



TUNING OUT DIVERSITY

STORY BY BETHANY KOHOUTEK

Americans live in a fast-paced world of conglomerates, mergers and globalization. They get their news from MSNBC, their entertainment from AOL Time Warner and eat at McDonald's. And their radio, too, comes from a handful of huge corporations.

The Issue

Radio diversity or, some would argue, the lack thereof, is a hot issue right now. Everyone from civil libertarians and anti-trust advocates to religious groups to business executives have stakes in it. Many want radio back in the hands of smaller companies, ensuring more localization. But big business argues it is the only one that has the resources and personnel to give listeners what they want.

The airwaves are changing. More and more stations are being snapped up by an increasing-

ly fewer number of corporations. Central Iowa is no exception.

Three companies, Saga Communications, Wilks Broadcasting and Clear Channel, dominate almost all of the popular FM radio stations Ames can pick up.

Saga, a Michigan firm which operates in Iowa through the Des Moines Radio Group, owns Oldies 93.3, Star 102.5, Lazer 103.3 and Lite 104.1. Wilks Broadcasting controls country stations 92.5 and 97.3, as well as Classic Rock 94.9 KGGO and a soft-rock station, 98.3. And San Antonio's Clear Channel claims 105.1 Channel Q, '80s station Mix 100.3, popular music Kiss 107.5 and 106.3, adult-contemporary soft rock.

Chances are you've heard what most of these stations have to offer, and perhaps you've realized that, besides the annoying jingles ("Today's best music without all the rap, rap, rap" or "The new music revolution"), every-

thing they play is pretty indistinguishable from what you'd hear on MTV or VH1.

Don't even bother looking for anything cutting edge, from jazz to electronica to hip-hop, on the commercial end of the dial.

"I think it's unfortunate that most people haven't noticed this lack of radio diversity," says

Shar Macatangay, general manager of Iowa State University's radio station, 88.5 KURE. "Unless you travel, you wouldn't know that there's a station exactly like Lazer or Channel Q in every town in America, playing the exact same sets of Marchbox Twenty and Staind."

Corporate Ownership of the Airwaves

Of the three major companies that control the central Iowa commercial tuner, none has generated more buzz than Clear Channel.

"No one is bigger, better or more intense than Clear Channel Radio," according to the company's own Web site.

And no one is disputing the "bigger" aspect of Clear Channel's claim. An ordinary communications firm? No. It is a multi-billion dollar entity that controls 47 of the 50 major American radio markets. It owns more than 1,200 stations in the United States alone. Those stations account for 20 percent of all radio industry revenue, according to the site.

Just to put things in perspective, Clear Channel's Web site informs readers that Clear Channel Radio proudly reaches more people than the population of many countries. According to a bar graph, Clear Channel Radio reaches 102,758,000 people. The population of Mexico, it reports, is 100,294,036.

Clear Channel is the Microsoft of the radio network. Never before has one company claimed such an enormous percentage of the market.

And Clear Channel's rise to the top occurred in a relatively short amount of time. In 1999, Clear Channel swallowed up the communications giant AMFM, Inc., an amalgamation valued at \$15.9 billion, according to financial news source *The Street.com*. A year later, it merged with another industry heavy hitter, SFX, for \$4.4 billion, making it the largest radio and concert entity the United States has

Garth Kelly, graduate student in agronomy and DJ for radio station 88.5 KURE, plays reggae at the station's studio in Friley Hall.



ever seen.

Not only will Clear Channel's dominance of the industry have a profound effect on radio, it will also impact concert selections and ticket sales. It owns 122 major concert venues and 40 of America's 46 outdoor amphitheaters, according to its site. Industry ranking specialist *Billboard* reports that Clear Channel has sold 70 percent of all concert tickets so far this year. Ticket prices have risen 43 percent since 1998, according to *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

And judging by various reports from around the country, the mega-corporation isn't afraid to play hard ball. According to *The Denver Post*, Clear Channel has allegedly warned artists it will cut their records from station playlists if the artists try to book a concert with anyone else. That drags musicians and smaller promoters into the fray, as well.

"From what I've read about Clear Channel and its business practices, I'd have to say that I'm not a big fan of the corporation," says Macatangay, senior in industrial engineering. "I've read stories of how they've shut down annual fund-raisers, bought out tiny stations, invaded markets similar to Ames and fired longtime disc jockeys to hire minimum-wage high school kids with no experience. They have no respect for women or minorities. They bully former employees into silence."

