Worth More Dead than Live

US Corporate Radio and the Political Economy of Cyber-Jocking

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Current public and academic discussion in the US tends to support the view that American commercial radio has taken a totally new direction for two reasons: the massive station ownership concentration after the Telecom Act of 1996 and the new digital technology. This view is very common among radio scholars and industry professionals – as well as journalists who write about radio media in the US¹

Some critics argue that this new form of corporate radio, owned by enormous, publicly traded companies, has changed radio's economic power structure so that these giants may now – using the latest in digital technology – transform what had been lively and local commercial radio into a sheer generic commodity. Local productions have been replaced with syndicated content and in the smaller markets many stations are programmed with pseudo-local and pseudo-live pre-recorded content, using the method of computerized, remote voice tracking also known as “cyber-jocking”.² As a result, in February 2003 the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) launched an advocacy campaign, called “Keep Radio Live”, against the voice tracking plans of the largest radio giant, Clear Channel Communications (AFTRA 2003).³

However, from a political economic perspective these recent developments in US radio can be understood as a strengthening and intensifying of certain deep and historical processes characteristic of profit-seeking, advertising-supported commercial radio, rather than as a turning point or a breakthrough of truly new phenomena. (Meiksins Wood 1998, 39-40; 47). Without doubt, US commercial radio has changed significantly because of the new ownership structure, but isn't the direction of change already familiar?

Although technologies are not neutral (Aufderheide 1999, 108; Ala-Fossi & Stavitsky 2003), it is also very unlikely that the new digital technology would have independently determined the way its capacity is now used. New technologies are always shaped by pre-existing social relations, which also define which technological advances will make a breakthrough and how they will be implemented (Winston 1998, 342; Streeter 1996, 70-71). In the following article I will examine some central themes and arguments concerning the current discussion from a political economic perspective, and try to analyze the differences between corporate and non-corporate US commercial radio.

Breaking the Market Boundaries

Fairchild (1999, 549) has described the development after the Telecom Act of 1996 as “deterritorializing” radio, which has removed necessary connections between a radio station and its local community.

According to Huntemann (1999, 400), “syndicated programming and corporate-developed playlists” have now decreased airplay of local talents and community tastes. Both Douglas (1999) and Mathews (2002) have also reported how radio, which used to be a highly local medium, is now transforming into a national business due to new technology and corporate ownership. Nellessen & Brady (2000, 6) have even argued that now, “for the first time in radio’s history it is moving away from its defining principles”.

On the contrary, my argument here is that this change is an example of how history repeats itself, because the basic economics of radio is again driving profit-seeking companies toward increasingly centralized program production. There are no reasons to romanticize the past: US commercial radio became a national business – for the first time – as early as the late 1920’s without any corporate station ownership or computer technology (McChesney 1993, 17-18; McChesney 2001). Acquisitions and mergers are not the only means of entering new geographic markets (Picard 2002, 199), and old technology can also be used to blur market boundaries (Sohn et al. 1999, 131). In the 1920’s, federal regulations limiting the number of stations one company could own were simply avoided by making private network affiliation contracts with locally owned stations (LeDuc 1987, 9-11; 78-79), and commercial network companies created their national broadcasting networks by connecting local radio stations to one another using existing telephone lines (Smulyan 1994, 63). The same has now been done by removing the ownership caps and using modern computer and satellite technology, but the basic economic motives are the same as 75 years ago.

Because commercial radio is not basically a business of producing and broadcasting programs but is instead a business of producing desired audiences for advertisers (Smythe 1977; Glasser 1984, 129, 131) with minimal cost for maximal profit, all money spent on programs can be seen as an unwanted expense on an intermediate product. (Picard 1989, 56-57; Hendy 2000, 13, 67). Just as the early network companies before them, new radio corporations are trying to exploit their large-market, high-salary performing talents as efficiently as they can (Ditingo 1995, 37-38). Because radio program production always has a high fixed cost but distribution is relatively inexpensive, it is cost-effective to distribute the expensive star-talent output from a single urban market to as many geographical markets as possible.⁴ Wide distribution of output decreases the relative cost of producing the audience per listener, so that even the high cost of this kind of centralized production is still substantially lower than it would be with multiple simultaneous local productions. (Smythe 1977, 4; Picard 1989, 65-66). This is the case with both program syndication and remote voice tracking, i.e. cyber-jocking. However, in the old network radio – as well as in modern syndication – the program output is identical everywhere, whereas in computerized voice tracking the output can be specially adapted to each market.

As Meiksins Wood (1998, 39) has pointed out, using new technologies for production does not represent an epochal shift, but instead “allows the logic of the old mass production economy to be diversified and *extended*”. Technologies are products of social relations: it is not the new technology itself determining the way it is used or allowing the removal of broadcast regulation – it is the market deregulation that allows companies to use suitable new technologies as means to achieve increasingly high productivity.

(Winston 1998, 342; Streeter 1996, 70-71; Walker 2001, 277; Picard 1989, 13; Sohn et al. 1999, 117). In the new environment, large radio corporations can now think nationally and globally while simultaneously easily operating regionally and locally with digital technology.

