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Independent Local Radio: How Local?

Seamus White

Introduction

1988 marked a new era in Irish broadcasting history. Up until then independent broadcasting services consisted of unlicensed and unregulated pirate radio stations. The 1988 Radio and Television Act created the Independent Radio and Television Commission, giving it powers to establish and supervise legal and independent local radio. By the end of 1991, twenty one such local stations were in operation. In deciding who would be awarded local radio franchises, the 1988 Act instructed the IRTC to take into consideration a range of criteria. Judging from the guide which the IRTC provided for applicants and the nature of the questioning at the hearings which preceded final selection of franchise holders, it would appear that the criterion relating to 'good economic principles' was regarded as most significant. Indeed most of the questions at the hearings related to the market analysis which prospective candidates were expected to provide. The IRTC's guide was much less concerned with production plans and actual programming. The main stipulation regarding programming in the 1988 Act itself was that twenty per cent of programming be given over to news and current affairs. Regulations regarding impartiality and censorship were to be similar to those covering RTE. While the contracts between the IRTC and the licence-holders allow the former to set out certain rules regarding the quality, range and type of programmes broadcast no such rules have been issued to date. The 1988 Act does mention the desirability of having a diversity of programming, catering for minority and local interests. However such considerations are mentioned as criteria for selecting licencees, but not as regulations to which successful applicants must adhere.

This study considers the degree to which local radio stations in Ireland can justifiably be titled 'local'. In the absence of any meaningful regulations regarding the nature of programmes which these stations would have to broadcast (in order to deserve the title 'local') I have used as my benchmark the aforementioned criteria for selection cited in the 1988 Radio and Television Act. By implication the legislation set out to create a system of local radio which, inter alia, would provide:

- A wide range and type of programming;
- Programmes in the Irish language, particularly for franchise areas which included the Gaeltacht regions;
- Programmes relating to 'Irish Culture';
- Opportunities for Irish talent in music, drama and entertainment;
- A diversity of programmes for a wide range of tastes, including minority;
- A service which was recognizably local and which was supported by the community (presumably in terms of participation, amongst other things).

The Monitoring Exercise

In order to consider the nature of programmes broadcast by local radio and their attempts (if any) to cater for specific needs and interests, the output of three local stations (North West Radio, LM FM and 98FM Dublin) was recorded and analyzed.

Among the three stations North West Radio broadcasts for the least amount of hours per day (07.00-01.00hrs) and since it was the first station to be monitored it was decided that the other two stations be monitored for the same hours on consecutive Mondays. An item by item summary sheet was made for each station's output and programming was then categorized, where possible, into the following types:

1. Music-based Programmes

Each programme was examined with reference to the following:

- a) D.J. continuity, type of music played and origins of records (ie foreign or domestic artists);
- b) Dedications and requests for records;
- c) Meaningful speech, information provided;
- d) Specialist music programmes.

2. Magazine/Feature Programmes

Programmes which are advertised as such often contain a large music content and thus these programmes are examined in much the same way as music-led programming. In addition these programmes are examined in terms of content, structure, range of opinions, depth of research and explanation of issues.

3. News and Current Affairs

The paucity of analysis offered for 98FM's output is a result of the homogeneous nature of that station's programming.

North West Radio

North West Radio was the last of the country's independent local stations to come on air. It commenced broadcasting on 2 November 1990. Based in Sligo, the station has a catchment area encompassing Sligo, North Leitrim and South Donegal. It is the first commercial franchise area where a licence has been awarded to a consortium which includes groups already involved in independent broadcasting. The franchise was originally awarded to Rosses Regional Radio, but was later handed back to the Commission because of Rosses' belief that the venture could not succeed in the medium or long term. The consortium which took over the franchise is partly owned by neighbouring Mid-West Radio. Indeed, the two stations share the same chief executive. Programmes are also shared between the two stations with twelve hours programming coming from the Sligo studios and six from Mid-West. The stations 'split out' for an hour and a half each day to broadcast their own programmes.

