

This is Radio Clash

*A Manifesto for Creating a Meaningful
Radio Experience*

Static on the radio has a new meaning: no growth. At stations across the country, request lines are unanswered, ratings are declining, and listeners are openly expressing their unhappiness with a medium they once loved. *continued* ▶

By Fred Jacobs



In the past decade, overall radio listening has dropped nearly fourteen percent. The declines are greatest among the group of listeners that radio needs the most: 18-24 year-olds. This influential audience shapes music trends and tastes, but they're abandoning traditional radio in droves.

This group was supposed to become the next generation of radio programmers and managers. But for the first time ever, stations are finding it difficult to attract bright, energetic young people to the business. Static, indeed.

I'm a researcher, so I spend a lot of time talking to radio listeners. And many of them are saying radio has become too commercial, too corporate, too predictable. A classic rock station in Portland, Maine sounds like a classic rock station in Phoenix, Arizona. Whether it's all-news or hip-hop, the answer is the same: radio's quest for consistency and profitability has made it dull.

The decline began in 1996, when governmental deregulation allowed broadcast companies to grow at meteoric rates. As they became more attractive investments to Wall Street, radio stations and their market clusters systematically reduced expenses and staff, added commercials, and took advantage of their ability to consolidate. Throughout these years, their focus has been on real estate — their share of the market.

Rather than follow the big-picture issues shaping American pop culture and changing media habits, most radio stations have focused their research dollars on traditional,

meat-and-potatoes areas, such as the identification of mass appeal songs, DJ popularity, and “most attractive” contests. In other words, the predictable stuff. As a result, they’ve missed the big picture.

Radio’s **myopic practices** are **threatening** its **future** as they would any **business** that focuses on **commerce** over **content**.

Some major-market radio stations rival professional sports teams in financial value. That contributes to a risk-averse culture as broadcasters face immense pressure to meet lofty financial goals. In this consolidated environment, the safe, proven road is the norm, in stark contrast to the “old days” when hundreds of smaller operators each tried their hand at creating compelling radio. The result wasn’t always a work of art, but those days of experimentation disappeared when Wall Street demanded a play-it-safe approach.

Radio’s myopic practices are threatening its future as they would any business that focuses on commerce over content. When radio had little direct competition, a cavalier attitude might have been passable. In the old days, disgruntled radio listeners simply retreated to their own personal music collections of albums, 8-tracks, cassettes, or CDs. But given the landscape of new media choices, consumers are doing what they do best — fleeing to attractive new options that put them in control. Video games, iPods, Internet radio, and satellite radio have captured the attention and imaginations

of our 18–24 year olds — and this trend is spreading to other demographic groups. This “tyranny of choice” affects all traditional media. Like radio, television and print have come under intense pressure because of new entertainment choices.

Satellite radio’s **wide-open approach** to music and radio is **winning over listeners**.

One of the biggest challengers to terrestrial broadcasters is satellite radio. XM and Sirius are emerging as bona fide threats to terrestrial radio. Both offer plenty of bite-size service introductions: satellite radio in rental cars, on Jet Blue flights, and as an option packaged with new cars.

Satellite radio’s wide-open approach to music and radio is winning over listeners. XM provides local weather and traffic information in many markets and has added popular radio personalities like Opie & Anthony. It struck a deal with Major League Baseball to carry every game. Sirius purchased the rights to NFL broadcasts and now has put almost all its chips on the table by signing Howard Stern.

In my research, I see consistent evidence that listeners get hooked on satellite radio’s freshness, variety, and its unconfined programming. As the “Sopranos” is to “Frasier,” so are XM and Sirius to commercial radio. And satellite also provides an element of surprise and discovery, elements that are M.I.A. on most terrestrial stations.

How are they doing it? The satellite broadcasters set out to discover what terrestrial radio listeners don’t like about the medium: Lack of musical depth. Song repetition.

Commercial overload. The satellite broadcasters didn't learn anything the terrestrial radio programmers didn't already know. The difference? XM and Sirius actually did something about it.

