

# **New Audio Villages Challenge Ballistic Radio**

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Ever since I first witnessed lightning destroy a power transformer at the age of 3, I have been fascinated by electronics. Like many broadcast engineers, my career evolved to focus on the magic of electro-acoustic wizardry. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, audio technology was novel and exciting just because sound, which had always been ethereal, fragile and ephemeral, became a tangible commodity that could be stored and transported. This change parallels the progression of printing five centuries earlier. In both cases, technology produced a social paradigm shift.

During the later stages of these shifts, when technology and knowledge are in abundance, inventiveness no longer dominates progress and change. But if technology no longer controls the destiny of audio and radio, what then drives market choices? The answer is the social attributes of a technology. Engineers, companies, and industries that ignore the social meaning of their technology do so at their own peril.

If one examines earlier cultures, one observes that sound played the dominant role in social cohesiveness. Sound connects people together. Our sensory biology of hearing, which existed long before our technology, evolved to link people to each other. Radiating sound waves enable the voice of one individual to appear inside the head of another, which is nothing other than sonic broadcasting.

Although radio broadcasting changed the scope and geography of how people were aurally connected, sound's basic function remained otherwise unchanged. Terrestrial broadcasters are caretakers of a particular social connection technology. The nature of broadcasting (be it by sound waves, radio waves, or digital networking) has changed, but people are still people—sound connects individuals within real or virtual towns.

By accepting the premise that communications are central to supporting social cohesiveness within groups, we are left with questions: how such groups come into existence, how they acquire their cultural values and how they grow. History provides some insight into the dynamic that creates communities. Cities and towns first appeared in Europe during the Dark Ages. After the Visigoths conquered Rome in 476, Europe became an unstable mix of migrants and tiny villages, the largest of which had no more than a thousand inhabitants. The population remained dispersed and at a low density for some 500 years. Suddenly, without any obvious explanation, large towns and cities sprang up across the continent as if by magic, often with a hundred thousand inhabitants. What produced such an instantaneous transformation in the social structure of an entire continent?

After the 10<sup>th</sup> century, there were a series of technical advances involving the management of energy, especially as applied to food production. More productive farms

(i.e. improved technology) could sustain denser populations. Cities were created by thousands of independent, individual decision makers, each of whom saw the advantages of living in a dense community. There were neither city planners nor political figures managing the process, and nobody instructed people on how to form large social units. In his book, *Emergence*, Steven Johnson explores numerous examples of how individual organisms, when living in a dense community with good communications and *feedback*, can create recognizable social entities that display intelligence.

In contrast to these examples, radio communications has been viewed as being intrinsically unidirectional. Without an ability to communicate to others, listeners are unlikely to coalesce into audio villages. Recently, however, broadcasters have been exploring alternative programming and technical models, explicitly designed to create virtual communities. The announcer-producer becomes the facilitator-coordinator rather than autocrat-king. There are numerous examples. Chris Lydon's Open Source, which is distributed by Public Radio International, uses the "people formerly known as the audience" to produce the show by contributing topics and ideas. WEEI's call-in sports program has top ratings in their local market. Big D & Bubba on Clear Channel Radio make liberal use of email and instant messaging to make their listeners part of the show. Opie and Anthony on satellite and terrestrial radio encourage fans to submit production fragments, crediting them on national air. In almost all cases, these program models make liberal use of the Internet and telephone to augment the unidirectional nature of terrestrial broadcasting.

A new generation of kids is growing up with Internet technology that supports real peer-to-peer feedback and communications. In contrast, terrestrial radio looks tired and obsolete. Using my teenaged son as an illustrative example of this new dynamic, we see a critical need to upgrade the social model of radio. His is the first generation to grow up with the Internet, which he describes as a social enabler, not as a technology. For his generation, the Internet was at first the AOL Chat room, but rapidly evolved to become such Web sites as MySpace, Facebook, Friendster, xPeeps, YouTube, and numerous others. These sites allow kids to share ideas, videos, audio, TV clips, pictures, drawings, poems, opinions, dress styles, troubles, and even pornography. Communication is one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-one.

Like early towns in ancient Europe and 1950's street corners in Peoria, groups of individuals now spontaneously coalesce at virtual locations, creating electronic villages. There is no mastermind or leader conducting the process. And as time goes on, villages change and evolve; some grow to be very large, while others disappear. They are organic and dynamic, just like a neighborhood. Each village has its own personality, morality, value system, and interests. In a similar way, adults use eBay, Craigslist, blogs, and other sites for selling, buying, advertising, and disseminating points of view. They too are electronic villages. Advertising is not necessarily unwelcome if it fits within the village ambience, which is the model being used on many Web sites.

By connecting the world's population together, globalization transformed isolated social groups into a single world city, and young adults are now sub-dividing this global city into many small, ad hoc virtual villages, each with its own personality. The radio industry

needs to understand the importance of audio villages if it is to provide something of value to this generation.

Kids today cannot conceive of the pre-Internet world that we grew up in. As any good anthropologist will tell you, to understand a foreign culture, you must live among them, learn to speak their language, and live as they do. Only then will you appreciate their way of organizing life. From the perspective of pre-Internet adults, the post-Internet generation is a foreign culture. If you want traditional radio to survive, talk to a young adult, or better yet, spend time with them.

In analyzing how organic communities emerge, Johnson observes that two critical elements must always be present: efficient communications among individuals, and feedback such that each individual can rapidly respond to the behavior of other individuals. The group then manages itself without a recognizable structure or appointed leader.

When we examine traditional radio broadcasting, we see the reverse situation. Executives and powerful personalities at the top control the listening experience of individuals at the bottom. There is limited communication among individuals at the bottom. As a result, a radio audience, however large, seldom becomes a dynamic and organic entity; it remains the passive, hierarchical and ballistic recipient of what it is given (ballistic missiles have no feedback: it's shoot and pray). Market research is too crude and slow to create real-time communications.

My son and his peers almost never listen to radio, and they are rapidly losing interest in television and newspapers, all of which are based on a ballistic social structure. The current generation values the organic experience of electronic towns. In fact, that is their dominant experience.

What does that mean for traditional radio? The answer is that its social structure must evolve to provide for the needs and expectations of the next generation, who value the organic and dynamic aspects of electronic villages. Thirty years from now, historians will observe the Internet produced the same kind of social revolution as improved agriculture did in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and advanced industrialization did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In each case, technology changed the social density, which then changed the number of bilateral communication links within the group.

By embracing technologies that are bidirectional, “broadcasting” becomes the name for a new communication system that just happens to include RF radiation as one of its components. There is no reason why terrestrial broadcasters cannot become meta-broadcasters—audio village enablers. The old model is dead even though its technology still has value within the new model. Similarly, if HD radio provides a large number of new channels, broadcasters can create audio street corners inhabited by such communities as guitar players, Chinese immigrants, political activists, and so on. HD radio, by breaking the old model, allows new programming models to be invented. Radio could become a “nation of audio villages.”

While we are discussing feedback as a means of sustaining a community, during the last two years, I have only received a few comments from readers about these Last Word articles, not unlike ballistic radio. If you want Radio World to become a village, readers must participate by influencing what authors write. Send us your comments and create a collective voice.