

National Association of Broadcasters

Tim Robbins

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Hello I'm Tim Robbins. I'd like to thank you for the invitation to address you here at the National Association of Broadcasters. When I first received the invitation I was a little confused because the last time I had contact with the national media I seem to remember them telling me to shut the hell up.

I would like to start with an apology. To Rush and Sean, and Billo and Savage and Laura what's her name. A few years ago they told America that because I had different opinions on the wisdom of going to war that I was a traitor, a Saddam lover, a terrorist supporter, undermining the troops. I was appealing at the time for the inspectors to have more time to find those weapons of mass destruction. I was a naïve dupe of left wing appeasement. And how right they were. If I had known then what I know now, if I had seen the festive and appreciative faces on the streets of Baghdad today, if I had known then what a robust economy we would be in, the unity of our people, the wildfire of democracy that has spread across the Mideast, I would never have said those traitorous, unfounded and irresponsible things. I stand chastened in the face of the wisdom of the talk radio geniuses, and I apologize for standing in the way of freedom.

So when they asked me to come speak to you I said, "Are you sure? Me?" And they said, "Yes"

And I said, "You know, I have a tendency to say things that I believe at the time to be well intentioned but that are actually traitorous." And they said, "Sure, cool." And then I read the press release and it said, "Mr. Robbins will be speaking about the challenges of new media and delivery systems". Oh OK. But I just want you to know I'm not sure I know what that fucking means.

But it is an honor to be speaking to you here at this years National Association Broadcasting convention even if I don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

I owe a lot to broadcast media. I got my start in radio in the early 20s. In my early twenties. And it was television.

But these tremendous inventions have benefited us all.

Radio has come a long way from the early days when family's gathered around the trusty old Philco to listen to such programs as Superman, Sherlock Holmes and Amos and Andy. Thanks to music and sound effects, this magical medium was able to transport families to a place where a man could fly, a brilliant detective could solve the most perplexing of crimes, and two white guys could portray ridiculously offensive black stereotypes for the amusement of millions.

The first broadcast occurred on Christmas eve in 1906 at Brant Rock MA, when a man named Fessenden played his violin, sang a song and read bible verses into a wireless telephone of his own invention. His goal was to find financial backers, but no investor of the day believed that radio could ever replace the most popular leisure activity of the day; listening to the hoot owl while playing the zither as your fourteen year old niece bounced on your knee. Some of you may remember. It was all the rage in the early century.

But soon broadcasting over the radio caught on and zither playing and child molestation were a thing of the past. Radio reached a boom time during the depression as people begin to listen to and depend on radio to lift their spirits during that catastrophic economic crisis. Shows such as "The Bickersons" taught people life is not so bad as long as somebody has got it worse.

President Roosevelt became the first "radio president" and his "fireside chats" set the stage for later presidential weekly addresses such as; "chew the fat with Ike", "LBJ's bull session", and George W's "Hooked on Phonics and Strategy Hour"

Radio continued to expand and soon, the public turned to their radios for news, which began to mature during World War II with the regular reports of the bombing of London by Edward R. Murrow, with his "London After Dark" series, where Murrow coined the famous phrase: "Good Night and Good Luck" as well as the lesser known phrase; "Die you Nazi cocksuckers"

In the post war years, the radio business exploded when 90% of all American's claimed radio was their primary source of news and entertainment. To meet this incredible demand Philco built 6 million radios in 1947. And to provide content for those 6 million radios, we were introduced to some of the greatest drama, comedy and musical entertainment this country has ever seen.

In the 70's, radio took a serious nosedive when Edwin Armstrong invented FM to eliminate the static and noise associated with AM and unwittingly provided a home for easy listening jazz rock, overly dramatic disco songs and 20 minute psychedelic sitar jams.

In the 80's and 90's the FCC, under pressure from the Reagan and Clinton administrations, changed the rules limiting the number of radio and television stations a business entity could own, paving the way for such conglomerates as Infinity broadcasting and Clear Channel to buy up local stations and put them under the umbrella of their larger corporations. Again the community benefited because due to Clear Channel and Infinities' conservative approach, listeners no longer had to be subjected to perplexing controversial subjects, or confusing varied opinion, or alternative rock. And as a bonus these large companies, with the help of Mr. Reagan and Mr. Clinton got rid of that annoying Fairness Doctrine, freeing its listeners from the burden of hearing equally from all sides of the political debate. What a bore.