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The bigger threat to terrestrial radio may be embedded in the Internet. As broadband proliferates, it has become increasingly easier to access online “radio stations” from companies like AOL and Microsoft, or hundreds of outlets around the world that provide streaming entertainment, often at no charge. As listeners become more comfortable accompanying their computer activities with audio, most commercial radio stations are left in the dust because few have invested in streaming technology.

This goes back to the early years of consolidation, too. When it became clear that big radio companies couldn't easily monetize streaming initiatives and that music licensing fees were a financial roadblock, most pulled their streams. In the process, Internet radio stations gained an important foothold, despite the better known, established terrestrial radio brands. While the Internet has become an essential part of most people's lives, radio has little presence beyond pedestrian web sites that feature DJ photos and concert calendars.

All this new-technology stuff costs money. Most listeners would rather not pay for entertainment they've received for free their entire lives. Virtually everyone has a radio, and listeners are aching for it deliver the type of programming they remember from their formative years with the medium. They're waiting for commercial radio to wake up from its coma. There are a few inklings of recognition.

In a purely technical contest, terrestrial radio has a few new jabs to compete. RDS technology (messaging on car radios) delivers text messages, such as artist and title. The promise of HD radio could help revive stations, including some AM outlets that have outlived their usefulness. And more and more companies are initiating streaming to better compete with Internet challenges — despite the expense. But new technologies won't deliver results unless radio programmers are given the power to use their creative skills to craft meaningful formats. As is always the case, it's about content.

There are indications that terrestrial broadcasters are beginning to get the message. New format experimentation is beginning in markets around the country. Liberal talk — namely, Air America — is attracting listeners. New stations for Hispanics are springing up everywhere. Ideas that might have been tabled in the corporate conference room just a few months ago are being given the thumbs-up from executives who realize that innovation is the best course of action. A few radio chiefs are beginning to open up to change, and it's a positive sign for the medium's challenged future.

During this awakening, the captains of the industry must realize the next bright, shiny object for radio is not a format or a musical genre. It's a code of conduct that separates a station from ... everything else. It's responsive, and listener-driven.

It's a *movement*. Listeners first.

To stop radio's decline, it must embrace a values-based revolution. Its programming must transcend music and traditional format boundaries, and it must be obvious on the air. Like any revolution, it is scary to those with the most to lose.

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A new radio revolution will work differently off the air by including listeners in the programming process. It will treat them more like customers, not as demographic segments on a spreadsheet. For this revolution to take root, programmers must acknowledge that non-radio competition is marginalizing their relevance as a society-changing voice, and they must pledge to make radio meaningful again. The times they are a changin' and radio must change with them.

A few stations are leading the way. The examples are at different ends of North America, across traditional format divisions.

For instance, there's National Public Radio. NPR's growth in listenership has exploded the past several years. Its success is due to its singular focus on news and the fast-growing need for credible, balanced information in a post-9/11 world.

Intangible factors play into NPR's success, too: its values. The network presents a calm, hype-free environment that respects and acknowledges the listener's thoughtful intelligence. NPR employees carry their values, literally, via laminated cards: honesty, respect for listeners, and a steady, credible voice in a business where news and information is reduced to utility ("traffic and weather on the 8s!"). NPR is the polar opposite of the cacophony of point/counterpoint shout-fests common among commercial radio's talk stations. NPR's value system motivates and frames every decision the network makes. As commercial broadcasters have begun to realize, NPR's ascension has been accomplished without the traditional trappings — shock jocks, mega-marketing, and big contests. This growth has taken place with the confluence of values and credible content.

On the commercial side of the dial, The Drive in Chicago (WDRV) is redefining commitment to music depth. It sounds like nothing else on the commercial radio dial, and while it is at times bland, it has generally been a ratings success because of its singular focus on music, and the fact that it simply sounds different than other stations.

The Mountain (KQMT) in Denver plays "classic hits" in a hype-free, depth-driven, anti-corporate environment. The station is hosted by DJs who know and "get" the music. The on-air staff is empowered to make musical choices, and listeners appreciate it. KQMT has entered the upper echelon of the 25-54 adult rankings. Their slogan, "Free Your Radio," is a cause-driven stake in the ground. Ironically, the station is owned by a major corporation, Entercom. Senior management took risks that enabled the station to experiment with ground-breaking values and approaches. As KQMT often says, "We may be a radio station, but that doesn't mean we have to sound like one."

