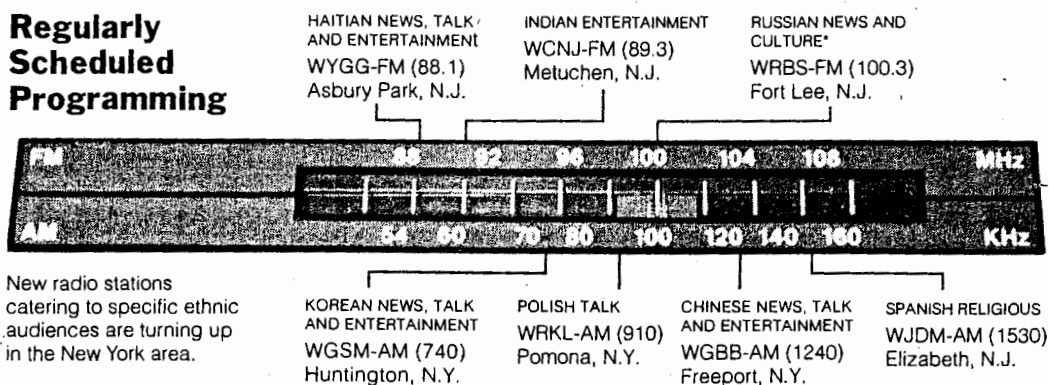


Regularly Scheduled Programming



New radio stations catering to specific ethnic audiences are turning up in the New York area.

*Shares a frequency with another major station.

All Languages, All the Time, And All Over the Suburban Dial

By DAVID W. CHEN

At daybreak in central New Jersey, Indian professionals wake up to live Hindi prayers on the radio. At midday on Long Island, lonely Chinese immigrants confide in the host of a popular radio program called "Happy Family." At dusk in the Hudson Valley, Polish-Americans absorb the latest news from Warsaw on Rockland County's only talk-radio station, which is all-Polish, all the time.

Though most radio stations that cater to specific ethnic groups attract just a smidgen of the audiences who tune in to, say, Howard Stern, they are increasingly popping up in the far corners of the New York metropolitan area, reflecting both the growing diversity of suburbia and the changing nature of the radio business.

Ethnic broadcasters are settling in the suburbs in part because a New York City station can cost more than 10 times as much as a suburban one. Moreover, they can tap into an expanding pool of suburban immigrants, while occasionally reaching the city's ethnic enclaves.

Guided by local hosts who function as cultural bridges, these stations are also slaking immigrants' thirst for round-the-



Richard Perry/The New York Times

In Pomona, N.Y., students from Gdansk visit the all-Polish WRKL-AM (910).

clock news, interaction and entertainment from their native lands at a time when immigrants, in city and suburb, are transforming the New York region.

"Ethnic is big, and there's been an explosion of ethnic radio in New York in the last

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Newcomers Drawn to Suburbs As Ethnic Radio Proliferates

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few years," said Zev J. Brenner, president of Talkline Communications Network, a Jewish television and radio network in Manhattan that has helped several ethnic groups lease or buy radio and television stations. "If you're flicking around in the suburbs, you can probably hear more ethnic radio than you can in Manhattan or Brooklyn or Queens."

New York's changing radio landscape mirrors the trends in Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington and other diverse cities, where listeners can stumble upon stations broadcasting in Arabic, Vietnamese or Korean. And this does not even include the many Spanish stations, which have become mainstream powerhouses, and West Indian and other ethnic English-language programming.

Such variety is a far cry from what used to constitute ethnic programming: renting an Italian hour here, a German hour there, on a weekend afternoon, on someone else's station.

These days, of course, listeners can find plenty of Spanish programming on major stations, like WSKQ-FM (97.9), known as Mega, which has the seventh-highest Arbitron ratings in New York City. WPAT-AM (930), once the epitome of easy listening, is now a multiethnic smorgasbord of Russian, Spanish and Caribbean programming. And many stations still reserve weekend slots for foreign-language programs.

But in recent years, ethnic broadcasters have begun to lease or buy their own tiny stations in the suburbs. Just in the last few months, a Korean company has agreed to buy WGSN-AM (740), a station in Huntington, N.Y., that plays Sinatra and his contemporaries.

Shifting demographics have contributed to the interest in ethnic broadcasting, said Tom Taylor, editor of *M Street Daily*, a radio newsletter. According to the 2000 census, some suburban counties had percentage increases in minority populations that exceeded even those registered in Queens. In New Jersey, the fastest-growing group was the Asian population, which rose by 77 percent.

Economics has been another important reason, particularly after the 1996 overhaul of the nation's communications laws allowed corporations to own multiple stations in a single market. Corporate consolidation has led to skyrocketing prices for radio stations in major markets. So while a weak-signal suburban station may cost \$2 million these days, a station

barely covering New York City may cost \$30 million, said Gary Stevens, a radio-station broker in Connecticut.

As a result, more than a dozen ethnic stations have emerged in the last decade or so in the suburbs, attracting audiences of 10,000 to 20,000 people, on average, with thousands more tuned in via the Internet, Mr. Taylor said.

