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To a large extent the World Service, like other radio services in the UK, is formed by the laws and regulations that govern radio broadcasting. In Chapter 9 key laws that impact on broadcasting are outlined, followed by a discussion on the regulation of radio in Britain and the importance of self-regulation by broadcasters. The prospect of Britain gaining a new third tier of radio through 'access radio', as suggested in the Communications White Paper of December 2000, is also discussed.

The final chapter examines education and training for working in radio. Since the early 1990s, when many in-house training schemes were sacrificed for economic reasons, there has been a rise in courses provided by colleges, universities and commercial concerns. This chapter outlines various routes available to those who want to work in the industry.

While this book is by no means an exhaustive account of how radio operates in the UK, it is hopefully an insight into the key issues faced by broadcasters. There are already many books that analyse the theory of broadcasting. There are also books available about the practice of radio. What this book attempts is to show how what we actually hear when we switch on the radio is influenced by theory – from the structure of the 'radio day' to the selection of news. As with many other areas of the media, there is a certain amount of hostility between those who work in radio and those who theorise about it: practitioners tend to regard grand theories as irrelevant and theorists are often unaware of the pressures under which broadcasters have to work. This book attempts to bring both sides closer together by using the experiences of those working in radio to illustrate how theory informs their decisions and choices. In other words it is hoped that it will go some way towards explaining *how* radio is produced and *why* it is produced in that way.

Notes

1 Radio Authority, *Radio Regulation for the 21st Century*, June 2000: 7.

2 Ibid.: 2.

1 The renaissance of radio

In the age of an abundance of media it might come as a surprise to some that the oldest means of mass broadcasting – radio – is not only holding its own but managing to increase its audience.¹ Radio is everywhere. Apart from the BBC's five national stations and 39 local and regional stations, Britain now has three national commercial radio stations,² and almost 250 local and regional commercial stations. But that is only part of the picture. Digital broadcasting began in 1998 bringing the potential of hundreds of new stations bundled together in multiplexes and in June 2000 the first British-based Internet station – Storm Radio – was launched.

At the other end of the scale, technological advances and lower operating costs mean radio broadcasting is more accessible to more people. Since the 1980s community radio stations have developed often operating on a Restricted Service Licence (RSL) but nonetheless reaching a dedicated audience. Moreover, the Communications White Paper published in December 2000 put forward plans for 'access radio' that will provide a new third tier of radio run on a not-for-profit basis that should give community radio stations a new lease of life.³ There are 70 student radio stations usually run by enthusiastic student volunteers to provide a service for and by students. Hospitals have their own stations and many supermarkets and stores also run their own service. Radio is available as a digital service, on the traditional analogue service, by cable, by satellite and over the Internet.

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More radio – less choice?

But more radio stations do not necessarily bring about more choice for listeners and sometimes the only way to distinguish between one station and another is the station ident (the jingle that identifies the station with its name and frequency). The majority of stations in Britain follow a very similar format dominated by music. As Andrew Crisell points out, 'Many students never listen to anything other than music radio and have only an inkling that stations still exist which broadcast a variety of "programmes" analogous to those they can watch on television' (1994: xi).

The reasons people listen to radio will be examined later in this chapter, and the following chapter will examine different kinds of radio. However, given that most people still listen to 'mainstream' radio, that is professionally produced radio for a mass audience broadcast on AM or FM, it is important to begin by examining those stations.

Broadly speaking, British radio falls into two categories: the BBC's 'public service' broadcasting and Independent Radio's commercial broadcasting. This division is not a clear-cut one, however, and the term 'public service broadcasting' is particularly problematic.

Although the BBC is publicly funded, it still needs to attract audiences to justify the licence fee and its very existence. Officially it is not in competition with commercial radio but many radio insiders believe the changes made to Radio 2 in 1998 with younger big-name presenters and more modern music were a direct assault on commercial radio's market. Moreover, the changes worked and in 2000 Radio 2 was the most listened-to station in the country.

But just because a station operates to make a profit does not preclude it from providing a service to the public. Indeed an audit in 2000 of the amount of time commercial radio devotes to public service announcements by the Commercial Radio Companies Association (CRCA) found that on average commercial stations spend two hours a week giving information about events in their area, with a further one and a quarter hours spent on social issues and charities. The CRCA say when this time is compared to paid-for advertising it works out at £104 million a year. 'Every week every commercial radio station supports its listeners in some way by educating, informing, fund raising or appealing on behalf of groups and individuals in need,' says Nick Irvine of the CRCA.⁴

For these reasons it is worth a closer examination of the two types of broadcasting to try to establish distinctions between them and see which 'public' is served by them.

Public service broadcasting⁵

For the first 50 years of its existence radio broadcasting in Britain was synonymous with the BBC. Originally a commercial company, the British Broadcasting Corporation was created in January 1927 by Royal Charter as a publicly funded organisation with sole responsibility for the provision of broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Its position as a monopoly with assured finance gave its first director general, John Reith, the time and resources to develop it free from commercial pressures, and its charter provided it with full editorial independence (Crisell 1994: 21).

However, being publicly funded also brought a responsibility for the BBC to 'serve' the public through programmes that 'inform, educate and entertain' and that are cost effective; and through targets that are continually reviewed by the government, who not only set the level of the licence fee but also determine the proportion of the fee given to the BBC and have the power to discontinue it altogether.

As Denis McQuail (1994) points out, there is no absolute definition of public service broadcasting; however, the Peacock Commission into broadcasting in 1986 came up with eight principles of the 'public service idea':

Geographical universality of provision and reception; the aim of providing for all tastes and interests; catering for minorities; having a concern for national identity and community; keeping broadcasting independent from government and vested interests; having some element of direct funding from the public (thus not only from advertisers); encouraging competition in programmes and not just for audiences; and encouraging the freedom of broadcasters.

(McQuail 1994: 126)

These principles are evident, to a greater or lesser extent in each case, in the way the BBC currently operates as their statements in *The BBC Beyond 2000* make clear.⁶

Public funding through the licence fee establishes an implicit contract with every household in the nation that the BBC will set standards of quality and diversity . . . And because BBC services are not competing for commercial revenues they can afford to meet a far wider range of these expectations, pushing the boundaries of public service broadcasting further, testing success not just by ratings – though no service succeeds unless it attracts a substantial audience – but according to

whether it offers something of real value to the audience that is not guaranteed elsewhere.

It is in striving to balance programmes that are 'popular' with listeners and those which provide the sort of things 'not guaranteed elsewhere' that causes the most problems for the BBC. It tackles this through what Stephen Barnard calls complementarity. 'Complementarity in radio services means the provision of programming which dovetails, rather than directly competes, with that of other stations' (Barnard 2000: 32). In other words, the BBC designs each of its radio services with a distinct audience in mind so that every interest can be catered for within the BBC family, and while continuing to 'inform, educate and entertain' listeners and provide what is seen to be lacking in commercial radio.

This is most noticeable in the speech-based stations of Radio 4 and Radio 3 that provide radio drama and documentaries unavailable elsewhere. However, it can also be argued that Radio 1 also provides a service not available elsewhere since its revamp in the 1990s from a pop-music station to a 'youth' station targeting 15–25-year-olds with a mix of new music and social-issue campaigns on drugs, unemployment and student life. Andy Parfitt, the controller of Radio 1, believes part of the public service his station provides involves promoting new talent that can be ignored by the globalising tendencies of the music industry. 'I think public service broadcasting is absolutely crucial in stimulating regional and cultural diversity and providing a platform for new artists and new talent,' he says.⁷ 'At the same time it can't be a niche activity. In order to be relevant it has to be a certain size and have a certain reach and be appreciated by a number of people, so you have to get a balance between great big global acts that are everyone's favourites and new acts that happen to come from South London or Manchester or Nottingham.' And he acknowledges that the public service aspect of the station is not just confined to the music. 'Predominantly we are a music station but because we reach out into people's lives all the time – we're the sound track to their lives – then what we also provide in terms of news and speech and the social action features enriches the output and gives it depth,' he says. 'It doesn't ever dominate but if it weren't there it would be sorely missed.'

In a similar way BBC local radio provides a service with a high level of speech and music programmes aimed at the over 45s who are a group until recently largely ignored by other broadcasters.

