WHEN IN ROME: HETEROSEXISM, HOMOPHOBIA, AND SPORTS TALK RADIO

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This article critically analyzes the U.S. growth of sports talk radio programs, with a particular focus on its sex and gender implications. It has been argued that sports talk radio texts reinscribe dominant ideologies, namely, hegemonic masculinity. A textual and audience analysis of the most popular nationally syndicated program, The Jim Rome Show, suggests that although the program reproduces many aspects of traditional masculinity, sexism, and heterosexism, there are fissures and exceptions to the dominant, hyper-masculine discourse. For instance, Jim Rome's liberal stance on homophobia and sports indicates that sports radio may be a place for sports fans/men to discuss gender and sexuality in meaningful ways. Hence, The Jim Rome Show serves as a mediated site where men can negotiate and reconfigure masculinity in contemporary postmodern times.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity; sports talk radio; heterosexism

I am negotiating the traffic in my car on a typical harried Monday morning. As an avid sports fan, I turn on my local sports radio station. A commercial plugging the local radio station is airing: “Your hair’s getting thinner, your paunch is getting bigger. But you still think the young babes want you! That’s because you listen to Sports 1140 AM—it’s not just sports talk, it’s culture.” Next comes the loud, rhythmic guitar riffs from the Guns N’ Roses song, “Welcome to the Jungle.” As Axel Rose begins to sing the lyrics to the heavy metal song, an announcer bellows, “Live from Los Angeles. You’re listening to the Jim Rome Show.” Next, the distinct, brash voice of Jim Rome, the nation’s most popular sports talk radio host, addresses his audience of 2 million sports fans:1 “Welcome back to the Jungle. I am Van Smack. We have open phone lines. But clones, if you call, have a take and do not suck or you will get run.”2 Over the next 3 hours, the well-known host interviews famous sports figures, articulates his notoriously controversial opinions on various topics using urban slang, and takes phone calls from his loyal listeners/sports fans who speak in Rome-invented terms such as Jungle Dweller, bang, and Bugeater.3 I listen to the program with mixed feelings. As a sports fan and long-time listener of sports talk radio, I find myself engrossed and amused; I want to know what each “in-group”
The Jim Rome Show reflects a growing cultural trend in the United States—sports talk radio. According to sportswriter Ashley Jude Collie (2001), Jim Rome is the “hippest, most controversial, and brutally honest voice” (p. 53) in mediated sports. In addition to his nationally syndicated radio program that airs on more than 200 stations, the 40-year-old hosts ESPN’s Rome is Burning, a weekly 1-hr television sports talk show (and his second show on ESPN). Rome began his radio career broadcasting University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), basketball games. After graduating from UCSB in 1986 and serving seven nonplaying radio internships, Rome earned a local weekend job at XTRA in San Diego, a powerful 77,000-watt station. The “clever fashioning of a streetwise persona” (Mariscal, 1999), his raspy voice, staccato delivery, and fiercely independent opinions separated him from the talk radio crowd, and he soon moved into hosting a primetime radio show. Eventually, his popularity earned him a television spot on ESPN2, Talk2, a cable show that Rome hosted in the early 90s. The Noble Sports Network syndicated Rome’s radio show in 1995, and Premiere Radio Networks acquired the rights to the show 1 year later. Rome also hosted Fox Sports Net’s The Last Word, a sports talk television program that ran from 1997 to 2002.

However, despite the variety of venues in which he plays, it is the radio show’s format that contributes to Rome’s controversiality and popularity. Loyal callers, whom he calls “clones,” phone in with their opinion (referred to as a “take”) on what’s happening in the world of sports. Rome listens intently and either “runs” the caller with a buzzer (meaning he disconnects the call) or he allows them to finish their take and says, “rack ‘em” (meaning he saves the call as an entry into the huge call-of-the-day contest). As opposed to other talk radio programs where there is some dialogical interaction between the caller and hosts, Rome and his callers do not engage in a back-and-forth interchange. The caller’s comments are highly performative, full of insider language, and monological. Rome silently listens to the call and only comments when the caller is finished with his or her monologue or Rome disconnects the call. Rarely, if ever, does a caller disagree with Rome.5 “Huge” calls are those that Rome considers good “smack” speech—his term for sports talk that is gloatful, uninhibited, and unbridled. According to Rome, only the strong survive in this 3-hr dose of smack and irreverence. Rome’s in-group language and his unique interaction (or lack thereof) make his radio show distinctive. His “survival of the fittest” format is responsible for the show’s reputation as sports version of hate-speech radio (Hodgson, 1999).

The Jim Rome Show epitomizes the growing trend of talk radio. Presented as a medium in which citizens/callers can freely “air their point of view,” talk radio has become a very popular forum for large numbers of people to engage in debate about politics, religion, and sports. The media
culture, with talk radio as a prominent discourse, plays a very powerful role in the constitution of everyday life, shaping our political values, gender ideologies, and supplying the material out of which people fashion their identities (Kellner, 1995). Hence, it is crucial for scholars to furnish critical commentary on talk radio; specifically, we should critique those radio texts that work to reinforce inequality.

Talk radio formats, particularly political talk radio, exploded in the 1980s as a result of deregulation, corporatization of radio, and niche marketing (Cook, 2001). Deregulation, which loosened mass-media ownership and content restrictions, renewed interest in radio as a capitalist investment and galvanized the eventual emergence of its two 1990s prominent showcase formats: hate radio talk shows and all-sports programming (Cook, 2001). By the late 1990s, there were more than 4,000 talk shows on 1,200 stations (Goldberg, 1998). Sports talk radio formats have, according to cultural studies scholar Jorge Mariscal (1999), “spread like an unchecked virus” (p. 111). Currently, there are more than 250 all-sports stations in the United States (Ghosh, 1999).

As a result of deregulation and global capitalism, new media conglomerates emerged as the only qualified buyers of radio programming. Infinity Broadcasting, the largest U.S. company devoted exclusively to owning and operating radio stations, owns WFAN and Sacramento’s local all-sports station, 1140 AM. Its competing company, Premiere Radio Network, owns the popular nationally syndicated programs hosted by Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh, Dr. Laura, and Jim Rome. Schiller (1989) refers to this homogenizing, modulated trend as “corporate speech” (p. 40) that encourages censorship and contains public expression within corporate, capitalist ideologies that reinforce dominant social institutions.

With the corporatization of radio came niche marketing that caters to targeted demographic groups. Talk radio is aimed at a very desirable demographic: White middle-class men between the ages of 24 and 55 years. Research shows that talk-radio listeners are overwhelmingly men who tend to vote Republican (Armstrong & Rubin, 1989; Hutchby, 1996; Page & Tannenbaum, 1996). The most popular program, the Rush Limbaugh Show, has 20 million daily listeners who laugh along with the host as he rants and vents, opening a channel for the performance of the angry White male. Roediger (1996) remarked, in a fascinating read of Limbaugh’s cultural significance in the United States, that “banality can carry much more social power than genius where White consciousness is concerned” (p. 42). Douglas (2002) argued that although most of the research on talk radio is on the threat it poses to democracy, what is obvious, but far less discussed, is talk radio’s central role in restoring masculine hegemony:

Talk radio is as much—maybe even more—about gender politics at the end of the century than it is about party politics. There were different masculinities enacted on the radio, from Howard Stern to Rush Limbaugh, but they were all about challenging and overthrowing, if possible, the most revolutionary of
Similarly, sports talk radio, according to Goldberg (1998), enacts its White hegemony via hypermasculine posing, forceful opinions, and loud-mouth shouting. Sports talk radio “pontificates, moralizes, politicizes, commercializes, and commodifies—as it entertains” (p. 213). Although Rome’s masculine style is different from Limbaugh’s and Stern’s, all three controversial hosts have built reputations through their rambunctious, masculinist, and combative styles (Farred, 2000). With White male masculinity being challenged and decentered by feminism, affirmative action, gay and lesbian movements, and other groups’ quest for social equality, sports talk shows, similar to talk radio in general, have become an attractive venue for embattled White men seeking recreational repose and a nostalgic return to a prefeminist ideal (Farred, 2000).

This article offers a critical analysis of the most prominent sports talk-radio program, The Jim Rome Show. My study does not critique and dissect The Jim Rome Show in isolation from other media texts or discourses about sports; rather, I aim to provide a historicized and contextualized study based in cultural studies methodology. I show how The Jim Rome Show is situated within a broader set of social, gender, racial, political, economic, and cultural forces. In particular, I examine the ways in which the show reinforces and (less obviously) calls into question heterosexism as well as what gender scholars call hegemonic masculinity. As a prelude to this analysis, I discuss sports talk radio and its link to traditional masculinity, homophobia, and heterosexism.

**SPORTS TALK RADIO AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY**

Many cultural critics and feminists are interested in examining the media industry’s participation in the construction and maintenance of oppressive gender and sexual ideologies. One such dominant ideology is hegemonic masculinity. Media critics and scholars of gender have described at least five distinctive features of hegemonic masculinity in U.S. culture: (a) physical force, (b) occupational achievement, (c) patriarchy, (d) frontiership, and (e) heterosexuality (Brod, 1987; Kimmel, 1994). Connell (1990) defined hegemonic masculinity as “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” (p. 83) that emphasizes “the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness,” as well as “the subordination of women” and “marginalization of gay men” (p. 94). Connell also suggested that hegemonic masculinity is not a static phenomenon but is an always contested, historically situated, social practice.

