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Air America Radio is stuck in the ratings cellar

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On March 31, 2004, Air America Radio, promoted as the liberal antidote to conservative-dominated talk radio, was launched with great fanfare.

Since then, it has generated headlines while losing some stations and picking up others. In April, it fired head writer Lizz Winstead, co-creator of Comedy Central's "Daily Show," who is suing for back pay. TV's Jerry Springer, who is mulling a run for governor of Ohio, is now in her slot.

Now that it's possible to compare ratings for this spring to last year's start-up, it's clear the network has yet to climb out of the cellar.

Air America's overall ratings, which rose initially after all the free publicity, faded before the November election and haven't recovered.

Still, it isn't yet time to call the coroner. "Air America is going to take a long time to grow ratings," said Michael Harrison, editor and publisher of the trade publication Talkers magazine. "People unfamiliar with our industry think ratings are like box-office receipts. But they're not. Radio ratings are slow to build.

"The network got an initial bump from the enormous amount of free press it got. There was a curiosity factor. Now, it is settling in."

Air America's programming is carried in part or in whole on 67 stations. Most are in smaller markets, such as Albuquerque, N.M., and Albany, N.Y. (Locally, it airs on KTNF-AM, 950.) The flagship show, hosted by author, former "Saturday Night Live" writer/comic and Minnesota native Al Franken, airs from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. weekdays.

Franken originally named his show "The O'Franken Factor" (now "The Al Franken Show") to tweak his archrival, populist pundit Bill O'Reilly, whose TV show "The O'Reilly Factor" on the Fox News Channel outdraws all other cable talk shows and whose "The Radio Factor" draws more than 3 million listeners nationally.

Measured season-to-season — the most accurate way to assess audience preferences, because listening patterns vary throughout the year — Air America has lost audience in major markets, including New York and Boston, since April, May and June of 2004.

Franken, best-selling author of such anti-conservative tomes as "Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot," chose to go head-to-head with gabber Limbaugh in many markets. This, it turns out, was not such a good idea.

Limbaugh, still the giant among talkers, with 14.75 million listeners on 600 stations, has squashed Franken, whose ratings have dropped 50 percent in Boston since spring 2004; he is down 14 percent in New York.

Ratings for many conservative talk shows have dropped as well, editor Harrison said. "It's what happens after an election."

But while more seasoned hosts shift the focus to other topics while awaiting the next election cycle, critics complain that Franken is still obsessed with bashing President Bush. In contrast to Limbaugh, who mocks his own pomposity, Franken comes across as angry and not funny, critics say.

"Is Al Franken going to be the hottest thing in radio? I don't think so," Harrison said. "But it's too soon to say he's finished. A lot depends on how dedicated he is to the show.

"And I get the feeling he's not dedicated to radio broadcasting. He's dedicated to politics and his own celebrity. I think he'll drop out to run for office."

Or, perhaps, he will stay on the air while running for the U.S. Senate in 2008 from Minnesota. Air America signed Franken to a multiyear contract in November, the network's Jon Sinton said.

Franken has been floating trial balloons about a possible Senate run, and he and his wife have bought a home here. In January, the network will move "The Al Franken Show" from New York to Minnesota, an Air America spokeswoman said last week.