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The Great Irish Radio Experiment

Eithné McCarthy

Within the space of six years the number of unlicensed radio stations operating in Ireland has risen from one, to a staggering 54. This figure includes both commercial and community Independent Radio, with the local community-based stations counting for 30 of the total number. No longer is the issue of independent radio just a dwindling flicker on the horizon, which the Government can extinguish with impromptu raids and the confiscation of equipment. Illegal stations now broadcast over the entire country, and politicians are slowly being forced to acknowledge their presence and take appropriate action.

The overriding question is no longer whether independent radio is here to stay — but what form it will take. The commercial stations claim that competition and market forces are the only practical means of determining a successful and popular service. Community stations such as *Kilkenny Community Radio* would argue with equal fervour that local sporting, cultural and religious interests should participate in a community context, with Government subvention if necessary.

New legislation is imminent. Recently appointed Minister with special responsibility for broadcasting, Ted Nealon, is expected to make an announcement shortly which will set a deadline for the Independent Radios to voluntarily cease broadcasting. He intends to "have the necessary Dail Bill circulated in early Autumn", and is hopeful that legislation "enabling effective action to be taken against" the Independents will be passed around September.

There is no doubt that Nealon is in a potentially delicate position. With the vast majority of voting power in the hands of the young people in Ireland, he must keep in mind that they also constitute the muscle of the Independents' audience. On the other hand, having worked in RTE for 17 years, much of his sympathy must lie with the National Broadcasting Service.

Already two bills have been presented to the Dail, but neither of them have been passed. The 1979 *Wireless and Telegraphy Bill* which would provide the clout necessary to take action against the Independent stations and the *Independent Local Radio Authority Bill 1981* which was presented by Albert Reynolds, the then Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. However due to rapid changes of government both of these have been shelved.

The 1981 Bill marked a substantial recognition by the Fianna Fail Government of the right of private individuals to operate Independent Commercial Radio. However in a Coalition context, it is unlikely that with a strong Labour Party influence the 1981 Bill will provide the blueprint for the pending legislation.

The most vocal critics of Independent radio are to



Ted Nealon: preparing legislation

be heard in RTE. Unhappy with the situation created by community or commercial independent radio, they are concerned about a possible *fragmentation* of the present national radio and television network.

They point the finger mainly at the operators of the big commercial stations, accusing them of paying their staff wages which are a long ways short of those required by unions.

Competition may be rife at the moment between the independent commercial stations and Radio 2, their legal counterpart. However, Radio 2 are fighting with one hand tied behind their back, they do not have the flexibility or mobility enjoyed by the independent stations to compete at the same level.

The question remains whether the eventual legislation on independent radio will ultimately see the end of something small or the beginning of something very big. Next stop Satellite Broadcasting?



What They Say

What follows is a broad cross-section of attitudes from bodies and individuals who have either a vested or objective interest in the development of Independent Radio:



Chris Carey Radio Nova KISS FM.

The proprietor of the largest and most lucrative of the unlicensed commercial operations, *Radio Nova* and *KISS FM*, Carey regards his stations as being a "growth industry". He feels that "Ireland has become, by default, a flagship for commercial radio in Europe" and will openly admit to be "proud of something which is revolutionising, not only Ireland, but the whole of Europe".

Carey feels that the Independent commercial stations are "an experiment that is not causing the Government too much embarrassment, and this experiment, like any other, must be reviewed, and will be, soon. I'm sick and tired of hearing about this and that kind of legislation being introduced to deal with us. The fact of the matter is, the Government are just around the corner from us, and if they wanted to, they could close me down today."



Robbie Robinson Sunshine Radio.

The man behind *Sunshine Radio*, Robinson believes that "local radio stations are a natural progression and people relate more easily to local rather than national enterprises". He would welcome legislation, because he feels that "it would put an end to the unprofessional and unscrupulous operators existing at the present time whose only concern is cash in the short term".

