

Q&A: On immigrants and immigration, when does talk radio go to far?



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A **UCLA study released last week** examined the prevalence of anti-immigrant rhetoric on talk radio, measuring instances of “code words” and other negative references to immigrants, Latinos and other minorities on segments of three popular conservative talk shows.

Participating in a panel timed to the release of the report along with its UCLA authors last week was **Alex Nogales**, president and CEO of the **National Hispanic Media Coalition**. The Pasadena-based media watchdog group advocates for “accurate and balanced” portrayals of Latinos in news

and entertainment programming, among other things, and part of its focus lately has been on talk radio.

The group has been leading an advertiser boycott against one locally produced program, Clear Channel’s **“The John and Ken Show,”** after its hosts gave out the number of an immigrant rights advocate on the air, prompting fans to deluge the man with hate calls. (Clear Channel said in a statement following **a recent protest** that it did not condone the calls, and that the hosts were “extremely sensitive to language that could be viewed as inciting threats or violence.”)

Illegal immigration, and immigration in general, continues to make headlines and inflame political passions, making it an attractive talk radio topic. But when hosts, as chronicled **in the report,** digress into conversations about things like inner-city obesity and “the Mexican diet,” does it go too far? And given **a spike in anti-Latino hate crimes,** should greater consideration be given to programming? Nogales, a former television producer and Emmy winner, provides his take.

M-A: Several talk radio programs make illegal immigration a frequent topic. When does it go too far?

Nogales: *Radio pundits can and should examine topics of public importance such as immigration. And there is ample room for people to heartily disagree on these issues. But radio pundits go too far when they encourage violence against a group of individuals, or when they create an atmosphere of hate and intolerance that is likely to incite violence. Unsubstantiated claims, flawed argumentation and divisive language are several mechanisms that some radio pundits use to place targets on the backs of those with which they disagree.*

M-A: Where does the First Amendment apply or not apply here?

Nogales: *The First Amendment protects the rights of all us to speak freely without government intrusion. Radio pundits often cloak themselves in the First Amendment when they say something*

that they shouldn't. But just because they can say almost whatever they want, doesn't mean that they should. And that's what our action against John and Ken is all about – a community exercising its own First Amendment rights to protest deplorable behavior over the public airwaves. And frankly, as trustees of our public airwaves, we can and should expect civility from our broadcasters.

M-A: How do you define hate speech? And in what ways is it problematic or dangerous?

Nogales: In a 1993 report titled "The Role of Telecommunications in Hate Crimes," the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) defined hate speech as either (1) "words that threaten to incite 'imminent unlawful action,' which may be criminalized without violating the First Amendment"; or (2) "speech that creates a climate of hate or prejudice, which may in turn foster the commission of hate crimes" (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993, 6). We use NTIA's definition.

Hate speech in media is dangerous because it can impact behavior. Countless scientific studies confirm that media forms peoples' behavior and perceptions. From 2003 to 2007 there was a 40% increase in hate crimes against Latinos. In California alone, last year hate crimes against Latinos has increased by 50%. NHMC believes these numbers to be a low-count of hate crimes because many undocumented immigrants do not report hate crimes in fear of being deported.

We have commissioned two more studies on hate speech in media that are being performed by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. The final study will discuss the impact of hate speech on biomarkers. A biomarker, or biological marker, is a substance used as an indicator of a biological state. This groundbreaking study will be the first of its kind to move the conversation from anecdotal to empirical on the impact of hate speech in media on behavior.

M-A: There has been a rise in anti-Latino hate crimes. Do you see this as being directly linked to media, and in particular to a specific sort of programming? How can what is termed as a "call to action" in the report manifest itself as violence – and do we know of any incidents stemming from anti-immigrant rhetoric in media?

Nogales: There are many factors that have led to the rise in anti-Latino hate crimes, and yes, NHMC believes that the increase in hate speech in media has directly contributed to the increase in hate crimes. The shock jocks are good at what they do. They know not to cross the line into unprotected speech. Their calls to action are about intimidating someone, usually one person against their millions of listeners. "Call so-and-so and give them a piece of your mind," they tell their angry listeners after riling them up with divisive language, dehumanizing metaphors and misinformation.

NHMC has been researching hate speech in media and hate crimes for a few years now. One very clear example of hate speech and violence is around Glenn Beck's rhetoric. In July, 2010 Byron Williams, an unemployed carpenter, packed his guns and set off for San Francisco with a plan to kill progressives. California Highway Patrol officers stopped him for driving erratically.

Shot and captured after injuring two officers, **Williams told investigators** that he wanted "to start a revolution" by "killing people of importance at the Tides Foundation and the ACLU," according to a police affidavit. Williams had heard a call to action from Fox News host Glenn Beck who had focused

his diatribe **against the Tides Foundation**. In total, prior to the attempted rampage, Beck had attacked the Tides Foundation 29 times. In jailhouse interviews, the gunman confessed he viewed Beck as a “schoolteacher” who **“blew my mind.”** Williams admitted that Beck “give[s] you every ounce of evidence you could possibly need” to commit violence.

M-A: NHMC has been leading an advertiser boycott to push Clear Channel’s ‘John and Ken Show’ off the air in Los Angeles. Can you provide an update?

Nogales: Eight major corporations have committed to **no longer advertise** on the John and Ken show: AT&T Wireless, Verizon, Home Depot, Vons, Ralphs, Albertson’s, General Motors, and Toyota. The Aquarium of the Pacific also made the commitment to no longer be part of the John and Ken show. Smaller advertisers have also dropped off as well, but we won’t put a spotlight on them to avoid any potential backlash to small businesses.

The group has held firm in its dialogue with Clear Channel, continuing to request that the show be discontinued. Clear Channel said in its recent statement, “Unfortunately, some groups continue to have a non-negotiable demand as a precondition of working together.”