

Comment – How local is local radio?

I'm a retired local radio journalist living in Edinburgh.

In the 90s I worked in Suffolk where there was a lively local radio scene. Even today there is a BBC station for the whole county and, at various times, commercial stations in Ipswich, Lowestoft, Felixstowe and in the west of Suffolk. The population of the county of Suffolk (730,000) is a bit bigger than the city of Edinburgh (507,000) but the variety of local radio is much greater than these proportions would suggest.



As I tune around the FM, AM and DAB bands here I remain baffled about the lack of local stations in this vibrant city, which is so rich in culture and is the political capital of Scotland.

And it is going to get worse under proposals from the UK regulator OFCOM. (broadcasting policy is NOT devolved)

Listeners do not always notice this, but a radio station which appears to be local can in fact have many of its programmes and news bulletins created in broadcast centres in other cities. There are all sorts of commercial pressures driving

this absentee broadcasting, not least from totally unregulated audio entertainment delivered over the internet.

But before giving in to these pressures, there is a public policy question to be asked. How do we balance the shareholder's desire to extract a profit from radio broadcasting with the benefits to ordinary people of having a healthy range of local news, entertainment and information free to air in their city.

For example, in defining local news, OFCOM say that a radio station should have the resources to 'be able to react on air to major local events in a timely manner'. The electronic juke box station, with its pre-recorded presenter voice tracks, is not allowed by OFCOM to carry on regardless if there is some major disaster happening in Edinburgh. A genuine locally staffed and locally owned station would of course react immediately if some calamity struck the city.

The mechanism by which OFCOM restrains the relentless de-localising of radio is called the 'Approved Area'. Within these OFCOM defined regions, a radio station is local enough, as long as it produces a minimum amount of its output in the same general area where the listeners live. If a station's main production effort comes from outside its 'Approved Area' then it will be in danger of losing its licence.

So here's the rub, at the moment OFCOM have an 'Approved Area' for Glasgow and SW Scotland and a separate one for Edinburgh and the Borders. OFCOM want to merge these into one 'Approved Area' to be called South of Scotland. From an Edinburgh point of view this removes the last line of defence against the complete concentration of media in Glasgow. Does Edinburgh want to be a satellite of Glasgow in its radio news and entertainment services?

The commercial radio trade body, Radiocentre, is all for it. They know it will enable stations to co-locate or share local

programming across larger areas than at present. Siobhan Kenny, Radiocentre CEO, says: "Radio stations need to be able to address and embrace technological change, not be shackled to an outdated regulatory system. Once enacted these changes will help unlock the potential of commercial radio, giving stations greater flexibility in how they operate and the ability to provide an even better service for listeners."

Just how a presenter or journalist in Glasgow can give a better service to listeners in Edinburgh is a puzzle.

Public consultation on the plans is open until 3 August 2018.

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/115113/consultation-localness-radio.pdf