

Mark Walsh, "Air America," And Al Franken Discuss Al's New Liberal Radio Talk Show

BYLINE: KATIE COURIC, NBC's Today Show

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KATIE COURIC, co-host:

Your radio is about to sound a little bit different. A liberal radio network called "Air America" launches today hoping to break into what has been a conservative lock on the radio. Former "Saturday Night Live" writer and comedian Al Franken will host his own show. His most recent book "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them" remains on the best-seller list. Meanwhile, Mark Walsh was the Internet guy for Senator John Kerry's presidential campaign and is now the CEO of "Air America."

Good morning to both of you. Nice to see you.

Mr. AL FRANKEN ("The O'Franken Factor"): Good morning.

Mr. MARK WALSH ("Air America"): Good morning.

COURIC: All right, should we rename this the "John Kerry for President Network"?

Mr. FRANKEN: Oh, no. It would be more the "Get Rid of Bush Network." No, it's--we're--we're going to be around for a long time. So after Kerry becomes president, then we'll be going after the Congress.

COURIC: What made you want to do this? What made you want to add this to your repertoire?

Mr. FRANKEN: Well, you know, I--while I was researching "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look At the Right" I got--just got madder and madder because this administration just has not been credible on anything. And they have been giving tax cuts to the rich, even in times of war. You know, we have never in our history cut taxes during war. And the president during the 2000 campaign said he was against nation building, I didn't realize then he meant only our nation. I think it's just absolutely vital that we get a foothold on the talk radio terrain because it's all Rush and, you know, Hannity and those guys. And we're--I'm going 12 to 3 against--directly against Rush. We're going to try to do drug-free radio.

COURIC: Yikes. So this is a taste of things to come. I mean, this will be--you'll be pulling no punches here?

Mr. FRANKEN: I don't know what you mean. No, I--I don't think I'll be--no. Well, they don't, and we won't either. And my show, of course, is called "The O'Franken Factor." And people have asked why that. And it's really just one reason, which is to annoy and bait Bill O'Reilly.

COURIC: You're hoping that he'll sue you for...

Mr. FRANKEN: Yes. Again.

COURIC: ...for kind of--for that title. Because I know Fox News sued you already for your book title...

Mr. FRANKEN: Yeah.

COURIC: ...which was "A Fair and Balanced Look At The Right."

Mr. FRANKEN: That was the subtitle, yeah.

COURIC: The--the judge threw it out and said it was wholly without merit, correct?

Mr. FRANKEN: Yeah. Yes, in fact, I think that's the new Fox slogan. "The Fox News Channel: Wholly Without Merit." They--they evidently didn't understand that in--in the United States satire is protected speech even if the object of the satire doesn't get it.

COURIC: Mark Walsh, you obviously think there's a mandate for this kind of radio.

Mr. WALSH: Yeah.

COURIC: Why do you think that? And--and what led you to think that this will be successful? Because a lot of people say, 'Hey, liberals are--are dull. They're not passionate about what they're feeling.' Jay Severin in the Boston Globe wrote this: He said: "Liberals are quite understandably quite apprehensive that liberal talk will again flop because of a dreaded glum message and deadly dull messengers." Now he did--he did say that, perhaps, people like Al Franken and Janeane Garofalo could change this. And I know she'll be doing a night show.

Mr. FRANKEN: Ah.

Mr. WALSH: Yeah.

Mr. FRANKEN: I like him.

COURIC: Yeah. But, I mean, a lot of people have said this--this will never succeed.

Mr. WALSH: Well, we--liberals--liberals can be very boring. Very much 'eat your vegetables' kind of, you know, sort of lecturing and hectoring. Al is really the tip of the sphere of a new style of--of--of radio for us, which is comedic. We believe people like to be entertained, people like to laugh. And we think that every single day we'll wrap information around comedy and visa versa and we'll get our message across in a way--way more clear way than prior efforts have done. Point number one.

Point number two, there's nothing on the airwaves and the nation is divided. This is a media opportunity. These people are waiting to hear the kind of radio, in my opinion, that Al and our other talent are going to put forth.

COURIC: Al, you're--you're known as, not only a--a very passionate guy politically...

Mr. FRANKEN: Mm-hmm.

COURIC: ...but as a funny--very funny guy. I mean, let's just run a clip from a "Saturday Night Live" skit.

Mr. FRANKEN: Ooh. Which one?

COURIC: And I'm going to ask you which Al Franken we'll see--or--or hear on the radio.

Mr. FRANKEN: OK.

(Beginning of clip from "Saturday Night Live")

Unidentified Woman: You still have 50 seconds left, Mr. Vice President.

Mr. DANA CARVEY: Well, let me just sum up. On track, stay the course, a thousand points of light. Stay the course.

Woman: Governor Dukakis, rebuttal?

Mr. JON LOVITZ: I can't believe I'm losing to this guy.

(End of clip from "Saturday Night Live")

Mr. FRANKEN: Well, that--that's something I wrote with...

COURIC: Wrote. I was going to say, obviously...

Mr. FRANKEN: ...with a couple other guys. I wasn't either--that was Jon Lovitz and Dana Carvey.

COURIC: Right. We--we realize that you did not appear in that skit.

Mr. FRANKEN: Dana will be visiting us today. Yeah.

COURIC: But ob--but obviously you wrote it.

Mr. FRANKEN: Yeah.

COURIC: And--and I'm wondering, is this going to be funny? Are you going to be hitting people over the head? Are you going to be sincere? Is it going to be a combination of things? This is three hours of Al Franken. With all due respect, that's a lot of Al.

Mr. FRANKEN: Well, I have a co-host, Katherine Lanpher, who has actually done radio and I haven't. So we--we've been doing practice shows. They go past--they go by very quickly. Today we have Bob Kerry as--as a guest who, as you know, is a newsmaker, a 9/11 commissioner.

COURIC: Right. I was going to say, a very outspoken member of the commission.

Mr. FRANKEN: Yes. And we have Michael Moore. And we're going to be having a lot of surprise call-ins. And it's--it's going to be fun.

COURIC: Will you have--would--would you invite a conservative to be on your show?

Mr. FRANKEN: Absolutely. John McCain is coming. I've invited--my friend Gary Bower who is a--a religious Christian conservative and who I like very much. G. Gordon Liddy I think is calling in today and will be a guest. So, yeah--no, no, no, we're--we--I want to have our conservative friends on. And we're not--I'm not going to be--this is not going to be the kind of bile you see on--on, like, Rush Limbaugh or--or Bill O'Reilly.

COURIC: You sure?

Mr. FRANKEN: There may be a little vile, but only--only for people who deserve it. I'm mean sometimes, but I'm just mean to people who deserve it.

COURIC: All righty. On that note--glad to see you're bringing the country together.

Mr. FRANKEN: We--we're--I'm going to be a uniter, not a divider.

COURIC: Yeah. Al Franken, thanks so much.

Mark Walsh...

Mr. WALSH: Thank you.

COURIC: Appreciate you all being here.

Mr. FRANKEN: Thanks, Katie.

COURIC: Have fun. Nice to see you.

Up next, news flash! Janet Jackson speaks out about her Super Bowl stunt.
That's right after this.