Commercial broadcasting

Commercial radio, as its name suggests, is run to make a profit by selling airtime to advertisers. It began in Britain in 1973 with a network of local stations overseen by the Independent Broadcasting Authority. In its early days the stations were similar to the BBC's music-based stations, except they carried advertising, partly because so many of the new stations' staff were former BBC employees but also because of the way it was regulated.

From the beginning the IBA imposed certain public service obligations on stations by insisting they carry a full news service and provide programming to appeal to all age groups and reflect the diversity of their community (Barnard 2000: 53). What this meant was that commercial radio could not deliver a specific audience to advertisers, so its appeal to them was limited. The prospect of making a profit was further hindered by what Andrew Crisell calls the 'unnecessarily high technical standards' (1994: 36) required by the IBA and high transmitter rents paid to it.

On top of this the birth of new stations occurred during a period of recurrent recession when advertising generally hit a slump, and at a time of increased competition from new forms of television – breakfast television, Channel 4, cable and satellite – as well as an increase in land-based pirate stations who were free from regulation and so could provide advertisers with targeted audiences (Crisell 1994: 37).

The 1990 Broadcasting Act changed all that. Ownership and investment regulations were considerably relaxed, as well as the public service requirement, and three national commercial stations were proposed along with a promise to expand local and regional services. The Act also saw the disbanding of the IBA and the setting up of the Radio Authority⁸ whose main tasks were:

To plan frequencies; to appoint licensees with a view to broadening listener choice and to enforce ownership rules; and to regulate programming and advertising.

(Radio Authority Fact Sheet Number One)

In particular the promise to 'broaden listener choice' brought hope that commercial radio would at last be able to cater to a wide range of interest groups by being freed from its requirement to cater to everyone in its transmission area. The reality, however, is that most commercial radio

stations target very similar audiences – the ones identified by advertisers as having the most spending power and therefore the ones they want to reach with their message. The size of radio audiences is important to advertisers but equally important is the audience profile that gives the demographic picture of the average listener. There would be little point in advertising disposable nappies, for example, on a station whose audience consisted mainly of 55-year-old men. For that reason commercial stations, especially since 1990, target a specific audience in order to ‘sell’ it to advertisers. In other words the audience of commercial radio is a commodity sold to advertisers to fund radio stations whose purpose is to attract and keep a specific demographic group of people.⁹ To paraphrase Jean Seaton, ‘commercial radio does not produce programmes it produces audiences’ (Curran and Seaton 1991: 212).

Of course the BBC also targets specific audiences, but its targeting is on the basis of interest. Commercial radio needs advertising to exist so they target audiences based on the people advertisers want to reach and tailor their programmes accordingly. The effectiveness of audience targeting is shown by the fact that in 1990 radio had a 2 per cent share of all advertising revenue, but by 2000 its share had increased to 6 per cent (Mills 2000).

For radio groups like GWR, the target audience is 25–34-year-olds, as the managing director of Leicester Sound, Phil Dixon, explains:

That sort of age group is very aspirational for the age group both above and below it. The younger ones want to be it and the older ones like to think they’re still a bit trendy and young. It all comes together in that age bracket and that’s the age we target. They’ve got money to spend and advertisers want them to spend it with them, so from a revenue/business perspective it’s important because that’s what advertisers want.¹⁰

Radio is big business and, while the number of stations continues to grow, there is increasing consolidation with groups buying out small independent stations which then adopt the group’s format. This is leading to a homogenisation of the sound of radio with ‘local’ stations controlled from group headquarters rather than the place their audience is based.

The biggest group is GWR based in Bristol. In October 2000 it owned 36 local stations from Plymouth Sound to Ram FM in Derby, as well as the national station Classic FM. The advantages of being a large group are that resources can be pooled to cut down costs; sales teams can sell

advertising for several stations at the same time; news can be delivered from a central newsroom; managers can oversee more than one station; programmes can be shared.

The disadvantage is that there is little to distinguish the output from Plymouth or Derby except the occasional local accent and the content of the news: the schedule, playlists and style of presentation are the same across the whole group. Moreover, as the format of large groups like GWR is seen to bring in revenue, other smaller stations are influenced by it and adopt it in the hope of increasing their listeners which they then ‘sell’ to advertisers. The result is that radio all begins to sound the same and as a medium its potential to inform and entertain other than through music is being ignored outside the BBC.

Supporters of commercial radio point out that the BBC can afford to take a more varied approach to broadcasting because it is not dependent on audience figures to produce advertising revenue in order to survive. They also point out that while the BBC national network is holding its own with a 51.1 per cent audience share compared to 47.2 per cent for national commercial radio, on a local and regional level the BBC only manages an 11.2 per cent share compared to the 38.8 per cent of local and regional commercial stations.¹¹ In other words, commercial radio appears to be giving audiences what they *want* to hear rather than what radio managers think they *ought* to hear.

Nonetheless the overall impact of commercial radio catering to advertisers creates a situation where there is less diversity of programmes and minority interests and groups are ignored. As Stephen Barnard points out,

The classic critical argument against commercialisation of mass communications media is that pursuit of advertising revenues encourages programming assumed to appeal to the greatest number, thereby marginalising less popular tastes and interests. It creates an environment most conducive to reception of the advertising message, leading to programming that is undemanding, unchallenging and pacifying.

(Barnard 2000: 51)

The bigger picture

Taken as a whole, radio broadcasting in Britain could be regarded as covering all tastes by offering commercial and public service models.

Moreover, the number of small stations catering for sparsely populated areas has increased dramatically since the 1990 Broadcasting Act. In Scotland, for example, 16 new commercial stations have gone on air since 1991, including bilingual stations like Isles FM on the Isle of Lewis, and Heartland FM in Perthshire.

Digital radio also appears to be offering more choice with most of the current multiplexes carrying a mixture of different types of music-based stations, and in large metropolitan areas an Asian service as well.

However, there are still many groups in Britain who are ignored by the currently available radio stations. Apart from a handful of Asian radio stations and the BBC's Asian Network, most ethnic minorities are not catered for by mainstream radio especially outside large metropolitan areas like London and Birmingham.¹² Regardless of ethnicity, children under 15 and adults over 65 are not catered for in any direct way, although, as Chapter 8 discusses in more detail, this is beginning to change. Even music-based stations are very narrow in the range of music they play. There is very little live music, and outside major cities even jazz and country music, which both have enormous followings, are barely acknowledged, let alone more 'specialist' forms of music.

As Denis McQuail points out, the mass media are of considerable importance to modern societies in part because they are

The source of an ordered and public meaning system which provides a benchmark for what is *normal*, empirically and evaluatively; deviations are signalled and comparisons made in terms of this public version of normality.

(McQuail 1994: 1)

From its beginning the strength of radio was that it opened up the world to people. It was no longer necessary to 'be' somewhere in order to experience an event – it was brought to you through your radio. The views and attitudes of different groups in society became available to those outside that group; the voices of politicians, trade unionists, archbishops, the homeless and the 'ordinary' person were all heard directly by thousands of people, whose 'experience' of society was enlarged. While this is not to suggest that this created greater understanding of different parts of society, it did provide greater knowledge of it. Similarly this is not to suggest a return to the paternalistic Reithian approach to radio as a means to 'improve' the masses. What is being suggested is that the majority of

radio stations now broadcast to a similar but narrow part of society, and in so doing they are promoting a narrow definition of what constitutes 'normal', which could lead to increasing numbers of people being seen as marginal and becoming alienated. As Robert McLeish writes, 'radio should surprise' (1994: 6). Unfortunately, in these days of format radio it seldom does.

The listener

But despite the increasing sameness of radio it is still a popular medium with 90 per cent of the population tuning in for an average of 24 hours a week (Leonard 2000). As Shingler and Wieringa (1998) point out, radio is very much taken for granted these days but that does not detract from the qualities that make it so enduringly popular.

Chief among these qualities is radio's ability to talk directly to the audience. Although it is a mass medium it does not address the 'mass' but the individual. In this way radio is an intimate medium, one that listeners feel is addressing them, even when they know that thousands of people are listening at the same time. This was not always the case, however, as Paddy Scannell notes:

The talk that prevailed in early broadcasting in the UK was monologue rather than dialogue, in which selected speakers spoke at length from the studio to absent listeners on predetermined scripted topics.

