

*Radio has had an interesting year. It was boosted by digital audio uptake and the availability of broadband radio stations. A new standard Digital Radio Mondiale, (DRM) was launched and the growing popularity of podcasting has meant that it continues to occupy an important place in the media landscape.<sup>1</sup>*

## **2005 Radio On!**

*Nigel Barnett*

Far from disappearing radio has earned a new lease of life in the digital era and is moving further and further away from the traditional radio receiver, piggy-backing on other media streams on the way. Take Visual Radio which was launched in Europe in March 2005 by Nokia along with marketing partners Hewlett Packard.<sup>2</sup> Their idea is to deliver text and visual data on FM-enabled mobile phones. The users, while tuned into their favourite Visual Radio station via their phones and listening to a particular song, can receive synchronised news about the artist, promotions, concert dates and of course click to download the track to their phone should the mood take them. The system makes use of existing technologies combined with GPRS or 3G for the data transfer. The extension of Visual Radio to more interactive services is envisaged with on-line voting, competitions and participation in current affairs programmes. They can visualise the graphics associated with news items and find summaries of bulletins or see what has been discussed in talk shows, while all the time being given up-to-date information about traffic and weather conditions. Although this is not particularly innovative because the system uses proven technology and existing radio stations, it is potentially, very attractive. For the radio stations the added value comes from a more active audience which fosters community and higher advertising revenues.

### **Radiotime**

With so many radio stations available on the Internet and elsewhere, a radio equivalent of TVs Electronic Programme Guide (EPG) has become essential. One answer is Radiotime which was launched in 2004 and now lists 35,000 radio stations and 18,000 programmes. As well as browsing the recommended radio stations it provides extensive search tools. A separate radio player will let you choose your listening format and there is even a pay service where you can schedule your listening and record programmes onto your PC or pod device. By associating Radiotime with a USB FM/AM receiver you can also access and record local FM/AM radio stations that are not streamed on the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the technical issue see [http://www.deutsches-drm-forum.de/IFA\\_Symp\\_BBC.pdf](http://www.deutsches-drm-forum.de/IFA_Symp_BBC.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.visualradio.com/>

<sup>3</sup> For more details see <http://www.radiotime.com>

There are advantages for the advertisers as well, who are able to tailor marketing messages more precisely and effectively. For the phone operators who are suffering from the slow uptake of data services despite the investment, any business that stimulates data downloads is welcome.

### The other DRM

Home and car receivers offering Digital Radio Mondiale (DRM) capability, were launched in 2005. This rather strangely named standard is, to quote the official web site, “*the world's only, non-proprietary digital radio system for short-wave, AM/medium-wave and long-wave.*”<sup>4</sup> Its main selling point is its ability to broadcast FM quality sound but over the frequencies and distances of AM; with, because of its digital nature, the added capability of sending, text, images and data casts. Do we need another type of digital radio transmission standard in parallel to Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) and the Internet? Perhaps, is the answer. DRM does have one or two things in its favour. It can be broadcast from existing, slightly modified, AM transmitters and it is an open source system, both of which reduce investment to a minimum. Not only that, analogue and digital signals can be broadcast at the same time and potentially it will allow broadcasters to share slots and increase digital coverage of rural areas. DRM has some powerful backers; both broadcasters and manufacturers like the format and a number of tests are going on around the world.

It remains to be seen however whether customers, who care little for how a service is delivered, will adopt the new format. In the United Kingdom for example some listeners are only just getting used to DAB. In 2005 there was exceptional growth, sales of DAB receivers were up 257% on the previous year and according to RAJAR, the radio audience measurement company while listening through DAB radio rose by 167% and overtook Internet and Digital TV radio listeners for the first time. UK listeners seem to like the choice that new DAB radio stations like *Planet Rock*, *Life* and *Primetime* offer.

This trend is not being copied elsewhere in Europe, Finland has already dropped it, and in December 2005 Sweden's government announced that that it would stop funding DAB and it is almost impossible to find a DAB receiver in France outside of specialist shops, because opposition from the major broadcasters has not encouraged its development. For many commentators DAB uses outdated technology and, unless bit rates are high, worse quality than FM, so why adopt it? Competition from Digital Video Broadcasting DVB via set top boxes offer radio programmes and many more homes are now equipped than at this time last year, so why not invest more in these and on Internet delivery, runs the argument of detractors. Nevertheless it seems that people still want to

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.drm.org/system/technicalaspect.php>

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listen to the radio wherever they are and want the variety that digital radio can provide along with the ability to schedule their listening.

## I am a Gnome and I live in ... your kitchen?

Aware of the growing numbers of digital radio listeners Sky digital, which offers its subscribers more than 100 radio stations over the satellite via their *digibox*, launched a portable, rechargeable, hardware device called the Gnome in October 2005. Basically it is a digital radio receiver and remote control which manages the *digibox* and lets you listen to the digital stations at distances of up to 30 metres from the set top box, so it can be used from any room in the house. Not only that, it will also tell you which TV channel is being accessed elsewhere in the home!

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