

Sharing Time

By Thomas White

Marconi was lucky. His unique status during wireless experimentation on his father's Italian estate insured that there were no competitors for air-time. As radio developed this situation rapidly deteriorated. Even the limited number of ship and shore stations at the dawn of the century frequently found it necessary to develop agreements in order to allow communication to take place. The reason of course was technological. Spark transmitters were about as selective as thunderstorms, and only a few longwave wavelengths were available. In those cases where no designated authority existed to settle disputes, cooperation was required but often not attainable. A local airhog might make it impossible to receive the desired dots and dashes through the normal background howls and screeches of static and competing signals. One option for protesting the nonessential transmissions of a nearby pest was to anonymously tie a weight to the sending key of your own set. This potent and surprisingly popular method of counterattack was an accepted part of the rough and rugged early days of oceangoing wireless.

The development of organized broadcasting in the early 1920s required a more civilized attitude. This newfangled service required that a measure of "listening pleasure" be assured. KDKA's debut took place in November 1920, and every United States broadcaster authorized in the next 2 years was assigned to the same "wave" of 360 meters (approx. 830 kHz). Time sharing between stations in the same community was clearly required. Moreover, the stations themselves were responsible for developing equitable time distributions, as federal authorities refused to get involved in local disputes. Fortunately, no station of this pioneering age desired to provide more than a few hours daily of programming. Unfortunately, most coveted the same time period of the evening hours.

New York City was a major magnet for early radio activity. Actually it proved too popular. By June 1922 at least 10 metropolitan broadcasters of various shapes and sizes had entered the ether via the 360 meter wave. (This even though AT & T, protecting its investment in a new commercial experiment over WEAJ (now WNBC) had begun to refuse to sell anyone in the NYC area a transmitter. At this time AT & T had a near monopoly in the production of high power radiophone transmitters.) Each newcomer required that adjustments be made, provoking acrimony from the senior outlets. Following multilateral bargaining, an intricate time sharing agreement for the ten broadcasters was ratified, covering 9 AM to midnight daily. This document, historic, although equal to the Treaty of Versailles only in complexity, featured station time slots as short as 15 minutes. WJZ (now WABC) predominated, claiming 5½ hours weekly. Its holdings were, however, chopped up into 7 separate time periods. Assuming every station was able to make each of its scheduled appearances, a weekday radio enthusiast could have heard more than 20 assorted sign-ons and sign-offs throughout the day.

Later innovations eased this complex state of affairs. In late September 1922 a second wave of 400 meters (approx. 750 kHz) was made available for quality "Class B" operations. The following May saw the beginnings of the of the modern 10 kHz spacings, with the creation of a band of frequencies extending from 550 to 1350 kHz. Refinements continued to lessen the need for piggybacking. But the biggest boon came in July 1926, when a ruling held that the Department of Commerce had overstepped its legal authority by specifying operating requirements for licensees. Until the reestablishment of controls the following February, stations were generally free, in a somewhat chaotic fashion, to choose their own frequencies and hours.

Federal authority was restored with the formation of the Federal Radio Commission, predecessor of today's FCC. Assigned the job of reorganizing the jumbled ether, the FRC developed interference standards far more restrictive than those currently in force. Their task of composing and assembling a national jigsaw puzzle of allocations under these tight standards proved both long and difficult. Frequency swaps and counterswaps were ordered, which for a time rivaled the previous uncontrolled period in frenetic activity.

Due to unrestricted grants of licenses to all comers, the period of "deregulation" had produced an increase in the number of stations. Armed with the new legal provision that stations be operated in the public "convenience, interest, or necessity", a number of excess broadcasters were pruned. But scores of the surviving stations were required to become time sharers, some in groups of 3 or 4, especially in the more saturated East.

Even many clear channel operations, most in the same community but some separated by hundreds of kilometers, were included. By the reallocation of November 1928 over half of the approx. 625 stations were sharing time.

An added restraint of this period was the "Davis Amendment". Designed to promote the equal distribution of radio service, it effectively blocked expansion in the East and Midwest until the South, West, and Southwest could attain broadcasting parity. Areas under American jurisdiction were divided into 5 zones, with quota points assigned the states and territories therein. If a station in an oversubscribed region applied for an improvement in facilities, it was informed that only if another station relinquished the desired quota points could the change be realized. For stations wanting a fulltime grant, the obvious conclusion was that if, for some reason, your frequency partners were to expire, the necessary points would be freed. Many were unwilling to let time and attrition take its course. Hoping to speed up the process, a large number of disputes broke out as to various competitors actually their status as "public trustees". Beginning in the early 30s sharetime facilities were required to submit a formal division agreement prior to each license period. In many cases these were less peace treaties than preliminary skirmishes.

The situation did become less critical in later years, as the development of directional antennas and less restrictive frequency separation standards eased technical requirements. In the legal sphere the Davis Amendment was finally dismissed as impractical. Airspace remained tight in the most congested metropolitan regions, however.

Many of today's major stations once shared time. Some even have blood on their hands. In 1928 the biggest one time consolidation occurred as five small town Nebraska stations were voluntarily merged with a surviving sixth KGBZ in York. KGBZ shared its frequency for a time with KHA in Shenandoah, Iowa. In 1935 the two stations filed applications seeking to delete each other. KMA won.

