergrad, name omitted)

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

¶Mondo can neither confirm nor deny that these supposedly outraged uninitiated callers are maybe themselves fakes, just more disembodied voices that Hendrie and his staff are creating, and that 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.

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

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

look greenish in the areas where the room's fluorescents are low. A large spread of takeout chicken sits uneaten and expensively congealing. Mr. Z.'s intern spends nearly an hour composing a mock poem to Ms. Amber Frey, the mistress to whom Scott Peterson evidently 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 the right conjugation of "to drown."

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

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° 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 co-workers 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 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 sure to have Vince load from TiVo into Prophet when the greedy bastards at *Dateline* finally 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 is the same type of change as when you put 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 inclines over the spot log. It seems like a lonely, cloistered place in which 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 morning drive's 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 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. 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 Mr. Z. perform in the studio, you can predict just what he’ll look like, how his head and arms will move and eyes fill with life as he says certain things that 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.”

To be fair, though, there truly are some dubious, unsettling things about the *Dateline* interview, such as for instance that NBC has acceded to O.J. Simpson’s “no editing” condition for appearing, which used to be an utter taboo for serious news organizations. Or that O.J. gets to sit there looking cheery and unguarded even 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 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. ♫

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

All of this John Ziegler will and does say on his program—although what no one in the prep room can know is that a 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 ...)

The only bit of genuine fun is during the interview’s first commercial break, when the opening ad is for Hertz—*Hertz*, of old 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-meta-media 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.)

EDITORIALIZING, OR JUST STATING THE OBVIOUS? Plus there’s the creepy question of why O.J. Simpson is doing a murder-anniversary TV interview at all. What on earth does he 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?

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, the question scripted. Which would seem to mean she’s acting.

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