



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

Clay's Corner

Is AM Improvement Really Possible?



By Clay Freinwald

[January 2017] As the new Administration takes office, a change in the makeup of the FCC is under way. The new Chairman, Ajit Pai, has been an advocate seeking to help broadcasters, especially AM broadcasters, hoping to improve their prospects. As always, Clay has a sober view on the challenges facing AM stations and possible solutions.

We have all been hearing a great deal about the problems impacting AM Radio. Adding another wrinkle in the works is the matter of what will be the impact on the FCC of the changing of the guard in Washington, DC.

The change of party in power could change a lot of things. An example of this took place late last month when we all thought the Commission would adopt a number of changes to EAS. They declined to act – instead we got news the Commission was undergoing a shake-up.

And then there was a group suggesting plans should be made now for the humane decommissioning of AM.

Giving all of this some thought, I would like to

share the following thoughts with you as to AMs future and the challenges in getting there.

DOES COVERAGE EQUAL SUCCESS?

There was a time, especially in locations like Seattle that has very poor ground conductivity and a population that continues to spread out, where an AM Broadcaster needed to have either a low-dial position or lots of power (or both) to cover the entire market.

Back when I got into this business, Tacoma and Seattle were, in many ways, hundreds of miles apart. Each had its own stations and that was fine. As the cities along Puget Sound grew together those big signals that covered most of the entire market were what kept them afloat with the smaller signal AMs falling by the wayside, and in some cases, going dark.

This shift to a larger conjoined area also forced FM stations to re-locate their transmitters to higher locations for much the same reason. Today we have FM stations whose coverage is equal to the signals from the big 50kW AMs creating a more level playing field.

Interestingly, in the Seattle area, we have very few small signal FM's but several limited coverage AM's continue to manage to survive.

IT HAPPENS AT NIGHT

Radio listeners today have come to expect that their favorite audio sources will be there whenever they want it.

AM is unique in that something bad happens when the sun goes down. For the most part, listeners do not understand and, furthermore, do not desire to understand. The fact that the vast majority of AMs either reduce power, switch to a directional antenna, or sign off at sunset is something that, 50 years ago, was tolerated – but those days are gone! (I recall a few years ago, while out doing AM field measurements, encountering a fellow that wanted to know how come a local station had their transmitter break every day – during the 5th inning of the ball game.)

FM Radio and all manner of streaming, does not have that problem. Sadly, there is nothing anyone can do to fix this problem, including the Government.

THE QUALITY DIFFERENCE

Today's audio audiences expect full fidelity, low background noise, and stereo, for the simple reason that, with the exception of AM Radio, they all get what they expect.

Meanwhile efforts providing increased audio bandwidth and stereo on AM have been less than hugely successful. First we had AM Stereo. It was a better but success was limited and the lack of universal adoption killed it.

Then came along IBOC, aka the AM Version of HD Radio. Like AM Stereo, a few stations operate it, but it has not been proven to be the key to universal success.

THE RECEIVER ISSUE

Quality AM Receivers are largely a dream.

For years the manufacturers of consumer radios have done a poor job in their AM sections, presenting a general lack of sensitivity, bandwidth (fidelity), etc. The fact is an old, tube-type, table radios manufactured over 50 years ago (I have one of those) work better than most of today's products.

It appears that the makers of receivers have given up on non-vehicle AM receivers. Even with today's HD Radio AM you would be hard-pressed to find a radio for your home that will decode it. Meanwhile you can purchase all kinds of receiving equipment for FM, including some models of smart phones.

Unfortunately, again the broadcast industry, nor any government entity, have done little to help correct this problem.

AM BOOSTERS

Some recent attention is being paid to the AM band thanks to activity in Puerto Rico where an operator has been operating a number of AM Boosters for some time,.

Apparently there are those that feel that if an AM Station could spread out its coverage with boosters it might be able to succeed. There are a number of cases where small AMs are linked with common programming serving multiple small towns that seem to work well. This has renewed discussion about how synchronized AM boosters actually might be good for the salvation on the "legacy band."

On the other hand, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) instead has indicated that it wants to rein in this sort operation, leading to a lot of raised eyebrows and wonder what the reasoning is behind this stance.

FM TRANSLATORS FOR AM

The FCC, in an effort to give AM a shot in the arm, thus far has agreed with those that have been claiming that if they just had an FM translator that things would be “all-better.”

Apparently this is based on the fact that FM now has the biggest piece of the radio pie.

I recall talking to an AM station owner many years ago about FM, trying to convince him to file for an FM frequency when they were still available. He was not interested, countering with arguments like – *“Why should I sink a lot of money into something that nobody listens to?”* *“How am I going to get my money back?”* and *“Why should I reduce my bottom line just to say that I am an AM/FM station?”*

Funny, is it not, how the same arguments are used today by some FM station owners when you discuss HD Radio?

History has taught us that these folks were wrong. Those who did indeed opt for an FM today find themselves in a much better position. The problem is there is just not enough empty spectrum to accommodate all those AMs with big signal FM’s to make a difference. That train left the station many years ago.

