



Crossing the Line: Don Imus and the Rutgers Women's Basketball Team

On April 4, 2007, in the early minutes of his morning radio talk show, host Don Imus jokingly remarked on the Rutgers University women's basketball team, which had lost a national college championship game the previous night. Picking up on a comment by his producer and longtime sidekick, Bernard McGuirk, who had described the Rutgers players as "some hard-core hos," Imus said, "That's some nappy-headed hos there." The remark was, wrote public television host Gwen Ifill, "a shockingly concise sexual and racial insult"—a "ho" was, in street argot, a whore, and "nappy-headed" a derogatory allusion to the texture of African-American hair—"tossed out in a volley of male camaraderie by a group of amused, middle-aged white men."¹

This was by no means the first time Imus and the regulars on his show had inserted racial and sexual innuendo into their early morning banter. "Imus in the Morning" had long been, in the words of *Newsweek*, "a mix of the high-minded and the profane,"² a show where serious conversations with prominent politicians and journalists alternated with what was often characterized as crass "locker-room" humor. Over the years, Imus and his cohorts had directed gibes at homosexuals, blacks, Jews, and other ethnic minorities while poking fun at prominent figures in sports, entertainment, and politics. Occasionally, there was a public outcry over some of the more egregious insults, forcing Imus to defend himself against charges that he was a bigot; but eventually the uproar—which seldom made headlines—would die down, and Imus, whose popular four-hour show was nationally syndicated through CBS Radio and simulcast on MSNBC-TV, ultimately emerged unscathed and unrepentant.

This time, however, would prove different. Imus's remark was picked up by a liberal media watchdog group and posted, with an accompanying video clip, on its website that evening;

¹ Gwen Ifill, "Trash talk radio," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2007, p. A21.

² Weston Kosova, "The power that was," *Newsweek*, April 23, 2007, p. 25.

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the group also sent out an e-mail alert and put the clip on the popular Internet video site, YouTube. Almost immediately, some black organizations and leaders responded, strongly condemning Imus and calling for CBS and NBC to fire him. Imus offered an apology and a defense of his show's brand of humor, but unlike past dust-ups, this one refused to subside. While African-Americans expressed the deepest sense of outrage, other individuals and groups—representing a variety of perspectives and interests—also began to clamor for Imus to be taken off the air. Media coverage, spotty at first, rapidly expanded as protest grew more vocal. By the middle of the following week, the fallout from Imus's remark, printed over and over in the press and screened repeatedly on television, dominated the news and sparked a vigorous debate on a broad range of issues—among them, race, misogyny, rap lyrics, civility, free speech, and the sometimes blurry line between comedy and slur. It also raised questions among some of Imus's guests, particularly journalists and media commentators, about whether their appearances on "Imus in the Morning" made them complicit in the racial and ethnic insults that were featured on the program.

In a little over a week, the controversy came to a head. After their own apologies and a two-week suspension of Imus failed to quiet critics, or to stem the exodus of the show's major sponsors, NBC and CBS abruptly canceled the long-running show. As Imus angrily exited the scene, commentators were left to puzzle over the question of why this crude remark, amid so many offered up on the Imus show over the years, had been the last straw and what, if anything, had been learned from his precipitous fall from grace.

Background: The "Equal Opportunity Offender"

A "radio personality" since the early 1970s, Don Imus was one of the medium's first "shock jocks"—a term used to describe the irreverent, crude, and often offensive patter of some talk show hosts—but in the late 1980s, he began to upgrade the content of "Imus in the Morning," adding interviews with authors, politicians, and media pundits to the usual mix of parody, satire, and rude banter that were the trademarks of the show. He became noted for the length and depth of conversations with his guests and soon, wrote Evan Thomas of *Newsweek*—himself a frequent guest—"pols and pundits ... [were begging] to go on the show."³ The show was often characterized as a "salon" and sometimes as a "clubhouse" for the political and media "elite." Speaking to Brooke Gladstone of National Public Radio's "On the Media" in 2001, Frank Rich, a *New York Times* columnist and a regular guest on Imus, said, "It's the only show I know of where you can actually talk in an informed way, not in sound bites, about the issues of the day with someone with whom you can match wits and who really knows his stuff." Imus also provided a valuable service for authors; he was, as David Carr of *The New York Times* put it, "the go-to guy for selling books, in part because when he becomes interested in a book, he will flog it for days and sometimes weeks."⁴

³ Evan Thomas, "The ringmaster," *Newsweek*, January 18, 1999.

⁴ David Carr, "With Imus, they keep coming back," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2007, p. C1.

The new format brought Imus wider success and a measure of distinction. In 1992, the show—which was produced by WFAN, a CBS Radio affiliate in New York City—was nationally syndicated, reaching, at its peak, about 100 stations; in 1996, MSNBC began airing simulcasts of the show, adding at least 200,000 viewers to his audience, according to *Newsweek*. Imus himself was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame in 1989, and named one of 25 “most influential people in America” by *Time* magazine in 1997. He also won praise for his charitable good works: he ran a camp for children with cancer and blood diseases on his New Mexico ranch, and raised millions of dollars for other charities as well.

But alongside the “high-minded” discussions on politics and books, the “profane” repartee, mostly between Imus and McGuirk, continued unabated and untempered. Imus “seemed to revel in reducing his targets to crude racial and ethnic stereotypes,” *Newsweek* observed.⁵ Over the years, he and his sidekicks amassed a virtual “Who’s Who” of offensive comments on a wide array of figures: NBA star Patrick Ewing was called “a knuckle-dragging moron,” and the New York Knicks basketball team “chest-bumping pimps”; singer Gloria Estefan was labeled a “little Chihuahua-looking ho”; *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz—another frequent guest on the show—was referred to as a “boner-nosed, beanie-wearing Jew boy,” and the “Jewish management” at CBS as “money-grubbing bastards”; CNN’s female anchors were characterized as “dyke-y broads,” and Hillary Clinton as “a tramp.”

Periodically, the media would take notice. In a memorable exchange on CBS’s “60 Minutes” in 1997, interviewer Mike Wallace asserted that Imus had told CBS producer Tim Anderson “that Bernard McGuirk is there to do ‘nigger’ jokes.” When Imus denied ever using “that word,” Wallace checked with Anderson, who was off camera. “Oh, okay. Well, then,” said Imus after Anderson confirmed the remark, “I used that word. But ... of course, that was an off-the-record conversation.” There was laughter as Wallace rejoined, “The hell it was.”⁶

A few years later, journalist Philip Nobile launched a more concerted effort to call attention to Imus’s language. He began compiling “a catalogue of slurs” and posting them on the TomPaine.com website in March and April 2000. TomPaine.com—which billed itself as an “online public affairs journal of progressive analysis and commentary”—also submitted an ad to *The New York Times*’s op-ed page in May, listing some of these insults; but the paper, citing its standards for advertisements, refused to publish it until the “racial and ethnic slurs” were removed.⁷ Nobile himself pressed the issue directly with journalists such as CNN political analyst Jeff Greenfield and *Post* media critic Howard Kurtz. “For many moons,” Nobile wrote in June 2000, “I have urged Howard Kurtz to cover the media scandal known as ‘Imus in the Morning’ in his *Washington Post* column. Yet Kurtz has resisted every tip. ...” In fact, as Nobile recorded, Kurtz defended Imus. In a

⁵ Kosova, April 23, 2007.

⁶ Transcript, “60 Minutes,” CBS News, rebroadcast on April 15, 2007.

⁷ “The Imus op ad The New York Times refused to run,” TomPaine.com, published May 16, 2000.

May 22 posting in the *Post's* chatroom, Kurtz wrote that while Imus "sometimes crosses the line," it was "all shtick. He's no bigot."⁸

Nobile's campaign did attract the notice of some newspapers, and for awhile Imus appeared to be on the defensive, particularly about his references to blacks. "These charges [of racism] are just crazy," he told *The Washington Post* in May. "I'm just trying to be funny. ... Nobody ever complains when we make fun of white people or stupid people."⁹ Still, when Clarence Page, an African-American columnist with the *Chicago Tribune*, appeared on the show that month, Imus submitted to a pledge, authored, as it turned out, by Nobile himself. "I, Don Imus," he repeated after Page, "do solemnly swear ... to cease all simian references to black athletes" and to ban "all references to non-criminal blacks as thugs, pimps, muggers and Colt 45 drinkers."

For whatever reason, Page was never again invited to appear on the Imus show, and the pledge, according to "On the Media's" Brooke Gladstone, was "immediately and inevitably broken." Nevertheless, Imus managed to ride out the controversy stirred up by Nobile with little apparent damage to his reputation among the "politico-media elite," in the words of the *Los Angeles Times*.¹⁰ He came to be variously explained, and largely forgiven, as an "equal opportunity offender," an "equal opportunity joker," and an "equal opportunity razzer," evenhandedly dishing out the stereotyping taunts.¹¹ While many of his regular guests acknowledged some discomfort with Imus's gibes, there seemed to be general agreement with the assessment of Senator Joseph Lieberman—also a frequent guest—that, as the *Post* worded it, Imus's "personal relationships with the media and political elite, as well as his 'good works,' make him largely immune to high-level criticism."¹²

An "Idiot Comment" and Its Consequences

By 2007, the 66-year-old Imus was no longer at the peak of his popularity. Although there had been a recent surge in his TV audience, which had grown to 358,000,¹³ fewer radio stations were carrying his show, which ranked roughly tenth among radio talk shows in audience size. Still, his audience of roughly 2.25 million listeners—while dwarfed by ratings leader Rush Limbaugh, who commanded a listenership of over 13 million—was not inconsiderable and was,

⁸ "TomPaine.com spotlight on Howard Kurtz: Missing in action on Imus?" TomPaine.com, published June 14, 2000. In an interview with TomPaine.com, Kurtz maintained that he wasn't "particularly offended" by Imus's eyebrow-raising description of him, "because everyone knows Imus specializes in rough-edged satire."

⁹ Frank Ahrens, "Don Imus, the shock jock we hate to love," *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2000, p C1.

¹⁰ Robin Abcarian and Meg James, "A talk powerhouse is shut down," *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2007, p. A1.

¹¹ The labelers were, in order, Jeff Greenfield of CNN (among several others), Senator Joseph Lieberman, and Mike Wallace of CBS.

¹² Ahrens, May 26, 2000.

¹³ David Carr, "Networks condemn remarks by Imus," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2007, p. B7.

moreover, believed to be “better educated and wealthier” than other talk show audiences.¹⁴ “Imus in the Morning” continued to be a favorite haunt of prominent political and media figures, and boasted a roster of guests that included, among many others, news anchors Brian Williams of NBC and Bob Schieffer of CBS, as well as a host of reporters and commentators from both the press and television; former Vice President Al Gore, former US Senator Bill Bradley, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, and former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani; Representative Harold Ford of Tennessee; and numerous US senators, including Democrats John Kerry and Joseph Biden and Republicans John McCain and Orrin Hatch, along with regulars Joseph Lieberman and Christopher Dodd—who announced his candidacy for president on the show in January 2007.

