



edison media research

jacobs media

Background

On February 1st, 2004, the singer Janet Jackson, in what she termed a “wardrobe malfunction” exposed her right breast during the television broadcast of the halftime of the Super Bowl. This incredibly high-profile event unleashed a firestorm of publicity and recriminations.

The backlash from the Jackson affair has been particularly strong in the world of radio. Politicians, eager to “clean up the airwaves” and to respond to various groups targeting “edgy” or “shocking” programming, have called radio executives in front of their committees and have chastised the FCC for not responding to public complaints and for not levying enough fines. Also, and perhaps most importantly, Congress has rushed through a variety of new laws that massively increase potential fines to broadcasters, as well as to threaten license revocations for repeat offenders.

Our two companies, Edison Media Research and Jacobs Media, have investigated the issues of “indecentcy” in the past, most notably in a survey performed in the fall of 2002 for Rock radio stations around the country. With the current level of interest in these issues, we felt it was time to talk to Rock radio listeners again, and to see if their feelings have changed. This survey furthers our inquiries into the topics and issues of indecentcy and adult material with regard to Rock radio listeners around the country.

Methodology

Jacobs Media and Edison Media Research collectively designed and administered this survey. We collected interviews via the Internet from a total of 13,798 respondents. In total, 40 Rock Radio stations around the United States invited their listeners to participate in the survey. The number of respondents who could come from any individual radio station was capped at 6% of the total sample. The interviews were conducted between March 12th and March 19th 2004.

As with all Internet-based research projects of this kind, the results reflect only those who choose to participate in the survey and do not necessarily represent the views of all Rock radio listeners in the country. Still, the 40 radio stations that invited their listeners are a broad cross-section of rock stations, with large and small markets, large and small stations, some stations with very edgy morning shows and some with very mild ones, and those that play the newest Rock music and those that play only Classic Rock.

According to audience estimates from Arbitron, just over 50 million people listen to Rock radio stations every week.

Sample Demographics

In total, there were 13,798 Rock radio listeners who completed our survey; these people were distributed as follows:

Men	61%
Women	39%
Under 18	5%
18-24	19%
25-34	28%
35-44	29%
45-54	17%
Over 54	2%
Democrat	26%
Republican	27%
Independent	34%
Attend Church Regularly	27%
Attend Church Few Times/Yr	19%
Rarely or Never Attend Church	54%
Listen to station with "Very Edgy" Morning Show	49%
Listen to station with "Moderately Edgy" Morning Show	24%
Listen to station with "Not Edgy" Morning Show	27%
Listen to "Alternative Rock" Station	24%
Listen to "Active Rock" Station	36%
Listen to "Classic Rock" Station	40%

KEY FINDINGS

- **Few Rock radio listeners are offended by what they hear on the radio.** We asked respondents: "Think about the radio station you listen to most often in the morning. How often does it offend you in some way?" More than half (55%) of respondents said "Never"; only 11% of respondents said more than "Rarely."

Significantly, the answers are nearly identical among those who listen to stations with all kinds of shows, from the most "edgy" to the least. This implies that people choose a show that is unlikely to offend them.

Women were only slightly more likely than men to be offended by what they hear (Women: 47% "Never Offended"; Men: 60%). Parents with children under 13 are no more likely to be offended than the group as a whole. Republican and Democrat Rock listeners have no significant difference between them with regard to this question.

As one respondent pointed out, “I am the parent of a 13 year-old boy. If I hear something potentially offensive, I have the right to change the station with my own hand. I am disturbed that the government will ‘parent’ me by choosing what I can and cannot choose to listen to.”

One interesting twist - there was a sizeable minority of respondents who said, "Shock Jock radio personalities have gone too far." More than one-quarter of respondents (28%) agreed with this statement. Certain subgroups, such as women (32%), parents (32%), frequent church-goers (40%), Republicans (35%) and Classic Rock listeners (43%) agreed with this statement in larger numbers. Among those who listen to the mildest morning radio shows, 43% agreed with this statement.