(1991: 2)

These days, however, radio is widely used for companionship, and the majority of radio listening occurs when people are alone (Hargrave 2000: 13). As a companion, radio is particularly undemanding and most people use it as a background to other activities, particularly driving the car, and because of this it is often referred to as a 'secondary medium' which implies that it is somehow lacking and inferior. But part of its strength comes from its ability to be used while doing other things, and one of the reasons given for the increase in audiences is that computer users listen to it while working on their PCs or surfing the Internet (Leonard 2000).

More than any other medium radio allows you to experience it while doing other things, but that does not lessen its effectiveness. The power of radio to create moods goes back to its earliest days when the BBC created the Forces Programme in 1940 'to maintain the morale of troops

forming the British Expeditionary Force in France' (Crisell 1986: 22), followed by programmes like 'Music While you Work' to help boost production in munitions factories. The fact that radio can be heard in shops, cafés, garages, offices and factories suggests it is still used in this way.

In research by the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Radio Authority it was found that one of the main uses of radio was to alter the listener's mood. It is used to help people relax before going to bed; to energise them before going for a night out; to stimulate them and give them something to think about; and to lighten their mood if they feel a bit down (Hargrave 2000: 12).

Another strength of radio is that it is immediate. Listeners tune in regularly for traffic updates, and those with car radios that have a Radio Data System (RDS) have regular traffic flashes displayed automatically. Moreover, despite advances in technology that allow television to broadcast live from almost any location, because radio is easier to access – in cars, the workplace, through personal headsets – it is ideal for keeping people informed about breaking news stories.

It is also a very responsive medium. Requests and comments from listeners can be made by telephone, fax and email and included almost immediately in the programme, making listeners feel part of it. This is particularly true of phone-in discussions where the programme is regarded as a place for the audience to express their views.

They were not considered to be a vehicle for the presenter's own views – this was not thought to be appropriate. It was felt the presenter's role should be neutral and their own view should be expressed only to aid the flow of the conversation and start or maintain a debate.

(Hargrave 2000: 19)

Radio also responds to the audience by making changes to its schedules as a result of market research or because of falling audience numbers. The way this is done is worth closer examination, if only because the industry spends so much time and money on it.

Audience research

As previously mentioned, the size of radio audiences is important to commercial radio because they sell advertising on this basis, but it is also

important to the BBC as a way to measure the popularity of their stations and thereby help to justify the continuation of the licence fee. For this reason the BBC and the Commercial Radio Companies Association (CRCA) set up a radio industry research company – RAJAR Ltd – in 1992 which they jointly own. Prior to this, audience data were collected by two separate services: the BBC Daily Survey which monitored BBC radio, and the Joint Industry Committee for Radio Audience Research (JICRAR) for commercial stations. The problem with this was that different methodologies and the fact the figures were not independently produced cast doubt on their accuracy. As RAJAR (Radio Joint Audience Research) points out:

The creation of RAJAR has greatly improved overall confidence in radio as a medium over the years since 1992, principally because it provides a single accepted measure of radio listening.

(www.rajar.co.uk)

Understandably, measuring radio audiences is complicated: radio can be listened to virtually anywhere and there are literally hundreds of station areas to survey. The cost to the radio industry for this service is almost £4 million a year.

RAJAR produce listening figures every three months based on the response from 3,000 selected respondents who each compile a seven-day diary of their listening habits. While this may seem a time-consuming and old-fashioned method of measuring audiences, because radio is listened to in a variety of locations it is still felt to be the most reliable. Several types of radio-meters are being developed, but because they require respondents to carry or wear the meter at all times, their effectiveness is still in doubt.

The problem with this kind of information, however, is that it only measures the number of people tuning in to a particular station. It is unable to tell whether the output was liked or even 'listened' to as opposed to just being on in the background. Because of this stations also have to do market research to show what kind of programmes are preferred at what times of the day and night.

For the BBC this research has two main purposes. The first is that it helps them to adapt their programmes to what listeners say they want in the hope it will increase their share of the audience. The second is that it fulfils their obligation to be seen to respond to the licence-paying public. For that reason as well as traditional market research carried out by its

own Audience Research Department, the BBC operates a series of audience 'councils' who meet periodically to give their opinions directly to BBC managers. Kate Squire, the editor of BBC Radio Nottingham, says the local radio council is 'a great source of information and help'. The 12 member councils meet every two months and follow a nationally agreed business plan about what programmes will be discussed. The councils are made up of 'ordinary' listeners, who go through a formal application process and an interview before joining the council. 'What I usually do is give them a listening exercise before they come for the interview, so it might be to listen to the mid-morning show and comment on this that and the other,' Kate Squire explains. 'We don't want people who just say everything's great and we think you're wonderful. We want people to be constructively critical but we don't want people from pressure groups – we want normal radio listeners who don't have a particular axe to grind, with a nice geographical spread around the county and a good age range and a good ethnic mix.'

The meetings are usually between the council and the editor of the station and are bound by strict confidentiality. 'We often talk very openly about presenters and programmes,' Kate Squires explains. 'Sometimes my news editor will come but usually it's just me because the meeting needs to be very open and the rule is what's said doesn't go out of that room.'

As well as commenting on programmes, the council is also used to help with outside broadcasts and special events like charity phone-in weekends and the station's Christmas pantomime.

In Scotland, Ireland and Wales there are National Broadcasting Councils, and in England audiences are represented by the English National Forum as well as the regional and local advisory councils. There is also an ongoing project called 'The BBC Listens' which comprises public meetings, special programmes and audience research. The comments from all this research are then sent to the BBC Board of Directors.

Audience research by commercial radio is done in a less comprehensive manner. Because it is expensive, small stations tend to use it before the station is launched and then only when a problem is perceived through a consistent drop in the RAJAR figures. Groups like GWR, however, undertake continual audience research most of which focuses on musical preferences.

Every week GWR speaks by telephone to hundreds of people, aged from 20 to 34, about their musical tastes. Each respondent is asked to

identify their current musical preferences from a shortlist of musical 'clusters', and then asked for their opinions on a list of current songs. The learning from this ongoing research helps in the construction of our group playlists.

(GWR brand document)

As well as this, however, research is done into the lifestyle of their audiences and their interests. This is used to help shape programmes, particularly the news (see Chapter 5), and to provide advertisers with information about the kind of people listening.

Ways of listening

However, there is evidence that the way we listen to radio is changing. In 1994 research into radio audience attitudes showed that people tend to find a station they like and stick with it, developing a loyalty to a station's style, presenters and schedules (Hargrave 1994). Six years later it was found that although some presenters elicited strong loyalty, with listeners changing to other stations to follow them, there was not so much loyalty to stations (Hargrave 2000). This is reflected in data from the Radio Advertising Bureau that shows the average number, radio stations listened to nationally each week rose from 1.9 in 1994 to 2.3 in 2000.

The most obvious reason for this is that there is now more choice, and curiosity makes listeners dip in and out of different stations. But another factor is that it is now easier to change stations because of technological advances that allow pre-programming, so that a station can be changed at the touch of a button rather than having to fiddle with a dial.

This means broadcasters have to work even harder not only to get an audience but also to keep its interest. While this is a constant challenge for established radio stations, new stations face the added problem of making people aware of their existence in the first place, as well as tempting them to stay tuned. For most stations this requires a period of trial and error, and as the following profile of Oak FM in Leicestershire shows, constant tweaking of schedules and formats. The second profile of the Asian station Sabras Sound shows how small stations can build a dedicated audience by being responsive to the local community.

Profile

107 Oak FM, Loughborough

Radio for the locality



Oak FM is one of a growing number of small radio stations set up to cater for a small town/rural population who feel ignored by larger local radio stations. As its station director Sheldon James explains, 'I think radio's got an additional tier to it now. You've got national and regional and local stations but there's another tier underneath those stations made up of smaller stations like Oak FM that centre heavily on one particular area within the larger local station's transmission service area.'

The station went on air in February 1999 and broadcasts to a potential audience of around 120,000 over-15-year-olds. Competition from other commercial stations is strong because of the location of Loughborough between three major urban areas. Trent FM in Nottingham, Ram FM in Derby and Leicester Sound all owned by the GWR group, as well as the regional station Century 106FM owned by Capital Radio, can be heard in the area, but Sheldon James does not see this as a problem. 'At least our competition locally is all doing the same thing, so if we want to be different there's a stronger chance of us picking up people who don't like what they're doing,' he says.

The station was created by a consortium of local businesses, including the local newspaper which provided good advance publicity for the new station. The station also had a 'trial run' before officially launching, through a 14-day restricted service licence (RSL) that was used to gauge local interest. This was further backed up by market research in the area to try to find what people most wanted from a local station.

