

Growing up from the '90s into the millennium when music streaming sites and MP3 players were just beginning to gain popularity, many in my generation, myself included, relied on the radio to introduce the latest hits released by our favorite artists. We all listened to the familiar radio personalities and DJs who hosted these shows give prizes to random listeners who called in. While I would've loved to win tickets to see Britney Spears in concert, I had too many doubts to call in. Why did all the callers sound so similar to each other, screaming the same way and saying the same things? Why did some seem confused about winning a prize that was explained in the same show? Most importantly, how was Ryan Seacrest on Z100 in New York and hosting American Idol around the nation? None of it seemed random or even real, and in a lot of ways, it really wasn't.

Since its beginnings in the early 1900s, the American radio broadcasting industry has undergone many changes, both positive and negative, depending on the perspective. One of the biggest developments the industry made has also become one of the most controversial issues still existing today: voice-tracking, also known as cyber-jocking, or radio studios' implementation of prerecorded shows by disk jockeys who are not actually present in the station as they seem to be. In the past few decades, this technique has become widely used and accepted among big members of the industry, as it is a legal, technologically feasible, and efficient alternative.

When the government regulation by the Federal Communications Commission was removed under the Telecommunication Act of 1996 and radio companies no longer had to abide by certain content rules, the industry became self-regulated. This act increased the industry's focus of making decisions based on potential audience demographics and psychographics, rather

than just the individual stations' geographical location, according to Marko Ala-Fossi's article, "Worth More Dead than Live: US Corporate Radio and the Political Economy of Cyber-Jocking" (Ala-Fossi 2004, p.318). With this shift in focus off a station's location, the companies were able to bring in these cyber-DJs that created fake-local shows quickly, in advance, and from different, more personally convenient locations to replace the traditional live, local DJs.

Furthermore, ridding stations' distinctly local qualities allowed the smoother syndication of radio program content across networks under one corporation and the consequent blurring of their spatial identity, or sense of place (Ala-Fossi 320). The use of voice-tracking mainly affected these corporations in positive ways, as it helped to develop the U.S. radio network following its collapse due to the rise of television. While live orchestras went on the air in the 1950s, technology later allowed DJs to replace these expensive performances by instead playing cheap, recorded music (Ala-Fossi 2004, p.317). Companies also began saving significant amounts of money by having these DJs record multiple segments at once in much shorter shifts (Ala-Fossi 2004, p.320).

The main controversy lies in the radio stations' integrity to their audiences. In the past, stations were required to explicitly tell listeners if they were going to play a recording so the public would not be deceived. Today, we have been conditioned to assume music we hear on the radio is live and that the DJs would always be live, although that is usually not the case. There is a clear difference between openly rebroadcasting an earlier show or recording a show in advance and prerecording a program with the intention of making listeners believe it is live. In addition, particularly in the 1950s, traditional radio programming was not always genuine in its content (e.g., simulating the sounds of a sports game that a DJ is not actually present at or even

watching) and was also ethically questionable (Ala-Fossi 2004, p.319). Today, the American radio industry's sort of combining these old traditions of simulation increases the ethical issue of voice-tracking.

While the use of voice-tracking is generally a smart choice for the radio corporations, it comes at the cost of some major negative effects on the DJs and radio personalities and the audiences. First, for the remaining DJs that do care, voice-tracking creates a separation between them and the music they play, as well as with the listeners. When a DJ records a segment, he/she does so in a much shorter time with a full schedule of set songs to play and no direct, live audience to take suggestions from and provide a real show to. Second, fewer DJs may earn and keep their jobs, and the opportunities for new DJs to enter the career and fulfill any related passions have greatly dwindled. Ala-Fossi states in his article that this effect reflects the industry's satisfaction with the "elimination of marginal talent" and the resulting "significantly smaller pool of new talent to draw from" (Ala-Fossi 2004, p.320). Third, the content DJs produce in radio shows is much more controlled by the companies, as everything that is to be said and played on the air is planned and can be completely controlled before and after the show by whoever holds the power to do so. These effects all make for a show that lacks authenticity in a number of ways, including its timeliness. If the DJ is not actually present during a show as he/she seems to be, when and where the recording took place no longer matters, which, according to Ala-Fossi, influences "the very rhythms, patterns, pace, texture and disciplines of everyday life" (Ala-Fossi 2004, p. 320). Additionally, voice-tracking allows the automating of shows to reach the point of creating mainstream music, which is evident in that DJs and their personal touch are usually not present in the music that plays on air. In early radio programming,

music selecting was generally simply based on DJs' preferences, audience requests, and record sales. Today, the process relies on one's own expertise, listener input, research, and the record industry, the latter two of which inevitably cause much of the mainstream format (Ala-Fossi 2004, p.322). However, because record sales are affected by song exposure through radio airplay and stations compete with one another by doing the same thing, essentially playing the same music, mainstream radio cannot be helped. While record companies' paying for record airplay is widely seen as an ethical issue by the general public, in another perspective, this action, with the aspect of blatantly cheating for more exposure aside, attempts to break that chain. Nonetheless, because this system of music selection is ultimately more concerned with the maximization of profit for the companies rather than the audience and its receiving quality content, the ethical issues arising from the separations between the DJs and the music and their listeners deepen.