Historically, sports have played a fundamental role in the construction and maintenance of traditional masculinity in the United States (Messner, 1992). Communications scholar Trujillo (1996) stated, “No other institution in American culture has influenced our sense of masculinity more than sport” (p. 183). The mass media have benefited from institutionalized sports
and have served to reaffirm certain features of hegemonic masculinity. As Trujillo (1994) wrote:

> Media coverage of sports reinforces traditional masculinity in at least three ways. It privileges the masculine over the feminine or homosexual image by linking it to a sense of positive cultural values. It depicts the masculine image as “natural” or conventional, while showing alternative images as unconventional or deviant. And it personalizes traditional masculinity by elevating its representatives to places of heroism and denigrating strong females or homosexuals. (p. 97)

Mediated sports texts function largely to reproduce the idea that hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality are natural and universal rather than socially constructed (Jhally, 1989). Because these dominant texts have detrimental effects on women, gays, lesbians, and some men, Trujillo argued that mediated sport should be analyzed and critiqued.

Many scholars have taken up Trujillo’s call, and in the past decade we have seen an explosion of research on sports and mass media (Wenner, 2000). Most of these studies examine televised sports and its link to violent masculinity, sexism, and homophobia (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). However, scholars have also turned their attention to the impact and meaning of “sports talk.”10 Farred (2000) described sports talk as an “overwhelmingly masculinist (but not exclusively male), combative, passionate, and apparently open ended discourse” (p. 101). Farred described sports radio talk shows as “orchestrated and mediated by rambunctious hosts” providing a “robust, opinionated, and sometimes humorous forum for talking about sport” (p. 116). Likewise, Sabo and Jansen (2000) posited that sports talk serves as an important primer for gender socialization in current times. They wrote:

> Sports talk, which today usually means talk about mediated sports, is one of the only remaining discursive spaces where men of all social classes and ethnic groups directly discuss such values as discipline, skill, courage, competition, loyalty, fairness, teamwork, hierarchy, and achievement. Sports and sports fandom are also sites of male bonding. (p. 205)

Sports radio does appear to have a communal function and is a particularly interesting site to study how men perform relationships and community. Haag (1996) found something inherently democratizing about sports talk radio, for she thinks it promotes civic discourse and “teaches us how to make community of and for a lot of people who lead isolated, often lonely lives in America” (p. 460). Haag also suggested that sports talk radio serves a different function than political talk radio, despite serving a similar largely White middle-class audience, because the values that it emphasizes focus on community, loyalty, and decency. The appeal of sports talk radio, according to Haag, lies in the idiosyncrasies of its hosts and the regionalism of the issues covered, in direct opposition to the increased national corporate
control of radio. Farred (2000), in speaking to the communal function of sports, suggested that sports talk on the radio can “temporarily break down barriers of race, ethnicity, and class.” As he put it, “White suburbanites, inner-city Latino and African-American men can all support the New York Knicks or the Los Angeles Dodgers” (p. 103).

Why is sports talk radio so popular at this particular time in history? Examining the historical and social context of masculinity suggests some interesting answers. With post-Fordist industrialization came economic changes that challenged the ideology of hegemonic masculinity. Women’s increased presence in the public sphere, along with the changes in men’s work and increased visibility of sexual diversity, provoked a “crisis in masculinity” (Dworkin & Wachs, 2000). This crisis made many men fearful of becoming “feminized.” Consequently, organized sports, with its emphasis on strength and physicality, functions as a popular homosocial institution to counter men’s fear of feminization in the new economy and to help men cope with changes in the gender and economic order (Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990).

Thus, as Douglas argued about talk radio in general, the emergence of sports talk radio can be understood as another attempt to retain certain aspects of traditional male identity. Its popularity with men coincides with other current media trends, including men’s magazines such as Maxim and FHM, or Comedy Central Cable Network’s hypermasculine TV show, The Man Show. It can be argued that these forms represent a nostalgic (and perhaps an ironic) attempt to return to a prefeminist masculine ideal. In particular, White, middle-class, heterosexual men may feel threatened and uncertain with changes encouraged by feminism and gay rights. Sports talk radio may represent an attempt to symbolically reassert their superiority over women and homosexuals (Horrocks & Campling, 1994). In this vein, Goldberg (1998) suggested that sports talk radio, far from being a democratizing force (here disagreeing with Haag), reinscribes dominant discourses and is a leading forum for reproducing male domination. He contended that “Sports talk radio facilitates this masculine self-elevation, the ideological reproduction of hegemony—risk and cost free but for the price of the toll call” (p. 218).

As a casual listener to The Jim Rome Show over the past 3 years, I have noticed themes of misogyny, violence, and heterosexual dominance appear to recur with considerable frequency. Rome’s persona embodies an aggressive masculinity with unassailable expertise and authority. This aggressive persona climaxed in 1994 on the set of Rome’s ESPN show Talk 2 while interviewing NFL quarterback Jim Everett. During the interview, Everett knocked Rome off his chair after Rome taunted Everett by calling him “Chris” (i.e., female tennis star, Chris Evert), a veiled reference to the quarterback’s reputed lack of toughness. Rome’s reference to Everett as “Chris” on the show was not the first time he had done so. In fact, Rome has used this term on Everett throughout the 1993 NFL season on his local radio show on XTRA 690 AM. This hypermasculine event increased Rome’s fame.
and reputation among some of his audience as a host who “tells it like it is” even if it means insulting someone. However, many in the media criticized Rome’s lack of professionalism and predicted the end of his career (Sports Illustrated Editors, 1994). Although Rome left ESPN2 soon after the Everett incident, his radio career slowly continued to grow to the prominence it now holds. Rome’s reputation as intolerant and abusive continues to this day because his rapid-fire, masculinist-laden opinion on sports provoked OutSports.com—a Web site that caters to gay and lesbian sports fans—to refer to him as “the commentator who makes a name for himself by saying stupid things with an obnoxious style, that for some reason, attracts many straight sports fans” (Buzinski, 2000, p. 5).13

As a cultural studies scholar and committed sports fan, I am compelled to study The Jim Rome Show to examine the sexism and homophobia present in the show. When in Rome do the clones do as the Romans do? This question led me to conduct a textual analysis that identifies those features that appear to reinforce or promote homophobia and sexism. I also researched audiences in various sports bars in the United States to achieve a better understanding of what The Jim Rome Show means to listeners. I was particularly curious whether certain audience members resist the dominant, hegemonic, textual themes.

METHOD

It is important to note that my research is influenced by my pleasure in listening to the show as a sports fan. Because I write as a scholar and as a fan, my study reflects these two levels of knowledge, which are not necessarily in conflict but are also not necessarily in perfect alliance. Being a fan allows me certain insights into sports talk radio that an academic who is not a fan might not have, particularly when his or her analysis of texts is isolated from actual audiences. I thus avoid Jenkins’s (1992) critique of academic textual analysis that is distant from audiences and consequently “unable to link ideological criticism with an acknowledgement of the pleasures we find within popular texts” (p. 7).

To help work against the limitations of critiquing texts in isolation from context, I hung out in sports bars and interviewed listeners of The Jim Rome Show to better understand the complex relationship between audiences and texts. These interviews were conducted in sports bars in Sacramento, Tampa, Las Vegas, and Fresno (see the appendix for interview script). I conducted interviews with 18 people who described themselves as fans of The Jim Rome Show. The average age of participants was 32 years. Ten were White, three were African American, three were Latino, and two were Asian American. Sixteen of the participants were men, and two were women, all identified as heterosexual.14 Given that my research was limited to a small number of participants and because the audience members I interviewed may not be representative of The Jim Rome Show’s North American audience, the results are not necessarily generalizable. Yet my
hope is that my findings will promote future research on the ways that listeners decode sports talk radio texts.

As I reviewed each interview transcript, I made notes about its content, analyzing the responses to each question. I was particularly interested in looking for common themes, key phrases, ways of talking, and patterns of responses that occurred in my conversations with the participants. Instead of a positivist model of research, my audience research is provisional, partial, and situated in a particular social and historical location. As Ang (1996) stated, “Critical audience studies should not pretend to tell the ‘truth’ about ‘the audience.’ Its ambitions should be more modest” (p. 45).

SPORTS BARS

I chose to research sports bars because many of the patrons who frequent these spaces are avid listeners of The Jim Rome Show. In addition, because it is a primary site for male bonding, the sports bar is an extension of the social practices and discourses evident in sports talk radio (Wenner, 1998). Nevertheless, conducting research as a sports fan in the highly masculinized space of a sports bar produced some interesting ethical dilemmas; specifically, the issue of power relations. I attempted to be self-reflexive of my privileged subject position (White, male, heterosexual, sports fan) as to not inadvertently reproduce male hegemony. This privilege was evident when I was discussing my research with a male friend who identifies as gay. As he said to me, “I could never do that research; a sports bar is a dangerous place for a gay man. I would feel very unsafe there.” Taking his comments into account helps me to continually reflect on my privileged status as researcher and straight, middle-class, White male fan. I also need to ask critical questions that invite my male participants to examine and interrogate masculinity.

Being a sports fan who has frequented many sports bars has advantages and disadvantages. The main risk is overidentifying with my research participants and not having enough critical distance. The main advantage of being a sports fan is that it helps to facilitate nuanced understandings and forms of access impossible from other subject positions. Conducting this study as a fan inspired me to a high degree of accountability—I have included verbatim materials, edited and selected from my taped interviews, as a way of privileging their voice (all the names of my research participants have been changed to preserve anonymity).

