

# 1 1st Inning

## OPENING PITCH

### *Thinking about Sports Talk Radio*

I am driving in traffic on a typical harried Monday morning. Turned off by the conservative “hate speech” of political talk radio and bored by Bob Edwards of NPR, I turn on my local sports radio station. A commercial plugging the local 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 riff from a Guns N’ Roses song, “Welcome to the Jungle.” As Axel Rose belts out the lyrics, 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 two million sports fans<sup>1</sup>: “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.”<sup>2</sup> Over the next three hours, the well-known host interviews famous sports figures, articulates controversial opinions, and takes phone calls from his loyal listeners/sports fans who speak in such Rome-invented terms as “jungle dweller,” “bang” and “Bugeater.”<sup>3</sup> I listen to the program with mixed feelings. As a sports fan, I find myself engrossed and amused; I want to know what each “in-group” term means. As a critical feminist scholar, I am uneasy with his confrontational and insulting style, not to mention the aggressive and uncritical content of his speech. I wonder, “What will Rome say next?”<sup>4</sup>

*The Jim Rome Show* reflects a growing cultural trend in the United States—sports talk radio. The most popular sports talk radio hosts, including Jim Rome and others such as Mad Dog and JT the Brick, built

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their reputations through their obnoxious and combative styles. With white male masculinity being challenged by feminism, affirmative action, gay and lesbian movements, and other groups' quests for social equality, sports talk shows have become an attractive venue for embattled white men seeking recreational repose and a nostalgic return to a prefeminist ideal (Farred, 2000).

### SPORTS TALK RADIO

Presented as a medium in which citizens/callers can freely "air their point of view," talk radio has become a 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 and 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).<sup>5</sup> Deregulation, which loosened mass-media ownership and content restrictions, both renewed interest in radio as a capitalist investment and galvanized the eventual emergence of its two 1990s prominent showcase formats: "hate" talk radio 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).<sup>6</sup> Sports talk radio formats have, according to cultural studies scholar Jorge Mariscal (1999), "spread like an unchecked virus" (p. 111). Currently, there are over 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 many other sports radio stations. Its competitor, Premiere Radio Network, owns the popular nationally syndicated programs formerly hosted by Howard Stern (who went to satellite radio—Sirius), and currently hosted by Rush Limbaugh, Dr. Laura, and Jim Rome. Herbert Schiller (1989) refers to this programming trend as "corporate speech" (p. 40) that

encourages censorship and contains public expression within corporate, capitalist ideologies that reinforce dominant social institutions.

With the growing corporate ownership of radio came niche marketing that caters to targeted demographic groups. Talk radio is aimed at a specific demographic: white middle-class men between the ages of twenty-four and fifty-five. Research shows that talk radio listeners are overwhelmingly men who tend to vote Republican (Hutchby, 1996; Page and Tannenbaum, 1996). The most popular program, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, has twenty 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) remarks, in a fascinating reading 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). Susan Douglas (2002) argues that while most research on talk radio focuses on the threat it poses to democracy, what is obvious but far less discussed is talk radio’s central role in restoring masculine hegemony. Similarly, sports talk radio, according to Goldberg (1998), enacts its white dominance via hypermasculine posing, forceful opinions, and loud-mouthed shouting. Sports talk radio “pontificates, moralizes, politicizes, commercializes, and commodifies—as it entertains” (Goldberg, 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.

*Beers, Babes, and Balls* explores the burgeoning genre of sports talk radio and related ideas about masculinity. It provides an interdisciplinary approach to this subject, drawing from sports sociology, media and cultural studies, masculinity studies, and queer studies. Popular culture plays a significant role in the fashioning of (post)modern identities, and sports talk radio is both a representative site and an organizing force of important cultural shifts in masculinity. The focus on sports radio sheds light on certain aspects of contemporary masculinity and recent shifts in gender and sexual politics. This book also examines sports talk radio within a broader cultural context that includes television, film, and men’s magazines.