He does however believe that there are certain things to be wary of in regard to the passing and introduction of legislation because "RTE are lobbying the Government to push through some form of local radio which will give them (RTE) an opportunity to participate. I believe they don't want that opportunity and that they want to create a vacuum in broadcasting by using the implementation of the Independent Broadcasting Bill, which only legislates for the setting up of an Independent Broadcasting Authority, and they want this bill to run concurrently with the 1979 Wireless Telegraphy Act which would render unlicensed radio illegal. If both run simultaneously they would become law at the same time. The result would be that what is known as unlicensed radio would close down on the same day that the Independent Broadcasting Authority was given finance to establish itself. During the time that it would take to find new locations RTE would reassume monopoly of the air and therefore would have the main lobbying tool in its hands."

RTE: Cathal O'Doherty

Press and Promotions Executive for RTE Radio 2, O'Doherty claims "the European Broadcasting Union is kick-

ing up stink at the present situation in Ireland with regard to the pirates. We're welcoming legislation in relation to radio. The airwaves are supposed to be regulated by the Government".

On the suggestion of keeping the pirates on the air while the IBA is setting itself up: "If there were 5,000 guns operating out there without licences, naturally the Government would call them all in before they decided who were going to get licences." On the owners of the Pirate stations, O'Doherty says that "they're two foreign operators working a loophole in the law. But, the can of worms has to be opened soon".

Ian Wilson

A producer in RTE Radio 2 and a W.U.I. shop steward, Wilson believes that the lack of legislation is aiding and abetting the Independents. "They can do what the hell they like because they're an illegal operation but, because we're a legal station we're tied hand and foot by Government regulations."

Pirate stations pay no royalties to the Performing Rights Society. Radio Nova and Radio Sunshine have both stated that they offered to pay, but, were rebuffed by the PRS on the basis that they could not endorse an illegal enterprise by taking money from it.

However, as far as Ian Wilson is concerned, Nova and Sunshine "offering to pay money to the PRS is like an anti-amendment group offering to give money to the Catholic Church. They know before they offer the money that they are not going to take it — it's just a public relations sham. Our copyright bill each year is £300,000. There is no way that the pirates could survive if they had to pay this as well as union wages."

THE COMMERCIAL STATIONS: Hugh Hardy

The owner of *Radio Carousel* in Dundalk, and three spin-off stations, Hardy believes that the most feasible form that independent radio could take would be "a station with a sound commercial base and community involvement". He is "very confident" about his prospects for procuring a licence. Gerry Gannon of CBC Radio, Clonmel: "we would consider ourselves to be an ideal compromise for local radio rurally".

Al O'Rourke of Royal County Radio, Navan, on the subject of pirate commercial stations like his own getting a licence: "No, why should they, they're

just people availing of the absence of law". He refers to the Dublin-based pirates, like Nova and Sunshine as "Zombie Radio that is doing nothing to promote Irish culture and is not, effectively, providing any social function or service".

Robin Ross, *ABC Radio*, Tramore, on the type of stations that are likely to get licences: "Their licencing guidelines are going to be like the national radio — uneventful".

John Blake, *ERI*, Cork: "RTE has the best of both worlds in that they have two sources of revenue: advertising and licence fees. They are continually jamming our medium wave service in the southern half of Cork which has a potential listenership of 25,000-30,000".

John Murphy, *Bray Local Broadcasting Community Radio*: "We are the only available option for most small towns in Ireland".

William Fitzpatrick, *Laois Community Radio*: "I don't think the power of the transmitter should exceed 1 kilowatt, as that is enough to cover a county which would constitute a community".

Pat Myers, *Tipperary Community Radio*: "Mr Nealon had a meeting with our community council, it lasted forty minutes, and at that the Minister expressed that he was happy to see the good service we were providing for the community, and that our format was very much in keeping with the plans he had for local radio in Ireland".



Terry Leyden TD.

The opposition spokesman for Posts and Telegraphs, Terry Leyden feels that the Government are "dragging their feet through the Dail as regards the issue of Independent Radio at the moment". He finds the present situation "unacceptable".

On the Oppositions position Leyden revealed that they are reviewing the 1981 Bill and will shortly be considering it in a private members Bill in the Dail. He would like to see this getting "a speedy pass through the Dail".



