



WOMANNEWS

Talk radio finds softer side

In rush to attract female listeners, programs multiply

By Lydialyle Gibson
Special to the Tribune

For the better part of two decades, talk radio has been a largely male enterprise: men arguing — not always politely — with other men about politics or sports, taking on-air calls from a vast audience of mostly men.

And women mostly have been tuning out, research shows. A survey commissioned by ABC Radio Networks last year found that only 3 percent of women ages 18 to 54 strongly agree that talk radio is relevant to them, and half cannot cite anything they like about talk radio.

Radio executives increasingly are seeing talk-radio programs aimed at female listeners. Programmers are looking to build female listenership with shows that answer women's common complaints: that talk radio is boring, argumentative and too political.

Consider the following:
■ Two years ago was the first time women's talk radio landed on the agenda at the annual Talk Radio Seminar, organized by industry publication Radio & Records. At the seminar held in March in Washington, D.C., the women's talk session drew a standing-room-only crowd.

■ In fall 2005 ABC Radio Networks launched a division devoted entirely to women's talk.

■ Last year a Washington, D.C.-based FM talk network called GreenStone Media was formed with the mission of developing and syndicating programs for women. Investors include Gloria Steinem, Rosie O'Donnell, philanthropist Wallis Annenberg and Billie Jean King. The company plans to launch most of its programming in July, says Edie Hilliard, executive vice president and chief operating officer.

■ XM Satellite Radio created a channel last fall called Take Five aimed at women and stocked it with stars such as Ellen DeGeneres, Tyra Banks and celebrity chef Rachael Ray.

■ Whoopi Goldberg recently signed with Clear Channel Radio to do a syndicated weekday morning show, "Wake Up With Whoopi," set to begin July 31.

■ XM executives are planning to launch an Oprah and Friends channel in the fall.

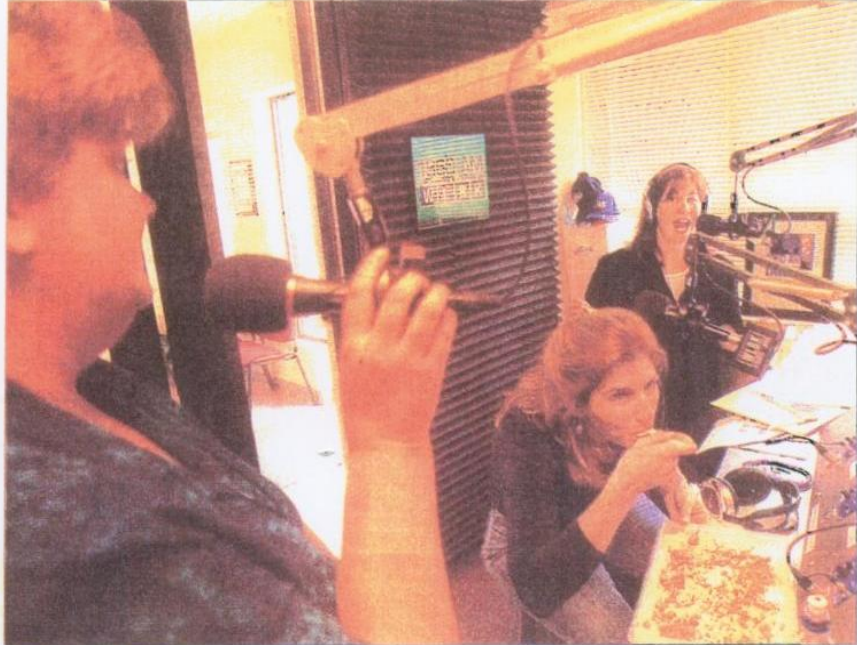
"It's not that women don't want to hear news and current events," says Coryn Koehl, director of women's talk for ABC Radio Networks. "They want to hear content that will make them think, but they also want to hear respect — from hosts, callers and guests."

Koehl attributes the clamor to a "perfect storm" that includes an abundance of quality content and eager advertisers such as Johnson & Johnson, J.C. Penney and General Mills.

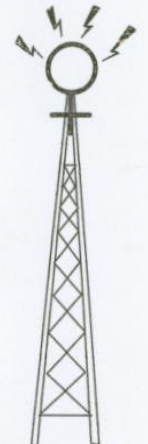
New format emerging

"For the first time in 12 or 15 years, we're seeing the emergence of a new format," says Wendy Figliuolo, vice president of women's talk ad sales for ABC Radio Networks. "We knew we were on fire when advertisers that usually buy time on network television were taking money out of their TV budgets to put it on the radio."

