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BATTLE FOR Ears

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Abstract:

[...] nearly half of the Rochester area's listening audience tunes to one of Entercom's 10 local stations at some point during the week, said Michael Doyle, the company's regional vice president. Before the 1990s deregulation of the industry allowed one owner to command multiple stations in a single market, there were many more owners and much smaller radio chains, said Scott Fybush, editor of NorthEast Radio Watch, an industry newsletter based in Rochester.

Full text:

Matthew Daneman | Staff writer

What makes good radio? Try the tale of a West Coast woman's arrest for pummeling her boyfriend over whether his dog should be in the bathroom while the couple showered together.

"There's the attitude 'love me, love my pets,'" said Barry Beck of "Kimberly and Beck," the morning duo at WBZA-FM (98.9), as the two lobbed quips in a volley of verbal tennis.

Part of Rochester chuckled in its commute last week, listening to one of the area's top-rated morning drive-time radio programs. Advertisers like Medaille College and Frontier Telephone continue to pay Kimberly and Beck's employer, Entercom Communications Corp., well to access those ears.

Commercial radio in Rochester is a \$51 million annual industry, according to Kagan Research Associates. But commercial broadcast radio is a far different medium in a rapidly shifting industry than just a few years ago.

Inside stations here and across the nation, much is automated and on-air personalities typically no longer cue up songs. They watch a computer monitor, which tells them when to speak, when a commercial is playing and when a pre-selected mix of music from within the computer system will be played. To cut costs, some stations are fully automated for part or even all of the day, with no local voices announcing the time or songs playing.

"You used to be able to drive across the country and hear different voices and accents. Now you can make the same drive and hear the same 15 songs," said Craig Aaron, spokesman for a Washington-based media reform advocacy group.

And local stations everywhere are competing with a vast and growing number of listening choices their consumers never had before.

Satellite radio delivered to cars and homes offers hundreds of channels, serving even the most eclectic tastes. Cable television has several digital music channels that are commercial-free. More and more cars now come with automatic connections for iPods or other mp3 players so drivers can play their own mixes. Even home computers offer Internet radio stations, from the very slick to ones that music buffs transmit over the net from their homes to their listeners.

As traditional radio broadcasters try to hang on to their markets, the industry is trying to stay profitable and, under relaxed Federal Communications Commission rules, has become more concentrated under huge national owners.

Consolidation rocked the industry in Rochester recently as Entercom acquired two former CBS Radio stations and dismissed some longtime on-air talent. Now nearly half of the Rochester area's listening audience tunes to one of Entercom's 10 local stations at some point during the week, said Michael Doyle, the company's regional vice president.

Entercom, based in suburban Philadelphia, owns six of the area's 10 highest-rated stations, from country WBEE-FM (92.5) to left-leaning news/talker WROC-AM (950). Entercom's holdings include the stations it finished purchasing last month from CBS Radio, WCMF-FM (96.5) and WPXY-FM (97.9).

Texas-based radio behemoth Clear Channel Communications Inc. also owns 10 local stations, including right-leaning news/talk station WHAM-AM (1180) and adult contemporary station WDVI-FM (100.5).

Only one station in the top 10, WDKX-FM (103.9), is a locally owned independent.

Before the 1990s deregulation of the industry allowed one owner to command multiple stations in a single market, there were many more owners and much smaller radio chains, said Scott Fybush, editor of NorthEast Radio Watch, an industry newsletter based in Rochester.

The local ownership picture is changing further. Entercom has put up for sale three stations, WRMM-FM (101.3), WFKL-FM (93.3) and WZNE-FM (94.1), to satisfy U.S. Justice Department regulatory concerns about a possible monopoly. For employees and fans of those stations, that raises questions about what could end up playing on those spots on the dial.

"A lot of the large companies are being less patient with formats that aren't producing revenue," said Robert Hammond, general manager of contemporary Christian music station WRCI-FM (102.7). "107.3 (WCRR-FM), they switch every other day."

Entercom said it doesn't plan substantial changes to its two new stations.

"You're not going to tune in and hear 80 percent different music on CMF or PXY," Doyle said, adding that the amount of advertising actually might be cut back a minute or two to match Entercom guidelines of 10 to 11 minutes per hour.

But the change in ownership did mean that several longtime radio personalities lost their jobs, including WCMF's Dave Kane and Dino Kay and WPXY's Pete "The Mayor" Kennedy.

And last week, Rochester rock radio icon Brother Wease, a mainstay on WCMF, was off the air because of contract negotiations with Entercom.

If anyone sees an impact from Entercom's increasing dominance locally, it could be Clear Channel, said Robert Savage, president of WYSL-AM (1040).

"It's fair to say CBS has not had a lot of interest in developing these stations," Savage said of the former owner. "Clear Channel is going to have to deal with a reinvigorated primary competitor."

Regardless of ownership, change is a constant in local radio. "Even successful stations will change things every so often," said Mark Fratrick, a vice president with BIA Financial Network, a broadcast industry consulting company in Virginia.

The increased ownership concentration in some ways is providing a niche for smaller stations to exploit.

Hammond said he met last week with an advertiser coming to his station because he was tired of dealing with conglomerates. "I have direct contact with our owner. Other businesses appreciate that fact."

Invisible airwaves

Italian electrical engineer Guglielmo Marconi developed the wireless telegraph, the forerunner to today's radio, in the 1890s. A hundred-plus years later, most every car and household has a radio. But digital technology has opened the way to new competitors and new opportunities for radio.