As noted, early radio network programming was similar in every market, with the affiliate station taking care of the local side. Because each station was, in legal terms, still a separate local entity, this model could be called quasi-local.⁵ Now that these stations can operate under same owner, basically similar programs, playlists and other programming items can easily be transferred between stations, differentiated and to a certain degree adapted to each market by simply adding a small local touch (McChesney 1998, 16). Using Bartlett's and Ghoshal's (1998) categorization for cross-border operations as a basis, this model could be described here as "transregional" (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1998, 15-20; Sohn et al. 1999, 199-200; Picard 2002, 212-229).

Radio has great potential as a local medium, but at the same time it also has potential to reach across limits (Hendy 2000, 215; Picard 1989, 30). This means that radio is not inherently a local medium. However, in radio's beginnings in the US it was considered a local medium and broadcasting legislation has always treated it accordingly. At the same time, FCC regulation tried to promote localism (Berquist 2001, 5, 20-21). Although this all was not highly successful, it maintained a certain structure. When the government regulation is removed (it can also be simply ignored, as in pirate radio), market regulation takes over, resulting in potential audience demographics and psychographics, more than pure geography, determining commercial radio markets. (Massel 1962, 201-202; Compaigne 2000, 550; Mosco 1996, 201-202; Huntemann 1999, 395; Hendy 2000, 24-25) If there are no other limits, it is the relationship between production and delivery costs and advertising revenues that finally determines the size of markets. (Picard 1989, 21; Albarran 1996, 28; Sohn et al. 1999, 196, 230, 239; Picard 2002, 143) In other words, the removal of the national radio station ownership cap in the US released an old genie from the bottle, where it had been waiting for decades.

In the past, the networks received money only for national advertising during national programming, but affiliates sold local advertising on their own account. Today, about three quarters of a radio station's annual revenue comes from local advertising (Ditingo 1995, 16-17). When the same large corporation receives revenues for both national and local advertising (Hendy 2000, 40-41), it makes contemporary national radio business much more profitable. Thus centralized but adaptable models of program production are likely both the most cost-efficient and potentially profitable ways to operate in the radio business. At the same time that these new radio corporations have been able to drastically cut production costs and gain new revenues, the market value of US radio stations has increased significantly during the ownership concentration process. According to a recent industry report, the average price of all radio stations increased by a 37.5% compounded annual rate between 1991 and 2000⁶ (BIA 2002, 11-13). This was to the advantage of the owners and shareholders, not the public or stakeholders (McChesney 2001), but this is how US commercial radio literally became worth more dead (or at least non-live) than live.

Taylorization⁷ of the DJ Work

Former Clear Channel Radio CEO Randy Michaels has reminded us that many local DJs playing cheap, recorded music replaced the high-salary national network stars and expensive live orchestra performances in radio during the 1950's (Mathews 2002). It was

then a new cost-effective way of programming, developed when the old US network radio collapsed after the rise of television. This metamorphosis of radio was possible only because radio station ownership was not yet concentrated, and the entire industry did not go down with the networks. In turn, high-salaried, non-local and even virtual DJs have forced aside many local live voices. However, station ownership concentration after the removal of national radio station ownership caps under the Telecommunication Act of 1996 and the development of satellite and computer technology were not the reasons or motives for this transformation, but instead merely prerequisites for running radio business more cost-effectively by using syndication or remote voice-tracking in the small markets. The real reason behind the change is simply the growing demand for a higher return on investment.

Concentration of ownership resulted in huge cost savings by merely eliminating all overlapping positions.⁸ Because a group of local stations can use the same regionally or nationally centralized corporate services instead of many individual, locally based services, personnel costs can be cut down to a minimum (Huntemann 1999, 401-402; Albarran 1996, 54). Replacing a station's live local DJs with imported "cyber-jocks", who produce their pseudo-local shows quickly from a distant location, sometimes several days in advance, is also an excellent example of spatialization. The practice of remote voice tracking particularly concerns overcoming the normal constraints of space and time, in both radio production as well as radio consumption. A large radio corporation can combine both *economies of scale* (virtually identical program products for many markets) and *economies of scope* (multi-station selection for each market) with *economies of speed* (production takes less time). (Picard 1989, 62-63; Picard 2002, 54-55; Mosco 1996, 173; Menzies 1998, 92)

It is now also possible to create completely virtual radio stations, which can be stored in the company computer network system; this is an example of *economies of integration*, which use shared platforms in the cost-efficient creation of new services (Nellessen & Brady 2000, 4,12; Picard 2002, 55).

This kind of virtual radio and pseudo-local voice tracking, by which a remote DJ lies about a living relation to the community and greets invented people in pre-recorded speaks, might first seem an outrageous fraud from the listener's point of view. But this is a result of a long process of a "Taylorization" of DJ work (Robins & Webster 1988, 53) – and may be only the tip of the iceberg.

