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## They Look Nothing Like Rush Limbaugh

By SUSAN BRENNAN

RACHEL MADDOW is the sunny, 32-year-old early bird of liberal talk radio, who spices her pre-dawn newscast on the Air America network with news of the weird. "I have to tell you about this story, or it will possess me for the rest of my natural-born life," Ms. Maddow mentioned one very early morning last month.

A Chinese man had been harvesting bile for medicine from the gall bladders of live bears until the day before, when his bears ate him. "You keep six bears and poke them with a sharp stick through their abdomen every day for their bile," Ms. Maddow said in a buoyant rapid fire, "eventually they're going to make their own decision, don't you think?"

Ms. Maddow's Air America colleague, Randi Rhodes, is a more political, more acidly caustic voice who calls the Bush administration "the dark side." On Ms. Rhodes's four-hour afternoon show, she's the middle-aged woman (she's 46) who doesn't have the time or patience to be nice. "You're a pig!" she cries at whatever male conservative broadcaster has angered her that day.

They are two sides of the liberal talk-radio coin. In their own small way, over at the far end of the AM dial where Air America is broadcast in most of its 72 cities, Ms. Maddow and Ms. Rhodes are changing the world of talk radio. Michael Harrison, editor of the trade magazine *Talkers*, said that, "For the most part, political talk radio is male," dominated by conservative broadcasters like Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage. "But in the next 5 to 10 years we're going to see an invasion of talk radio by women of all political and subject stripes."

"Rachel and Randi are part of a natural evolution," Mr. Harrison said, along with popular conservative radio personalities like Laura Ingraham, Monica Crowley and Janet Parshall. Mrs. Parshall was paired with Ms. Rhodes on an uncommonly animated C-Span program last month, which ended when Mrs. Parshall plugged her ears with her fingers and said: "Oh my goodness, we don't do this on conservative radio. We're polite," while Ms. Rhodes repeatedly interrupted and hollered, "You call yourself a woman of faith!"

If the Air America network hangs on long enough to reach the next presidential campaign, Ms. Maddow and Ms. Rhodes can claim some of the credit. The network's chief executive, Danny Goldberg, calls them "exactly the two people who have emerged in dramatic fashion" from the shadows of Air America's stars, Al Franken and the comic actress Janeane Garofalo, who helped the network make a high-profile debut 20 months ago.

Since then the network has added and lost stations, dipped in the ratings, then slightly risen again, while lagging far behind conservative talk radio in popularity. Its New York station, WLIB, was ranked 24th in the city in the most recent Arbitron ratings report, compared with WABC, the conservative talk home, at No. 8. Air America's reputation was also shaken by revelations that a

founder, now departed, had borrowed \$875,000 from a Bronx Boys and Girls Club to finance the network. In a statement, the network's current management said that it had repaid the loan into an escrow account, "where the money will remain until the city has completed its investigation of the club."

As for its current financial outlook, Mr. Goldberg said, "We pay the bills any way we can." Earlier this fall the network started an online fund-raising drive similar to a public radio campaign.

Larry Rosin, the president of Edison Media Research, a firm that tracks the radio industry, said that Air America had done "quite a credible job of creating a brand name very quickly." Because of that, he said, the network was well-positioned in a world where "the radio dial is not the totality of the picture any longer," but where programs are also available through syndication, through podcasts and on satellite radio.

While Mr. Limbaugh and Sean Hannity are bigger brand names, Mr. Rosin said: "There is no station brand that's been developed on the conservative side, and Air America is a station brand. It's possible that down the road we'll see them as a vanguard of a new approach."

The network's biggest stars can be distracted. Ms. Garofalo was off filming episodes of "The West Wing" this fall, and Mr. Franken has said that he might run for Senate in Minnesota. "Air America has to look beyond Franken and Garofalo," Mr. Harrison said, "and Rachel and Randi are turning out to be quite good, and quite successful for them."

The network is expected to announce imminently a move by Ms. Maddow into a more prominent morning drive-time role. She also has a gig debating the conservative commentator Tucker Carlson on his MSNBC show, "The Situation," and a contract to appear on other MSNBC programs. "Rachel is the universal donor of good chemistry," said Bill Wolff, the network's vice president of primetime programming. "You can put her on to talk to just about anybody about just about anything, and she comes across as just so cheerful and hopeful and likable," he said.

And Ms. Rhodes is collaborating with the concert promoter John Sher on a live comedy and music show that she expects to try out in New York then take on the road.

Ms. Rhodes is the longtime radio broadcaster, having worked her way up through consecutively bigger markets from her first job, 20 years ago, at a storefront station in West Texas.

As for Ms. Maddow, her résumé before joining Air America four years ago included a job at a friend's coffee business. An honors graduate of Stanford University, Ms. Maddow identifies herself as the first openly lesbian activist to win a Rhodes Scholarship. She returned to Western Massachusetts to work as an activist on behalf of prisoners with AIDS "even though people think of that as the most marginal and obscure political issue ever - and it is. I didn't talk about it at cocktail parties."

She made cold calls and hounded the Air America founders for a job, then moved to New York to share a program with the comedy writer Lizz Winstead and the rapper Chuck D. When that show was replaced by one with Jerry Springer as its host, Ms. Maddow took the only slot available: 5 to 6 a.m. Now she comes into the network's Chelsea studios at midnight, drills through the Web for her picks of underreported stories. "My challenge is to give you the news I think should be on all national broadcasts, but isn't," she said. At around 8 a.m. she retires to a 24-hour bistro for a Bloody Mary, since "it's your day but it's my night."

AT 3 p.m. each weekday, when Mr. Franken's wry monotone gives way to Ms. Rhodes's Canarsie rasp, it feels like the Ivy League-bound class president is handing off to the girl from detention. Ms. Rhodes was born in Brooklyn, and says she spent her teenage years sneaking out of her Queens home and harassing the subway's night riders. "I was a rotten, rotten kid," she said. "That's why I went into the Air Force," her only source of higher education, and the place she says she learned discipline and dedication.

Ms. Rhodes, whose show is the network's second-highest-rated, behind Mr. Franken's, still stirs up trouble regularly. Recently she compared the Hurricane Katrina refugees to the victims of the Holocaust. This prompted a rebuke from the Anti-Defamation League of America. "It was a bit, it was comedy," she insisted. Last spring she ran a recorded comedy segment that featured angry Social Security recipients shooting at the president. Ms. Rhodes apologized for that one, and said she had not heard it before it was broadcast.

She starts each hour of her show with a political rant or self-deprecating monologue, then proceeds through call-ins and comedy bits recorded by the station's writers.

Ms. Rhodes gives the impression she is not entirely committed to Air America, though Mr. Goldberg said her contract runs into 2007. She said she cringes when the network rattles the tin cup, as with its pledge drive.

"It may get unbearable; it may get insufferable," she said. "But I hope to God that we live long here, that we prosper, that Air America becomes a brand and I become a brand. I would love to see that day."