



The

# Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

## Clay's Corner

### Is It Time for Digital AM to Take the Stage?



**By Clay Freinwald**

*[January 2020] For some two decades now, the industry has been seeking a way to help the older band by fostering “AM Improvement.” Although HD radio included an AM component, it did not really spread very well, for several reasons. Last November, the [FCC's NPRM](#) sought comment on digital-only operation by AM stations. As usual, Clay has some thoughts:*

Perhaps you were aware about Hubbard Radio's WWFD(AM), which went to an all-digital transmission mode last year, in an experiment to see if we had reached the point where this was viable.

Currently, the [FCC is asking for input](#) on the matter of all-digital operation (19-311) and the simulcasting (19-310) of radio programs.

In light of today's consolidation and clustering, perhaps relaxation of the rule on this issue is in order?

The period for comments on the proposal to permit all-digital AM Stations runs until March 9<sup>th</sup>, with Reply Comments due by April 6<sup>th</sup>. (Reply Comments on the simulcasting aspect are due February 6<sup>th</sup>.)

#### MIXED OPINIONS

As might be expected, not everyone is happy with these ideas.

Part of the thinking is based on the notion that you could have the same program on two AM's (for example) in the same market, with one of them running all-digitally – and the other in the usual analog mode.

Those opposed to the idea of changing the rules are concerned it would negatively impact what is called “program diversity.”

In my opinion, there is plenty of diversity on the radio dial today.

#### THE END OF ANALOG?

Some are interpreting all of activity to be meaning that – every – AM will be switching to digital leaving a jillion AM-only receivers with nothing to listen to (except for electrical gizmo noise).

Personally, I give more credit than that to the owners of AM Radio Stations.

I would highly doubt if any market would see all of their AM's go digital. Perhaps with an ownership that had two AM's it might make sense to have one of each. With the proposed rule change, they could each have the same programming, which could be viewed as a financial incentive.

### QUESTIONS IN THE AIR

Another argument is that the FCC should not limit digital AM's to HD Radio but rather they should permit Digital Radio Mondial, or DRM, to have an equal shot.

However, the question needing to be answered is just how many of the millions of HD-capable radios out there would be able to decode DRM? If that percentage is low, it would place DRM at a significant disadvantage. I know that both systems use COFDM, however I have no idea of there is any degree to compatibility between the systems.

Perhaps that too could change?

And, finally, it is important to know what the company that owns HD Radio (EXPERI) will want to extract from the owner of an AM station that is willing to put everything on the line and go all-digital?

### GROWING INTEREST

The bottom line is there appears to be a lot of interest in this proposal.

The FCC's process will likely draw a number of comments, pro and con. This will be an interesting process to watch.

There is one thing I can say: never did I ever dream that we would be debating this issue!

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*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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