In writing this book, I wanted to answer the following questions:

- How is masculinity and its intersection with race, class, gender, and nation represented in sport talk radio? What do the images of masculinity portrayed in sports radio reveal about current gender politics?

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- What accounts for sports talk radio's appeal? What kind of bonding occurs in the mediated space of sports talk radio? Who is included in this airwave community and who is excluded?
- What is the link between portrayals of masculinity and ideas about heterosexuality in sports talk?
- How can we best articulate the relationship between the production, text, and consumption of sports talk radio?
- Where does sports talk radio fit within the larger context of popular culture and the relationship between popular culture and consumerism?

Why study this topic and what significance does this topic have for me? I became attracted to this subject for two reasons. First, as a cultural studies scholar, I am interested in studying cultural practices of everyday living (such as listening to sports talk radio). Second, as a sports fan who has been a regular listener to sports talk radio, I am curious to examine a genre in which I participate. Because I write both as a scholar and as a fan, this book reflects these two levels of knowledge, which are not necessarily in conflict but also are 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 that 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 acknowledgment of the pleasures we find within popular texts" (p. 7). Because I am a fan, I am participating in the subject of my study, which has implications (as well as constraints) for what I observe and understand about the topic. Next, I will discuss the conceptual frameworks that inform this book, keeping in mind the benefits and perils of fandom.

Just as I am both sports fan and scholar, this book is written for both sports fans and academics. Warning, sports fans: you may want to skip some of the theoretical discussions in this book. Theory is important for us professor types, but may not be so interesting or necessary for general readers to benefit from and understand this book. There is enough material here that you will comprehend and connect with as a sports fan. However, I also caution general readers and sport talk radio listeners: as a cultural studies and feminist researcher, I am committed to promoting a just and democratic society. This commitment means social justice for women, people of color,

and gays and lesbians. This book may confront some of your taken-for-granted ideas about sports, particularly the idea that sports exists outside politics and power. In addition, this book may challenge male sports fans to examine their ideas of masculinity and invite them into accountability about male dominance, homophobia, racism, and sexism. Enough said. I will now discuss the conceptual frameworks that inform this book, keeping in mind the benefits and perils of fandom.

#### THEORIZING MASCULINITIES

I view masculinity as a social construction that assumes different forms in different historical moments and contexts (Jackson, Stevenson, and Brooks, 2001). Sociologists have long recognized that there are diverse forms of masculinities found among different cultures (Anderson, 2005). What it means to be masculine shifts also within the same culture over time due to various political, social, and economic forces, and not all masculinities are treated similarly. Connell, in his book, *Masculinities*, describes the various and often conflicting forms of masculinities in Western societies, particularly for understanding the operation of hegemony as it relates to masculinity.

Hegemony, a theory developed by social theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci (1971), refers to a form of dominance in which the ruling class legitimates its support from and power over the subordinate classes not by brutal force but through more insidious forms of control and consent (e.g., through the media, institutions, and schools). The subordinated classes, through the process of hegemony, come to see their marginal places as both right and natural. Eric Anderson (2005) states that hegemony is exemplified when

a slave believes his rightful place is that of a slave (a racist society), when a woman believes she should be subservient to a man (a sexist society), when a poor person believes that he does not merit wealth (a classist society), or when a gay man believes he is undeserving of the same rights as a straight man (a heterosexist society). (p. 21)

Anderson goes on to note that hegemony has been a central concept in understanding oppression of racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians, and the lower classes in Western society. Recently, the concept of hegemony has been applied to a more complex understanding of how men and their masculinity are stratified in society (Anderson, 2005).

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Much of masculinities studies centers on how men construct hierarchies that yield decreasing benefits the farther removed one is from the ideal version, something identified as hegemonic masculinity. Gender scholars have described at least five distinctive features of hegemonic masculinity in U.S. culture: (1) physical force, (2) occupational achievement, (3) patriarchy, (4) frontiermanship, and (5) heterosexuality (Brod, 1987; Kimmel, 1994). Connell (1990) defines 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 suggests that hegemonic masculinity is not a static phenomenon, but an always-contested, historically situated social practice.

