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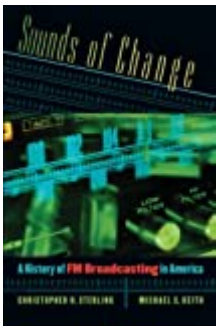

Christopher Sterling, Michael Keith. *Sounds of Change: A History of FM Broadcasting in America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 336 pp. $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5888-2.

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The Sound of History Repeating Itself

Within the ever-increasing body of historical radio studies, many aspects of this particular medium have been explored, though one large topic remained in the dark, specifically the development, diffusion, and eventual dominance of FM broadcasting. It is as if media scholars agreed that yes, radio was indeed important to study, but only so far as it laid the foundation for television.

Christopher Sterling and Michael Keith, by contrast, bring their considerable expertise to bear on the most significant technological change within the radio industry in the twentieth century: the transition from AM to FM broadcasting. Understanding this transition is important, argue Sterling and Keith, as the broadcast industry is dealing with an equally significant moment of transition–the change from analog to digital broadcasting, with the old methods threatened by satellite as well as Internet radio. The book is current as of 2008, though the authors can only offer suggestions and predictions regarding the next few years, as no one (least of all radio moguls themselves) knows what the industry will look like in the next decade.

The authors were well prepared for this project. Sterling has published and edited a number of studies of broadcasting, and is the co-author of *Stay Tuned* (3rd ed., 2001) the gold standard of broadcast history textbooks. Keith has also written a number of books on radio history, including works that explore Native Americans, gay programs, underground radio in the 1960s, and the demise of locally produced programs. Drawing from this body of research, Keith weaves elements from these previous books into this new study, perhaps devoting more attention to Native Americans and gays than another author might have done. This reviewer, however, appreciated the inclusiveness lest this study fall into the pattern of many previous radio histories and focus on only the most successful voices within the industry.

In a classic example of what Brian Winston has dubbed âthe suppression of radical potential,â [1] the Radio Corporation of America and other broadcasters did not welcome the innovation of FM broadcasting in

the early 1930s. The new method, which relied on frequency modulation rather than amplitude modulation, produced a higher-quality sound that was less prone to interference. The existing radio industry, however, was built for AM broadcasting; shifting to the new technology would require significant expense. There was also a classic âchicken-or-eggâ scenario. Why should anyone broadcast in FM if nobody owned a FM receiver, and why should anyone buy an FM receiver if nobody was broadcasting in FM?

Despite these difficulties, a handful of FM stations popped up. Along with improved audio quality, FM advocates also claimed that the new technology would offer more variety to listeners by increasing the number of stations. The fact that many AM stations, however, were simply duplicating their existing offerings on FM worked against this second claim. By the early 1940s, the FCC allowed FM stations to sell airtime and financial security seemed imminent.

In 1945, however, the FCC reorganized airwave allocations, largely to make room for the coming arrival of television. Over strenuous objections, FM frequencies were shifted, thus making all existing FM receivers obsolete. The FCCâs decision was seen as a debilitating blow to the struggling medium, though Sterling and Keith conclude that the shift was ultimately beneficial. If FM had stayed at its original home, there simply would not have been enough distinct frequencies to accommodate all of the new stations that would appear from the 1960s onward.

After two more decades of struggles, the growth of FM stations increased in the 1960s. The number of FM receivers likewise grew, and advertisers were persuaded to support the medium. The biggest boon to FMâs growth, somewhat ironically, came from the FCC. After drawn-out deliberations, the government ultimately mandated that AM stations could not duplicate programming on FM. The result was on overflowing of creativity on the FM band, with many educational, community stations springing up, along with free-wheeling rock stations that catered to the counterculture movement.

By the 1980s, FM stations outnumbered their AM brethren. And, in a reversal of policy, the FCC again allowed stations to duplicate programming on both the AM and FM dial. This time, however, the rule was designed to preserve AM stations by allowing owners to utilize them as a second-tier service.

At this point in the narrative, Sterling and Keith admit the story loses a bit of its focus. Since most stations were broadcasting in FM, the story of FM thus becomes synonymous with radio in general. The authors lament the current state of the industry, as FMâs original promise was not achieved. Too many stations offer bland, formulaic programming with a preponderance of advertising chatter, precisely the same problem with AM that FM stations claimed they would resolve. Clear Channel, the largest radio conglomerate, is the most prominent villain in this portion of the book.

Following the chapters are a number of useful appendices that chart the growth of commercial and educational FM stations, as well as the number of FM receivers. A glossary and a handful of charts also demystify some of the technical jargon related to the technology.

Overall, the authors do an excellent job of synthesizing several decades of radio history (and several decades of sometimes confusing FCC policy) into a readable narrative. If there is one critique, it pertains to the particular narrative that Sterling and Keith have chosen, whether inadvertently or not, to wrap around their research. They present a triumph narrative of technology, with new innovations presented as âbetterâ than the old. The question was not, in the authorsâ perspective, whether FM would be successful, but rather why it took so long for it to achieve dominance. Regarding digital broadcasting, they make a similar claim that it will triumph over analog broadcasting because it is âbetter.â

However, historians and scholars of technology have repeatedly argued that there is no objective definition of âbetterâ when it comes to technology. Certain technologies achieve certain goals more effectively than others, but these goals are not absolute and are largely determined by those interest groups who are managing said technology.

FM broadcastingâs eventual dominance was not destined to occur. Similarly, digital broadcasting is not necessarily going to overtake analog (though it does appear to be on this path). Decisions of the FCC, radio programmers, and listeners themselves exert more influence upon the evolution of radio technology than technical innovations alone. The importance of social, cultural, and economic factors to any technologyâs success is the crucial lesson of *Sounds of Change*, even though the authors themselves seem to present a narrative in which FMâs dominance was inevitable (perhaps because they are clearly fans and advocates of the medium).

This theoretical critique regarding the tone of the

book, though, in no way overshadows its value. Given the lack of serious scholarship on FM broadcasting, as distinct from radio history in general, the book fills a significant gap in the literature. And, given the current changes in the media industry, the lesson of FM is indeed instructive in helping scholars comprehend the next chapter in radioâs evolution, whatever that might prove to be. *Sounds of Change* is likely to remain the definitive history of FM radio for some time to come.

Note

[1]. Brian Winston, *Media, Technology, and Society: A History: From the Telegraph to the Internet (*London: Routledge, 1998), 336.

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