This new world of conglomeration also brought us back to a simpler, more exciting time with regard to natural disasters and calamities. Your local station would now be broadcasting from a city many miles away and should there be a tornado coming your way you wouldn't know about it until the funnel was in full view. Exciting times.

In the 1950's, television began to replace radio as the chief source of revenue for broadcasting networks. It quickly became apparent that talking about "Old Sandusky Lager" on the radio didn't quite have the same impact as watching a buxom flaxen haired temptress in a skin tight dress play pool in a bar while she drank "old Sandusky Lager". Beer sales skyrocketed.

In the 60's, American television networks began broadcasting in color bringing a new vibrant reality to the content of the day. Suddenly it didn't seem unusual that an astronaut was dating a scantily clad genie that lived in a bottle in his living room.

Television also brought the horror and reality of war into our living rooms airing footage of the war in Vietnam. Building on the mistakes of the past, war is now televised in an easily digestible sanitized version. The current administration has proven that war doesn't have to be upsetting, or sacrificed for, or even reported on at all. We have come a long way, baby.

But what is the state of broadcasting today? Some critics have noted that there is a dangerous lack of diversity and opinion. That may be true, but imagine the nightmare of having to rectify that situation.

I propose a much simpler solution, which I've separated into three prongs, or a Satan's trident if you will.

First, erase all diversity. Thankfully the majority of what is broadcast over television and radio is of two opinions and that feels good. That's simple. But unfortunately there is a tiny minority out here on the airwaves expressing a different view outside of the Democrats and Republicans nexus trying to confuse us all. Can we please shut them up? How expensive could it be to buy Pacifica Radio? These people are driving us apart.

Secondly, let's stay focused on Sex Scandals. Stop with the in depth reporting that gets outside of the sound bite. More sex scandals! Surely with a little more prying, a little more effort we can find more sexual deviants. And trust me, sexual deviancy is something we can all agree on. It's deliciously intoxicating to watch unfold. It's titillating.

The absolute zenith of news, the perfect storm of reporting, the shining city on the hill in news coverage was Lewinsky v Clinton. Now that was fun. We couldn't get enough of that. There were salacious details, semen stains, oral sex. And the president lied. He threatened every notion of marriage and the sanctity of family.

He put our country at risk. And when he did lie we held his feet to the fire. We reported on every angle, every permutation of the story. We held hearings, appointed an independent council, led off every newscast for months about the lie, played it until there was no hiding from it, and then held him accountable by impeaching him. It is our moral responsibility to report on the sex lives of the powerful. It is the only thing that kept our country alive at that point. It righted our ship of state. It saved our collective soul. And it was great, juicy fun. Imagine what would have happened to our country's soul if the president lied and nothing was done about it, if impeachment was off the table. Where would we be today if we did not hold our president accountable?

Third, find more racially divisive news and play that constantly. As long as we hate each other we will never be bothered with this gnawing lefty obsession with information. Let's make the purpose of the media salacious entertainment, not information. The more our news outlets and talk radio can distract us the better. We love distraction. When the nattering nabobs of negativity tell you that the economy is falling apart, that gas costs 4 dollars a gallon, that they are foreclosing on your home, that there is chaos in Iraq, when these propagandists spread this "information" it is our moral responsibility to distract. I don't know about you but show me a starlet without panties getting out of a car and suddenly the world seems like a better place. Show me Knight Rider drunk on the floor eating a hamburger, and I won't ask why my kid has no health insurance. Let's stop burdening people with facts. I bet some of you are saying; "Sure Tim, there's no question, sex scandals, race riots and drunken TV stars are a lot of fun, but shouldn't broadcasters see themselves as part of the larger picture? Isn't there an obligation to honestly report on what is going on, to pursue stories past their headlines? Haven't criminal acts occurred in government? Shouldn't there be accountability for inept policy decisions? Shouldn't someone be fired?" And you know something? I didn't hear any of that because I'm still thinking about that starlet getting out of the car without her panties. You see, that doesn't take any energy. I know exactly what to think about.