Michael Messner (1997) has a useful framework for theorizing masculinities in a U.S. context:

1. Men, as a group, enjoy institutional privileges at the expense of women, as a group.
2. Men share very unequally in the fruits of male privilege/patriarchy: normative/hegemonic masculinity (white, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual) is constructed in relation to femininities and to various subordinated masculinities (racial, sexual, class, female masculinity).
3. Men can pay a cost—in the form of poor health, shallow/narrow relationships, for instance—for conformity with the narrow definitions of masculinity that promise to bring them status and privilege.

Messner’s thematics allow theorists to speak of masculinities in the plural and to put the relationship between gender and power at the center of analysis. Furthermore, his conceptualization creates space to examine connections between the construction of masculinities and other social constructions, such as race, class, and sexuality.

In addition to studying the construction of gender (accessed through my textual analysis and audience interviewing), I am influenced by ethnographic approaches to masculinity (Duneier, 1992; Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994). Hence, this book will move beyond research on masculinity and the media (Craig, 1992) in which the level of analysis remains at the level of the textual and grapple with how these media representations are negotiated by individual and groups of men (in my case, sports talk radio fans).

Ethnographic approaches to masculinity are needed to understand men's actual lived experience of masculinities. Without researching masculinities in real-life settings, including sport, the research is reduced to merely theoretical understandings of manhood. Surely, masculinity studies has been invaluable in unmasking an historically invisible category, particularly through writings from people who have been marginalized by white male dominance—women, gay men, people of color. I am indebted to such writings (e.g., hooks, 1984). Yet what jumps out in much of the writing on masculinity is the overall negativity and its bleak outlook regarding men. Beynon (2002) comments on this overemphasis on pessimism in masculinities scholarship and writings: "A Martian arriving on Planet Earth and not knowing what masculinity was would quickly form the opinion that it is a highly damaged and damaging condition with very few, if any, redeeming features" (p. 143). This book addresses this problem by exploring how real men experience contemporary masculinity, how they perform masculinity, how they connect to other men and women, and how men rework ideals of masculinity in a postmodern society. Thus, I hope to examine how the proliferation of masculinities may open up new opportunities for men.

In addition to being positioned as a cultural studies informed ethnographer, I am situated as a psychotherapist who has worked in various clinical settings for the past two decades. Most of my research and writings has been in the area of narrative therapy (Nylund, 2000; White and Epston, 1990), a school of therapy that is informed by poststructuralism, critical theory, and feminist theory. The goal of narrative therapy is to deconstruct the client's problem-saturated story and support the client in noticing and performing alternative and preferred stories. White and Epston (1990) suggest that no single story accounts for the person's total lived experience since there are always contradictory stories and accounts of a person's life. These alternative stories are referred to in narrative therapy as "unique outcomes"—events that contradict or resist the dominant problem narrative. In a clinical interview, unique outcomes serve as an entry point into alternative stories and pathways into new ways of being. A narrative therapy framework is useful in my analysis of sports radio and masculinity. I intend to be vigilant to unique outcomes in sports radio—moments that contradict sports radio's dominant themes of misogyny, nationalism, racism, or homophobia. These moments, I will suggest, should not be minimized since they can serve as an entry point for substantively discussing sexism, racism, and heterosexism.

DEVELOPMENT OF MANHOOD IN  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY UNITED STATES