The first format radio DJs were usually able to select the records they played rather independently, using their own judgment and expertise, but as the format method developed, management control and supervision gradually increased, following the basic principles of Frederick Taylor's scientific management and of Fordism: a) selecting records for airplay and b) choosing the order and frequency in which they were to be played was separated from c) the process of actually playing the records and d) hosting the show on-air (Smythe 1977, 18; Sohn et al. 1999, 84-86; Ritzer 2000, 28-30; Clement 1988, 223-224; Robins & Webster 1988, 65-66). The great payola scandals in 1959–1960 gave radio stations an excellent excuse to implement Taylor's scientific management theories and as a result DJ autonomy was restricted even more (Fornatale & Mills 1980, 53; Segrave 1994, 89,93; Douglas 1999, 245, 248, 251; Walker 2001, 59-61). Already at this point, some stations tried to use prerecorded announcements instead of live DJs between records, while others pursued an increase in DJ and playlist control, for instance using industrial timing clocks indicating the rotation of top-three songs. (Hilliard & Keith 2001, 182; Walker 2001, 59-62)

During the ensuing decades, radio broadcasting technology has developed in a way that has decreased the possibilities to resist control even more. Today, practically every commercial music station counts on computerized on-air systems, which include not only the playlist but all audio elements of the station. Because everything is now in digital form in an automated system, there is no need for anyone to c) actually play the tangible records, either. On some stations the DJ can still change songs or promos for airplay within certain limits, but on other stations they are not allowed to touch the list at all. Although an intentional deviation might not be noticed on air, all actions are recorded in a system log. This potential for surveillance and control has virtually eliminated the DJ's autonomy. (Nellessen & Brady 2000,4-5; Hendy 2000, 227; Robins & Webster 1988, 57) Although the relationship between radio DJ and record has always been different than, for example, between performer and music, contemporary music format radio DJs have very little to do with the a) selection and b) rotation and finally also c) playing of music on their show. Still, they are expected to bring their creative – but not too creative – contribution to the show by otherwise using their talent in d) hosting the show.

During the first decades of radio, US stations had to expressly announce when they were going to play a recording “so that the public would not be deceived into thinking the performer was there in person” (Segrave 1994, 71). As modern radio listeners, we do not usually expect that any music performance we hear on the radio is actually live. We have gradually been taught to think this way. On the other hand, we have been also been taught to believe that the DJ would always be live, although the case has hardly ever been this simple.⁹ Because live broadcast was first the *only*, and later still the *cheapest*, way to produce radio programming, an early DJ show was usually mostly live (Tusa 1993, 7-8; Hendy 2000, 88).¹⁰ The practice of non-live, tape-recorded shows began in the US just after the World War II, when Bing Crosby refused to continue making a live repeat of his popular show for the West Coast. He first tried instant disk recordings, but soon began to use the new tape-recording machines. Because of good sound quality and all the possibilities the new device offered, radio stations soon adopted it. For example, famous DJ Alan Freed regularly made recorded shows already in 1953 (Winston 1998, 266-267; Gronow & Saunio 1998, 96-97; Douglas 1999, 230-231). But as George Lucas' movie *American Graffiti* (1973) has shown us, the tangible nature of a taped show required human supervision even in the middle of the night.¹¹ Consequently, the practice of pre-recording at least part of the otherwise live show or some parts of daily programming was already widespread in American commercial music radio over 30 years ago (Zarecki 2002, 28; Shepherd 2001).

There is a certain difference between broadcasting a straight, open rerun of an earlier show, or recording a show in advance for later use, and intentionally creating a recorded program in such a manner that it would be interpreted by the audience as something other than what it actually is. However, already in the early 1950's, some US stations offered radio programming that was certainly live and not recorded, but was not “real” at all – the reality was simulated. For example, format radio pioneers Gordon McLendon became famous for his sports broadcasts, in which he re-created sports events using sound effects in real-time radio, without actually seeing the game (Garay 1992, 19-21, 56-58; Zarecki 2002, 28). Although it is possible to argue as Zarecki (2002) quite correctly does – that it is thus such that the practice of modern voice-tracking actually brings nothing new to American radio but rather combines these two old traditions – in the end this argument does not make pseudo-local voice tracking any more acceptable ethically or morally.

As Nyre (2001) argues, the development of recording, sound editing and broadcasting technology has resulted in the relation between reality and radio becoming increasingly complicated to the degree that “external reality is vanishing from media presentations”. (Nyre 2001, 15) Automation makes the syndication of program material across networks of stations smoother and breaks down the distinction between local and non-local programming, blurring the radio’s sense of place (Hendy 2000, 103, 185; Ditingo 1995, 16-17, 91-95), so that it becomes “radio from nowhere produced by no-bodies” (Kirn 2003). Many stations that still produce most of their programming locally have also adopted the practice of voice tracking (Karr 2002). Since late 1970’s it has been possible for DJs to record their day-time, night-time and weekend shows in advance, making it unnecessary to be present at the moment of broadcasting: when four-hour shifts can be voice-tracked in 15-30 minutes, companies can save a great deal of money¹² (Fornatale & Mills 1980, 144). In many cases, the morning show is the only one still broadcast live, because it is considered the most important show of the day and requires some timeliness to be successful. (Nellessen & Brady 2000, 8-9; Allan 2002; Love 2002; Starr 2002; Kelly 2002)

All this means at least four things. First, a music radio DJ, who initially worked for the most part in a vital relationship with both the music and the listeners, has now been totally separated from not only the music but also the live audience.¹³ Another issue is that both syndication and voice tracking means that fewer voices in general – and especially fewer new voices – will ever have a chance to be on the air. While the industry has thus far been satisfied with the “elimination of marginal talent” (Zarecki 2002, 29) this also means that there will be significantly smaller pool of new talent to draw from. Third, using more voice-tracking means increased editorial control over DJ work, because an increasing amount of their work is done “off-line”. Everything to be said on the air, as well as everything to be played, can be completely controlled both before and after the show. This is not to say that it *will* be controlled, but it can be. Also, this means that a substantial part of a station’s local production is not live at all – not to mention records and syndicated shows – but is instead pseudo-live. If the DJ is not actually present, but is rather in another time and/or place in the form of a recording, does it actually matter where or when the music show was recorded, since listeners cannot call in or receive information about an oncoming storm that is developing in real-time (Shingler and Wieringa 1998, 104; Nellessen & Brady 2000, 9-10)?¹⁴ This is certainly something that influences “the very rhythms, patterns, pace, texture and disciplines of everyday life” (Robins & Webster 1988, 46).

