

I, Bach! U.S. broadcasters try reinventing radio

BY DAN ROACH



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Something very strange is going on south of the border. U.S. FM stations are falling all over themselves to upgrade their facilities to IBOC. And the great majority of them are adding HD2 (and sometimes even HD3) channels to their carriers as well.

Hmmmm...

Let's face it, in spite of all the hype at NAB and elsewhere, IBOC has been with us (or more properly, *them*: the U.S. radio broadcasters) for a while, now. And while Ibiqity has offered tweaks here and there, we haven't seen a wholesale change in the technical quality of the offerings in the last couple of years.

About the last thing to happen—originally touted as the Tomorrow Radio project, then as HD2—was the cleaving of the FM IBOC digital stream to offer additional channels. These additional channels, which have no analog support, can

be simulcasts of other services (such as an AM sister station), or even something completely unrelated.

And most of the new ones seem to be just that—unrelated.

In the immediate Seattle area, for instance, there are now 21 IBOC FM stations on the air. Of these, 15 are transmitting HD2 signals (one is dabbling with HD3!). Only two of the HD2 signals are simulcasts of local AMs.

Well, I have been very sceptical of all this. To my ear, "full spectrum" IBOC quality is pretty marginal, and to split it into two or more channels is to seek parity with AM IBOC, which still sounds dreadful. Obviously, there are many folks out there who disagree.

A vocal group of manufacturers have been pushing for the extra channels to be used to make a standard for surround sound broadcasts, which strikes me as just silly, both because of lack of appropriate source material and because of the attendant loss of sound quality overall. This, to my mind, would not be progress.

There are still very few IBOC receivers on the market, and only a fraction of them can pick up the HD2 signals, since that development erupted after the Ibiqity standard had already been "set". And IBOC receiver sales have been very, very limp, so far.

So, just what is going on here? Is this

a panic reaction to the continuing hype of satellite radio? Is it a response to the iPod phenomenon? Is it another case of U.S. stampede response to an opportunity offered in the "free marketplace"?

Or, more altruistically, is this an effort to boost early IBOC receiver sales by offering something not available in analog, but as a service that you don't have to pay extra for? (Contrasting with XM and Sirius.)

Or is it all of the above?

Most importantly, could all this be about to happen to us here in Canada?

Well, maybe, I guess.

In our analog world, we have a name for a second channel that has no main channel support. In the States, they call it SCA. We Canucks call it SCMO. And it's been around for almost as long as FM stereo.

And, with some notable exceptions, it has been dying a very slow death across the land.

You'll say that the sound quality of SCMO wasn't good enough, or that the service wasn't available in stereo. To state this is to forget that there were no "cast in stone" standards for SCMO, and there were alternative modulation schemes that offered more bandwidth and higher quality, at prices that were still far below what IBOC is now asking... but the companies that offered them went out of business. From lack of business, one suspects.

Maybe they just weren't "digital" enough. That buzzword seems to be able to work miracles in consumer circles, even when the actual quality of what's on offer is apparently absent.

Maybe there's a lesson in marketing for Canada here. Maybe if, instead of offering "replacement technology" we'd offered alternative programs on DAB, stuff that you just couldn't receive any other way, then maybe we'd be up to our armpits in DAB receivers today.

Or maybe it wouldn't have made any difference. Perhaps the time just wasn't right.

But perhaps it is, now...

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