- **While not personally offended by it, a majority finds the Janet Jackson/Super Bowl incident a “major issue”.** Our respondents had interesting views on the Janet Jackson kerfuffle. Only 14% of respondents said that they were personally offended by it. Yet, just over half said it is an “important issue.” We see the implication that our respondents can separate what is offensive to them and what is appropriate in different contexts.

This is summarized by one of the web poll’s participants who opines, “I believe in freedom of speech, and I believe that even shock jocks are entitled to this right. However, I think that programmers should be cognizant of what the expected audience will be. Without a doubt, the ‘expected audience’ for the Super Bowl halftime show included children. That act was totally inappropriate, and anyone who was privy to the planned exposure should be held responsible for abusing the broadcast.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, men were much less likely to be offended by Ms. Jackson’s “costume reveal” than women. But only 17% of our female respondents said they were personally offended by the stunt. Frequent church-goers (24%) and Republicans (20%) were slightly more likely than the group as a whole to have been personally offended – but clearly overwhelming majorities of these groups were also not offended.

Those who listen to the edgiest morning shows, as might be expected, were the most likely to say it was not an important issue (56%); among those who listen to the mildest morning shows only 39% thought the incident was “not important.”

Well over half of all respondents, including many who thought the issue “not important,” feel that someone should be punished or sanctioned for the Super Bowl incident. The entity most felt should be held accountable is Ms. Jackson herself (59%), followed by Justin Timberlake (50%), and MTV (21%). Only 34% of our respondents felt no one should be punished for what transpired.

- **Rock listeners overwhelmingly support Howard Stern.** Howard Stern is the rare radio personality who, because of his exposure across many media, is well known even in markets where his show doesn’t run. Fully 98% of respondents (from a mix of markets where Howard is and isn’t aired) said that they have heard of Howard Stern. More than 90% of those respondents were aware that Howard Stern’s show had recently been taken off the air in a handful of radio markets because of indecency concerns.

Those who knew of Howard Stern's removal in these markets overwhelmingly believe that this was an unfair decision. When given the choice between two statements about Howard Stern's elimination, they answered as follows:

- They were right to take Howard Stern off the air 20%
- People who want to listen to Howard Stern should be allowed to do so 80%

In every subgroup a strong majority said that people who want to listen to Howard Stern should be allowed to do so. The groups most likely to say, "They were right to take Howard Stern off the air" were listeners to stations with mild morning shows (30%) and frequent church-goers (32%).

- **Rock listeners are extraordinarily sensitive to government involvement in programming.** We asked a series of questions to evaluate respondents' feelings about the government's role in overseeing programming on the radio. In pretty much every case, the group overwhelmingly felt negatively towards government involvement in programming. Even those who felt that the Janet Jackson incident was an "important issue" felt that the government should not overly restrict radio talent. Here are some example responses:
 - "The FCC should take programs that it considers indecent off the air"
 - Agree 12%
 - Disagree 71%
 - Neutral 17%
 - "It angers you that the government is attempting to regulate the radio shows that you can listen to"
 - Agree 72%
 - Disagree 12%
 - Neutral 15%
 - "Radio personalities should be able to say whatever they please; if people don't want to listen they can change the station"
 - Agree 58%
 - Disagree 26%
 - Neutral 16%

These findings were consistent among subgroups.

- **Respondents overwhelmingly feel that it is parents' responsibility to keep adult material away from children.** We asked respondents which of these statements best describes who is responsible when it comes to radio programming and listening:
 - It's the parents' responsibility to keep material they find indecent away from their children 87%
 - It's the broadcasters' responsibility to eliminate indecent material from the airwaves so children can't hear it 13%

Every subgroup we looked at gave similar answers. Parents broke 86%/14% to parents' responsibility. Frequent church-goers were 81%/19%. Both Democrats and

Republicans, who one might think would have differing opinions about the role of government, agreed with the first statement in similar numbers.

- **Rock radio listeners are suspicious of what’s behind the current environment.** A strong majority of respondents says, “The investigation of some radio shows is an overreaction to the Janet Jackson/Super Bowl incident.” Just under seven-in-ten agreed with this statement, and this held among all subgroups.