However, the station was not just created on the whims of the population. Twenty per cent of its shares are owned by the Echo Newspaper Series who belong to the Midland Independent Newspaper

group, now owned by the Mirror Group. A further 20 per cent of the shares belong to Milestone Pictures, whose chairman is an experienced radio and television broadcaster, that also runs Show FM, a company that specialises in RSLs at agricultural shows and other special events. Another 10 per cent of the shares belong to Non Metropolitan Radio, a radio consultancy headed by experienced broadcasters. So, although the local population was consulted, the creation of the station was also guided by experienced broadcasters.

Having gained the licence, the next step was to find suitable premises for the station. In line with many new stations, Oak FM found premises on a small industrial estate on the edge of the town centre, turning the all-purpose shell into a reception area, a large open-plan office for the news team, sales team and station manager, and two fully operational studios.

Building and equipping the studios with the latest digital technology was the biggest expense, although Sheldon concedes that being a radio station is easier than it used to be. 'New technology makes life easier and cheaper once you've invested in the initial technology,' he says, but adds it is still a specialist job. 'It's a different way of doing things. If you're editing a cut on a digital editing machine it still takes time to find the right bits – there's no magic wand – it still takes skill and precision.'

Although the station uses the industry standard Selector software to programme music, it was decided to augment this with a traditional studio desk. 'We use a system called Bar Code which is fader operated so when you're at the desk it's like being a "proper" DJ,' says Sheldon. 'One of the reasons we went for a fader system is that a touch screen is located either to the left or right of the desk and every time you want to change something you have to turn your head which takes you away from the microphone. This system avoids that and gives you all the advantages of digital play-out.'

According to the licence application submitted to the Radio Authority, the station aimed to provide a minimum of 20 per cent speech in its daytime output. Sheldon James admits that in its first year of operating, before he joined the station, this was higher with features like the chief executive of the County Council doing guest slots every week, and lunch-time phone-in programmes. But this style of broadcasting appealed to older listeners too much. 'We were typically hitting a 55-year-old male,' Sheldon explains. 'I looked at the sound of the

station and tried to reposition us a bit because we had too many older listeners and we needed to lower the age we appealed to. Our target now is a 35-year-old female and I would like to think that we would never broadcast anything that would make her switch off.' The current format reflects this change, and while there are still studio guests they tend to be visiting celebrities rather than local dignitaries.

However, despite these changes Oak FM tries to be involved with the local community as much as possible through charity drives, events like the switching on of the Christmas lights, and interacting with the audience through listeners' phone calls, faxes and emails. The presenters are key to this. 'A good presenter is someone who is the same on-air as they are off-air – people who don't go into "Smashy and Nicey" mode,' explains Sheldon. 'They have to be people who have a knowledge of the area and for us – being a small team – someone who is a team player, who is just as interested in passing on leads to the sales department as becoming a star on the radio.'

The news is also a key part of being part of the community, and the station employs three full-time journalists who do hourly bulletins between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. every weekday, with headlines on the half hour during breakfast news, the lunch-time segment and drive-time. The hourly bulletins are four minutes long with extended bulletins at 1 p.m. and 6 p.m.

'News is particularly important because it is a very good way for us to be local,' comments Sheldon. 'Leicester Sound was the main local station but they don't have the resources to cover Loughborough in as much depth as we can, so it's important for us to have some very strong local angles in our news and news which is relevant to our target audience.'

At weekends, in common with the majority of local stations, local news runs from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. with IRN bulletins at other times. Weekends see a change to schedules in other ways too with a Saturday afternoon programme that has match reports from sporting events, although these feature less now than in the early days of the station, in line with their target listener. 'It's a music-based show that keeps people informed about what's happening without sport dominating it,' says Sheldon. 'We try to provide a service that doesn't make people switch off.'

Keeping the station prominent has also prompted other changes, with a new logo reflecting a 'show business quality', a four-wheel-

drive station jeep to do promotions, and plans for a web site. The station is also negotiating with the Radio Authority to change the position of its transmitter, currently on top of the tower of Loughborough University, to a site that will make its signal stronger in its core area.

Although small, the 16 people who work at Oak FM are all genuinely enthusiastic about the station and its potential, but that does not detract from what Sheldon James sees as the bottom line. 'It's important that we serve the community,' he says, 'but it's crucially important that we never forget that this is a business and we have to make money. The reality is that any business is there to make money – it might be radio and you might like to provide great entertainment for people and you might like to have good promotions – but the bottom line is it's there to make money.'

Profile

Sabras Sound

Radio for the community



1260 KHZ MW

Broadcasting
24 hours a day

SABRAS

The word 'sabras' means 'all tastes' in Hindi and it was with that in mind that Don Kotak used it to name his weekly two-hour show on the first commercial radio station in Leicester in 1980. The show is now a 24-hour commercial station in its own right with what the *Sunday Times* has dubbed 'the keenest radio fans in the country' tuning in for over 19 hours a week on average.¹³

The station broadcasts throughout Leicestershire mainly in English and Hindi (the main language of the Indian subcontinent), but also in Gujarati, Punjabi and Bengali. It provides a mix of Indian music, local and international news, features, Bollywood gossip and even religious programmes. The station's main shareholder and managing director is broadcaster and businessman Don Kotak, who says the station's popularity comes from knowing the local population so well. 'We

have designed programmes to suit the mix of the local population,' he explains. 'If I were sitting in Bradford running an Asian station I would not programme it in the same way as I have done here.'

Asian broadcasting in Britain was pioneered in Britain on BBC Radio Leicester in 1976. By the time commercial radio came along the city's Asian population had programmes for five hours a week. Don Kotak agreed to move to the new station, providing its two-hour programme did not clash with the BBC's, so that overall the city would have more Asian programmes. 'It was always my ambition to have a 24-hour Asian radio station in Leicester,' he says.

By 1992 the dream looked possible, and the Radio Authority agreed that the Midland Radio Group who owned Leicester Sound could change their AM 'golden oldies' frequency into a 24-hour Asian radio station. At this stage, however, business took the dream over, and instead of Don Kotak being allowed to run the new station as had been expected, a deal was struck with the London Asian station Sunrise Radio to take it over, and Don and his team walked out. However, the Sunrise broadcasts were not popular, and after being approached by various groups in the Asian community, Don made a successful application for the AM licence for the city when it came up for renewal and began broadcasting in September 1995.

The station is based in a beautifully converted church in the middle of Leicester's 'Golden Mile' Asian district. The body of the church has been converted into a large open-plan area with settees and coffee tables looking into the station's three studios that still have the old archways and stained-glass windows of the original building. This area is used for any live broadcasts involving an audience, but it also allows shoppers a chance to pop into the station and see the presenters at work. 'They treat us like a community centre,' laughs Don.

But the reality is that the station's output has been carefully selected to cover all sections of the Asian community. 'I have to direct our programming to reflect a huge range of requirements that mainstream stations don't have to,' explains Don. 'We have to reflect young and old, address religious requirements, different cultural music requirements, and then we have to address the language balance between how much English we use and how each community's language will be used. We have gone out not to be antagonistic to anybody but to recognise the requirements of all sections of the Asian community.'

To that end ISDN lines have been installed in the city's mosques and temples so that they can broadcast directly from there. The Sabras 'day' begins at 4 a.m. with three hours of religious broadcasting from Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus who have an hour each that is rotated each week. This is followed by a three-hour breakfast show in English that is 'very zany and fast moving'. The bulk of the day is broadcast in Hindi and targets housewives, factories and the elderly, before returning to English broadcasting for drive-time. Evening and weekend broadcasts have programmes in Punjabi, Bengali and Gujarati.

The station takes IRN news on the hour but supplements it with in-house news from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. which is a mix of local news and news from the Indian subcontinent, three of which are in Hindi to cater to elderly listeners.

For all the success of Sabras Sound, Don Kotak is frustrated at the lack of choice in radio for Asians. 'An English person has a choice of what radio station they want to listen to – the Asian listener doesn't have that choice. It's between Sabras and the BBC,' he explains. 'The BBC is still very speech-orientated and still behind in terms of slickness and trendy-sounding if you like, so we have a great responsibility to the listeners.'