The sports bar is a fascinating site to conduct fieldwork. In his assessment of the cultural space of modern and postmodern sports bars, Wenner (1998) argued that alcohol, sports, and hegemonic masculinity operate as a “holy trinity.” He distinguished the modern sports bar, a traditionally gendered place, from the postmodern sports bar, a place where gender relations are rearranged into a commodified hybrid. The modern sports bar, according to Wenner, is a place to talk to your male peers, have a drink, and watch and discuss sports—places I remember hanging out with my father.
and grandfather after Detroit Tigers’ games. In contrast, the postmodern sports bar is “designed as an experience as opposed to a real place” (Wenner, 1998, p. 323). He wrote,

The postmodern sports bar does not seek to stimulate the “authenticity” of a local place. Designed for out-of-towners to catch the game and for the realization that fewer and fewer people live in the places they were from, the postmodern sports bar offers “memorabilia in the generic.” A wide net is cast so that there is some identity hook for everyone, no matter what their favorite team, level of fanship, or geographic past. (p. 325)

The bars I frequented were of the postmodern type that Wenner described. Distinct from the smell (I remember the local taverns in Detroit as smelling like men’s locker rooms) and look of local sports bars (worn furniture, photos of local sports heroes, and virtually all men—no women—sitting at bar stools), the bars I conducted my research in were airy, bright, lively, loud, and smelled good. The bar areas looked very similar in each city—a large rectangular perimeter that resembled a large table with four corners and a “wet area” in the middle serviced by bartenders. In contrast to the local sports bar, the sexual geography of the postmodern bars I frequented was more egalitarian. Men and women worked as bartenders and waiters. During the time I spent observing, the majority of people sitting at the bar were men, but women also sat there without noticeable harassment. The space was a metaphor for postmodern culture in general—a constant tension between democratization and commodification. In this space, I found that male hegemony was still present as in the older bar context but in a more understated way. As Wenner (1998) wrote, “In the postmodern sports bar, male hegemony does not go away, it is merely transformed by its reframing” (p. 327).

In each bar I visited, I sat at the large bar area and began socializing with patrons, discussing sports and current events. After some small talk, I asked them if they listened to The Jim Rome Show. Virtually all the men I approached stated that they listened to the show. I then informed them of my research project and asked them to do an audiotaped interview about their experience of the show. All agreed enthusiastically after I assured them of confidentiality. The interviews, generally lasting 20 min, were enjoyable and surprisingly substantive and informative. Although the common initial explanation for listening to The Jim Rome Show was “it’s entertaining,” the conversations also focused on issues of homosexuality, masculinity, and other social topics. Often, people shared very personal stories and thanked me for an “enlightening” or “thought-provoking” experience. The interviews confirmed the notion that sports talk can provide an opportunity for men to discuss and even raise their awareness of gender and sexual issues that they might not otherwise have.

In addition to interviewing people at sports bars, I taped The Jim Rome Show from April 30 through September 7, 2001—roughly 390 hr of
programming (130 shows). I listened to each taped show and classified the content of the program into two general categories: (a) discussion of sports that centers on statistics and player/team performance and (b) discussion of larger social and political issues including racism, sexism, and homophobia. In my estimation, roughly 80% of the content of The Jim Rome Show was devoted to the former whereas social issues were the main topic 20% of the time. I also grouped the sociopolitical content into two general categories: hegemonic and counterhegemonic and found that roughly 70% of the discussion on such issues was hegemonic in nature. In addition to grouping the show’s content into these categories, I transcribed portions of the program when sexuality was discussed to conduct a close “reading” of the text. During the period in which I transcribed and analyzed The Jim Rome Show, four instances stood out as particularly important moments, what journalists often call “pegs”—critical events that generate a flurry of coverage (Grindstaff, 1994). In this case, the pegs generated discussion of homosexuality, prompting further commentary on other sports media programs. In the pages that follow, I analyze four topics that were widely discussed on The Jim Rome Show and other sports media programs as well as among the fans I interviewed. My analysis is connected to the larger media and cultural context. The period in which I taped the show was/is representative of a post-Clinton/Lewinsky, post-Bush inauguration, and pre–September 11, 2001, period of U.S. history. I intend to show links between the topics discussed on The Jim Rome Show and larger mediated discourse in general. By examining these pegs and placing them in their historical context, I hope to provide a forum in which to think through some of the ways that capitalism, hegemonic masculinity, sexuality, race, class, and consumption operates in contemporary U.S. culture.

HEGEMONIC THEMES

As stated earlier, my analysis of the text confirms that much of the discourse on the show contains themes of misogyny, violence, and heterosexual dominance including themes that reinforced sexism and lesbian baiting. The following examples highlight these instances. The first is from an infamous program date July 23. On this date, Rome was commenting on the breaking story that several professional male athletes (Patrick Ewing, Terrell Davis, and Dekembe Motumbo) had testified in an Atlanta court that they regularly attended a strip club (The Gold Club) and engaged in sex acts with the some of the club’s dancers. This tabloid-like story was a great opportunity for Rome to engage in his sardonic “smack” talk. Here are Rome’s acerbic comments on Patrick Ewing’s admission that he received “free oral sex” at the Gold Club:

Want some free oral sex Patrick [Ewing]? Nah, I’m good. Maybe next time! Come on! He said he’d been there 10 times. He said he had free oral sex 2 times. And by the way, who’s going to say ‘no’ to free oral sex? I mean, clones, would you like some free oral sex? Who’s going to say no to that [laughing]? Most athletes
go to a club or restaurant and get comped some free drinks, chicken wings. . . . not Patrick, he gets comped free oral sex.

[later in his monologue] Meanwhile, a former stripper testified. And it’s a good thing. We finally have some good testimony. She testified that she performed sex acts or witnessed other dancers perform sex acts on celebrities including Terrell Davis and Dekembe Motumbo. So in response to the proverbial question, “who wants to sex Motumbo?” The answer obviously is whichever skank’s turn it is at the Gold Club.

In this section of the transcript, Rome employs a very common, taken-for-granted discourse—"the heterosexual male sexual drive discourse" (Hare-Mustin, 1994). This dominant ideology is predicated on the notion that women are objects (Rome misogynistically refers to the dancers as “skanks”) who arouse men’s heterosexual urges, which are assumed to be “natural and compelling” (Hare-Mustin, 1994, p. 24). Accordingly, men cannot control their primitive sexual yearnings, and women are blamed for inflaming them. This assumption, reproduced by Rome’s rhetorical question, “who is going to turn down ‘free’ oral sex,” reinforces women’s subjugation as they become defined as existing solely for men’s pleasure.

Rome’s language takes on homophobic tones later in the same program. In this excerpt, Rome ridicules a former dancer’s testimony:

Finally we are getting somewhere. I thought Ewing’s testifying of getting ‘hummers’ was going to be the best that the trial had to offer. Thankfully, it’s not. In fact, not even close! After Patrick was done humiliating himself, one of the hookers got on the stand. That’s when it really got good. A former dancer at the club starting naming names! This is just the beginning. This ‘tramp’ also testified that she went back to the hotel room of a former wrestling executive, to perform sex acts, not on him, but on his wife! Now, we are getting somewhere. Sex with athletes; lesbian sex acts with the wives of executives. That’s what I was hoping for from the beginning! And this tramp also added that she and another dancer performed a lesbian sex show for Ewing and some friends before he was given free oral sex by other dancers. And perhaps the most amazing thing, this tramp that ratted everybody out, is now working at a day care center in Georgia. Wonderful. Who wouldn’t want to leave their kids with a woman who used to perform lesbian sex shows for NBA centers and sex with wrestling executive’s wives. What a perfect person to have around children! Man, I can’t wait to see what happens today in the trial. I wonder who else’s life will be ruined today?

Many of the callers on the September 9 program also reproduced male hegemony during their takes. Here is the call of the day:

Dan: [Contemptuously] I feel sorry for those skanks. I mean Ewing, Motumbo! Hopefully, the dancers got time and a half! I guess America has finally found a job worse than Assistant Crack Whore. About the only thing good to come out of this sordid mess is that Motumbo finally found a bar where his pickup line works.

Rome [Laughing]: Good job Dan!
Rome and his production staff chose this take as the call of the day, and in doing so, they support offensive, masculinist humor. Dan’s behavior reflects a common social practice for many men—the desire to earn the homosocial approval of other, more powerful men such as Jim Rome. Rome has power over the discourse and decides that Dan’s wit gives him the right to enter the homosocial space of male privilege. Yes, Dan attempts to hold the players accountable for their behavior. However, the underlying tone of Dan’s comments—“crack whore” and “skanks”—are racialized and sexist.

Rome’s comments on athletes receiving oral sex at a strip club references the Clinton/Lewinsky affair and the increasing media focus on sex scandals in the lives of public figures. Although the “tabloidization” of the media has many negative consequences, Lumby (2001) posited that it is not completely destructive. In fact, the increased media attention on private sexuality is because of, in part, the “feminist project of politicizing the private sphere and its attendant issues, such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and child care” (p. 234). “Bad” tabloid style press may actually stem from some “good” political motives that have focused on issues that were once seen as merely personal. Yet the media focus on Clinton and Rome’s focus on athletes at the Gold Club elides a feminist analysis of structures of power (Clinton with an intern or famous athletes with female sex workers). Hence, the entertainment value of sex scandals undermines the feminist goal of politicizing the private and reinforces “patriarchal sexuality morality: a proscription of sexual behavior outside the bounds of heterosexual monogamous marriage and the violation of that proscription by power and privileged males” (Jakobsen, 2001, p. 307).

