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Open Mic: "Blogosphere" boom launches Pundit Review hosts into global talk radio

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Story By Gerry Boyle '78
Photos By Tracy Powell

It's approaching nine o'clock on a Sunday night, and in the WRKO radio studios in the New Balance building in industrial Brighton, Mass., talk-show hosts Kevin Whalen '92 and Gregg Jackson '90 are counting down to air time. A producer has an embedded reporter waiting to talk by satellite phone from Baghdad. Callers—from Florida, Massachusetts, Chicago, Nevada—are beginning to stack up, their names and locations listed on a computer monitor.

Whalen and Jackson review notes, divvy up topics for the coming hour. Headphones go on, a lead-in runs (Jackson saying, "The old media is circling the drain. We're doing the flushing."), and the producer gives the cue.

"He's Kevin and I'm Gregg, and you're listening to *Pundit Review*, the voice of the new media. Our goal here on this show is to bring you coverage and analysis of the stories and events which those in the elite media routinely relegate to the back pages—or altogether ignore," Jackson begins, his voice filled with conviction.

Tonight it's the Iraqi charter referendum. Embedded "blogger" Michael Yon, a former Green Beret, has been on the scene. But first Jackson and Whalen excoriate the mainstream media, charging liberal bias and skewed, negative coverage of the Iraq war.

A self-described political junkie, Whalen left Colby after graduation and headed for Miami. In the wake of Hurricane Andrew, he started a house-painting business, doing one house after another in Cutler Ridge and Homestead. The lifelong Democrat turned small-business owner said he found himself confronted by tax policies and a government that seemed to be trying to make his life harder. "When I was painting, I used to listen to Rush [Limbaugh]," he said. "I thought, this guy isn't the evil moron that everyone I know says he is. He's making a lot of sense to me right now."

House painting was soon traded for a graduate degree in communications and a public relations job at Raytheon, the defense contractor. "That," Whalen said, "is not a liberal culture."

But for the guy responsible for doing the daily news clips for the company's CEO, it was a wealth of information, and soon after he left Raytheon in 2001, Whalen was posting stories, links, and his own opinions on a Web site he called *Pundit Review*. The word "blog," (a neologism from "web log") had not yet made its way into the vernacular.

As Whalen headed south, Jackson went west, riding on a \$68 cross-country bus ticket that deposited him in San Francisco with two Colby friends. He soon worked his way into sales positions at

"The idea for the show was the new media, the blogs. The whole citizen-journalist movement. . . . We wanted to do a talk-radio show, but instead of Imus—the same 20 people on all the time, mainstream media, conventional wisdom—we want to bring in thought leaders from the new media. Highlight those opinions because they were fresher, more unique."

And via radio and live audio streaming on the Internet, across the United States, and beyond, thousands of people are listening.

Eighteen months ago, Jackson, a medical-devices salesman by day, had been a caller to conservative talk shows but never a host. Whalen, an account executive with a Boston PR firm, posted his conservative musings on his own blog (punditreview.com), read by perhaps a few hundred friends and Web acquaintances.

Now, in testimony to the pair's political passion, marketing savvy, and the sheer force of the Internet and its emerging "citizen journalist" bloggers, Whalen and Jackson sit at the microphones of a 50,000-watt station in Boston's highly competitive talk-radio market. The station's signal reaches from New Hampshire to Rhode Island. More importantly, the Internet streams *Pundit Review* to thousands of listeners around the world via the spidery threads of the "blogosphere."

At first glance, it's an unlikely story for the Colby pair, college liberals who never set foot in a radio station until a year ago last summer. Jackson, an administrative science major and economics minor, has taken in more than 100 Grateful Dead and Jerry Garcia shows over the years and ran a business at Colby called Buck-a-Dog, selling hot dogs on campus. Whalen was a pony-tailed government major from a Boston family whose father was so Democratic that he described the voting process to his young son this way: "You go into the booth and you look for the 'D' next to their name," Whalen said.

Both Whalen and Jackson voted for Bill Clinton in 1992.

Acquaintances at Colby but not close friends, they had their conservative epiphanies on separate coasts.