And Don is also aware that the demographic profile of the population is changing. 'In my opinion Asian radio is at a huge crossroads – we are where mainstream radio was in the mid-80s,' he says. 'We've now got 20 years of broadcasting under our belt and we have to restructure our programmes to make sure the youngsters not only come to our stations but stay there. We're losing a lot of youngsters to mainstream radio because Asian youngsters don't relate to Asian music. This is a huge problem because we have to address the needs of the whole community but we have to be mindful that the population is changing.'

For Don the solution is to have more radio stations that could tailor their output to specific age groups. Ideally he would like an FM service for younger Asians, and continue the AM service for more traditionally minded people but he realises this will probably never happen. Of the five Asian radio stations in Britain, only the one in Bradford broadcasts on an FM frequency.

'We're stuck – we want to expand but there's nowhere to go,' says Don who is aware that the days of one radio station catering for 'all tastes' may soon be ending.

Notes

- 1 In the first three months of 2000 commercial radio in Britain increased its audience by one million, while the BBC added an extra 400,000 to its listeners. Quoted in 'Ad hoc: Advertisers Going Ga-Ga for Radio' by Dominic Mills, Tuesday, 23 May 2000 at www.electronictelegraph.co.uk.
- 2 Atlantic 252 also broadcasts to Britain but it is based in Ireland and does not come under the control of the Radio Authority or other controls that apply to British-based stations.
- 3 See Chapter 9 for a detailed discussion on the Communications White Paper and access radio.
- 4 CRCA press release, 14 September 2000.
- 5 For a fuller history of the BBC see Crisell (1997) and Scannel and Cardiff (1991).
- 6 Full document available at www.bbc.co.uk.
- 7 Author interview with Andy Parfitt, July 2001.
- 8 A fuller explanation of the role of the Radio Authority is given in Chapter 9.
- 9 See Dallas Smythe (1997) for a fuller explanation of the commodification of audiences.
- 10 Author interview with Phil Dixon, managing director of Leicester Sound, October 2000.
- 11 Figures for second quarter of 2000. Source: RAJAR.
- 12 There are minority stations available by satellite, for example Tamil Radio and Television, and cable, for example Radio Orient.
- 13 *Sunday Times*, Culture Section, 15 February 1998. Since 1998 the station's average listening has increased from 14.4 hours to 19.2 hours (RAJAR for second quarter 2000).

2 The radio revolution

Radio is endlessly adaptable. Despite challenges from other media, radio continues to be popular because of its ability to adapt to changes. Technological determinists might claim that the changes are due to advances in technology like stereo broadcasting, the transistor radio and the use of FM and digital frequencies for better-quality sound. But a closer examination of these technological developments shows that most were available long before they were applied. What brought about their application is what Brian Winston calls 'supervening social necessities' (1995: 68) which act as accelerators in the development of media and other technology.

The transistor, for example, was first discovered in 1948 but it did not become widely used until the 1960s when Britain was more affluent. The new transistors made radio portable at a time when society was becoming increasingly mobile and the younger generation was emerging as a distinct consumer group. Radio responded to this by tailoring programmes to match the lifestyle of the time. Similarly, the first FM transmitter was opened in Kent in 1955 but it was not until the 1980s that stations began to switch to the better-quality frequency, mainly because the Independent Broadcasting Authority insisted that franchise holders provide separate services on AM and FM. The supervening social necessity in this case was the need to find more spectrum combined with that of producing better-quality sound to meet the expectations of audiences used to ever more sophisticated sound systems. As Stephen Barnard notes, 'radio's ability to survive in a competitive media environment has always depended on how well broadcasters tap into social, cultural and technological change' (2000: 17).

The adaptability of radio is clear not only in the many ways it is broadcast but also in the way it is used for so many different purposes. As this chapter shows, the different forms that radio has made it suitable to reach people in a myriad of ways from mass global audiences to those in closed communities.

Digital radio

Even before digital radio was broadcast it was hailed as the saviour of radio. Here at last was a system that delivers 'pure' sound free from atmospheric and electrical interference, and uses new frequencies that allow the creation of new stations at a time when space on the existing AM and FM frequencies is scarce.

Initially developed in Britain by BBC engineers in the 1970s, Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) uses new high-frequency bands, with several services carried in one block of frequencies called a 'multiplex'. Britain has seven multiplexes divided between the BBC and commercial operators, with each multiplex typically carrying ten services.

The sound quality of digital radio has been compared to the different sound quality between vinyl and CDs. It works by converting the radio signal into binary digits (0s and 1s) in a way that is resistant to interference using a Single Frequency Network that allows the same frequency block of spectrum to be reused throughout a large service area. This means there is more space for extra services, and because all the transmitters are using the same frequency to broadcast the same digital radio signal, there is no need to retune the radio when driving. Digital radio also allows extra information to be sent to the LCD display of radio sets. This can be anything from the name of the band that is playing to stock market prices or the telephone number of advertisers.

The BBC began its digital broadcasting in 1995 simulcasting its five national stations, and it has plans for another five new national services including a sport station to complement Radio 5 Live; a speech-based station with a mix of comedy, drama, stories and features and 'regular sections' devoted to children; a station that 'focuses on black music, news and speech aimed at a young audience'; a station focusing on music from the 1970s to the 1990s; and a national Asian station.¹

The national commercial service, Digital One, went on air in November 1999. This is owned by a consortium including the GWR group, who are

the major shareholders and own the national station Classic FM, and National Transcommunications Ltd (NTL), the telecommunications company that also runs the transmitter network for commercial radio. Through its multiplex it broadcasts the existing national analogue stations Classic FM, Virgin Radio and talkSPORT. But like the BBC, commercial broadcasters realise that the replication of existing services is not enough to tempt consumers to buy digital receivers so they have five other services broadcasting exclusively on digital radio. This comprises three different music stations; a station aimed at 'older listeners'; a speech-based station, One-word, that focuses on plays, books, comedy and reviews; a rolling news station, ITN News; and one that deals with finance and business news.

In the same way that the BBC has control of its own analogue transmitters, and the Radio Authority controls those used by the independent sector, the BBC has control of its own national multiplex, while the Radio Authority controls the national commercial multiplex and the first licence was awarded for 12 years.²

At a regional and local level, however, the situation is slightly different. The Radio Authority is in charge of licensing all regional and local multiplexes, and the licensee then contracts with the BBC to provide a local service within the multiplex. This means, for example, that the two multiplexes currently serving Scotland that are both owned by Group Scottish Radio Holdings plc, who own Edinburgh's Forth FM and Glasgow's Clyde 1 FM, also carry BBC Radio Scotland as one of its services.

However, for all its perceived benefits digital radio has two interlinked drawbacks. The first is that in order to receive the service consumers have to invest in new radio sets. The initial cost of these was prohibitively high, making audiences for the new stations almost non-existent in the early years. Since 2000 the price of the sets has fallen, and many top-of-the-range new cars are now fitted with digital radios. It is also possible to buy a special card for PCs for as little as £100 that will allow the service to be played through computers. Nonetheless, most commentators believe it will be 2010 before the majority of the population has access to digital radio.

The second drawback is that the start-up costs involved make launching into digital broadcasting impossible for all but the big players in radio. A glance at the existing licences awarded for local multiplexes shows that every one has gone to one of the existing big radio groups including GWR, Capital, Emap, and Group Scottish Radio Holdings.

Of course the Radio Authority would counteract that, although small operators might not be able to own the licence for a multiplex, there is

nothing to stop them running a service as part of one. The licences are not awarded to the highest cash bidder, but considered on merit, and among the criteria for local applications, the Radio Authority requires applicants to show:

- To what extent the radio services proposed by applicants appeal to a variety of local tastes and interests. The legislation also requires a broadening of local digital choice to be taken into account.
- How fair applicants have been in contracting with providers of radio programmes and data services who wish to be included in the multiplex.

(Radio Authority Fact Sheet Number Four)

Moreover, in order to make DAB more attractive to existing stations, any analogue service that broadcasts on a digital multiplex has its analogue licence automatically extended for a further eight years.

But the stark reality is that until digital radio audiences grow, it will not produce enough revenue to be self-financing, and by the time it does those stations in at the beginning will be firmly entrenched. For radio operators like Don Kotak, the managing director of a small independent station in Leicester, this means digital radio will be in the hands of a few large operators. 'The problem we have – while nobody will admit it – is that all the digital areas are being carved up by the big companies among themselves and it will cost anybody else who wants to provide a service up to £90,000 a year,' he says. 'That's fine – but we're not going to generate that revenue. All the research shows it will be 2010 before it is commonly used, so from now until then you're faced with huge expenditure with no return. The large companies have to go with it because they've got a different agenda – it's an investment in the future – but we can't do that.'

