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Future of Radio

The Future of Radio must focus on the demands of "citizens", generally called listeners, not the self-serving desires of the radio industry.

The 182 pages of OFCOM's Future of Radio appear to cover most aspects, though sadly the bravely commissioned research into illegal broadcasting was not included in the document despite being published virtually simultaneously. It would be reassuring to know that the Future of Radio is not just being decided by vested interests and bureaucrats wishing to maintain the status quo before they move on to their next job.

Licensing

There must be hope for frustrated young broadcasters and listeners for whom piracy is the only way to get on with the radio they enjoy. Incidentally, it is likely that such groups are largely unaware of this consultation. It could determine their future if development is not held back by vested interests, both commercial and political. There will always be the need for experimentation and this should be encouraged by easy on-demand licensing and a "can do" approach, whether it be for Community Radio (as presently defined) or young people wishing to express their ideas.

Research shows that regional and national radio rely on national advertising campaigns while other stations rely principally on local revenue. The Community tier of stations should be able to access this in the same way as local stations.

Licences should be non-transferable and obtained on a simple basis where programme and technical parameters are self-identified. Local radio would be focused on live and up to date content originated in the area served with music policy being entirely up to the operator, while national and regional radio would be regulated on both speech and music content. London has 3 or 4 stations carrying nearly identical music formats, which may explain the loss of *total* commercial audience share to the BBC. In all areas diversity has to be encouraged and a sink or swim approach needs to be taken by OFCOM, with licences being returned if unsuccessful.

Ownership

For local radio to succeed an understanding of small business is needed since all local stations fall into this category. A successful small business builds from the ground up, with prudent budgeting to suit. Virtually all local radio stations, however, have fallen into the hands of large companies on the short-sighted premise that the licence is in safe hands and there may be an economy of scale. The reality is that money is sucked away from the core purpose of the business by shareholder and excessive levels of management. The result is a lack of investment in locally generated programming, creating a grey, centralised, bland sound: many would say we have regional radio pretending to be local. Stations lose proper contact with their audience. They are then deemed to be unprofitable and this is used by radio conglomerates as a negotiating tool with OFCOM.

Efficient Spectrum Use

The radio spectrum - this scarce resource that has been guarded over the decades - has been shamefully wasted, with misinformation from senior regulators based on poor technical knowledge. The frequency cupboard has always been bare! Practices from 30 years ago are still applied and the BBC occupies more than 50% of Band II. A single body needs to be established to allocate the entire broadcast spectrum to its maximum capacity, allowing full utilisation and interference-limited occupation of channels.

Digital Radio

"DABbling" in digits is costly for those who have chosen to run before they could walk and the fanaticism for radio to become digital in hopelessly unrealistic time-scales should be cooled. Digital will evolve rapidly when the right technology is in place and when operators see it appropriate to make the investment. Multiplex delivery systems bypass the very concept of *independent* broadcasting, introducing the unhealthy commercial gatekeeper and thus can never be the only way forward. Obvious gains for digital broadcasting will be in upgrading the AM channels to versions of DRM. There is no need for "bribes" (licence extensions) from technology neutral OFCOM, but there should be quick and easy long term licensing for future digital investment. Putting a date now on the compulsory silencing of analogue broadcasts is foolish, destabilises the industry and confuses the public.

It is admirable that you have called for a consultation. Let us hope that you have the same dedication and enthusiasm in exploiting to the full a medium that arouses so much passion.

Tony Collis
Radio Jackie