The McDonaldization¹⁵ of Commercial Format Radio

For some reason, it seems to be quite common for representatives of the US radio industry to compare their products with those of the fast food giant McDonald’s¹⁶ (Ahlqvist 2001, 352; Karr 2002; Stimson 2002). In one case, former Clear Channel radio CEO even described their national KISS brand by comparing it to the McDonald’s franchising system (Mathews 2002). These comparisons are actually quite descriptive, but do not reveal all the similarities between the production of fast food and format radio. The resemblance between these two processes is much older, deeper and more comprehensive than is seen at first glance. Firstly, both methods were based on the same precursory socioeconomic developments¹⁷ in American society, developed during the mid-1950’s. Also both a fast food restaurant and a format radio station rely on basic dimensions of McDonaldization:

efficiency, calculability, predictability and control through non-human technology (Ritzer 2000, 11-15, 21-39; Fornatale & Mills 1980, 26-27 ; Robins & Webster 1988, 49,65).

In short, both try to create a predictable and familiar alternative for repeated personal consumption by offering consistent choice with limited selection of goods within the same genre. There is some variation, but it is intentional and controlled. Listeners can expect a format radio station that offers their favorite content to have (at least) tolerable programming (primarily a certain genre of music), just as they can always expect to receive an edible hamburger in a hamburger restaurant. Both try to provide a certain kind of consistent quality¹⁸ for their customers. Viewed this way, format radio was already thoroughly McDonaldized from the very start, even when it was strictly a local business. And after local success, both these methods have become a basis for national – and later international – business operations.

The efforts of large radio corporations to build national format brands through franchising takes the McDonaldization of commercial format radio to a new level. Franchising is an attempt to multiply earlier success by transferring and adapting a reliable product and production pattern developed elsewhere into new geographical markets. The franchised national brands promise the end-users of the commodities a predictable experience. In the fast-food business the promise is meant for those who consume fast food, but the new national radio brands are created primarily for advertisers (Mathews 2002; Karr 2002). While American listeners have come to expect consistent commercial radio stations in their local environments over the past 40 years, over 12,000 separate US radio stations with different formats and audiences present an inconsistent and difficult field from the perspective of national advertisers. For Clear Channel, the KISS brand is an easier concept to sell than are 44 separate audiences, and also gives advertisers a guarantee that their message will be received in a similar context in every market. Of course, franchising also provides necessary product differentiation (for both listeners and advertisers) between otherwise interchangeable radio products in every market, and guides listener choice in moving from one market to another (Massel 1962,203-204; Leeds 2002; Hendy 2000,168; Picard 2002, 73, 142).

Franchising gives companies the opportunity to combine centralized control and support functions such as research and planning with decentralized, and even partly autonomous, production. The central agency could serve as coordinator, interacting constantly with the individual franchises using new technology. Thus, Clear Channel could also easily create a locally produced though still nationally consistent KISS brand, but this is not the case (Meiksins 1998, 155-156). There are no longer any economic or regulatory reasons to operate within less cost-effective quasi-national models. As we have noted, radio production has a relatively high fixed cost, but because of the intangible nature of intermediate products (programs), the marginal cost of distribution is low. Therefore, highly centralized production makes economic sense. On the contrary, in the fast food business, production (or at least final assembly) is relatively cheap and the intermediate products (buns, beef, etc.) are tangible as well as consumable – although the real commodities (audience, meal experience) in both industries are intangible and in a certain sense not consumable at all (Smythe 1977, 15-16; Compaigne 2000, 549, 551; Albarran 1996, 27-28).

Increasing Standardization and Mainstreaming of Playlists

At first glance, it might seem that the process of creating station playlists for music stations has also been severely affected – or even damaged – by ownership concentration.

However, the number of gatekeepers selecting content for airplay was already decreasing steadily in the late 1970's (Fornatale & Mills 1980, 142). Now a single brand manager can design playlists for several stations across the country and even make their playlists completely identical (Mathews 2002; Huntemann 1999, 400). Although this kind of concentration of control by which a few large corporations dictate the playlists is certainly a threat for cultural diversity, there are several other factors that have long been streamlining station playlists toward the mainstream on two separate market levels – first between the different musical genres, and second, within individual genres as well. Scherer's two-dimensional model of market structure is useful in understanding these developments: the first dimension examines the number of sellers in a market and the second notes the difference between differentiated and homogenous products (Albarran 1996, 36-38).