Programmes based primarily on music formed just under seventy per cent of the material broadcast on Monday, 29 June. Commercially produced Country and Western and Middle of the Road (MOR) records formed the foundation of most of the daytime music programmes, while much of the evening was taken up with 'specialist' music programmes, including *Pick of the Pops* and *Fleadh Cheol*. The speech content of these programmes consisted primarily of requests and dedications for listeners. Otherwise there were no obvious links made between records, with the exception of the *John Duggan Show* (which contained an interview with a studio guest), and *Fleadh Cheol* (studio guests). Presenters appeared to say the first thing entering their head. The introduction to the *Lyons mid-Morning Show* provides an example of this phenomenon:

Between now and one, there's a lot of good music on the programme, I'm not sure about the mayhem ... there will probably be a bit of madness all right but nevertheless we'll keep you company or do our

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best to keep you company'.

DJs also provided a steady stream of banal comments on records which they played:

Here is a song that will shake the milk in your cornflakes... that's music from 1976 and a great hit it was ... seems like an extended version of that song ...

Occasionally presenters did provide information on local events but overall what the Local Radio Workshop refers to as 'DJ Prattle' predominated. A recurring feature in the day time music programmes was the 'surprise telephone call' to the unsuspecting listener:

Presenter: Is that Miss Ellie? Happy Birthday... how are things?

Listener: Not too bad ...

Presenter: Did you think you'd see the big '80'?

Listener: I did not, it's too old!

Presenter: The older the fiddle, the sweeter the tune! What do you do with yourself? Do you go out for walks?

Listener: I do.

Presenter: Do you live on your own?

Listener: Oh, no ... with Paddy and Willy.

Presenter: And you have a little pension every Friday... puts the Connaught Gold on the table!

By far the most innovative music-based programme appearing on the day in question was *Fleadh Cheol*. Comhaltas Ceoltóirí were invited into studio to put on a live programme of 'traditional music and traditional song'. In all, six guests played or sang eighteen numbers. A detailed 'Event Guide' for traditional music, song and dance was also presented, mentioning events such as summer schools, ceillí, fleadh festivals and Irish dancing classes. Another unique feature of this programme was the use of the cúpla focail.

Two magazine/feature programmes were broadcast by NWR, *Talkabout* and *Farming Matters*. While *Talkabout* was billed as an information/chat-show, most of the ninety minute programme was actually devoted to music. Items which did appear included a fifteen minute pre-recorded discussion between the presenter and four people involved in a local summer project. There was also a 'Health Spot' where a local doctor gave some basic advice for listeners planning to holiday abroad:

Be careful of the water, standards vary... maybe bring along a holiday first aid kit ...

Little research would have been needed prior to both items and at no stage were listeners invited or allowed to make a contribution to discussions. The rest of the speech content of the programme consisted of short references to the weather and sport. While advertised as an information programme for farmers, *Farming Matters* could also be categorized as a current affairs programme. One third of the programme was devoted to a well researched 'question-and-answer' feature on the issue of headage and premium payments and entitlements and applications for such payments. The rest of the programme was taken up with two telephone interviews, one with a local vet and the other with a local opposition T.D. Issues under discussion included proposals for the setting up of a Regional Technical College in Mayo, cattle diseases, the closure of a local meat factory and the Green Paper on Education. Overall, the content of the programme was related directly to issues and problems of intrinsic interest to local people. While the

range of opinions sought was very limited, in terms of depth of research and explanation of issues, *Farming Matters* was quite thorough.

