



Rush: Save radio...again?

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Several seemingly unrelated items these past several days suggest an opportunity:

- Various forecasters quoted in the trade press continue trying to wish spot revenue higher, while advertising dollars continue to drift Digital. Meanwhile...
- Published research now demonstrates AM/FM's Share of Daily Media Minutes (P18-64) at just 19%.
- Undeniably undiscovered, HD Radio also seems geographically challenged, based on several days I've spent inhaling new car smell. But that's fixable, according to no-less-than a former FCC Chairman, who says his company's technology can improve coverage, at the receiver, not the transmitter. Because so few people own HD receivers, re-tooling seems undaunting. Could automakers upgrade OEM via recall? Going forward, smartphones and other HD-enabled devices would be state of the art. One group owner, an investor, says this development could be a radio "game-changer."
- Want game-changer? For the first time ever, a Triple-A baseball team is broadcasting its play-by-play Internet-only, via the team's web site and free iPhone and Android apps. The Syracuse Chiefs cite available AMs' poor night time coverage and politely explain that bigger-footprint AMs' terms aren't viable. Netcasting is already SOP with AA and A teams, of every sport. Heck, ESPN3 is a webcast.
- Talkers' most recent estimates reckon Rush Limbaugh's audience is still the format's biggest, if down to a still-respectable 14 million (P6+).
- The owner of Limbaugh's biggest affiliates reiterated that Talk Radio still hasn't recovered from the Sandra Fluke episode, after all this time.
- And El Rushbo himself reminded us what makes radio cool:

"People will go wherever they have to in order to get the content that they want. So if what they want is on an AM radio station, that's where they'll go to get it. If they have to string two tin cans together with a piece of string to get it, that's where they'll go, if they want it."

Plain talk: HD Radio still hasn't caught on, and might never, unless...

The Consumer Electronics industry seems more excited about it than the radio industry, as you'll hear if you listen to the app-like side-channel programming from stations that could afford conversions. Typically, those which continue to broadcast side-channels offer:

- a HD simulcast of their main-channel feed, and it does sound better, when it's not cutting-out...as do...
- a HD simulcast of their News/Talk AM sister; and/or
- a music format variation of the main-channel feed, i.e., Oldies HD2'd onto a Classic Rocker, Classic Country HD2'd onto a mainstream Country, etc.; and/or
- a music format that the main-channel outgrew, minus the fired DJs who made it livelier than the side channel's robo-version; and/or
- an otherwise-unavailable music format, i.e., Smooth Jazz.

Other than the AM sister simulcast, I hear no commercials, or even title sponsor IDs, only nerdy-sounding legal IDs and occasional garden-variety imaging liners punctuate Segue Serenade. NOT special.

Why would it be? Compromises main-channel programming has suffered have cost radio overall (except Public Radio, where many, of all ages, are escaping schlock). So don't count on main-channel incumbency to drive side-channel sampling, even if consumers did own enough HD receivers to make this a business.

Why they don't: There's no "Rush Limbaugh of HD," no programming magnet that would force users to be aware of a new delivery system. And NOBODY gets that like Rush:

"I still think it boils down to content...They'll go wherever it is if they want to listen to it."

Could Rush Limbaugh save radio, again, by moving to HD side channels?

Think "Digital Transition," cold turkey, like TV did. No less will move the awareness needle.

Consequences?

- Affiliates would keep the franchise. Rush migrates to one of their side channels.
- Affiliates who haven't converted to HD yet? Cough it up. That's life in the NFL.
- Based on ads we're hearing, the move might not hurt E.I.B. Network business. After The Fluke Flap scared off so many "real commercials," Limbaugh's national avails sound largely Direct Response. If the show moved to HD, tax delinquents could still enter the Promo Code "Rush" to order chocolate-dipped strawberries, and buy gold, KNOWING that their computer is backing-up and nobody's hacking their credit file, all while chortling at that parody guy's latest compendium.
- Heck, this might attract new "real advertisers:" automakers, smartphones, and other HD ripples. And even if not...
- Stations Limbaugh vacates would once again be "safe," a term national reps have been using to torture client stations post-Fluke. By going Rush-free, his present affiliates would make a statement, and recover 15 weekday hours many advertisers now black-out (and three weekend hours that scream re-run). TRY SOMETHING there. Once upon a time, Rush himself was a try-something, remember?
- The Rush Limbaugh Show would take on new cachet. Position AM as your father's Oldsmobile. "HD" is 21st Century; and, like satellite radio, it implies Premium. It's "Digital," where do-re-mi is moving.
- All boats could rise with the tide, as Radio, generally, attracts new attention when Limbaugh's move is announced.

OK, OK, I'm making this sound easy. It's work, alrighty. But turning-one-channel-into-four should be a radio breakthrough. Yet HD remains largely an idea, which too few people have heard of, unlike Netflix, which invested in "House of Cards" starring Kevin Spacey.

Is Rush Limbaugh HD Radio's Kevin Spacey?

Would he walk his Two Tin Cans talk?

NOTE: This opinion piece was rejected by Talkers magazine. But you may find these recent related Talkers and Radio-Info columns of interest:

- [Radio: "House of Cards?"](http://www.talkers.com/2013/02/13/radio-house-of-cards/) (<http://www.talkers.com/2013/02/13/radio-house-of-cards/>)
- [Why Not Just Say "Don't Listen?"](http://www.talkers.com/2012/07/11/why-not-just-say-dont-listen/) (<http://www.talkers.com/2012/07/11/why-not-just-say-dont-listen/>)
- [2013 Talk Radio Breakthrough: Actual Conversation?](http://getonthenet.com/newtone.html) (<http://getonthenet.com/newtone.html>)