Now some of you are concerned with that unrelenting pesky competition. You

know, the new technologies; the Internets and satellite radio and television. The problem is there are too many people in this country that take the notion of creativity and invention too damn seriously. Just when one technology is centralized, conglomerated, monopolized, along come new technologies and delivery systems to threaten the good work born of deregulation. Just when we were getting close to a national play list for our music, satellite technology is threatening to provide music that people actually want to hear. Just when we were close to a national news media, providing a general consensus on what the truth is, along comes the Internets that allow its users a choice on the kinds of news it watches. And the You Tube. My God we've got to stop them. Recently when we were about to enjoy our great national pastime of 'tearing apart a presidential candidate with relentless repetition of ugly things his friend said', You Tube provided the candidates reasoned response and millions watched and responded positively.

Well you here at NAB have the power to stop this dangerous technology. The question is, how? I respectfully suggest that you do what others have done when facing the competition of new technologies. Get compromising information on your enemy and expose them in a sex scandal. Or call them a racist, or better yet a traitor. That not only undermines your competitor, but provides the public with fantastic entertainment.

Of course you can do that. And no one in this current world would fault you for it. It is after all where we stand today. In all seriousness folks, let's face it. We are at an abyss as a country and as an industry. And I know that saying we are at an abyss isn't the stuff of keynote addresses but all sarcasm and irony and rude pithiness aside, we are at a critical juncture in this nations history. This is a nation divided and reeling from betrayal and economic hardships. And you, the broadcasters of this great nation have a tremendous power, and a tremendous potential to affect change. You have the power to turn this country away from cynicism. You have the power to turn this nation away from the hatred and the divisive dialogue that has rendered such a corrosive affect on our body politic. You can lift us up into a more enlightened age. Or you can hide behind that old

adage; “I’m just a businessman, I provide what the audience wants.” Well, I’m here to tell you that we don’t need to look at the car crash. We don’t need to live off of the pain and humiliation of the unfortunate. We don’t need to celebrate our pornographic obsession with celebrity culture. We are better than that.

Some of you are trying. Some of you are inspiring people towards altruism and compassion with your programming. Some of you are trying to lift the civic dialogue into a more responsible and adult arena. But I know you do so against the odds of ratings and job security. It is really up to the leaders in this room. It is up to you, the scions of this industry to leave behind formulas and focus groups and your own fears of job security. Only with your courage and your vision can we begin to imagine a world of broadcasting where the general consensus of those with real power say “Enough is enough. Now is the time to move away from our lesser selves. Now is the time to stop making money on the misfortunes of others and the prurient and salacious desires of the public. Now is the time to admit and recognize that we aren’t just businessmen but the guardians of the human spirit, with a responsibility to the health of this nation. That we can lift this country up with our programming, that instead of catering to the gossips and the scolds and the voyeurs we can appeal to the better nature in our audience, the better nature of what this country is all about.”

This is a country filled with people of great compassion and tremendous generosity. This is a country that has survived dust bowls and depressions, that united to defeat Hitler and fascism and communism. We are a resilient people and a tenacious people. And we are ready for change.

Imagine a new broadcasting industry esthetic, that respecting the better nature of the American people, produces shows that promote strength instead of fear. That does not divide, but inspires, that does not promote hate, but unity, that will not tear the weak down, but build up their strength. Imagine a world of broadcasting where the American people are encouraged to reject despair and distrust. And when they turn their TVs and radios off at night and go to sleep they possess strength, and unity and compassion for those they disagree with. That’s not out of

the question. You can make that happen. It will be difficult, and will fly in the face of conventional wisdom, and standard operational procedures. But do we have any choice? The road we are on is leading us to a corruption of our former selves. We are better than that. You can help us reclaim our better nature, our perfect union. It isn't necessarily a matter of country before profit, or of patriotism and truth before personal comfort. There could be money to be made in appealing to our better selves. Wouldn't that be great?

And if there isn't and we came out of it a little less rich but more unified and healthier as a nation wouldn't that be something we could all be proud of?