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IT'S NOT JUST YOUR IMAGINATION

The radio scene really has changed

BY MAUREEN NEVIN DUFFY • CORRESPONDENT • MAY 18, 2008

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While listeners try to hunt down their favorite radio personalities, a larger picture is emerging to explain why the great radio host disappearance is happening.

If you've been following this column, you know that we offered a while ago to track down missing DJs for fans. We're making slow progress. But the radio pros we're tapping into are telling us a big story: They say we're witnessing the homogenization of radio. In brief, we're seeing less local flavor and more one-size-fits-all. While most of us are trying to decipher the difference between terrestrial and satellite (terrestrial relies on radio towers to send the signal) the radio we grew up with is fading into the abyss.

Here's the business model: Local mom-and-pop stations across the country, squeezed for advertising dollars, are being bought out by large media companies, like Citadel Broadcasting — the third largest broadcasting group in the country, which now owns and operates WABC Radio and ABC Radio Networks, or a total of 165 FM stations and 58 AM stations. ABC Radio Networks creates and distributes programming to more than 4,000 affiliates.

The nation's largest radio entity, Clear Channel, operates 1,200 radio stations in the United States and another 240 around the world. Its syndication arm, Premiere Radio Networks, syndicates more than 70 radio programs to over 5,000 stations reaching 190 million listeners a week.

Such large media groups have the deep pockets to attract and sign a Rush Limbaugh, Don Imus or Sean Hannity for multi-million dollar salaries. The parent companies can afford to pay because they're slicing overhead by letting go of local talent — on-air personalities, news people and reporters — at stations across the country, people whose annual salaries can run in the very high six figures. In exchange for carrying the network's ads, the stations replace local staff with stars like Imus or Hannity, who attract advertising revenue and who cost the stations nothing.

According to Radio Somewhere's sources, this business plan is reversing the local formula of syndicated programming from two syndicated shows for every six or eight local shows maybe 10 years ago, to one or two local shows to every eight syndicated. And this is true in L.A., Boston, Chicago and New York.

Clear Channel's Web site states, "Programming decisions are based on local research into the needs of communities, broadcasting in approximately 50 listening formats across the U.S."

"There really are only two local talk radio stations left in New York, and one in New Jersey," notes ABC Radio Networks news anchor George Weber. Most local talent, he notes, are from the news staff. In Chicago this February, Citadel-owned WLS-AM (890) fired five of its seven news staff, in what the Chicago Tribune described as a cost-cutting "bloodbath." The report also said WLS is rumored to be bringing Imus to the station.

The large broadcasting companies do maintain enormous, worldwide news departments that can buy product from Bloomberg News and the Associated Press as well as their own news networks, all of which is available to local stations. The local station saves all those annual salaries — from \$74,000 for a

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morning DJ in Des Moines to \$300,000 to \$400,000 in Chicago, and \$500,000 to \$1 million for a New York news anchor.

But local news has to suffer. Who is covering city hall? Where will they get the on-the-scene reports of local events? Weber says: "The local relevance is you have a decimated news department."

Consequently, stabbings and other crimes are a dime a dozen, he says. "I've got five minutes to tell what's happening in the world."

Where will this trend end? One popular industry pundit, Jerry Del Colliano, who writes on Inside Music Media, (<http://www.insidemusicmedia.blogspot.com>) says the end could be near if this latest idea takes off. Apparently, the CEO of Citadel, Farid Suleman, now wants to cut the sales staff. Stay tuned

Gambling fans, take note: Write him at John Gambling, 111 Broadway, New York, N.Y., 10006 or call the show at (800) 321-0710.

Maureen Nevin Duffy created and hosted "Asbury Radio — The Radio Voice of Asbury Park," a weekly public affairs talk show at the city's WYGG, 88.1FM station, for more than six years. Please send your comments and suggestions regarding Radio Somewhere to AsburyRadio@aol.com or 3 Deal Lake Court, Asbury Park, NJ 07712.

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