As they say, you snooze, you lose.

THE NOISE PROBLEM

As with a lot of things, there will always be those that look to the regulators for answers.

In this country, the FCC could have done more to deal aggressively with the ever increasing noise floor that is, effectively, reducing the coverage of AM radio stations as each day goes by. Only lately have they been receiving pressure to do so.

Unfortunately that horse left the barn many years ago. There is plenty of blame to go around here:

I blame the owners and operators of AM stations for being anti-science and failing to recognize their enemy was all around them. Generally, they did not wish to try and understand what was going on (too close to that ugly word: “Science”). Their solution was simply to ask for more power.

I also can blame the Feds for their apparent refusal to enforce their own Part 15 rules.

SPECTRUM SUPPLY VS DEMAND

Unfortunately, the “Magic Band-Aid” FM translator is a limited resource solution. The FCC recognized this and twisted their rules to permit the importing of translators from afar (as much as 250 miles!), calling it a minor-change.

The fact is the spectrum for these devices is limited and as it fills, that resource becomes increasingly more limited – to the point that some translators will be severely limited in terms of coverage, resulting in being minimally effective at limiting the bleeding.

Worse, some of these translators apparently are interfering with full power stations.

Regardless of how they are viewed, their actual benefit may be more limited to being an addition to the station's letterhead. Will having a flea-powered FM save the day? I think not.

THE LAWS OF SUPPLY AND DEMAND AND NATURAL PROCESSES

In some ways, owners of AM stations have been discovering what it is like when demand for a product goes down.

This is nothing new. Consumers will always gravitate toward something new and/or better. Need I mention some former major products: the Horse & Buggy, black and white TV, cassette and reel-to-reel tape, typewriters, rotary dial phones, and on and on. There are countless other industries that have not looked at the future and adapted (the same as applying for those

FM channels when they were available) and have been reduced to a paragraph in history books.

We need to face the fact that to a large extent AM Radio is facing the same dilemma that countless other industries have faced. As it has been said: there is nothing more constant than change. Radio, like all things, is facing change.

One of the biggest factors of change today is choice – there are a zillion audio choices. You can only divide the pie so many ways. The other big factor is quality – face it, a hyper-compressed digital audio source sounds a whole lot better than any monophonic, narrow band, pop and crackle AM signal ever will.

Today's consumers are not likely to lower their expectations unless there is compelling content that you cannot get anywhere else.

CONTENT DOES MATTER

Content is always a huge factor. The fact that some AMs are doing well underscores that.

The change in listening habits and demands have pretty much forced AMs to abandon music formats (there are a few exceptions) and become places where talk will work. And this is good, as the technical characteristics of AM are more compatible with voice transmission. Formats like News/Talk, Sports/Talk, and Telephone/Talk continue to work well. Examples - ESPN, Rush Limbaugh, and many more.

Another area where AM has changed is in presenting programming in other languages. Today you will find, in most metropolitan areas, a number of stations with non-English programming. The issue here is that there are more stations than there are viable formats. (In effect, supply and demand again creeps into the picture.)

THE SMALL MARKETS

There are a number of small markets across the country impacted by the shift of listening habits to FM.

Certainly these folks are impacted. Admittedly the addition of an FM transmitter, albeit low power, can certainly help them – especially if that AM is a Daytimer.

THE SURVIVAL OF THE FIT

I suspect that a lot of major market AMs would go dark, regardless of their power level, if they did not have an co-owned cluster of FMs footing the bill.

I also have to believe that a number of ownerships would be happy to sell their AMs just to get away from the financial drain. Further, I would wager that a lot AM's could go off the air and no-one would notice. Any takers?



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REDUCING THE BLOW TORCHES

There are those that are calling for the reduction of protection for the legacy high powered stations at night.

The feeling is that if this were done, more small stations could survive and perhaps remain viable. Seems to me that this is a process that has been going on for some time. The old "Clear Channels" are not there anymore, folks.

Just turn on your AM radio at night and try and find them.

MY RECOMMENDATIONS

If I were King for a day, here is how I would handle AM station needs:

1 – I would leave AM alone. There are times that it is best to "hold 'em."

2 – I would tell the Feds to quit trying to interfere with a natural process. This is not the auto industry or the society for the preservation of the horse and buggy.

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3 – I would let the future of AM be determined by supply and demand. What happened to this foundation of capitalism in this case?

Perhaps if the Feds backed off we would find that AM will find a way to determine the level at which it can sustain itself.

This may mean that AM Radio, in a few years, may end up with a whole lot fewer stations and those that do survive could perhaps be economically viable. Those stations may be a mixture of small ones serving small markets and some big ones that have found a way to survive economically. That's my \$.02. What do you think? I would love to hear what you see in your crystal ball for AM Radio.

*Clay Freinwald, a frequent contributor to **The BDR**, is a veteran Seattle market engineer who continues to serve clients from standalone stations to multi-station sites.*

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