In fact, Dodd was one of the guests slated to appear on “Imus in the Morning” on Wednesday, April 4. To kick off the show, however, there was the usual early morning badinage between Imus and his sidekicks. Shortly after 6:00 a.m., during a segment on sports, Imus mentioned that he had watched the final game of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) women’s basketball playoff series, which pitted the “Scarlet Knights” of Rutgers University in New Jersey against the “Lady Vols” of the University of Tennessee, who were the victors in the match. “That’s some rough girls from Rutgers,” Imus said. “Man, they got tattoos and ...” At this point, McGuirk chimed in, saying, “Some hard-core hos.” A laughing Imus responded, “That’s some nappy-headed hos there. I’m gonna tell you that now, man, that’s some—woo. And the girls from Tennessee, they all look cute, you know.” McGuirk went on to liken the two teams to “the Jigaboos vs. the Wannabes”—a reference to a Spike Lee movie, “School Daze,” which depicted two rival groups at a fictional black college: the dark-skinned “Jigaboos” and the lighter-skinned “Wannabes.”¹⁵

After a few milder digs at the Rutgers team, the conversation moved on to other topics, but the brief exchange had caught the attention of one careful viewer: Ryan Chiachiere, who worked for Media Matters for America, a watchdog organization devoted to “comprehensively monitoring, analyzing, and correcting conservative misinformation in the US media.” That night, a little after 6:00, a transcription of the conversation, with an accompanying video, was posted on the group’s website.

The video clip would play a key role in determining reaction to the verbal byplay. Almost all of the conversation about Rutgers—including the “nappy-headed hos” remark—took place off camera, while clips from the basketball game were screened for the TV audience; but the video supplied by Media Matters began with a brief shot of a grinning Imus seated at the microphone and the sound of laughter from whatever he and McGuirk and others in attendance had been talking about just before launching into the discussion of the game. It appeared to leave some with

¹⁴ Thomas, January 18, 1999.

¹⁵ Transcription from Media Matters for America. Online at www.mediamatters.org/items/printable/200704040011. In the conversation, McGuirk incorrectly identified the Spike Lee movie as “Do the Right Thing.”

the impression that they had actually seen Imus uttering his soon-to-be-infamous words. Viewers, David Carr of the *New York Times* wrote, not entirely accurately, could “see a vicious racial insult that delighted him visibly as it rolled off his tongue.”¹⁶

Along with posting the transcription and video clip—which was also placed on YouTube sometime later—Media Matters sent out an “email blast to several hundred reporters,” according to *The Wall Street Journal*, “as it does nearly every day.” But although the posting “received dozens of comments, many of them heated,” the *Journal* noted, the incident went unmentioned by “top news outlets” the following day.¹⁷ Beneath the surface, however, the waters had begun to roil.

Thursday, April 5. The first sign that something was amiss came from Imus himself. “I don’t understand what the problem is, really,” he said on his Thursday morning show, and characterized his remark of the day before as “some idiot comment meant to be amusing,” not something to get upset about.¹⁸ What prompted Imus to refer to his earlier remark was unclear, and he offered no further explanation, but by Thursday afternoon it became evident that the Internet was buzzing with word of the previous day’s show. At around 3:00 p.m., according to an account in *The Wall Street Journal*, NBC News President Steve Capus was asked to take “an urgent phone call” from the general manager of MSNBC, who told him that his executives were “fielding complaints from viewers and employees who had seen a video clip of Mr. Imus’s remark on the Media Matters site. ...”¹⁹ After Capus convened an emergency meeting with MSNBC’s management team to discuss the matter, the cable news network drafted and released a brief statement of apology that, as many commentators later noted, carefully distanced itself from Imus and his show. “While simulcast by MSNBC,” it said, “‘Imus in the Morning’ is not a production of the cable network and is produced by WFAN Radio. As Imus makes clear every day, his views are not those of MSNBC. We regret that his remarks were aired on MSNBC and apologize for these offensive comments.”²⁰

Meanwhile, according to a *Newsweek* account, Jemele Hill, an ESPN reporter, posted a link to Media Matters on the e-mail list of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ). When it came to the attention of the association’s president, Bryan Monroe, shortly after 5:00 p.m. on

¹⁶ David Carr, “Flying solo past the point of no return,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2007, p. C1.

¹⁷ Brooks Barnes, Emily Steel and Sarah McBride, “Airwaves: Behind the fall of Imus, a digital brush fire,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2007, p. A1.

¹⁸ Christian Red and Michael O’Keefe, “Imus story unleashed on YouTube, blogs, e-mail,” *New York Daily News*, April 13, 2007; Lisa de Moraes, “Sorry excuses: MSNBC’s form apology,” *The Washington Post*, April 7, 2007, p. C1.

¹⁹ Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

²⁰ One *Washington Post* reporter sardonically noted that the MSNBC statement was a candidate for inclusion in the “MSNBC We Apologize for Don Imus’s Show Which Is Not Our Production Hall of Fame.” In 2004, after Palestinians were referred to as “stinking animals” on the show, and again in 2006, after “unprintable metaphors” were used to describe the relationship of two male lovers in the movie “Brokeback Mountain,” MSNBC issued identical apologies, noting that “the views expressed on the program are not those of MSNBC.” [de Moraes, April 7, 2007.]

Thursday, he was stunned by what he saw. "I heard the words come out of his mouth," he later told the *Journal*, "and thought, 'Has he lost his mind?'"²¹

Friday, April 6. Monroe's incredulous question was repeated in a strongly-worded statement posted on the NABJ website at 5:30 on Friday morning. Describing itself, and the nation, as "outraged and disgusted" by Imus's "crude and insulting comments leveled ... against the student athletes of Rutgers University's women's basketball team," the organization demanded an apology "from the sophomoric host," and called for "all journalists of all colors to boycott his show until he acknowledges and apologizes for his damaging remarks." Monroe went further in his comments for the statement. "Imus," he said, "needs to be fired. Today."

Shortly after 6:00 that morning, Imus began his show with an apology. "Want to take a moment," he said, "to apologize for an insensitive and ill-conceived remark we made the other morning regarding the Rutgers women's basketball team. It was completely inappropriate, and we can understand why people were offended. Our characterization was thoughtless and stupid, and we are sorry." For good measure, CBS Radio issued its own statement of regret that day. "We are disappointed by Imus's actions earlier this week," it declared, "which we find completely inappropriate. We fully agree that a sincere apology was called for and will continue to monitor the program's content going forward."

Imus's public apology came, as the *Journal* noted, on Good Friday, at the beginning of a holiday weekend, when news "was supposed to slow to a crawl for several days. Instead, the apology made the story explode," as it hit the wire services and reporters began calling.²² But "slow boil" might be considered the more apt description, since, with one exception, the simmering controversy was not mentioned either in the press or on TV on Friday. The exception was a brief report on CNN's "The Situation Room" at 7:00 p.m., which featured an interview with Barbara Ciara of the NABJ. Earlier that day, the NABJ had issued a second statement rejecting Imus's "so-called apology" as "too little, too late," and called for the "immediate removal" of Imus and McGuirk. In her appearance on "The Situation Room," Ciara struck a theme that many others would echo and elaborate in the coming days. "We don't understand that a long-term veteran broadcaster wouldn't think that [the remark] would hurt the feelings of student athletes," she said. "We're talking about girls, college girls who tried their best to win a championship and he degrades them by calling them nappy-headed hos."

Saturday and Sunday, April 7-8. Over the weekend, the story began to gather steam in the press, though it was not prominently featured. On Saturday, most of the major papers, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, carried articles on Imus's remark the previous Wednesday and the stirrings of outrage it had provoked. "Even for Mr. Imus, a nationally syndicated radio host who knows his way around an insult," David Carr observed in

²¹ Kosova, April 23, 2007; Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

²² Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

the *Times*, “it was a shocking remark, one that seemed to impugn both the physical and moral characteristics of a team composed mostly of black players.” A stronger statement of the case came from *New York Daily News* sports columnist Filip Bondy, who, in a 4:00 a.m. online posting on Saturday, called Imus’s remark “despicable.” It was, Bondy continued, “even worse because of its target, a group of 19-to-21-year-old, largely African-American women ... who had just accomplished something wonderful and unexpected by reaching the [NCAA] Final Four. What do you tell these women now, who did absolutely nothing to deserve such shameful scorn, to face such horrendous racist remarks?” Bondy called for Imus to be fired immediately, though it would likely “never happen in a million years. ...” The only “reasonable hope” for change, he wrote, would be for the politicians who “pander to [Imus] during his ‘serious’ segments” to refuse to appear on the show.²³

Perhaps more ominously for Imus, *The Associated Press* reported on Saturday night that Rev. Al Sharpton, a longtime civil rights activist with a high profile in the media, had entered the fray. Sharpton showed no sign of being mollified by Imus’s, or the networks’, apology. “I accept his apology,” he said, “just as I want his bosses to accept his resignation.” He vowed to picket WFAN, the AP reported, unless Imus was “gone within a week.”²⁴ Others joined the chorus calling for Imus to be fired. Labeling Imus’s remark “beyond reprehensible,” Rafael Olmeda, president of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, who had, he noted, never before “advocated for someone to lose his or her job,” did so now. “Enough is enough,” he declared. “Can him.”²⁵ The National Organization for Women (NOW) launched a letter-writing campaign—directed at WFAN, CBS Radio, and MSNBC—with the message that it was “time to Dump Don.”²⁶

Meanwhile, the story of Imus’s remark got little airplay on the major television networks. On Saturday, ABC News’s “Good Morning America” devoted two sentences to Imus’s apology, but elsewhere on national TV there was no mention of the controversy. The following night, however, “CBS Evening News” aired a brief piece on the growing “chorus of complaints” over Imus’s remark. This time, C. Vivian Stringer, the coach of the Rutgers women’s basketball team, made what might be called her first public comment on the matter by sitting “front and center” at Easter services in a Baptist church in New Jersey where, it was reported, “the sermon was about Don Imus.” There, the preacher called for a boycott of the show’s sponsors until Imus was let go. Still, Ken Auletta, media critic for *The New Yorker*, expressed confidence in Imus’s ability to weather the current tempest. Talk show hosts, he told “CBS Evening News,” were fired “if they’re

²³ Filip Bondy, “Imus spews hate, should be fired,” nydailynews.com, April 7, 2007. Eight of the ten Rutgers team members were black. The team had five freshmen and no seniors; although it had lost the championship to Tennessee, Rutgers was viewed as a “Cinderella” team that had fought back from early defeats to amass an impressive 22-3 season.

²⁴ Larry McShane, “Sharpton, critics demand Imus ouster,” *The Associated Press*, April 7, 2007.

²⁵ “Richard Prince’s Journal-isms,” April 7, 2007; updated April 8, 2007. Online at http://www.maynardije.org/columns/dickprince/070407_prince.

²⁶ National Organization for Women, “Dump Don Imus,” April 8, 2007. Online at <http://www.now.org/lists/now-action-list/msg00290.html>.

not successful, if they don't bring in money for the company. If they bring in money, as Don Imus does, and ratings, as Don Imus does, he will survive."