In order to understand contemporary masculinity, it is imperative to give a historical context of the shifting nature of ideas of manhood. The late nineteenth-century American male image was that of a rugged individualist who, to escape civilizing constraints, went to work in exclusive male preserves, went to war with other men, and went West to find fortune, pitting his will against the perils of nature (Kimmel, 1996). However, as the United States became increasingly urban and mobile in the early twentieth century, these “masculine” options were no longer available, and men were forced to look elsewhere to reclaim their lost identities. To many middle-class white men, this retrieval of identity was vital due to the changing nature of work, the visibility of first-wave feminism, the closing of the frontier, and changes in family relations (e.g., modern urban boys being separated from their fathers and placed in the care of mothers or women schoolteachers). The resultant changes in work and family life brought on by urbanization led to fears of boys and men being feminized. Many men, in response to these changes, searched for places “where they could be real men with other men” (Kimmel, 1996, p. 309) and where they could actively exclude women, nonnative-born whites, men of color, and homosexuals. Men created homosocial organizations (male-only spaces) such as fraternal lodges, rodeos, college fraternities, and the Boy Scouts to initiate the next generation of traditional manhood (Mechling, 2001; Messner, 1997).

Beginning with the 1960s, a similar pattern of work and family relations, along with second-wave feminism, civil rights, and the gay liberation movement, has produced another so-called period of crisis or confusion for men (Kimmel, 1996). Much like their turn-of-the-century ancestors, men began renewing efforts to reinvent masculinity. These renewal efforts took the forms of various “men’s movements”: men’s rights advocates, feminist men, men of color, gay male liberationists, Promise Keepers, and the mythopoetic men’s movement (Messner, 1997). While some groups were viewed as “essentialist retreats” (Messner, 1997, p. 17) to restore a “true” manhood, all of these groups were attempting to make sense of masculinity in the shift from an industrial to information society and have been attempting to reinvent new ideals of masculinity (Newton, 2005).

Turning now to the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, masculinity once again was transformed, this time by commercial forces and neoliberalism (the weakening of the welfare state and consolidation of corporate power). The postmodern transformation of masculinity produced two new forms of commercialized masculinities: the “new man” and the “new lad” (Beynon, 2002; Nixon, 1997). Put briefly, the “new man” emerged in the 1980s around the time of contemporary U.K. and U.S. men’s lifestyle magazines such as *Arena* and *GQ*, which produced a “new politics of looking as the ‘male-on-male’ gaze joined the ‘male-on-female’ as socially acceptable” (Beynon, 2002). Nixon has argued that the new politics of looking helped to challenge the previously unmarked or invisible status of men. The “new man” was an avid consumer and narcissist who also internalized and endorsed principles of feminism, including a reassessment of the traditional household division of labor and a new commitment to fatherhood (Beynon, 2002). The 1990s “new lad” was a clear reaction to the “new man” and arguably an attempt to reassert hegemonic masculinity deemed to have been lost by the concessions made to feminism by the “new man.” “New laddism” is most clearly embodied in current men’s magazines, such as *Maxim*, *FHM*, and *Loaded*, and marked by a return to hegemonic masculine values of sexism, male homosociality, and homophobia. Its key distinction from hegemonic masculinity was a huge dose of irony and reflexivity about its own condition that arguably rendered it immune from feminist criticism. Lastly, the “new lad” was also a construct that drew upon and appropriated working-class male culture for its values; was younger than the “new man”; was less invested in work, preferring to drink, party, and watch sports; made hardly any references to fatherhood; and addressed women as sexual objects.

I am interested in situating sports talk radio in the framework of the aforementioned historical manifestations of masculinity. It is my belief that, similar to developments in the early twentieth century, contemporary sports talk radio helps to construct a new male identity in response to changes in the gender and economic order. There are reasons for this. First, in the United States, sport is a key symbol for masculinity. Secondly, sports talk radio is a unique medium because the highly competitive nature of the radio market makes it likely that producers and program directors will exploit current cultural trends as quickly as possible. I am interested in exploring the ways that sports

talk radio borrows from and exploits contemporary masculine ideals—namely, the versions of masculinity enacted by some of the men’s movements and by the “new lad” and “new man.” I am also interested in analyzing the type of male community that is created by sports talk radio: In what ways is it similar or dissimilar to other male homosocial communities?