Further, a strong percentage were suspicious of the role of politicians in this situation:

- “The crackdown on radio personalities is clearly an election year ploy by politicians”
 - Agree 49%
 - Disagree 23%
 - Neutral 28%

Interestingly, this is the one place where we saw a large difference between Democrats and Republicans. A full 56% of Democrats thought that this is an election year ploy; only 38% of Republicans think so.

- **There is concern of a new “tyranny of the minority.”** We asked if “small groups of people are having too much influence over whether radio programs should be fined or punished.” Fully three-in-four (75%) agreed with this statement. Here, all sub-groups gave responses within a similar range. One of our participants states, “I feel the vocal minority is the only groups that are ever heard from.”

What’s more, our Rock radio listening respondents don’t approve of the new standard that seems to exist – where if anyone is offended then the show should be fined. The statement that received the most uniform response in our entire survey was to the following:

- “If even a small group of listeners is offended by a radio show’s content, the FCC should take action against it.”
 - Agree 5%
 - Disagree 81%
 - Neutral 14%

When one reads the comments that our respondents sent us, this stands out as one of the clear findings: Rock radio listeners feel that by dint of the size of the audience, they prove that these shows are meeting “community standards.” The Rock radio listeners are saying, essentially, “50 Million Elvis Fans Can’t Be Wrong.”

- **It’s shocking what Rock listeners want.** One cannot look at these results without coming to one easy conclusion: the people who are consuming shows that the government is investigating as being “indecent” or “offensive” are seldom offended by what they hear.

The relentless findings that these listeners are not offended by what they hear implies that those who *are* offended are *not listening*.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this research, the following areas should be considered for further thought and discussion:

1. **“Shock” is often a matter of expectation.** This might explain why half the respondents believe the Janet Jackson incident is an important issue. When they sat down to watch the Super Bowl – an American tradition and a family television experience – they were expecting to see a good football game, and the typical music-oriented halftime show. Instead, they saw something altogether different – a violation of their expectations.

This might also explain why the drumbeats weren’t all that loud when Madonna and Britney Spears liplocked on the MTV Video Music Awards. That event almost always provides a controversial moment or two.

Had the Janet Jackson/Justin Timberlake “costume malfunction” occurred on “Saturday Night Live,” the reactions would have likely been muted. Why? SNL is a show that is famous for over-the-top behavior, and celebrities displaying out-of-character performance.

When listeners listen to a show like Howard Stern’s, however, most know what they’re going to hear. The show’s content and emphasis are not secret or surprising. There is an implicit “R” rating. Many morning radio shows have a reputation for shaking the tree, generating controversy, and making noise. This is why most of these shows rarely field listener complaints. Listeners are there not despite the controversial content, but *because* of it. On the other hand, those who are likely to be offended by “Shock Jock” antics typically don’t listen. It is important also to point out that few teenagers are regular listeners to shows like Stern’s.

2. **While there are listeners who feel that some morning radio shows have indeed gone “too far,” they overwhelmingly are against the idea of government regulation of their content.** As the analysis clearly pointed out, an overwhelming majority feels that government control of radio content is not the way to address content issues. They also feel strongly that it is *their* responsibility to ensure their children’s media safety when it comes to radio content. Perhaps this is an outgrowth from years of more controversial content on television, be it on cable or broadcast network programs. Whether it’s sex, violence, or other adult-oriented programming, parents of young children (who comprise nearly 40% of our respondents) told us they don’t feel it is the job of broadcasters to censor programming. This says a great deal about how consumers have been able to handle the many media options that enter their lives. Most have a firm understanding of where there are “danger signs,” and act accordingly. Again, this is probably why the Janet Jackson incident was so shocking – it was unexpected for something like it to occur during the Super Bowl.

It is interesting to see that while many people think some radio shows have gone too far - so few people say they are ever offended by what they themselves hear. This implies that in a radio market with so many options, most people are regulating themselves. This might explain why so many people who feel "Shock Jock radio personalities have gone too far" still say that the FCC should not regulate these shows nor do they personally get offended.

