



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on January 25, 2010

The Demise of Air America

From the very beginning Air America's chances for success were dubious at best. The idea of a full-time radio network filled with personalities and callers spouting opinions and perspective that listeners could already get from NPR, the major news networks, daily newspapers, and weekly magazines simply did not seem like what a large enough demographic of listeners would tune to on a daily basis.

The fact that they were up against some formidable "conservative" competition didn't help. Late last week the inevitable news came, as Air America, the radio network launched in 2004 in part as a platform for comedian and future U.S. Senator Al Franken, announced that it was filing for bankruptcy and would leave the airwaves.



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In a memo posted to its website, Air America's chairman, Charlie Kireker, announced that the network would cease its live programming on January 21, and would leave the air for good at 9 p.m. (EST) on Monday, January 25.

"This past year has seen a 'perfect storm' in the media industry generally," Kireker said. "National and local advertising revenues have fallen drastically, causing many media companies nationwide to fold or seek bankruptcy protection." He noted that Air America was not alone, with radio industry ad revenues having sunk for ten consecutive quarters, prompting other broadcasters and industry services either to go out of business or severely cut back on their staffing and budgets.

"Those companies that remain are facing audience fragmentation as a result of new media technologies, are often saddled with crushing debt, and have generally found it difficult to obtain operating or investment capital from traditional sources of funding," Kireker added. "In this climate, our painstaking search for new investors has come close several times right up into this week, but ultimately fell short of success."

But observers and industry experts noted the continuing success of talk radio from a broadly conservative perspective, and pointed out that Air America was doomed early on by a couple of basic factors. Michael Harrison of *Talkers* magazine, a trade journal catering to talk-radio, noted that while Air America had plenty of initial capital and publicity to get them off the ground, many of its on-air personalities unwisely jettisoned reasoned discussion of important issues in favor of ongoing rants against those figures they assumed were the most formidable enemies of their perspective — the rank-and-file hosts of "conservative" talk radio. "The thing that was so maddening about Air America's original programming [was its focus on] how bad Rush Limbaugh was and how bad Sean Hannity was," Harrison was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*. "If that's the 'liberal message,' there is no message."



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Robin Bertolucci, a program director for two talk stations in Los Angeles owned by radio giant Clear Channel Communications, said that successful talk radio is about far more than political ideology. “The thing that makes any radio program successful is the entertainment value and the information value,” she said, noting that Rush Limbaugh’s success is based more on the entertainment value he brings than on any supposed conservative ideology he shares with his audience. “He’s a wildly talented and entertaining broadcaster,” she said. “If he was a communist, I think the show would be successful, too — in a very different way.”

Air America was also hurt by its role as a “Johnny Come Lately” to the talk-radio arena. By the time it hit the airwaves in April 2004, neo-conservative entertainers like Limbaugh, Hannity, Michael Medved, and others had been on the air for years, solidifying a popularity against which even the most talented and worthy competitor would have found it difficult to compete.

Walter Brasch, a media analyst and reporter for Online Journal, noted that by at least 2000, neo-conservative personalities had largely co-opted the AM radio waves, targeting “the same kind of audience that the liberal ’60s alternative media had targeted — the socially and politically marginalized who distrusted Big Government and believed in individual liberties. Any emerging liberal network would be seen as merely an annoyance, rather than competition.”

But even in a market saturated by larger-than-life “conservative” personalities, there may yet have been a place at the table for a network broadcasting entertaining and thoughtful liberal opinion.

Unfortunately, Brasch explained, the folks at Air America tried to do in a short span what it took decades for major “conservative” talk radio to accomplish. Putting people on the air with their own shows who had little background in broadcast was, in itself, a recipe for failure. Brasch pointed out that even the most talented of Air America’s personalities, such as Franken, “had minimal radio experience. In contrast, almost all of Rush Limbaugh’s career was in radio before he became the man most loathed by liberals.” The network may well have survived had it “tried to evolve slowly, as had conservative talk radio, and not try to match it in salaries and personalities the first year,” he said.

In addition to the penchant of its hosts to attack perceived “conservatives” like Limbaugh and Hannity while ignoring the more important issues of developing unique entertainment and a focused message, Brasch noted that Air America’s demise was keyed to an arrogance that served to repel its listeners and others who could have helped it succeed. “Its hosts and producers ignored phone calls and e-mails from liberals and moderates who were not on its radar as ‘important,’” he noted. “And, it and many of its affiliates also ignored calls from many reporters who were trying to do stories about the network and its personalities. If the producers arrogantly didn’t think something mattered, then it didn’t.”

Ultimately, the folks at Air America failed to grasp the one truth that its neo-conservative counterpart has gotten right — and which is key to any grass-roots success: People are inclined to embrace a movement that values their input and involvement, while rejecting those who look with suspicion or annoyance on involvement from outside its direct ranks.

Photo of Al Franken: AP Images



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