The next day, however, brought a fresh torrent of outrage and protest. The controversy had "metastasized," Carr later wrote, "and by Monday, the media began to lock and load. Mr. Imus, who had shrugged off the initial criticism [the previous] week, was fighting for survival."²⁷

On the "Apology Tour"

Monday, April 9. Imus appeared acutely aware of his suddenly vulnerable position after the weekend break. On his Monday morning show, he apologized at considerably greater length, setting out a number of themes that he would offer up in his defense over the next few days. First, he attempted to explain—particularly to the Rutgers players, who, he said, didn't know him, and therefore didn't know whether "I'm some right-wing nut, [or] whether I was angry, ... whether I was drunk"—the "context" in which the remark was made. For over 30 years, he continued, his was "a program that made fun of everybody," including himself. That "has got to change," he acknowledged, "... because some people don't deserve to be made fun of, like these young women. ..." Imus told his audience that he had "reached out" to Sharpton, who had invited him to appear on his own talk radio show that afternoon, and had also asked to meet with the Rutgers women's basketball team and their families to apologize to them in person. Imus concluded with another familiar theme: his "work with black children" and his "black friends," which, he hastily added, did not excuse his ill-considered remarks. "But," he said, the Rutgers players "need to know I'm a good person who said a bad thing. And there's a big difference."

Thus Imus embarked on what was variously called an "apology tour," a "walk of shame," and a "campaign of contrition." Generally, it did not go well for him. His appearance on Sharpton's radio show on Monday afternoon was a tense, quarrelsome affair. The two argued over whether Imus's remarks were racist. "I wasn't even thinking racial," Imus protested. "I was thinking like a 'West Side Story,' like one team's tough and one team's not so tough." Once again, Imus returned to the idea of "context" and "intent." He and his sidekicks, he told Sharpton, were "trying to rap and be funny. ... I understand it's not funny. I understand there's no excuse for it. I'm not pretending that there is. I wish I hadn't said it."

But Sharpton was not impressed by Imus's remorse or his efforts to contextualize his remarks, nor by testimonials—some of them offered by callers to the show—to his work with children, black or otherwise. Imus, he said flatly, should be fired. "This is not about whether you are a good man," he told Imus. "... This is about setting a precedent that allows racist language to be used in mainstream, federally regulated television and radio." As the show wound down, Imus had testy, sometimes heated, exchanges with Bryan Monroe of the NABJ and Rep. Carolyn

²⁷ Carr, April 13, 2007.

Kilpatrick, Democrat of Michigan. Imus did not help his cause when he complained, in a line that was widely reported in the press, “I can’t get any place with you people”—a “hoary racial trope,” as Carr later termed it, that made both Sharpton and Kilpatrick bristle.²⁸

Meanwhile, press coverage of the remark intensified, though reportage in the major papers was still largely confined to their media columns. There were stories of a protest, led by another high-profile civil rights activist, Rev. Jesse Jackson, outside the Chicago offices of NBC, and interviews with members of the NABJ. But possibly the strongest statement in the press on Monday came from David Carr of *The New York Times* who, according to the *Journal*, had “scrapped his planned subject”²⁹ for his media column that day to write a scathing commentary on what he termed the “A-list establishment names” who appeared on the Imus show. Describing Imus’s “slur” as “the kind of unalloyed racial insult that might not have passed muster on a low-watt AM station in the Jim Crow South,” Carr meditated on the relative silence of the “mainstream media” in responding to it. Imus was “popular,” he observed, “good at his job and, perhaps more important, he generously provides oxygen—and an audience—to the kind of journalistic and political elites who would [normally] be expected to demand his head on a pike” for his digs at the Rutgers players.

Regular guests like Evan Thomas, one of *Newsweek*’s “top guns,” or Thomas Oliphant, a writer and former *Boston Globe* columnist—both of whom, Carr reported, were scheduled to appear on “Imus in the Morning” that day—seemed disposed to forgive and move on. “He should not have said what he said, obviously,” Thomas told Carr. “I am going on the show, though. I think if I didn’t, it would be posturing.” For his part, Oliphant expressed satisfaction with Imus’s apology. “Whatever problem there was,” he said in response to Carr’s query, “I think he took care of with his statement of Friday. It was classic Imus. He said he screwed up and he was sorry. ... It was very much to the point, and did not offer any excuses.”³⁰

Imus’s “corporate owners,” Carr continued, seemed similarly disinclined to hold Imus’s feet to the fire. They were “eager for the latest gaffe to blow over,” he wrote, “... so that they can get back to counting the lucre he generates.” The Imus show provided “a cheap and effective way for the third-ranked cable news network [i.e., MSNBC] to compete in the morning. ...” And while his radio audience had shrunk in recent years, Imus’s show nonetheless “fills a demand for serious

²⁸ Ibid. The remark, as printed in the press, was only a partial quote. Imus said, “So I can’t get any place with you people, but I can get some place with Jesus.” Imus was referring to the lyrics of a country song: “God may forgive you, but I won’t. Jesus may love you, but I don’t.” He insisted that “you people” referred specifically to Sharpton and Kilpatrick, but both seemed unpersuaded.

²⁹ Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

³⁰ When he spoke with Imus by phone on Monday morning’s show, Oliphant said that the comments on Rutgers appeared to him to be “the beginning ... of a riff. And the train went off the tracks, which, you know, can happen to anybody.” As he concluded their conversation, Oliphant remarked that “those of us who ... were scheduled [to appear on the show] ... have a moral obligation to stand up and say to you, ‘Solidarity forever, pal.’”

discussion on contemporary radio so that the journalists and politicians pushing an agenda or a book don't have to get in line behind the stripper act at [shock jock] Howard Stern's show."

Toward the end of his column, Carr noted that it was "hard to say how much coverage the protests will get," but by the end of Monday, that was no longer in doubt. Late that afternoon, NBC News President Steve Capus issued a statement announcing that MSNBC would suspend the Imus show for two weeks; the suspension would start the following Monday, April 16, to allow an already-scheduled telethon on Thursday and Friday for a number of children's charities to take place. Shortly after NBC acted, CBS Radio said that it, too, would suspend "Imus in the Morning" for two weeks. While CBS offered no accompanying explanation, the NBC statement, using more forceful language than it had in the past, said the decision to suspend came "after careful consideration in the days since [Imus's] racist, abhorrent comments were made." Imus, it noted, had "expressed profound regret and embarrassment and has made a commitment to listen to all of those who have raised legitimate expressions of outrage." His "dedication ... to change the discourse moving forward has confirmed for us that this action is appropriate," the statement continued, but warned that the network's "future relationship with Mr. Imus is contingent on his ability to live up to his word."

The suspensions came after a day of escalating protest—Sharpton had declared that he would organize a boycott of the show's sponsors—and, perhaps more worrisome, the announcement that the Rutgers women's basketball team had scheduled a news conference for the following day. Once NBC and CBS issued their statements, the Imus story began to move inexorably to the front of the news. It was featured on "NBC Nightly News" that evening. "Tonight it is being announced on this broadcast," said news anchor Brian Williams, that Imus was being suspended. "Many of us at NBC News are frequent guests on the Imus show," Williams noted, adding, somewhat unsympathetically, that Imus had "spent this entire day apologizing under withering fire for the remarks he made about members of the Rutgers women's basketball team." The other major TV networks also aired pieces on the suspension during their evening broadcasts, many of which included excerpts from his appearance with Sharpton, showing an alternately beleaguered and combative Imus.

Imus's remark and the increasingly vocal response to it were also the focus of ABC's "Nightline" that evening and CNN's "Paula Zahn Now." On the latter show, he was defended, as he had been in 2000, by Howard Kurtz, who once again asserted that Imus was not "a bigot" or "a racist." Imus's comments were "offensive, insensitive, and just plain stupid," Kurtz acknowledged, "but I do think it has to be weighed against the fact that he has a career in which he's raised tens of millions of dollars for kids with cancer of all races." Kurtz also pointed out that Imus had "backed Harold Ford, Jr., an African-American congressman, in the Senate race [in Tennessee, which Ford lost]."³¹

³¹ Other defenders offered evidence that Imus was not a bigot. Commentator Jeff Greenfield mentioned Imus's tradition of playing the full "I have a dream" speech every year on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday.

Thus far, Imus's efforts to apologize or to establish his racial bona fides, with help from supporters, had failed to still the voices calling for him to be fired. Nevertheless, Kurtz and other commentators continued to believe that the radio host would ride out this storm as he'd done before. But the following day brought more serious setbacks for Imus.

Tuesday, April 10. At 11:00 a.m. on Tuesday, Coach C. Vivian Stringer and all ten players on the Rutgers women's basketball team stood before reporters and TV cameras to deliver their response to Imus's remark. "Let me bring a human face to all of this," Stringer began. "Ladies and gentlemen, people of the nation, I want you to see ten young women who accomplished so much that we, as a coaching staff, as a state university, men, women, and people across this nation are so very proud of. These young ladies that you have seated before you are valedictorians of their class, future doctors, musical prodigies, and, yes, even Girl Scouts. These young ladies are the best this nation has to offer." Stringer went on to talk for almost 20 minutes, according to CNN, which broadcast the press conference live; she reviewed the ups and downs of Rutgers' ultimately triumphant season, of her own life and career, and of the days following Imus's riff on the team. "[A]ll of our accomplishments were lost, our moment was taken away," she said. "... We were stripped of this moment by the degrading comments made by Mr. Imus last Wednesday."

After Stringer finished speaking, a few of the Rutgers players took questions from reporters. Some of them struck a defiant note in their responses. "I'm a woman, and I'm someone's child," Kia Vaughn declared. "... I achieve a lot. And unless they have given this name—a 'ho'—a new definition, then that is not what I am." But most echoed Stringer in speaking of the toll Imus's remarks had taken. "I think," said one, "this has scarred me for life. ..."

The effect of the press conference, *The Wall Street Journal* later observed, "was devastating." The ten young women "looked uncomfortable in the media glare. Without a hint of professional polish, their remarks came across as heartfelt."³² They made a deep impression on commentators, who praised the players' dignified comportment. "The personification of young womanhood there," said CNN anchor Tony Harris at the end of the press conference. "They just held their heads high and handled themselves with such class and distinction. ..." Their youth and vulnerability, one observer pointed out, transformed the issue for some from a racial one to a "parental" one. "These were no roughhouse kids," NPR's Juan Williams noted. "These were university women who had really performed well, and I think a lot of people said, 'Wait a second, that could be my daughter.'"³³

The Rutgers team's performance could be said to contrast tellingly with Imus's appearance earlier that morning on NBC's "Today" show, where he continued his "apology tour." He called his suspension "appropriate" and vowed to "try to serve it with some dignity, and a lot of dignity,

³² Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

³³ Transcript, "Scarborough Country," MSNBC, April 10, 2007; transcript, "Special Report with Brit Hume," Fox News, April 12, 2007.

if I can." Once again, he tried to provide "context" for his remarks. What he said was not a "malicious rant," he insisted, but "a stupid, idiotic mistake in a comedy context" and on a show "designed to push the envelope. ..." Asked why he should be trusted to "clean up [his] act," as he had pledged to do, he replied that he had "kept my word to millions of people. I've raised over \$100 million for various things. I kept my word on this marvelous facility we have out in New Mexico, which is a cattle ranch for kids with cancer and various blood disorders, and so on." But Imus also sparred angrily with host Matt Lauer over whether he had, decades earlier, called Gwen Ifill a "cleaning lady," and then with Al Sharpton for not having "the courage that I had" and refusing to make a reciprocal appearance on the Imus show.