While NWR subscribes to the Ireland Radio News service, taking eleven out of a possible eighteen such bulletins, it also provides its own news service. There are three main news programmes produced in-house (between 7.00am and 7.00pm), lasting for two and a half hours. Local bulletins are also provided at 10.00am and 12.00pm. In relation to the IRN bulletins, it was difficult to identify any consistent criteria for news selection. While topics appeared repeatedly in a string of reports, the order was consistently changed. Indeed some reports which appeared early in the day disappeared in the afternoon, only to re-appear in the evening bulletins. Much of NWR's morning news programme consisted of edited news stories taken from IRN but read out by the local presenter. However, the lunchtime news provided a more detailed account of local news. The use of interviews to accompany local stories was also more noticeable. Local sports news was quite thorough with detailed results of local events, together with descriptions of matches and interviews with players. The evening news programme provided, in some cases, an update on stories carried earlier in the day. For example, earlier news bulletins reported that the Taoiseach had yet to make up his mind on the re-appointment of Ray MacSharry (a native of Sligo), as EC Commissioner. The six o'clock news reported that MacSharry wanted to give up the post and carried an interview with him. Overall, NWR does appear to succeed in combining national news sources with local items to give an adequate news service. However, the station is less successful in terms of relating news items to the daily lives of listeners. Little, if any effort was made to ascertain the views of listeners about issues such as factory and school closures which were reported in the news.

LM FM

LM FM came on the air on 27 August, 1989. The station's franchise area includes Louth and Meath. Programmes are broadcast from studios in Drogheda, Dundalk and Navan.

LM FM begins broadcasting at 7.00am with its breakfast programme *Waking up the North-East*. This programme is based around its two presenters, who, between records and features, discuss 'lifestyle' items lifted from the morning newspapers. Items under discussion on this morning included, amongst other things, plastic surgery for men and Croatian cursing:

Male Presenter: Well, what have you got for us this morning?

Female Presenter: Well, would you consider having plastic surgery done? One clinic says that 50 per cent of its nose jobs are on men ... you can have cheek implants ... on your face that is ... or if you are tired with your pecs you can have a pec implant ...

Male Presenter: So what happens when you get tired, you run out of 'pectoral'?
Ha, Ha.

No obvious links were made between records or between records and features. What listeners heard could justifiably be termed a 'mindless fun approach'. Examples of continuity between records included

If I said you had a beautiful body would you hold it against me (title of record)... at twelve after seven on a Monday morning, too much for me!

With the exception of *Record Review* and *Country and Irish* the other music-led programmes broadcast on LM FM followed a similar pattern of requests and 'surprise phone calls'. However details of local events were occasionally given in a sponsored *Community Diary*. *Country and Irish* can be categorized as a 'specialist' music

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programme in that it concentrated solely on country and western music, both domestic and foreign (the rest of LM FM's musical output was mostly made up of contemporary pop and MOR discs). Much of the programme consisted of a studio discussion on emerging trends in the music business and it provided the first evidence that a presenter was actually interested in the music he played. *Record Review* also provided welcome relief from the earlier deluge of DJ-speak. The programme consisted of a both humorous and critical discussion of the records under review. On Madonna's latest record one guest had the following to say:

Stop this record ... she'll probably do something erotic in the video to help sales ... it's a ridiculous song, totally boring to the end ... you'd go to sleep listening to that ... dreadful ... sad.

The three hour *Ray Stone Programme* was the only programme of the day which attempted to address issues and concerns which might be of direct interest to listeners (other than weather forecasts, music etc.). A studio guest from the local Citizen's Advice Centre dealt with questions from listeners on social welfare entitlements, employment and general rights. A studio discussion, in conjunction with 'Alzheimers Awareness Week' also took place. The discussion centred on the nature of the disease, its symptoms and the problems it caused for sufferers and carers. Meetings and events for the 'Awareness Week' were detailed throughout the remainder of the programme.