E&J Gallo Winery, then moved to the medical equipment industry—and politically to the right.

Jackson began attending rallies in support of George W. Bush during the 2000 Florida recount. At one gathering in San Francisco, he was invited to address the crowd, he said. "I got that microphone, totally unscripted, and it just flowed," Jackson recalled.

He continued to speak at political rallies and even considered running for public office. Jackson's sales career took him to North Carolina, where he continued to read and explore conservative ideas. At a get-together with Colby buddies, someone mentioned Whalen, saying, "He's a conservative like you. You should read his blog."

Jackson did. Then he called Whalen from North Carolina and said, "We should do a radio show someday." A few months later Jackson called to say he'd taken a job in Boston and was on his way.

Someday was approaching.

Now, it should be pointed out that this was a little like saying they should start a song-and-dance team. "We're thirty-something years old," Whalen said. "We've got not one day of radio experience. How the hell do you get started?"

Well, if you're in sales and PR, you sell yourself. Jackson and Whalen learned that a local AM station that broadcast business news during the week was looking for weekend programming to supplement infomercials. Neither Whalen nor Jackson had been on the air anywhere. The sum of their radio talk-show experience? They listened a lot, sometimes even called. But they knew what they wanted to do.

They believe the "elite media"—*The New York Times*, *The Wash-*



Kevin Whalen '92, left, and Gregg Jackson '90 in the WRKO Studios in Boston. Their talk show, *Pundit Review*, is heard worldwide via the Internet.

ington Post, network news—are practicing agenda-driven journalism with a liberal bias. As a result, the public doesn't get the whole story. "The idea for the show was the new media, the blogs," Whalen said. "The whole citizen-journalist movement. ... We wanted to do a talk-radio show, but instead of Imus—the same 20 people on all the time, mainstream media, conventional wisdom—we want to bring in thought leaders from the new media. Highlight those opinions because they were fresher, more unique."

Said Jackson, "We bring the best of the blogosphere to your radio."

That was the pitch, delivered after they finagled their way into a function attended by the owner of the station, WBIX. He passed them on to the program director. "He said, 'I'll give you a show on weekends.' We were like, 'Awesome!'" Whalen said. "And then he says, 'You have to sell your own commercial time.'"

So they did. Except they sold it to themselves, paying their way onto the air: 13 weeks for \$5,200. "That was the only way two thirty-five-year-old guys could walk off the street and get started," Whalen said.

That was their first break. Dan Rather provided the second. It was Rather who broke the story about evidence of President Bush's alleged no-show National Guard career. That story was retracted after documents associated with it were found to have been faked by a source. The first to discredit the piece? A blogger.

"We went from nobody knowing what a blog was," Jackson said, "to guys we interviewed being on the cover of *Time* magazine. ... It was perfect."

The show became enough of a hit that the station wanted to continue, but the station owner ran into financial troubles and the *Pundit Review* pair decided to move on. With the help of a producer, Whalen and Jackson put together a three-minute highlight tape. They packaged it in a cardboard cube with the pitch printed on its sides, and Jackson's wife, Anne, (both *Pundit Reviewers* are married with children) hand delivered it to WRKO, the biggest talk-radio station in the Boston market. The box landed on a Thursday. With another stroke of good luck (*Newsweek* retracting its story about desecration of the Koran; WRKO pulling a *Newsweek* radio show from Sunday nights), Whalen and Jackson were on.

The idea, said WRKO Executive Producer Tom Shattuck, was to give *Pundit Review* a one-night shot, like a TV pilot. "They were just great," Shattuck said. "A lot of times with broadcasters, it's just a matter of filling the air. These guys have so much ammunition at the ready because they're rabidly politically minded anyway. If you care about the subject matter, you've got a library of conversation."

And with the show's connection to the blogosphere, a world of people with whom to converse.

While the radio's signal reaches a chunk of New England, its streaming live audio finds listeners via the Internet. To get the word out, Whalen does a Web search (technorati.com) prior to each show and sends out as many as 100 e-mails promoting the week's guest and *Pundit Review* to sites where that guest's blog has been linked. Michael Yon's site (michaelyon.blogspot.com) alone gets an estimated 200,000 visits per day, and all of those people will see notice



of his upcoming *Pundit Review* appearance. “It works like a charm,” Whalen said.