While Imus accepted his suspension as just, he vigorously fought back against calls for his outright dismissal. "I don't deserve to be fired," he said on his Tuesday morning show. "So I should be punished, and I'm being punished, and not insignificantly, by the way. I'm not whining," he added, "because I don't feel as bad as those kids [on the Rutgers team] feel."³⁴ By this time, however, some of the voices calling for his ouster were coming from within Imus's corporate home, as well as from outside. Among these was Al Roker, the "Today" show's genial weatherman and one of the nation's best-known African-American media figures. In a Tuesday morning posting on the show's blog, Roker wrote that it was "time for [Imus] to go. I, for one, am really tired of the diatribes, the 'humor' at others' expense, the cruelty that passes for 'funny.'" A two-week suspension "doesn't cut it," he maintained. "It is, at best, a slap on the wrist. A vacation. Nothing." Imus's apologies and explanations, Roker continued, didn't "cut it" either, and his appearance on the "Today" show earlier that morning was evidence that "Don Imus doesn't get it. ... He has to take his punishment and start over."

Inside NBC. Roker's opinion was apparently amplified by others later that day, when NBC News President Steve Capus called a meeting with African-American staff members in the network's news division, "many of whom," *The Wall Street Journal* reported, "had complained to managers that MSNBC was sticking with Mr. Imus." The meeting, according to the *Journal*, was scheduled to last 45 minutes, but "stretched out for nearly two hours as employees—some emotional and frank—argued for axing the broadcast. ..." ³⁵ For some, it was particularly galling that their employer would provide a platform for the kind of crude insults that were Imus's stock in trade. "We all expressed very strong and deep feelings about the comments and the wider issue of what this says about decency in broadcasting," NBC correspondent Ron Allen told *The Washington Post*. "The comments were so beyond any line we could draw—I just couldn't believe I could hear something like that and hear it in a place where I work."³⁶

³⁴ As quoted in Paul Farhi, "Don Imus is fired by CBS Radio," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2007, p. A1.

³⁵ Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

³⁶ Farhi, April 13, 2007.

For NBC, the situation was complicated. Critics of Imus were reportedly “focusing their energy on MSNBC,” according to the *Journal*, both because television was a “more visible platform,” and because its financial stake in “Imus in the Morning” was relatively low: the show generated only about \$8.3 million for MSNBC, compared to about \$25 million for CBS Radio. Nonetheless, as David Carr pointed out in his April 9 column, the Imus show was valuable to NBC News, which had used it to “promote the brands” of its news show hosts and correspondents. He had also helped attract major sponsors, such as Procter and Gamble (P&G), American Express, and General Motors.

By Tuesday, however, there were ominous rumblings from some high-profile TV sponsors—most notably, P&G, the show’s tenth largest advertiser, which officially announced on Tuesday that it was pulling its ads. “[A]ny venue in which our ads appear that is offensive to our target audience,” the company said, “is not acceptable to us.”³⁷ Others followed suit that day. Bigelow Tea, a “regular advertiser” on the show, announced it was, in the words of the *Journal* “suspending its current advertising and re-evaluating its future relationship with the show.” Staples, the office supply chain, and American Express also said they would pull their ads.³⁸ At Sprint Nextel Corporation—Imus’s second largest sponsor—employees “had lobbied for [the company to withdraw its ads],” the *Journal* reported, “including members of an African-American Sprint employee group. ...” Sprint would “publicly confirm” its decision to stop advertising on the show the next day, as would another important sponsor, the drug company GlaxoSmithKline.³⁹ Imus’s largest sponsor—General Motors—had a closer connection to the show and its host. Its vice president for North American sales had been “an occasional guest” on the program, and the company had donated vehicles for use on Imus’s ranch for sick children. Thus far, GM appeared to be staying put—it had “no plans to make any changes at this point,” it told the *Journal* on Tuesday—as were a few other major TV sponsors, such as Verizon and General Electric (which was NBC’s parent company); but there could be little doubt that those advertisers who remained were becoming skittish as the uproar over Imus’s remark grew persistently louder.⁴⁰

Within NBC, the debate continued. “There has been a lot of soul-searching going on, both publicly and privately,” Roker wrote in his blog on Wednesday morning, April 11. “... Our president, Steve Capus, has been about as transparent in his dealings with this as anyone could be. It visibly pains him, as it does all of us here, both people of color and white, that we are going through this.”

³⁷ Brian Steinberg and Sarah McBride, “P&G, others pull Imus ads,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2007, p. B3. According to an April 13 account in the *Journal*, P&G had “quietly pulled” its ads the previous Friday, but did not announce it publicly until Tuesday.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

⁴⁰ In contrast with TV, most of Imus’s radio sponsors, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, had “not yet jumped Imus’s ship.” [Martin Miller, John Horn and Matea Gold, “NBC cancels its Imus simulcast as outrage builds,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 2007, p. A12.]

While Capus and his boss, Jeff Zucker, CEO of NBC Universal, deliberated on Imus's fate, the media became increasingly consumed by the story, which by Tuesday night was dominating TV news shows and by Wednesday morning had moved onto the front pages of most major US newspapers. Some commentators expressed bemusement over the intensity of the debate provoked by Imus's remark. Imus "has attacked Irishmen," Joe Scarborough, host of MSNBC's "Scarborough Country" observed on Tuesday night, "He's attacked Catholics. ... He's attacked Jews. I mean, this is what they do [on Imus]. They skate on thin ice every day. The question is this. ... Why is it that he says 'nappy-headed hos,' and suddenly a volcano erupts in mid-town Manhattan?" The answer to Scarborough's question, which commentators and pundits would spend the rest of the week chewing over, would prove complex, and elusive.

Debating the Issues

Imus's remark raised a host of thorny issues touching on a broad range of concerns, though many of them could be said to boil down to the question of what was and was not permissible to say on the airwaves and, perhaps most critically, by whom.

Incivility on the Air. Many of those who weighed in on the Imus controversy viewed his remarks as symptomatic of the deplorable state of discourse in all the broadcast media, but particularly on radio. "Drive-time radio," wrote Eugene Robinson in *The Washington Post*, "has become a free-fire zone, a forum for crude and objectionable speech that would be out of bounds anywhere else." In this realm of the flamboyantly scurrilous, Imus was hardly unique. Even if he were to be booted off the air for good, Robinson observed, "there would still be plenty of radio jocks spewing racism, misogyny and other forms of cruelty for the amusement of gridlock-bound commuters."⁴¹ Media commentators offered up numerous examples of the offensive material that abounded on talk radio: the duo Opie and Anthony broadcasting a couple having sex in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York; radio host DJ Star threatening to sexually abuse, and urinate on, the four-year-old daughter of a rival; another radio talk show host, Neal Boortz, calling Cynthia McKinney, then a member of Congress, "a ghetto slut"—her new hairdo, he added, "looks like an explosion in a Brillo pad factory."⁴² Occasionally, such incidents led to firings, but often the banished hosts—as in the case of Opie and Anthony—eventually managed to find a perch on another radio station. Rudeness and shock were not, however, the sole jurisdiction of radio: Cable news networks, one radio talk show host maintained, were "making a habit now of hiring these shock jocks."⁴³ Michael Savage—like Imus, a radio host who also appeared on MSNBC—told a gay

⁴¹ Eugene Robinson, "Misogyny in the morning," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2007, p. A17.

⁴² Larry McShane, "Open mouth, insert foot: Imus latest casualty in morning radio," *The Associated Press*, April 10, 2007; transcript, "Paula Zahn Now," CNN, April 10, 2007.

⁴³ Transcript, "Paula Zahn Now," CNN, April 9, 2007.

caller he should “get AIDS and die.” He was promptly fired by MSNBC, but continued to broadcast on 370 radio stations.⁴⁴

Most observers regarded the offensiveness of talk radio as a reflection of a larger trend in the US. “For some time now,” wrote Tim Rutten, media columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, “our national conversation—as expressed in entertainment and commentary—has become increasingly coarse, vulgar, violent and just plain mean.”⁴⁵ Imus’s remark appeared to awaken Americans—or at least many of its media observers—to the lack of civility in public discourse. The “national debate” sparked by the “nappy-headed hos” remark, Howard Kurtz noted, quickly “morphed into an argument over indecency and meanness in broadcasting,” and Imus into “the symbol of all that was wrong with today’s toxic popular culture.”⁴⁶ This raised in some the hope that the outcry over Imus would “change the discourse,” as Bryan Monroe of the NABJ put it. “We don’t have to appeal to the lowest common denominator,” he said. “... We can actually lift it up.”⁴⁷

Preserving Free Speech. For others, however, calls to clean up the “national discourse” prompted concerns about protecting free speech. One of the most forceful arguments in this vein came from Michael Meyers, executive director of the New York Civil Rights Coalition and a former assistant national director of the NAACP. In an op-ed piece in the *Post*, Meyers worried about what would become of “our culture of free speech” if the “censors and activists who are so readily offended by idiocy on radio” succeeded in their drive to have Imus permanently removed from the air. While there should be “no sympathy ... for any shock jock’s racial prejudice,” he argued, there “ought to be space on radio for dialogue and for racial impoliteness, too. ... There is no captive, fragile audience or hostile environment such as the workplace or schoolhouse to worry about—just the robust radio world, full of gabbers. ...” While “pressure groups” should respond “when talkers veer off with their inane hatreds,” they should not be allowed to silence them altogether. “If we prize freedom,” Meyers wrote, “we should let the talkers talk. ... I say that if you don’t like what you’re hearing, turn the dial. If you want to call in and talk back to the jockass, do so. But we can’t talk back on the radio if the censorship crowd gets its way—if the sound of morning drives is bland conformity with the peculiar and narrow tastes of those who don’t want us to hear what they themselves don’t like.”⁴⁸

Others, however, countered, as Bryan Monroe did, that “free speech has responsibility” or pointed out, as *New Yorker* Editor David Remnick did, that the First Amendment protected “freedom of speech,” not “the freedom to have a radio show.” And some, like Patricia Williams, a professor at Columbia University Law School, expressed impatience with “this invocation of the First Amendment by people who say, ‘I have my First Amendment rights to call you a nappy-

⁴⁴ Howard Kurtz, “A sorry story, with apology yet to come,” *The Washington Post*, April 16, 2007, p. C1.

⁴⁵ Tim Rutten, “Imus’ end could be a hopeful sign,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2007, p. E1.

⁴⁶ Kurtz, April 16, 2007.

⁴⁷ Transcript, “Paula Zahn Now,” CNN, April 11, 2007.

⁴⁸ Michael Meyers, “Let the idiocy be heard,” *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2007, p. A15.

headed whatever, and you shut up about it.” It “dilute[d] the meaning of the First Amendment,” Williams argued, when it was so often invoked in defense of crude and insulting speech. “It seems to me the only time when we really have an intense discussion about the First Amendment,” she maintained, “[is] when it’s about somebody who goes off in this peculiarly puerile way. . . .”⁴⁹

Generally, though, few on either side of the debate appeared interested in tackling the knotty question of free speech and its limits when the speech turned offensive. This would not be true of what was arguably the most incendiary issue to arise in the wake of Imus’s remark: the content of rap songs. On this matter, it would soon become evident, many people had a good deal to say.

