

Using Radio as a Tool for Teaching Music Industry

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Abstract

Like other areas of the music industry, radio has undergone major changes in the last twenty years brought about by advances in digital technology, including the proliferation of the internet and connected phones. Listeners have many more options for entertainment today, yet radio in all its forms still remains a vital part of the entertainment scene and is capable of delivering a sit-back experience for listeners through terrestrial broadcasting and streaming. It also provides many opportunities to help students get practical experience, make contacts, and learn to add value through the curation of content. This report covers some of the activities on a variety of platforms that have been developed for an introductory course about the music industry. Students are developing a database of Midwest college, listener-supported, network, and independent stations whose internet streams are available through our Midwest Radio Player phone app. Students also learn to create social media messages of interest to readers about regional musicians and their appearances on local radio stations. These messages are distributed through our social media outlets, and students learn how to use analytics to see the resulting engagement. Related apps for West Coast Radio Player and Southern Radio Player are also available.

Keywords: radio, streaming, regional music, Midwest, West Coast, southern, phone app, music industry education

We have many options for entertainment today, including the sit-back experience that radio offers. We define “radio” broadly here to include both terrestrial broadcasting and internet streaming and return to it periodically in the course as we discuss how the music industry has evolved and continues to change copyright, promotion, and income streams.

The activities described in this report were developed for a survey of the music industry class with 125 students. The course objectives include a number of transferable skills that apply to students majoring in any discipline, since 95% of the students take the class to fulfill a general education requirement and are not planning careers in music and entertainment. The assignments in the class challenge students to develop an entrepreneurial mindset beginning by taking an inventory of what they are good at, what they can do with their skills, how they can help other people, and how they can add value to whatever situation they are in. Communication skills are developed by practicing finding common ground, understanding what is in it for the listener, and creating interesting social media content. As they create marketing messages suitable for use by musicians with their fans they become more alert to how they themselves are being marketed to and how their choices are influenced by labels and broadcasters. Over the course of the semester they become more aware of the regional music and entertainment scene, which is heard more on college and listener-supported stations than those owned by radio conglomerates. They learn about the history of iHeartMedia, how playlists limit the number of new songs they hear, and the advantages major labels have in getting their artists heard on radio. This consolidation of broadcasting companies parallels that of the major record labels, and students are challenged to discover independent artists and become sympathetic to the challenges they face in becoming known. One of the things they enjoy most is sharing their favorites with other students in the class.

As we cover the history of the recording industry we trace the technological breakthroughs that led to changes in listening habits. Radio began as a social experience shared by the family as they gathered together in the parlor. Popular music became a youth business when young people had disposable income and went off to their own rooms to listen to

records by themselves or with friends. Youth culture gained momentum and even greater disconnection with adults with the advent of the ultimately portable transistor radio, and the Walkman cassette player system that followed that allowed listeners to organize their own collections of music and fix the order of songs which they could then share with the special people in their lives. The Apple iPod expanded the variety of available songs with its capacity to put 1,000 songs in its owner's pocket. Being able to make one's own playlists was easier than copying records onto cassettes, and soon personal listening was a standard feature on smartphones. Music, like video, has moved from a social experience to a personal one. Apple has continued to miniaturize the technology in the Apple Watch, while offering streaming access to 45 million songs. Their HomePod speaker works in the Apple Music ecosystem and adapts to the surrounding space, and listeners can choose from their own playlists, algorithmically generated content, or sets created by Apple's celebrity DJs. Now listeners have the ability to simultaneously share the same music on a global scale, in a geographical area much larger than what terrestrial radio stations can reach. Whatever technology is used, radio in all its forms provides a sit-back, hands free experience that can be enjoyed when one can't, or doesn't want to make choices, for example, while working or driving. Services like Apple Music, Spotify, Pandora, Amazon Music, and Google Play offer huge music libraries stored in the cloud that listeners can connect to through their phones wherever they go. There is no longer a limit to the number of stations resulting from bandwidth constraints of the radio spectrum.

Being faced with unlimited choice can be overwhelming, and it is understandable that many listeners retreat to their old favorites or accept the algorithmic suggestions based on their listening habits in order to reduce the cognitive load of having to make a series of choices. Radio satisfies this need as well by giving the listener the option to leave the choice of music to someone else, leaving them with just three choices to make: when to turn it on, change the channel, or turn it off. Pareto's principle states that 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. This proportion can be applied to other aspects of life, for example, it may be that you may wish to control what music you listen to 80% of the time and leave it up to someone else or an algorithm 20% of the time. Other people may wish to have their music selected for them 80% of the time, leaving them 20% of the time to make the decisions themselves.

Whether at a club, a party, or on air, a DJ is a specialist who has the time, knowledge, expertise, and sensitivity to design a listening experience. Human intelligence and taste may trump the science of the selection process used by streaming services, and the explanations of who appears on each song and why it was chosen can add an extra dimen-

sion to the experience. DJs on college and listener-supported stations have little or no financial incentive to do their work, and are motivated to create programs by their love of the music and desire to share it with listeners. This feeling may be felt by the listener, who may also enjoy hearing a voice that is connected to a specific place rather than having the selections appearing on a corporate playlist honed in another state, informed by feedback from focus groups, or made by a faceless algorithm running on a server in an undisclosed location.

