

Task and Finish Group on the future outlook for the media in Wales

Response from GTfm, Community Radio Wales

A submission by Terry Mann to the Welsh Government Consultation

Terry's Background (for fuller career details see www.terrymann.co.uk)

Terry is celebrating forty years in British local radio, a medium he clearly believes in! He has worked in all three industry sectors, the BBC (1971-74; 77-80 & 2003-7), Independent Local/Commercial Radio (1974-77 & 1980-2002) and Community Radio (2006-present).

A resident of Swansea, he is currently Station Manager of GTFM in Pontypridd. The first Community station in Wales, GTFM was established in 2002 as the only Welsh participant in the Radio Authority 'Access Radio' Pilot Study. By co-incidence Gtfm's station 'sound' is modelled on the original 1970's locally-focussed style of Wales' first local station 'Swansea Sound', which Terry helped launch in 1974.

After working successfully in London and Southern England he returned to Wales as MD of Swansea Sound 21 years later to establish sister station 'The Wave', which he designed and launched in 1995, doubling the audience reach of the station. He also established Valleys Radio based in Ebbw Vale. After that he worked as a Rajar-interpreting Consultant, helping various stations improve their audience delivery and ending up at BBC Radio Wales prior to joining GTFM in 2006.

Terry has a good grasp of broadcasting technology and project-managed Real Radio's coverage extension west of Swansea, which included locating suitable transmitter sites and negotiating frequencies with Radio Authority engineers. Last year GTFM acted as a local information hub for Digital TV Switchover, helping its listeners (especially the elderly ones) through the process, which included personal re-tuning visits!

My View of Media Issues from a Welsh Perspective

Digital Radio

DAB radio is generally unsuitable for the digital conversion of smaller scale local stations (commercial and community). The main reasons for this are prohibitive transmission costs, unsuitable coverage 'footprints' and the lack of available multiplex capacity in the larger cities – a problem compounded due to continued use of the now obsolete Mpeg 2 coding system. A way needs to be found to re-specify this medium very quickly to allow the introduction of AAC (DAB+/Mpeg 4) coding alongside Mpeg 2, for a transitional period – though the fact several million existing DAB sets would become prematurely redundant is very regrettable.

Nevertheless, the UK government should be encouraged to specify a date after which Ofcom can introduce AAC alongside Mpeg 2 on DAB and the manufacturing industry be obliged to make multi-standard digital radios available which are capable of decoding DAB and DAB+ signals as well as FM. I think these sets should also be able to also decode DRM signals, as well as be software upgradable over the air, like Freeview TV equipment.

Coding 'u' turns are not unknown after-all, evidenced by the fact the specification of Freeview was changed (thankfully) at the (very) last moment to accommodate High Definition broadcasts alongside SD. Otherwise that system would have been largely redundant even before switch-over is completed next year. I think the same applies to DAB.

The DRM digital system, already in use by international broadcasters on Short Wave, allows individual stations to broadcast digitally on existing AM and FM wavebands at much lower

cost than via Band 3 DAB multiplexes. Therefore, DRM might be especially useful in rural Wales. For example if the BBC Radio Wales Medium Wave (AM) sites were modified to broadcast DRM signals, FM quality (mono) reception would instantly become possible in remote valleys too expensive to reach via DAB.

DRM might also eventually allow very small stations like GTFM to operate their own digital transmitters from their existing FM transmission sites, therefore very closely duplicating their FM coverage footprint - especially if some of the FM band is re-allocated for use by low power DRM+ (stereo) transmitters post 2015 when many of the bigger stations migrate to DAB only delivery.

Community Radio

The very low operating costs of this medium, coupled with the very real social benefits of high levels of community involvement/interaction make this an ideal vehicle for widespread deployment in Wales, but only if the Welsh Government (continues to) support it financially, especially as launch funding streams come to an end. For example, despite being very well established and offering the only popular 'mainstream' (broad-appeal) local radio service originated within Rhondda Cynon Taff (the second biggest local authority areas in Wales), GTFM has very nearly been forced to close several times during the past two years due to recession inspired budget cuts, including the unexplained loss of Welsh Government advertising which suddenly stopped a year ago but continues on other media.

As well as continuing to operate its Community Radio Fund grant support scheme towards core station operating costs beyond the initial five-year period therefore, the Welsh Government could also demonstrate its support for Community Radio by automatically placing all its 'public service' radio advertising campaigns on *all* the Community stations in Wales, alongside commercial radio and TV. Advertising charges on community stations are usually only a fraction of those charged by the larger commercial stations so I'd guess that using all nine existing stations would still leave enough cash for commercial radio and TV campaigns.

Other possible discussion topics

Local TV – The apparent UK Govt proposal to use large scale transmitter sites like Wenvoe for these broadcasts may mean that transmission costs are so high there will be little money left to produce 'tidy' looking TV output on any reasonable scale. Budget TV looks far worse than budget radio sounds. So, while local TV is a nice idea, don't let engineers (who might also own all the big transmitters) hold it back.

Commercial Radio - Not all the existing stations are networked from miles away – or even from another country – much of the time. So please encourage the ones who still broadcast 'live' and 'local' Welsh output to continue doing so!

BBC Radio Wales – should this excellent station be encouraged to offer a consistent 'national' service on its Medium Wave, Satellite and Freeview outlets, while developing more regional 'opt-outs' on its FM network (which should be expanded when more frequencies become available), mirrored by the same regional services appearing on local DAB multiplexes as they roll-out. At present there are inconsistencies in this pattern, largely caused by technical considerations which can be overcome with a bit of investment. At present regional output is also confined to split-frequency soccer game coverage, but could easily be expanded to include regional news, weather and travel at peak listening times within the same national programming. For example, while Swansea is still lucky enough to have a commercial radio local news service broadcast from a local newsroom (on Swansea Sound & The Wave), should Radio Wales provide more Cardiff & Newport news on local FM/DAB?

I was asked to prepare no more than 2 sides of A4 – so that's about it for now – except to pose the question: **'Will all existing forms of transmission and reception be replaced by**

a consumer preference for all their media to be delivered via internet powered 'smart' devices within the next decade?

Terry Mann - 26th October 2011.