Corporate and Local?

Is it possible for radio to be both corporate and local? According to Jim Schaefer, operations manager for the Des Moines Radio Group, the answer is yes. The Des Moines Radio Group is owned by the relatively large media conglomerate Saga Communications. But, claims Schaefer, the emphasis remains on local wants and needs.

"Basically, the rules are that you play with your gut and the research will justify if you've made the right decision," Schaefer says. "Typically, we research the music we play. ... If the audience likes it, we continue to play it. And we research people in the Des Moines area. It's not like we are researching people 500 or 1,000 miles away."

He says there is a difference between Saga and Clear Channel, which both control roughly the same amount of the popular radio market in the Des Moines-Ames area.

"I think there's a fundamental difference," he says. "We're not cookie-cutter. Their format is a template. But there's a difference in our formula, a difference in management philosophy. Clear Channel's management is very centralized. Saga's mission, as defined by the president, is that we have more of an entrepreneurial spirit that gives lots of local autonomy to managers of local stations."

Lou Sipolt, assistant director of operations for the Des Moines cluster of Wilks Broadcasting stations and morning host on 95 KGGO, says corporations are capable of serving local audiences if they stick to a few guide-



lines.

"The bigger companies who brag that they are local, yet over 50 percent of their programming is piped in from other cities, are really doing a disservice to the community as they are confusing a lot of listeners," he says. "If a big company comes in and owns the station, that's fine. The smart ones will let the local talent and management continue to operate the station on a hometown level with people that know the community..."

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But does this guarantee a deviation from the standard radio fodder? Many would argue that even the Saga- and Wilks-operated channels stick to a predictable playlists.

Sipolt says this is due to stations becoming increasingly specialized.

"I remember when KGGO used to play Aerosmith followed up by Michael Jackson. ... You won't find that happening now," he explains. "Every station has a specific target audience, and they cater to that audience to justify their commercial rates."

Bobby Hacker, program director of the Clear Channel-owned 105.1 Channel Q, says many mainstream commercial radio stations still

attempt to serve local audiences and their specific musical tastes. The problem, he says, lies in what those audiences want to hear. Stations may try to spin more eclectic music, but neither advertisers nor local CD sales support it.

The Alternatives

So does all of this corporate fusing of the airwaves spell certain doom for listeners trying to squeeze some diversity out of the contemporary radio landscape? Maybe. Locally owned commercial radio stations are fighting a losing battle. For example, if one person operates a station by him- or herself, the operator can fill one ad slot with one advertiser. However, a large company can produce one nationally syndicated program, ship it to 100 of its stations and have 100 advertisers in that same time frame.

Sipolt says when he started in the radio business, it was different. Almost all radio was independent.

"It's a matter of being competitive and doing business," he says. "Nowadays, you can't really compete in the market place unless you have some reinforcement with some other stations in your stable."

So people are looking for alternative routes. There are a few ways radio is ever so slightly being pried from the fingers of corporate giants and placed back in the hands of locals.

One alternative to commercialized radio is campus radio. ISU has its own student-run FM station, KURE 88.5, where listeners can hear anything from standard college indie rock to reggae to Taiwanese tunes.

"KURE is student run and operated," Macatangay says. "We don't have a music programmer, but we trust our DJs enough to play what they feel is appropriate for a college audience without playing music you'd hear on a commercial station. Our goal is to provide students, as well as the Ames community, with radio that is truly Ames and ISU based. Since our station isn't commercial, we don't have to worry about pleasing advertisers or a big corporation."

Other radio diversity crusaders are taking different routes. Rather than tackling mainstream commercial ownership head on, some have found ways around it like creating their own radio stations.

In January 2000, the Federal

Communications Commission, the agency that regulates our airwaves, legalized certain radio bandwidths for low-power broadcasters. This move, celebrated by political groups, minority associations, churches and those with more diverse musical tastes, opened up more frequencies for noncommercial use.

Most low-power stations can only be heard within a few miles of the transmitter, so content is by definition local. With a permit from the FCC and the right equipment, almost anyone can broadcast from his or her home.

Pete Tridish is one of the top proponents of radio diversity in the United States. He is an ex-radio pirate and a co-founder of the Prometheus Radio Project, a national nonprofit organization created by radio activists to promote the democratization of the airwaves through avenues like low-power radio.

