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INTERNET TALK INNOVATOR

Alan Levy is the CEO/Founder of BlogTalkRadio – a 21st century communications industry pioneer whose ingenious grassroots online talk network has combined existing platforms with new devices to create a burgeoning new media empire. Story inside.

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The Bible of Talk Radio and the New Talk Media

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PROGRAMMING • MANAGEMENT • MARKETING • TECHNICAL • LEGAL

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BlogTalkRadio shows amazing innovation, growth and potential

Emerging internet talk giant redefining the meaning of grassroots radio

By **Bev Santaniello**

TALKERS MAGAZINE
Assistant Editor

NEW YORK — Meet Jamey DuVall. During the day, Jamey works in marketing for a health-care company in Florida. But several times a week, using a regular telephone as a microphone, he sits down with his buddy and co-host Jerry Dennis to interview some of the biggest names in the film industry on their online radio show, “Movie Geeks United!” on BlogTalkRadio.



DuVall started the online talk show on BlogTalkRadio.com three years ago to share his love for film with others. Now, “Movie Geeks United!” is one of the most popular movie-themed podcasts not only on BlogTalkRadio, but across the internet and iTunes. The show reaches hundreds of thousands of listeners with regular interviews with film superstars such as Francis Ford Coppola, Jeff Goldblum, Matthew Broderick, Jeremy Piven, Brian De Palma and more. The show boasts cinephile fans and listeners from around the world.

As extraordinary as this story seems, Jamey is just one of the tens of thousands of citizen talk radio hosts who use BlogTalkRadio, the largest online social radio network, as their online broadcasting home base.

BlogTalkRadio has redefined the concept of grassroots broadcasting as it applies to talk radio, the internet and the very idea of the “new media.” It also is poised to provide traditional terrestrial talk radio with an extraordinary farm system — a resource sorely missing since the era of consolidation changed the traditional paradigm of small town radio being a place for talent to start and from which to “work their way up” to the big time.

In the process, BlogTalkRadio has blossomed into a unique and major broadcasting force unto itself — an entity with enormous proportions and growing larger by the moment.

The BlogTalkRadio story

BlogTalkRadio, a company whose mission is to enable anyone to host a free online radio talk show, was born when Alan Levy, CEO and founder, started a blog to keep his friends and family up-to-date on the health of his cancer-stricken father. Levy, a retired telcom entrepreneur who successfully built and sold multiple businesses in the early 2000s, was amazed at the number of conversations that were taking place across the blogosphere, but he felt there was something missing. Where was the audio, the voices, in these online conversations?

In an effort to address this need, in September of 2006, Levy launched the BlogTalkRadio platform. Blending the most basic tenets of talk radio with the best of social media and telephony, the platform enables individuals and businesses to broadcast live online radio talk shows using just a phone and computer. BlogTalkRadio shows are then syndicated with one click to iTunes and across the social web, to sites like Facebook and Twitter, where the audio content is easily shared and consumed. Just over three years later, BlogTalkRadio has become the largest online social radio network. It has broadcast more than 500,000 episodes since its launch and is attracting more than 5.6 million unique listeners and 4 million unique website visitors a month (comScore Jan. 2010 – extended web), a number that has been doubling every six months, according to Levy.

“The simplicity of hosting a talk show on BlogTalkRadio and the viral strength of our technology and tools, have enabled us to create a virtuous cycle — more hosts bring more listeners, more listeners bring in more high-quality hosts.”

Remarkably, this tremendous growth in hosts, listeners and content has happened organically, through word-of-mouth and the efforts of hosts just like Jamey DuVall, and not through larger corporate partners or sizable media campaigns.

BlogTalkRadio is a prime example of what social and technology observers describe as the “democratization of the media” that has drastically reduced the barriers of participation in online talk radio. Levy tells *TALKERS* magazine, “The simplicity of hosting a talk show on BlogTalkRadio and the viral strength of our technology and tools, have enabled us to create

a virtuous cycle — more hosts bring more listeners, more listeners bring in more high-quality hosts. We have a solution that scales.”

