August 2012

Social Networks for Hate Speech
Commercial Talk Radio and New Media

Key findings on the study commissioned by the National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC) to the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

Is there a correlation between hate speech—language that promotes racist and exclusionary ideologies—and the commission of actual hate crimes? This is the question that NHMC posed to researchers at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) when it contracted with CSRC to conduct three studies examining the content of commercial talk radio, the influence of that content across new media and the physiological impact of hate speech in commercial talk radio. The studies are focused specifically on broadcast radio because it remains the most pervasive form of media, reaching 93% of Americans each week.

The first CSRC study on the issue, “Quantifying Hate Speech on Commercial Talk Radio,” found that significant instances of hate speech infuse conservative talk radio. Conservative talk radio accounts for 91 percent of all weekday talk radio programming. According to the study’s findings, program hosts and their guests make unsubstantiated claims and use divisive language and nativist rhetoric that targets vulnerable groups—primarily ethnic, racial, and religious minorities as well as the LGBT community. Additionally, hosts and guests frequently position the social institutions that represent these groups as outsiders undeserving of the protection of society and its laws.

For the second study, presented here, CSRC monitored conservative talk radio programming over a six-week period in 2010, focusing on five prominent shows—The Rush Limbaugh Show, The Sean Hannity Show, The Glenn Beck Program, The Savage Nation and The John & Ken Show—and analyzed the ideological positions of 102 scheduled guests and their affiliated organizations. CSRC’s analysis revealed the following:

• An overwhelming proportion of scheduled guests were white (89 percent) and male (81 percent), matching the race and gender of the shows’ hosts;

• Political figures who appeared as guests were largely members of the Republican Party (93 percent) and/or affiliated with the Tea Party movement (89 percent);
• The top five ideological positions of scheduled guests were determined to be anti-federalist (23.6 percent), pro-Republican (19.1 percent), pro-Tea Party (12.1 percent), anti-Islamic (11.1 percent) and anti-immigration (8.5 percent); and

• Though 88 topics of interest were identified, immigration emerged as the number one issue, dominating nearly one-quarter (23.9 percent) of all topic segments.

With this knowledge, we better understand how the ideological content of conservative talk radio that targets vulnerable groups has helped cultivate a social network built around talk radio hosts and their guests. This social network then helps spread content across affiliated social media web sites. The result is an echo-chamber of voices, both online and off, that promotes hatred toward and exclusion of ethnic, racial, religious minorities and the LGBT community.

This social network of hate speech focuses on a narrow set of priorities. For example, messaging often includes anti-immigration and anti-Islamic focuses: immigrants are “illegal” and law-breaking while Islam is portrayed within the context of terrorism. The social network is also highly insular. Media personalities and political figures representing the Republican Party and/or affiliated with the Tea Party movement thoroughly dominate the social network. This leaves little room for issue-driven organizations, advocacy groups and subject-matter experts capable of expressing alternate points of view. Media powerhouses such as Premiere Radio Networks, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Clear Channel Communications that nationally syndicates three of the five shows examined, and Fox News, whose media personalities appear most frequently on the shows, are also key components of this social network.

Hate speech on its face is troubling, but this study demonstrates how speech may be affecting the nation’s political discourse as well as the safety of minority communities. The social media sites that support this social network of hate speech are part of an increasing trend where social media serves as the gateway to internet news and information. In this scenario, social network members are more likely to be directed to sites that only reinforce a narrow set of ideological priorities supported by conservative talk radio. Furthermore, in amplifying hate speech, the dynamic connections that constitute this social network may explain or contribute to an individual’s attitudes and behaviors, including the actual commission of hate crimes. The release of the third study, “Using Biological Markers to Measure Stress in Listeners of Commercial Talk Radio,” will follow. Taken together, the three CSRC studies will help to identify the correlations, if any, between hate speech in commercial talk radio and the execution of hate crimes—a potentially important step forward in ensuring the safety and well-being of vulnerable groups.