

Bill O'Reilly profiles Jerry and moderates a talkers' roundtable with Jerry and Larry Glick, originally in this unedited form in Chapter 9:

In 1983, WRKO's TV affiliate, Channel 7, hired Bill O'Reilly. O'Reilly had been knocked around in broadcasting a bit, partly because of his own take-no-prisoners attitude, at one point rising to the ranks of a CBS correspondent, but now trying to rebuild his career. Channel 7 gave him the helm of *New England Afternoon*, a newsmagazine show.

In mid-November the program spotlighted some notable movers and shakers in Boston talk, spotlighting one a day for the first four days one week and bringing them all together for a group panel on Friday November 18. The producers lumped television and radio together as parts of a single talk continuum, although the programs represented had almost no commonalities. Tim White and Eileen Prose did "Good Day" on Channel 5, a typical chatty morning program. Nancy Merrill was the host of "People Are Talking" on Channel 4, a lightweight, fast-moving discussion show. Larry Glick was still holding court with his personal brand of all-night entertainment on WBZ radio. The fifth local star was Jerry Williams.

The day Jerry was featured, Tuesday, November 15, happened to be primary day in Boston. It was a big deal news day, since whoever won the mayoral primary would be King Kevin's successor (it was a given that the Democratic candidate would roll over anyone the Republicans could put up in the final). The two major candidates offered a vivid contrast in styles and politics, and the election showed where Boston was going.

South Boston's white populist, Raymond Flynn, had once been one of the guys in the anti-busing crowd, but he had modified his style towards the center, expressing a Jerry Williams-like sympathy for the regular Bostonian and a desire to bring everyone together, blah blah blah. The left side of the Democratic party had fallen behind the South End's black activist, Mel King, a revered but polarizing figure who spoke softly but never pulled punches about the plight of the poor and disenfranchised and the need to redress old grievances, blah blah blah.

So, on the afternoon of the day the votes were still being cast, O'Reilly had to ask Jerry to handicap it: "Tell it like it is, Jerry."

"Ray Flynn will win by a substantial margin." Which turned out to be right on the button.

"What have people been saying to you on the radio today?"

"They've been bored. . . . I don't hear very much at all. This is the first time since I've been watching Boston mayoral elections that nobody seems to be fired up too much."

But Jerry's feature on "New England Afternoon" didn't lead with the news of the day or his election analysis. That exchange was almost an afterthought to the main event, a live two-way radio-and-TV-simulcast with O'Reilly in the Channel 7 studios and Jerry on the job at WRKO, wrapped around a produced profile of Mr. Talk in action.

O'Reilly was trim and wore a generic TV suit. By this time in his career, he had already refined his TV presence to a genial polish, which took the edge off his pushier questions. Nonetheless, he was far better than the usual TV interviewer – he actually seemed to care about his subject's responses, and he even asked follow-ups.

Jerry chose an aggressive black shirt (“my Johnny Cash shirt,” he called it, referring to Cash’s song, “The Man in Black”) without a sport jacket. The lighting guys had been pretty kind to him, softening the look of his usually threatening eyebrows and deemphasizing the growing sag under his chin.

Jerry was feisty, ready for action, bringing his radio intensity up a notch, but still surprisingly candid.

The feature put Combative Jerry front and center, showing him on the air at WRKO, vigorously jabbing his finger in the air, poking nastily at callers (the lines almost sound as if Jerry punched up the usual barbs to give Channel 7 some good bites):

“Willya take a Valium or something?”

“If I was Samuel Q. Niceguy every day, I wouldn’t be on the air.”

“Would you go away? . . . **Go away!** I do **not** wanna talk to critics today, awright? . . . Go to **Haiti**.”

O’Reilly: “Some people say you’re the meanest guy in town. I mean, y’ know, people call up, you hang up on ’em, you call ’em names, you attack people in the news. **Are** you the meanest guy in town?”

“No. I think I’m . . . mean at **times**. I think if people listen to me steadily, as they have in Boston for over twenty years . . . they know that I have various sides to me. I’m kind, gentle at times. I’m emotional at times. I lose my temper at times. Like all human beings, I display every emotion.”

“You know why I think you’re successful? Because you maintain a sense of outrage and anger, and you don’t see that too much anymore. . . . You don’t see it on television, either.”