LM FM subscribes to the Ireland Radio News, bulletins of which are broadcast on the hour. In addition, the station provides its own local news bulletins at 8.00am and 9.00am together with extended news programmes between 1.30 and 2.00pm (North East To-Day) and between 6.00 and 7.00pm (LM FM Regional News). Almost all local news items were accompanied by interviews. However, while much of the news was presented in terms of conflict, only the views of so-called experts such as politicians, doctors, etc. were sought. The evening news programme did provide a more detailed analysis of issues which had appeared in earlier reports.

98FM (Dublin)

Classic Hits 98FM is licensed to broadcast to Dublin City and County. Its format is 'music-driven adult contemporary', targeting twenty-two to forty-four year olds.

Programmes based on music made up over ninety-five per cent of programming on Monday, 13 July. The speech elements of 98FM's output were confined almost exclusively to promotions for the station in terms of sponsored competitions, concerts, etc. Indeed each time a presenter spoke, he began with the phrase 'Classic Hits 98FM, Dublin's Better Music Mix'. This was related directly to an ongoing competition whereby a listener was 'rewarded' if he or she would answer the phone with the same phrase. On this day there were no winners but in order not to 'discourage' listeners, a recording of a past winner was broadcast on dozens of occasions throughout the day. Listeners were also constantly reminded by each presenter to listen out for a 'key' song:

Key Mania Three ... have you got your key yet ... well every hour we play the key song ... when we play it, if you are the ninth caller on the winning line, we'll organize you with a key which could unlock the door to your very own BMW.

Meaningless jingles such as:

From a classic movie ... to a classic rock song ... 98FM ... the home of classic rock.

98FM's breakfast programme *The Morning Crew* was centred around the chat between two co-presenters. On this occasion they discussed their weekend activities. The presenter of the mid-morning programme announced 98FM's new 'Reaction Line... from the station which listens to its listeners'. That day's topic was the Beef Tribunal,

callers were invited to explain what it was all about. Several minutes later we were informed that no-one had phoned up with any suggestions. The presenter drew several conclusions from the lack of response:

...you don't know what it's about, you don't care ... maybe people over in Leinster House should pay attention to that ...

Subject closed.

In terms of information on local and other events, listeners were informed that '98FM supported the Blackrock Festival and our athletes at the Olympics'. No details on either event or what such support might entail was offered. Features which appeared in the rest of the station's music programmes included, amongst other things, a 'Gig Guide', 'Bed Check' (listeners were asked to name their ideal bed partner), and 'Love Song dedications'. In addition to the constant references to competitions being run by the station and to its own call name, programme presenters concentrated on merely naming off records just played. Seldom did they demonstrate much interest in, or knowledge about the music aired. Comments on records did not go beyond:

I can't dance ... from Genesis ... maybe some dance lessons for the boys.

The only feature programme broadcast on 98FM was an hour long programme, between 10.00 – 11.00pm entitled *Dublin Tonight* with Fr. Michael Cleary. The issue under discussion on this particular evening was the revival of the Christian Churches in the former Soviet Union. The contrast between this programme and the day's other output could not have been greater. While undoubtedly a special interest programme, where the range of views and opinions were quite limited, it did provide an interesting and informative break from that which had come before it. Listeners were also afforded the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the discussion. However, the title *Dublin Tonight* was misleading (on this occasion in any event) in that the programme did not deal with issues of particular relevance to a Dublin audience.

98FM provides its own news service in the form of hourly news bulletins. These lasted an average of four to six minutes. The bulletins at 1.00pm and 6.00pm were slightly longer in length. (Bulletins were also broadcast at 7.30am and 8.30am). In terms of content the station might be said to offer a 'fast food' approach to news. There was little, if any, analysis offered with regard to items broadcast. Every bulletin began with the phrase 'In 98FM news this hour' and the style of what followed suggested that the station was more interested in presenting a packaged four or five minutes of programming and assuring listeners that they were indeed listening to 98FM rather than attempting to inform or enlighten listeners about important news items. With regard to local news, the term seemed a misnomer given the scant attention it received. In most bulletins there was no reference to the capital, and taking the day's news output as a whole there were three items of specifically Dublin news.