In accordance with these negative effects and despite the financial advantages of voice-tracking, there do exist radio companies and professionals in the industry that are against this technique. In an article in Toledo's *The Blade*, Tim Roberts, the operations manager for the Cumulus stations in Toledo, holds onto his belief that local programming will beat out voice-tracking, for the former allows listeners to form bonds with the DJs, who are accessible for song requests and questions, and the latter rids that genuine bond and allows no spontaneity (Lemmon 2001). In addition, the job-loss effect is a real cost many professionals face. Fred "Hollywood" Moore, who worked at Clear Channel's WDIA-AM 1070 for 23 years, was laid off after being in radio for about 39 years due to the cost-saving voice-tracking that swept the industry (Wade 2008). Following his laying-off, Moore stated that he did not expect to ever find an opportunity to go back into radio, due to the digitally-dependent direction the industry is heading. While

using voice-tracking is a smarter business decision in many ways, it comes at the cost the genuineness of the disk-jockeying profession.

However, from a different perspective, many professionals in the industry who also truly care about providing quality entertainment find voice-tracking helpful, as it is often the only means to fulfill this goal to the widest audience possible. One major reason DJs and radio personalities might be willing to use voice-tracking is a schedule conflict. Kevin O'Connell, a WGRZ-TV meteorologist, was specifically hired to host an afternoon program for WECK-1230 AM/102.9 FM The Breeze, but because his television obligations conflicted, he had to prerecord the show in morning sessions (Kwiatkowski 2012). He stated that voice-tracking allows him to continue fulfilling his main commitment to the TV station while still allowing him to take on radio, which is something he loves and wants to do. Another major issue that voice-tracking can resolve is commuting. Because radio personality Heather Gersten Perry lives near Boston, she makes a difficult commute to Providence for her morning show, 5:30 to 10 a.m., and to Buffalo for her 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. show (Kwaitkowski 2012). She stated there are times she prerecords her shows days or just one day in advance to still stay current, if she is unable to make the complete commute. In addition, for Christmas, she prepared about a week's worth of material in advance, so she would, reasonably, not have to be in the office all those mornings during the holidays. Neither of these professionals necessarily wants to abuse the available technique of voice-tracking, but situations arise in which using it allows them to fulfill all the commitments they have as professionals and as people.

In order to at least somewhat alleviate this controversy of using voice-tracking, the radio industry and all its members must only use the technique when necessary in a non-deceptive way.

The difference between people in the industry who play hard in the numbers game and the DJs and radio personalities who aim to do their jobs the right way shows in the authenticity of the shows that are subsequently produced. Clear Channel is one of the industry's leaders in implementing voice-tracking, yet it is unclear whether its stations are purposely engaging in this deception. Radio personality Randi West stays in Cincinnati for her 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. show on Clear Channel's WVKS-FM (92.5), and she is one of a number of DJs there that seem to keep up with the ruse that they are in Toledo during the show, according to an article. In one instance, West told listeners to come in to the station to drop off Halloween treats on the holiday. West can be heard on shows in at least 10 stations for Clear Channel across the nation, so while most DJs who voice-track their shows from different locations typically do about two or three according to WRVF's Kim Carson, West's daily work is of "almost mythical proportions" (Lemmon 2001). To avoid this ethical complication and to keep DJs and radio personalities on the air, radio companies should avoid deceptive tactics and be more transparent about using voice-tracking when necessary. The aforementioned Heather Perry stated, "As a live DJ, you don't want to be replaced by voice tracking. That would be a nightmare. In today's economy, you need to make money where you can make it. ... I never say anything that's not true on air. I just talk about my life, the stations and the music" (Kwiatkowski 2012). The radio personality admits to using voice-tracking due to its necessity for her schedule, yet also maintains her professional authenticity by avoiding lying about being live on the air. In the same article by Jane Kwiatkowski, Chet Osadchey, the market manager for Cumulus Media Buffalo stressed this point of effectively use voice-tracking without compromising too much: "There are certain situations where it may be convenient, that it's operationally efficient. There are other times

when it makes no sense at all, and you would want to use a preferred local personality who has equity in the marketplace and in the community. Those things are invaluable."

Through digital technology, large radio companies have been able to exist and function with multiple stations located in different areas, unlike previous times when every local station was its own entity, and had the luxury of branching out nationally and even globally, while still easily maintaining operations in a regional and local way. DJs and radio personalities stand on either side of the ethical debate of voice-tracking, for on the one hand, they do not produce real, live shows, while on the other, they have more options to allow stations to produce quality programming by using the best, or star, talent in cost-efficient ways. In some ways, the radio industry is generally for the use of voice-tracking rather than opposed to it, as long as the method is used as an efficient, convenient alternative, not a solution to make a lot of money by bringing the people in the industry down. Using voice-tracking when necessary and being transparent about it would lessen the ethical issue and increase the industry's authenticity. Had this been done earlier, hearing Ryan Seacrest on the New York radio and watching him in Los Angeles on live-television soon after might not have been so jarring growing up.

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