

Sue Wilson: Federal rules give corporation-backed conservative radio all the local voices

By Sue Wilson - Special to The Bee

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There's a mournful hush in Sacramento these days, the empty sound of an entire political viewpoint quieted. More than 32,000 weekly listeners who once tuned to KSAC (1240 AM) to hear partisan Democrats beat up on President George W. Bush, now hear only Christian hip-hop.

There's nothing wrong with Christian hip-hop; it's a great outlet for artists breaking out of the gansta rap mold. But there are six other commercial radio stations licensed in the Sacramento area programming the Christian message. In the political realm, three local radio stations program 264 hours of partisan Republican radio talkers beating up on Democrats every week. Now, zero stations program any Democratic view whatsoever: 264-0.

This follows the national trend revealed in the 2007 Free Press and Center for American Progress study, "The Structural Imbalance of Political Talk Radio." Nationally, 90 percent of commercial talk radio is conservative; only 10 percent is liberal. (This study does not include Public Radio, which by statute is required to provide differing points of view. One is as likely to hear a Republican's views as a Democrat's. And NPR hosts don't beat up on anybody.)

KSAC shared another characteristic with other liberal radio stations: It had a tiny, 1,000-watt transmitter. Tough for a little station that barely reached Sacramento's suburbs to compete with 50,000 watt giant KFBK, whose signal stretches from Chico to Modesto, from Reno to that little town of San Francisco. Despite KFBK reaching millions more potential listeners, KSAC mustered an audience nearly 20 percent that of KFBK's. (Its ratings were double local conservative station KTKZ, which has a 5,000-watt transmitter.) And Arbitron showed the progressive station's audience was steadily growing. KSAC was the little station that could.

Until it couldn't.

It wasn't that Talk City didn't have listeners, it's that it didn't have advertisers.

The radio business model is simple: Start a show, grow an audience and advertisers will follow. But that model doesn't work for progressive talk radio.

Why would advertisers steer clear of progressive talk? Chris Jones, managing editor of the blog "the Hot Points," writes: "What respectable business is going to send millions of dollars in ad revenue to people who bash the president, the country and the war on a constant basis? Not only that, but liberals never miss an opportunity to bash corporations as evil and crooked. Why the hell would big business support the enemy?"

Well, wait a minute. Plenty of advertisers supported radio shows that bashed then- President Bill Clinton, calling his pursuit of Osama bin Laden "wagging the dog." But this misses the real point: Why are corporate dollars the sole arbiter of what information we the people get to hear on publicly owned airwaves?

The answer is policy-makers, with campaigns financed by those same corporations, changed two important rules. In 1987, then-President Reagan's FCC got rid of the Fairness Doctrine, which required that radio and TV provide a "reasonable opportunity to hear both sides of controversial issues." The Reagan administration thought the marketplace would provide its own balance.

Then, in 1996, Congress allowed a few companies to own unlimited numbers of radio stations. Huge conglomerates bought the best and biggest stations, and purchased multiple stations within the same market. Then they blanketed more than 1,700 stations with conservative talk. Using their newly created economies of scale, they offered businesses special packages to advertise on stations they owned both locally and nationally.

That in turn starved independent stations of revenue. It was good business.

But it shouldn't be only about good business; it should also be about public policy and the discourse demanded by Democracy, a discourse protected well by the founders of broadcasting but ignored by recent deregulation.

Broadcasters make a deal when they obtain – for free – a license to broadcast in a community. In exchange for the opportunity to make millions of dollars, the broadcasters must serve the public interest – the public interest of all of the people, not just a targeted slice of audience most likely to buy their product. It should not be solely about corporations willing to shell out millions to market their message and to keep business-friendly politicians in office.

It should also be about revealing the information that Enron, Bear Stearns, Halliburton and other corporations would prefer to hide.

Critics will argue that there is so much information available in these modern times, people can easily find an opposing point of view to Rush Limbaugh, or Sean Hannity, or Bill O'Reilly or the rest, somewhere other than radio. But commuters who are stuck in traffic for hours every day own these airwaves, too.

Why must they go online when they get home just to hear the other side? Why should traveling salesman and long-haul truckers, who can drive across several states without hearing any progressive point of view, have to pay hundreds of dollars for satellite radio to replace what they already own for free? Why should rural communities, which depend first on AM radio for their information and who are lucky to get low-speed Internet access, be deprived of any political balance on their own airwaves?

We have allowed policy-makers in this country to create a so-called marketplace to promote one message almost exclusively over another.

But there really is no marketplace at all. Anybody can start a new coffee shop across from Starbucks and compete for business. But almost nobody can just start a new radio station to compete for listeners; the airwaves are limited, and the frequencies are already taken – mostly by big corporations.

Considering a 2003 Gallup poll showing that 22 percent of Americans get their information from talk radio, we're not just talking about what is fair play; we are talking about a threat to the democracy we hold dear.

What to do? The FCC (five commissioners, appointed by the president) could bring back the Fairness Doctrine. But Republicans in Congress, such as Indiana Rep. Mike Pence, are fighting tooth and nail to prevent its return. And even groups who favor media reform, like Free Press, believe restoration of the Fairness Doctrine would face First Amendment challenges. But as a producer who actually worked under the Fairness Doctrine, I personally don't see what's wrong with proving to the community that I at least attempted to provide both sides of the story.

Repealing radio-ownership rules put in place by the 1996 Telecommunications Act is another possibility; restoring ownership caps to their 1995 levels – allowing one company to own a maximum of 40 stations nationwide – would put many more microphones in the hands of independents. Whether the advertisers would support speech anathema to their ideology, even on independent stations, remains to be seen.

One thing is certain: It is time to act. Progressive talk radio has been taken off the air in Boston; Fresno; San Diego; Madison, Wis.; Eugene, Ore.; Austin, Texas; New Haven, Conn.; Columbus, Ohio and other markets all across the country since the 2006 election, often replaced with formats that get lower ratings. But in Madison and Columbus, people rose together and protested and brought progressive radio back to their communities.

It is time for all of us to take their lead, to remember that we the people own these frequencies, and to compel our representatives to put the public back into the public airwaves.

GIVE US YOUR VIEW

Do you think talk radio in its current format is fair and good for our democracy?

Please e-mail your answers to forum@sacbee.com and include your name and where you live. Please limit your responses to 300 words, and we'll consider them for next Sunday's Forum.

About the writer:

- Sue Wilson, a former reporter and host for Capital Public Radio, is an Emmy award-winning television and radio journalist based in Sacramento. She is producing and directing a film about media policy and reform titled "Broadcast Blues," which she hopes to premiere this year. You can reach her at suewilsonreports@gmail.com.