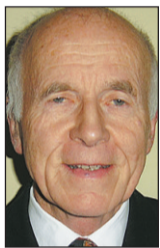


Trusty old AM has edge in terms of availability



Retired RTE staff member **Enda O'Kane**, who worked on transmitters and is now a member of the Emigrant Advice Network, insists that medium-wave radio still has an important role to play in Irish life

ON March 24 RTE will cease its medium-wave service, ending its broadcast of Radio 1 to AM listeners. While other options including FM, long wave and the internet are available for listeners, this move by RTE is premature.

Despite newer technologies coming to the fore, AM radio still has relevance and an important role to play.

Medium wave is adequate for a speech-based service and it provides seamless availability.

It's still enjoyed by many senior citizens, who value it above FM for its reliability and ease of use – while FM provides high fidelity, it is also plagued by reception blackspots.

Senior citizens find AM medium wave easier to tune in, with predictable and stable reception. In addition, medium wave is fitted to most inexpensive radios and in most cars. Long wave is not.

The simplicity of MW is particularly important to those with limited vision – the FM dial is cluttered with stations. MW is also convenient for fishermen and those on the move either in cars, ferries, or on holiday – MW stays on the same spot on the dial.

For drivers, tuning in to FM and retuning as the signal shifts around the country can be a distraction and a factor in car accidents.

Cutting service also contradicts the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement. Parts of Northern Ireland, including the Falls and other parts of Belfast, still rely on medium wave. RTE medium wave and Radio Ulster from Lisnagarvey are traditional cross-border cultural links enjoyed by all. They serve all ages and social groups.

For the past number of years RTE has been running its long and medium-wave transmitters on close to half their allocated power, thus reducing its service to Northern Ireland, Britain and beyond, contrary to custom and practice, as well as the spirit of the recent Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2006 which specifically provided for the broadcast of radio to our emigrant communities.

Has a restructured RTE abandoned its public service responsibility by this action?

There is another important issue – new digital technology will soon render our existing receivers obsolete.

A new technology called DRM has arrived. It can be broadcast over medium, long and short-wave transmitters. It is supported by more than 30

“Has a restructured RTE abandoned its public service responsibility?”

countries and being rolled out across Europe. It is giving digital quality to these frontier-crossing signals and a renaissance to a dying technology.

DRM radios are multi standard and offer benefits similar to those on digital television such as a tuner that displays the station name and the ability to stop the programme, record it and replay it.

RTE has installed a long-wave DRM transmitter on 252kHz. Its FM-like sound was heard across the UK and



■ **WAVE GOODBYE:** Medium wave is convenient for fishermen and those on the move because stations stay on the same spot on the dial

Europe in tests last August.

Since then, however, RTE has been focused on DAB, a digital technology that is considered by many in the industry as out of date.

DRM long wave can deliver RTE in near FM quality across Northern Ireland, the UK and near Europe but in cutting off the medium-wave transmission prematurely, RTE has abandoned a principle which served them well over many years – when a new technical standard is being introduced, it's vital to maintain the existing one during the transition period to allow the public time to switch over.

This was done with the switchover to FM and likewise the transition from black and white to colour television. The principle has not been pursued here. Medium wave should be recognised as an integral tool in the strategy toward digital radio.

Those who purchase a long-wave radio now will find it obsolete when RTE cuts the existing long-wave signal and sends out a digital signal in its place. They will end up having to buy a second radio to continue listening on long wave after this change occurs.

For that reason, RTE must continue with the medium-wave service to give an alternative to long wave until a long-wave digital signal is sent out.

Foreign affairs minister Ahern steps in

By **Valerie Robinson**
Southern Correspondent

THE Republic's foreign affairs minister, Dermot Ahern, has intervened in the controversy surrounding RTE's decision to drop its medium wave transmission. The Louth TD, pictured, who is based in Dundalk, has written to RTE's director general Cathal Goan about the “acute concerns” of people who have contacted him about the matter.



An official in the Department of Foreign Affairs confirmed that Mr Ahern had also expressed his own concerns in the letter about the impact the loss of RTE Radio 1 on medium wave would have on listeners in Northern Ireland. Mr Ahern's representatives broached the subject with Mr Goan during a meeting about other issues last Wednesday.

They said they were told “informally” that RTE had made a “technical decision” and that the station would still be available on long wave 252.

The official said he had been assured by Mr Goan that RTE was “looking at how to remedy the gap” between the station's MW and FM coverage in the north.

He said that “most contemporary cars” would have radios capable of allowing travellers to pick up Radio 1 by “scrolling back” on the AM or FM bands. RTE has yet to reply formally to Mr Ahern's correspondence.

Mr Ahern, who along with Brian Cowen is a front-runner to replace Bertie Ahern as Fianna Fail leader, served as minister for communications, marine and natural resources between 2002 and 2004.

During his term in that department he sanctioned a reform package for public service broadcasting in Ireland and introduced a charter for RTE.

As foreign affairs minister Mr Ahern has played a key role in the Northern Ireland peace process. He has described himself as “an Irish republican” whose main goal is to “live to see the unity of Ireland”.

Air your views



WHAT do you think of RTE's decision to cut its medium-wave radio service from next month?

Contact *The Irish News* by phone, text or email to let us know.

A selection of readers' comments will be printed.

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