The earliest methods of selecting music for format radio were DJ's own preferences, audience requests and (local) record sales statistics (Segrave 1994, 89, 92, 98). In modern American radio, Ahlqvist (2001, 345-346) has identified four main approaches to music programming: esthetic (reliance on one's own expertise), audience (reliance on listener input), research (reliance on research) and industry-oriented (reliance on record industry) philosophies. The use of the two latter "rational" philosophies tends to produce music programming that "rarely strays from the format mainstream" (Ahlqvist 2001, 352). Record sales are still the basic indicator of market success of the music and because record sales in turn depend on song exposure via radio airplay, and also because competing stations tend to imitate their most successful rivals (or other successful stations with similar target audiences elsewhere), this system becomes partly self-determining so that radio airplay produces more radio airplay (Segrave 1994, 37; Hendy 2000, 228-229; Ahlqvist 2001, 342, 352). This is what drives basic mainstreaming within every genre of format radio. Stations usually strive toward the best-selling and safest programming product, which also makes them more homogenous within their own genre despite the number of stations in direct competition offering similar products (Albarran 1996, 37-38). There is always only one selection of the "best-selling records" in every genre¹⁹. It is no wonder that record companies have tried to utilize – or, depending on your perspective, to break – this circle by simply paying DJs for record airplay.

In the music industry, this kind of "payment practice" or "song plugging" to ensure that songs were performed was begun by music publishers already in the 1860's (Segrave 1994, 22-29). As we noted earlier, after the US payola scandal and antipayola rules in 1960, the role of the DJ preferences decreased rapidly and a more "scientific" and professional approach using sales statistics, monitoring other stations and conducting market research increased (Walker 2001, 60-61). This creation of the professional DJ was somehow parallel to the creation of the professional, objective radio news journalist a few decades earlier (Douglas 1999, 181-189, 196-198; Hendy 2000, 110; McChesney 1998, 5-6). By emphasizing the role of research – objective information instead of personal judgment – in selecting music, commercial radio was somehow able to distance itself from the record industry. But, on the other hand, payola had just then been institutionalized with record companies beginning to bribe program directors instead of DJs (Walker 2001, 61; Fornatale & Mills 1980, 51). And as Coase (1979, 311-312) argues, the new rules concerning payola did not bring about their intended change in US commercial radio programming products.

Just as mainstreaming occurs on the genre level, it also occurs at the market level between different stations. More than once, regulators have tried to achieve more diver-

sity through competition by simply increasing the number of stations. However, this has tended to produce more multiplicity than diversity (Wasko 1984, 216; Mosco 1996, 258-259; Glasser 1984, 139-140). The main reason that separate commercial stations in a given market usually concentrate on certain genres and target audiences is purely economic. Because the system does not rely on *audience* maximization but instead *profit* maximization, they try primarily to reach the wealthy audiences in which the advertisers are most interested as potential buyers and consumers (Murdoch 1982, 145; Glasser 1984, 129). This “pure” type of competition tends to create several outlets of different owners producing fundamentally the same type of “interchangeable” programming. Stations will produce both a standard type of programming and a standard type of audiences for advertisers – as long as it is more profitable to concentrate on the most desired audiences instead of some other niche. In this situation, listeners receive only more and more of the same thing, but at the same time advertisers may enjoy the lower prices as a benefit of competition. (Massel 1962, 187, 227; Albarran 1996, 37-38; McChesney 2001; Picard 1989, 30-31; Vogel 1994, 167; Sohn et al. 1999, 234-236)

On the other hand, if regulators allow station ownership concentration, the more oligopolistic or monopolistic competition may actually produce more program or format variety through product differentiation. When the same owner has several stations (a cluster) in the same market, the company may start to operate so that its stations do not compete with one another, and to cover the most interesting audience segments as completely as possible with the entire cluster of channels. This strategy is called spatial preemption (Wirth 2002, 6). This effort by a company to avoid “cannibalism” between its own stations produces more narrow and specific formats for single stations within a cluster – provided that it is still profitable to run all the stations. (Glasser 1984, 129; Albarran 1996, 37-38; Ala-Fossi 2001, 10) Thus, the “horizontal” mainstreaming between different genres in a market may decrease at the same time that the “vertical” mainstreaming in each genre in the market is increasing.

For example, Berry and Waldfogel (2001, 1024) have found evidence from the US market that radio station ownership concentration increases the amount of programming variety in relation to the number of stations, as well as some evidence that it also increases the programming variety absolutely. On the other hand, as Wirth (2002, 21-22) has pointed out, this development has also resulted in many listeners actually having fewer options, because direct format competition in their own favorite genres has decreased after the consolidation.²⁰ Another point is that although variety may exist within each station cluster, the format selection in each cluster (internal differentiation) is likely rather similar (external homogenization) (Huntemann 1999, 398-399). However, the main problem in this discussion is likely that variety is mistaken for diversity. According to Glasser (1984, 140) this is inevitable, when consumer welfare is defined economically instead of culturally, and it seems to me that this also happens when socio-political definitions are replaced with economical definitions. Even a wide variety of different format genres – resulting from monopolistic competition – with similar solid corporate values in every channel will be quite far from true program diversity – as well as from real consumer sovereignty. (Compaigne 2000, 547; Gomery 2000b, 515; Murdoch 1982, 144; Picard 1989, 32, 73, 78-79; Albarran 1996, 37-38; Sohn et al. 1999, 241; Huntemann 1999, 397).