Rap Lyrics and Hip-Hop Culture. Imus himself was one of the first to raise the issue of the language of rap music and the larger “hip-hop culture” surrounding it. During his April 10 appearance on the “Today” show, Imus noted that “that phrase didn’t originate in the white community. That phrase originated in the black community. And I’m not stupid. I may be a white man, but I know that these young women and young black women all through that society are demeaned and disparaged and disrespected by their own black men and that they are called that name. And I know that doesn’t give me, obviously, any right to say it, but it doesn’t give them any right to say it.”

Presumably, Imus was referring to “ho,” an epithet that was common in some strands of rap music—so much so that it was “basically a synonym for ‘woman,’” according to Eugene Robinson.⁵⁰ To some, though, “nappy-headed” was the more insulting term, the “real unpardonable sin,” in the words of one observer, “[r]eminding blacks of our tangled love-hate relationship with our nappy hair.”⁵¹ The word was widely viewed as derogatory when used in reference to blacks; when combined with “ho,” it had the effect of “a double whammy,” in the words of author Michael Eric Dyson, which struck women particularly hard. “Frankly,” wrote another observer, “not even the most popular rap artist could get away with calling black women ‘nappy-headed hos.’”⁵²

But while “nappy-headed” may have given Imus’s remark an added sting, attention focused more generally on “ho,” perhaps because its pervasiveness had made it familiar to many. Though rap or hip-hop music had its roots in black urban street life of the 1970s, by the end of the 20th century, it had become a worldwide phenomenon, generating billions of dollars in sales, and a cultural force among youth in white communities as well as black. The strand of hip-hop known as “gangsta rap” had long been controversial for what was seen as its glorification of “thug” culture

⁴⁹ “Paula Zahn Now,” April 11, 2007; transcript, “The Charlie Rose Show,” PBS, April 13, 2007.

⁵⁰ Robinson, April 10, 2007.

⁵¹ Darryl Owens, “Getting to root of Imus’ ‘insult’ regarding hair,” *Orlando Sentinel*, April 14, 2007, p. B1.

⁵² Transcript, “Today,” NBC News, April 10, 2007; Mary Mitchell, “Nappy-headed? Now those are fighting words,” *The Chicago Sun-Times*, April 12, 2007, p. 12.

and for its strong language; its lyrics were liberally laced with words like “ho” and “bitch” and what was often referred to as the “n-word,” and did not shy away from sexual or violent imagery. In the days following Imus’s remark, a number of commentators assiduously mined the Internet for examples of rap lyrics, some of which could only be printed with asterisks or dashes to meet decency standards; but many readers already knew the words. “The problem is,” said Jonathan Capehart of *The Washington Post*, “we have gotten to the point where the b-word, the n-word, ho, and a whole lot of other words are now mainstream.”⁵³

Appropriating Rap. To some critics, Imus’s remark reflected the widespread, but superficial, assimilation of the ethos of hip-hop into American popular culture. Its appearance in the mainstream was largely driven by the “corporate music industry,” in the words of author Bakari Kitwana, with the aid of “a handful of rap artists [who] packaged and commodified rap music,” which was then consumed by Americans who did not “take the time to decode the complexity of black life” from which it sprang. Imus, Kitwana continued, “took liberty with a culture that he didn’t fully understand, and when he got called on it, rather than coming clean, he pointed the finger at hip-hop to take the weight. ... If indeed Imus is a hip-hop fan, innocently consuming its language and aesthetics, that doesn’t remove him from the responsibility to understand hip-hop cultural and political roots in all their complexity.”⁵⁴

Some observers, however, argued that contemporary culture, with its more relaxed attitude toward “previously taboo social distinctions,” in the words of *Time* magazine’s James Poniewozik, led to confusion over what liberties could or could not be taken. It was difficult to know “who could say what,” Poniewozik wrote, in a time when “racially and sexually edgy material is often—legitimately—considered brilliant comment, even art,” and when “people—especially young people—feel free to borrow one another’s cultural signifiers.” Comics like Sacha Baron Cohen and Sarah Silverman, or TV shows like “South Park,” he noted, routinely dealt with racially or socially charged material that sometimes generated loud complaints but seldom led to calls for the ouster of those involved.⁵⁵ “... It’s complicated,” mused *The New Yorker*’s David Remnick, “in the sense that people don’t know what to think about what is transgressive speech and what is satire and what is performative, as in the case of hip-hop music.” Imus’s audience, he hypothesized, “thought they were so sophisticated and beyond this, that they [thought] these weren’t race jokes. They were somehow ... meta-jokes.”⁵⁶ True, Poniewozik wrote in *Time*, Imus had “crossed a line, boorishly, creepily, paleolithically. But where is that line nowadays?”

Wherever that line was, many agreed with Poniewozik that Imus had crossed it. There were derogatory terms, one observer noted, “that may be acceptable within a minority culture but

⁵³ Transcript, “Hardball,” MSNBC, April 11, 2007.

⁵⁴ Bakari Kitwana, “Hip-hop slang spreads wrong word,” *Newsday*, April 13, 2007, p. A41.

⁵⁵ James Poniewozik, “Who can say what?” *Time*, April 23, 2007, p. 32.

⁵⁶ “The Charlie Rose Show,” April 13, 2007. It was another guest—Jeff Greenfield—who came up with the term “meta-jokes,” which Remnick then repeated.

almost certainly are not outside it.” Hence, as NPR senior correspondent Juan Williams pointed out, a “black disc jockey” would likely not have created a stir with the same remark that Imus had made. “But when you get a white male like Imus doing it, and you have the weight of history, the weight of race in this country, I think there’s a different level of scrutiny.”⁵⁷ In some eyes, Imus’s age, as well as his race, seemed to make his unthinking venture into hip-hop talk especially repellent. “It’s true that mainstream white culture has appropriated the use of ‘ho,’ just as it has swiped clothes, gestures and other lingo from the rap and hip-hop worlds,” wrote Julia Keller, cultural critic for the *Chicago Tribune*. “Imus was indulging in just that sort of cultural larceny when he uttered his ghastly, revolting crack about the Rutgers athletes. That’s why it sounded not only stupid and callous, but slightly pathetic: Behold a doddering old white man, trying to sound hip.”⁵⁸

Many rappers rejected the notion that Imus’s misguided appropriation could be compared to their own provocative use of language. “It’s a completely different scenario,” said rap star Snoop Dogg—whose own oeuvre included such titles as “Can You Control Yo Ho” and “Break a Bitch Til I Die”⁵⁹—in an April 10 interview with MTV, which was later posted on its website. “[Rappers] are not talking about no collegiate basketball girls who have made it to the next level in education and sports. We’re talking about ho’s that’s in the ‘hood that ain’t doing sh**, that’s trying to get a n***a for his money. These are two separate things. First of all, we ain’t no old-ass white men that sit up on MSNBC going hard on black girls. We are rappers that have these songs coming from our minds and our souls that are relevant to what we feel. I will not let them mutha****as say we in the same league as him.” As for Imus’s fate, Snoop Dogg was unequivocal: “Kick him off the air forever.”⁶⁰

Attacking Rap. Snoop Dogg’s colorful defense—and those of other rap artists—notwithstanding, the fallout from Imus’s remarks led to renewed criticism of rap for “its glamorization of coarse, derogatory language and imagery,” in the words of one observer, particularly—though not exclusively—in regard to women.⁶¹ A number of critics observed that while Imus was merely getting his due for his repugnant remark, rappers, who used equally repugnant language, had managed to escape the kind of skewering he had endured. “For all the media condemnation of Imus’s denigration of the Rutgers women as ‘hos,’” Howard Kurtz asked, “what about those who routinely use that word and others far worse, including the n-word—rap artists and hip-hop singers? Why do they get to make millions of dollars with lyrics about sexually

⁵⁷ Nick Madigan, “Imus gets two-week suspension,” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 10, 2007, p. 1C; “Morning Edition,” NPR, April 13, 2007.

⁵⁸ Julia Keller, “Talking about the word ‘ho,’” *Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 2007, p. 1. In his April 14 column, *Los Angeles Times* media critic Tim Rutten asked if there was “anything even remotely lamer than some shaggy old white guy trying to sound like a Piru Blood [i.e., gang member]?”

⁵⁹ Bob Herbert, “Signs of infection,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2007, p. A19.

⁶⁰ “Snoop says rappers and Imus are ‘two separate things,’” MTV.com. Online at http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1556803/20070410/id_0.jhtml.

⁶¹ Audra Burch, “Imus flap may fuel hip-hop scrutiny,” *The Miami Herald*, April 15, 2007, p. 1.

abusing, degrading, and even murdering women? ... Why does the mainstream media give these artists and these record companies that provide the contracts a pass on this question?"⁶² Many also asked why Al Sharpton—who, along with Jesse Jackson, was a controversial figure in the debate on Imus—had not devoted comparable energy to condemning the misogynistic and racial epithets in rap music.⁶³

In fact, as several observers pointed out, some in the black community had been fighting to clean up rap lyrics for years—dating back to 1993, when civil rights activist C. Delores Tucker began speaking out against the treatment of women in hip-hop music. Since then, there had been a number of efforts to focus attention on rap lyrics, and, as Eric Deggans, media critic for the *St. Petersburg Times*, told Kurtz, "lots of African-American columnists have written about this issue." However, he added, "we don't get the same response [as in the Imus affair] from the mainstream media or from mainstream society."⁶⁴ Sharpton himself made a similar point. When asked by Fox News's Chris Wallace whether he would "go after rappers who say a lot worse things than Imus," Sharpton replied that he had "led a campaign against the ... [Oscar-winning] song 'It's Hard Out Here [for] a Pimp'" and "had marches against the [animated television] show 'Boondocks' that used the n-word," both of which were the work of black artists. Neither effort got much play in the media, according to Sharpton. "I think the real question," he said, "is whether or not the major media will cover our already having gone after some of the rappers and record companies that they have in some cases not covered."⁶⁵

Still, a number of black members of the press argued that African-American leaders had not brought the same passion to the fight against the worst features of hip-hop music that they had shown in other causes. "There's no crusade. You don't see the marches," observed Juan Williams. "... I think it's a vacuum when it comes to the Sharptons, the Jacksons, the NAACP."⁶⁶ Perhaps the most scathing commentary on the issue came from Jason Whitlock, a sports columnist for *The Kansas City Star*. "Thank you, Don Imus," he acidly wrote. "You've given us (black people) an excuse to avoid our real problem." Whitlock castigated Sharpton, Jackson, and even Vivian Stringer for their opportunism in focusing on Don Imus, who, he maintained, "didn't do anything outside the norm for shock jocks and comedians. He also offered an apology. That should've been the end of this whole affair. Instead, it's only the beginning. It's an opportunity for Stringer, Jackson and Sharpton to step on victim platforms and elevate themselves and their agenda" [sic]. Meanwhile, the black community had "allowed our youths to buy into a culture that has been

⁶² Transcript, "Reliable Sources," CNN, April 15, 2007.

⁶³ A number of critics pointed out that both Sharpton and Jackson had themselves used terms that, if not outright racial slurs, came perilously close. Jackson had called New York City "Hymietown"—a reference to Jews—for which he later apologized. Sharpton was said to have referred to Jews as "diamond merchants" and to a Jewish tenant embroiled in a real estate dispute as a "white interloper."