Vying for listeners' ears are iPods, satellite radio, music streaming over the Internet and coming from

your cable television box.

"There is so much more competition than there used to be," Doyle said. "The barrier to entry is lower and lower. It used to be you worried about your competition being Clear Channel radio. The worry now is what people do with their time."

Bridge Ratings, a California-based radio audience measurement service, estimates that weekly listenership of traditional "terrestrial" radio will remain about 280 million people through this decade, but then drop to 260 million by 2020. Meanwhile, options such as mobile phone streaming will go from about 8 million users today to more than 100 million by 2020, and Internet radio listenership is expected to nearly triple, to 200 million.

HD expands

Radio's coffers, meanwhile, are struggling with growing competition from local cable TV advertising and Internet advertising.

Numerous radio stations now broadcast high-definition signals - entirely separate stations that can be picked up only on HD receivers - in hopes that HD radio sees similar growth. Entercom HD signals locally include an all-blues station and a comedy channel. WPXY and WCMF both plan to broadcast HD signals within a few weeks, Doyle said.

WRCI, the Christian station, also has an HD station, 102.7A, that carries the same programming, though the goal is to differentiate the two as HD listenership picks up, Hammond said.

Technology is changing what and how stations broadcast in other ways. Gone are the libraries of CDs and LPs, replaced by large computer servers holding digital audio files - Entercom has a sole turntable in its suite of studios at its High Falls location.

Almost every local station uses pre-recorded voice tracks or just music and ads run by a computer for their overnight programming.

And both WBEE and WCMF have morning show personalities who take part from Texas and Pennsylvania, respectively, with their voices chiming in with the talent sitting in the actual studio, Doyle said.

Kimberly Ray and Barry Beck started seven years ago, as both moved to the fledgling station "The Buzz" from separate stations in Ohio. The show runs from 5 to 10 a.m. weekdays, but both are at the station well before then, prepping for that day's show, and are in the office for hours afterward, booking future guests.

But for that five hours, their job is to be up and bubbly without being cloying or manufactured. As such, in between Kansas' "Dust in the Wind" and Pearl Jam's "Last Kiss," they talk about themselves - parents' deaths, their own divorces - as well that morning's news or about nothing in particular, like how awesome the Pittsford Wegmans is.

"You can't fake it," said Beck, 50, a Perinton father of two. "It's a lot like marriage - we spend a lot of time together and there's no sex."

"People don't want b.s.," added Ray, 42, of Hilton, a mother of one. "They want real-life stuff. The audience knows fake crap when they hear it."

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Owning air

Here are the companies and organizations that own the radio stations heard around the Rochester region. Note: Some stations broadcast from the Buffalo and Syracuse markets.

Entercom: WROC-AM (950), WBEE-FM (92.5), WFKL-FM (93.3), WZNE-FM (94.1), WCMF-FM (96.5), WPXY-FM (97.9), WBZA-FM (98.9), WRMM-FM (101.3), WTSS-FM (102.5), WLKK-FM (107.7).

Clear Channel: WHAM-AM (1180), WHTK-AM (1280), WFXF-FM (95.1), WDVI-FM (100.5), WVOR-FM (102.3), WBBS-FM (104.7), WKGS-FM (106.7), WPHR-FM (106.9), WCRR-FM (107.3), WWHT-FM (107.9).

Crawford: WLGZ-AM (990), WRCI-FM (102.7).

Educational Media Foundation Inc.: WKDL-FM (104.9).

Estate of David L. Wolfe: WRSB-AM (1310), WASB-AM (1590).

Family Worship Center Church Inc.: WJCA-FM (102.1).

Holy Family Communications: WHIC-AM (1460).

HPL Communications: WBTA-AM (1490).

M.B. Communications: WYLF-AM (850).

Miller Media Inc.: WDNY-FM (93.9).

Monroe County BOCES 1: WBER-FM (90.5).

Monroe County Broadcasting Co. Ltd: WDKX-FM (103.9).

North Coast Radio Inc.: WJZR-FM (105.9).

Radio Livingston Ltd.: WYSL-AM (1040).

Regent Broadcasting: WYRK-FM (106.5).

Rochester Institute of Technology: WITR-FM (89.7).

The Radio Group: WCGR-AM (1550).

University of Rochester Broadcast Corp.: WRUR-FM (88.5).

Waynco Radio: WUUF-FM (103.5).

West Irondequoit school district: WIRQ-FM (104.7).

WXXI Public Broadcasting Council: WXXI-AM (1370), WXXI-FM (91.5).

Sources: Arbitron, WhoOwnsRadio.com, Federal Communications Commission, staff research

Top of the charts

Here are the 10 top-rated commercial stations in the Rochester market for summer 2007, the most recent quarter for which Arbitron ratings are available. The rating number represents the percentage of the listening audience tuning in to that station.

1. WBEE-FM (92.5)

Country - 10.2

2. WHAM-AM (1180)

News/talk - 8.8

3. WDKX-FM (103.9)

Urban contemporary - 7.9

4. WCMF-FM (96.5)

Classic rock - 6.5

5. WRMM-FM (101.3)

Soft adult contemporary -

6.1

6. WBZA-FM (98.9)

80s hits - 5.8

7. WPXY-FM (97.9)

Current hits - 5.7

8. WDVI-FM (100.5)

Modern adult contemporary -

5.1

9. WKGS-FM (106.7)

Current hits - 4.3

10. WZNE-FM (94.1)

Modern rock - 2.3

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