#### MASCULINITY AND THE SPORTS MEDIA

Historically, sports have played a fundamental role in the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity in the United States (Messner, 1992). Communications scholar Nick Trujillo (1996) states, “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) writes,

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 traditional masculinity and heterosexuality are natural and universal rather than socially constructed (Jhally, 1989). Since these dominant texts have detrimental effects on women, gays, lesbians, and some men, Trujillo argues that mediated sport should be analyzed and critiqued.

Many scholars have taken up Trujillo’s call and in the last decade we have seen an explosion of research on sports and mass media (Wenner, 1998a). Most of these studies examine televised sports and its link to violent masculinity, sexism, and homophobia (Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt, 2000). However, scholars have also turned their attention to the impact and meaning of “sports talk.” Grant Farred (2000) describes sports talk as an “overwhelmingly masculinist (but not exclusively male), combative, passionate, and apparently open ended discourse” (p. 101). Farred characterizes 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 (1998) posit that sports talk serves as an important primer for gender socialization in current times. They write:

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. Pamela Haag (1996) finds something inherently democratizing about sports talk radio because she thinks it promotes civic discourse and teaches us how to create community “for a lot of people who lead isolated, often lonely lives in America” (p. 460). Haag also suggests that sports talk radio serves a function different from 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, suggests that sports talk on the radio can momentarily break down barriers of race, ethnicity, and class.

While acknowledging the productive potential of sports talk, Susan Douglas (2002) argues that talk radio (including sports talk radio) is to be understood as another attempt to retain certain aspects of hegemonic male identity that have been lost due to feminism. 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 television show, *The Man Show*, which, according to Maureen Smith (2002), represents a nostalgic (and perhaps ironic) attempt to return to a prefeminist masculine ideal. In particular, white, middle-class, heterosexual men may feel threatened and uncertain about changes encouraged by feminism and by gay rights. In a *Sacramento Bee* article titled “Frat Boy Nation: A New Culture of Chauvinism Buries the Sensitive Guy,” popular culture writer J. Freedom du Lac (2002) identifies a new (or recycled) form of a masculinity being marketed to white men ages eighteen to forty. This mediated masculinity, similar to the “new lad,” is typically seen as a backlash

against the sensitive, pro-feminist male. It is characterized by a recycled, nostalgic form of masculinity, a throwback to a time when men were able to behave badly and not worry about censure. Men, according to this media-created construction, should return to a traditional, phallogentric masculinity that includes displays of sexism, consuming large quantities of alcohol, machismo, and hedonism—a return to a “frat boy nation.” Television shows such as Fox Sport Net’s *Best Damn Sports Show Period* and Comedy Central’s *The Man Show*, magazines such as *Maxim*, and Coors Light beer commercials embody and valorize this popular form of manhood.

Sports talk radio, linked with the other masculinist genres previously noted above may represent an attempt to symbolically reassert straight men’s superiority over women and gay men (Smith, 2002). In this vein, David Theo Goldberg (1998) suggests 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 contends 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). Smith (2002) suggests that sports talk radio is an audio locker room that reinforces hegemonic masculinity and suggests that the locker room is a key site of male privilege and a center of fraternal bonding (p. 1). She writes:

Men attach deeply personal meanings to “being a sports fan.” Sport talk radio shows have been able to capitalize on utilizing the airwaves to create “communities” despite the physical distance between listeners and from the host and still provide that emotional attachment that fans seem to search for. Unlike a television, which would be difficult to transport around and requires consistent visual attention, the radio requires the listener to hear, making multitasking possible. Listeners can participate as they drive to work, sit in their cubicle, deliver packages, exercise, or sit at home. (p. 8)

Self-confessed addict of sports talk Alan Eisenstock (2001) wrote a book titled *Sports Talk*, a masculinist celebration of the significance of sports radio and the sports talk radio junkie. He refers to sports talk shows as a “non-stop fraternity party, a sport bar on the radio” (p. 3), in which men, through the medium of a call-in program, can interact with other men free from the censure of feminism and political correctness. Sports talk radio, from this perspective, is a mass-mediated attempt at preserving male-only spaces reminiscent

of the rise of fraternities and the Boy Scouts around the turn of the twentieth century (Kimmel, 1996).