⁶⁴ "Reliable Sources," April 15, 2007.

⁶⁵ Transcript, "Fox News Sunday," Fox News, April 15, 2007.

⁶⁶ Transcript, "Fox News Sunday Roundtable," Fox News, April 15, 2007.

perverted, corrupted and overtaken by prison culture. The music, attitude and behavior expressed in this culture is anti-black, anti-education, demeaning, self-destructive, pro-drug dealing and violent.” The “real battleground,” Whitlock concluded, was not over the remarks of a “washed-up shock jock” like Imus. “We know that the gangsta rappers and their followers in the athletic world have far bigger platforms to negatively define us than some old white man with a bad radio show. There’s no money and lots of danger in that battle, so Jesse and Al are going to sit it out.”⁶⁷

Whitlock’s impassioned piece created a stir in the media and earned him a number of appearances on television, where he was sometimes the lone voice—and almost always the lone black voice—raised in opposition to the campaign to have Imus fired. While many commentators agreed with him that the content of rap songs was often degrading and destructive, some did not find Imus’s remarks as irrelevant and dismissible as Whitlock did; nor did they agree on the relative size of the “platform” commanded by Imus and rap artists. Imus, some argued, enjoyed a much more visible perch, which made his rude remarks more consequential. The rap singer Jay-Z, said author Laura Flanders, “is not hosting a show that [featured] the major politicians of this country. Jay-Z is not being visited by the presidential candidates in his studio. And I want to know whether those presidential candidates are going ... to visit with Don Imus two weeks from now.”⁶⁸ It was a question that Eugene Robinson of *The Washington Post* also asked his colleagues in journalism. “While we’re at the business of blunt truth,” he wrote, “do the big-time media luminaries who so often graced Imus’s show have some explaining to do?”⁶⁹ Many who had been guests on the program—and many, like Robinson, who had not—came to the conclusion, sometimes reluctantly, that the answer was yes.

The “Politico-Media Elite” Responds. For many on Imus’s glittering roster of guests, the sustained and highly public outcry over Imus’s remark was the cause of considerable discomfiture. Whereas in the past they had lightly brushed off their association with the cruder side of Imus—in 2001, for example, Frank Rich had likened it to “juvenile speech at the level of, say, *Mad* magazine”⁷⁰—now they found themselves tarred with it. Their response to the controversy varied. Politicians who had appeared on Imus roundly condemned his language, but seemed disposed to forgive. “Don Imus’ comments were deeply offensive,” Senator Lieberman declared in a written statement. “... Because he is a friend and I know he is a better person than his remarks would suggest, I will continue to appear on his show.”⁷¹ Two Republican presidential contenders—Senator McCain and former Arkansas Governor Huckabee—likewise indicated a willingness to

⁶⁷ Jason Whitlock, “Imus isn’t the real bad guy,” *The Kansas City Star*, April 11, 2007.

⁶⁸ Transcript, “The Big Story with John Gibson,” Fox News, April 10, 2007.

⁶⁹ Eugene Robinson, “Why Imus had to go,” *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2007, p. A17.

⁷⁰ Transcript, “On the Media,” NPR, April 13, 2007.

⁷¹ David Lightman, “NAACP leader slams Lieberman, Dodd,” *The Hartford Courant*, April 12, 2007, p. A6. Senator Dodd was a little more cautious, telling CNN that he would appear on the show only if Imus’s promise to do better proved to be sincere. [“Dodd not ruling out return to Imus show,” *The Associated Press*, April 12, 2007.]

return as guests on the show. “He has apologized,” McCain told reporters. “He said that he’s deeply sorry. I’m a great believer in redemption.”⁷²

One notable exception was Harold Ford, whose candidacy for the Senate Imus had championed. Ford, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, was “hardly leaping to the defense of his radio ally despite repeated on-air pleas from Imus to appear in his defense.”⁷³ Eventually, on Wednesday, April 11, Ford did make his views known, in comments forwarded to *The Associated Press*. Calling Imus a “good friend” and a “decent man,” Ford nevertheless branded Imus’s remarks as a “reprehensible thing.” He made no mention of further appearances on the program, noting only that he “would leave it to others to decide how his future in media should play out.”⁷⁴

Generally, political figures appeared to treat the Imus affair with dispatch, briskly delivering their judgments to the press and moving on to other issues. It was different with pundits and commentators, perhaps because they turned the full glare of media scrutiny upon each other and themselves. Newspaper columns and TV talk shows were devoted to lengthy considerations of why they had appeared on the Imus show, and whether they had turned a blind eye to behavior they would find unacceptable anywhere else. Not all of the scrutiny was done in a sympathetic light. “[Imus’s] guests—even members of the high-minded commentariat who are quick to call out public figures for racism, sexism and other cultural pathologies—seemed not to mind Imus’ penchant for nastiness as they pushed their products or themselves,” the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, paraphrasing the views of *Vanity Fair* contributing editor H.G. Bissinger. “They would never tolerate that type of behavior from anyone in public life,” Bissinger said, “but Imus sells their books.”⁷⁵ Perhaps equally stinging was a question posed by Gwen Ifill, a respected public television correspondent and host, in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*. “Why do my journalistic colleagues appear on Mr. Imus’s program?” she asked. “That’s for them to defend, and others to argue about. I certainly don’t know any black journalists who will.”⁷⁶

The answer to Ifill’s question troubled many of the regulars on “Imus in the Morning.” Most of them ruefully acknowledged that self-interest had played a major role. Evan Thomas—one of several *Newsweek* columnists who frequently appeared on the show—noted that while he was sometimes made uncomfortable by the crass talk, he had “rationalized my appearances by pointing to other prominent journalists and politicians who did it, too. I was eager to sell books, and I liked being in the in crowd.”⁷⁷ As confessional columns filled the press, it did seem as if

⁷² Peter Johnson, “There’s a close eye on Imus,” *USA Today*, April 10, 2007, p. D3.

⁷³ Peter Wallsten, “Democrats have lost a soapbox with firing,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2007, p. A23.

⁷⁴ “The Ford Report,” April 11, 2007. Online at <http://haroldfordjr2006.blogspot.com/2007/04/ford-calls-remarks-by-imus.html>. The blog posting also noted that Imus had earlier said that Ford has lost the Senate election because of “abject racism.”

⁷⁵ Abcarian and James, April 13, 2007.

⁷⁶ Ifill, April 10, 2007.

⁷⁷ Kosova, April 23, 2007.

being a regular on the show conferred “a certain insider status, a frisson of celebrity,” in the words of *Newsweek’s* chief editor, Jon Meacham, that journalists found irresistible.⁷⁸ When she became a guest on Imus, recalled Ana Marie Cox—the “Wonkette” blogger turned Time.com editor—she was “thrilled” to be “invited inside the circle,” and soon found herself “succumbing to the clubhouse mentality that Imus both inspires and cultivates.” There was, she frankly admitted, “no reason beyond ego to play along. I did the show almost solely to earn my media-elite merit badge.”⁷⁹

Others professed themselves drawn to the show for the stimulating, if sometimes edgy, conversation it offered. “Journalists like me,” Howard Kurtz reflected, “who have gone on Imus’s show have done so because we enjoyed the opportunity to talk about politics and media without the stuffiness of so many other programs.”⁸⁰ Later, on his CNN program, “Reliable Sources,” Kurtz spoke with *Post* columnist and ESPN host Tony Kornheiser about the experience of being on the Imus show. “It was fun, wasn’t it?” he asked.⁸¹ In his columns and on TV, Kurtz expressed a mix of regret and bewilderment, or perhaps resentment, over the backlash that Imus’s remarks had generated. “I always made a distinction between somebody trying to be funny and somebody speaking out of anger,” he told Kornheiser, “but maybe I had a blind spot on this. In any event, this hurricane of criticism now about Imus—I mean, he’s basically been turned into public enemy number one. Is it a little over the top?”

In his column on the Imus affair, Frank Rich of *The New York Times* struck a similar, somewhat defensive note, as he decried the “astounding display of hypocrisy, sanctimony and self-congratulation from nearly every side of the debate, starting with Al Sharpton, who has yet to apologize for his leading role in the Tawana Brawley case. ...”⁸² Like Kurtz, Rich wrote of enjoying the quality of conversation on the Imus show. While Imus’s “obnoxious comments”—some of them aimed at Rich himself—made him wince, he “saw him as equally offensive to everyone. The show’s crudest interludes struck me as burlesque.” Also like Kurtz, Rich argued that Imus was not a bigot, pointing to his condemnation of political ads linking Harold Ford to white women as evidence. Still, Rich acknowledged, “perhaps I was kidding myself. ... The spectacle of a media star verbally assaulting [the Rutgers team], and with a creepy, dismissive laugh, as if the whole thing were merely a disposable joke, was ugly.” But Rich also studded his piece with examples of the hypocrisy of those who condemned Imus while tolerating bad behavior in other areas,

⁷⁸ Jon Meacham, “The editor’s desk,” *Newsweek*, April 23, 2007, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Ana Marie Cox, “No more Imus for me,” *Time*, April 23, 2007, p. 37.

⁸⁰ Howard Kurtz, “The race debate,” *Washingtonpost.com*, April 11, 2007.

⁸¹ “Reliable Sources,” April 15, 2007. Interestingly, Kurtz went on to ask Kornheiser if anyone had ever challenged him about appearing on Imus. Kornheiser said no, and then asked the same question of Kurtz, who, apparently forgetting his encounter with Philip Nobile in 2000, likewise answered no.

⁸² Frank Rich, “Everybody hates Don Imus,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2007, section 4, p. 14. Sharpton had been a key figure in the Tawana Brawley case, in which a black teenager falsely claimed she had been assaulted and raped by six white men, some of them law enforcement officials. Later, one of the alleged perpetrators successfully sued Sharpton and two others for slander.

particularly where their self-interest was at stake; and he warned of the “chilling effect” that silencing Imus would have on comics who “push the line” and on pundits at either end of the political spectrum who did the same.

Like the politicians who had appeared on “Imus in the Morning,” media commentators were asked—and asked themselves—whether they would continue to be guests on the program. For some, like Ana Marie Cox, the answer was clear. Though it was “too little and too late,” she conceded, she was “giving up the show. ...”⁸³ Others were not so sure. *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham initially told *The Washington Post* that he and the three other writers for the magazine who were regulars on the Imus show would watch to see whether Imus kept his pledge to improve the tone of the program. “And if he follows through,” Meacham said, “then we’re open to going back on. ... We don’t want to rush to judgment. At the same time, he’s on serious probation here.”⁸⁴ By the end of the stormy week following Imus’s apology, however, the *Newsweek* regulars had made up their minds. “As the national conversation about Imus unfolded,” Meacham would later write, “... our concern about his comments grew, and it became clear that our view of the show—that the high outweighed the low—was no longer the right view for us to take.” The four had “agreed that we would no longer take part in the program.”⁸⁵

But some said they would stand by Imus. “[I]f you’ve had the benefit of being on his show for 15 years,” said Jeff Greenfield, who had moved from CNN to CBS, “... then to stay away ... when he gets in serious and deserved trouble, seems to me the ultimate act of hypocrisy and cowardice.”⁸⁶ Others invoked the bonds of friendship that had developed over the course of repeated appearances on the show. “Will I go back on?” replied former CBS anchor Bob Schieffer, when asked by the *Post*. “If it were anyone else, I wouldn’t have anything to do with them. But I’m not going to sever a relationship with someone who has apologized for what he said. He’s my friend. I hate what he did, but he’s still my friend.”⁸⁷

Such declarations on one side or the other of the to-appear-or-not-to-appear debate, however, would soon be moot: before the week was out, Imus would be gone from the airwaves.

