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Safe speech

What should you be able to say on the radio? We convened an insta-roundtable -- Scott Simon, Sandra Tsing Loh, Michael Musto and more -- to find the answer.

By Dipayan Gupta and Thomas Rogers

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May 1, 2007 | Last week hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons said that broadcasters should ban "bitch," "ho" and the N-word from the airwaves. Just a week earlier -- a day after Don Imus' landmark epithet -- the same Russell Simmons told the press that offensive references in hip-hop "may be uncomfortable for some to hear," but that his job wasn't to censor expression.

Why the turnaround? Perhaps because in the weeks since Imus-gate, freedom of speech has come under renewed scrutiny. CBS just suspended the hosts of WFNY's "The Dog House With JV and Elvis" for a racially charged prank call and Rush Limbaugh was upbraided for calling Virginia Tech shooter Cho Seung-Hui a liberal.

Still, networks hired shock jocks for a reason: to test the limits of acceptable behavior. Now they're second-guessing themselves.

So we asked some of our most knowledgeable sources: **In two sentences or less, what's your guideline for acceptable speech on the public radio?**

Their responses follow.

Floyd Abrams, attorney and constitutional law expert.



Racist speech is (or should be) always over the line and Imus' coarse and racist reference to the Rutgers team was all the worse because it seemed so casually uttered. We protect such speech legally but are, of course, free to condemn it morally. Yet I am concerned about policing even errant speech to the point that we risk losing the enlivening and sometimes even acute commentary that accompanies it and of which even offensive speech is sometimes a part. Would I trade the chance to hear Lenny Bruce on the radio for the benefit of avoiding speech that is sometimes odious? Not for a moment.

John Darnielle, writer, guitarist, singer and songwriter for the Mountain Goats.



I'm kind of all-or-nothing about speech, but I have a Puritan streak -- I wish, ardently, that people would police themselves and try not to hurt others' feelings with name-calling and cheap shots. One rather wishes that people would grow up a little. So I think Don Imus is wrong to go for cheap laughs like he did, and that Rush Limbaugh -- like most political commentators, right or left -- is almost always unnecessarily mean-spirited, but I also know that bacteria mutate and become stronger when you throw too many antibiotics at them.

Greg Gutfeld is host of "Red Eye With Greg Gutfeld," on Fox News.



The First Amendment was created back when citizens had a limited vocabulary, and most sentences had a fixed capacity to hurt or maim. Now, many years later, we have so many more words -- most of which are far more powerful and dangerous than our Founding Fathers could have ever imagined. For this reason, you should be extremely frightened.

Brian Lehrer is host of "The Brian Lehrer Show" on WNYC.



Personally, I think it's a sign of a healthy culture when hate speech on the public airwaves is seen as taboo (think Rwanda and Nazi Germany). But asking for a "guideline" is irrelevant, because in our country, only the market draws the hate speech line (Imus CBS, Limbaugh NFL) while the government is obsessed with sexual and excretory speech (Howard Stern).

Michael Musto writes the weekly "La Dolce Musto" gossip column in the Village Voice.



No N words. No H words. In fact, no consonants whatsoever. Vanna, can you give me a vowel?

Scott Simon is host of "Weekend Edition Saturday" on NPR.



Personally, I try to avoid using any words that would get me thrown out of a baseball game. So, no racial or religious epithets, or slurs on sexuality. I wouldn't want to see a law enforcing that. I think free speech should be unfettered. But I also don't feel that my so-called creativity or freedom of expression is genuinely restricted by a self-imposed exercise of basic human respect.

Sandra Tsing Loh is host of "The Loh Life" on KPCC and is a regular contributor to NPR and the Atlantic.



In practice, rants that are acceptable on public radio *feel* politically incorrect but aren't really. You're safe if your utterances fall within range of those expressed by the New York Times.

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