As noted earlier, homosocial spaces became popular once again beginning in the 1960s with men who were interested in addressing and changing masculinity. Judith Newton (2005) argues that men's movements, albeit diverse and contradictory with differing agendas (pro-feminist, men's rights, Promise Keepers, and the mythopoetic movement), share one element in common: "male romance." Newton refers to "male romance" as an effort to transform masculine ideals by going off with other men in a homosocial space to enact particular rituals that provide a sense of being "born again." Feminists have long criticized male romance by suggesting that it almost always works to reinforce white, middle-class, and heterosexual male power. Daniel Lefkowitz (1996) suggests that the popularity of sports talk shows depends on "the same cultural dynamic that lends dynamism to the Men's Movement" (p. 210). The appeal of sports radio, according to Lefkowitz, depends in part on this notion of male romance—namely, a desire to engage in homosocial bonding via the ritual of sports fandom. Hence, sports radio could be viewed as a commodified, mass-mediated version of male romance.

This book will critically examine the link between the cultural phenomenon of sports talk radio and organized efforts by men to reinvent masculinity (sometimes referred to as men's movements). I will inquire if sports talk radio, as part of the "frat boy nation," shares the goals and values of some men's movements. Does the discourse of sport talk radio consolidate male dominance and reestablish traditional gender relations and roles? Is sports radio just a crude marketing device that affirms hegemonic masculinity without confronting or questioning it? Can sports radio, while highly market-driven, open up some space to transform masculinity? I will attempt to complicate Goldberg's (1998) assertion that sports radio uniformly reinscribes dominant positions of power by exploring the ways the genre may allow some promise to reinvent masculinity as it simultaneously reinforces traditional gender relations. This book will also extend beyond the few academic articles that have been written on sports radio that have focused solely on textual analysis (Goldberg, 1998; Haag, 1996; Mariscal, 1999; Smith, 2002; Tremblay and Tremblay, 2001). *Beer, Babes, and Balls* includes interviews and fieldwork with actual fans of sports radio. This opens up space for more complex analysis in terms of how the text interacts with consumption.

## MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES

This book's inquiry into sports talk radio is informed by cultural studies theories and methodologies. I am aligned with cultural studies work that has called into question assumed hierarchies of "high" and "low" culture by turning critical attention to formerly disparaged media forms such as women's magazines, working-class style, popular music, romance novels, and television (Ang, 1996; Grindstaff, 2002; Hall and Jefferson, 1983; McRobbie, 1991; Morley, 1992; Radway, 1984). This strand within cultural studies is in contrast to certain traditions within critical theory—namely, the Frankfurt School. Frankfurt School theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1997) argue that cultural products/texts are commodities produced by the culture industries that, while purporting to be democratic, are in actuality conformist and authoritarian. I believe that the Frankfurt School's analysis, while very useful and compelling, holds to an overly monolithic view of the culture industries (media organizations that produce and distribute art, entertainment, and information), and denies the capability of consumers/audiences to be active producers of meaning rather than passive victims.

Cultural studies draws from the fields of anthropology, sociology, gender studies, feminism, literary criticism, history, and psychoanalysis in order to examine contemporary media texts and cultural practices. It has broadened beyond the sphere of a sole focus on political economy (studying the production end of the cultural industries) and texts (anything that produces meaning) to encompass a focus on audience reception and meaning-making. Research within this cultural studies tradition takes as its starting point a belief that media texts cannot be examined in the abstract; instead, what is crucially important is how audiences respond to texts.