The End of Imus

Late in the day on Wednesday, April 11, NBC News President Steve Capus issued his second statement on Imus in three days. “Effective immediately,” it said, “MSNBC will no longer simulcast” the Imus show. “This decision comes as a result of an ongoing review process,” it

⁸³ Cox, April 23, 2007.

⁸⁴ Sridhar Pappu, “No one to talk to?” *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2007, p. C1.

⁸⁵ Meacham, April 23, 2007.

⁸⁶ Transcript, “The Early Show,” CBS News, April 11, 2007.

⁸⁷ Pappu, April 11, 2007.

continued. "... It also takes into account many conversations with our employees. What matters most to us is that the men and women of NBC Universal have confidence in the values we have set for this company. This is the only decision that makes that possible."

The announcement capped a tumultuous period following Capus's meeting the previous afternoon with African-American employees of NBC News. Others had "piled on," *Newsweek* reported. Capus "got lobbied hard, really hard," one network executive told the magazine, "and he really took it to heart." Shaken by the "confrontation," according to a *Wall Street Journal* account, Capus "started lobbying CEO Jeff Zucker to pull the plug. ..." ⁸⁸ By Wednesday, it had also become apparent that General Motors—by far the largest sponsor of the simulcast and the "top spender at MSNBC overall" ⁸⁹—was changing its mind about staying with Imus; the company would formally announce its decision to pull its ads the following day. At NBC Universal, according to the *Journal*, "the only debate left" was whether to cancel the show immediately or wait until the charity telethon scheduled for Thursday and Friday could take place. At a 5:00 p.m. meeting on Wednesday, Zucker "made the call to pull the plug immediately." ⁹⁰

That night, a somber Capus appeared on MSNBC's "Hardball" to explain the decision. "I've received hundreds, if not thousands, of e-mails, both internal and external, [from] people with very strong views about what should happen," he told host David Gregory. "... And many of them are people who have worked at NBC News for decades, people who put their lives on the line covering wars and things like that. [Imus's] comments were deeply hurtful to many, many people. ... And when you listen to the passion [of] the people who [have] come to the conclusion that there should not be any room for this sort of conversation and dialogue on our air, it was the only decision we could reach." Capus dismissed the suggestion that the flight of sponsors had driven NBC's move to terminate the Imus show. The "reputation of this news division," he maintained, "means more to me than advertising dollars. Because if you lose your reputation, you lose everything." At the same time, Capus expressed some sadness about letting Imus go. "I take no joy in this," he said. "It is not a particularly happy moment. ... I'm one of the people who consider themselves an Imus fan. I listen to him every morning, and I think very highly of him, I really do. But I needed to make this call, and I believe this is the right call."

Meanwhile, over at CBS, the Imus show was, literally and figuratively, in a state of suspension. Officially, CBS said only that it would stick with the two-week suspension, but would "continue to speak with all concerned parties and monitor the situation closely." ⁹¹ Behind the scenes, however, the pressure was on. On Wednesday, Bruce Gordon, former head of the NAACP and a director of CBS Corporation, told *The Associated Press* that he had spoken personally with

⁸⁸ Kosova, April 23, 2007; Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

⁸⁹ Melissa Preddy, "General Motors pulls ads from Imus show," *The Detroit News*, online, April 12, 2007.

⁹⁰ Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

⁹¹ Bill Carter and Louise Story, "NBC News drops Imus show over racial remark," *The New York Times*, April 12, 2007, p. A1.

CBS Chief Executive Leslie Moonves, and hoped the company would “make the smart decision” and fire Imus. “He’s crossed the line, he’s violated our community,” Gordon declared. “He needs to face the consequence of that violation.”⁹² Moonves also met with Bryan Monroe of the National Association of Black Journalists on Wednesday, and on the following day with a delegation of feminist and civil rights leaders, including Sharpton and Jackson. Late that afternoon, Moonves called Imus to tell him his show was being canceled.⁹³

In an e-mail to CBS employees to explain the decision, Moonves wrote, “One thing is for certain: This is about a lot more than Imus. ... He has flourished in a culture that permits a certain level of objectionable expression that hurts and demeans a whole range of people. In taking him off the air, I believe we take an important and necessary step not just in solving a unique problem, but in changing that culture.” This was a sentiment Moonves repeated in the statement he issued on Thursday night, April 12, to announce the firing. “From the outset,” it said, “I believe all of us have been deeply upset and revulsed” by Imus’s remarks. In the course of meetings with “concerned groups,” it continued, “there has been much discussion of the effect language like this has on our young people, particularly young women of color trying to make their way in this society. That consideration has weighed most heavily on our minds as we made our decision. ... We are now presented with a significant opportunity to expand on our record on issues of diversity, race and gender. We intend to seize that opportunity as we move forward together.”

Exit Imus. As prospects for holding onto his show dimmed, Imus had grown increasingly bitter. On Thursday morning, as he kicked off the scheduled charity telethon, he noted that it was “more important to give money to this show than any other year, because these bastards went after me. They got me.” At that point, though no longer televised, he was still on the radio, but, he said, “I didn’t sense a lot of courage on the part of people at CBS.” Imus struck a more defiant note after almost a week of contrition and self-defense. He railed against the “hypocrisy” of MSNBC and the press, and declared that he was “not going on some talk show tour. ... I have apologized enough. The only other people I want to talk to are these young [Rutgers] women.”⁹⁴

According to *The New York Times*, CBS had originally delayed severing its ties with Imus, in part because he had asked for time to meet with members of the Rutgers women’s basketball team.⁹⁵ In the end, however, CBS had chosen not to wait, and when Imus finally met with the team on Thursday night, April 12, he was no longer employed. The meeting lasted three hours; afterward, team members took a vote on whether to accept Imus’s apology. The following day, Vivian Stringer announced the results. “We, the Rutgers University Scarlet Knights basketball

⁹² David Crary, “Ex-NAACP head now on CBS board hopes company will fire Don Imus,” *The Associated Press*, April 11, 2007.

⁹³ Abcarian and James, April 13, 2007; Barnes et al., April 13, 2007.

⁹⁴ Excerpts aired on “CBS Evening News,” “Paula Zahn Now,” and “The Big Story with John Gibson,” April 12, 2007.

⁹⁵ Carter and Story, April 12, 2007.

team, accept ... Mr. Imus's apology, and we are now in the process of forgiving." From Imus himself, there was no further word. His wife took over hosting duties for the remainder of the telethon—where pledges were running well ahead of previous years—while he withdrew from the public eye.⁹⁶ In the immediate aftermath of the firing, while the talk show host fell silent, media commentators continued their avid discussion of the reasons for Imus's abrupt fall and its long-term impact.

The Media Reflects

As commentators looked back on the turbulent eight days it took for the "nappy-headed hos" incident to play out to its conclusion, most agreed on the basic elements that made this one offensive remark, among so many uttered over so many years, the one that brought the apparently invincible Imus down. For one, Imus had chosen the wrong target for his gibe—"a specific and sympathetic target," wrote Randy Kennedy in *The New York Times*, "a come-from-behind women's basketball team that had just lost a tough championship game. He did not level his lampoon at all black people or all women or, alternately, the kinds of supposedly bulletproof figures used for target practice by the comedy world all the time—politicians, reality-show contestants and celebrities. ..." ⁹⁷ Nor did it help Imus's cause, as David Carr pointed out, that Vivian Stringer proved to be a formidable adversary, whose "eloquent, aggressive defense of the team—and the obvious class of the players at the podium—made for riveting television with a great deal of emotional content." ⁹⁸

Perhaps equally damaging to Imus, the insult was captured on video and quickly made available on the Internet by Media Matters, first on its own website and then on YouTube, which registered over one million "hits" for both the original remarks and Imus's subsequent apologies.⁹⁹ The effect was to set in concrete what in the days before simulcasts would have been an evanescent moment. "Twenty years ago, you said something stupid on the radio and it disappeared," one talk show host observed. "Now it's replayed endlessly, and 99% of the people who are reacting to it haven't seen the show and/or know its context." ¹⁰⁰

As the "nappy-headed hos" video became a runaway hit on the Internet, Imus's efforts to contain the damage, some believed, largely backfired—particularly his appearance on Al Sharpton's radio program on Monday. Imus "gave the story stout legs," in Carr's words, "by seeming to lose his cool on the show by calling his interrogators 'you people.' ..." Even without

⁹⁶ Bill Carter and Jacques Steinberg, "Off the air: the light goes out for Don Imus," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2007, p. 1C. On Friday, the head of one of the telethon charities told CBS Evening News that "to punish [Imus], you're punishing a thousand kids that he has aided every single day."

⁹⁷ Randy Kennedy, "Hey, that's (not) funny," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2007, section 4, p. 1.

⁹⁸ Carr, April 13, 2007.

⁹⁹ Neal Justin, "The camera never blinks," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), April 14, 2007, p. 1E.

¹⁰⁰ Miller et al., April 12, 2007.

that misstep, however, it was an ill-considered decision on Imus's part, Carr argued, to place himself in Sharpton's "wheelhouse." "By seeking absolution," he wrote, "from people with their own political agenda, Mr. Imus lost custody of his apology."¹⁰¹

Finally, many believed that Imus's efforts to elevate the tone of his show by bringing in guests from the media and the political world contributed to his downfall. "When he was a 60-year-old guy acting like a 12-year-old in the corner as a shock jock," said Roland Martin of CNN, "we were not paying attention. When he elevated himself to interviewing prominent people, he changed the standard."¹⁰² As it turned out, the influential guests who in the past appeared to immunize him from serious consequences became something of a liability for Imus this time. Imus, Carr reflected, "played host to the cream of journalism and politics. ... [H]is ability to book the likes of Senator John McCain and Tim Russert of NBC News means that he became a far worthier target. When most radio talkers go off the rails, the only question is whether advertisers will pull back. In this instance, his guests were implicated; whether they would return to the show became an issue of public moment."¹⁰³

Or, at least, it became an issue for the guests—it was not clear whether the general public cared as much about the Imus affair as did the media, which had given the story considerable prominence. According to an April 2007 report from the Project for Excellence in Journalism, Imus was the "second most-heavily covered story of the year to date"—topped only by the debate over President George W. Bush's "surge" plan for Iraq in January. While the Imus story "cut across every media sector" during the week of April 6-13, it was "particularly powerful on cable news," the report noted; by week's end, it was taking up 48 percent of the time on "the three cable news channels."¹⁰⁴ It also made the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* twice, and was the subject of editorials and op-ed pieces in those and other papers across the country.

