

Consider  
the  
Lobster  
and Other  
Essays

*David Foster Wallace*



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## HOST

(1)

MR. JOHN ZIEGLER, thirty-seven, late of Louisville's WHAS, is now on the air, "Live and Local," from 10:00 PM to 1:00 AM every weeknight on Southern California's KFI, a 50,000-watt megastation whose hourly ID and sweeper, designed by the station's Imaging

FCC regulations require a station ID to be broadcast every hour. This ID comprises a station's call letters, band and frequency, and the radio market it's licensed to serve. Just about every serious commercial station (which KFI very much is) appends to its ID a sweeper, which is the little tagline by which the station wishes to be known. KABC, the other giant AM talk station in Los Angeles, deploys the entendre-rich "Where America Comes First." KFI's own main sweeper is "More *Stimulating* Talk Radio," but it's also got secondary sweepers that it uses to intro the half-hour news, traffic updates at seventeen and forty-six past the hour, and station promos. "Southern California's Newsroom," "The Radio Home of Fox News," and

"When You See News Break, Don't Try to Fix It Yourself — Leave That to Professionals" are the big three that KFI's running this spring. The content and sound of all IDs, sweepers, and promos are the responsibility of the station's Imaging department, apparently so named because they involve KFI's image in the LA market. Imaging is sort of the radio version of branding — the sweepers let KFI communicate its special personality and

tude in a compressed way.

There are also separate, subsidiary taglines that KFI develops specially for its local programs. The main two they're using for the *John Ziegler Show* so far are "Live and Local" and "Hot, Fresh Talk Served Nightly."

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department and featuring a gravelly basso whisper against licks from Ratt's '84 metal classic "Round and Round," is: "KFI AM-640, Los Angeles — More *Stimulating* Talk Radio." This is either the eighth or ninth host job that Mr. Ziegler's had in his talk radio career, and far and away the biggest. He moved out here to LA over Christmas — alone, towing a U-Haul — and found an apartment not far from KFI's studios, which are in an old part of the Koreatown district, near Wilshire Center.

The whisperer turns out to be one Chris Corley, a voiceover actor best known for movie trailers. Corley's C<sup>2</sup> Productions is based in Ft. Myers FL.

The *John Ziegler Show* is the first local, nonsyndicated late-night program that KFI has aired in a long time. It's something of a gamble for everyone involved. 10:00–1:00 qualifies as late at night in Southern California, where hardly anything reputable's open after nine.

It is currently right near the end of the program's second segment on the evening of May 11, 2004, shortly after Nicholas Berg's taped beheading by an al-Qaeda splinter in Iraq. Dressed, as is his custom, for golf, and wearing a white billed cap w/ corporate logo, Mr. Ziegler is seated by himself in the on-air studio, surrounded by monitors and sheaves of Internet printouts. He is trim, clean-shaven, and handsome in the bland way that top golfers and local

(By the standards of the US radio industry, this makes him almost movie-star gorgeous.)

TV newsmen tend to be. His eyes, which off-air are usually flat and unhappy, are alight now with passionate conviction. Only some of the studio's monitors concern Mr. Z.'s own program; the ones up near the ceiling take muted, closed-caption feeds from

Fox News, MSNBC, and what might be C-SPAN. To his big desk's upper left is a wall-mounted digital clock that counts down seconds. His computer monitors' displays also show the exact time.

Across the soundproof glass of the opposite wall, another monitor in the Airmix room is running an episode of *The Simpsons*, also muted, which both the board op and call screener are watching with half an eye.

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Pendent in front of John Ziegler's face, attached to the same type of hinged, flexible stand as certain student desk lamps, is a Shure-brand broadcast microphone that is sheathed in a gray foam filtration sock to soften popped p's and hissed sibilants. It is into this microphone that the host speaks:

"And I'll tell you why — it's because we're *better* than they are."

A Georgetown BA in Government and Philosophy, scratch golfer, former TV sportscaster, possible world-class authority on the O.J. Simpson trial, and sometime contributor to MSNBC's *Scarborough Country*, Mr. Ziegler is referring here to America versus what he terms "the Arab world." It's near the end of his "churn," which is the industry term for a host's opening monologue, whose purpose is both to introduce a show's nightly topics and to get listeners emotionally stimulated enough that they're drawn into the program and don't switch away. More than any other mass medium, radio enjoys a captive audience — if only because so many of the listeners are driving — but in a major market there are dozens of AM stations to listen to, plus of course FM and satellite radio, and even a very seductive and successful station rarely gets more than a 5 or 6 percent audience share.