The stations usually fall into three categories: AM and FM stations; subcarrier stations that share a frequency with a major station but require a special radio or subscription; and pirate stations, which sneak in some very local programming on empty frequencies and are more prevalent in Brooklyn and Queens.

In Elizabeth, N.J., Radio Restoration, WJDM-AM (1530), has been operating for seven years, and just two months ago expanded its religiously tinged Spanish programming to include weekends. With a small 5,000-watt signal that reaches from Trenton to the Bronx, the station, which originates from a church called Ministerio Puerta de Paz, sometimes broadcasts Sunday services.

"Prisoners call from the Union County Jail," said Alicia Reynoso, the station's coordinator. "They are very lonely sometimes. They say: 'Can you contact my wife? Can you teach me about the Bible?'"

Another religious station is Radio Bonne Nouvelle in Asbury Park, N.J. (WYGG-FM 88.1). Reaching perhaps 20,000 people in a 20-mile radius, the Haitian-American station, which began in 1991, offers tips in Creole on immigration, Social Security and community events. "In the city, people don't have to travel far to get what they need," said Hermann Larose, the station's administrator. "In the suburbs, it's different."

In Metuchen, N.J., EBC Radio (WCNJ-FM 89.3), which began three years ago, now segues from morning prayers to daytime quiz shows and nighttime song-dedication programs. The disc jockeys often banter in a mix of English and Indian languages, said Kulraaj Anand, the station's director.

At a recent live broadcast outside Andhra Bhavan, a new restaurant in Iselin, Mr. Anand and other radio personalities handed out prizes, danced to the latest Indian pop hits and promoted an Indian concert in Plainfield. One passer-by, Avi Kulkarni, said he had called the station recently to dedicate a song to his wife. "I love it," said Mr. Kulkarni, a software engineer who lives in Edison. "I listen to it every day."

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James Estrin/The New York Times

Kulraaj Anand, center, recently led a live broadcast with fans of WCNJ-FM (89.3) outside Andhra Bhavan, a restaurant in Iselin, N.J..

On Long Island, the Chinese Radio Network bought WGBB-AM (1240) in Freeport in late 1999, replacing a varied format of popular standards and multiethnic talk and music. Before that, the Chinese broadcasters had been based in Queens and delivering Mandarin programming over a subcarrier signal.

The station's regular lineup includes news programs on China and Taiwan, radio soap operas and call-in shows dominated by issues of health and the elderly. And though the station can reach Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island, it wants to lease or buy another small station, probably in central or South Jersey, said Josephine Chain, the station's owner and general manager.

"Obviously, we want the largest station to cover the city and the suburbs," said Ms. Chain, a former disc jockey in Taiwan. "But now, the big stations are very, very expensive."

In Patchogue, N.Y., WLIM-AM (1580), a longtime haven for popular standards, was bought in May by Poinet, a Chicago company that also operates WRKL-AM (910) in the

Rockland County village of Pomona. As a result, Poinet now broadcasts its all-Polish programs to both northern New Jersey and the Hudson Valley, as well as eastern Long Island and southern Connecticut, said Kent D. Gustafson, the company's vice president and chief executive.

On a recent day at WRKL, the station's program director, Agnieszka Kaczowska, was interviewing a group of high school students from Gdansk who had just won an international scholastic competition in College Park, Md. Just before the students arrived, the station broadcast its daily "Vatican Report" live from Rome. Inside the studio, one of the clocks was set to Warsaw time.

The only reminder of WRKL's previous incarnation as an English-only station three years ago was an indigo mug holder that read: "Rockland News, Rockland Talk."

Actually, WRKL and WLIM are not the only local radio stations in Polish. There is also a Polish subcarrier station in Fort Lee, N.J. In fact, there are more subcarriers than commercial stations broadcasting in foreign languages throughout the re-

The New York Times

gion, said Ralph Sorbara, president of Sound City Electronic Corporation in Bayonne, N.J., which makes the specialized radios necessary to capture the subcarrier signal.

In recent years, Mr. Sorbara has manufactured radios for more than a dozen ethnic broadcasters, including an Iranian subcarrier in Port Washington, N.Y., a Russian one in Fort Lee and three Colombian ones in Queens.

"Many of these people, they have little command of the English language, said Jouhard Nicolas, the founder of Radio Vérité, a Haitian subcarrier in South Orange, N.J. "They need to adjust to the American way of life; that's why they're tuned to their radio 24/7."

The immigrants are not the only ones who are paying attention. Bret D. Schundler, the Republican candidate for New Jersey governor, has chatted on Radio Pinoy USA (WRMN-FM (88.3), a Filipino subcarrier station in Bloomfield, N.J., which emphasizes news and talk. And the Democratic candidate, Jim McGreevey, has called to schedule an appearance, too, said Lino Celle, the station's owner.

So far, ethnic stations have not elicited criticism from residents unhappy with losing their old stations, although a few Rockland residents initially protested WRKL's switch. And eventually, more ethnic stations may introduce bilingual programming to appeal to children and grandchildren of immigrants.

But for now, the stations are enjoying their new niche.

"At the beginning, I was afraid that no one would listen," said Jola Naklicka, whose bubbly morning show on WRKL began two months ago. "Then you realize there are so many people getting up. And people tell me, it's so great that there's a Polish station. They miss their language, their country, everything."