Nonetheless for digital radio to succeed it has to offer more than the current services in better-quality sound, and to some extent, at least for the time being, that should ensure that whoever provides the service it will have more diverse programming than the analogue services.

Internet radio

Radio on the Internet, or webcasting as it is known, is a growing phenomenon with literally thousands of radio stations across the world available

through computer modems. Its supporters claim that it is a new medium that removes the barriers to entry out of radio broadcasting because it is not dependent on regulated licences and is relatively cheap to set up. Its detractors, however, point out that, like other aspects of the Internet, it is unregulated and uncontrolled and can encourage music piracy because music can be downloaded on to CD for future use.

However, radio and the Internet appear to complement each other very well and all the major stations in Britain as well as many smaller stations now have web sites. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the main factors behind the increase in radio listening is that people tune in, either to conventional radio or through the Internet, while they are working on their computers.

But Internet radio sites are not just about listening to a station's live output via computer. The sites also provide background information about programmes and presenters, allow users to access travel information and news, provide 'virtual' tours of the station, and give them a direct link to programmes through email. Indeed as PC penetration in homes grows, and the cost of accessing the Internet falls, programmes as diverse as the *Steve Penk Breakfast Show* on Virgin Radio and the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4 increasingly refer and respond to listeners' emails they have just received.

The BBC has a web site for each of its national and local services available at BBC Online where, as well as providing information about programmes and presenters, selected excerpts can be listened to and there are links to other web sites of interest.

Although slower off the mark than the BBC, the big commercial groups are also keen to establish an on-line presence, and both Capital Radio and the GWR group launched their sites at the end of 2000, keen to exploit a market that allows advertisers to reach an audience 'simultaneously over the airwaves and on screen' (Mills 2000).

But Internet radio is not just confined to existing stations going on-line. In June 2000 stormlive.com, the 'UK's first Internet radio station to broadcast live 24 hours-a-day', was launched with the slogan 'the future has no frequency'. As well as having its own site, the 'virtual station' also broadcasts over the Freeserve Internet service provider channel bringing with it a whole new vocabulary. The presenters are called EJs rather than DJs, and those connected to the service are referred to as 'streamies' because of the streaming technology involved in bringing audio to a computer (Court 2000).

Radio on the Internet can also play an important role in keeping channels of communication open in areas under the control of a repressive regime. This was most notably demonstrated during the uprisings in Serbia in 1996, when the then Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic tried to stop the broadcasting of reports by the independent Serbian radio station Radio B-92 about anti-government demonstrations over the annulment of municipal elections. After the station's transmitter was switched off, the station posted print versions of its news on its web site, and also began using RealAudio to broadcast on-line, reaching people not only in Yugoslavia but equally importantly all over the world (Fleming 2000).

Even in democracies the Internet allows access to broadcasting by groups previously restricted. As Stephen Barnard points out, 'Pirate radio operators have found they can broadcast freely, without interruption or fear of prosecution, via the Internet' (2000: 253). And increasingly student radio is going on-line to avoid the high cost of RSL licences and transmitter costs.

But Internet radio has its drawbacks. In Britain and many other countries where going on-line is charged at the local telephone call rate it is an expensive way to listen to a 'free' service. And although the number of households on-line is growing, very few people have Internet access compared to those who have radios. It is also dependent on a computer and connection to a telephone line and for the time being that makes it less portable than traditional radio. That said, in the USA there is already a product available that looks like a conventional radio but plugs into a telephone socket and plays Internet radio (Court 2000) so technological advances could soon manage to overcome these problems.

Satellite and cable radio

The problem of portability is also shared by satellite and cable radio because sets have to be connected to either a dish or cable network. In most cases the services available via satellite or cable are those already available on analogue or digital terrestrial radio. All the national BBC services plus the BBC World Service are available via the Astra satellite, as is Virgin Radio and the London Asian station Sunrise. Cable radio which broadcasts over a local cable network is less prevalent and tends to be used by community radio stations, although a series of music-based stations each dealing with a different genre (chart, rock, indie, jazz, etc.) is available in London.

The main advantage of satellite broadcasting is that it can be accessed from anywhere, and this is of particular use for stores who want to have their own radio station playing in all their branches like Homebase FM and Costcutter Radio. It is also used to provide a service to other broadcasters. The Student Broadcast Network, for example, provides programmes like the student Radio Chart show on its satellite service, which can then be relayed through various student radio stations across the country. On a larger scale, the World Radio Network provides programmes from 20 different public service broadcasters across the world. These can be heard directly via satellite, but they are also available for small stations to rebroadcast on AM or FM for the cost of downlinking the material from satellite.

Hospital radio

Hospital radio began in the 1920s to 'help relieve the boredom and isolation a period of hospitalisation causes'.³ It now has over 300 individual stations that broadcast mainly through a closed-circuit system accessed through bedside headphones, although some broadcast on low power AM or FM transmitters. The service is run entirely by volunteers, loosely overseen by the Hospital Broadcasting Association, a national charity that provides technical and programming advice and promotes the services.

The aim of the service is to 'ensure the patient is kept in touch with their local community, family and friends in a way no other broadcasting medium can attain'. And while the service is acknowledged by the Department of Health as beneficial to patients, most hospital radio stations have to raise their own funds to maintain their service.

However, hospital radio also has another often unacknowledged role in that it is a valuable training ground for up-and-coming radio presenters. Many current radio personalities began their career as one of the 11,500 hospital radio volunteers, and it is still used as a pool of potential talent by radio station managers on the look-out for new presenters.

Pirate radio

Pirate radio – unlicensed illegal broadcasting – was at its height in Britain in the 1960s and enjoyed another surge of interest in the 1980s. Nowadays pirate radio is usually referred to as 'non-licensed radio', although licensed

broadcasters tend to use the term 'unlicensed radio'. The first British pirate station was Radio Caroline which began broadcasting from a ship off the coast of Essex in March 1964. By 1968 21 pirate stations were broadcasting with an estimated total daily audience of between 10 and 15 million (Shingler and Wieringa 1998: 24).

This first wave of pirate broadcasters were unashamedly commercial in their output, influenced by the format of Radio Luxembourg and American radio stations. Most followed a top-40 music format with casual, chatty links from DJs so that in both style and content the stations were the antithesis of BBC broadcasting at the time. It is generally acknowledged that the restructuring of BBC radio with the creation of BBC Radios 1, 2, 3 and 4 in 1967 was a reaction to the popularity of pirate radio, and Andrew Crisell believes they also inspired the creation of local radio.

First they were in some sense 'local' themselves. None of them broadcast over an area larger than the Home Counties, many of them publicised local events and aroused local loyalties, and a few such as Radio London and Radio Essex took local names. Second, although they afforded no broadcasting access to actual members of the public, they broke the BBC's virtual monopoly of radio to fulfil a demand which it had neglected, and so in that sense assumed a 'public' voice.

(Crisell 1994: 33)

However, despite the creation of Radio 1 – whose first DJs often came from pirate stations – and the 1967 Marine Broadcasting (Offences) Act which officially outlawed the stations, pirate radio continued, moving from ships and sea-based platforms to urban areas in the 1970s. As Shingler and Wieringa point out, 'During the 1980s growth in terrestrial pirates was so massive that at one stage illegal operators actually outnumbered legal broadcasters' (1998: 25).

Throughout this period pirate stations met with increasing opposition, especially from the BBC. They claimed that the pirate stations caused interference on legitimate services and could interfere with frequencies used by the emergency services. They also objected that the pirate stations did not pay royalties on the music they played, and this could have an adverse effect on the music industry. Nonetheless the pirate stations like Radio Invicta, JFM, and London Weekend Radio continued to gain audiences and increasingly operated quite openly. As well as catering to

marginalised music communities ignored by mainstream broadcasters – such as reggae, hip-hop, jazz, rhythm and blues – they also catered to ethnic minorities through stations like London Greek Radio which broadcast to the Greek and Greek Cypriot communities.

The demise of pirate radio came about with the 1990 Broadcast Act which opened up the development of commercial radio to try to encourage diversity in radio. As a result, many pirates like London's dance-music station Kiss FM applied for licences to the new Radio Authority and went legitimate. However, since then the number of unlicensed broadcasts appears to have increased, in part because many non-licensed broadcasters feel let down by the 1990 Act, believing the changes it brought about have undermined community-orientated stations and small-scale radio entrepreneurs.