Part of the reason for advertisers' increased



Betsy Brint samples a cake made by guest Darlene Orth (left) as sister Sally Higginson comments during the sisters' weekly talk show, broadcast from DeKalb.



days a week. It also airs on XM Satellite Radio's Take Five channel.

Dolan and her sisters' conversations cover family, motherhood, movies, fitness, civility, consumer cautions and everyday experiences, as well as politics and current events. "We try not to take ourselves too seriously," Dolan says.

In Chicago, Kathy O'Malley and Judy Markey's weekday morning show has been a mainstay on WGN-AM radio since 1989. The show draws men and women listeners, and O'Malley and Markey eschew partisan political debate. (WGN is owned by Tribune Co., which also owns the Chicago Tribune.)

"They've shown what you can do without talking about politics all the time," says Al Peterson, news, sports, and talk editor at Radio & Records.

A real relationship

"We put our relationship on the air, and it's real," O'Malley says. Markey adds, "People are listening for a friend."

Other women are following O'Malley and Markey's lead in the Chicago region. Among them is "Walking on Air," a two-hour live show each Wednesday on WLBK-AM 1360 in DeKalb. Sisters Betsy Brint and Sally Higginson, who live five blocks apart in Highland Park, started the show about 18 months ago. Topics of discussion have included adult eating disorders, teen sex, Crock Pot recipes, politics, shopping and C-sections. The show can be heard in DeKalb, Kane and parts of DuPage and Lake Counties.

Brint and Higginson are pleased with the feedback they have received.

"I think people recognize an authenticity of voice," Higginson says. "We're still in the trenches of child-rearing. . . . So what's going on in our minds can't be that different from our listeners."

Another local show is "What a Woman Can Do," which airs 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. Sundays on WCFJ-AM 1470 in Chicago Heights. Host Holly Campbell launched the show last year. She has a specific goal: to help women change.

"Women are realizing they can make changes in their lives," she says. "If you make a decision to do something, the most important thing is to do it."

Topics include setting and achieving goals, overcoming stress and racial justice, says Campbell, who is African-American.

Where the girls are

Here's a sampling of female talk radio shows.
Walking on Air: Airs noon to 2 p.m. Wednesdays on WLBK-AM 1360, DeKalb. 815-758-8686, www.1360wlbk.com. Hosts are Highland Park sisters Betsy Brint and Sally Higginson.
Kathy and Judy: Airs 9 a.m. to noon weekdays on WGN-AM 720, Chicago. 312-591-7200, www.wgnradio.com. Hosts are Kathy O'Malley and Judy Markey. (WGN is owned by Tribune Co., which also owns the Chicago Tribune.)

What a Woman Can Do: Airs 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. Sundays on WCFJ-AM 1470, Chicago Heights. Host is Holly Campbell. 773-594-1474, www.whatawomancando.com.

Satellite Sisters: Carried live 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. CST Mon.-Sat. at nearly 100 stations nationwide; in the Chicago area the show is available only on XM Satellite Radio's Take Five channel, prerecorded. Hosts are sisters Liz, Julie, Sheila, Monica and Lian Dolan. 866-33-SISTER (866-337-4783), www.satellitesters.com.

Drivetime Divas: Airs 3 to 6 p.m. weekdays on



Los Angeles Time photo by Anne Cusack

The five Dolan sisters (clockwise from upper left), Lian, Liz, Monica, Julie and Sheila, launched their Satellite Sisters talk show in 2000. The show, based in Portland, Ore., is carried on nearly 100 stations.

WFMP-FM 107.1, Minneapolis-St. Paul. Hosts are Lori Barghini and Julia Cobbs. 651-641-1071, www.fm107.fm.

interest is the widening realization that women are a huge buying force: marketers consistently estimate that women make about 80 percent of household purchasing decisions.

Women's relationship to talk radio differs from men's in much the same way their relationships do, says Erin Rasmussen, program director at WFMP-FM, which calls itself FM 107, a Minneapolis-St. Paul station that switched to a 24-hour women's talk format four years ago.

"Women are navigating intimacy and bonding, supporting each other, whereas for men talk radio is about establishing hierarchies, maintaining independence," she says.

The station ranks 8th overall Monday

through Friday among women ages 25-54 in its market, says Todd Fisher, station manager.

Frustration with male-dominated talk radio is what led Liz Dolan and her four sisters to launch a radio show, "Satellite Sisters," in 2000.

"When I'm driving home at the end of a long day and listening to the radio, I'm not going to push the button that gets me men yelling at each other," says Dolan, who spent a lot of time on the road as global marketing director for Nike before starting the show, based in Portland, Ore.

Satellite Sisters began as an hourlong weekly show on Portland public radio. In 2003 it was picked up by ABC, which now syndicates it as a live three-hour show to nearly 100 stations six



Goldberg