

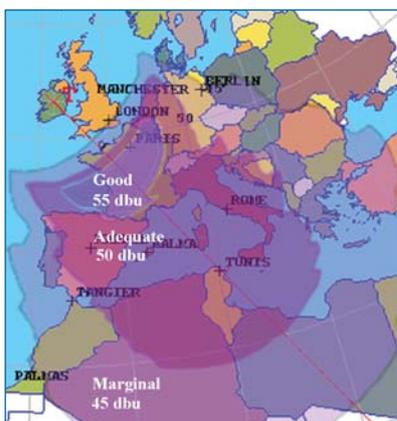


Bringing Irish Radio to Europe

Enda O’Kane offers a proposal for short wave digital transmissions from Athlone.

Low airfares and a standard of living undreamed of by early emigrants provide us with new opportunities, making the Irish a much travelled nation. In a typical year, half of our citizens spend on average 10 days in other EU countries. Home ownership overseas now exceeds 200,000, of which 50,000 are in Spain. On an average day, 140,000 Irish people are outside the State. Some may travel by high-speed ferry and motorway to destinations across Europe – on holiday, business or engaged in freight haulage. Disruption and delays to ferry services in winter, added to by disputes or blockades, is an extra inconvenience for many.

Potential European coverage



During their 10-day absence, these travellers will have contributed more than €2 million in licence fees, for a radio service they cannot, but would like to receive. In addition to this, they pay a tax of €5 million on leaving the State.

Broadcasting our radio service into the heart of Europe would provide a useful information service for these licence payers and would also ensure that our national voice and cultural identity could be heard by fellow Europeans.

In the late 1940s a previous attempt to establish a high-power overseas service failed. However, an unrealised ambition still lingered in the minds of many. It is likely that this dream was shared by the late Michael O’Hehir, then at the peak of his career as a GAA and racing commentator. His prominence allowed him to influence decision makers of the day.

Colleagues from those early days concede that the relay of the All-Ireland Hurling and Football Finals during the mid-1950s was largely due to his enthusiasm. These games were broadcast by Radio Brazzaville in the then French Equatorial Africa.

From the Henry Street Studios in Dublin, on the top floor of the GPO, commentary was carried by landline to Paris and broadcast from Radio Brazzaville on the evening following the actual match.

Scattered emigrants, missionaries across Africa, radio officers at sea – anyone near a radio – shared the atmosphere of Croke Park through the magic of radio.

Soon after the high-power short wave project was abandoned, jamming and propaganda wars were about to bring chaos and an overloading of shortwave channels worldwide. An Irish overseas service would be drowned out by the powerful. Receiver technology was also primitive and non-portable. Today’s radios are paperback book in size, cheap and user friendly. One can enter and store the exact channel and recall it instantly just as on a TV.

World band short wave radio is seeing a renaissance internationally.

A survey in 1999 revealed that 97% of regular business travellers listen to international short wave. One factory in China is frantically producing 300,000 sets per month just to keep up with demand. Grundig

in America reports growth each year on its sales of short wave radios.

As a technology it has matured. Radio now brings to global travellers their own cultural high street. Affordable international travel has arrived and, unlike the emigrants of past decades, those who leave today are absent for short breaks, are net contributors to our economy, and as voters and licence holders they include in their ranks, leaders of industry.

The Iron Curtain's collapse in 1989 brought a cessation to jamming, restored order to the airwaves, and freed up a worldwide network of short wave transmitters. As listeners' expectations for higher quality had increased, it was feared that satellite reception would see a decline in short wave listening.

However, portability, a key element in radio's success, was missing. Requiring a receiving dish, fixed on a south-facing wall, satellite reception also involves listening to radio through a television. Neither is reception possible in moving vehicles, except in the USA, where XM and Sirius satellites serve motorists. Nevertheless, just like World Space satellite, these services are scrambled and must be paid for by the listener. Following RTE's recent ending of short wave transmissions worldwide, listeners are now forced to purchase a special radio, and pay a subscription, to receive RTE Radio from World Space. These cutbacks occur at a time when the economy is booming and we are among the wealthiest nations in the world.

The ending of the Cold War opened up new opportunities for advocates of short wave. Benefiting from the pioneering work of the BBC, Deutsche Welle and others, digital short wave DRM became a reality.

Since its early beginnings in Paris in 1996 other broadcasters have joined the consortium and today more than 100 members, from over 30 countries worldwide, form the powerful Digital Radio Mondiale alliance.

China was an early participant and leading broadcasters now include Radio Luxembourg, Radio France International, Radio Netherlands, Radio Canada, Voice of Russia, Vatican Radio, and Radio Sweden. Radio Luxembourg has returned to the air using digital DRM on 208 metres medium wave backed by the world's third largest media group, Bertelsmann. In addition, Radio Luxembourg is also beaming short wave digital towards the UK and Ireland.

The USA has now joined the consortium with the National Association of Shortwave Broadcasters participating. DRM is now used worldwide by 32 broadcasters and more than 40 hours of English language programmes are broadcast across Europe.

Mass production of receivers using the new DRM standard has commenced. As well as DRM on short, medium and long wave, these receivers cover existing AM and FM bands. With DRM the problem of fading, interference from appliances and other stations, has been solved. DRM short wave is received with ease and a total absence of noise. Difficulties in receiver tuning have now been eliminated. It is only necessary to enter the name of the station and the receiver locks on to the signal without any fuss or further effort. The result is very stable reception of a quality similar to that of FM.

An Irish radio service into the heart of Europe would help fuel our tourism industry and would serve to call back Irish emigrants, as well as inciting visits from those foreign to our country.

As already stated, it would provide a badly needed travel information service to our business community that is otherwise unavailable. The Internet cannot provide a listening experience to people on the move. Neither is the RTE Astra service receivable by motorists, or accessible in hotels and apartments across the EU.

RTE has just upgraded its longwave transmitter to the new DRM standard. RTE's Longwave 252 is the first installation of its type outside of Germany. The new system can now broadcast a clear FM-like sound across the UK and part of continental Europe. It is expected to test in the very near future.

Marketers would have a direct line to Irish listeners both at home and abroad. What is more, satellite services that are currently in use by RTE are vulnerable to external influences and World Space now requires payment of a fee. A digital radio service across Europe would give complete independence, enabling broadcasters to further Irish interests in both programming and advertising.

RTE already owns the critical broadcast infrastructure. For a mere €4 million, the former Athlone medium wave site could be adapted to digital short wave and so provide a service to our citizens across the EU.

Affordable car and portable 'smart' receivers were released last year. Bosch, Panasonic, Roberts, Sangean, Morphy Richards and Visteon were among eight leading brands showcased last autumn at the Berlin and Amsterdam consumer shows.

Sound clips and info see <http://www.drm.org/>



Radio Athlone 1932

The author, Enda O'Kane, is a former RTE engineer on Television Transmitters and latterly as Reception and Investigations Representative. He is active in the research group Irish Overseas Broadcasting and Emigrant Advice Network, having a focus on improving radio links to our emigrants in the digital age. © All rights reserved, Enda O'Kane.