Albert Reynolds TD.

The former Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, who was responsible for the 1981 Bill, Reynolds feels that the "Labour Party is committed to letting RTE run the whole show". He hopes that presenting the reviewed 1981 Bill in private members time to the Dail will have a catalytic effect on the Government's action. "We might flush them out, and bring some action back into the arena".

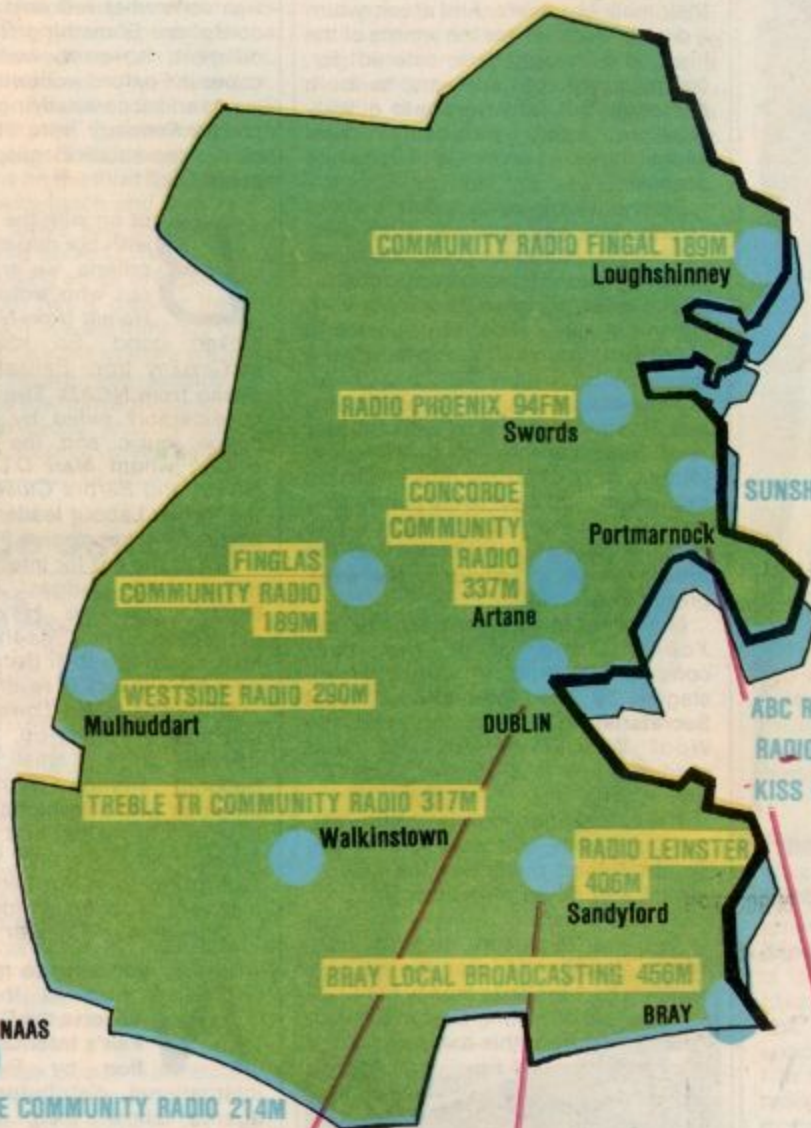


Mary Harney TD.

"Just from going around my constituency, I have gathered that the Independent stations are a lot more popular than either of the RTE radio stations. Personally, I am a great defender of Independent Radio. When I was a Senator, I introduced a motion into the Seanad in 1979 which initiated a debate on the subject, I feel that opposition is healthy in any field."

The Great Irish Radio Experiment





*Closed By P-T
19.5.83*

*Closed
By P-T 18.5.83*

NOVA
88FM/846 AM

Closed 18.5.83

SUNSHINE
539 MW 101 FM

Closed 19.5.83

RADIO LEINSTER
406 AM-93FM

Sandyford, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

Closed 18.5.83