FM 94/9 in San Diego is winning this way, too. Like KQMT, its “alternative” playlist is hype-free, depth driven, anti-corporate, and hosted by DJs who have the freedom to call musical audibles. For two years, FM 94/9 has demonstrated that solid listener relationships, depth, variety, and an independent spirit produce results. The station has neutralized its key competitor. An industry trade publication named it “Alternative Station of the Year.” With this new approach, revenues have climbed seventy percent.

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It’s worth noting that FM 94/9 is owned by Jefferson Pilot, a multi-billion dollar insurance giant. For a company whose industry is all about mitigating risk, Jefferson Pilot’s experiment is not without some irony. But its executives understand the value of standing naked on the leading edge — the station sounds vastly different than its competitors.

Then there’s Jack-FM. It’s the talk of Canada. While often driven by hype and bravado, Jack breaks other conventions, such as a traditional focus on hyper-target demographics and genres. Jack plays what it wants — just about everything — and creates a “big tent” approach. Like its new-revolution contemporaries in the States, Jack defiantly says, “We play what we want!” It’s proudly anti-corporate. It has succeeded

throughout Canada but acceptance has been slower in the States, primarily because the concept is impossible to “pre-test” using standard radio research methods.

The people behind stations like **KQMT** and **FM 94/9** have **standards, values, and guts.**

It could be argued these terrestrial radio examples are “passion plays,” designed to stir up trouble by capitalizing on emotional withdrawal. But these stations are the future. They rethink standard practices of querying listeners. They adapt and change. They have courage.

Listeners want more choice, more unpredictability, more surprises, more DJ involvement, and more of a voice in what their radio stations are programming. These stations do that, and that’s why they’re succeeding.

The next big thing cannot sound like the last big thing. “Classic rock” was vilified when it came out. Programmers didn’t understand the appeal of Nirvana when it was a young band. That’s why this growing movement in radio is different. It’s unlike anything else happening.

Every revolution needs a name. Let’s call it the NeoRadio movement.

The people behind stations like KQMT and FM 94/9 have standards, values, and guts. They take risks and authentically care about the opinions of listeners. Instead of broadcasting to the masses, NeoRadio stations play to their base by valuing listeners

as individuals and their needs. It's not "a format in a box." The degree of difficulty in doing NeoRadio is very high.

NeoRadio is about listeners and what *they* want. It's the opposite of the post-Telecom Act Wall Street norm. Radio's charm has always been its ability to reflect the vibe of its local communities, large and small. We heard this in the days and weeks after 9/11 when many local radio stations stepped out and provided a hometown voice for their listeners. NeoRadio embraces that grassroots approach every day.

NeoRadio means staying focused on music — or playing what listeners want, rather than in-your-face morning shows and big, splashy contests. It means hiring DJs who are passionate about music rather than human automatons. It means connecting with listeners as part of a larger "retail" philosophy that empowers stations to be in touch with local issues. Only local radio stations can hold a mirror up to listeners and reflect their ethos, values, and concerns.

Adversity breeds opportunity. Still in its infancy, NeoRadio is breathing life into old formats and reviving the industry. The early evidence indicates big corporations can run NeoRadio stations successfully and deliver results. Entercom has championed KQMT, Jefferson Pilot has developed FM 94/9, and many of the Jack FM stations are run by Rogers, the Ted Turner of Canada. In the States, Infinity has a few stations trying to break the mold. Emmis is experimenting with formats that are new and different. Other broadcasters are realizing that risk-taking has rewards. They're integrating listeners into the programming process, and creating audience buy-in by giving them a stake in the solution. It's a brave new radio world.

Despite the competition of new entertainment choices, radio remains the most widely used and ubiquitous medium. It has survived intense challenges before — like television.

Perhaps those young and influential listeners *will* create the next generation of great terrestrial radio stations.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fred Jacobs created the “classic rock” format, and played a major role in the growth of the “alternative” format as a longtime media researcher and consultant. He is the founder and president of Jacobs Media and maintains a blog at <http://www.jacobsmedia.com/blog>.

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