

Small Community & Commercial Radio Co-existence in rural, low populated areas

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Community Radio Order Restrictions

The advent of the community radio order was a wonderful new piece of legislation which offered more diversity of programming and freedom of choice to the whole of the UK population, of great benefit to isolated communities in rural locations with limited radio options.... That is provided you didn't live in an area with a small commercial station nearby when, regardless of your community's needs and limited services, you will be banned by a clause which was inserted to protect the small commercial stations sponsorship and income. It is also denying the general public a "freedom of choice" and a "diversity of programming" which for many years has been two of Ofcom's criteria for new services on the basis of the government's own guidelines. A paradox? Whatever "protections" might be upheld after the Ofcom review and advice to the DCMS, surely there must be no outright ban on community radio anywhere in the UK? Or at the very least each case should be allowed a voice of appeal and be judged on its merits.

Who pushed for the restrictions?

The commercial radio companies association (CRCA) were looking after the interests of their member stations and automatically opposed any legislation that could possibly have a detrimental effect on their incomes. This was regardless of any benefits to the general public demonstrated by the Community Media Association (CMA). The CMA had fought long and hard for its members on behalf of the general public to promote this third so-called *separate* tier of radio service. One must pose this question to Members of the government who voted on this bill approving the restrictions... Were they doing so representing the expressed wishes of the general public whom they were elected to serve or was it to satisfy a minority of lobbying shareholders and businessmen who wanted a "damage limitation clause" fearing for their listenerships and incomes? Surely any restriction which denies a community a service which the rest of the country is able and entitled to have, purely on the grounds of private commercial concerns, is against the human rights of the persons so denied. They have not been asked, they have not had a freedom of choice or been offered a diversity of programming to which others across most of the UK are allowed by the Community Radio Order .

Small Commercial Stations?

One could possibly understand restrictions placed to protect a small autonomous station privately owned, working and existing alone in a rural area. But how many are, or how many are in fact part of a larger corporation which owns multiple stations around the country and draws on large resources of staffing to support the small station to minimise their costs and maximise profits for shareholders. In these cases the small non-profit, voluntary run, rural community station is banned in order to protect just a "*small*" commercial interest in a large national company, which has no community loyalties. These do not provide a local service; in fact Warminster's "local" commercial co. no longer mentions the town in its idents, professing a much

larger coverage area by saying “Serving Frome and West Wiltshire”. Ironically “Frome” 6 miles down the road or Westbury 4 miles down the road could have their own full community licences. *Warminster* cannot. Advertising also reflects their wider coverage with very few small businesses from *Warminster* advertising. Again the commercial companies hide behind the protection of the MCA numbers (measured coverage area) which for our local station 3tr is a miserable 18,400 adults (the adult pop of Warminster, the area they were licensed to serve). Whereas, ask their advertisers what 3tr say, and you will get offered a TSA (total service area of 100,000 adults). Now we all understand that MCA is a measured signal strength and TSA is the area they can be heard in and adverts are sold in; so isn't hiding behind the MCA rather petty? If it were TSA, WCR could have a licence! What does signal strength really matter you can either hear it or you can't!

Conflict of programming?

By their very nature, commercial stations provide mass appeal music for mass advertising revenue for the target audiences with disposable income. Community stations exist to promote and preserve local culture, local minority interests and a diverse range of programming, which is not provided by local BBC or commercial stations. Styles of programming are totally different, as are broadcasting practices. This makes community radio stations unique to their own area so that every community station in the UK will sound different - something that cannot be said of commercial stations, which invariably feed networked music around multiple stations after 7pm at night.

Sponsorship and Advertising

If Community Radio could exist without it they probably would, given the time and trouble to administer, but certainly the 50% of income restriction in a small community station like WCR would not damage their local commercial station. Running costs for WCR with voluntary workers could cost £25,000 pa, which would allow £12,500 pa from adverts and sponsors. Since they can, and have raised this in two RSLs per year and the commercial station looks to around £350,000+ per year any effect would be minimal. Given also that WCR advertisers are supporters of the station and that a majority of them are small local businesses who do not, or cannot, afford advertising on the commercial station, there is little doubt that WCR's impact on the financial viability of the smallest commercial station in the UK is perhaps only slightly more than NIL. We cannot prove this conclusively without a year long trial but for the government to have insisted and legislated for a permanent ban without this evidence is denying its electorate freedom of choice.

Listenership

Put quite simply, those who like and listen to commercial radio will continue to do so. Those who want a truly local flavour to the music, news, and a range of minority interests will listen to Community. Those who listen to commercial will not suddenly switch to community. Having a choice will stabilise listener habits over a longer period of time. It may be that commercial stations will have to vary their concept of what people want accordingly, rather than the blinkered approach to programming which their currently protected status encourages. Community stations will have their programming moulded by their communities directly, whereas the commercial station

answers only to the shareholders and owners at present. Why deny the people in these areas the right to choose?

Funding WCR - A small community station

WCR Community radio has existed and grown for over 11 years. Revenue from RSLs these days basically pays for the licences. So how do we exist? Diversity of related services is the key. The community station is a resource not only providing the radio service but other associated media services, which the community use and pay for to support the station. Public address system hire for school sports days, civic events, open-air fun days, theatre shows, church services etc. provides several thousands per year. CD souvenir recording services provide mementoes of all sorts of events, and in addition provide low cost demo discs for local artists. This also yields several thousands per year. Media training for all ages is undertaken at the studios in conjunction with other agencies, that pay for the use of the facilities and the staff. The facilities and services are also available to commercial companies for film and documentary voice over work. Recently, government funding was granted to WCR for carrying out training in the 13 to 19 year old age group. WCR also act as consultants to schools and colleges by advising and building radio studios for them and running training courses not only in the UK but with enquiries from as far afield as Botswana and Uganda .

The current basic annual costs of £10,500 are currently met from the aforementioned services and grants. The additional costs of running on a full licence would more than be covered by the same amount as is accrued by two months of RSL advertising.

The impact on the commercial station of WCR running full time would be negligible both in revenue and listener loss.

Providing a full time service to the wider community of 25,000 population instead of just a few grouped dwellings and hospitals would attract larger funding and would eventually provide part time staffing opportunities.

The benefit would be that those members of the public who feel they are uncatered for would finally have the service they have waited for after 11 years.

Grass Roots inequity

WCR has built a full radio station, the envy of many commercial operations; it has trained numerous presenters; carried out more than a dozen month long RSLs; has national recognition for its work and is also supported financially by its Town Council and has been since it started in 1996. In addition it has had support from businesses and community for over 11 years and now has government funding for training. Yet...**We cannot have a full licence!** At the same time, a few miles down the road..... *WCR is currently advising a nearby school granted a full time community*

*licence, by Ofcom. They confess to having limited financial resources, no infrastructure, no training, no equipment, no experienced personnel, and have only ever carried out one 5-day public broadcast. They have asked for OUR help. **They can have a full Licence!***

We feel that it is imperative that the DCMS be advised that the restrictions are punitive and unfair to large numbers of the UK population and should be scrapped or at the very least this ban should be justified by clear evidence of harm to the commercial stations. ie a proper trial in a banned area.