Not very local?

All three stations have predominantly music-based programming formats. However, while some attempts are made by NWR and LM FM to cater for music tastes outside of their target age groups, no such attempts are made by 98FM. Indeed, notwithstanding this, it would appear arrogant in the extreme to presume that similar age groups have similar tastes in music. It is also unusual that the IRTC, which (according to legislation) should be striving to create a system of local radio which caters for the widest possible tastes, should allow for specific age targeting formats in the first place. If, as the IRTC contends, the local stations are keeping the programming promises set out in their original applications, then the narrowness of music tastes being catered for, in the case of 98FM, is occurring with the blessing of the IRTC.

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Credit should, however, be given to those stations which attempt to cover more than one musical taste. In the case of NWR, most daytime music is MOR and country; 'pop' music and traditional Irish music tastes are catered for in evening programmes. While most of the music broadcast on LM FM was MOR or contemporary pop, a programme devoted exclusively to 'Country and Irish' music was provided. With regard to pop music, LM FM provided a much wider variety (i.e. music for 'teeny-boppers' not just 'thirtysomethings') than the Dublin station. 98FM broadcast, repeatedly in many cases, a narrow playlist of 'adult contemporary' and album based songs. Listeners with a taste for jazz, classical music, opera or blues would have been disappointed with the output (on the days in question) of the three stations. In terms of commentary on records, programme presenters at 98FM never got away from merely listing off discs just played or in some cases, sarcastic comments about the title of songs. While the amount of 'D.J. Prattle' was quite high on the other two stations, they did have some meaningful discussions on music at some point during the day.

In the case of NWR, one evening programme had a guest artist in studio who discussed both the background to her own music and trends in country music in general. Another programme (of live traditional Irish music) provided biographies of artists included in the broadcast. LM FM also devoted a large part of its 'Country and Irish' programme to a discussion with two guest artists about their own music. The station's *Record Review* programme contained an interesting section on changing musical tastes among the 'post teeny-bop generation'. The opinions expressed about records under review were also in stark contrast to the 'adoring' comments of other station presenters.

Programmes in the Irish language were absent from all three stations. 'Cúpla Focail' did appear on NWR's traditional music programme and in the signing-off words of the continuity announcer. Not one word of Irish appeared on LM FM while the word 'Fáilte' was uttered by Fr. Michael Cleary on his 98FM programme (not even Eamonn Mac Thomáis' 'tríocha solcind' were included on this particular day). While Tommy Marren (Station Manager, NWR) admits that his station should be including more Irish language programming, given that NWR's franchise area in Donegal includes Gaeltacht areas, he is of the belief that very few people are interested in learning the Irish language. He fails to mention those (outside of the Gaeltacht) who might actually be able to speak the language already. (However, to be fair, NWR's schedule did indicate that a two hour weekend traditional music programme is presented bilingually). Jeff O'Brien (Director of Programmes, 98FM) argues that while he does not have a problem with the Irish language if it is done in the right way he does not believe that listeners would be prepared to listen to more than a couple of minutes in Irish. Michael O'Keefe (IRTC Chief Executive) sees the lack of Irish programming as a result of the conflict between minority interests and the commercial nature of stations.

If one takes 'programmes relating to Irish culture' to refer to programmes which contain a distinctly Irish flavour (whether in terms of the arts, music, etc.) such programmes were almost completely absent. Again programmes which did have a distinctly Irish content included NWR's *Fleadh Cheol* and LM FM's *Country and Irish* programme. If one takes the interest which many people in rural Ireland have in attending funerals as a uniquely Irish trait, then the death and funeral announcements broadcast on NWR and LW FM could constitute programmes (or features) relating to Irish culture; such notices are among the most popular features in these stations. One would need to define Irish culture in very bland and homogeneous terms if one considered 98FM's output as 'relating' in anyway to Irish culture.