3. **Rockers are people, too.** One should not discount this survey as representative of a small faction. As noted in the analysis, 50 million listeners tune in Rock stations every week. In our sample, nearly half were over the age of 35, while over half are either married or living with a partner. Also 38% have children. These listeners are more likely to be exposed to controversial morning programming – and that’s precisely the point. Because so much noise on this issue is coming from people and groups that *don’t* listen to these shows, it is important to listen to the opinions of those who regularly consume them.

These facts also beg the question about community standards, and how to identify them. If indeed, the “community” for morning shows, or for radio programming in general, is comprised of those who actually listen, this study indicates that most are not surprised by what they hear. And an overwhelming majority tells us emphatically that they know what to do when they hear something that runs afoul of their tastes. This speaks to the issues the FCC is grappling with – defining community standards and acting accordingly.

4. **Research among fans of other formats should be conducted.** To get a full spectrum of how other radio listeners perceive some of the issues discussed in this study, follow-up projects should be conducted among partisans to other radio formats. Again, if the FCC and Congress hope to reflect the will of the people in decisions that have been or will be made, understanding how “end users” – in this case, radio listeners – feel is essential.
5. **Radio should consider adopting a ratings system.** With the superimposed letters that accompany every TV show from “SpongeBob SquarePants” to “N.Y.P.D. Blue,” television viewers are given information to help them decide whether to watch, and whether to let their children watch. If radio broadcasters were willing, airing the audio version of this type of radio systems at every commercial break might provide the same type of information – or warning. If, for example, Howard Stern’s listeners were clearly notified that the show is “intended for mature audiences,” that might go a long way in dissuading listeners for whom his show is not targeted to go elsewhere.
6. **Small groups do not necessarily represent the larger population.** And listeners are very skeptical of the power and influence of certain small interest groups in the current radio regulatory controversy. Three-quarters are concerned about these groups and their potential to affect and impact radio programming. And as we clearly saw when given a choice, 97% of our sample would *not* contact the FCC if they heard something objectionable. Most understand they have the power to do the one thing that may hurt radio companies and so-called “shock jocks” the most – change stations.

We are hopeful that this unique view of a large number of radio listeners – including many of those who tune in some of these controversial morning shows – will stimulate discussion in both the radio, legislative, and regulatory communities.

About Edison Media Research:

Edison Media Research conducts survey research and provides strategic information to radio stations, television stations, newspapers, cable networks, record labels, Internet companies and other media organizations. Edison Media Research works with many of the largest American radio groups, including Entercom, ABC Radio, Infinity, Bonneville, Radio One, and Westwood One, and also conducts strategic and perceptual research for a broad array of companies including AOL/Time Warner, Yahoo!, Sony Music, Princeton University, Northwestern University, Universal Music Group, Time-Life Music and the Voice of America. Edison Media Research also conducts research for successful radio stations in South America, Africa, Asia, Canada and Europe.

Edison Media Research designed and operated the CNN RealVote election projection system in 2002, and currently conducts all exit polls and election projections for the six major news organizations: ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC and the Associated Press.

About Jacobs Media:

Jacobs Media is the largest Rock radio-consulting firm in America. Founded in 1983 by Fred Jacobs, the company is best known for its creation of the Classic Rock radio format. Over the past twenty years, Jacobs Media has risen to dominance in its field through constant innovation to improve the programming and business of its radio clients. Today, Jacobs Media works with the leading Classic Rock, Active Rock, and Alternative Rock radio stations in large and small markets.

Currently, Jacobs Media works for some of the most outstanding broadcast ownership groups in America, including Entercom, Emmis, Infinity, Greater Media, Cox, ABC, Journal, Susquehanna, Saga, and many others. The company also provides research and consulting services to National Public Radio and has contributed to many projects for the Corporation For Public Broadcasting.

Jacobs Media is a nationally recognized expert in radio and broadcasting. In 2004, Jacobs Media has been featured in articles in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Newark Star-Ledger*, *Advertising Age*, and *Entertainment Weekly*.