The blog connection was by no means unique. Richard Carbery, a former WRKO executive producer who recently moved to Fox News Talk Radio in New York City, said he was “hyperaware of the blogosphere.” The station already had a “political junkies” tab on its Web site, linking to dozens of blogs.

But still, *Pundit Review* soon got management’s attention. Stuck in a Sunday night slot, without a strong lead-in show preceding it, *Pundit Review* still outpaced its closest competition (on rival WBZ) in its first weeks. “There are some points of the show where it’s just full lines,” Shattuck said, “which is something that doesn’t happen with the highest-rated shows sometimes.”

Fielding e-mail comments about the show Monday mornings, he also noticed that these listeners weren’t from greater Boston.

“Let’s see,” Shattuck said, going to his computer. “Baghdad. Beijing. Hawaii. I got an e-mail from Vatican City. I honestly don’t know what to make of it.”

Nor does the local talk-radio industry know how to effectively turn its new far-flung audience into a global-sized profit. Ratings still are based on actual radio listeners. Some traditional radio people still don’t know what a blog is, Shattuck said. But they will soon, he added. “It’s inevitable.”

Carbery, in New York, cautions that radio is entertainment, first and foremost, and that *Pundit Review* will succeed or fail based on its hosts’ ability to entertain. In a sign that management sees potential in Whalen and Jackson (who now actually get paid), the pair was asked in November to prepare a formal presentation for the station’s sales team. Shattuck said he expected *Pundit Review*’s one-hour slot to be at least doubled soon. And the show was nominated for a Weblog Award (the Oscars of blogdom) in the media/journalist blog category. Another nominee: embedded blogger Yon, who, as the show began, was standing by on the phone in Iraq.

The subject: the referendum vote on the new Iraqi constitution. Jackson and Whalen’s view: the mainstream media is pooh-pooing, even denigrating, the historic enactment of the Iraqi constitution. For the “elite” media, Iraq’s glass is always half-empty. “It took us, what?” Jackson said. “Thirteen years? It took them thirteen months.”

Headphones on, leaning into his microphone, reading from a folder

of notes, Jackson runs down a list of media outlets and recounts how they reported the constitution’s approval.

Boston Globe: “U.S. Image a Tough Sell in Mideast.” ABCnews.com: “U.S. Toll Rises,” he said, anger building. BBC: “Sunni Area Rejects Iraq Charter.”

“That was the glimmering piece of good news,” Jackson said, dripping sarcasm. “The most momentous event ever to take place in the Middle East, arguably. Fifty million people vote to govern themselves in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the BBC says, ‘Sunni Area Rejects Charter?’”

“We know what their agenda is,” Whalen interjected. “Their agenda is to sour the American public on this war in Iraq so we can withdraw.”

Whalen reported that a survey has shown that of 1,400 news stories about the war, negative stories outnumbered positive ones by a 10:1 ratio. “That’s why newspaper circulation is tanking,” he said. “That’s why network news ratings are tanking. That’s why [the number of] people reading online sources of news is exploding.”

Jackson chimed in, making the transition, “The only reason we get some kind of balance is because of people like Michael Yon, a roving reporter, former Special Forces . . .”

Yon also is an author who has attracted a loyal following that includes actor Bruce Willis, among others. In the studio before the show began, Whalen pulled up one particularly riveting installment on Yon’s blog, titled, “Gates of Fire.” In it Yon recounted a patrol with the Marines in Mosul. A Marine sergeant featured in Yon’s ongoing missives came under fire from a shop and was hit. As the sergeant went down, still firing from one knee, Yon first kept taking digital photos. Then, when green soldiers froze, he grabbed a rifle and leapt into the breach, spattering a shop with covering fire until the wounded man was pulled to safety.

“I think this guy should win a Pulitzer,” Whalen said.

Minutes later, Yon was on the line, his fourth visit with *Pundit Review*. After plugging a recent column Yon contributed to the conservative *Weekly Standard* newspaper, Jackson asked about the mood in Iraq on election day.

