

An Interview with Alan Levy, CEO - BlogTalkRadio

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of the John Wiley & Sons, *The Social Media Bible*, the largest book ever written on the subject of social media.

Today we are here with Alan Levy from *BlogTalkRadio*, and we'll be speaking about hosting your own internet radio show today. So let's get started.

LS: Alan, please tell our listeners who you are and what you do at *BlogTalkRadio*?



AL: Hi. Well, I am Al Levy and I am the co-founder and CEO of *BlogTalkRadio*, and I'm the CEO and janitor, all in one. (Laughter) You know how it goes. *BlogTalkRadio* is a kind of citizen broadcast network where anyone, any one individual, company or organization that has a phone can live-stream their own radio show live and interactive with callers, and a chat that goes on during the show and that conversation is caught as a podcast.

LS: To me, I think that's absolutely unbelievable, that you can actually give a voice to the average citizen at no cost. What's the process? I mean it's free, right?

AL: It's free. Yes. Well, we have two parts of the network. The main network is the network which we launched in October, 2006, which we launched from scratch. I mean, we created this idea and I came up with the name, *BlogTalkRadio*. We had no content. We invented this technology which essentially incorporates using any kind of phone into the web. And to date we've broadcasted about 110,000 segments, maybe about 115,000. Each day we broadcast 500 new live shows. You can see them all at *BlogTalkRadio.com*. They all appear here in our programming guides.

We have had everyone on the network, from John McCain who has been on three **blogtalkradio**sm  times, to Yoko Ono, Brad Pitt, Brian DePalma, Salman Rushdie, famous authors, actors, and of course, thousands and thousands of bloggers. Anybody, really, who is looking to communicate a message and promote an idea or promote a book, can come on *BlogTalkRadio* for free. All they have to do is create a profile, set up a show on when they would like to broadcast, and they can dial in and be "on air" in a matter of minutes.

LS: That's absolutely amazing. A close friend of mine and co-author of two of the books that I worked on also, is the first one to introduce you to me over a year ago. He has been doing a show every Friday at noon, and he just loves it. He has over 4,000 or 5,000 listeners; it's growing at 10-15% every month. He has got quite a following. Without your technology, nobody could really afford to do that.

AL: We found that I'm either very crazy or very smart. I don't know which one yet but we realized that a lot of people that had been coming on *BlogTalkRadio* were being asked to pay hundreds, in not thousands of dollars to have their own radio show. And we figured out a way to keep it at a very low cost-point by using the phone. That's my background, in phone technology. And by doing that, we are able to provide the service for free. And I think that when you create a platform that is open and available, you look into democratizing the medium, much like blogging did for bloggers and tech space communication. *BlogTalkRadio* is doing the same for audio and, soon-to-be video.

LS: Well, the exciting thing is that it's a lot more sophisticated technology than just blogging; I mean, to have a radio show. This friend of mine has a co-host that calls in and they take live callers. You really cannot tell the difference between this and a professionally produced commercial radio show. It is that good of quality.

AL: Yeah, we are very pleased with the quality. You know, when I first came up with the idea, the podcasting I did not set out to create [4:33.0] or become another podcasting company. I set up *BlogTalkRadio* because I created a blog for my Dad, who was ill with lymphoma and cancer. I learned about blogs, and I realized that there were 75-80 million of them. And everyone's talking about "conversation" and I could not hear any. So I created it. We created a platform that allows live, interactive conversation using the phone, of course, as I mentioned...and we achieve it. That's the easy part of it.

So, for us, I do think we're more like a broadcast medium as an alternative. If you look at our audience, the guests that are on, (there is) such diversity. It is incredible the type of content, and then it's archived for the long [5:13.7] which we can then modify.

LS: That's exciting. One of the things that was a realization that came to me in studying social media for *The Social Media Bible* was that this is one of the very few mediums that the FCC does not get involved in. There is no censorship.

AL: Well, that's true. We did build it from scratch, so we very often have people looking at the site and our own internal customer service people and feature editors, and the like, and very often we'll get an email from one of the hosts and it will say, "You know, we've got to call the FCC." And we say, "Fine, call the FCC."

I mean, they have no mandate here. This is a collection of conversations and it's monitored, it's run by us on our site. So there is no FCC. But we do insure that the quality is good and we double up the best content and the platform is not being used to facilitate "hate" or conversations like that, for example.

LS: That's great. And just like other Social Media mediums, it's kind of self-policing. If something is out there that the public really does not like, you'll me make aware of it and you can go in and clean it up.

AL: Yeah, well it is self-policing also, in a sense, because the host's know that when they come on this network they sign a form and they're responsible for content, and there's clearly terms and conditions; thing they can and cannot do. And if they're in breach of those terms and conditions, I mean, they'll get a warning. But then, they'll be removed from the network. And there are no other places for them to go.

LS: Yeah, that's what's great about this!

AL: So, you know, they're not going to go to *Pod Cap*, or they're not going to go to a podcasting platform because they don't even know how to create this podcast. We take care of everything from the broadcast, the live interaction, all the way through iTunes and the RSS feed. So, it is self-policing and it's very exciting to see it grow and evolve. And many times the listeners become hosts. You know, they're getting involved and they say, "Why not! I could do one of these things."

LS: Absolutely! Who is your typical user on *BlogTalkRadio*? Is there a profile?

