

Radio – beyond on-air

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1. Introduction

It's a new media era and it will have a major influence on traditional media including radio. Some say radio is dying altogether because of the rapid emergence of new media services and platforms like podcasting and satellite radio.

Traditional radio should acknowledge that its function essentially as a scheduled broadcast is under a lot of threat. New media technologies are creating competition, providing more for the user experience. They include P2P line sharing, online music clearing houses like iTunes, portable MP3 players, other smart and media phones, and the enormous podcasting wave. How should traditional radio embrace convergence? How should it promote its uniqueness and thematic content? What synergy can be pursued between traditional radio and new media technologies?

2. At the beginning – On-Air

While history recognizes Marconi as the father of wireless communications in 1896, it was Canadian Reginald Aubrey Fessenden who showed the world that it was possible to send audio signals via wireless on 24 Dec 1906. Radio is now more than 100 years old and at this ripe old age, should it be allowed to die gracefully or can it be reincarnated into a new form?

The 1990's saw the birth of digital radio. WorldSpace launched digital satellite radio with the promise of cheap digital receiver and wide coverage of Africa and Asia to bring digital broadcasting within reach of the world's poor. Out of Europe, Eureka-147 DAB was developed to usher in an era of digital terrestrial radio. The march towards digital broadcasting continued into the 2000's with Sirius and XM in the USA heralding commercial satellite-delivered digital radio services offering hundreds of audio channels. On the terrestrial front, HD Radio started in the USA and ISDB-T was launched in Japan. Another major initiative was the development of DRM, a digital broadcasting system that aims to significantly improve the quality of analogue SW and MW services. In the broadcast arena, the development of digital broadcasting is an extremely important one in that, for the first time, it provides a broadcast digital multimedia platform for Radio. Radio can now provide multimedia content in the form of texts, graphics and even video to value add its basic audio service.

A good example of such a service is SmartRadio, a digital service of MediaCorp Radio Singapore Pte Ltd. Launched on 19 Nov 1999, it was the first DAB commercial service in Asia. It comprises 14 audio services with 6 DAB-only stations and 8 FM-simulcast stations. It also carries DLS, a dynamic scrolling text service appearing on the radio receiver screen which provides information like song title, artist's name, traffic and headline news. In addition, there is also a PAD(Programme-Associated Data) and NPAD(Non-Programme Associated Data) service which provides news, traffic, weather, airport flight information, TV guide etc in text and pictures.

3. Radio in cyberspace – On-line

The World-Wide-Web(WWW) provides the first non-broadcast digital platform for Radio. It allows Radio a vital space on the Internet, a phenomenon that first appeared in the late 20th century that has made a tremendous impact to many aspects of human life from learning to communication and business. Beginning in the early 1990's, thousands of radio stations appeared overnight on the Internet. Radio stations everywhere began to create their own websites providing useful information about the stations' personalities, offerings and events and importantly, a new platform to interact with their listeners. The Internet has provided a multimedia extension to Radio to reach out to an exponentially growing number of Internet users world-wide. This helps Radio to arrest the decline in traditional listening that is already being felt in developed radio markets like in the USA and Europe.

4 Radio On-the-go

The telephony world has also undergone tremendous transformation brought about by the digital era and convergence. These developments have allowed telcos to enlarge their business from merely being a means to carry voice communication to now include offering media-rich content. With the advent of 2.5G and 3G digital wireless systems, telcos are now providing text, graphic, audio and video services. This development poses a direct challenge to traditional media company and Radio is not spared. However, it is not all doom and gloom as there are opportunities that the digital mobile platforms can provide to Radio. The mobile phone has today become an indispensable part of one's personal possession and is more than just a gadget for communication. It is now a personal communication, information and entertainment tool that is in the hands of billions of the world's population today and Radio must find ways and means to be present in this very important mobile space.

An example of such a service is Visual Radio, a development of Nokia and HP which allows visual content to be delivered via a telco data network and displayed on mobile phones synchronized with the FM audio broadcast by a radio station. MediaCorp Radio has also launched a Visual Radio service which allows it to offer visual and interactive user experience to its FM radio listeners.

5 Radio On-demand

The Internet has been a major catalyst in changing media consumption habits. It has been predicted by many that the days of scheduled broadcasting where one has to make an appointment with his TV or radio station to catch a certain programme are numbered. The media consumer today wants his media content anytime, anywhere and on any device. Therefore, Radio has to also change with the time and offer an increasing variety of on-demand content. The explosive growth of iPods and MP3 players demands that radio stations do make available music for downloads to these devices. They can do so by partnering music and record labels to offer such service on a commercial basis. Another service that radio stations are well positioned to deliver is Podcast. These could be whole or edited versions of aired programmes or even new programmes that are made available on the station's website. Podcasts have proven to be very popular for many radio stations that have launched them. For example, more than 1 million podcasts are being downloaded from the MediaCorp Radio's website every month. Besides Podcast, radio stations can also offer Vodcast (video equivalent of Podcast) of their activities and promotional events using simple consumer-grade video camcorders and free or inexpensive video editing software.

6 Conclusion

The era of digital technology and convergence has spawned many new media platforms and technologies and has changed media consumption habits and patterns. It cannot be denied

that these developments have posed serious challenges to traditional media organizations including Radio. However, these same developments have also provided new opportunities for Radio to embrace them and introduce new services that fit in very well in the new media landscape. In conclusion, I would like to extract the following quote from Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu which aptly summarises the state of the radio industry today.

“The days of radio as a single, broadcast product, are coming to an end. Through offering consumers a widening scope of ways in which to consume radio content, the radio industry has the potential to boost its revenues significantly.

Preparation will be key:

What is happening is far more than just an explosion of distribution options. Rather, the business model for radio is being rewritten.”

Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu

Technology, Media & Telecommunications Predictions (2006)

[Above paper was delivered during the 2nd Asia-Pacific and Europe Media Dialogue in Bonn, Germany on 3-5 Sep 2007]