In an effort to stop non-licensed broadcasting, operators are heavily fined if they are caught and can even face a prison sentence.⁴ Moreover, further legal action may be taken by the 'official' stations in the non-licensed broadcasting area. In summer 2000 the Commercial Radio Companies Association (CRCA) initiated legal action against Scene FM who broadcast dance music at weekends until they were closed down in 1998. In the first case of its kind, the CRCA sued the pirate station for £50,000 for causing interference to transmissions and a reduction in advertising revenue.

Community radio⁵

The chief characteristics of community radio are that it is participatory – being run by those who also make up its audience – and that it is non-profit-making. This does not mean that it eschews advertising, but that all profits are put back into the running of the station which is owned and run by the community it broadcasts to. As one definition explains:

It should be made clear that community radio is not about doing something for the community but about the community doing something for itself, i.e. owning and controlling its own means of communication.

(AMARC web site)

In Britain community radio has been slow to develop compared to other parts of the world. The Community Media Association (CMA), which was

formerly the Community Radio Association, argues that specific legislation is needed to aid the development of community services. They point to the example of community radio in France, which has a separate licence category to provide protection from takeovers by networks and for-profit organisations, and a special fund based on a levy on the advertising revenue of commercial broadcasters provides revenue to support the stations.

It had been hoped that the 1990 Broadcasting Act would lead to a growth in community radio stations but according to CMA director Steve Buckley this has not happened because of the economics of radio broadcasting whereby small stations are bought out for their licences. As Buckley comments,

This severely distorts the market since licences are acquired on merit but sold to the highest bidder. This economy is a deterrent to public and community investment in small-scale services. Public agencies and charitable donors do not want to invest in local community projects if this is seen to be taken for private profit. A separate licensing category is therefore an essential underpinning of their economic viability.

(*Airflash*, issue 69: 21)

What the CMA and other organisations including the Radio Authority want is a third tier of broadcasting to operate in a complementary way to existing BBC and commercial radio, with separate licensing and regulation to protect it. Currently full-time community radio services mainly operate in remote rural areas like Radio Ceredigion in West Wales, and Oban Fm and Nevis Radio in the Highlands and Islands. Other community radio services operate on RSLs normally limited to 28 days. Through the CMA these small-scale stations receive advice and training and are kept informed through conferences organised by the CMA and a quarterly magazine, *Airflash*. Since 1997 the remit of the CRA has extended to cover all forms of community media including radio, television, cable and Internet broadcasting. But according to Steve Buckley radio is still the most appropriate medium for community access to the means of communication which is regarded as a vital component of democracy. As he explains,

It provides a local counterbalance to media concentration and globalisation. It provides a route into new information and communication

technologies based on creative work and creative content. It provides access to those most in danger of exclusion from this new economy.

(*Airflash*, issue 69: 21)

Community radio is also important as a training ground for new entrants to radio, and as a place where new ideas can be tried. This is especially relevant at a time when in-house training by ILR and the BBC is being cut back, and when format radio is increasingly being adopted. As the CRCA note, 'These operations [community radio services] bring valuable new talent into our sector . . . creative industries rely upon the fostering of new ideas and talent for their creative renewal' (*Airflash*, issue 69: 13).

With so much support for a third tier of broadcasting, as well as the availability of digital frequencies that in the long term might free space on analogue frequencies, the future of community radio in Britain looks better than at any time in its history.

Restricted Service Licences

Restricted Service Licences (RSLs) are temporary licences granted by the Radio Authority to operate on a low-power basis for a limited geographical area, typically to cover a town or a 3-kilometre radius in a city. Most licences are granted for a maximum of 28 days, and outside London groups can apply for two RSL licences a year as long as there is a four-month gap between the two services.

RSLs are used for two different purposes. The most common one is to cover special events, like an agricultural show or bigger events like the Edinburgh Festival, or for charity fund-raising by a local community, as in the Radio Cracker broadcasts around Christmas in many towns. As previously mentioned they are also used by community groups who want to provide a highly localised service, or by ethnic minority groups who do not feel fully represented by mainstream radio.

The second use of RSLs is as a trial run for a proposed permanent service, to demonstrate the need for a service in that particular area and gauge support for it. As shown in the profile of Oak FM in Chapter 1, this information can then be used to back up an application for a full-time licence, but the Radio Authority make it clear that an RSL does not guarantee that they will advertise a full-term licence.

The Radio Authority also issues long-term restricted service licences (LRSLs) for radio stations to serve a single establishment like a hospital

or university campus. To qualify for an LRS the establishment concerned must have a permanent member of staff to be the licence holder, and meet the RA's legal and technical requirements. Licences are granted for a maximum of five years and are automatically renewable. In October 2000 there were 79 LRSs operating, mainly in universities and hospitals, but also on army and airforce bases.

RSLs are not cheap. Each application incurs a £200 fee which is normally not refundable if the application is rejected, unless it is because there is not a suitable frequency available. On top of this a tariff is charged for every day of the licence, including any time used for testing and any days when there is no broadcasting. The tariff varies according to whether it is an AM or FM frequency and the strength of the signal,⁶ and must be paid before the licence is issued. Added to this is the cost of renting the use of a transmitter that is usually more than the total cost of the licence.

Generally RSLs are issued on a first-come-first-served basis, but applications must be received at least six weeks before the proposed service goes on air, and will not be considered more than a year in advance. Usually only one RSL is permitted in any area at the same time, with a gap between the ending of one RSL and the beginning of another. There are also restrictions for RSLs in areas where there are plans to advertise a full local radio licence or readvertise an existing one.

Under the 1990 Broadcasting Act certain groups and individuals are automatically disqualified from holding an RSL including local authorities and political groups. However, local authorities can usually fund an RSL, and political organisations may fund one as long as the Radio Authority is 'satisfied it is not against public interest'. Similarly, religious groups can hold a licence as long as they 'do not practise or advocate illegal behaviour or have rites or other forms of collective observance that are not normally directly accessible to the general public' (RSLs: Notes for Applicants: 18).

Despite the bureaucracy and expense involved in an RSL they are very popular. As the profiles below show, RSLs are used for a variety of reasons by a wide range of people but at their core is the ability they have to provide an identity to specific groups who feel their needs are not being met by mainstream radio as well as providing those interested in radio with hands-on experience.

Profile

Profile Fly FM

Radio for students by students



The Nottingham Trent University first began broadcasting in 1996 when its Students' Union decided a radio station would complement the student newspaper, *Platform*, and add to their entertainment programme. As SU general manager Sylvia Whalton explains, the

university helped fund the station's first year, matching the SU's investment of £25,000 to help equip purpose-built studios in the Student Union building, and pay for a full-time station manager. 'We had a full time manager for four years,' Sylvia explains. 'This was to give us continuity between the RSLs and, because we were new to this field, to give us some assurances about what was being broadcast and that the equipment was being handled properly.'

In its first four years of broadcasting twice a year, in November and April, the station has gone through several changes. The first big one came after two years when the station – then called Kick FM – was forced to change its name because another station had a copyright on it. That called for a relaunch and a change of name to Fly FM.

Another blow came two years later when the expected April RSL was given to a commercial station wanting to do a trial run as a regional dance-music station, followed by the resignation of the station manager. The future of the station was in doubt.

One of the reasons behind employing a full-time manager was to meet the Radio Authority's requirements for a permanent member of staff needed to get an LRSL, but when it was realised that it was unlikely the station would manage to be permanent it was decided to change tactics. 'We were at a crossroads,' explains Sylvia Whalton. 'In the end we decided to keep the budget to a minimum and use what we've invested to give the students hands-on experience of radio.'

The station budget is around £15,000 a year with each licence costing around £1,000 and between £2,500–£3,000 needed to pay for renting the transmitter. Another expense is indemnity insurance which the SU take out in case the station gets sued. 'We've had nine RSLs now and never had any trouble but it's still something you need,' says Sylvia.

The student management team comprises a station manager, assistant manager, programme controller, head of music, head of production, head of sales and head of promotions. The manager for 2000/01 was third-year international relations student, Katrina Gill, who started working with the management team in July towards the November RSL, to be ready with a new station logo at the beginning of term.

