Shortwave in the 21st Century – does it belong?

Bryan Coombes, Director of Broadcast for VT Communications, looks at the future of shortwave radio

Bryan Coombes

In the exciting age of podcasts, video-on-demand, Internet radio and a multitude of hand held devices that integrate numerous functions including cameras, music players and even car keys, is there really a future for the traditional, fairly low sound quality shortwave radio?

Most major international public broadcasters have announced reductions in shortwave broadcast hours over recent years. Industry experts are quick to make bold predictions about its usefulness for today's technologically sophisticated broadcasters, leaving it in the hands of a few enthusiastic hobbyists. If you believe the headlines then it would be easy to assume that it has already been given the last rites and is all set to become a fond memory in the museum of international broadcasting.

To arrive at this conclusion is, I believe, an oversimplified and naive mistake.

Since 11 March 1927 when PCJ (now known as Radio Netherlands) broadcast from the Netherlands to Indonesia, the ability to broadcast into a country thousands of kilometres away became a reality. This led to many organisations producing programmes to go on air in multiple languages, all around the world.

For whatever reason; political, educational, religious or ideological, there was a way of reaching an audience many thousands of kilometres away, sometimes in an area where such content would be censored. And from the audience perspective, shortwave sets became readily available, relatively affordable and easy to use. Today there are literally billions of shortwave receivers all round the world.

The main problem with shortwave is the audio quality. Even under ideal conditions most would agree that shortwave doesn't sound as clear as domestic stations, and cannot compare to an FM signal in terms of quality. Additionally, 'ideal broadcast conditions' are also a rarity. Interference can come from various sources (atmospheric disturbances, electrical interference from domestic appliances such as TV sets) and the need to change frequency at certain times of the day and/or season means that audiences need a certain level of technical understanding in order to receive a signal.

So, in some parts of the world such as North America or Western Europe, shortwave gradually lost out to higher quality, easily accessible ways of listening (and indeed, viewing). FM networks, Internet, direct-to-home, satellite, mobile phones to name but a few have all become available platforms, meaning international broadcasters have had to make choices about the most effective ways to reach their audiences. Not surprisingly in a world of limited budgets, shortwave broadcast services were reduced and largely stopped to these parts of the world.

However, the rest of the world faces different challenges to these developed countries. Some of the newer technologies have grown at different rates in other parts of the world. For instance, some parts of Africa have sophisticated mobile phone networks and handsets easily available, and others don't. It is all so easy to generalise, but the reality is that within many Indian and Asian countries there is an enormous range of ways that audiences can receive their programmes from abroad.

And here's my point. Shortwave broadcasting still accounts for a huge proportion of international audiences globally. I am forever reading articles about the imminent end of shortwave, but the facts just don't support these claims. Recently published figures by the BBC World Service reveal that of its 182 million audience, 105 million are shortwave listeners.

Shortwave has an important role to play complementing all the newer technologies. Different platforms should

not be seen as competing with one another for audience. It's about making sure your programming is available on the most appropriate platform that is accessible by your audience at the right time. Broadcasters can simply offer audiences the same content on a range of complimentary platforms.

So today the job of the broadcaster has gone beyond making compelling content for its audience. The audience has more choice and is more sophisticated in how it accesses content. It is no longer realistic to think of one country as a 'target audience', as that audience is segmented into multiple groups, all with different interests and different ways of accessing or receiving the programmes. Eighteen-to-24 year olds may have different interests to 50-60 year olds. People in a city may have access to computers, whereas people in a rural village won't. Some people listen whilst on the move, some don't. The permutations are endless and continually changing. Changes to political regimes in a country can mean that access to key communications and broadcast infrastructure, such as FM or mobile networks, can be blocked quickly. Sometimes the infrastructure is destroyed, either deliberately or through natural disasters such as flooding or earthquakes.

This is why it is important to consider the range of technologies that are available at any one point in time, in order for the broadcaster to reach their target audience. At eutsche Welle's Global Media Forum in Bonn, Germany earlier this year, VT Communications launched a new combination of capabilities to enable broadcasters to re-establish communications inside areas struck by a disaster. From the ability to get shortwave messages into the area within 24 hours, to providing temporary on the ground production, communication and local broadcasting facilities as soon as access is possible, right through to providing mobile platforms or permanent infrastructure as re-building begins. These solutions ensure that the link between the broadcaster and their audience is available whatever the conditions or circumstances.

With a 75 year heritage in international broadcasting, VT Communications understand the importance of shortwave and we remain committed to its future, continually investing in equipment and resources to ensure the longevity of the platform. We were delighted to have sponsored the joint HFCC/ABU/ASBU co-ordination conference earlier this year in Kuala Lumpur. The group co-ordinates transmission schedules of about 60 organisations from more than 30 countries. They represent about 75 to 80 percent of the global output of shortwave broadcasting. It is important to keep the industry traditions and policies that have worked so well over the years going, as well as investing in new resources so that shortwave continues to be available to play a major role in years to come, both in the analogue and the exciting world that DRM will open up to broadcasters around the world.

However, at VT Communications we also recognise and welcome the exciting opportunities that newer technologies offer for broadcasters in their challenge to build closer and better relationships with their audience. That is why we have invested nearly £2.5 million (US$4.9 million) in a state-of-the-art Global Media Network and Media Management Centre, so the broadcaster can take advantage of these multiple delivery platforms, without having to invest heavily in the new technology and resources to operate.