The situation of commercial music radio is still more complicated than this. One reason is that the record business is an oligopoly; only five large companies dominate the US and global music industry.²¹ Only they have the financial resources to produce prof-

itable hit songs, because small and independent companies cannot afford promotion expenses. Contrary to common belief (cf. Albarran 1996, 144), direct payola is not illegal in the US; it is perfectly legal to take money for airplay. It is only when this economic transaction is not made clear to the audience that the procedure becomes a violation of antipayola rules (Coase 1979, 296-297; Segrave 1994, 157). Over the years there have been experiments in playing openly sponsored records for money, but these attempts have – because of rather interesting moral objections – been disapproved of by the press and other operators, and results have not been satisfactory (Segrave 1994, 125-126; Martin 1998). Because it seems bothersome for both the station and record company to openly admit that certain songs are being played primarily for money (Picard 2002, 126), record companies usually pay the money to ‘independent promoters’, who in turn use this money to pay radio group owners for “promotion” (Vogel 1994, 143; Huntemann 1999, 400). This way, record companies get their songs radio airplay without direct payments, and because of the loophole in the antipayola rules, the entire operation remains secret.²² The Big Five also directly buy station airtime and produce radio “showcases” to promote their products. This is how the playlists can basically be determined by whatever the record giants decide to produce and promote. Small and independent record companies usually cannot bear the expenses of making a hit, because even after getting onto the playlists a song will not stay there long without a steady flow of money. (Huntemann 1999, 401; Boehlert 2001c, Gomery 2000a, 319, 327; Walker 2001, 61)

The relation between Clear Channel and the Big Five is even more interesting. The first reason is that the music industry can no longer be sure of making a hit without this horizontally integrated giant and largest radio owner in the US. Clear Channel owns about 10% of all commercial stations, most of which are the key music stations in the largest markets. Moreover, there is now another important issue between the music and radio industries, besides the old synergy of radio and records. Clear Channel is crucial for the music industry, because it is the largest promoter and presenter of live entertainment, as well as probably the largest outdoor advertising company, in the world. Thanks to this synergy created by vertical integration, Clear Channel can offer artists an entire national concert tour package with performance places, radio promotions and outdoor advertising.²³ Thus, Clear Channel can be paid not only for advertising but also for broadcasting recorded music and (pseudo-local) artist interviews, while at the same time actually promoting its own business of live concert acts. Program production, which used to be merely an expense, can thus be turned into a direct source of income. This also provides an ingenious way to bring the payola or “promotion” money in a clean form directly onto the corporate balance sheet. The record companies and artists can ensure record airplay by paying for it in the price of the concert tour package. And finally, artists or companies not able or willing to pay the price can be effectively excluded.²⁴ (Massel 1962, 218; Leeds 2002; Dezell 2002; Turow 1992, 697-700; Karr 2002)

Because of these tendencies and this monopolistic development, it has become increasingly difficult to find a difference between one playlist and another in a certain genre. Moreover, a hand-picked playlist of new popular music that is carefully prepared following the latest preferences of the target audience and a playlist that is simply put together according to what the record companies are promoting will be very similar. Tastes and preferences are not determined by forces outside the market (Gandy 1992, 26; Hendy 2000, 214-215) and the selection in each genre will become increasingly narrow and limited, whereas the vast variety of different genres and artists is most likely increas-

ing (Sohn et al.1999, 201; Karr 2002; IFPI 2002), although the nature of these genres might be somewhat artificial.²⁵

We have given in to some sort of notion of, you know, like sanctioned music. So we're selling them red jelly beans, and green jelly beans, and black jelly beans, and blue jelly beans. Yes. They're all jelly beans, you know? We're interested in a cheeseburger. You got any cheeseburger? You know? No. We don't. (Record producer T-Bone Burnett, quoted in *Karr* (2002))

Performance, Quality and Commercial Radio

There is a certain consensus between the largest players in the US radio industry and even some scholars (Albarran 1996, 54) that satellite programming as well as remote voice-tracking will both allow companies to provide professional or "higher-quality programming product" (Stimson 2002) even to the smaller markets (Mathews 2002) and replace "marginal talent", improving air quality at many stations (Zarecki 2002, 29-30).²⁶

Nellesen and Brady (2000) also reported similar opinions among radio professionals in Arkansas: "top quality talent improves the sound of a station" (Nellesen and Brady 2000, 9). Moreover, the company that introduced the concept of "Real Feel" voice-tracking in 1989 (RCS) promotes it as a system with which "a station can eliminate borderline or poor DJ's and use only the best talent." (RCS 2001)

Although all this "talent exportation" is then said to be "a huge benefit to the audience" (Chen 2003; Mathews 2002) as Picard (1989, 10-13) argues, the decision whether to "use live disc jockeys or automatic playback equipment" is primarily a decision of production resource allocation, and not directly a decision about product quality. At the same time, critics have argued that all this has actually ruined the quality of commercial radio (McChesney 2001; Spencer 2002) and a locally operated station may still use live DJs and promote itself on a program quality basis – as live and local (Mathews 2002; Karr 2002).

Which, then, is better – the local or pseudo-local show? This is actually a completely absurd question from a commercial perspective.²⁷ Although some sort of localism has earlier been seen as important by both the FCC as well as industry experts (Berquist 2001; MacFarland 1997, 135-136; McKinsey & Co 1987, 10, 15-16), for the industry it has never actually been an objective in itself, but rather a means to an end in producing large and loyal audiences. Now, as Fairchild (1999) and Kassof (1999) have both pointed out from very different perspectives, the station's relationship with local reality does not matter much anymore. In the industry's logic the better show has, naturally, better ratings, regardless of where it comes from or how it might be produced: listeners will always be attracted to good radio talent (Ditingo 1995, 93; Webster, Phalen & Lichty 2000, 40). Although ratings do not tell anything about the quality of program experience, but are rather an estimation of past program consumption (people exposed to programming) in certain area, however, they are perhaps the most powerful force in commercial broadcasting. Ratings determine the price of advertising and outside programming as well as payments for performers, at the same time that they also affect the station's market value. (Webster, Phalen & Lichty 2000, 10-12, 114, 159, 165) Thus, information about past program consumption as well as production cost information have been the basis for programming decisions and all practical definitions of quality in commercial radio through the decades.