*Beers, Babes, and Balls* draws upon the cultural studies tradition of simultaneously studying the production, textual content, and reception of the mass media. Media scholars argue that in order to understand a cultural phenomenon, one must understand the interrelationship between the activities through which the text is produced, the messages in the text, and how those who consume the text interpret it (Davis, 1997; Gamson, 1998; Jackson, Stevenson, and Brooks, 2001). Studying the production, text, and consumption aspects of sports talk radio requires me to engage in a variety of research methods in different contexts. In addition, these diverse methods and locations

produce potentially different ethical and methodological problems. This book discusses some of the ethical, epistemological, and methodological dilemmas and questions that arise in conducting a triangulated analysis. For instance, one of the most challenging parts of the book was the audience response component. Accessing the audience was more difficult than my reading of studies of the television audience had led me to expect. A reflexive account of the research process will allow me to illustrate some of the difficulties of doing audience response.

There is a growing body of sporting analysis informed by cultural studies scholars (Birrell, 1988; Birrell and McDonald, 2000; Butler, 1990; Cole, 1993; Dunning, 1986; Messner 1992). These scholars are engaged with the intersection between feminism and cultural studies. Feminist cultural studies is based on the assumption that power is distributed inequitably throughout society, often along lines of gender, class, race, and sexuality. These relations of power are not fixed, but contested. Moreover, power usually is not maintained by force but through more subtle forms of ideological dominance (Gramscian hegemony theory). Ideology is the set of ideas that serve the interests of dominant groups, but are taken up as the societal commonsensical even by those who are disempowered by them. Sport is a particularly public site for such ideological struggle: “What is being contested is the construction and meaning of gender relations” (Birrell and Theberge, 1994). The utility of the theoretical vocabulary of cultural studies to explore the intersections of gender, race, and class in sport has been clearly recognized. It is this struggle that interests me and other critical sport scholars.

#### CRITICAL RADIO STUDIES

This book also draws upon critical radio studies. In its heyday—the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—radio occupied an exclusive position as the only home-based electronic mass medium (Cook, 2000; Hutchby, 1996). Radio scholar Michele Hilmes (2002) states that “radio provided one of our primary means of negotiating the boundaries between public life and the private home, becoming the American family’s ‘electronic hearth’ and our central acculturating and nationalizing influence” (p. 1). Abandoned by the media networks for television in the late 1940s, radio plays a diminished role in the United States. With the ensuing dominance of television, radio became the

poor relation in media and cultural studies. The recent radio scholarship, informed by cultural studies, argues that radio continues to be an important cultural form, problematizing the distinctions between public and private and raising questions about the primacy of voice and sound as a central and potentially subversive feature of subjectivity.

This book thus seeks to study sports talk radio by situating it within its historical and institutional context. To achieve this goal, this book explores some of the previous studies on talk radio. Much of the research on talk radio emerged in the 1990s, exploring its potential democratic functions. Writers placed great emphasis on the significance of the opportunity provided for audiences to participate in mass-mediated debate and discussion. Researchers have focused on the role talk radio plays in keeping listeners up-to-date with political issues, and how talk radio shows provide a forum where these issues can be discussed by ordinary citizens (Page and Tannenbaum, 1996). The consensus here is that this participation has positive functions, both for individual callers and for the democratic system.

A serious shortcoming of these studies of talk radio is that they tend to overlook the fact that the majority of radio stations are commercial broadcasters competing for advertising revenue that is attracted according to niche demographics and audience size (Hilmes, 2002). The most important of these is profit-making via advertising. The commercialization of radio casts serious doubt on the potential for talk radio to be a democratic forum. Talk radio is not unique in this respect as Hilmes (2002) identifies a general trend whereby the commercial functions of the U.S. media are becoming increasingly important. This leads to consumption taking over from participation, and the audience increasingly being positioned as consumers rather than as citizens. Hilmes also notes that the Telecommunications Act of 1996 removed the barriers to ownership of multiple stations in the same market, provoking a wave of station purchasing and media consolidation of territory.