ENTERTAINMENT AND MALE HEGEMONY

How do fans themselves make sense of and respond to Rome’s problematic masculinist commentary? Not surprising, many of the fans I spoke to found it humorous; “It’s entertaining” was the most common response. In fact, 2 days after Rome’s acerbic comments about the incidents at the Gold Club, the topic came up with George (all the names of my research participants have been changed to preserve anonymity), a 27-year-old White male, in a sports bar in Sacramento. While inquiring about what he finds appealing about Rome, he replied,

I listen every day. He tells like it is. He lets it rip. He doesn’t hold back. I like that! And he’s entertaining! He pokes fun at people like the other day when Rome went off about the Ewing [Gold Club incident]. It’s funny! It reminds me of locker room humor. Yes, I get a kick out of his smack talk. It’s pure entertainment. Like when he trashes NASCAR and the WNBA.

His friend, John (a 26-year-old White male), echoed similar sentiments:

Yeah, Rome is hilarious. I thought it was hilarious when he called Jim Everett, “Chris.” That’s what sticks in my head when someone says something about
Rome. He’s kind of like the Rush Limbaugh or Howard Stern of sports talk radio. Like he thinks he’s God. But I don’t mind it because he’s entertaining. And it’s a way for him to get the ratings and the market share. I admire that because I am a stockbroker. You need to market yourself to stand out. You need to be aggressive and controversial to be successful in today’s society. The show makes men cocky—like the clones. I listen to it for the entertainment. And he does know his sports.

Such comments are fairly representative of the participants that I interviewed. Many men valorize Rome’s “transnational business masculinity,” a term coined by Connell (2000) to describe egocentrism, conditional loyalties, and a commitment to capital accumulation. In addition, as stated above, many participants found the program pleasurable because Rome is knowledgeable, authoritative, and comedic. Implied here is the notion that listening to Rome is a natural as well as an innocent pleasure. One person, when asked about the so-called harmlessness of the program, said, “If you don’t like it, turn the radio dial. No one is forcing you to listen. It’s just entertainment!” This is a common response to critiques of the negative effects of media culture and audience pleasure. Yet amusement is neither innate nor harmless. Pleasure is learned and closely connected to power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980b). As media scholar Dougas Kellner (1995) observed,

> We learn what to enjoy and what we should avoid. We learn when to laugh and when to cheer. A system of power and privilege thus conditions our pleasures so that we seek certain socially sanctioned pleasures and avoid others. Some people learn to laugh at racist jokes and others learn to feel pleasure at the brutal use of violence. (p. 39)

The media industry, therefore, often mobilizes pleasure around conservative ideologies that have oppressive effects on women, homosexuals, and people of color. The ideologies of hegemonic masculinity, assembled in the form of pleasure and humor, are what many of my participants found most enjoyable about The Jim Rome Show, including Rome’s aggressive, masculinist, “expert” speech that ridicules others. Thus, many of the pleasurable aspects of the program may encourage certain male listeners to identify with the features of traditional masculinity.

**CALLING THE ROME SHOW:**
**HOMOSOCIALITY AND APPROVAL**

I was also interested in what listeners of the program thought of callers’ comments and if they had ever called the program themselves. Many enjoyed listening to callers such as Dan and found their commentary to constitute comical moments of the show. I was particularly interested in what calling in to the show might mean for men who subscribe to traditional masculinity. One of the main aspects of traditional masculine homosociality involves men’s striving and competing for prestige and approval within their peer groups (Wenner, 1998). This striving provides the basis for an
affiliation. Many people I interviewed stated that the ultimate compliment would be for Jim Rome to approve of their take if they called. To have your call “racked” by the leading sports media personality would be a revered honor. What’s more, from within the terms of hegemonic masculinity, having one’s call rejected may signify a “failure” of masculinity. The following dialogue occurred between me and Fred (a 44-year-old Black male):

David: Have you called the program before?
Fred: No, I never have called. I thought about calling but I would hate to get run [Rome disconnecting the call]. Man, that would hurt! I sometimes think, “Man, I could give a good take . . . but if I call and ‘suck’ . . . you know . . . get run, start stuttering . . . man that would be embarrassing.

David: What would be embarrassing about getting run?
Fred: It’s embarrassing ‘cause it’s Jim Rome. He’s the man [laughing]! He’s the pimp in the box! Man, if you get racked and are the caller of the day, you’re the man!

As stated earlier in this article, some scholars believe that sports and the media expanded to create a homosocial institution that functions to assuage men’s fear of feminization in current postmodern culture. Some of my interviews appear to confirm this view. When asked why The Jim Rome Show and other sports talk radio programs are so popular among heterosexual men, about one half of the men told me that they feel anxious and uncertain because of the changes in men’s work and women’s increasing presence in the public sphere. Moreover, several participants believed that sportstalk provides a safe haven for men to bond and reaffirm their essential masculinity. Here’s what a 27-year-old White male said in a bar in Tampa:

It’s [The Jim Rome Show] a male bonding thing, a locker room for guys in the radio. You can’t do it at work, everything’s PC [politically correct] now! So the Rome Show is a last refuge for men to bond and be men. It’s just in your car, Rome, and it’s the audience that you can’t see. I listen in the car and can let that maleness come out. I know its offensive sometimes to gays and women . . . you know . . . when men bond . . . but men need that! Romey’s show gives me the opportunity to talk to other guy friends about something we share in common. And my dad listens to Romey also. So my dad and I bond also.

This comment is telling about the mixed effects of sports talk. On one hand, sports talk radio allows men to express a “covert intimacy” (Messner, 1992) and shared meaning about a common subject matter. This bonding can bring forth genuine moments of closeness and should not necessarily be pathologized or seen as completely negative. However, much of the bonding is, as the interviewee stated, “offensive sometimes to gays and women.” Many of the men I interviewed were speaking in a group context in the presence of other male peers. The gender displays (sexist and homophobic jokes, for example) by the men I interviewed in the homosocial space of a sports bar were interesting to observe as they confirmed Messner’s (2002) point that men in groups define and solidify their boundaries through aggressive misogynistic and homophobic speech and actions. Underneath this bonding
experience are homoerotic feelings that must be warded off and neutralized through joking, yelling, cursing, and demonizing anybody who does not conform to normative masculinity. Pronger (1990) argued the arena of sports is paradoxical: on one hand, sports is a primary for the expression of heterosexual masculinity, and on the other hand, there is a powerful homoerotic undercurrent subliminally present in sports. Sports radio operates similarly as an extension of this paradoxically homosocial and homoerotic space. Shields (1999), in his analysis of sports radio, stated, “It would be impossible to overstate the degree to which sports talk radio is shadowed by the homosexual panic implicit in the fact that it consists almost entirely of a bunch of out-of-shape White men sitting around talking about Black men’s buff bodies” (p. 50).

LESBIAN BAITING

Sabo and Jansen (2000) suggested that radio talk shows are regular forums for men to lament and demonize lesbians or “dykes” in sport. A vivid example of lesbian baiting occurred on Jim Rome’s September 7 show. Rome began the program with comments about a story in Sports Illustrated that claimed that ex-coach of the Detroit WNBA team, Nancy Lieberman, was rumored to have had an affair with one of her players. Consider Rome’s bombastic and derisive comments about this rumor:

Not surprisingly, Lieberman is divorced from her husband right now. I can’t imagine why! I would think that your wife having a lesbian affair with one of your players would make your marriage that much stronger! Lieberman continues to deny the accusation. “I did nothing wrong. I was never in a relationship with her [the guard]. I mentored her to the best of my ability. If the media can write that Hilary Clinton’s gay, write that Oprah Winfrey’s gay, write that Rosie O’Donnell is gay, I guess that is the hand I am dealt with. Again, I did nothing wrong” end of quote. Wow! Look Nancy, stop the lies [Yelling]! . . . She has inferior ability. You are kicking it with her by the pool. You don’t think your players are going to resent that? And leave Hilary, “Obese” Winfrey, and Rosie “O’Fat” out of this. I imagine they loved you tracking their name through this by pointing the finger at them as lesbians by the media.

This is another instance of Rome’s loyalty to hegemonic masculinity. One way to interpret the above passage is that Rome is simply criticizing the unethical behavior of a coach supposedly having an affair with a player. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that he is also marginalizing the presence of lesbians in sports. Lesbians present a unique threat to the maintenance of male hegemony in sport as do women generally. The visibility of lesbians in sport contests the idea that sports are naturally a “manly” pursuit by rupturing cultural associations between masculinity and heterosexual potency. As Crosset (1995) posited, “The media industry has a stake in maintaining the image of sport as a resource for doing masculinity. It sells” (p. 126). For this reason, Rome’s ridiculing of lesbians preserves male hegemony in sport.
While talking to a heterosexual couple (both listened to the program and described themselves as committed sports fans), I asked the husband, Sam, what he made of Rome’s sexist humor. Sam said that he thought it was ironic and should not be taken literally:

Sam: I mean Rome’s joking about lesbians and women is tongue in cheek. Neither he nor the clones mean it literally. I mean it’s not like you are going to start gay bashing or treating your wife or daughter poorly! It’s just playful satire!
Dave: But why find that type of humor funny—humor at the expense of lesbians and women—even if it is tongue-in-cheek humor?
Sam: I don’t know, maybe men are feeling mixed…unsure about being all gender sensitive and politically correct.

