

Low-power radio -- an autopsy

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By Thomas Hazlett

"In creating a low-power FM radio service, the FCC has thrown open the doors of opportunity to the smaller, community oriented broadcaster, and will give hundreds - if not thousands - of new voices access to the nation's airwaves."

William E. Kennard, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, January 2000

In December 2000, the Federal Communications Commission announced the first community groups to win low-power FM radio licences. The regulatory path had not been smooth. The FCC's plans for the medium - framed to promote free speech and local diversity in the face of mega-consolidation in commercial radio - had been savaged in Congress by the National Association of Broadcasters and National Public Radio. An estimated 2,800 new licences would have been available under the regulator's proposed rules; this total shrank to just 1,200 after the incumbent broadcasters - predictably crying "interference" - had got their way.

Still, when the first non-profit organisations were awarded radio permits, hopes ran high. What might creative folks make of the golden mike when free from corporate constraints? Enthusiasts envisioned innovative formats, including free-form music and serious talk from alternative perspectives.

Yet two years on, silence dominates the low-power FM playlist. And the problem stems not from limitations imposed by foes of the medium - whose lobbying had persuaded Congress to trim available assignments by 60 per cent - but from FCC rules that were largely written by its champions. These rules are now strangling the upstarts.

Of the 255 recipients of the FCC's initial station awards in late 2000, only half have bothered to respond. The process begins with a construction permit, after which a station is built, followed by issuance of an operating licence. Such micro-stations cost under \$10,000 to create, but only 35 had reached the second stage by late 2002. Of these, just 18 stations - seven per cent of those eligible - were found to offer any regular programming. Station construction permits are now expiring, unused. Low-power FM will need a boost to get even 100 tiny stations on-air.

The majority of America's 269 radio markets will fail to hear a single new broadcast. Even if you live in a city where a new station locates, you will be searching for a needle in a haystack, as low-power signals travel just 3.5 miles. But that limitation is also an opportunity: we could be filling the airwaves with thousands of fresh voices. Using traditional FCC spacing rules, at least 100,000 low-power transmitters could join the FM band.

The handful of new stations actually broadcasting hints at the promise of the medium. In Oroville, California (population: 12,656) low-power KRBS was launched in April 2002 by 100 local citizens who donated \$100 each. No one who has applied for their own show has been turned down. According to the station's website, listeners may enjoy: punk rock, bluegrass, Celtic, reggae, "Free Speech News", ethnic programs, a reading of Steinback's *Grapes of Wrath*, "Resistance Radio", history lessons, and "Fishing with Splitshot." Middle-of-the-road it is not.

But nor is it likely to be economic. To comply with FCC rules, local programmes must air for 80 per cent of KRBS's 36 weekly broadcast hours. That takes a lot out of the unpaid staff. These volunteers keep monthly expenses to \$800, but even this squirrel-sized nut is tough to crack. Listeners are exhorted to donate time and money.

Just a dozen \$3 commercials spread out over the programming day could sustain the fledgling station and provide local retailers with a productive advertising channel. But ad spots are banned by Commission rules, as are multiple-station ownership and greater use of syndicated programming.

Each fledgling station is forced to go it alone, begging. Major commercial radio chains coast on scale efficiencies, combining hundreds of broadcasting stations. If the Oroville community group could team up with low-power stations in Marysville, Chico and Redding, shared operations - and programmes - could shave costs. Stations offering neighbourhood promotions - for stores, shops, churches, car dealers or restaurants - might achieve critical mass, producing quality programmes for those desperate to escape mass media. Capitalist innovators might follow the example of Ben & Jerry's, co-opting a market alternative to create an alternative market. Off-beat broadcasting chains could flourish in a variety of flavours.

Alas. That could lead to the emergence of a Northern Sacramento Valley low-power FM radio monopoly, clearly a far more dangerous thing than Clear Channel's 1,200 full-power radio station network with 110 million listeners, blessed by the FCC.

J. Rodger Skinner, who in 1998 filed one of the two petitions triggering the FCC's low-power radio action, says: "It was a huge blow when the FCC limited low power FM to non-commercial use only. This left station operators with no way to support a real radio station." He notes that many pirate operators wanted low-power FM simply to "play radio". He took issue. "This was not a plaything that I was attempting to create, but rather a full-fledged new broadcasting service."

Lobbyists from the big broadcasters have been blamed in dozens of news stories and commentaries for burying low-power radio. But the attack they launched was simply gratuitous violence. The FCC's rules were advanced by "public interest" enthusiasts for low-power FM radio. To further their crusade against commercialism they loaded it with a bucket of poison pills. The result is that new community radio stations will be quaint, casual and exceedingly rare - which is exactly the way their old foes, the NAB and NPR, like them.

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