

Radio—lacking professionalism?

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Don't listen to a station for a least a year after you have worked there. Those were the warning words of a friend as I exited a station about five years ago.

In those intervening years, I have become convinced that one should not listen to radio at all if they have ever worked in that medium. It's just too frustrating.

As I tune across the dial and listen to a variety of formats, I wonder what has happened to quality. I'm not talking here about the quality or sterility of radio formats—that's a discussion for another time. What I am referring to is the quality, or lack thereof, in the execution of whatever format that sounds like it is just thrown on the air.

Just a few examples will suffice:

- **Skill.** Back in the years BC (before computers) when commercials were cued on tape or set up on carts, it seemed that even the high-school weekender who was responsible for most goof-ups could meet the network news dead on. Perhaps I shouldn't complain since so few stations even use network news anymore, but for those who do—would it be possible to get everything wrapped up on time without a cacophony of music finishing, a prerecorded ID with jingle and the network sounder all on the air at the same time? Or, what about that public radio station that I hear each morning either arriving at the BBC news a good ten seconds early, allowing us to hear just the tail end of the billboard for the program that we will never hear, or, entering the news in progress Wally Ballau style? The same for our local NPR station which covers much of the national news with program promos, news, underwriting announcements, traffic reports and other such clutter and, as a result, often times can't get back into Morning Edition on time. And, can live announcers going into the network news no longer back time an instrumental that brings the hour to a close right up against the legal ID that ends with the network sounder? That's a much more professional sound than the interruption of a vocal in progress for the canned ID.
- **Earphones.** The last time I checked, there were still a number of companies producing high quality earphones for use in radio studios. If these wonderful modern marvels are placed over the announcer's ears while on the air live, the operator/announcer will know instantly that there is another song playing as well as a commercial while he/she is also giving the weather. Continued use of the earphones when off the air, combined with turning off the microphone switch, will allow the announcer to hear similar technical problems before a listener has to call in and report them.
- **Automation.** Granted, mechanical execution will involve occasional gremlins just as will live engineering and announcing. The question is, doesn't anybody listen to his or her station anymore? Automation screw-ups can continue for hours, offering dead air or garbled transmissions or whatever and nobody seems to notice. If the format is too unbearable for station personnel to listen to, perhaps that old fallback of contracting with a 24-hour diner or some such similar operation to keep track of whether things are running smoothly might be in order.

- News. I probably shouldn't even get started in this area, so will limit my remarks. Back when news anchors evidently were well trained, there was the admonition not to begin each news story with the word "well." Well, that idea seems to have been forgotten. The local chicas on one station's 10 p.m. newscast in our market begin almost every story with that word, as do at least three anchors for CNN, one on Headline News, the other two on CNN International.
- Writing. OK, I'm cheating; this is a news item as well. And, it has nothing to do with the verbless writing to which we are subjected every day on TV and radio. (In that regard, my wife, a professional ESL teacher, no longer recommends that her students listen to the news to practice hearing English. The grammar is horrible). The problem here is just a poor command of the English language and its grammatical points. Just one recent example—those Egyptian Siamese twins that were recently separated? Why did I hear several news reports concerning "the two twins?" It seems to me that twins imply two—but then, I never was good at math.
- Pronunciation. Maybe it's because I'm a news junkie, but I just have to throw in one more news-related gripe. If local stations insist that they are going to do national and world news rather than leave it to the experts at the networks, then they need to learn how to pronounce things correctly. For example, the capital of Uruguay is pronounced Mon-tey-vih-day-oh, not Monte-video, and when the pope elevates a person to sainthood, the process is be-at-ih-fication, not beet-a-fication. Just two enlightened examples actually heard on the air.
- Preparation. How often have you heard a metro-style traffic report end with, "this report was brought to you byyyyy.....Joe's garage?" Or the music hostess on one classical music station who is always saying, "We just hearrrrddd...."—the voice goes up as the word is extended while the announcer is scrambling to fill in the blank. Come on, have the info ready *before* you go on the air.
- Annoying. Programmers should work to attract and keep listeners, not annoy them so that they go away. Why then must we hear "Newsradio XXX, WXXX in-depth, team coverage" repeated so many times in a half hour that it takes up enough time to include another news story or two? Such repetition not only is akin to dripping water, but its overuse renders the whole concept meaningless.

Why do I gripe so? Perhaps because it's because I'm getting old and grouchy, or maybe it's because I love radio and want to hear it done well.

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