“That’s because management of radio and television stations are afraid of the controversial aspects of it – the fact that somebody has hard opinions. And you see no opinions on television news . . . nobody who sits there in front of the camera and says, ‘Here’s what I think.’” (Hey, Bill, **there’s** a good idea for a show. Controversy. Hard opinions. “Here’s what I think.” Of course, Jerry’s fantasizing about doing this kind of show himself, but he’s too old, right? It would need someone younger, smart, a little edgy. Hmm.)

“Do you wanna be on TV?”

“Oh, yes. Sure. ’Bout a minute a day.”

“How come you’re not?”

Jerry remembered the WBZ TV show and sighed. “You know how TV is. You come and you go. I don’t know – I’m just – I’m in radio. That’s about it. And television execs . . . these days seem to think that, ‘That’s where you belong, in radio.’”

The Friday roundtable, with all the profiled hosts together, was much less focused – what can you expect when you put five people used to running their own programs in a TV studio? – and the discussion was mostly TV-fluffy. But Jerry took every opportunity to play The Man You Love To Hate.

O’Reilly: “People listen to you to hear – ”

Jerry: “Sex and violence.”

Jerry: “Shall I make a really sexist comment? . . . NBC did a survey a couple of years ago – women eighteen to twenty-five just are not interested – ”

Eileen Prose, shocked and offended: “Oh!”

“Wait a minute, I haven’t finished yet. **Please!** Let me finish my provocative statement. . . . Obviously, eighteen to twenty-five women are not all in one bag, but most people . . . eighteen to twenty-five, female, do not want to hear about hard issues. They listen to FM rock, they listen to entertaining things, they watch the soaps. That’s what they do. They’re into themselves. That’s OK. I’m not saying it’s anything **bad**, but that’s the way it is. . . .

Prose: “. . . I very much know the status of the working woman these days and so much of it is out of necessity, and there are women that are very much looking to have a career – ”

Jerry: “It’s not an insult. It’s just a fact that women eighteen to twenty-five do not care about Bulger and McGee. If you went downtown and asked a hundred women eighteen to twenty-five who William Bulger was, they wouldn’t know.”

O’Reilly: “I’ve been all over the country . . . I’ve been everywhere, OK, and there are a lot of anchor people who really have to be guided into the men’s room.”

Nancy Merrill: “Yeah, but not in Boston.”

Jerry: “I’ve been in the business a little longer – and I’ve been in **more** cities – I keep moving – I want to be a moving target – and I challenge any one of the TV people to come up and do four hours, on the air, off the cuff, speaking to people, day in and day out, doing the commercials, listening to the –

Merrill: “You seem **angry!**” She smiled and took Jerry’s arm, as if to calm him, but her look and tone were witheringly patronizing. This poor guy just doesn’t know how to behave on TV.

“No, I’m not angry.”

Sweetly, with a knife in her voice: “I mean, if you don’t like the job, why don’t you leave?”

Finally O’Reilly hit a hot button for Jerry: “The people who anchor the news . . . they read off those TelePrompTers . . . and they make a lot more money than we make . . . Do you, Larry Glick, think that those people deserve that kinda money? Do you resent it?”

Glick: “No! No! I’m for big salaries. I like big salaries and loose women. I’m **for** that, no!”

Jerry: “You know, the only people who **don’t** make that kinda money are guys on the radio who labor every day for three or four hours.”

O’Reilly: “Somehow, I think that **you** resent the big salaries.”

Jerry: “I resent them. I resent it—**deeply!** . . . When Glick and I do a program in radio, why, the guy sits down about thirty seconds before we go on the air, and we **wing** it. And we do it because we do our homework every day.” Speaking to Nancy Merrill, he made an offer: “If you want to do the show, I’d be happy to have you come up and do it for four hours . . . if I can do **your** show.”

A few months later, O'Reilly took that bait. "Jerry's going on vacation, you wanna try out talk radio for a change?" "Yeah, why not?" And that's how Bill O'Reilly did his first radio talk show, just as David Brudnoy had—as a fill-in for Jerry Williams. After his trial by fire in the WRKO studio, O'Reilly told Alan Tolz that doing four hours on the radio was a lot harder than it looked. "How long has Jerry been doing this? Twenty-seven **years**?"

These stories are reconstructed from videotapes of the Channel 7 broadcasts of New England Afternoon, 11/15/83 and 11/18/83. Alan Tolz provided his recollections of producing Bill O'Reilly's talk radio debut on WRKO.