The public, on the other hand, seemed less consumed by the issue. According to a poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 57 percent of respondents believed the Imus story was given too much coverage. But there were signs of a racial divide over the question: 62 percent of whites said that news organizations had devoted too much time or ink to the incident, while only 31 percent of African-Americans felt the same.¹⁰⁵

"Going Forward." In just over a week's time, a host of journalists, public figures, presidential aspirants, and even President Bush, through a spokeswoman, had weighed in on the

¹⁰¹ Carr, April 13, 2007.

¹⁰² Transcript, "Anderson Cooper 360," CNN, April 10, 2007.

¹⁰³ Carr, April 13, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ Journalism.org, "Imus second biggest story of 2007 so far," Project for Excellence in Journalism, News Coverage Index, April 8-13, 2007.

¹⁰⁵ "Most say Imus's punishment was appropriate," The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, April 18, 2007. The report also noted that more whites than blacks thought that Imus's punishment was "too tough" (35 percent vs. 18 percent).

“nappy-headed hos” remark and on the appropriate punishment for Imus. Now that he had been taken off the airwaves, it remained for commentators to ponder what, if any, lasting effects the controversy would have. There were some early signs of change for them to mull over. Sharpton had announced that his campaign against demeaning language would not end with Imus’s firing. “We will not stop,” he declared, “until we make it clear that no one should denigrate women. We must deal with the fact that ho and the b-word are words that are wrong from anybody’s lips. It would be wrong if we stopped here and acted like Imus was the only problem. There are others that need to get this same message.”¹⁰⁶

And it did seem as though the message was being heard in some surprising quarters. At the height of the Imus controversy, Russell Simmons, founder of the rap music company, Def Jam Records, and chairman of the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), had issued a statement with Dr. Benjamin Chavis, president of HSAN, that was a ringing defense of hip-hop artists and “freedom of artistic expression.” Ten days later, however, Simmons and Chavis released another statement that indicated some change of heart. While still affirming its support for artistic freedom, it said, HSAN “is concerned about the growing public outrage concerning the use of the words ‘bitch,’ ‘ho,’ and ‘nigger.’ We recommend that the recording and broadcast industries voluntarily remove/bleep/delete the misogynistic words ‘bitch’ and ‘ho’ and the racially offensive word ‘nigger.’ Going forward, these three words should be considered with the same objections to obscenity as ‘extreme curse words.’”

Whether such developments augured real change was still a matter of debate. “I think there’s been some very interesting conversation going on in this country about what’s appropriate about race relations,” Steve Capus observed on NBC’s “Today” show the morning after the network had cut its ties to Imus, “and I hope that conversation goes forward.” Some had serious doubts. Jason Whitlock of *The Kansas City Star* was perhaps the most pessimistic of this group. “Once the advertisers started pulling away and the money went away,” he said, “Don Imus became expendable. I don’t think any great progress or any progress at all has been made. ...” Whitlock saw Imus as a “pawn in a bigger game of political agendas by different people—Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton.” Reiterating the point he had made earlier in his column, he argued that Sharpton and Jackson had chosen an “easy target” and dodged the risks attendant upon taking on hip-hop culture. “Running [Imus] off the air was very easy,” Whitlock maintained. “Changing this culture, this negative, hip-hop prison culture among black youth that is killing us—that’s hard work.”¹⁰⁷

Others took a more hopeful view. Bryan Monroe of NABJ—one of the first to speak out against Imus and call for him to be fired—responded to Whitlock’s pessimistic conclusions with his own, far more upbeat assessment. “I actually think,” Monroe declared, “this is a watershed

¹⁰⁶ Burch, April 15, 2007.

¹⁰⁷ Transcript, “Lou Dobbs This Week,” CNN, April 14, 2007.

moment in American society. Something has happened over the last few days. ... Since Friday, America is standing up and speaking and saying enough is enough. And I actually think this is an opportunity here for the American media to lead, to finally lead. You know, we all get beat up about catering to the lowest common denominator. Now we've actually got a chance in the media—television, radio, newspapers, magazines—to lift up the level of discourse and change the conversation about race, about sexism, about tolerance and diversity.”¹⁰⁸

Some echoed Monroe's optimism, though perhaps more tentatively. “This might be different,” said Bob Herbert of *The New York Times*. “... In a weird sense, the fact that Imus is so famous, and that we're talking here about entertainment, which is always a much bigger issue in this country than public policy, usually—I think it may hold people's attention, and this may be a story that has legs.”¹⁰⁹ Mark Jurkowitz, associate director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, largely agreed. “I don't think this is simply a speed bump that everyone will forget in about two weeks,” he remarked, though he went on to acknowledge that “it's very hard to know if a year down the line this will change the nature or culture of talk radio.”¹¹⁰

But others voiced doubts about whether the media would, as Monroe hoped, lead the conversation about race and other matters that the Imus affair had provoked—or even keep it alive. “It'll jump-start [a national dialogue] for awhile,” Jeff Greenfield observed, “but I don't know what the half-life of this is. ... The media can focus on an issue and then move away. ... I will admit ... I'm a little skeptical of the long-term effect of this. But one can hope.”¹¹¹ Howard Kurtz was more dubious than Greenfield. The media “have a short attention span,” he asserted in a TV appearance on Saturday, April 14. “And I bet by next week the Imus thing has died down, [and] we're off chasing the next scandal.”¹¹²

As it happened, Kurtz was largely proven right, although the cause was not a scandal but a shocking tragedy: on Monday, April 16, Cho Seung Hui, a student at Virginia Tech, shot and killed 32 students and teachers at the college and wounded dozens more. The following day, the horrifying story of the shooting rampage filled the front pages and whole sections of newspapers and dominated the airwaves, squeezing out any mention of Imus or the debate he had provoked. But before the year was out, Imus would be back in the media spotlight.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Transcript, “Countdown,” MSNBC, April 12, 2007.

¹¹⁰ Alexandra Marks, “With Imus ousted, will other shows clean up their acts?” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 16, 2007, p. 1.

¹¹¹ Transcript, “The Early show,” CBS News, April 13, 2007.

¹¹² Transcript, “The Saturday Early Show,” CBS News, April 14, 2007.

The Return of Imus

In August 2007, Imus—who had threatened to sue CBS for breach of contract—reached a settlement with the company, reportedly worth \$10-\$20 million. This opened the door to what many had long considered inevitable—Imus’s return to the airwaves; he was, the *Post* reported, already “angling for a way to get back on the air.”¹¹³ A few months later, on November 1, Citadel Broadcasting Corporation, which owned ABC Radio Networks, announced that it had signed him to a five-year contract—for \$5-\$8 million, according to news accounts—to host a morning drive-time radio show from WABC in New York City. The show would be simulcast by RFD-TV, a little-known satellite and cable channel that catered primarily to rural communities.

Imus’s new employers left little doubt as to their reasons for signing the controversial talk show host. “Obviously, we are doing this because we think we can make more money,” said Phil Boyce, program director for WABC. “There’s an opportunity to charge more for our advertising rates. I am not ashamed of saying it is about the money. We are running a business.”¹¹⁴ Whether Imus’s new show would attract the same caliber of sponsor that his old one had was still an open question, however. While several of his former advertisers—Bigelow Teas and Mohegan Sun casino, for example—returned, some of the more prominent ones, such as General Motors and Verizon, had adopted a “wait-and-see approach,” in the words of one report.¹¹⁵

The same could be said of a number of the pundits and journalists who had frequented the Imus show in the past. Some, like the stable of *Newsweek* columnists and editors who had been regulars on the old program, would apparently not be returning. “We are standing by the policy we announced in April,” a spokesperson for the magazine told the *New York Observer*. “We will not participate in the Imus program.” Others, like NBC’s Tim Russert, seemed on the fence. “If [Imus] asked me to come and talk about political developments, I would absolutely do that,” he said. “But I guess I’ll have to check with the folks at NBC.” Still others expressed no reservations about appearing on the new show. “I said I wouldn’t go on at the time of the controversy,” Ken Auletta of *The New Yorker* acknowledged. “But I wouldn’t make that claim today. Because I think people deserve second chances.”¹¹⁶

Politicians, on the other hand—at least those with presidential aspirations—seemed unconcerned about being associated with Imus. When his new show debuted on December 3, 2007, both John McCain and Christopher Dodd phoned in to offer their congratulations. “Welcome back, old friend,” McCain said warmly. “Drive-time radio has been boring,” Dodd told Imus. “Welcome

¹¹³ Linton Weeks, “Imus, CBS settle lawsuits,” *The Washington Post*, August 15, 2007, p. C8.

¹¹⁴ Adam Goldman, Associated Press, “Back on the air, Imus ‘faces some choices,’” *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2007, p. C7. The head of Rural Media Group, which owned RFD-TV, told reporters he hoped Imus would help boost the cable network’s audience from 30 million to 50 million homes.

¹¹⁵ Andre Hamp, “Advertisers take wait-and-see approach to Imus,” *Advertising Age*, November 26, 2007, p. 4.

¹¹⁶ Felix Gillette, “Imus is back!” *New York Observer*, November 13, 2007.

home.”¹¹⁷ The following day, two more presidential hopefuls—Republican Mike Huckabee and Democrat Bill Richardson—also called in to the show.

Imus’s return briefly sparked renewed media interest in the talk show host and some curiosity about how he would conduct himself on the air. His new employers had expressed confidence that Imus would not revisit the sins of the past. “I don’t have any doubt [about] his future,” Phil Boyce of WABC-AM told the *Post*. “He’ll obviously be wiser, smarter and a bit more careful. He’s learned from this. I’m not concerned that he’ll have a repeat.”¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, they took some precautions. They put the Imus show on a 21-second delay—far longer than the rarely-used five-second delay at CBS—which would give them “ample time,” the *New York Observer* reported, “to bleep out anything troublesome.”¹¹⁹ A further check on Imus could perhaps be seen in some additions to the host’s cast of regulars. Along with such Imus stalwarts as Bernard McGuirk—who had provided the notorious lead-in to the “nappy-headed hos” remark—were two comedians, Karith Foster and Tony Powell, both African-Americans.

The opening show, on December 3, was, according to the *Post*, a “cautious, even stilted affair, especially compared with the freewheeling satire and commentary that characterized his program before the controversy.”¹²⁰ In his opening remarks, Imus appeared to be trying to reassure both his critics and his longtime fans. To the former, he pledged that he would “never say anything in my lifetime that will make any of these young women at Rutgers regret or feel foolish that they accepted my apology and forgave me.” To the latter, he noted that “we now have the opportunity to have a better program, to obviously diversify the cast,” but quickly added that “the program is not going to change. Other than that, not much has changed. Dick Cheney is still a war criminal. Hillary Clinton is still Satan. And I’m back on the radio.”¹²¹

¹¹⁷ As reported in Jacques Steinberg, “The Imus touch,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 2007, p. A33.

¹¹⁸ Goldman, December 3, 2007.

¹¹⁹ Gillette, November 13, 2007.

¹²⁰ Paul Farhi, “Don Imus gingerly steps back on air,” *The Washington Post*, December 4, 2007, p. C1. In addition to McCain and Dodd, Imus’s guests that day included historian Doris Kearns Goodwin and political advisors James Carville and Mary Matalin.

¹²¹ As quoted in Jacques Steinberg, “Imus is back, chastened but still proudly obnoxious,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 2007, p. E 1; and in excerpts aired on “The Big Story with John Gibson,” Fox News, December 3, 2007.