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What a shock! Stern taking show to Sirius

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Business & Tech

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NEW YORK - Escaping the grasp of federal regulators, shock jock Howard Stern is taking his top-rated morning show to paid satellite radio.

As of Jan. 1, 2006, radio's most famous personality will be heard on Sirius Satellite Radio, outside the restrictions of the Federal Communications Commission which for years has dogged him for his racy brand of humor.

Stern's announcement Wednesday follows Monday's debut of former FM radio duo Opie & Anthony on XM Satellite Radio after a two-year hiatus.

"I've decided what my future is," Stern told his listeners, and parent company Infinity Broadcasting, on his show. "It's not this kind of radio anymore."

The FCC has fined several radio stations over the content on Stern's program. Media giant Clear Channel dropped Stern's show from some of its stations in April after the commission proposed a \$495,000 fine against the conglomerate.

"I'm tired of the censorship," said Stern. "The FCC ... has stopped me from doing business."

Unless Congress extends the commission's reach, there will be no restrictions on what Stern can do or say at his new home. Because it is available only to paid subscribers, satellite radio - like cable television - is not subject to federal indecency regulations.

Gregg "Opie" Hughes and Anthony Cumia said having Stern follow them to satellite radio is a shot in the arm for the nascent medium.

"I think it's great for the industry and generally can only help Anthony and I," Hughes said.

Cumia, meanwhile, called it "another nail in the coffin for traditional broadcast radio."

Given his celebrity, Stern's move could indeed be a "watershed" moment in radio history that reduces the number of traditional radio listeners, said Ron Dresner, whose family owned the Hartford radio station WCCC, where Stern first did morning broadcasts in 1978.

Sirius estimates production costs and operating costs of \$100 million annually. It says that to break even, it needs about 1 million of Stern's 12 million listeners to purchase the \$12.95-per-month service.

XM reports 2.1 million subscribers, while Sirius has about 600,000.

The federal censorship push began in earnest in January when pop star Justin Timberlake pulled back a piece of Janet Jackson's clothing during the halftime show of the Super Bowl, exposing her breast to millions of viewers. Since then, Congress has held indecency hearings and the FCC has levied fines against several broadcasters, including a record \$1.75 million fine against Clear Channel.

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Federal lawmakers are also considering a bill that could increase fines to up to \$3 million per day for stations airing material the FCC deems indecent. Under FCC rules, broadcast radio and television stations are barred from airing offensive material between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., restrictions from which cable and satellite TV and satellite radio are exempt.

Stern's agent, Don Buchwald, said Stern was excited about the move and looks forward to doing his show on his own terms. Sirius will allow Stern programming control over three channels on its service, he said.

"The excitement of this new technology is awesome, and he sees a way he can do his show his way without government interference," Buchwald said.

It wasn't clear yet whether Stern's supporting cast - including longtime sidekick Robin Quivers - will join him at Sirius, Buchwald said.

"He will be, in effect, bringing on other talent to work alongside that he's probably competed against in the past," the agent said.

Dresner, meanwhile, said the move to satellite could bring an edge back to the Stern show that's been missing the past few years.

"Stern was gliding along because the money was there," Dresner said. "He no longer is cutting edge. He's going to be reinvigorated, and it's going to really excite him to be himself."

Some fans interviewed on Wednesday complained that Stern's constant on-air battle with the FCC and scathing criticisms of the Bush administration were hurting the comedic value of his show.

"I listened to him up until about six or seven months ago," said Dan Boyle, 26, of Lindenwold, in Camden County. "I would turn the show on and he was just ranting about the FCC. It was just annoying and not even entertaining."

Clifton resident Michael Richmond, a 28-year-old hard-core Stern fan and already a Sirius subscriber, was even more blunt.

"The political [stuff] is getting a little old," he said. "I want to hear about lesbians, not John Kerry. ... I think it's great because it will be completely uncensored."

Being able to curse freely isn't the point, said "Opie" Hughes.

"I truly believe that I don't think we should curse just because we can," he said. The key, he said, is cleverness.

Opie and Anthony were fired from WNEW-FM in August 2002 after they broadcast the description of what seemed to be a live sex act inside St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Although Stern's new program won't begin for another 15 months, the competition already has begun.

Opie and Anthony tore into Stern on their XM show after Wednesday's announcement, something they said they were unable to do while working for Infinity.

Cumia called Stern a "tool," a "hypocrite," "whiny," and "pathetic" for using his clout at Infinity's parent company, Viacom, to muzzle any criticism directed at him by the duo and then complaining about restrictions on his own speech.

"Please God, have his daughter bring home a black guy," Cumia said during the broadcast.

Asked about the comment, Cumia later said, "I think it would be sweet justice."

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