"We're not perfect, we suck a lot of the time, but we are *better* as a people, as a culture, and as a society than they are, and we need to recognize that, so that we can possibly even *begin* to deal with the evil that we are facing."

When he's impassioned, Mr. Z.'s voice rises and his arms wave around (which obviously only those in the Airmix room can see). He also fidgets, bobs slightly up and down in his executive desk chair, and weaves. Although he must stay seated and can't pace around the room, the host does not have to keep his mouth any set distance from the microphone, since the board op, 'Mondo Hernandez, can adjust his levels on the mixing board's channel 7 so that Mr. Z.'s volume always stays in range and never peaks or fades. 'Mondo, whose price for letting outside parties hang around Airmix is one large bag of cool-ranch Doritos per evening, is an

Prophet is the special OS for KFI's computer system — “like Windows for a radio station,” according to Mr. Ziegler's producer.

immense twenty-one-year-old man with a ponytail, stony Meso-american features, and the placid, grandmotherly eyes common to giant mammals everywhere. Keeping the studio signal from peaking is one of 'Mondo's prime directives, along with making sure that each of the program's scheduled commercial spots is loaded into Prophet and run at just the right time, where-

“Analog” is slightly misleading, because in fact KFI's signal is digitized for transmission from the studio down to the transmitter facility in La Mirada, where it's then converted back to analog for broadcast. But it is true that AM signals are more limited, quality-wise, than FM. The FCC prohibits AM signal frequencies of more than 10,000 kilohertz, whereas FM signals get 15,000 kHz — mainly because the AM part of the electromagnetic spectrum is more crowded than the FM part.

'Mondo's lay explanation of what peaking is consists of pointing at the red area to the right of the two volumeters' bobbing needles on the mixing board: “It's when the needles go into the red.” The overall mission, apparently, is to keep the volume and resonance of a host's voice high enough to be stimulating but not so high that they exceed the capacities of an AM analog signal or basic radio receiver. One reason why callers' voices sound so much less rich and authoritative than hosts' voices on talk radio is that it is harder to keep telephone voices from peaking.

upon he must confirm that the ad has run as scheduled in the special Airmix log he signs each page of, so that the station can bill advertisers for their spots. 'Mondo, who started out two years ago as an unpaid intern and now earns ten dollars an hour, works 7:00–1:00 on weeknights and also board-ops KFI's special cooking show on Sunday mornings.

Another reason is mike processing, which evens and fills out the host's voice, removing raspy or metallic tones, and occurs automatically in Airmix. There's no such processing for callers' voices.

In the unlikely event of further interest, here is a simplified version of the technical path taken by Mr. Z.'s voice during broadcast: Through channel 7 of 'Mondo's board and the wall of processors, levelers, and compressors in Airmix, through the Eventide BD-980 delayer and Aphex compellor in KFI's master control room, through a duo of Moseley 6000-series digital encoders and to the microwave transmitter on the roof, whence it is beamed at 951.5 MHz to the repeater-site antenna on Briarcrest Peak in the Hollywood Hills, then beamed from the repeater at 943.5 MHz to KFI's forties-era transmitter in Orange County, where its signal is decoded by more Moseley 6000s, further processed and modulated and brought up to maximum legal frequency, and pumped up KFI's 757-foot main antenna, whose 50,000 watts cost \$6,000 a month in electricity and cause phones in a five-mile radius to play ghostly KFI voices whenever the weather's just right.

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As long as he's kept under forty hours a week, which he somehow always just barely is, the station is not obliged to provide 'Mondo with employee benefits.

The Nick Berg beheading and its Internet video compose what is known around KFI as a "Monster," meaning a story that has both high news value and tremendous emotional voltage. As is SOP in political talk radio, the emotions most readily accessed are anger, outrage, indignation, fear, despair, disgust, contempt, and a certain kind of apocalyptic glee, all of which the Nick Berg thing's got in spades. Mr. Ziegler, whose program is in only its fourth month at KFI, has been fortunate in that 2004 has already been chock-full of Monsters — Saddam's capture, the Abu Ghraib scandal, the Scott Peterson murder trial, the Greg Haidl gang-rape trial, and preliminary hearings in the rape trial of Kobe Bryant. But tonight is the most angry, indignant, disgusted, and impassioned that Mr. Z.'s

Here is a sample bit of "What the *John Ziegler Show* Is All About," a long editorial intro to the program that Mr. Ziegler delivered snippets of over his first several nights in January:

The underlying premise of the *John Ziegler Show* is that, thanks to its social-istic leanings, incompetent media, eroding moral foundation, aging demographics, and undereducated masses, the United States, as we know it, is doomed. In my view, we don't know how much longer we still have to enjoy it, so we shouldn't waste precious moments constantly worrying or complaining about it. However, because not everyone in this country is yet convinced of this seemingly obvious reality, the show does see merit in pointing out or documenting the demise of our nation and will take great pains to do so. And because most everyone can agree that there is value in attempting to delay the sinking of the *Titanic* as long as possible, whenever feasible the *John Ziegler Show* will attempt to do its part to plug whatever holes in the ship it can. With that said, the show realizes that, no matter how successful it (or anyone else) may be in slowing the downfall of our society, the final outcome is still pretty much inevitable, so we might as well have a good time watching the place fall to pieces.