The interplay of quality, price and consumption is so ubiquitous that even DJs are ranked through a hierarchy based on these two latter concepts. Although the most important issue for a good DJ might be creativity, a creative talent is recognized in the first place because he or she can generate an audience for the show (ratings/consumption). It is the general view that truly creative talents work in the large markets, because it is there that stations receive larger audiences (ratings/consumption) and consequently more money (price of advertising) from advertising and are therefore able to pay much higher salaries (price of labor) (Ditingo 1995, 37-38).²⁸ Radio professionals as well as many consumers share the idea that large urban stations with “major market sound” are able to provide more sophisticated and high-quality programming (Hendy 2000, 187-188; McKinsey 1987, 47-48; Ala-Fossi 1999, 154, 171).

Because market success is here understood to equal social success (Mosco 1996, 65), it becomes economically inevitable that large market programming is produced more creatively and has therefore always been considered to be of higher quality. This is also the basis for “quality justification” for bringing a pseudo-local show, done by a major-market DJ, to smaller markets (Stimson 2002) – although the companies are merely trying to utilize their expensive star talent in a more cost-effective way. As long as the ratings of the voice-tracked pseudo-local show are better than those of the rival station’s local show, and its relative production costs per listener remain low, there is no need to reconsider or expand these quality definitions. Ratings have also become a part of the value system of popular culture: large consumption is seen as a sign of popularity (audience choice as preference), which in turn is also understood to be the ultimate indicator of quality (Webster, Phalen & Lichty 2000, 10, 75, 165).

Viewed this way, the practice of voice tracking from distant markets is perfectly congruent with the former definitions of quality and good performance in commercial radio. Voice-tracking technology has been seen as *compatible*, because it can be used as a tool in achieving operational goals in a way that is consistent with existing values (Sohn et al. 1999, 117, 123; Winston 1998, 342; Streeter 1996, 70-71; Walker 2001, 277). Thus, voice tracking has not changed the underlying commercial market logic, which merely becomes more obvious and visible when this method is used. In the end, there are no other permanent values in commercial broadcasting besides consumption and price. Although competitors and local DJs may disapprove of the competition of cheap and non-local production, their opinions do not count for much if this programming continues to receive high ratings – this is due to the unbreakable circle of consumption and price²⁹. Both are purely economic perspectives on quality and performance, which can be reduced to economy of time (Garnham 1990, 46). There is not much room for other values that cannot be measured directly in form of time or money (Picard 1989, 17).

Not a Turning Point: Only Business, as Usual.

Ownership concentration and the new digital technology are not the real reasons for the changes in US radio. They are not the disease, but rather part of the symptoms created by the self-regulating free market. If dominant market position and large size were not economically desirable for profit-seeking operations, there would be no mergers or ownership concentration. Although the new digital audio systems like voice tracking are designed and developed especially for commercial purposes to boost productivity, they do not directly determine that original and/or local productions be replaced with cheaper imitations. Ultimately, the decision to use this technology only to cut production expenses

is not based on technology itself, but on profit-seeking. Large publicly owned broadcasting companies are continuously striving for a higher return on investments and it is in this way that American radio has become worth more dead than (a)live.

The tendencies of expanding the markets and centralizing production, the Taylorization of DJ work and the McDonaldization of production as well as the complex standardization of music programming and payola are not new processes, launched only after Telecom Act of 1996, but are at least as old as commercial radio itself. When market regulation allowed US radio ownership structure to change and suitable technology was developed, it only became much easier to expand, diversify and intensify these existing tendencies and processes according to commercial operational strategies. Commercial, profit-seeking radio broadcasting in the US has not turned onto new path, but has merely matured³⁰ under more free market conditions and become closer to its true, capitalistic essence.