Sam is suggesting that the humorous content of The Jim Rome Show provides men a space to playfully mediate the changing and tenuous nature of hegemonic masculinity; he describes Rome’s misogyny as “ironic” not as sexist. However, as Jackson, Stevenson, and Brooks (2002) stated about satire and men’s magazines (Maxim and Loaded, for example), “Irony allows you to have your cake and eat it. It allows you to express an unpalatable truth in a disguised form, while claiming it is not what you mean” (p. 103). Hence, irony, while making visible the ambivalence man feel toward traditional masculinity, ultimately works to mask oppressive, patriarchal aspects of this masculinity in the form of humor. More interesting, Sam’s wife Susan, a self-proclaimed feminist, fervently disagreed with her husband’s views about the so-called innocence of the humor on the show:

Okay, Jim Rome may know his sports. But he’s a macho asshole like Rush or Stern. Sarcastic humor is not innocent [looking at Sam]! But I mostly hate the program because of the men I know that are fans of the show. I know some men at work who love the show, and call themselves, “clones.” These guys have never grown up! It’s like they are still in a fraternity! The Jim Rome Fraternity of men who never grow up! And they are all very sexist and make homophobic jokes all the time. I think Rome is dangerous and wrong.

COUNTERHEGEMONIC THEMES

As the above analysis illuminates, The Jim Rome Show reinforces male hegemony. However, a close reading of the show reveals some contradiction and fissures to hegemony. The following transcripts of the program exemplify times when the text and its voices (Jim Rome, audience members) partially subvert hegemonic masculinity and homophobia. The first example is from the show dated April 30 when the topic of bigotry was raised by Rome. Here, Rome, in his belligerent vocal style, is taking issue with the homophobic comments made by Chicago Cubs pitcher, Julian Tavares, about San Francisco Giants fans:

Julian Tavarez, a pitcher for the Cubs said this about San Francisco Giants fans—his words not mine—“they are a bunch of a-holes and faggots.”… You know, it would be nice to go a week without some racist or bigot comment… but
no, Julian. Nice job Julian. . . . And here’s a thought. Julian Rocker [reference to John Rocker, a pitcher who became famous for making racist and homophobic comments during an interview in Sports Illustrated], just because San Francisco has a significant gay population, I would be willing to bet that not everybody at a Giants game is a homosexual. Maybe. Can’t document that. Just a thought . . . I feel pretty secure in saying that? How do you come up with this garbage? I mean how do you get to the point where the proper response to heckling fans is to drop racist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic bombs on people? And even if you had those bigoted views, you would have the sense to keep it yourselves. They might realize that not everybody hates everybody else. I think there is only one solution to this problem of overcrowding in the racist frat house. We are going to have to have honorary members.

In this instance, the host clearly positions himself as antiracist and anti-homophobic. This stance is noteworthy and a possible contradiction to dominant sports talk discourse. Rome uses his masculine authority to stand against the intolerance often engendered by homophobia.

Rome’s comments on the subject appear to be progressive and reasonable.24 On closer examination, however, Rome’s location of the problem of homophobia in a few bigoted, intolerant individuals leaves unchallenged the larger societal structures that perpetuate heterosexism. The stance taken up by the host is rooted within liberal discourse, which reduces analysis to an individual, private endeavor (Kane & Lenskyj, 2000; Kitzinger, 1987) and forecloses any serious discussion of homophobia as structural and political issues related to power, gender, and sexuality. When Rome denounces a few athletes as “bigots,” it prevents a wider analysis of the link between the institution of organized sports and its heterosexual, masculinist, and homophobic agenda. Addressing the thorny questions of sexuality, politics, power, and privilege would be a risky and bold move for The Jim Rome Show, as it would offer a more radical challenge to the institution of heterosexual privilege and sports.

The next seemingly subversive segment relates to an editorial letter in the May 2001 issue of Out magazine. In that issue, editor in chief, Lemon, stated that his boyfriend was a Major League baseball player. Lemon did not give names but hinted that the player was from an East Coast franchise. Rome and other mainstream media programs reacted quickly to the editorial. A media firestorm resulted in a rumor mill: Players, fans, owners, and sports talk radio hosts swapped guesses and anxieties over the athlete’s identity.

On May 18, Rome’s monologue pondered the questions. What would happen if that person’s identity became public? What would it mean for baseball, gays, and lesbians in sports in general, and for the man himself? Given that Lemon’s boyfriend would be the first athlete in one of the “big four” major league team sports (baseball, football, basketball, and hockey) to come out “during” his career, what effect would this have on the institution of sport? Rome decided to pose this question to one of his interview participants that day, well-respected baseball veteran Eric Davis.
Rome: What would happen if a teammate of yours, or any baseball player, would come out of the closet and say, “I am gay”? What would the reaction be like? How badly would that go?

Eric: I think it would go real bad. I think people would jump to form an opinion because everybody has an opinion about gays already. But I think it would be a very difficult situation because with us showering with each other . . . being around each other as men. Now, you’re in the shower with a guy who’s gay . . . looking at you . . . maybe making a pass. That’s an uncomfortable situation. In society, they have never really accepted it. They want to come out. And if that’s the cause fine but in sports, it would definitely raise some eyebrows. . . . I don’t think it should be thrown at 25 guys saying, “yeah I am gay.”

[Rome changes the subject . . . no follow-up]

Rome asks a pointed question to Davis whose predictable homophobic response warrants more follow-up questions. Yet Rome shifts the subject to something less problematic, letting Davis off the hook. After Rome ends the interview, he addresses Davis’s comments in another monologue:

That’s [Eric Davis] a 17-year respected major league ballplayer. And I think that’s a representative comment of a lot of these guys. . . . He is very highly regarded guy. This is why I asked him the question. And he answered it very honestly. He would be concerned about having a gay teammate. . . . For instance, when he’s showering. Personally, I don’t agree with the take. It’s my personal opinion. However, I posed the question to see what the reaction would be. And this is what I have been saying since this story broke. This is why it would not be a good thing. This is why the editor of that magazine clearly was wrong and has never been in a locker-room or clubhouse. That’s why it hasn’t happened. Eric Davis’ reaction is what you would expect. Not everybody would feel that way, but a large majority would. It would make it nearly impossible for a gay player to come out.

Here, Rome is aware of the difficulties that would occur for an openly gay ballplayer. However, he shares his opinion in the safety of his “expert” monologue, not in the presence of Eric Davis. He does not risk compromising his masculinity or his relationship with Davis by endorsing this unusually progressive stance in the presence of a famous ballplayer such as Davis. However, when a listener calls immediately after the Davis interview, Rome responds differently:

Joe: I never imagined my first take would be on gays but I had to call. Being gay, it matters to no one but gays themselves. Why don’t you guys, girls or gays . . . whatever you guys are. Just do us a favor, do yourselves a favor and keep it to yourselves. I mean . . . [Rome runs the caller with the buzzer and disconnects the call]

Rome: I think that’s a very convenient response—“It’s an issue only because you make it an issue.” I don’t agree with that frankly. It’s an issue because they are often persecuted against, harassed, assaulted, or killed in some cases. That’s why it is an issue. They are fired from jobs, ostracized. It’s not only an issue because they are making it an issue. What you are saying is keep your mouth shut, keep it in the closet; you are not accepting them for whom they are and what they are. It’s not an issue because they are making it an issue. It’s an issue because of people saying things like, “keep your mouth shut . . . We don’t want
you around . . . We don't want to know you people exist.” That's why it's an issue because of that treatment.

Again, Rome takes a strong stance against homophobia and demonstrates a fairly nuanced appreciation of the injustices of homophobia and heterosexism. This position is worth mentioning, particularly in the context of a program referred to as “The Jungle” with an audience of mostly men steeped in traditional masculinity and for whom heterosexuality is the unquestioned norm. Rome's antihomophobic stance represents a fissure in hegemonic masculinity. It can potentially foster a new awareness in Rome's listeners and invite new voices into this important conversation about masculinity and sexuality, potentially spurring a rethinking of masculinity and sports. Cutting off the first-time caller because of his homophobic comment could be viewed as a productive accountable maneuver, which is notable because straight men do not have a rich history of holding other straight men responsible for homophobic slurs.25

The historic May 18 radio show generated further substantive discussion on the issue of sports and heterosexual dominance in various media sites. This included a two-part show on Jim Rome's Fox TV show, The Last Word, titled “The Gay Athlete.” The show's guests included two out athletes: Diana Nyad and Billy Bean. The show's discussion was very rich with the host asking fairly nuanced and enlightened questions. Since this show, Rome has interviewed other athletes who have come out since they left professional sports including football players, Esera Tuaolo and David Kopay. In these interviews, Rome asked perceptive questions about the prevalence of homophobia in male sports and applauds their courage in coming out. ESPN also addressed the same topic and conducted a poll that showed that a substantial number of sports fans would have no problem with a gay athlete (“Outside the Lines,” 2001). What’s more, the Advocate magazine published an article by cultural critic Toby Miller (2001) where he argued that the media firestorm generated by Brendan Lemon’s article could potentially create a moment “for unions and owners of the big four to issue a joint statement in support, to show that queers are a legitimate part of the big leagues” (p. 3).

