

# Radio: Splitting The Bands

By JACK GOULD

**R**ADIO, so long overshadowed by the more spectacular doings of television, is facing interesting and hectic days ahead. The listener in the metropolitan New York area is probably not aware of the fact that, come fall, he may be offered what would amount to nine new stations for half of the program day.

Under a rule promulgated by the Federal Communications Commission, the owners of standard amplitude modulation stations (AM) would not be able after Oct. 15 to duplicate the same programs on their FM affiliates for more than 50 per cent of the time. The remaining half of their schedules would have to be programed separately.

Among the stations affected by the rule would be WABC, WCBS, WNBC, WNEW, WNYC, WOR, WPAT, WQXR and WVNJ.

The Commission has indicated, however, that it may grant a few exceptions and WQXR, which is owned by The New York Times, is among those asking for the right to continue duplication. WABC would not feel the strain particularly because it is now doing classical music programing on its FM affiliate in the evenings and rock 'n' roll on AM. WNYC also has done separate programing with some frequency, carrying the United Nations on one station, for instance, and music on the other.

## Usefulness

The rule applies only to stations in cities with a population of more than 100,000, so that most suburban stations operating on both the AM and FM bands will not be immediately involved. Actually, less than 200 AM-FM operations across the country will be affected, but the impact in New York could be especially great.

And the present ruling is only a beginning. Ultimately, the F.C.C. hopes to separate AM and FM entirely. Depending on its precise location within the metropolitan area, such eventuality in the years ahead would mean for the listener a choice of somewhere between 40 and 50 radio stations of all kinds.

The thinking behind the F.C.C. proposal is rooted in its basic legal commitment to assure maximum usefulness of the airwaves. The agency feels there is a waste of channels in having one program broadcast twice in the same community and that the air waves should be apportioned with a view to providing as many different services as possible. The same philosophy, it might be noted, also governs the F.C.C.'s hopes of popularizing ultra high frequency television channels so that the

viewers will enjoy a greater diversity of programing.

But the pragmatic ramifications of the F.C.C. proposal are much more involved and raise a fundamental question of the effects of competition in broadcasting.

One of the amusing ironies attending a discussion of the AM-FM problem at last week's convention of the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington was the juxtaposition of views of the regulatory agency and some, but by no means all, representatives of the broadcasting industry.

It was the F.C.C. membership which was championing the free enterprise credo of increasing maximum competition in the marketplace, while some of the industry dissenters were pleading for Government regulations to protect the present profit position.

## Need for More

The New York radio listener might well wonder if more competition is what broadcasting needs. Taking AM and FM together, there is quite a choice at present and, so far as the listener can detect, the chief consequence of competition has been intensification of commercialism on many outlets—one would not think WQXR entirely above reproach in this respect, incidentally.

Quite obviously something of a mad scramble is under way for survival in New York radio. Unless the ear is misleading, WNEW seems to be veering toward the "top 40" tunes, which means the hard rock 'n' roll stuff. WINS has switched to an all news format after losing out to WMCA and WABC in wooing teen-agers.

What might be around the corner, especially under the pressure provided by the new F.C.C. rule, could be the rise of FM radio as a competitive economic threat to AM radio. Indeed, this is partly the reason for the F.C.C. action. AM broadcasters have been giving away their FM audiences to advertising sponsors, which has put the independent FM station under a very severe commercial handicap.

## Alternative

Another alternative is that the present AM operators with FM affiliates, if forced to program separately, might run off with the lion's share of the advertising dollar invested in FM and leave the pioneering independents in a new difficulty. No one can really foresee all the possible consequences.

But there is a bright side. After so many years of struggle the high fidelity FM medium is catching on in a big way. More than six million

sets capable of picking up FM were sold last year, boosting the national total to something like 28 million. FM in cars is also a new vogue.

Once FM does become a mass medium the discriminating listener can prepare for the worst. There is going to be rock 'n' roll on the bands. But, more importantly, popularization of the band has introduced many more listeners to the likes of WRVR, WBAI, WSOU, WFUV, WKCR and WNYE. The future for stations providing different services is more important than ever as commercial forces, public awareness and the passing of time combine to give the FM medium the sizable audience it deserves.

With the entertainment side of television seemingly more and more committed to routine programing designed to woo the very young viewer, it is radio which offers a major opportunity for an adult alternative in broadcasting. How the sound medium evolves in the next year or so could be of crucial importance to the New York listener.