

What a different radio world we lived in the mid-70's, when Steve Dana launched Broadcast Equipment Exchange and began to dream of the new "Radio World".

Asked to write some perspective about those years, I must tell you it's tempting to mount the soapbox or to write the "history of the broadcast world". Instead I'm just scratching my silver-haired pate to try to remember what issues we were facing in the trenches in the 70's.

For someone to say "radio was still fun" in 1976, we'd have to define what "fun" meant. I think the short answer was that most of us felt we were still in charge of the product, and we still found the reward in pushing the envelope in engineering and programming. Most importantly, we still had the time to do a good job.

Because each of our stations lived in its own environment, not sharing walls with six other operations, we could still pretend for a moment that we were the only station on the dial, and that everyone was listening only to us. Such was the "magic of broadcasting", left behind as we emerged into a world of consolidation and cost-efficiencies enabled by regulatory relaxation and equipment reliability.

So herewith a few thoughts on what radio was like for me in the 70's. On the programming side, for starters, you could still pick your own music! That is, unless you were "automated". "The Automation" was not a 17-inch screen but a long row of deep racks with 14-inch Scully tape players controlled by a sequential "brain" that interspersed pre-recorded hit reels with oldies and commercials/promos played from the cart "Carousel". If you were lucky, the "Currents" reel was updated every week or two. If you were unlucky, you had to deal in the middle of the night with badly-wound or stretched tapes, courtesy of the last station to use them.

Program Directors still had a serious function in the mid-70's. For music product, many were at the mercy of the regional record distributors who acted as outlets for the labels. Playlists cloned the charts of Billboard and the Gavin Report, and R&R was about to revolutionize record promotions with the Parallel 1-2-3 structure that stratified markets. There was only one "Consultant" in our lives; that was the technoid who tuned our directional antenna arrays.

The trend toward homogenization had not yet begun. While a lot of individual broadcasters still stamped their own mark on their singular air product, the copy-cat effect was alive and well. What was happening on the "Coasts" made it slowly into the sub-continent. The rock-and-rollers and the full-service AMs were still carrying the water. Stations on a dozen 1-A frequencies still enjoyed clear-channel protection, and there was nothing as uplifting as hearing a rock-and-roll giant booming through the night from a thousand miles away.

FM made a lot of headway in a hurry in the early 1970's, but there was still room in every market for "progressive" formats and for experimentation with live music remotes and "quad-casts". And it wasn't at all unusual for a public affairs station to dedicate

dozens of hours to congressional hearings and unfolding news events. The progressive broadcasters still met every year at the National Radio Broadcasters' Association (NRBA) meetings, to swap lies and discuss ways to make radio a better place to live and work. The NRBA was the only serious national alternative to the NAB, but there were regional gatherings of note; especially for engineers. In Madison Wisconsin, 1976 marked the 22nd year of the "Broadcasters Clinic". The agenda that year included papers on SCA and AM antenna linearity, and circular polarization of TV transmitting antennas.

At those meetings, engineers would congregate around industry leaders to learn first hand what they were thinking about and what turned them on. Composite Clipping was one of the hot topics. So was hands-on telephone interfacing, "Trans-Amp" inputs and "square waves to the exciter". While we waited for digital tape, we no longer had to be satisfied with Ampex's latest try. MCI tape machines began to appear from Jeep Harned's factory in Fort Lauderdale. Boasting what was essentially a discrete microprocessor control system, the MCI was at once a complicated, maintenance-prone machine and a very faithful tape recorder, at least when compared with previous analog decks.

While Jack Williams was busy in San Diego working on marketing plans for the "Max Trak", in New York, Gotham Audio's Steven Temmer was playing with a German device called a digital tape recorder. And a few privileged engineers were opening the shipping cartons on something called an "Optimod". As complex as that system was, it was classically simple in its approach to a long-standing problem: eliminating filter overshoot. Most of us stood in awe of the Optimod (for at least several months), before we succumbed to the temptation to "improve" it. I still give Bob Orban a lot of credit for not reacting more vehemently to the hot-rod opti-"mods" that began to float through the underground.

Engineers still had their "First Phones" hanging on the wall...next to the telephone numbers for RCA Sales and Service. Most engineering staffs were big enough so that things could be done right, and engineers were not yet relegated to the singular role of "fireman".

To the credit of the engineering fraternity, most engineers weren't satisfied with the role being forced on them. They responded to the challenges and took advantage of the many opportunities for career growth provided by the increasingly-effective SBE, and they began the process of re-making themselves into Information Technologists. It's truly gratifying to note that today, in the new media environment, the technologist (nee "engineer"), is still at the heart of the action.

Thanks, Radio World, for letting me contribute to your 25th Anniversary observations. I can't wait to see what you write about today's radio when you celebrate your 50th!

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