

RADIO OVERVIEW

In many parts of the world radio is much more accessible than television. One new technology promises the possibility of cheap crank-up receivers. With a few turns, listeners will get half an hour of listening without battery or electrical current. For the illiterate, radio brings instruction, news and music, and can become a catalyst for social change.

In the more developed world, teenagers begin viewing a little less television—turning to radio for music and talk shows while they travel or do something else. One issue that needs examination are the raunchy shows with very “adult” and sexual content listened to by even young children on their way to school. Perhaps of larger concern is the bland content of so much radio.

In its July-August, 1998 issue, Group Magazine commented:

If your kids say that most radio stations sound the same, they’re on the right wave. Community-oriented radio is fading out fast as corporate consolidation takes over independent stations. Big business owners rely on more conservative playlists, syndicated programs, more commercials, less news and new music, and less local information. In a Rolling Stone interview, Rober Unmacht, publisher of radio industry’s M Street Journal, says, “It’s been horrible for listeners. (Radio has gone) from a business focused on communities to a business that’s the same as any other chain.”

Mergers and globalization of radio stations lead in two directions: to the intertwining of news and entertainment media and to the consolidation of power in the hands of a few. Negatively this can marginalize local and small businesses. It can also lead to larger abuses of manipulation and corruption. Advocates of consolidation point to the way large companies can increase the scope and quality of content.

The U.S. was once covered by thousands of privately owned local radio stations. Just years ago there were forty national leaders in the field. Today a few huge companies control the radio medium and tie it into other interests. Clear Channel Communications, for instance, owns 1,225 radio stations and 776,000 outdoor advertising spaces (billboard companies).

Interestingly, in 2002, Clear Communications developed a joint venture with the Vatican looking for corporate partners for 2003’s tour of “St. Peter and the Vatican: The Legacy of the Pope.” A leather-bound, glossy sponsorship catalog says an exhibition will spend three and a half months in each of four US cities hosted by a major museum. Corporate partnership promises: “use of Vatican

exhibition imagery, Vatican exhibition proprietary marks, and inclusion in multi-million dollar multi-market broadcast, out door and print advertising campaign." Some doubt the profit to be made by such corporate partners. Here is an example of media power and a collaboration between commercial and religious organizations.

Also at issue is the widespread use of money to promote certain labels and artists. "Source" Magazine (June 2002: 31) describes the current role of payola in promoting songs through radio.

Ever wonder why some FM radio stations appear to only have five or six songs in rotation?... Most radio stations rely on playlists—a preprogrammed collection of songs—which are now at the center of a simmering debate between radio station owners and record label executives.

Since the advent of rock'n'roll in the '50s, record companies have hired independent radio promoters, spending millions of dollars annually. These promoters pass money—payola—to radio stations to insure that their songs get added to playlists. It's a murky world of pay-for-play that Mary Catherine Sneed, chief operating officer at Radio One, wants to clean up.

Radio One is one of the few challengers of Clear Channel Communications' leadership. Radio One owns 65 urban music radio stations. Partnering with Ventura Media Group, they pitch songs to program directors at Radio One's top 25 stations paying a fee to each one of those stations. In return, record labels will pay Ventura about \$2,500 for each new song added to a playlist. It is Mary Sneed's hope that the clear partnership between Radio One and Ventura and the up-front fee will put an end to murky payola. It is well known that DJs and program directors have been bribed with money, gifts, travel and other amenities. According to Sneed, "Somebody at some label is going to get cut out of some secret transaction when Radio One starts doing things the right way." But others like Wendy Day of the Rap Coalition are doubtful. "All I see (this deal) doing," she says, "is centralizing the payments. It's going from a variety of people to pay to a system where you would pay one person."

DJ Julio G, who hosts an old-school show on LA's Hot 92.3, has a different and more hopeful read. "Maybe I'm being stupid and I'm not understanding the process—what hip-hop is all about. It's about a person breaking records *and* doing things they need to do to move up."

The author of this "Source" article, Brett Johnson concludes:

Payola, in some form, may continue despite regulation and arrangements like that of Ventura and Radio One. But deals such as these show that urban radio is clearly taking baby steps toward a more egalitarian system of playing good music.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How important is radio to the young people you know? How much do they listen to it? What is its influence on their lives?
2. What concerns about radio and its commercialization would come up in a discussion among these teenagers? Are they dissatisfied with the offerings? Are there new or other artists they'd like to hear played?
3. Does the article above begin to give some insight into the problem? What would you like to see answered and about what would you like more information? How might you get it?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Radio is still a very important disseminator of information and entertainment.
2. Those who care about young people need to be aware of its importance and influence in their lives.
3. Besides critiquing the style and content of local stations, we must also be aware of the media giants who control radio and their methods of choosing format and content.

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