Be advised that the intro's stilted, term-paperish language, which looks kind of awful in print, is a great deal more effective when the spiel is delivered out loud — the stiffness gives it a slight air of self-mockery that keeps you from being totally sure just how seriously John Ziegler takes what he's saying. Meaning he gets to have it both ways. This half-pretend pretension, which is ingenious in all sorts of ways, was pioneered in talk radio by Rush Limbaugh, although with Limbaugh the semi-self-mockery is more tonal than syntactic.

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gotten on-air so far, and the consensus in Airmix is that it's resulting in some absolutely first-rate talk radio.

John Ziegler, who is a talk radio host of unflagging industry, broad general knowledge, mordant wit, and extreme conviction, makes rather a specialty of media criticism. One object of his disgust and contempt in the churn so far has been the US networks' spineless, patronizing decision not to air the Berg videotape and thus to deny Americans "a true and accurate view of the barbarity, the utter *depravity*, of these people." Even more outrageous, to Mr. Z., is the mainstream media's lack of outrage about Berg's taped murder versus all that same media's hand-wringing and invective over the recent photos of alleged prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, which he views as a clear indication of the deluded, blame-America-first mentality of the US press. It is an associated contrast between Americans' mortified response to the Abu Ghraib photos and reports of the Arab world's phlegmatic reaction to the Berg video that leads to his churn's climax, which is that we are plainly, unambiguously better than the Arab world — whereupon John Ziegler invites listeners to respond if they are so moved, repeats the special mnemonic KFI call-in number, and breaks for the :30 news and ads, on time to the second, as 'Mondo takes ISDN feed from Airwatch and the program's associate producer and call screener, Vince Nicholas — twenty-six and hiply bald — pushes back from his console and raises both arms in congratulation, through the glass.

It goes without saying that there are all different kinds of stimulation. Depending on one's politics, sensitivities, and tastes in

ISDN, in which the *D* stands for "Digital," is basically a phone line of very high quality and expense. ISDN is the main way that stations take feed for syndicated programs from companies like Infinity Broadcasting, Premiere Radio Networks, etc. KFI has its own News department, but on nights and weekends it uses a service called Airwatch that provides off-hour news and traffic for stations in the LA area. When, at :17 and :46 every hour, Mr. Z. intros a report from "Alan LaGreen in the KFI Traffic Center," it's really Alan LaGreen of Airwatch, who's doing traffic reports for different stations at different times all hour and has to be very careful to give the right call letters for the Traffic Center he's supposedly reporting from.

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argumentation, it is not hard to think of objections to John Ziegler's climactic claim, or at least of some urgent requests for clarification. Like: Exactly what and whom does "the Arab world" refer to? And why are a few editorials and televised man-on-the-street interviews sufficient to represent the attitude and character of a whole diverse region? And why is al-Jazeera's showing of the Berg video so awful if Mr. Z. has just castigated the US networks for *not* showing it? Plus, of course, what is "better" supposed to mean here? More moral? More diffident about our immorality? Is it not, in our own history, pretty easy to find some Berg-level atrocities committed by US nationals, or agencies, or even governments, and approved by much of our populace? Or perhaps this: Leaving aside whether John Ziegler's assertions are true or coherent, is it even remotely helpful or productive to make huge, sweeping claims about some other region's/culture's inferiority to us? What possible effect can such remarks have except to incite hatred? Aren't they sort of irresponsible?

It is true that no one on either side of the studio's thick window expresses or even alludes to any of these objections. But this is not because Mr. Z.'s support staff is stupid, or hateful, or even necessarily on board with sweeping jingoistic claims. It is because they understand the particular codes and imperatives of large-market talk radio. The fact of the matter is that it is not John Ziegler's job to be responsible, or nuanced, or to think about whether his on-air comments are productive or dangerous, or cogent, or even defensible. That is not to say that the host would not defend his "We're better" — strenuously — or that he does not believe it's true. It is to say that he has exactly

It is maybe more significant that not one of the listeners who call in tonight and wait on hold for ten, twenty, or in one case forty-plus minutes to respond to John Ziegler has any problem with his assertions of Arab inferiority. And this is not (unlike Rush's call-screening protocols) just a matter of whom Vince and Mr. Z. allow on the air. Vince's screening conversations with callers are clearly audible in the Airmix room — even the ones who don't get through agree; or, if they disagree, it's that they don't think the comparison goes far enough.