Only two studies have examined talk radio as it is understood by its audiences (Herbst, 1995; O'Sullivan, 1997). This is not surprising. As stated earlier, the radio medium has been neglected by media studies scholars in recent decades and has taken second place to television. There have been a just a few empirical studies of the medium (e.g., see Moores, 1993). However, almost no attempt has been made to theorize the genre, with the exception of Erving Goffman (1981). The result of this neglect is that turning on the radio is seen as something "natural," something that is done by most people every day:

Radio, in this age of television predominance, has taken on the role of a familiar family member—accepted, unquestioned and treated as part of the scene. Popular commentators and researchers alike have focused our attention on the electronic tube, to the neglect of radio. Radio, however, continues to outdraw audiences in both time and number. It is . . . an important part of the cultural day. (Moss and Higgins, 1982, p. 282)

In contrast, work focusing on television, and in particular on the television audience, has been both plentiful and theoretically rich. Hilmes (2002), in addressing the future direction of radio studies, suggests that a “greater attention to audience and meaning making from a cultural studies perspective could help to bring radio into the mainstream of academic study and provide a necessary and provocative corollary to the many important findings in the area of television studies” (pp. 13–14). This book is a response to Hilmes’s call as it fills a much-needed gap in the area of radio studies. It will also move beyond the radio studies’ focus on talk radio’s relationship to democracy and politics. As Douglas (2002) argues, talk radio plays a central role in reestablishing male privilege: “talk radio is as much—maybe even more—about gender politics at the end of the century [twentieth] than it is about party politics” (p. 485). This book examines the relationship between sports talk radio and male privilege.

#### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

*Beers, Babes, and Balls* is divided into three parts. Part I—The Climate for Sports Talk Radio—will examine the production aspect of sports radio. It will first sketch the history and impact of talk radio from a political economy perspective, which means studying the interconnections between corporate ownership, the radio industry, and sports radio genres. Rather than a strictly linear approach to production–content–audience, this book will explore the connections between post-Fordist economics (the emergence of flexible specialization), culture industries (niche marketing), and society (shifting gender and sexual relations). This section will also include interviews I conducted with various producers and hosts of both local and national sports radio programs along with my brief participant observation of the production of a local sports radio show. I will highlight some of the tensions and contradictions that are part of the sports radio production process.

Part II—Reading Sports Talk Radio—provides a textual analysis of the nationally syndicated sports radio program *The Jim Rome Show*.

I have selected this program because it is the most popular national show and is fairly representative of the genre of sports talk radio in general. I taped the show on an ongoing basis and downloaded transcripts of programs from Jim Rome's Web site ([www.jimrome.com](http://www.jimrome.com)). I am particularly interested in analyzing instances on the program that stand out as important moments, what journalists often call "pegs"—critical events that generate a flurry of coverage (Grindstaff, 1994). I am chiefly concerned with pegs that focus on issues of sex, class, gender, and race. Using these themes, this section analyzes the ways the show serves to both reinforce and challenge hegemonic masculinity.

To help work against the limitations of critiquing texts in isolation from context, Part III—The Audience of Sports Talk Radio—is an ethnographic account of the sports radio audience to better understand the meanings and uses of sports talk radio in the everyday practices of living by some of its fans. I have chosen to conduct this fieldwork in sports bars because many of the patrons who frequent these spaces are avid listeners of *The Jim Rome Show* and other sports radio programs. In addition, since 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, 1998b). Given that my research will be limited to a small number of participants and because the audience members I interview may not be representative of the North American sports radio audience, the results are not necessarily generalizable. Yet my hope is that my findings will promote insight into future research on the ways that listeners decode sports talk radio texts. I am particularly interested in exploring the pleasures associated with listening to sports radio, the imagined community that is created through sports radio, and the meanings that listeners make of some of the more progressive moments of *The Jim Rome Show*.

The concluding chapter summarizes the connections between the production, text, and consumption of sports talk radio. It examines the messages that circulate on sports radio, its listeners, and the larger media and societal dialogue on masculinity and gender relationships. This chapter will also summarize the ways that sports talk radio serves as an important mediated site for male bonding, helping men feel empowered in a society in which the gender order is changing. It will make some conclusions about how male bonding in sport talk radio not only reinforces hegemonic masculinity but may offer some potential for men to alter traditional manhood.