

Who killed micro radio?
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Who killed micro radio? Reports of the death of Low Power FM radio at the hands of Congress are greatly exaggerated. Low Power FM was already a corpse.

COMMENTARY--Low power FM radio is a superb idea. Allowing small, community-oriented stations to spring up--emitting just the power of an ordinary light bulb-- would be a burst of fresh broadcast air. Transmissions limited to just three and a half miles would politely avoid cacophony with existing stations, while empowering local pundits and entrepreneurs to speak their peace. From neighborhood Pentacostals to the angry urban militant, from mom & pop bookstores to the library's poetry circle, low power FM (LPFM) radio could be a delight to listeners, a windfall for local enterprise, and a boon to community awareness.

It will never happen. Airspace that could sing will be silent. Like a long list of wireless services new and old, it is blocked by the spectrum allocation system. What gives this story a twist is that LPFM found champions at the heart of that system, the Federal Communications Commission. As has been widely chronicled, the FCC's plan for low-power radio was derailed this past December by the U.S. Congress, under pressure from existing (full-power) broadcasters. The New York Times reported that a sleeper budget provision "sharply curtails the ambitious plans of the Federal Communications Commission to issue licenses for low-power FM radio stations to 1,000 or more schools, churches and other small community organizations." The rules instituted by Congress would limit the FCC to licensing perhaps just 250 stations. Then-FCC Chairman William E. Kennard decried the "the dangers of politicizing spectrum management."

It made good press. Clinton-Gore Democrats in bed with Christian conservatives to promote free speech, only to be slaughtered in Congress by lobbyists for the National Association of Broadcasters and National Public Radio. (Hey, what happened to the House GOP radicals for capitalism? And what about those corporate liberals pushing diversity at NPR?) But the brutal truth is even uglier: community radio was already hovering near death when bludgeoned by Congress. The FCC's regulatory process routinely stifles new technologies; politics-as-usual guaranteed that LPFM would never flourish. Most ironic is that it was doomed to fail by those who claimed to be its friends.

Sounds of silence According to FCC rules, the radio waves are jammed. Are atmospheric conditions responsible? Yes. The atmospheric conditions in Washington, D.C.

There are 269 U.S. radio markets, from New York, New York to Casper, Wyoming. Listeners in the average market can tune to 15 FM stations. Since there are 100 channels allotted to FM stations, 85 channels go unused. The "ambitious" FCC plan offered to drop in just four low-power stations per market. Most households would be unlikely to receive even a single one.

The major roadblock is the FCC's practice of silencing three channels on either side of a full-power FM station as a buffer against interference. This soaks up precious bandwidth, a ridiculously slothful way to limit static. The broadcasters, knowing competitors could be slotted into those frequencies, pay big bucks for engineering studies showing such squandering necessary for easy listening.

The FCC knows otherwise. Full-power stations peacefully co-exist with just one channel of separation. Hundreds of FM stations were "short spaced" into various cities as long ago as 1964, and interference complaints have been nil. These situations involve stations emitting up to one thousand times low-power's 100 watt limit. Proven separations for citywide blasters ought be civil for neighborhood whispers.

Using this simple logic and conservative assumptions about radio spacing, there exists bandwidth to easily insert in excess of 100,000 low-power stations around the U.S. Community radio could unleash virtually ubiquitous broadcast opportunities for artists, schools, churches, local governments, police and fire departments, over-the-air classifieds, community newspapers, discount warehouses and grocery stores (announcing merchandise, produce or specials), book dealers and libraries (books on tape, poetry readings, services for the blind), parks (Little League play-by-play), political parties, legit theater, art galleries, foreign language communities, hospitals, youth and senior centers, 12-step programs, Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, social welfare organizations--the universe of niches is varied and vast.

Gratuitous burdens This radio bazaar will not materialize under the parsimonious allocation of licenses contemplated by the FCC. Indeed, low-power service will attract only trivial audiences on those few stations licensed (before or after congressional restrictions) due to uneconomic Commission mandates.

Under FCC rules only non-profit organizations are allowed to own licenses. Commercial, advertising-supported stations are prohibited. Initially, only one station is permitted per organization. (After three years, a maximum of ten micro stations may be owned in different markets.) No license goes to a newspaper or other local media outlet. And licensing rules can force stations to program eight hours of original shows daily.

Regulatory overkill assures that low power FM stations are expensive to operate, difficult to fund, and a yawn to audiences. Entrepreneurs who might discover how to make low-power FM popular are eliminated: for-profits need not apply. LPFM could provide finely targeted audiences for advertising by local shops, craftsmen, or repair services, but commercial ad time is illegal. Economies from networking local operations are powerful in radio--as the ongoing conglomeration of hundreds of full-power FM and AM stations in mega-mergers attests--but common ownership is strictly limited. Leveraging the resources of local newspapers, including alternative weeklies, to create content is a cost-savings no-brainer. Illegal monopolization. Syndication of unique audio programs would enhance free speech. But these bump into original content obligations. As would attempts to serve an immigrant enclave by broadcasting home country news and entertainment.

The bitterest aftertaste left by these poison pills is that they were imposed with the advise and consent of low-power's most vocal advocates. LPFM activists proudly tout the technology as analogous to public access channels on cable television. The irony--the utter failure of public access channels to attract viewers despite countless millions in subsidies from cable TV systems coast-to-coast--is lost.

LPFM champions such as Andrew Schwartzman of the Media Access Project were eager to impose economically debilitating limits on low-power FM operators. Schwartzman argued that the FCC should "place stricter ownership limits on low power FM stations than on full power stations," and restrict "low power licensees to a single license." This is bizarre public policy. By severely handicapping fledgling stations, the policy reduces both free speech and market competition. That is the outcome of a regulatory system that is broken.

Rodger Skinner, the low power FM advocate who filed one of the two 1998 petitions that provoked the FCC into opening a rule making on the matter, fought a lonely battle for liberal rules allowing financially viable stations. Many low-power advocates were really just into "play radio," says Skinner, a retired radio engineer who sought to create "a full fledged new broadcasting service." It was a "huge blow when the FCC limited LPFM to non-commercial use," he says, leaving operators with "no way to support a real radio station." He believes that LPFM "died" January 20, 2000--the date FCC regulations were adopted.

Mbanna Kantako is a blind disc jockey broadcasting "Human Rights Radio" to Springfield, Illinois' housing projects since 1987. The airwaves have quiet spaces available for tens of thousands of Kantakos to bloom. But the seedlings will not be planted. Indeed, Kantako is himself ineligible; as a "pirate" broadcaster, FCC rules bar his license application. In this silence, a careful listener hears "the dangers of politicizing spectrum management." It is as shattering at the FCC as it is in Congress.

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