Another significant moment occurred on the May 18 show when Rome read the “huge e-mail of the day,” usually reserved for the nastiest comments. Rome chose an e-mail from “Mike from San Gabriel,” who wrote the following:

Jim, Eric Davis is perhaps the quintessential baseball player / human being who has overcome tremendous odds in battling and overcoming cancer and physical challenges. He's faced and battled a disease that strikes fear into the heart, and understands that life must be taken a day at a time.

Yet, despite this brush with death and the clarity in some areas that it brings, Eric's reaction to your question regarding baseball players' reactions to knowing that a teammate is gay spoke volumes, and none of it particularly heartening. Eric's fear (speaking for the average baseball player, that is) that a gay player
may be checking him out in the shower is representative of the stereotypes
foisted upon homosexuals in our society, and in baseball in particular. I find it a
little sad and ironic that an African-American player would espouse a view-
point—fear, ignorance and intolerance—that for much of baseball's history had
kept some of the best players in history—African-Americans—out of the Major
Leagues.

Perhaps, though, baseball may play a progressive role in our society once
again. Like it did in helping to erase the “color” barrier in the 1950s, so too it may
be able to play a part in fostering tolerance and acceptance in society today. I
think it’s going to take someone the stature of a Jackie Robinson from the gay
community to help allay the fears of baseball players, and in turn our society,
before progress can be made. Until then, gay baseball players will be relegated to
a shadowy world of fear and intolerance once reserved for African-Americans
and other minorities.

Mike

Mike’s comments caught the attention of the editor of Outsports.com,
Mike Buzinski, who commented that Mike's e-mail of the day was “well-
written” and “gay-positive.” In the Web site article titled “Give the Media
Good Marks: Coverage of Closeted Gay Baseball Player was Positive and
Non-Judgmental,” Buzinski (2001) went on to write:

Lesbian basketball fans and gay Major League Baseball players have been all
the rage in the sports media the past two weeks. This alone is unprecedented.
The mainstream media barely acknowledges the existence of gay athletes or
Angeles Times, Internet discussion boards and sports talk radio is all to the
good. Even better is that, overall, the coverage was balanced, informativea n d
non-homophobic. (p. 1)

Later in the same article he refers to Jim Rome:

The tenor of talk radio (at least when I was listening) was not as Neanderthal
as one might have expected. Jim Rome, the guy who called Jim Everett “Chris”
a few years ago, has been very enlightened on the gay issue, saying it's nobody's
business, while at the same time acknowledging the difficulties an “out” athlete
might face. (p. 2)

Rome’s stance against homophobia is groundbreaking and historic in sports
talk radio.

Ultimately, however, the perspective articulated by “Mike” and sup-
ported by Rome once again confines the meaning of homophobia in sports to
the intolerant or ignorant behavior of individuals and locates the responsi-
bility for changing that behavior in gay players and/or Black athletes, who,
after all, should “understand” about discrimination. Mike’s letter and
Rome’s comments also innocently presume that African Americans have
achieved equality in sports and in the larger society. This presumption, common
in sports talk radio discourse, is informed by what Goldberg (1998)
referred to as a “feel-good colorblindness of sports talk hosts” (p. 221).26

Queer scholars have discussed how sexuality is often produced through the
process of racialization (Gopinath, 1997; Munoz, 1999). By ignoring the intersection of race and sexuality, Rome saves sports from a more biting and transgressive critique, one that would expose the deep, institutional sexism and racism in sports. Instead, Rome refocuses the audience on the simple metaphors of sports—bad guy bigots and heroic gay athletes—rather than the larger discursive environment of sports and media that keep White, heterosexual masculinity at its center, thereby systematically excluding and oppressing all “others,” including women, racial minorities, and gays.

Hence, there are contradictions in, and limitations to, Rome’s “progressive” stance on sexuality. His comments espouse a liberal discourse that views homophobia as fearful behavior enacted by intolerant individuals. 27 Take, for example, Rome’s careless dismissal of the caller who wants gays to stay in the closet. Although the caller’s comments certainly reflect a homophobic viewpoint, Rome locates the blame in the caller as an individual, as if the caller is one of just a few, unenlightened bigots. A closer look at Rome’s own discursive practices on the show, including homophobic references, jokes, and name calling, all point to the same homosocial fears that motivate the caller’s concern. Perhaps the caller’s comments are better understood as a reasonable (but repugnant) apprehension of gays and lesbians based on the widely shared perception that out gays and lesbians challenge heteronormativity and patriarchy. As Card (1995) pointed out, hatred and hostility toward homosexuals is not a pathological disorder of a few individuals. Rather, homophobia is a pervasive affliction that is not isolated in its effects.

Also embedded in this discourse is the assumption that the right, best way for gays and lesbians to live is out. Almost all parties in this dialogue refer to coming out, including Mike, Rome, Eric Davis, and the editor of Out magazine. As Gopinath (1997) observed, the “coming out narrative” assumes that people who have same-sex desire need to reveal their sexuality and become visible and also presupposes a universal gay subject. Coming out is viewed by Rome as a contested privilege, a “right,” and the natural and logical next step in achieving “health” and an “authentic life.” This identitarian narrative is supported by many people and institutions, including the mental health industry, straight allies, and in particular, by the dominant discourses of the urban gay community.

The Jim Rome Show suggests that coming out signifies freedom and egalitarianism. Although this stance can provide a very powerful option for persons who identify as gay or lesbian, coming out can also be another standard for sexual expression that people may feel obligated to meet. In addition, privileging the coming-out narrative can unwittingly work in the service of heteronormativity. Coming out requires that a person claim an identity as gay or lesbian. Foucault (1980a) suggested that claiming a fixed identity as homosexual may be personally liberating but unintentionally relocates heterosexuality in the privileged center. Because straights are not required to come out and claim a heterosexual identity, heterosexuality is assumed to be natural and normal. Although Rome and his callers discuss
homosexuality, heterosexuality is never interrogated or discussed hence remaining an unmarked and naturalized category.

It is important to note that Rome’s interviewing of out athletes such as Billy Bean and David Kopay is a unique outcome in the world of heteronormative sports. To allow visibility of the gay athletes cannot be taken lightly in terms of its potential ramifications. Yet it is equally important to ask which athletes are allowed to become visible? What is their social location? How is their sexuality represented? Virtually all the gay athletes who have been on The Jim Rome Show are White males (an exception is Esera Tuaolo who is Samoan) who define homosexuality as an essentialist identity. Foucault (1980b) contended that although visibility opens up some new political possibilities, it is also “a trap” because it creates new forms of surveillance, discipline, and limits. Sure, Bean and Kopay are given space to discuss their experience as a gay athlete, however it must be contained within a very limited, private discourse. Scholar Duggan (2001) claimed that much of the recent visibility of gays and lesbians are framed within a post-Stonewall, identitarian, private discourse. She referred to this discourse as homonormativity—“a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p. 179). According to Duggan, homonormativity is privatizing much as heteronormativity is, and each lends support to the other. As much as Rome’s recognition of gays in the sporting world is noteworthy, it is very much contained with a homonormative frame that reproduces the sex and gender binary. Hence, Rome’s show although it may be influenced by traditional gay and lesbian identity politics; it is not a queer space. Athletes, including women who perform a more transgressive, non-normative sexuality are invisible in sports radio.

DON’T ASK DON’T TELL

Sexuality and sports was again the subject of discussion of Rome’s show on August 29. On the program that day, Rome was interviewing heavyweight boxers Lennox Lewis and Hasim Rahman about their upcoming title fight. During the interview, a war of words broke out because Rahman questioned Lewis’s heterosexuality. Lewis became quite perturbed stating, “I am not gay! I’m 100% a woman’s man.” This verbal conflict continued later that day on an ESPN interview program. During the ESPN taping, a physical scuffle broke out between the two boxers as they pushed each other and rolled around on the ground. The following day, Rome discussed the incident, and the subsequent brawl on ESPN on his program focusing mainly on the question of whether the incident was staged to hype the fight. Rome argued that the harsh feelings between Rahman and Lewis were “genuine,” that the incident was not staged. Yet in focusing on the theatrics or authen-
ticity of the scuffle, Rome failed to address the inappropriateness of Rahman’s homophobic slur.

The host did make an attempt, however, to address some of his callers’ heterosexist/homophobic comments in the wake of the incident. On the August 30 radio show, many clones called pronouncing that Lewis’ strong reaction to Rahman’s assertion proves that Lewis is gay. Hence, homophobic gossip questioning Lewis’ sexuality became the spotlight of the talk. In this next excerpt, Rome criticizes Rahman’s allegations and the callers’ fixations with Lewis’ sexual orientation:

Personally, I don’t care. It’s nobody’s business what that guy [Lewis] does outside of the ring. It’s nobody’s business but Lennox’s. I don’t care. But apparently, he does. He says he is not. I don’t care whether he is or isn’t. I tell you what—HE’S NOT GOING TO STAND FOR ANYBODY SAYING HE IS. He made that pretty clear. I don’t think Rahman should have said what he said. He should not have said quote, “That was gay of you to go to court to get me to fight.” But, I tried to point out to Lennox that he’s not calling you a homosexual, he’s saying “it was gay to go to court.” Lennox didn’t want to hear it. He didn’t make the distinction. And yes, it is a little peculiar that he got that hot that quickly, but I don’t really care.

