



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

Clay's Corner

Can AM Be Saved? Should AM Be Saved?



By Clay Freinwald

[June 2015] A lot of ideas are being tossed around as to how to help AM radio. Revitalization, translators, FM allocations, and other ideas are being advanced. The FCC has been rather slow to actually do anything substantial, aside from allowing many translator owners to get windfall prices selling to AM stations. What is lacking is an overall plan. Here are Clay's ideas on what will work.

It appears the realization that AM Radio, our first broadcast system, is in trouble has finally sunk in and the Government, aka the FCC, is attempting to come to the rescue.

There is no doubt we are a regulated industry, dependent on and limited in what we can accomplish by the Rules and Regulations. But, should broadcasters expect real help from that direction?

Or, should the industry actively be doing something to improve matters from the inside?

A DIFFICULT TIME

AM's many woes are well known: A jammed band with limited bandwidth, where natural

interference (lightning and other static crashes or loss of signal under bridges and in tunnels) makes reception difficult, combined with generally poor receivers.

Now, mix in regulatory and political roadblocks, and AM continues to be at a great disadvantage, compared to FM. And this is my short list based on a quick head-dump.

How bad is AM doing? Similar to the situation in many markets, I have watched a steady drop in the ratings of AM Stations here in the Seattle area. One time powerhouse AMs are becoming also-rans. In a recent 12+ rating for Seattle-Tacoma, the highest AM station as #16. The rest, many pumping out 50 kW, rate down in the 20s and lower.

And here is the clincher: long time market leaders are now being beaten-out in the ratings by KNHC (FM), a station operated by bunch of high school students!

Another factor: the land under many AM antenna systems can be sold for more money than the AM could ever reasonably expect to make. This situation is underscored by the recent announce-

ments of the sales of property currently under some large, major market stations.

The bottom line: This is a very sad situation. Some would likely call it a crisis. It is no wonder that the FCC is concerned. They should be.

So what should be done? Do we just let the AM band expire and dwindle down to just a few that are supported by their co-owned FM's. Or do we do something that will pump new life into these operations?

LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS

Part of the problem – and an impediment to real solutions – is that, in general, we have become a society that has in large part assumed that the government is our ‘nanny’ and when things go wrong government will come to our rescue.

A number of owners and operators of AM radio stations likely feel the same way about there issues. After all did not the Feds dump truck loads of money into GM to keep them from failing? Why should it be different for radio?

Now the folks are awaiting what magic-button the FCC is going to press that will suddenly turn things around. But, what is missing here, in my humble opinion, is an unfortunately common problem – a lack of understanding of the science behind the issue.

IFTGAIHTH

On the other hand, as Ronald Reagan once said, the nine most terrifying words in the English language are “I’m from the Government, and I’m here to help.”

Unfortunately, just as President Reagan pointed out, the FCC has been part of the problem, having approved the over-saturation of the band with minimally effective stations while failing to control the many devices that cause the coverage of radio stations to continue shrinking, due to an ever increasing noise floor.

For a while, the FCC and a lot of stations placed their hope in the iBiquity solution. However a decade or so of experience has shown that this has not been the salvation they were seeking. At the same time, despite constant consumer complaints about reception neither the FCC nor many manufacturers have much interest in AM receivers.

The result is what has become normal in terms of audio quality (wide frequency response, stereo and reasonable signal to noise levels) are not standard features of today’s AM Radio.

Until the Feds start getting meaningful pressure from the industry, they will continue down the same road, attempting to ‘shore-up’ something that is washing away.

INDUSTRY EFFORTS

More recently, everyone has come to believe that letting an AM have an FM channel was the solution.

The very fact this has taken place (to a limited extent) has been clear evidence that minds are changing about fixing the AM band. Perhaps there is no fix, some are thinking. So they look to what might be considered a bolder approach – fix AM by abandoning it and moving to FM.

I am not new to this industry and to the idea that the ultimate solution to this problem is to look the VHF spectrum immediately below the FM Broadcast Band. Thankfully, some broadcasters have been changing their minds. Unfortunately, not everyone is on board with this idea and by that I mean the FCC and certain other parties.

AM IS PROBABLY DOOMED

In my opinion, regardless of the rhetoric coming from Washington, DC, the FCC is *not* going to be able to pull the rabbit out of the hat and come up with some new policies that will magically repair the problems impacting AM Radio. Those who think this will happen are delusional and

apparently also believe in the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus.

Just consider what we might do if the industry were able to speak with one united voice and were to try to start a new broadcast band from scratch right now.

- 1 Would you choose to use the current spectrum (.5 to 1.7 kHz)?
- 2 Would you choose to use Amplitude modulation?
- 3 Would you try and cram as many stations into this new band as there is now?

I submit that the answers are all “no.”

Therefore, perhaps, we should ask the questions make famous by a well-known TV personality: *What were you thinking? How's that working out for you?*

CLAY'S SOLUTION FOR AM

With that in mind, I am going to step out here (with my flack suit on) and lay out my recommendations.

- 1 First: *Stop making things worse!* Do not grant more FM Translators to AMs. All this does is to clutter up the existing FM band. There is not enough spectrum for every AM to have translators anyway, especially after the FCC opened the band to LPFMs!
- 2 And *stop flogging dead horses!* Admit that AM HD and AM Stereo are failures and eliminate any further use of HD on the existing AM Band.
- 3 Open up the spectrum immediately below the FM band (TV channels 5 and 6 have been suggested) for aural broadcasting. (Now is the time to act before someone comes up with a use for the spectrum for more broadband).
- 4 Enact an all-channel radio rule that would require all receivers manufactured be capable of receiving the existing 88-108 as well as the new expanded band like we did

with the expanded band AM Radios or the All-Channel TV rule.

- 5 Create an allocation scheme to ensure all existing AM stations would have priority and a level playing field, being treated equally in the new-band.
- 6 Set a date-certain for the process to start.
- 7 Accept applications for the new band for one year.
- 8 Grant construction permits with a required two-year period to construct.
- 9 Require simulcast operation for a period of 10 years.
- 10 Sunset the existing AM band at the end of the 13th year.
- 11 Maybe require all new-band stations operate in hybrid mode until year 13 when analog FM could be turned off, leaving a digital-only band.

THE “LEFTOVER” BAND

Oh yes. What do we do with the existing AM Band after this is all concluded?

Here are a couple of quick ideas:

- 1 Let the Amateurs (Hams) have it. Think of it as an expansion of the 160 Meter band.
- 2 Create a series of *truly clear channels* to be used for emergency message distribution.

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AND ALL THOSE OPPOSED?

I am encouraged that many others now support much of what I propose. But, certainly there are those that are opposed:

- 1 Manufacturers of AM Radio Equipment.
- 2 Those that feel they cannot afford the money that such a switch would require.
- 3 Those that feel that they will sit-tight and wait for the Feds to send them money to make the change.
- 4 Those that feel that they will be saved by some other solution from the FCC's secret 'Skunk Works.'

If the industry could focus on a solution rather than parochial interests, we might have an opportunity to actually address this issue.

So what is your idea for saving the legacy band? Got a better idea? I would love to hear it. Please do let me know what you think.

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