Notes

1. For example, see Douglas (1999, 347-357), Nellesen and Brady (2000), Boehlert (2001a-c), Shepherd (2001), Mathews (2002), Karr (2002) and Spencer (2002). In addition, Huntemann (1999 and 2002), Fairchild (1999) and McChesney (2001) have given space to this kind of interpretation by emphasizing the dramatic effects of recent changes more than the similarity with the patterns of earlier development.
2. Voice tracking refers to the digital pre-recording of voice audio for integration into a radio show: it becomes cyber-jocking when done over a computer network from a distant location (RadioFocus 2002). The use of both locally produced voice-tracking as well as remote cyber-jocking has increased significantly since 1999 in Finnish commercial radio as well (Ala-Fossi 1999; Pöntinen 2003; Ala-Pappila 2003).
3. Clear Channel argues that voice-tracking presently only accounts for less than 15% of its total radio programming (Chen 2003).
4. This is why Clear Channel prefers to call voice-tracking "talent exportation" (Chen 2003).
5. On the other hand, a group of locally operated stations under one owner may operate as a "quasi-national" network with one brand and centralized decision-making (Hendy 2000, 40-41, 109-110).
6. In 2001, the amount of radio station transactions in the US decreased dramatically and average prices decreased by almost 70%. However, according to industry experts, the lower prices in 2001 reflect the poor profitability of stations that were sold rather than lower market values (BIA 2002,13).
7. With this term I refer to applying Frederick Taylor's theories of "scientific management" (Sohn et al 1999, 84-86).
8. According to one estimate, as many as 10,000 radio-related jobs have been lost in the US between 1996 and 2002 (Spencer 2002).
9. See Nyre 2001.
10. Although all the musical performances in a DJ show were, of course, recorded, the interaction and discussion between the program host and the audience was conducted in real time.
11. In the film, one of the main characters visits a local radio station to meet the DJ in the middle of the night. However, he finds only a recorder playing a tape and a man who denies being the DJ (Wolfman Jack).
12. For example, Clear Channel (also known as Cheap Channel) is able to produce voice-tracked morning show for its Phoenix station for only \$6 an hour (Boehlert 2001b).
13. It is not the audience that is separated from the DJ, because in many cases the audience does not know at the moment of consumption that the broadcast is not live. However, a cyber-jock knows this at the moment of production. Thus, external reality may vanish from production of media presentations as well.
14. In January 2002, a cloud of ammonia was spilled over the city of Minot, N.D. However, the police were unable to reach anyone by phone at the local Clear Channel radio station, which was the designated emergency broadcaster. The company owns all six commercial stations in Minot and operates them under the same roof (Lee 2003).
15. With this term I refer to Ritzer's (2000,1) theory, which defines McDonaldization as "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of Ame-

- rican society as well as the rest of the world". See also Ala-Fossi (1997). Kurtz (2000) has written that "the cookie-cutter-McDonaldization of sound happened 20 years before consolidation" and Spencer (2002) has written about "the McDonaldization of radio", but the term's definition for these two researchers has been more narrow.
16. This fast-food analogy can also be found in an academic textbook (MacFarland 1997, 13) and is used in Finnish commercial radio as well (Hytinen 2003, 35).
 17. Including Taylorism, Fordism, Levittowns and shopping malls (Ritzer 2000, 21-39).
 18. MacFarland (1997) argues that words "consistent" and "quality" do not belong together at all in radio: quality programming always requires some amount of inconsistency, because sheer consistency leads to boredom (14-15, 25-26). However, it can also be argued that intentional and controlled inconsistency is only a part of a larger, consistent framework.
 19. It is also possible that a top-selling record will not get much airplay, because it represents the "wrong" genre: for example, the sound-track from the movie "O Brother, where art thou" won five Grammy Awards and sold over five million copies in the US, but did not receive much radio airplay because the music was considered too old-fashioned or "country" for country radio (Karr 2002, Dretzka 2002). See also note 23.
 20. However, a recent report published by the Future of Music Coalition provides some evidence that even formats with different names may actually have highly similar playlists. This raises the question of how artificial the different genres actually are. The report also found that US radio companies still regularly operate (561 cases nationwide) two or more stations with the same format in the same market (DiCola & Thomson 2002, 41-56), which is actually not surprising when we know that the owners are trying to maximize profits, not audience (Glasser 1984, 129).
 21. In 1992 the Big Six produced about 70% of all recorded pop music in the world (Hendy 2000a, 62), and in the mid- 1990's they controlled about 94% of all recording revenues (Albarran 1996, 143). The Big Six became The Big Five in 1998, when Seagram acquired Polygram (Gomery 2000a, 319). See also Rifkin 2001, 248-252, Hendy 2000a, 223-224 and Sohn et al 1999, 201.
 22. After some members of Congress expressed their concern over this practice, in April 2003 Clear Channel announced that it would "cut ties with independent promoters" (Clear Channel 2003b). However, it seems that the company is hoping to receive the same promotion money in another form (Kot 2003).
 23. Clear Channel also has concert promotion firms and outdoor advertising companies in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark (Clear Channel 2003a). In July 2003, Clear Channel traded its radio stations in Norway and Denmark for common shares of SBS Broadcasting and stated that Clear Channel chose not to be the consolidator in the Nordic region. Only a few months later in October 2003, SBS became the largest commercial radio operator in Scandinavia, with 52 stations after a merger with Bonnier Radio AB. (SBS 2003a, SBS 2003b).
 24. It has been claimed, for example, that the airplay of Britney Spears' songs on Clear Channel radio was restricted, because she did not hire Clear Channel as her tour promoter. (Leeds 2002) Moreover, in January 2003 performer Don Henley testified at a Senate Commerce Committee hearing about this Clear Channel practice (Kot 2003). There has also been at least one lawsuit filed against Clear Channel regarding similar cases in Denver (Chen 2003).
 25. See also note 20.
 27. "We're not in the business of providing news and information. We're not in the business of providing well-researched music. We're simply in the business of selling our customers products." – Founder and CEO of Clear Channel, Lowry Mays, quoted in Chen (2003).
 28. Robert Picard explains the relationship of the quality (and amount) of labor and the geographic location of a station so that a station in a distant and small city is a less desirable location for workers than is a station in a big city. According to Picard, this is why the quality (and amount) of labor in the labor pool of small stations will be lower than that of a big city station (Picard 1989, 105-106). Consequently, if inferior talent is then used, the commodity produced will also not be of high quality (Sohn et al 1999, 246).
 29. See Webster, Phalen & Lichty 2000, 55.
 30. See Herman 1995, 175-176.

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