Here again, Rome takes up a “tolerant” position by asserting that sexual orientation should not matter and gossip about Lewis’s sexuality is improper. Yet, by stating that sexual orientation makes no difference to him, Rome is once again invoking a liberal, privatized argument that contradicts his previous intolerance of the same “don’t ask, don’t tell position” held by a caller. In addition, his comments mirror the “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” on gays in the military. Queer theory scholar McWhorter (1999) critiqued this personalized approach to homophobia:

When tolerant people insist that that my homosexuality doesn’t matter to them, they say in effect that my homosexuality is not a social or cultural phenomenon at all but rather some sort of brute quality inherent in me and totally disconnected from them; they say in effect that my homosexuality is a kind of object that is obviously there but has nothing to do with me as a person. Thus, this “tolerance” in the final analysis amounts basically to the same stance as that taken by reductivist homophobes. (p. 3)

In summary, Rome’s position of tolerance is praiseworthy. Yet his stance is less than revolutionary if one takes critiques such as McWhorter’s into account. Rome’s discourse replicates essentialism—the idea that sexuality can be reduced to some biological essence—an ideology that replicates heteronormativity by failing to examine sexuality in a historical, social, and political context.

Many of the people I interviewed in sports bars appreciated that Rome and his show addressed larger, social issues. The overwhelming majority of interviewees respected and agreed with Rome’s opinion or takes on the i s
sues of gender and sexuality. For many, the show was the main forum for them to discuss and reflect on wider, political matters. The following is a conversation I had with Nick, a 26-year-old Latino male in Fresno that reflects the dominant discourse of don’t ask, don’t tell:

Nick: Romey is like a sports sociologist with humor. He’s entertaining. He’s really into the gay issue. He’s an advocate for gay rights. I respect him for it but because he speaks his mind.

David: Why do you respect him for that?

Nick: Personally, I don’t care what gays do. But it’s not cool that gays have to stay in the closet. But I don’t think gays in team sports won’t work because so many athletes are macho and homophobic.

Nick’s comments are fairly representative of the conversations I had with fellow fans. All 18 people I interviewed respected and agreed with Rome’s tolerant position on the issue of homosexuality and sport—a position, although progressive in the context of sports talk radio, is limited because it ignores larger structures that promote heterosexism. Although all made it clear that they were heterosexual, my interviewees indicate that some who listen to sports talk radio are somewhat open minded on the issue of homosexuality and sports.

I don’t know if this attitude is representative of the larger Rome audience. It may not be, because The Jim Rome Show Web site (www.jimrome.com), contained 16 pages in which self-described clones passionately opposed Rome’s antihomophobic takes. Here’s an example of the deep-seated homophobia expressed on the Web site message board. It reveals how those who subscribe to dominant masculinity feel threatened by Rome’s position:

My 13 year-old was working with me at my business today, and we were listening to Rome when he takes off in his “gay defender” mode. My son looks at me and says, “Dad, what’s wrong with this guy? He thinks homosexuality is normal?” Well, clue-in Romey—it IS wrong: morally, and in every other way. Why you pander to this group is beyond comprehension.

There were other responses on the fan message board that questioned Rome’s genuineness stating that his progressive stance on homophobia was primarily motivated as a marketing strategy to stir up controversy and recruit new listeners. Some on the message board found Rome’s stance to be hypocritical as Rome himself has made homophobic references in the past. One of the men I interviewed also stated that Rome’s position on homosexuality was hypocritical:

A contradiction! He’s totally a hypocrite. Here is a so-called gay advocate on one breath and in the next breath, he refers to the LPGA as the “dyke” tours. And remember, he’s the guy who got famous for calling Jim Everett, “Chrisis.” Plus, he panders to athletes and celebrities such as Jay Mohr. I was listening to Romey in May when Mohr called Mike Hampton (a baseball pitcher) a “gay
Curious George." Rome laughed at this and lauded Mohr’s brilliant humor. He’s not progressive. If he were progressive, he would confront homophobes. He’s just another macho dude who’s using social issues and controversy to gain market share, profits, and more radio affiliates.

FEMALE LISTENERS

Because many of Rome’s comments were sexist, I was also interested in finding out how women listeners experience the show. In addition to Susan, I interviewed Joan, a 31-year-old White woman hanging out in a bar in Las Vegas. Diverging from Susan’s opinion, Joan believed Rome to be progressive on gender and sexual issues. In fact, she was the only person I interviewed who actually called the program. Here’s part of our dialogue at a bar in Las Vegas:

Joan: I actually called. My voice was heard. He was cool. He didn’t bag me. I didn’t speak the clone language. I am me! I called to state that violence should stay in hockey—hockey is not hockey without violence—I feel very strong about that.

David: What was cool about Rome?

Joan: He’s cool to women. He’s not sexist or homophobic. He respected my call. I know sexist guys. I have lived with them. My ex-husband was one. He was very violent and mean. I lived in a bad environment. I left him and moved to Vegas. I no longer will be around men who are offensive or demeaning to women.

David: And you don’t experience that from Rome, him saying sexist comments?

Joan: No, I don’t feel that from him. I don’t see him as demeaning to women. If he were a sexist, I wouldn’t listen to his show.

Joan’s comments could be seen as firmly grounded in postfeminist discourse that replicates hegemonic masculinity. Her comments advocate continued violence in hockey, and she does not experience Rome as sexist despite Rome’s repeated misogynistic references on the show. Joan presents herself as “one of the guys” and replicates a patriarchal view of the show and its contents. Her response is further indication the listeners of The Jim Rome Show, dependent on their social location, read the text in multiple ways.

CONCLUSION

At this historical moment when hegemonic masculinity has been partially destabilized by global economic changes and by gay liberation and feminist movements, the sports media industry seemingly provides a stable and specific view of masculinity grounded in heterosexuality, aggression, individuality, and the objectification of women. The Jim Rome Show, with its aggressive, make-talking host and masculinist themes, is located within this hypermasculine space.

However, my analysis indicates that The Jim Rome Show is not a simple, completely obnoxious site of monolithic masculine discourse. Rather, the show represents a complex, paradoxical, ambivalent, and polyvalent text.
The Jim Rome Show fosters a mix of masculine styles, identities, and discourses, ranging from highly misogynistic to liberal humanist. My article notes some of the discontinuous and contradictory moments that disrupt hegemonic masculinity and heterosexual dominance; it considers Jim Rome’s antihomophobic stance to be somewhat progressive given the context and hypermasculine discursive space of sports talk radio.

In my effort to recognize the complexity and contradictory elements of the text, I suggest that the antihomophobic tenor of the radio program, although laudable, is informed by a liberal-humanist approach that elides substantive interrogation and political discussion of the structures of heterosexual domination. Moreover, Rome’s examination of homophobia focuses entirely on sexuality and sexual identity; issues of race fall by the wayside, making his analysis monothematic. Whiteness and heteronormativity stay at the privileged center.

It is also important to note that The Jim Rome Show is a highly popular, commercialized radio program owned by a giant corporation (Premiere Radio Network) that privileges profits, niche marketing, and audience ratings over challenging oppressive practices and institutions. Consequently, Rome’s show tends toward a more conservative “reproductive agency” (identification with corporate consumerism that stabilizes oppressive social institutions) than a more radical or transgressive “resistant agency” (Dworkin & Messner, 1999).

My audience analysis suggests that The Jim Rome Show may, in the end, stabilize the institution of heteronormativity. I showed how the textual content greatly influences the ways audience members understand the show’s messages. The participants interviewed generally held conservative opinions about gender and sexuality that conform to the hegemonic masculine ideal. However, most of my interview participants did support Jim Rome’s antihomophobic posture. Thus, further research should explore whether the text helps to transform the beliefs of men who have not yet acquired a sincere commitment to antihomophobia.

In addition, future research needs to investigate how gays and lesbians may experience this discursive space. The Jim Rome Show has been specifically created for heterosexuals to publicly discuss sports. Even if Rome is sometimes antihomophobic, how does this space feel for a gay or lesbian person? Even if Rome defends gays (and usually not lesbians), is his show a “safe haven” for queers? Does The Jim Rome Show simply re-create hierarchical power relations or is it a democratic site that opens up the potential for achieving real social justice? These questions are critical for future feminist inquiries into radio sports talk programs. Moreover, how has the discourse of the Rome show and other sports radio programs changed since September 11, 2001? Has the discourse become more nationalistic?

It is also crucial to consider the role of pleasure in listening to sports talk radio while steering clear of the problems associated with uncritical, moralistic, and/or celebratory accounts of popular culture. I myself enjoy
listening to the program even though I am aware of the sexist, homophobic themes. Pleasure is a double-edged sword: It provides opportunities for relaxation, bonding, but also makes the sexist and homophobic content seem more innocent and easier to dismiss or laugh off. Hence pleasure cannot be valorized per se but needs to be critically examined to determine whether the pleasure of a given moment in the text of the program is progressive, emancipatory, or destructive.

Regardless, it is important for critical media scholars and activists to leverage and build on those moments in the text that disrupt hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism. McKay, Messner, and Sabo (2000) suggested that there is a tendency for critical media studies and sports sociology to overemphasize negative outcomes for men in sports. They argued that this overemphasis on negative outcomes leads to a simplistic view of the incongruities in talk and commentary about sports.