We believe that these newer technologies and services all have their part to play in the challenge to reach ever changing audiences across the globe, which is why we are able to offer a 'one stop shop' for the broadcaster from traditional to new and emerging technologies. And in answer to the original question – although its role may have changed over the years, at VT Communications we absolutely believe shortwave belongs in the 21st Century! □

***Rukmin Wijemanne**, one of the ABU's longest-serving employees, will retire from the Secretariat on 25 September after 15 years' service. Rukmin talks to ABU News about his career with the Union and the changes in information technology that he has been a part of.*

Q: What are the key challenges that you've faced in the past 15 years you've been with the ABU?

RW:Back then, Sharad Sadhu (Director, Technical Department) and I did most things on paper and the typewriter as there was hardly any technology. When I joined in Oct 1993, I asked the then Secretary-General Hugh Leonard for a computer and he loaned me his old laptop and a bubble jet printer. That year for the first time in the ABU, the technical proceedings were prepared partly using this computer.

With regard to serving our members a challenge we face even now is finding out what they need and then organising activities for them. Our members are non-homogenous and different categories of members had their own needs. Thus we had to cater to their needs and adapt to the changes.

Q: Of all the projects which you have undertaken during your tenure here, is there one that you would regard as the most significant?

RW:We introduced on-line training from around 1996, three years after I came into the department. This was conducted with the collaboration of the Development Sector of the ITU, in probably one of the first such activities in the world. This technology was later developed further and we launched the Virtual Learning Centre (which later became the Media Learning Centre) in 2002. Several courses were conducted via this platform.

Rukmin Wijemanne with a 'Radio-in-a-box'

Sharad and I also introduced many other activities in the form of workshops and seminars. One deviation from the norm was the Radio-in-a-box, which attracted significant interest around the world. The genesis of this was a request from UNESCO. I would say that is my legacy at ABU. 'Radio-in-a-box' introduced the manufacturing aspect to the ABU.

Q: Is there a possibility of you continuing to work in the broadcasting industry considering your long involvement with ABU technical activities?

RW:I have some things in my mind and certainly I will be in touch with the industry. I have a few things planned.

Q: In a few words how has your experience been at the ABU?

RW:I have had a rewarding experience at the ABU. I came to know many people from around the world.

It is nice to know our members appreciate our work we have done for them and to see that they are growing in the field of technology. It's a good feeling to know that my 15 years in the ABU have helped many members grow and I hope to always be in touch with the ABU after this. □

ABU CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Events of interest to the ABU and its members in 2008 and 2009

SEPTEMBER		
1-19	DW/ABU training workshop on TV Studio Planning	Kuala Lumpur
11-16	IBC 2008	Amsterdam
15-19	TV Documentary Screening, Exchange & Workshop	Kuala Lumpur
OCTOBER		
8-10	PBI Conference	Arles
13-17	MIPCOM	Cannes
14-19	ASEAN Golden Melodies Festival	Ho Chi Minh City
22-28	Japan Prize 2008 International Contest for Educational Media	Tokyo
23-25	TRT Turquoise (radio competition)	Antalya
27-31	CASBAA Convention	Hong Kong
NOVEMBER		
3-4	IIC Annual Conference	Hong Kong
5-9	Indonesian Broadcast and Multimedia Show	Jakarta
19-25	45th ABU General Assembly & Associated Meetings	Bali
DECEMBER		
2-4	3rd Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction	Bali
3-6	Internet Governance Forum	Hyderabad
JANUARY 2009		
9-11	ASBU General Assembly	Jeddah
TBA	DW-ABU Seminar on Technical Planning	Kuala Lumpur
FEBRUARY		
10-13	CBA Regional Conference	Tonga
23-25	BES Expo	New Delhi
MARCH		
3-4	CabSat Broadcasting Conference	Dubai
10-13	ABU Digital Broadcasting Symposium 2009	Kuala Lumpur
MAY		
5-6	ABU Administrative Council meeting	Paro
25-27	Asia Media Summit	Macau
JUNE		
25-26	EBU General Assembly	Copenhagen
JULY		
20-23	AIBD General Conference	Nadi
AUGUST		
6-8	ABU AIDS Workshop	Bali
9-13	9th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific	Bali
OCTOBER		
5-6	Asia-Europe Media Dialogue	Amsterdam
7-13	46th ABU General Assembly & Associated Meetings	Ulaanbaatar

Please note that the ABU Secretariat will be closed on the following Malaysian public holidays

1-2 October 2008	Hari Raya Puasa
27 October	Deepavali
8 December	Hari Raya Qurban
25 December	Christmas Day
29 December	Awal Muharram (Maal Hijrah)
1 January 2009	New Year's Day
26-27 January	Chinese New Year
1 February	Federal Territory Day
8 February	Thaipusam
9 March	Prophet Muhammad's Birthday

ABU News
3rd Quarter 2008
Vol. 27 No. 3

Published four times a year by the **Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union**

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Printed by **Tan Check Siong**
32-3A-1, 4th Floor, Jalan 1/116B,
Sri Desa Entrepreneurs Park,
Off Jalan Kuchai Lama,
58200 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

PP 4408/2/2008
ISSN 0127-4902

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