AL: No, we really run the gambit. The hosts are, demographically 24 to 55- years-old. We have some hosts that are 75. We have a professor who has been doing shows for over a year at a university in Kansas. He is 75-years-old. We do shows from a political philosopher from Brazil. We have shows from around the world. You know, if you look at (them), a lot of shows are young demographics. Like hip-hop and Vh1 reality shows like *Big Brother*. Some of the shows will have some of the guests of these T.V. shows on *BlogTalkRadio*, and the fans love the stuff.

And we also have “corporates” using it in “off-station-products” that we created private radio stations for companies. And we have the Pentagon, Submicro Systems, Harper-Collins; companies like this with established “brands” are using it to be part of the conversation. So that’s another aspect of it that really creates a lot of great content.

LS: That’s a really great idea. I’ve never thought about it until you just mentioned it. What an incredible communication vehicle this would be for corporations and even the Pentagon! That’s exciting!

AL: Yeah. I mean it was very exciting to get the Pentagon. They actually established a new media department and we reached out to them when we were four or five months into this. We reached out...we were doing a show with an embedded from Afghanistan...a U.S. Embedded...and he was calling in on Friday mornings at 11 a.m. doing a radio show! I sent an email to the Pentagon saying, “Hey, you guys have to check this out.” (Laughter) And they got back to me in four hours!

LS: Four hours! (Laughter)

AL: They took that and said, “Wow, interesting!” And now the Pentagon uses it for multiple shows. They have shows about *America Supports You*, which is *Homefront Groups*. They actually have shows called *Defense Department Roundtable*, *Blogger Roundtable*, where generals who are often in the field are interviewed by bloggers. And that seems to be a very useful tool for them. So, we are very excited about the corporate application and non-profits, as well.

LS: Congratulations! That is so cool!

Now you also mentioned, I heard that you really incorporate all of the useful *Social Media* tools, like iTunes and RSS feeds, and it’s all kind of built in. Can you talk to me a little bit about the tools that are built into this?

AL: Right. So there’s a lot of tools that we offer. In addition to be able to create the content, we offer and we provide a distribution platform for our hosts, which include HGL code, it’s a Flash Player that you can imbed on your My Space or your Face Book page or your blog. And when you do a show on *BlogTalkRadio* that content automatically gets repurposed and plays in that player that sits on your own website.

So people can come to you and you can invite people to *BlogTalkRadio* to listen to your live show, but your archive will be right there on your own website.

LS: That is so cool!

AL: We also use *Twitter* to send notifications out to people. You know, people very often will use *Twitter* to make “alerts”, “My show’s on live now. Click here.”...and they send that out to that *Twitter* list. We use email to notify people as to when shows are taking place. As you mentioned, we have RSS...Really Simple Syndication...which we use throughout the site. But the most popular, of course, is the iTunes capability, where our hosts are [11:07.8] for iTunes, and the RSS feeds for iTunes would incorporate the content on *BlogTalkRadio*.

LS: So it is a “turnkey” solution.

AL: It is a total “turnkey” solution! That’s correct!

LS: That is just, hey, wait a minute? You have your own talk show. Is that true?

AL: I do. I am. I was the first talk radio host on *BlogTalkRadio*, of course, and my show is at www.blogtalkradio.com/alanlevy, and I interview a lot of new hosts that come on the network. I’ve interviewed some famous authors, presidential candidates, it’s very exciting. It’s one of the aspects that I love most about what I do. I don’t get to do it enough, but I’m planning on doing a lot more of that in the fall.

LS: Totally cool. Lastly, is there anything else that you would like to share with our listeners about *BlogTalkRadio*, or something you think might be helpful if they wanted to get started using your service?

AL: Well I think, again, if you listen to content and you’re looking for a different type of experience and you come to www.blogtalkradio.com, you can register and sign up and become part of the community. You know, lots of people make friends on *BlogTalkRadio*. There is a lot of interaction with other people on *BlogTalkRadio*, like-minded and we can see who’s listening to shows you like to listen to. Of course, if you want to host a show you are welcome to do that. If you are a company that’s looking to be part of the conversation and to get certain messages out and, also, leverage our audience. We also provide that capability on *BlogTalkRadio*.

So, I think that’s it! I appreciate the opportunity. I think we’re a unique platform. We may not be the most famous, but I like where we are positioned. I think there’s a lot of very exciting things to look forward to.

LS: Alan, this is really great. Can you tell our listeners, once again, where they can go, where the websites are, for more information about you and *BlogTalkRadio*?

AL: You can go to www.blogtalkradio.com to check out the site, and of course, you’d like to hear my shows at www.blogtalkradio.com/alanlevy, and just come on in and, as we say, join the conversation.

LS: That’s great! I really appreciate sharing these insights with you. Alan Levy, thank you for sharing those insights. Please go visit *BlogTalkRadio*. Take “a listen” to some of the shows. They are really great. And, again, thank you for being here today and sharing those valuable insights.

This has been Lon Safko, the co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons. Be sure to check out the other valuable Social Media tactics, tools and strategies that can be found in *The Social Media Bible* book, and at our website, www.thesocialmediabible.com.

For more information about me, Lon Safko, or to learn how I can speak at your company or your next event, please visit my website at www.lonsafko.com.

And again, Alan, thank you and thank everyone for being here today with us. Thank you.

AL: My pleasure. Thank you. Bye.