In terms of opportunities for Irish talent in music, drama and entertainment, O'Keefe judges the station a success given that the industry as a whole has created 650 jobs. However, notwithstanding the contribution which local radio does make to employment levels, the criterion on opportunities for Irish talent would suggest that the 1988 Act had more in mind the degree to which the local radio would and should promote Irish music, Irish talent and Irish drama. Of the one hundred and seventy eight records played on

NWR (on the day and time period of monitoring), fifty were by Irish artists, a rate of approximately twenty eight per cent. LM FM played one hundred and eighty six records, twenty six of which were by Irish artists (14 per cent). 98FM played twelve records by Irish artists out of one hundred and seventy eight records aired on the relevant day (under 7 per cent). NWR's *Fleadh Cheol* and *John Duggan at Home* programmes did concentrate exclusively on Irish records and Irish talent. Both programmes had Irish music artists in studio. These artists were afforded the opportunity to promote their records and their musical talent. Similarly LM FM's *Country and Irish* programme was explicit in its support for Irish artists, two of whom appeared in studio. 98FM's policy on Irish music?

It's a very difficult area ... from time to time we do play an Irish song that we know is not going to be accepted by our listeners ... but we play it just to try and give someone a leg up ... to be seen to be playing Irish music ... you know, in research, they (listeners) say if you keep playing that music [U2's *Achtung Baby*] we will turn off your station.

It is interesting that the only artist named by O'Brien (in relation to a question on opportunities for Irish talent) was U2, the most commercially successful Irish band.

While the three stations do provide opportunities for Irish talent in entertainment, through the employment of programme presenters (that they do in fact entertain is obviously a matter of opinion), opportunities for talent in drama are much less apparent. None of the stations carried any drama features. However, North West Radio does in fact broadcast plays (by amateur drama groups) every winter. Drama groups are given access to studio facilities to record hour long plays. These are broadcast through the winter months (depending on the number of drama groups which apply) culminating in a radio drama awards programme which is broadcast live from a local hotel. Such an innovation is most heartening for those seeking meaningful participation in the output of local stations.

With regard to the provision of a 'diversity of programmes for a wide range of tastes, including minority tastes' none of the three stations performed particularly well. Given that the three stations earmarked between just under 70 per cent to over 95 per cent (98FM came at the higher end of the scale) of their schedules to music-based programmes, the opportunities to provide a diversity of programmes were limited. However, where stations did provide programmes other than music, the result was quite encouraging. As referred to earlier in the text, 98FM's *Dublin Tonight* programme did provide both an interesting and informative hour of radio which contrasted greatly with the other seventeen hours of homogeneous programming monitored. NWR's *Farming Matters* programme was the station's strongest, in terms of meaningful speech content. While essentially designed to inform and advise on farming matters, the programme did not shy away from dealing with topics which were of relevance to a wider audience (issues such as education, employment, etc.). LM FM's sympathetic treatment of Alzheimer's disease in its *Ray Stone* magazine programme was an example of how the stations could successfully provide items other than music. Notwithstanding Fr. Cleary's programme on 98FM, this station provided listeners with the narrowest range of programmes of the three stations. Indeed, on being asked to provide a schedule of the station's daily output the Programme Director replied:

We don't have one ... our programmes are all the same.

The final (specific) criterion for awarding of radio franchises directs the IRTC to have regard to:

The extent to which the service proposed serves recognisably local communities and is supported by the various interests in the community ...

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In judging the adequacy of a station's output in relation to the above criterion I have measured their programme content against the degree to which the stations:

- Allow community groups to participate in programmes;
- Take account of, and broadcast, the views and opinions of the local listenership;
- Deal with issues and problems of particular relevance to the franchise area;
- Publicize local events and undertakings.

In spite of O' Brien's contention that:

We (98FM) with every possibility we get ... want to talk about or give the feeling that we are Dublin ... every chance we get to be 'Dublin' we will be ...