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one on-air job, and that is to be stimulating. An obvious point, but it's one that's often overlooked by people who complain about propaganda, misinformation, and irresponsibility in commercial talk radio. Whatever else they are, the above-type objections to "We're better than the Arab world" are calls to accountability. They

See, e.g., Mr. John Kobylt, of KFI's top-rated afternoon *John & Ken Show*, in a recent *LA Times* profile: "The truth is, we do everything for ratings. Yes, that's our job. I can show you the contract. . . . This is not *Meet the Press*. It's not the *Jim Lehrer NewsHour*."

are the sorts of criticisms one might make of, say, a journalist, someone whose job description includes being responsible about what he says in public. And KFI's John Ziegler is not a journalist — he is an entertainer. Or maybe it's better to say that he is part of

Or you could call it atavistic, a throwback to the days before Joseph Pulitzer started warning everyone that "A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself." The truth is that what we think of as objectivity in journalism has been a standard since only the 1900s, and mainly in the US. Have a look at some European dailies sometime.

a peculiar, modern, and very popular type of news industry, one that manages to enjoy the authority and influence of journalism without the stodgy constraints of fairness, objectivity,

KFI management's explanation of "stimulating" is apposite, if a bit slippery. Following is an excerpted transcript of a mid-May Q&A with Ms. Robin Bertolucci, the station's intelligent, highly successful, and sort of hypnotically intimidating Program Director. (The haphazard start is because the interviewing skills behind the Q parts are marginal; the excerpt gets more interesting as it goes along.)

Q: Is there some compact way to describe KFI's programming philosophy?

A: "What we call ourselves is 'More *Stimulating* Talk Radio.'"

Q: Pretty much got that part already.

A: "That is the slogan that we try to express every minute on the air. Of being stimulating. Being informative, being entertaining, being energetic, being dynamic . . . The way we do it is a marriage of information and stimulating entertainment."

Q: What exactly is it that makes information entertaining?

A: "It's attitudinal, it's emotional."

Q: Can you explain this attitudinal component?

A: "I think '*stimulating*' really sums it up. It's what we really try to do."

Q: [Strangled frustration-noises.]

A: "Look, our station logo is in orange and black, and white — it's a stark, aggressive look. I think that typifies it. The attitude. A little in-your-face. We're not . . . stodgy."

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and responsibility that make trying to tell the truth such a drag for everyone involved. It is a frightening industry, though not for any of the simple reasons most critics give.

Distributed over two walls of KFI's broadcast studio, behind the monitors and clocks, are a dozen promotional KFI posters, all in the station's eye-catching Halloween colors against the sweeper's bright white. On each poster, the word "Stimulating" is both italicized and underscored. Except for the door and soundproof window, the entire studio is lined in acoustic tile with strange Pol-

KFI has large billboards at traffic nodes all over metro Los Angeles with the same general look and feel, although the billboards often carry both the sweeper and extra tag phrases: "Raving Infomaniacs," "The Death of Ignorance," "The Straight Poop," and (against a military-camouflage background) "Intelligence Briefings."

lockian patterns of tiny holes. Much of the tile is grayed and decaying, and the carpet's no color at all; KFI has been in this facility for nearly thirty years and will soon be moving out. Both the studio and Airmix are kept chilly because of all the electronics. The overhead

lights are old inset fluorescents, the kind with the slight flutter to them; nothing casts any sort of shadow. On one of the studio walls is also pinned the special set of playing cards distributed for last year's invasion of Iraq, these now with hand-drawn Xs over the faces of those Baathists captured or killed so far. The great

L-shaped table that Mr. Z. sits at nearly fills the little room; it's got so many coats

The Airmix room's analogue to the cards is a bumper sticker next to the producer's station:  
 WHO WOULD THE FRENCH VOTE FOR?  
 — AMERICANS FOR BUSH

of brown paint on it that the tabletop looks slightly humped. At the L's base is another Shure microphone, used by Ken Chiampou of 3:00–7:00's *John & Ken*, its hinged stand now partly folded up so that the mike hangs like a wilted flower. The oddest thing about the studio is a strong scent of decaying bananas, as if many cast-off peels or even whole bananas were rotting in the room's wastebaskets, none of which look to have been emptied anytime recently.