"When you listen to a community radio station, it's not stellar, but the people are for real," he says. "If you listen to a Clear Channel station, it sounds like robots off the assembly line — transparent and soulless. It points out all the problems of pure capitalism. ... People don't want to listen to radio like wallpaper."

By law, all low-power radio stations must be noncommercial, according to Andrea Cano, director of the Microradio Implementation Project. Similar to the Prometheus Project, the goal of the Microradio Project is to assist community groups that want to start low-power stations.

"That's what's good about low power FM — it's noncommercial," she says. "LPFM's goals

radio broadcasters] want to offer local music and local musicians and musicians throughout the nation who don't get as much airplay. It invites diversity of art and culture," she says.

No Easy Solutions

There are no clear-cut winners in the battle between corporate radio and grassroots reform efforts. With millions of dollars at their disposal, companies such as Clear Channel are like the Goliath to small radio's David.

Macatangay says corporations should take local audiences into consideration when deciding on a station's programming.

"Radio stations can program their own music to cater to the local audience instead of the national audience," she says. "Stations can take requests, spin more local and regional artists, and produce their own specialty shows instead of broadcasting nationally syndicated shows."

Although she hopes that commercial stations would step up their local involvement on their own, Macatangay and many others believe that only the government has the ability to combat the power of such massive corporations.

"I don't think radio will change until the government steps in," she says. "The government can change this in two ways. First, bring antitrust suits against them [big corporations]. This will stop their penny-pinching business practices and break up ownership of stations. Second, reduce the number of stations per market a company can own. This will create more rivalry between corporations over a national audience."

Just this August, a Denver concert promoting company called Nobody In Particular Presents filed a lawsuit against Clear Channel in federal court claiming that the corporation monopolizes the industry and denies radio time to artists who hire competing promoters. This is the first antitrust suit Clear Channel has ever faced, according to *The Denver Post*.

But Tridish says the chance that government would break up a huge corporation like Clear Channel is slim, especially considering the current conservative political climate.

Cano believes the first shift must be at the grassroots level. Listeners should be more attentive to what is going on around them.

"The most important message is that people really need to understand how radio functions," she says. "They really have the opportunity to make it better. People haven't done it for the last 10 to 15 years, and the media conglomerates have just eaten it up. I think people need to understand just how pervasive things are. And if they want to do that, they have to be much more proactive."

Specifically, she says, all cities should have a communications committee on the city council so that the citizens have the final say as to what is being broadcast.

"There really has to be local oversight for whatever is being proposed," she says. "Simple awareness and simple education is what we



Studio of the Clear Channel-owned 105.1 Channel Q.

really need to create at this point."

Is it the listeners' fault?

So does the problem lie not with mega-corporations, but with the listeners themselves? Do media consumers just want to be spoon-fed the latest sure-fire hit from Britney, Blink or Papa Roach? Possibly, according to 105.1's Hacker.

Many of today's radio fans are part of the MTV generation. What they see on MTV translates to what they want to hear on the radio, he says.

"I can always tell when MTV adds another video," Hacker says. "I start getting calls for whatever it is. There's a definite cause and effect."

And this prepackaged tendency isn't just boring, it's dangerous as well, Tridish says.

"[Extreme media conglomeration] is very disturbing in a democratic society because we rely on media to shape our public opinion," he says.

Listening to the radio isn't like eating a \$.69 McDonald cheeseburger. Radio was never meant to be consumed. It is a major medium for communication, expression and diversity. Music is not a product or a service. Yet a select few wealthy CEOs have manipulated it as such to fatten their wallets, and it seems the majority of Americans don't care. They seem to love conforming to the latest overplayed drivel that Channel Q or Kiss pumps into their ears. And if they don't, they aren't saying anything about it.

Until listeners actually crave one, don't expect a "new music revolution" any time soon.

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Additional reporting by Aaron Jones

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are completely different. Comparing it with commercial radio is like comparing apples and oranges."

"People should think of radio more as a public trust than a slot machine that money pours out of," Tridish adds. "A good society would make some serious efforts to make sure media is ethically used for more than just profit."

And because it is noncommercial and it can't be heard very far away, low-power radio has the distinct ability to connect with local music tastes, Cano says.

"It is very clear that those people [low-power