

Methodology Measures Hate Speech on Talk Radio

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UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) partners with the National Hispanic Media Coalition

A UCLA team of researchers have developed a replicable methodology to quantify hate speech in commercial broadcasting—i.e., speech that expresses prejudice against ethnic, racial, religious, and/or sexual minorities.

In a groundbreaking pilot study conducted by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC) in partnership with the National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC), the researchers documented language that may be constitutive of hate speech in thirty- to forty-minute segments from three politically conservative talk radio programs: The Lou Dobbs Show: Mr. Independent (syndicated by the United Stations Radio Networks), broadcast July 31, 2008; The Savage Nation (produced at KFMB 760 AM and syndicated by Talk Radio Network), broadcast July 24, 2008; and The John & Ken Show (KFI AM 640, Los Angeles), broadcast July 30, 2008.

Using a new methodology that promises to advance understanding of the nature and prevalence of hate speech in commercial media, the research team found a significant incidence of speech that incorporates targeted statements against foreign nationals and members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. In addition to targeted statements, the study measured unsubstantiated claims, divisive language, and indexical terms (code words) related to political nativism.

“Based on the evidence we uncovered, the programs reveal a distinct and recurring rhetorical pattern for targeting specific vulnerable groups,” said Chon Noriega, center director and UCLA professor of cinema and media studies. “Through this rhetorical pattern, vulnerable groups were defined as antithetical to core American values, which were attributed by the hosts to themselves, their audience, and the nation.”

Noriega and Javier Iribarren, MSWPsy.D, the center’s assistant director, chose to examine conservative talk radio because research has shown it accounts for 91 percent of total weekday talk radio programming. In addition, radio has the greatest penetration of any media outlet (print, broadcast, or digital), reaching 90 percent of Americans each week and the news-talk format is the predominant radio format in terms of dedicated stations nationwide (over 1,700).

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration has defined hate speech as either “words that threaten to incite ‘imminent unlawful action,’ which may be criminalized without violating the First Amendment” or “speech that creates a climate of hate or prejudice, which may in turn foster the commission of hate crimes.”

Even with a limited sample, a qualitative content analysis revealed several distinct features of speech among the talk radio programs that qualified as hate speech under the NTIA definition. The findings also raise useful questions for future studies on hate speech in the media.

Among the study’s findings:

Across the three program segments, researchers identified 148 statements targeting a vulnerable group or their supporters. Seventy-nine percent of these instances (117) targeted vulnerable groups, and 21 percent (31) targeted their supporters.

Across the three program segments, researchers identified 33 instances of a ‘call for action’ against a vulnerable group. Of the 33 calls for action, most focused on Latinos and immigration.

Averaged on a per-program basis, Latinos (both citizen and undocumented) represented 91 percent (43 of 47, including those in public office) of the targeted vulnerable groups on The Lou Dobbs Show, 43 percent (15 of 35) on The Savage Nation, and 43 percent (15 of 35) on The John & Ken Show.

