Is There Any Hope for Broadcasters Throttled by Consolidation?

By Dave Shiflett

Feb. 5 (Bloomberg) -- If you think your local radio station sounds like it's being run by aliens, you may be right.

As Eric Klinenberg reports in "Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media," consolidation in the radio industry has produced creatures we might call the omnipresent jocks: on-air personalities who do "local" shows from several states away and may have never set foot in the markets they pretend to broadcast from.

Klinenberg, an associate professor of sociology at New York University, looks at consolidation in radio, newspapers, television and the Internet.

He presents a panorama of virulent homogenization -- and an industry that typically fails to serve the public interest.

Something even worse than a distant on-air personality is no on-air personality at all, especially when a natural disaster is about to envelop your town.

Klinenberg offers several harrowing examples of what he calls the empty-studio phenomenon, including a 2002 train derailment near Minot, North Dakota, that unleashed a cloud of ammonia gas 5 miles long, 2.5 miles wide and about 350 feet high.

Area officials attempted to get the six local radio stations to sound the alarm. Unfortunately, all the stations were owned by Clear Channel and consolidated into two offices. It took a couple of hours to find a live person to interrupt the canned programming.

Relaxed Restrictions

How have we come to this pass?

Largely, Klinenberg argues, through relaxation of restrictions on the number of outlets a company can own in the same market. Evolving computer technology has also played a role, allowing stations to have one employee record more shows in an eight-hour workday than was previously possible in a few weeks."

Texas-based Capstar, he notes, created software allowing jocks to record "voice tracks up to two weeks in advance." The pitch: "Sound live and local" -- and, of course, be neither.

Playlists feature the same songs by the same acts, a development that, besides being mind-addling, shuts out musicians without corporate backing. Klinenberg quotes journalist Eric Boehlert: Listeners are unaware that virtually every song they hear on FM commercial radio has been paid for -- indirectly -- by five major record labels."

Payola, Klinenberg adds, isn't restricted to radio playlists. The political commentator Armstrong Williams got $241,000 to secretly plump Bush-administration education policies. In the same spirit (but at a lower rate), columnists Maggie Gallagher and Mike McManus were paid to promote other policies.

Three-Man Newsroom

The author has expended lots of shoe leather gathering his facts, and he has a terrific eye for the telling quote, like the Hollinger executive David Radler's boast that his highest achievement "was the three-man newsroom -- and two of them sell ads."

Another fruit of consolidation: Newspaper reporters are increasingly required not only to write stories for the paper but also to appear on the company-owned television programs.

Klinenberg makes plenty of room for critics who agree with him that media companies are shirking community responsibilities. Robert Short Jr., who operated a Syracuse, New York, radio station focused on the local African-American community, couldn't withstand the Clear Channel onslaught, and the result, Short argues, has been bad for
Syracuse:

``They do zero community work. They don't give our community a voice. They don't want us to have a voice. They just want to sell ads.''

Internet Dreck

The Internet, Klinenberg says, while suffering no shortage of dreck, offers a forum for independent voices (though he quotes a Project for Excellence in Journalism finding that, of the top 20 sites in 2005, ``17 were associated with traditional news companies"").

He ends with a call for reforms, not the least of them revisiting the rules on ownership restrictions. Citizen involvement, he insists, is crucial to success.

As Eddie Fritts, who for more than two decades headed the National Association of Broadcasters, has predicted, this could become ``the mother of all legislative battles.''

``Fighting for Air'' is published by Metropolitan (339 pages, $26).

(Dave Shiflett is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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