Brooklyn boasted 4 timesharing stations in late 1928. Following a decade long legal free-for-all, WARD emerged victorious, absorbing its 3 adversaries. It later moved to Newark, becoming WNJR.

And in 1931, noting that Illinois was over quota, WJKS in Gary, IN argued that the two Chicago stations sharing 560 kHz be deleted, and WJKS allowed to move from its share time frequency to fulltime on the emptied channel. Permission was granted in a decision which was eventually sanctioned by the Supreme Court. (In 1944, after the Davis Amendment which supported the move was safely out of the way, this station moved to Chicago as WINDI.)

The trend of consolidation is continuing. WHAZ Troy, NY had a Monday night slot shared with WEVD and WPOW in New York, until the latter bought WHAZ in 1967 and reduced it to daytime-only status. Until 1970 WBAP and WFAA held joint custody of both 570 and 820 kHz. WBAP purchased the right to broadcast fulltime on the clear channel, leaving WFAA 3.5 million dollars richer but reduced to regional status. 1979 marked KYAC Seattle's receipt of permission to operate fulltime, due to the addition of a directional antenna used during the nighttime operation of KWSU Pullman. (KWSU still must close down during the nighttime hours set aside for KYAC non-directional operation, leading to a kind of "one-way" timesharing.) Recently WAWZ and WBNX in the New York area have informed the FCC that they are unable to come to an agreement on their respective hours. Their last agreement will remain in force until FCC hearings produce a settlement. Meanwhile, WAWZ has applied for exclusive possession of the frequency.

Currently there are just 10 share time setups on the broadcast band, located mainly in the East and the Midwest. In most cases these stations date back to the FRC reallocations of the late 1920s. However, WLEE Richmond, VA was a relative latecomer, picking up WBBL's unused hours in 1945. (WBBL, on the air only 2½ hours each week, has by far the most limited schedule of any active AM broadcaster.) Timesharing's most recent addition occurred as two stations, WCEV and WXOL, were authorized to take the place of a deleted Cicero, IL broadcaster.

It is interesting to note that 8 of the 20 timesharers are noncommercial outlets. In fact, educational broadcasting has traditionally been associated with time sharing. Recently promulgated rules by the FCC will require FM educational stations not maintaining at least a 12 hour daily schedule to begin sharing their frequency if requested.

Space does not permit a detailed history of each of the current share time operations. However, the background of the KUOM-WCAL arrangement is broad enough to cover most of the turmoils this class of stations faced.

4 educational institutions in Southeast Minnesota received broadcast authorizations in 1922 and 1923. Two were in Minneapolis - the University of Minnesota's WLB (now KUOM), and the William Hood Dunwoody Industrial Institute's WCAS (later changed to WHDI). The other 2 were located in Northfield - St. Olaf College's WCAL and Carleton College's KFMX. Although many colleges in this era quickly allowed their authorizations to lapse under circumstances no more pressing than apathy or limited checkbooks, these 4 continued to provide programming throughout the 20s. Unfortunately, the FRC spectrum reorganizations applied increasing pressure, as each offered only a few hours daily of programming in an area oversubscribed under the Davis Amendment provisions. That some kind of share time agreement was required was apparent. A proposal was submitted to the FRC that the 4 be assigned the same frequency, where the necessary time agreements could be amicably negotiated.

After a series of frequency shifts the FRC finally settled on a plan that only partially satisfied their desires. In October 1928 4 stations were assigned to the same spot on the dial. However, WLB, WCAL, and KFMX were required to divide their small island of the ether with a very aggressive commercial outlet, WRHM (now WWCT). WRHM's owner, the "Minnesota All Night Broadcasting Company", left little doubt about its distaste toward any constraints on its airtime. It soon applied for fulltime operation, a move that could be accomplished only with the demise of the 3 other channel occupants.

WHDI found itself equally vulnerable but more isolated. Its October move was also to a frequency shared with 3 others. Shortly thereafter a further move reduced its companions by 2, but the remaining bed partner, commercial WDGY, took a no more generous view of cooperation than did WRHM.

Many long grinding hearings in Washington followed. Greater economic clout bought better legal counsel and lobbying presence for the 2 commercial stations. They considered this an acceptable business expense aimed at fostering higher income. For the colleges, with limited finances reduced the the beginning of the depression, it was a wearing marathon struggle fought on a strictly defensive basis.

Friendless WHDI was the first to fall. Bowing to the inevitable, the William Hood Institute sold its station to WDGY's owners in late 1931. WHDI was quickly deleted, leaving WDGY the fulltime channel it desired.

The ranks of the 3 stations allied against WRHM were reduced by one when Carleton College allowed its license to lapse in April 1933. (Its hours were split among the 3 survivors.) The former director of KFMX noted bitterly that "educational and commercial broadcasting will not mix". The battle ended with the relaxation of Federal rules. In 1938 WLB and WCAL moved to a daytime-only frequency. WRHM expanded to its long sought fulltime status following their move.