

Sadness and Static as AM Stations Fade

Space aliens, UFOs, the supernatural—all grist for radio shows.

By Peter Funt

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When I lived in Denver in the early 1970s, Sunday nights included an audio excursion to my hometown of New York—a trip only AM radio could provide. At 770 on the dial I listened to WABC, with its distinctive disc jockeys, rock

music and “news at :25 and :55,” via a signal traveling more than 1,600 miles.

This magic was possible only for a few hours when station KOB in Albuquerque, N.M., which shared the 770 frequency, shut down for maintenance. With the competing signal out of the way, WABC’s sound was able to travel far west—literally bouncing off the ionosphere.

That’s a trick unique to AM (amplitude modulation) radio waves. They are subject to static interference but are longer and can travel much farther than FM (frequency modulation) waves, which don’t move well through large obstacles, such as mountains. As children, many of us built crystal sets that pulled in AM signals from near and, with luck, far. As teens, AM transistor radios were constant companions, until we were old enough to drive and AM car radios provided the soundtracks of our lives.

Cars have helped AM radio survive. “Drive time,” the hours in the morning and evening when people commute, is when AM stations, carrying primarily news and talk, make most of their money. So it is sad to see that some carmakers are giving up on AM, a move that could have the unintended consequence of hastening the medium’s demise.

Several European car makers, including Audi, [BMW](#), [Porsche](#), [Volkswagen](#) and Volvo, have stopped putting AM radios in certain models. Trendy EVs and hybrids have electrical systems that interfere with AM audio. But rather

than moving a few parts around, or shielding the equipment better, manufacturers are cutting out AM.

American automakers are taking a more cautious approach, but [Tesla](#) has already eliminated AM radios, and [Ford](#) plans to drop AM from its electric pickup trucks. It's no small matter, since [about 47 million Americans](#) still listen to programming on the AM dial, according to Nielsen data.

Many AM stations, such as all-news WINS in New York City, have added simulcasts on FM to retain their audience. Hundreds of stations are also available on the internet. But AM remains the medium of choice for certain types of broadcasts, notably conservative talk. According to Talkers Magazine, the most popular political voices on radio are the conservatives Sean Hannity, Mark Levin and Brian Kilmeade.

AM signals travel farther at night than during the day when there is no interference from the sun's rays. Truckers, shift workers and people living in remote areas have long supported overnight programs, many of which dwell on UFOs, the supernatural and all sorts of fantasies. Most popular by far is "Coast to Coast AM," hosted by the smooth-talking George Noory.

Early in my career I was a regular on a similar program originating at WMCA in New York and hosted by a character who called himself Long John Nebel. John favored conspiracy theories and chatter about space

aliens. It was mostly nonsense—the kind you wouldn't want to hear on a sleek FM signal. AM's strange tales at night and rock music by day seemed to benefit from a touch of static, along with the notion that the broadcasts originated from faraway.

I'm sure I'll learn to live without AM radio, as I have with other outmoded media, such as CD players. But I once heard Long John Nebel muse about how radio waves never fully disappear; they're out there somewhere for all time. Sounds good to me.

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