Following this thesis, I think it is important for critical scholars and activists to be vigilant in noticing and promoting the possibilities for disruption and resistance within dominant media sport structures. The antihomophobic tenor of The Jim Rome Show is an opportunity to address heterosexual dominance in sports. Yes, Rome’s radio program reveals the limits of liberal discourse, however, his progressive stance may be a starting point to influence men who are deeply embedded in hegemonic masculinity. Remember, Rome was not built in a day! Rome likely has more influence with many men who are recruited by the specifications of dominant masculinity than academic scholars and political activists. In other words, a radio community of men discussing sports may not be just simply reproducing hegemony—there is more complexity in this discursive space, including opportunities for men to engage in relationship building and to reinvent masculinity. Perhaps Haag’s (1996) suggestion that sports talk discourse may serve as a blueprint for civic discourse has some merit here.

Although Rome’s radio program is deeply embedded within corporate consumerism and tends more toward a more reproductive than resistant agency, it remains a potential channel for challenging hegemonic masculinity and homophobia. The contradictions, fissures, and ambivalences within the discursive space of The Jim Rome Show should not be trivialized. It is through those contradictory spaces that Rome’s show may have potential for generating new conversations about masculinity and sexuality. Although The Jim Rome Show is situated within commercial culture, it does offer heterosexual men a rare public space for dialogue on homophobia and contemporary masculinity. Furthermore, I would assert that this discursive space is occupied in a multiplicity of ways, not all of which are immediately colonized by consumer capitalism. Hence, my study neither uncritically celebrates the show nor views the show in purely negative terms as a backlash against feminism and gay rights. Rather The Jim Rome Show offers a potential site to change gender relationships and identities, while concurrently reinscribing particular forms of traditional masculinity.
APPENDIX

In general, I asked the interviewed audience members the following questions:

1. How often do you listen to *The Jim Rome Show*?
2. What do you like most about the show?
3. What do you like least about the show?
4. What do you think the show means to most men who listen regularly to the program?
5. Why is the show popular with many men?
6. What is your view on Rome's position on various social issues?
7. Have you ever called the program?
8. What do you think of most of the takes of the callers?
10. What other television and radio programs do you consume?

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**NOTES**

1. According to Arbitron ratings, *The Jim Rome Show* is ranked eighth in radio talk audience share. The most popular radio talk hosts, according to the ratings, are Rush Limbaugh and Dr. Laura. All three shows, Jim Rome, Rush Limbaugh, and Dr. Laura, are owned by Premier Radio Networks, a company worth U.S.$330 million dollars. These statistics are from Premiere Radio's Web site: www.premiereradio.com.

2. “Run” refers to the host hanging up on the caller.

3. Jim Rome's Web site (www.jimrome.com) has a 24-page glossary (known as “city jungle gloss”) that lists his terms and the definitions. For instance, “Jungle Dweller” refers to a frequent telephone contributor to Rome's show. “Bang” means to answer phone calls. “Bugeater” refers to a Nebraskan who is a fan of the Nebraska Cornhuskers' college football team.

4. The comment “What will Rome say next?” has been applied several times to listeners of the *Howard Stern Show*, for those who enjoy and despise it. This is (even) mentioned in the Howard Stern autobiographical movie, *Private Parts*. 

5. Rome's relationship with his caller, similar to most talk-show power relations between caller and host, is quite asymmetrical. Hutchby (1996) in his study of the discourse in talk radio stated that although the host has an array of discursive and institutional strategies available to him or her to keep the upper hand, occasionally callers have some resources available to resist the host's powerful strategies. Hence, Hutchby argued that power is not a monolithic feature of talk radio. Hutchby's argument does not appear to work with The Jim Rome Show as callers hardly ever confront Rome's authority. Rather, Rome's callers want his approval.

6. Deregulation was championed by then FCC chairman Mark Fowler who sold it as a form of media populism and civic participation. However, this public marketing campaign masked increased economic consolidation and increased barriers to entry into this market for all but very powerful media conglomerates such as Infinity Broadcasting and Premiere Radio. Commenting about the success of conservative White male talk radio due to deregulation of the 1980s, Douglas (2002) claimed that Reaganism was successful by "selling the increased concentration of wealth as move back toward democracy" (p. 491).

7. In 1960, there were just two radio stations in the United States that were dedicated to talk radio formats (Goldberg, 1998).

8. The other significant deregulatory move in the 1980s was the abandonment of the Fairness Doctrine, which the FCC announced it would no longer enforce. The doctrine required stations to offer access to air alternative opinions when controversial issues were discussed. The goal of the doctrine was to promote a balance of views. Opponents of the doctrine, including Fowler and Reagan, felt it inhibited freedom of speech. Stations, they argued, avoided giving airtime to opinionated individuals because of the requirement to broadcast competing points of view. Unrestricted by the Fairness Doctrine's mandate for balance, Limbaugh and a legion of ultraconservative imitators took off the gloves and revived the financial state of AM radio.

9. The largest sports station in the United States based in New York. WFAN is also the largest ad-billing radio station in the United States.

10. These popular hosts are known for being rude and abrupt to their callers. If the host disagrees with the callers' opinion, they are likely to be disconnected by being buzzed, flushed down the toilet, or run over by a bus.

11. The idea that contemporary masculinity is in crisis is an arguable point. Beynon (2002) suggested that it is misleading to assume that the current alleged crisis is new and unique to current times; that there are many historical periods when masculinity appeared to be in crisis. In fact, he argued that crisis is constitutive of masculinity itself.

12. Mariscal also disagreed with Haag's stating the national syndicated programs such as The Jim Rome Show undermines the regionalism of sports radio.

13. In a recent interview in Sports Illustrated, Rome stated he regrets the Everett interview and has matured into a well-reasoned interviewer. In the article, Rome stated that he was "wiser" because of being married and having a child (Deitsch, 2003).

14. I invited several women to be interviewed about The Jim Rome Show. However, only two stated that they listened to the show.

15. The local Sacramento sports talk affiliate runs a commercial that says, "Belly up to the bar and pour yourself a cold one! You are listening to your sports bar on the radio."

16. It is important to note that my coding scheme was based on my interpretation of what constitutes hegemony and counterhegemony; it is not an objective measure.

17. The court in Atlanta was prosecuting the owner of the Gold Club for mob connections and other illegalities. This event received a great deal of media attention.

18. Ewing and Motumbo are Black men. The caller of the day, Dan, is implying that they are unattractive men. Dan's disdainful "smack talk" could be understood to reproduce racist representations of Black athletes.
19. As a sidebar, Cook (2001) challenged the common notion that radio talk shows are a natural two-way dialogue between the caller and host that allow the caller to “freely air their point of view” (p. 62). The production process reveals that it is a complex, mediated process that constrains the dialogue through a range of in-studio control techniques. These hidden maneuvers include off-air talk decisions on what gets included on the program, what gets omitted, and time control cues. Cook argued that examining the complex relational politics in radio talk is important to examine to contest its negative power and influence.

20. The term pimp in the box refers to Rome’s “pimping” of NHL hockey in Los Angeles during 1992-1993 when the Los Angeles Kings made it to the Stanley Cup Finals. Rome’s show was the first in Los Angeles to actively talk about hockey on sports talk stations and book hockey players as guests. This made national news as Wayne Gretzky was to appear on the show following every playoff game the Kings played that season to the point where Gretzky thanked Rome during a televised interview after the Kings won Game 7 of the Western Conference Finals to advance to the Finals. After thanking Kings management and players he said, “To my friend Jim Rome, we’ve got the karma going.”


22. Rome has consistently “bashed” the LPGA and the WNBA, sports with lesbian visibility.

23. Rome has a history of marginalizing lesbian athletes including Martina Navratilova, referring to her as “Martin” because of embodying qualities that are usually associated with maleness, such as strength, authority, and independence. In her book, Female Masculinity, Halberstam (1998) made a compelling argument for a more flexible taxonomy of masculinity, including not only biological men, who have historically held the power in society, but also women who perform a traditionally masculine persona. Halberstam argued “a major step toward gender parity, and one that has been grossly overlooked, is the cultivation of female masculinity” (p. 3). Utilizing Halberstam’s framework, Heywood and Dworkin (2003) suggested that athletes who perform female masculinity, such as Navratilova, create fissures in the heterosexual male preserve of sport.

24. When I refer to Rome in this section, I am referring not to Rome, the individual person. Rather, I am referring to Rome’s discourse.

25. However, it is important to note that Rome asserts his authority over a person with less power—a first-time caller. Rome doesn’t take this strong a stance with Eric Davis, a high-status person who likely has more influence within the sports world. This textual example reveals the power relations of talk radio; hosts and famous athletes have more authority than callers.

26. Goldberg (1998) and Mariscal (1999) suggested that sports talk radio is more racialized than any other radio format.

27. Mariscal (1999), in his analysis of The Jim Rome Show, noted Rome’s contradictory stance on race. At times, Rome is very progressive and antiracist, and other times Mariscal noted that Rome engaged in derogatory stereotypes toward Latinos. Mariscal stated that Rome’s inconsistent stance on “racially charged topics reveals the basic slippage in liberal discourse,” (p. 116) a situation where citizens engage in post-civil rights speech that “slides easily from tepid antiracism to the reproduction of deeply ingrained racist clichés” (p. 116).

28. Postfeminism refers to the idea that women have already achieved full equality with men (Humm, 1995).

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