Every month, BlogTalkRadio welcomes countless notable guests, as prestigious and recognized as Brad Pitt, Maya Angelou and Oliver Stone. In August, President Obama even made an appearance on the network, broadcasting a live address to an audience of hundreds of thousands on the topic of health care reform.

In an era in which traditional talk broadcasting companies are largely defined by the nature and style of their programming niche, the collective variety of content on the network is staggering, with BlogTalkRadio hosts streaming more than 1,200 episodes each day covering more than 75 categories, from politics to parenting, from gardening to God.

Martin Savidge, former NBC news correspondent and the anchor and special correspondent for “Worldfocus,” has been hosting a weekly radio show on BlogTalkRadio for more than a year. “BlogTalkRadio allows ‘Worldfocus’ to do today what many news organizations hope to be doing five years from now,” says Savidge. “It makes it possible for us to hold a global conversation, where the world not only can tune in but call in. The most complicated and difficult international stories can now be covered using just a cell phone and BlogTalkRadio.”



The screen shot above shows how input from BlogTalkRadio participants can influence which stories are covered on the weekly radio program.

The technology

Internet radio typically falls into two buckets: music and talk. Services like Pandora and last.fm have dominated and continue to successfully grow online radio in the music category. BlogTalkRadio is pioneering a way to scale internet talk radio in a way that has not been achievable with existing terrestrial radio technologies.

“BlogTalkRadio is radio for the 21st century,” according to Sree Sreenivasan, Dean of Student Affairs at the Columbia

Graduate School of Journalism. Sreenivasan has used the BlogTalkRadio platform over the last few years to cover a wide variety of subjects including the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai and the current human rights situation in Sri Lanka. “It has changed the way SAJA and Columbia Journalism School interact with the world. I am able to use BlogTalkRadio to connect with current and potential audiences and bring more timely, high-quality speakers on major issues from around the world to people around the world.”

BlogTalkRadio’s patent-pending technology is powered by a large-carrier-grade phone network. The online tools feature a browser-based switchboard that enables hosts to easily conduct a moderated dialogue between hosts and listeners from the convenience of their office, living room or kitchen table without any special equipment, downloads or installation of applications. Presently, the site is capable of streaming up to 175 simultaneous live shows, a number that can easily be scaled up with the addition of servers to the network.

“The ‘secret sauce,’ if you will, behind the BlogTalkRadio platform is that the technology was designed to fuel the viral growth of the network,” explains Levy. BlogTalkRadio is seamlessly integrated with Facebook, Twitter and Ning, and allows the content to be syndicated via RSS and iTunes in one click. To further promote sharing and content consumption, BlogTalkRadio also features downloadable mp3s and a player that can be embedded by hosts and listeners on any website. As the size and scope of the BlogTalkRadio community has grown, so has its SEO (Search Engine Optimization) strength. This SEO strength helps BlogTalkRadio’s content reach the top of the search results as listeners browse for content on specific topics or keywords with engines such as Google or Yahoo.

“We have reached a tipping point where practically every brand is using social media as a core pillar of their marketing and outreach efforts.”

What about the quality of the audio? Podcasters and audio gurus have long complained about the potentially tinny sound quality of digital and streaming audio. To address this concern, BlogTalkRadio has also developed a set of technologies that enable the archived audio file to be compressed at a rate much higher than the normal bit rate used to

stream the live broadcast (8 kbps) that will be launching this April. By recording the audio file at an “FM-Quality” compression rate, BlogTalkRadio has prepared its content for possible syndication to terrestrial radio platforms.

Show me the money

How does BlogTalkRadio make money? One of the ways BlogTalkRadio is generating revenue is through a set of premium products they have developed from the technology. They range from basic services, that give hosts the ability to screen callers using an enhanced switchboard and to edit and replace episodes, to branded solutions that provide hosts with unrestricted access to all of BlogTalkRadio’s broadcasting tools and enable them to conduct shows in a branded environment, while simulcasting them on any website.



The screen shot above shows the easy-to-use enhanced switchboard hosts use to facilitate their programs.