Katrina explains that each head of department has responsibility for training their team in a specific area. The assistant manager, who covers for Katrina while she is in lectures, is in charge of DJs and works with the programme controller and head of music on the

station's format. The head of productions makes all the station's jingles and adverts, liaising with the heads of sales and promotions to get firms interested in backing the station.

As well as the usual flyers and adverts in the university, the station is promoted through the student newspaper and its output is piped directly to the Student Union bar.

'The hardest part is organising everything and getting people to come to meetings,' says Katrina. 'Because they're students and this isn't their main job you have to recognise that and not put too much pressure on them. They're volunteers and you have to recognise that and get the right balance.' The station follows a traditional format with a breakfast show, mid-morning show, lunch-time show, afternoon show and drive-time that work from an agreed playlist of contemporary music. After 7 p.m. it goes to more specialist music. 'We've got a broad mix of music from drum and bass, rock, R&B right through to jazz and blues,' says Katrina. 'We do promote student activities but we're a community station and we like to include the community and cover cultural events like cinema and theatre reviews.'

The station is helped by having a broadcast journalism degree at the university, whose students provide hourly news, features and sport throughout the day and at weekends. 'The standard of the news provided is excellent,' says Katrina. 'I've spoken to a lot of other student stations who wish they had something like that – and it obviously helps the broadcast journalism department by giving students hands-on experience.' Her aim is to get every department in the university to contribute to the station. 'We've got a lot of departments with a lot of talent who can all contribute,' she says.

The station is also given help by the Student Radio Association. As well as providing training sessions at conferences, the SRA is a way for student broadcasters to meet each other and those working in the industry. They also have regional representatives who can be contacted if there are any legal issues that need to be checked, and their web site has useful help-sheets with technical and presentation tips.

Although hard work, Katrina says there is no shortage of volunteers to work on all aspects of the station. 'I think initially people get involved because they think of it as something new and interesting and then they realise that there could be jobs in it and it's being taken seriously by the industry,' she says. Katrina's own experience has shown how valuable working on the student station can be in getting

paid work. As a result of presenting the Breakfast Show on Fly, she was given the chance to take part in a Radio 1 campaign about student debt, and broadcast live on the Sunday afternoon Sarah Cox Show. An offer of summer work from Channel 9 in Northern Ireland followed, and she has since secured a place with an Australian broadcasting company for when she graduates.

'It is pretty stressful when it's 24 hours a day but everyone's very enthusiastic and it's great fun,' she says. The station has won several Radio 1 Student Radio Awards and that encourages everyone to keep standards high, but Katrina says the most important part of Fly FM is that it delivers a service to students.

'We don't want to be the best radio station,' she explains, 'we want to be the best *student* radio station – that's a station run by students for students.'

Profile

Radio Ramzan

Radio to communicate and educate

Running a radio station with the backing of a large university and Student Union is quite different from starting from scratch in a deprived inner-city area, as Fazal Malik well knows. But as with the student station, it has its rewards. 'It's the feedback from the community that keeps us going,' says the inner-city community worker.

The Nottingham station started in 1997 as a way to help address problems with health, housing, employment, crime and low achievement in education. Like other Radio Ramzans in cities like Bradford, London, Leeds and Glasgow, the station broadcasts over the fasting month of Ramadan. 'One of the reasons for the station's success is that we do it around Ramadan when people are fasting and go to mosque more and think more of charity,' Fazal explains. 'The station is not purely religious, however, we also have programmes on education, training and development and culture. Unlike other Radio Ramzans we also play music.'

The station is funded in part by organisations like the Karimia Institute which is a mosque and a cultural centre, the Pakistani Centre and health organisations in the city, as well as small businesses in the Asian community. 'From the beginning small businesses have

supported us – like the butcher shop, small corner shops, take-aways and taxi firms,' says Fazal. 'These are the people who listen to us and support us – we must have invested five or six thousand pounds given by them over the last three years.'

The station's studios are in a rented house in the heart of Nottingham's Asian district and that means they have to be made from scratch every year. For the first three years the station also had to hire equipment every year, but slowly they have managed to buy pieces so that now they are virtually fully self-equipped and have even bought their own transmitter to save on renting one. The permanent equipment will also be able to be used to train people before the station goes on air.

'I had some background in radio because I have a degree from City University and radio was one of the things I studied,' Fazal explains. 'But doing it in practice is quite different and I had to learn as I went along and we made some terrible mistakes in the beginning.' But Fazal does not think this detracts from the station's appeal. 'People like it because it's not like BBC radio which is highly professional and slick,' he says. 'We make mistakes and people understand that it's their own people from their own community.'

Almost 6 per cent of Nottingham's population belong to an ethnic minority group with the largest South Asian group being Pakistani Muslims mainly from the Mirpuri district of Kashmir. They speak Mirpuri Punjabi which is a regional dialect with no written script, and literacy levels in both English and Urdu (the main language of Pakistan) are low especially in women and the elderly. Because of this Radio Ramzan broadcasts in a mixture of languages – English and Urdu as well as Mirpuri and Bengali.

The station has a mix of programmes designed to appeal to a wide age group. It starts at 6 a.m. when fasting begins and the daytime programmes concentrate on women and the elderly. Late afternoon there is a quiz programme for school children and in the early evening there are music and cultural programmes aimed at younger people.

Among the most popular shows are health programmes made in association with health care groups in Nottingham. 'The interpretation of our health messages within an Islamic perspective added authority to what we were saying and increased the chances that listeners would take notice of what was being said,' explains Roger Williams, the chief executive of the City Centre Primary Care Group who are involved

with the station. 'Radio is a brilliant medium for helping us to do this. It is immediate, you can talk to people in their own homes and get feedback from listeners to the messages we are giving out.'

Interactivity is an important part of the whole RSL and the station has two lines into the studio for people to go on air directly or leave messages with the reception to be read out later.

Programmes on religious and political issues are also popular and studio guests feature local councillors, Muslim MPs and even cricketer and politician Imran Khan talking from Islamabad. 'We get 200 or more calls for these programmes,' says Fazal. 'The response is phenomenal because we do what interests the local community.'

And the community's involvement with the station grows each year with elderly people in their 70s staffing the reception to take calls and see to studio guests, and younger people enthusiastic to make programmes. 'Some of them are so keen they want to make it their career – we've even got one volunteer who's taking 15 days off work to give us technical back-up,' says Fazal. 'We're hoping that through links with local colleges we'll be able to run proper courses for people who want to go into radio professionally.'

However, running the station has its problems. The RSL costs almost £2,500 a year because the station transmits on the highest power available in order to reach as much of the city as possible. And despite its popularity there is no guarantee that they will get a licence. 'We are very popular with our community but every year we have to go through the application not knowing if it's going to be awarded or go to some other group,' Fazal explains.

Fazal believes the radio station has not only helped the Muslim community in a direct way by providing them with important information on health, education and employment, but also indirectly by giving them self-confidence and a clear identity – something the mainstream media do not do.

'The problem with the BBC Asian Network, for example, is that it is still too general. They categorise Asians as one monolithic, homogeneous community which is just not true,' he explains. 'They [ethnic minorities] are already marginalised in society and mainstream media don't cater to their needs so they are further marginalised. Under these circumstances community media have a positive role to integrate them into society and provide a platform to plead and propagate their own issues.'

Although Fazal believes the station is both needed and wanted by the Asian community, he also recognises that it will never be able to become a permanent service. 'There is a need and I know we could do it but the cost of the licence fee is a big problem,' he laments. 'I can't understand why Britain does not do more for community radio. There is very good community radio in Australia, South America and Canada and even our neighbours in France and Germany have a good system. It's time Britain did more for community radio.'

Notes

- 1 Taken from 'Digital Radio – New Services' at www.bbc.co.uk, October 2000.
- 2 For a fuller discussion of the role of the Radio Authority in commercial radio see Chapter 9.
- 3 Information from the Hospital Broadcasting Association web site at www.hbaw.com.
- 4 In June 2000 two defendants were sentenced to four and six months in prison at Southend Crown Court, for operating a pirate radio station that caused interference to Rochester Airport air traffic control. Quoted in *Airflash*, issue 69.
- 5 See Chapter 9 for more details of proposals for 'access radio' made in the Communications White Paper 2000.
- 6 Full details are available in the Radio Authority's *RSLs: Notes for Applicants*. In 2000 the fees ranged from £28 a day for AM, to £80 a day for FM broadcasts above 1W.