98FM fails miserably to reflect or present a particular 'Dublin' ethos in its programming. While the station relentlessly promotes itself as 'Dublin's Station' it never goes far beyond merely informing listeners about the weather and traffic news. On the day in question, 98FM's 'Community Diary' publicized one event, Quiz Night. We were informed that 98FM was supporting 'the Blackrock Festival'. What the festival, or support for it, entailed, was never divulged. Listener participation was almost exclusively confined to invitations to answer quiz questions (other 'phone-up' items, such as the 'bedcheck' were detailed earlier in the text). There was little reference to Dublin news in news bulletins, except for three crimes which had recently taken place. Issues discussed in *Dublin Tonight* could not be said to have had particular relevance to the area. 'Nothing local about it' – the Local Radio Workshop's assessment of London's local radio stations – could justifiably denote 98FM's output.

Interestingly, the two most successful programmes on NWR, in terms of meeting the criteria of the 1988 Act, were both presented and researched by local community groups: *Fleadh Cheol* (Comhaltas Ceoltóirí) and *Farming Matters* (Sligo branch of the Irish Farmers Association). While the views and opinions of ordinary listeners were not in evidence, issues of direct relevance to the area (school closures, job losses) were discussed with local representatives. Many local events were also signposted throughout the day, along with information as to how listeners could become involved.

There were few examples of direct participation by listeners in LM FM's programmes, but the station did provide air time to local groups and representatives to inform listeners about issues such as the care of sick relatives, social welfare entitlements and local events. Its news coverage also provided some degree of analysis (but only through the use of extracts from interviews with local politicians etc.)

Because 98FM's programming consisted almost exclusively of wall to wall music, fast food news and continuous promotions and reminder of the station name (all accompanied by meaningless continuity), it is quite likely that the positive elements of the other two stations, in terms of variety of programming and reflection of locality have been exaggerated. Indeed, it is important to reiterate that programmes and features (on NWR and LM FM) which did cater for tastes other than those of the target audience, which supported Irish talent or which reflected particularly 'local' concerns, were the exception rather than the rule.

Before the introduction of independent local radio (and notwithstanding the then existence of pirate radio stations) the monopoly position which RTE then enjoyed was much criticized. The 1988 Radio and Television Act set out to break that monopoly by providing for the establishment, amongst other things, of legal local radio stations throughout the State. However, a fact which is often overlooked, particularly by the radio stations themselves, is that most local stations constitute monopolies in their own franchise areas, in terms of their ability to serve (or nor to serve) local concerns. According to Jeff O'Brien:

(98FM) is a business the same as a guy down the road who opens a clothes shop.

If, however, the clothes shop owner sells only one range of clothing another person can come along and open a shop which caters for a wider and more diverse set of tastes. This, however, is not the case in local radio. Local radio stations have, in effect, been awarded licences for fourteen years (a seven year contract which contains an option for renewal for a further seven years). Since many local stations do enjoy this monopoly situation (notwithstanding their competition with national radio) should they not also be required by law to reflect the interests of and provide programming for all groups in their area. Such a move might not be required if the 'up to 100 neighbourhood (community) radio stations and community of interest stations' promised when the 1988 Act was being debated were actually set up. While a community station has recently begun broadcasting in the Dublin area such a development is not envisaged outside the capital (that the capital was in dire need of such a service, as compared with elsewhere, is indeed clear from this study). In the absence of such a development and given the experimental nature of the plan of the new Dublin station, it is imperative that the criteria used in the selection of licencees be enforced as regulations.

In the absence of such a move we might well rejoice the 'second coming' of the pirates.

Note: This article is an abridged version of a dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the M.A. in Film and Television Studies, Dublin City University.

Interviews

Tommy Marren, Station Manager NWR
Jeff O'Brien, Director Of Programmes 98FM
Michael O'Keefe, Chief Executive IRTC

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