

For Digital Radio to Compete With Satellite, It Needs to Think Outside the Jukebox

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I have lots of new stations on my radio and I don't pay a penny for them.

I've got an all-folk music station and one that plays classic country songs that haven't been heard on country radio in years. There's a station with the incongruous but accurate label "Deep Tracks Classical," one that plays pop tunes so new they aren't on Hot 99.5 yet, and one that plays the real rock you don't hear so much on DC101 anymore.

I'm not hearing this stuff on my computer and I'm not downloading a thing. I listen to all this on an old-fashioned tabletop radio in my kitchen.

And that's where the catch comes in. I have a digital radio and you don't. So I can hear all the new stations on the radio, and you can't.

I say this with a fair bit of confidence because the audience for digital radio -- which the industry is marketing as "HD Radio," a nod to the popularity of high-definition TV -- numbers only in the thousands. But someday, perhaps this Christmas, you might own one of these gadgets, because the radio industry -- which is in something of a panic these days over declining audiences and snowballing competition from the two big satellite radio services, XM and Sirius -- sees digital as its savior and therefore wants you to get a digital radio yesterday.

For the moment, however, these sets run you about \$300 (down from \$500 just a few weeks ago), but hardly anyone is going to shell out that kind of green for what looks like an ordinary radio. (I didn't -- mine is borrowed from a friendly local radio station.)

But electronics prices have a way of tumbling, and digital radios probably will be available for \$100 by year's end. Automakers also are moving toward offering the units as options. Within a year or so, far more ears could be exposed to the offerings the big broadcast radio companies now have up and running. I've spent the past few weeks listening to those new stations, and the content includes a fair number of the features that make satellite radio so attractive, but they've got a long way to go before they'll separate me and millions of others from our XM or Sirius.

In January, seven major radio companies decided that the dastardly duo of the satellite threat and the popular perception that AM and FM broadcast radio stinks were becoming a dangerous problem. So the big companies got together and launched dozens of digital stations, all commercial-free (at least for the first couple of years of the service). Digital radio works pretty much like old-fashioned analog radio except that instead of sending out one signal, an AM or FM station can transmit a bundled signal, thereby putting two or three streams of programming on one position on the radio dial, along with text information (song names, weather or traffic data).

So, for example, your radio and mine both pick up Big 100's regular offering of top hits of the late '60s and '70s, but when I tune my digital radio to 100.3 FM, I get to choose between Big 100 and the Big Oldies

Channel, which plays the music an oldies station would have played 25 years ago, with a heavy emphasis on tunes from the '50s and early '60s. But with no DJs and no human presence of any kind on the air -- most of the new digital channels are, and sound like, computer-generated jukeboxes -- the station feels even less like radio than do many satellite channels.

Across the country, digital stations are experimenting with such new formats as All-Beatles, Indie and New Rock, Comedy, Club Dance, Xtreme Hip-Hop, Disco, Chill, Female Talk, Extreme Hard (rock) and Coffeehouse Folk -- all of which are familiar to satellite radio customers. "This cements our role as a leading provider of content," Clear Channel Radio President John Hogan said when he announced the new formats earlier this year. "This is only the beginning."

The three biggest radio companies with stations on the Washington dial -- Clear Channel, Bonneville and Infinity -- are adding digital stations, about half of which are up and running:

Public WAMU (88.5 FM) has played around with its second channel, variously using an adult alternative-rock music service from Philadelphia's WXPB, a program of ambient electronica called Groove Salad from online radio station Soma FM, and FolkAlley.com, an online acoustic music service that features tunes of the sort heard on Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion," broadcast from the public station at Kent State University in Ohio; FolkAlley, unlike most digital stations, feels like radio -- it has intelligent, welcoming DJs who clearly know and love the music.

(National Public Radio is offering its member stations five programming streams for their second channels, including classical music, jazz and the three services WAMU is using. The classical, jazz and FolkAlley streams feature DJs; the other two are pure jukeboxes.)

Hip-hop station WPGC (95.5 FM) devotes its second channel to gospel, using programming from its corporate sister station, Heaven 1580 (but the digital station is not simulcast with the regular AM station, so Washington listeners end up with two choices of gospel at any hour).

Country WMZQ (98.7 FM) calls its digital channel of classic country hits "Q2," which plays a set including Crystal Gayle's "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue," John Anderson's "Swingin' " and Elvis's "Kentucky Rain." Q2 has no DJs and no announcements of what songs you're hearing.

The only digital pop station on which I've heard signs of life from a deejay is Hot 99.5's "Digital FM 2," which bills itself as "the new music channel" and plays a mix of hip-hop, rock and pop not dissimilar from what airs on the parent station, but its songs haven't yet made it to the top of the charts.

DC101-HD2 is the unhosted, harder version of its parent rocker, emphasizing new music, which makes the lack of information about what you're hearing particularly frustrating.

The switcheroo now playing out on Bonneville's Washington stations, moving its all-news WTOP to the former home of classical WGMS and shunting that station over to where modern-rock Z-104 used to be, remains upsetting to many listeners, and the company's digital programming only compounds the confusion. The new WTOP (103.5 FM) has a digital second channel of classical music called WGMS-2, which offers full works of a much more interesting quality than the brief excerpts and light pops that dominate on WGMS (104.1). But the Deep Tracks Classical approach is marred by the lack of announcements or even text telling listeners what they are hearing. Eventually the station plans to put its excellent all-vocal music service, Viva La Voce (now heard exclusively online), on the second channel at 104.1.

Also yet to debut are an adult alternative format on 94.7 The Arrow, the classic-rock station; a program of ballads and love songs from 97.1 WASH, the light-rock station; and talk shows aimed at women on the very male WJFK (106.7).

Digital radio is an inconsistent offering in its infancy; several stations described here mysteriously go silent for hours or days at a time. Others suffer from dropouts in which the sound vanishes for a disturbing second or two every few minutes.

But if you were thinking about subscribing to satellite radio solely for a broader variety of music, digital radio might offer a cheaper and reasonably satisfying experience. On the other hand, if you're smitten by satellite's other offerings, including the unmatched selection of sports, more thinly sliced music niches (blues, classic jazz, old-school soul, chamber music, show tunes) and unusually creative radio -- drama, movie soundtracks, live performances, artist profiles -- satellite has nothing to fear from broadcast's new venture. At least not yet.