

I, Bach returns!

BY DAN ROACH

Just back from the National Association of Broadcasters convention, our annual bacchanalia of technological excess, and full of notions of broadcasting's past, present and future.

Those that were expecting the annual showdown between Avid and Apple were disappointed, as neither made an appearance at the show. With the no-show of two of the biggest exhibitors, the flavour of the exhibition has changed perceptibly.

Other changes: TV types from the Central Hall continued their incursion into the North Hall, formerly virgin radio country. This has reinvigorated the Radio Hall, which had been shrinking gradually year by year and was becoming decidedly prune-like. And this was the first year that I noticed the South Hall (upper and lower) has definitely become the busiest area of all. The whole centre of

gravity of the show seems to have shifted to new media and away from the traditional feeding frenzy in Central Hall.

Do you remember when the main object of IBOC radio was to provide a high-quality replacement signal for analog? In these days of shifting priorities, someone needs to remind iBiquity and their minions, because the goalposts keep on sliding around.

Now that they've got fairly decent audio quality (at least on the test bench), suddenly the essential goal is to have as many channels as you can. To that end they've introduced an extended version of FM IBOC that gives you more bits at the expense of increased interference to the analog signal. And there's a move to increase the relative level of the digital signal ten-fold or so, as apparently it has been discovered that -20 dBc (decibels relative to carrier) isn't effective at penetrating office buildings and the like.

If you ever thought that Canada's traditional position, well behind the U.S. bleeding-edge of technology, was wise, it's time to hold that thought. If this proposal is approved, any of the early-adopters down south that had chosen a hybrid approach to IBOC will be tearing everything apart and starting over. Headroom is one thing, but 10 dB = a new digital delivery system.

In my more cynical moments, I've concluded that these guys are just going to keep screwing around until they completely wreck the spectrum. They just don't seem content to settle for the level of chaos they have achieved to date.

And I'm getting really, really tired of so-called technical people saying that 36 kbits or 24 kbits/sec "equals" or is "the same as" (a) CD quality, (b) FM quality, or (c) insert your favourite standard here.

It isn't—usually it isn't even close. Please don't insult my intelligence or my ears. It may be the best that we can do, but don't try to B.S. us all with words like "equals". Makes the whole thing smack of snake oil.

On a more positive note, the IBOC team has come up with a really killer application that caught my eye. It's almost



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enough to give you faith in the technology. A couple of new receivers have been introduced, originally exclusive to Apple stores in the States. These little table radios have iPod sockets, as is the current fashion for such devices. They also have a little lighted pushbutton called "Tag".

Here's the drill: you're listening to your favourite IBOC FM station when you hear a song you like. If the "Tag" button is lit up, you can press it, and the radio will automatically store PAD (Program Associated Data), containing the song title and artist and the radio station's ID, into memory. When you plug in an iPod, the data goes there. When the iPod is subsequently plugged in to a computer with iTunes, iTunes conveniently searches for the music and lists it for downloading. If you download it, Apple sends a small commission back to the station that provided the Tag data.

All this was predicted 15 years ago with DAB's "coupon radio", but it's just so much more effective to see the stuff actually working. The radios and the service are available right now. Apple covers all the front-end costs and provides the PAD to the radio station. And they are apparently prepared to pay the stations a small fee for the service.

It all seems to work rather seamlessly, but I hope you'll excuse just a little scepticism, if only because I saw it at NAB, the original home of smoke and mirrors. In the words of the all-powerful, all-knowing Oz, "Ignore the man behind the curtain..."

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