Helping brands join the conversation

As consumer attention, and thus brands, continue to move to the social web, social networking platforms, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Ning and Twitter, are earning an increasing percentage of advertising dollars. According to Forrester Research, social media advertising will grow from \$716 million in 2009 to \$3.11 billion by 2014.

Levy tells TALKERS magazine, “We have reached a tipping point where practically every brand is using social media as a core pillar of their marketing and outreach efforts.”

BlogTalkRadio, with a rapidly growing network and white label solutions, is purposely and strategically well positioned to capture part of this growing marketing spend. It has extended its tools to support brands looking to join the conversation in a moderated way, enabling companies such as Allstate, Ford, PepsiCo and others to sponsor, and start conversations among consumers.

BlogTalkRadio is even enabling the Pentagon to broadcast multiple shows, including the popular "Armed with Science" show that discusses the importance of science and technology to military operations and the Department of Defense. Using BlogTalkRadio technology, they simulcast the show live each week on BlogTalkRadio and the Department of Defense's site, <http://science.dodlive.mil/>.

"I think every institution that has a public presence should consider how it can incorporate BlogTalkRadio into its communications strategy," suggests Sreenivasan.

BlogTalkRadio also offers brands with more traditional forms of advertising, including audio ads that can be featured in live and archived shows, show sponsorships and online banner and video ads. Advertisers can run campaigns broadly across the network or they can target messages by genre, category or demographic. BlogTalkRadio attracts more young than old, more men than women (60% male, 40% female) and boasts the third largest and the fastest growing African-American population on the web, following well-known BlackPlanet.com and BET.com.

It's a "cinch"

In October of 2009, BlogTalkRadio launched a new related service called Cinch (www.cinchcast.com). Cinch, often referred to by users as BlogTalkRadio's "audio Twitter," is an easy way to create and share shortform recorded podcasts, with accompanying text and photos on Facebook, Twitter and on the Cinch website. A "cinch" recording can be created in three ways: using the phone, computer or using the Cinch iPhone application. Cinchers participate in a consumer-based community at www.cinchcast.com, but the Cinch team has also developed a white label solution that is enabling media outlets and brands to reach and engage audiences where they are participating online.

Cinch helped power the "What's Your Pitch?" contest for PepsiCo at last year's South by Southwest. "BlogTalkRadio and Cinch were an essential part of PepsiCo's presence," says Bonin Bough, director of digital and social media at PepsiCo. "The platforms enabled PepsiCo to engage digital influencers and innovators in a thoughtful dialogue."

An exciting application for the radio industry is the use of Cinch as a citizen reporting tool, where listeners can use their mobile phones to "cinch" in breaking news (traffic accident, experiences at local events, etc.). These audio recordings can be embedded on the local station website and/or repurposed to be used on air. Cinch can provide radio platforms with participatory media that not only enables listeners to be part of the conversation,

but virally spreads these messages to Facebook and Twitter.

What's on the horizon

Alan Levy sums it up for *TALKERS*, "At the core of BlogTalkRadio's strategy are two principles: One, today's audiences are highly fragmented and therefore content needs to be everywhere; secondly, we are witnessing an explosion of participatory media across all forms of broadcast media and talk radio is no different." According to Levy, the BlogTalkRadio team will continue to focus on building out technologies to reach and engage listeners wherever they are...online, on their phone, in their cars. The BlogTalkRadio team is also continuing to evolve the solutions and support they are offering to other media outlets and brands so that they too can leverage the technology, tools and social media expertise BlogTalkRadio has developed along the way.

Levy goes on to say, "Whether it is empowering citizen journalists to better tell their story or enabling publishers of online newspapers, magazines and books to create and share a new form of interactive, monetizable content, BlogTalkRadio provides solutions to fuel the continued online conversation."

BlogTalkRadio is headquartered in Midtown Manhattan in New York. Led by Alan Levy, CEO, and Bob Charish, Co-Founder and COO, the company has 20 employees across the United States in customer support, production, marketing, sales, product development and operations. The Kraft group, the owners of the New England Patriots, was one of the company's outside investors in a Series A financing in June 2008. If you would like more information about BlogTalkRadio, you can reach out to them directly at pmilead@blogtalkradio.com.



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