“The mood of the people was very exuberant,” Yon said, sounding surprisingly soft-spoken. “I was all around Baghdad. All the dangerous places, the less dangerous places. . . . The mood of the people



was very good. Really, nothing more needs to be said than the super-high turnout. ... That speaks for itself."

Yon said there were very few attacks that day. "I heard one explosion at six twenty-five in the morning, but that turned out to be no casualties. Extremely good day. Actually, the best day I've spent in Iraq."

Responding to questions from the *Pundit Review* hosts, Yon said Iraqis are, contrary to the opinion of some war critics, ready for democracy, that they know how to make a country work, and are "not just a bunch of warring tribes, as is often portrayed." The insurgency remains strong, he said, but the Iraqi security force and other government agents are gaining strength. With that, Whalen and Jackson went to the phones. "Let's go to Rick in Florida," Jackson said.

Rick is a high school friend of Yon's who wanted to say hello. Mike in Massachusetts came on, told Whalen and Jackson their show is "a breath of fresh air, no question." Mike wanted to know what would happen if American troops pulled out. Would Iraqis be able to maintain order?

"If we pulled out, I think this place would fall apart," Yon said. "The government is just not ready to stand on its two legs yet." But morale of U.S. troops is very high, he said, though news reports of violence and attacks can be discouraging. "The news is almost creating its own news by fomenting more violence," the embedded reporter said.

Said Whalen, "It's a sad state of affairs when Al Qaeda and the Democrat Party have the same agenda, which is to erode support for the war."

Back to the phones, Lorraine from Chicago said she has e-mailed Yon often, is honored to talk to him. Jessica in Florida identified herself as "a Deuce Four wife," referring to the 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry unit Yon is following. "I want to thank you so much for doing what you do and being the eyes and ears for so many military families. Everything you did would just calm me down, letting me know what's really going on over there."

Denise from Nevada thanked Yon for providing "truthful coverage." Jackson interjected a question, asking whether troops would get a boost from a visit by President Bush. "I doubt they'd even notice," was Yon's answer.

Eugene in Massachusetts wanted to know what part of Iraq was least secure. Anbar Province, the Wild West on the Syrian border,

Yon said. Jackson noted a Newt Gingrich book that describes the war on terror as "the long war." Jackson asked if it is a dangerous perception to think that Iraq is the only front in the war.

"Dangerous and very wrong," Yon said. "This is just one footprint on a long path."

Steve from Massachusetts was the first caller critical of the show's perspective, saying Yon seemed to be echoing "talking points for the White House. . . . You're painting a rosy picture. . . . Two thousand men—that's a damn shame."

"I don't pay much attention to what's coming out of the White House," Yon countered, sounding irritated. "I pay attention to what's going on on the ground, and morale is very high. . . ."

"This is full-on combat. Don't kid yourself. But walking away from it is not going to make it go away. Next week you might have more planes smashing into your buildings. This is not a joke . . . It will follow you home."

With that the hour was nearly up, just enough time to promote the next week's show, a debate on gay marriage. Whalen is for it, Jackson, who describes himself as a Christian who is also Jewish, is opposed. "We have a good yin-yang going," Whalen said. "Gregg's really passionate, Type A. I'm more mellow. He's more conservative and I'm more of a typical Massachusetts Republican—kind of squishy."

Howard Dean-school liberals might fail to see the distinction. Jackson is self-publishing a tome called *Conservative Comebacks to Liberal Lies*. Whalen lambastes the GOP Congress in a recent post for what he says is its failure to stick to the conservative principles that brought about a Republican majority. Recent *Pundit Review* guests include Michelle Malkin, Michael Medved, and Ann Althouse, all weighing in from the right. The blog links on the *Pundit Review* site include 32 labeled conservative, only six categorized as liberal.

But Whalen and Jackson see this as simply trying to correct an existing imbalance in the mainstream media. "We don't feel we're being adequately nourished from the mainstream media in terms of coverage of these issues," Jackson said.

As he does often, or at least every Sunday, Whalen chimed in. "It should lead to a more vibrant democracy," he said. "The more thoughts, opinions, and beliefs, the better. It's the democratization of the news."