

CMFE

COMMUNITY MEDIA FORUM EUROPE

Kiev, 27 October 2011: Regional and Local Media go Digital

Introduction:

The CMFE was founded in 2004. The Community Media sector was not yet represented at the European level, for example at the European Union and Council of Europe. There are thousands of community and not-for-profit broadcasting stations, open channels, minority stations, local radios and TV's, student radio's, web broadcasting, etc. Already 75 members from more than 20 European countries are participating in CMFE.

Problem

My presentation will deal with the following question: *How to facilitate regional and local media, radio and television, in the transition to the digital media era ?*

First I'll describe the situation for radio, then television and present possible solutions.

Radio

Most audiences listen to a relatively limited number of radio stations, which are all present on analogue terrestrial platforms. Listening to Internet radio, live and podcast is increasing. This does not change the listening behaviour drastically: even by way of the Internet the majority of listeners tune in to the most popular radio stations.



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CMFE Office Heliendoorstraat 3 6534 SH Nijmegen The Netherlands Tel: + 31 24 3550559 Mobile: + 31 6 34150581
www.cmfe.eu We prefer mail to be sent electronically to president@cmfe.eu

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But digitalization has advantages: better use of frequency space, better sound quality, more added services, greener (lower power use), better integration with internet (hybrid radio). Wherever the development of radio might lead it should at least keep offering:

- Free access (meaning without a subscription or registration);
- Universal availability in time and location;
- Instant access to live programming (e.g. news and sport);
- Wide functionality and flexibility in the use of radios (e.g. electronic programme guides, associated programme information, recording facilities, etc.);
- The ability to find different programmes easily (e.g. by automatic tuning) and
- A wide variety of radio channels

Much progress has been made with digital radio the last years: The Netherlands have given out digital frequency licenses, Germany has launched a national DAB+ network on the first of August this year. In for example the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway and Sweden digital radio is widely introduced and the listeners' base grows. This progress has been made with one specific digital standard: DAB and recently DAB +.

All this is making terrestrial radio far more spectrum efficient, much less power consuming and offering high quality reception and audio quality.



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But this progress that is being made for national radio sharply contrasts with digitization of regional and, even more, local radio.

The first concern is that regional and local radios are not in any way able to fill up multiplexes of DAB networks. DAB+ multiplexes allow for transmission of 20 programs or more. There are few areas where more than 5 local stations serve a common region. Hence they are confronted with structural underutilization of (and therefore relatively expensive) DAB multiplexes, should they use these.

Furthermore there are no countries so far that have been assigned suitable band III or L-band frequencies for local radio. In most cases areas that can be covered by DAB+ multiplexes are far larger than the area needed to reach local listeners. This poses economic problems both with transmitting in larger areas than needed and with copyright levies that are usually based on the number of potential listeners in an area.

DAB provides an efficient multiplex solution for multiple broadcasters sharing the same coverage area, but is less suitable for individual broadcasters like community stations or single local/regional services.



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There are other solutions for digital radio, as DRM+, iBiquity's HD Radio and RAVIS (Real-time AudioVisual Information System, former AVIS). DRM+ pilots have taken place in the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, France, Brazil, The Netherlands, India and Sri Lanka. And HD Radio is widely used only in the USA and tested in Germany, Switzerland, Romania and Ukraine.

I will concentrate on DRM+ and HD Radio, since RAVIS is not yet widely tested. I'm aware that HD Radio is considered in Ukraine as a serious candidate for digitalization of FM. Still I would like to make the following remarks.

Since DAB is already widely used in Europe, another technology should easily coexist next to this standard. EBU, in a recent document, states: *"There are several ways of transmitting and receiving digital radio today, including digital audio broadcasting, the so-called 'DAB family of standards'. These include the most commonly adopted DAB, DAB+, DMB (Digital Multimedia Broadcasting), DRM and DRM+ (Digital Radio Mondiale)."*

In the same document EBU states: *"DAB provides an efficient multiplex solution for multiple broadcasters sharing the same coverage area, while DRM is suitable for individual broadcasters like community stations or single local/regional services."*



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Some of the advantages of DRM over iBiquity's HD Radio are:

- DRM is an Open source system. Royalty free systems are preferable. Royalties are paid by the transmitter/receiver/chipset manufactures only. Broadcasters don't pay royalties when installing DRM and consumers don't pay when buying a DRM capable receiver. One company for all the broadcasters in the country does not own the rights to the modulation system. DRM (and DAB) are open specifications, while iBiquity's HD Radio specification is partly open but mostly private.
- Universal standard; The lack of a common standard could mean that HD Radios cannot receive DAB and DRM format broadcasts of other countries and vice-versa, and that manufacturers must develop separate products for different countries. Driving through Europe with a digital car radio could become problematic.
- Among the obstacles to solve on the way to adoption of HD Radio Standard are the problems of cross border coordination and the enlargement of bandwidth in a hybrid mode.
- HD Radio as recommended by ITU does not fit in the European frequency roster. DRM does.
- HD Radio is considered to be rigid and spectrum hungry where DRM is more flexible, fitting with the European channel allocation and DAB and DMB.

The DAB and DRM system share the same licensing models. Both systems are openly standardized and their specifications are freely and completely available for all to implement encoder/transmitter and receiver equipment; there is no undisclosed or restricted intellectual property rights (IPR) owned by individual companies and organizations. Broadcasters and receiver manufacturers can rely on the current as well as future availability of concurrent and independent implementations.



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The Australian government concluded just a week ago, 12 October, a preference for DRM and DRM+ above HD Radio to be used to supplement DAB+ services in (some) local and regional areas.

Receivers

All these technologies depend on the availability of receivers. And these receivers become increasingly capable of handling different standards. NXP announced chipsets, supporting all standards: DAB, DAB+, HD Radio and DRM and DRM+. Also Frontier Silicon, and UK based company, already produces these kinds of chipsets.

So in principle many digital radio standards can co exists without bothering the listeners: their radios will easily switch between standards.

The receiver manufacturers have to be persuaded to use these multi standard chips. Or may be even manufacturers should be required by EU regulations to use these chips, as in other areas EU also forces open standards to protect costumers.

Switch off FM ?

Some countries are discussing setting a date for the FM switch off. I hope they mean the switch off of analogue FM. And I hope they will take into account that thousands of regional and local radios still depend on analogue FM and have no future in DAB+. These stations need more time to choose their own digitalization technique.



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Television

Digitalization of TV is a complete different story. There already a switch of analogue broadcasting takes place in 2012. In many European countries analogue transmission has already stopped.

Still, local and regional stations face the same problems as with radio: the chosen standard, DigitalVideoBroadcasting Terrestrial - DVB-t, is developed for large scale broadcasting, with multiplexes only efficient if these serve larger areas. The solution could be to also to plan small scale, low power multiplexes, using the same channels in small areas outside the areas served by the larger multiplexes. In The Netherlands, experiments with this option in 2008, were quite successful. Further trials are urgently needed.

Of course regional and local TV should use also other platforms for digitalization, e.g. cable and Internet. Since viewers are increasingly fragmented among these platforms, TV-stations must use all of these platforms to reach their audiences. This also provides new challenges, as e.g. hybrid television, connected television. In The Netherlands the Dutch association for local broadcasters just announced a test with connected television: six local television stations are currently testing a 'connected TV' application. With this application they can offer services like catch-up TV and interactivity. Streaming to tablets and mobile phones will also be possible.



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Conclusion:

For regional and local radio:

- DRM+ next to DAB+ fits well, certainly in Europe. But multi-platform chips are already available and manufactures of receivers should be forced to build these into their new receivers.
- Analogue FM should not be switched off before there is a solution for regional and local radio.
- Listeners should not be bothered by the technique behind digitalization.

For regional and local television:

- Low power DVB-T should be further tested.
- Regional and local radio should use the possibilities offered by platforms as digital cable and IP-television.

I also want to mention the “Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on the role of community media in promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue” as Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 11 February 2009 of the members states of the Council of Europe, including Ukraine, in where it “Draws attention to the desirability of allocating to community media, to the extent possible, a sufficient number of frequencies, both in analogue and digital environments, and ensuring that community broadcasting media are not disadvantaged after the transition to the digital environment;



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General conclusion:

The digitalization of regional and local broadcasting is still problematic, but must be solved. And these developments also offer new challenges for all stations: new digital and better services for audiences.

Two closing statements:

New technology moreover digitalization is meant to make more possible, not less!!!

New technology should serve media policy, not dictate it!!!

Pieter de Wit
President CMFE



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