Using Radio in Teaching

Terrestrial and streaming radio provides a platform to look at the music industry from a number of angles. One assignment used in our class has students report on what they hear when listening to four types of stations—corporate, independent commercial, college, and listener-supported. By logging what is played, advertised, and said for fifteen minutes on each type of station, students come to understand how much autonomy programmers on each type have in choosing what to play, and how much comes from rotation or a playlist. They also become more conscious of how local stations incorporate news and weather, public service announcements, take requests, and feature interviews and performances by independent artists. Some students report that they like the college stations the most because they play songs that are unfamiliar to them. Other students in the class dislike the college stations for the same reason and prefer the commercial broadcasters because they stick to the hits they already know.

We operate a streaming radio station and half of the schedule is rebroadcasts of packages created for our public radio affiliate by our music production students who make multi-track field recordings and conduct interviews at venues around the state, which they bring back to mix and edit into 55-minute episodes. We have a website called Middletown Music whose goal is to promote original music from the Midwest. It serves as a hub for the students' work in crafting email, interviews, and social media messages. Ball State University is located in Muncie, Indiana, which was chosen as the site for a series of sociological studies beginning in the 1920s due to our area being typical of small manufacturing towns. We are trying to capitalize on having our fingers on the pulse of the country's music taste. We want to flip being considered average to be an advantage. Our unique selling proposition continues to be how extremely representative we are, expressed in our motto, "If we like you here, they will like you everywhere." We have the facilities, students, and time to help promote music of the Midwest in order to make a contribution to developing the music and entertainment industry in the region. We are supporting our student radio station WCRD and want to reach as many lis-

teners as possible with them and our internet radio station in order to increase awareness of independent music. This and our other activities are intended to increase the viability of careers for our music production students, and students majoring in communications and other subjects, and want to be part of a rising ocean that floats all boats.

YouTube provides another type of sit-back experience and is one of the main places where people discover and consume music. Middletown Music has a YouTube channel, and the class has developed a playlist for each Midwestern state. Students have a type of A&R experience as they seek out and choose what groups they want to share with others, and then add descriptions to their videos to add value, as they do for the Facebook, Instagram, and email messages they create on behalf of the regional artists they choose to promote, while always looking for what will be of interest to readers, rather than for the benefit of the artists. In an interview conducted for the textbook I wrote for the class (*Introduction to the Music Industry: Midwest Edition*), Ariel Hyatt recommended that 40% of your social media should be cross-promotion of things other than yourself, that your goal should be to satisfy your readers and to develop an expectation that they will find things of interest in your messages, rather than tiring and turning them off by constantly bombarding them with offers of things they can buy from you. Students are challenged to create content of interest to readers so that they won't unsubscribe or disconnect after signing up for our mailing list or connecting with our social media outlets.

Over the course of the last year we have redirected our energy from the development of podcasts and our own streaming radio station to engaging with Spotify and Apple Music. Dropping our internet streaming station will save a thousand dollars per year in hosting and licensing fees and reach students on the platforms where they spend their time. Students contribute to a collaborative playlist that we listen to before class starts, providing an opportunity to discuss explicit lyrics which not everyone is comfortable with. Students can apply their experiences in different fields like exercise physiology, sports administration, or hospitality in a project where they create playlists and explain their choices. This may include conducting surveys to see what students outside the class prefer listening to.

Another assignment is to have students report their favorite radio stations from their hometowns, which are then added to a database of internet streams made available to users of our Midwest Radio Player app, which was written by BSU computer science students for both iOS and Android phones. The app acts like a virtual car radio with scan buttons that steps through the list of stations created by the students. Once users find a station that they like they can do a long-press on one of the memory locations and save

it as a preset, and those that are selected that way by listeners are reported back to us as a list of favorites. We also have a "West Coast Radio Player" and a "Southern Radio Player" app which can be found on the purplecalves.com website. The programming team made the code open source in case someone would like to create players for other parts of the country. We expect that the next generation of cars will come with internet radios as a standard feature, but in the meantime, you can use our app, in the car or anywhere else you go.

Radio is going to be increasingly driven by big data. Spotify already uses software developed by Echo Nest to categorize each song, such as how danceable it is, how long it lasts, if and when a fadeout starts, how much energy it has, the name of the album it comes from, songs that are similar to it, its tempo, and the year it was released. This data can be used to automatically generate playlists using any strategy the programmer wishes. One option is to generate a playlist for a user's upcoming road trip in which the hometowns of the artists are sequenced in the same order as the route the traveler takes.

While we can't predict what the environment will be that our students will work in, it seems likely that radio will become increasingly individualized and tailored to each listener's unique habits, place, time, associates, and activities in the same way that drugs will be personalized based on the patient's DNA. Songs may even be composed in response to each profile, for example, a song may have a guitar solo if the system detects that the listener skips to a new song more often when one isn't heard within the first two minutes. In the meantime, radio provides an opportunity to exercise and develop students' capacity to add value through curation, an activity and service that seems likely to grow as a business and career opportunity in a world in which listeners feel adrift in a sea of content, and which they expect to be free.

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