When in Rome

Heterosexism, Homophobia, and Sports Talk Radio

David Nylund

... 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 non-playing 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. \(^1\) “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). \(^2\) 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). \(^3\) 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. \(^4\) Infinity Broadcasting, the largest U.S. company devoted exclusively to owning and operating radio stations, owns WFAN\(^5\) 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. . . . 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. . . . 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 social movements, feminism. The men’s movement of the 1980s found its outlet—and that was talk radio. (Douglas, 2002, p. 485)

Similarly, sports talk radio, according to Goldberg (1998), enacts its White hegemony
via hypermasculine posing, forceful opinions, and loudmouth 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 chapter 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 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).

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. . . .

**Hegemonic Themes**

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 dated 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 some of the club’s dancers. This tabloidlike 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 had sex with wrestling executives’ 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 powerful 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 surprisingly, 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 Council (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, 1980). As media scholar Douglas 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!10 Man, if you get racked and are the caller of the day, you’re the man!

. . . 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 sports talk 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”11 (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 site 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). . . .
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 Tavarez, 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 [to] 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 antihomophobic. 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. 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, the editor in chief, Brendan 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 case, 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 [a] very highly regarded guy. This is why I asked him the question. And he answered it very honestly. He would be concerned about having 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 who 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.13

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 applauded 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). . . .

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 (1980) 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 Lisa Duggan (2001) claimed that much of the recent visibility of gays and
lesbians is 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 polities, is not a queer space. Athletes, including women who perform a more transgressive, non-normative sexuality, are invisible in sports radio.

Notes

1. 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.

2. 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).

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

4. 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 air-time 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.

5. 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.

6. 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).

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.”


12. 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.

13. 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.

**References**


Buzinski, J. (2001, May 20). Give the media good marks: Coverage of closeted gay baseball player was positive and non-judgmental. Available at www.outsports.com


