This is a repository copy of *The failure of a 'success story': digital radio policy in the UK*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/82580/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

The failure of a 'success story': digital radio policy in the UK

Stephen Lax, School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, UK

Digital radio continues to make steady progress in a number of countries throughout the world, but it is in Europe that most growth has been experienced. In a handful of countries (Denmark, Norway, UK) progress has been such that plans have been discussed for a switchover from analogue provision (AM and FM) to digital, although by mid-2014 no decisions to do so had actually been taken. In fact, in spite of these few 'success stories', in most countries and in most regions of the world, the development of digital radio broadcast systems has been slower than most industry insiders, and some governments, had anticipated. Nevertheless, digital radio remains high on the agendas of broadcasters and regulators who see it as a natural, logical development of broadcast radio. For if almost all other areas of media and communications consumption have migrated to digital, why not radio? Consumer adoption of digital replacements of analogue technology began in the 1980s with the launch of the compact disc, continuing in the early 1990s with digital photographic cameras and the DVD displacing analogue videotape. Most recently, and most closely related to radio, is the completion of digital *television* switchover in a large number of countries, enabling the ending of analogue terrestrial broadcasting and freeing up spectrum for other uses.

Thus, radio stands alone as continuing to be dominated by transmission of analogue signals and reception on analogue receivers. In this article I will review the current state of digital radio development and consider the reasons why it appears to have bucked the analogue-to-digital trend. In particular, I will consider the various policy decisions that have sought to promote its growth and seek to locate digital radio within the wider media and communications policy context.

Radio and the digital age

The first point is to reinforce the observation, made elsewhere in this issue, that radio continues to be a popular medium, one that has survived what might be seen as the competition from alternative, now digitalised, audio and audiovisual technologies. Listening figures remain high in Europe, as in other parts of the world: for example, weekly reach remains over 90 per cent in many European countries and daily listening hours exceed three

and sometimes four hours (EBU 2011a: 5-6). Nevertheless total radio listening hours are in slow decline, so that in the UK, while reach remained more-or-less unchanged between 2008 and 2013, during that time weekly listening hours per person declined by around 4 per cent (from 22.4 to 21.5) across all age groups, and notably more so, by 13%, amongst younger listeners (Ofcom 2014a: 234-5). This reflects a longer term decline, albeit a steady one that does not suggest that radio faces imminent collapse, but does reinforce the idea that radio's future must somehow be different. For many, that means that radio must become digital.

The European Broadcasting Union, which represents public service broadcasters across the continent, states categorically that, 'Digital broadcast radio is key to radio's future. Radio will have an uncertain future if it remains an analogue medium without the opportunity to evolve with technology' (EBU 2011b: 1). It recommends publishing 'target dates' for switchover as a way of speeding up take up of digital radio (EBU 2013). Setting dates has been part of digital radio policy in a few countries where digital radio is established. For example, the UK, Norway and Denmark are the leading European countries in digital radio and each has stated an intention to switch from analogue to digital broadcast radio. In each case digital switchover thresholds have been set in terms of the geographical availability of digital radio signals and the level of radio listening via digital platforms. While they have not yet been met in any of these countries, in each expectations have been expressed either by government or industry that switchover may take place in the next few years. The UK's switchover criteria are typical: before any switch is announced, 50 per cent of all radio listening must be via a digital platform; and national DAB coverage (DAB is the terrestrial broadcast platform) should be comparable to FM, while local DAB should reach 90 per cent of the population and all major roads (DCMS 2010: 2). In 2010 the UK government declared December 2013 as a possible date by which the thresholds would be met but, subsequently, announced in that month that listening levels remained too low and switchover would be postponed: in mid-2014, just over one third of UK radio listening took place via one or other digital platform, a share that was unchanged from one year earlier, and so while the UK, alongside Norway and Denmark, have intentions to switchover, there remains a significant gap between the rhetoric and exhortation for a transition to digital radio and the reality of listeners' habits.

The growth of digital radio in the UK has been slow but steady and, as noted, is considered to represent the most advanced state of digital radio in terms of the number of listeners, number of stations and availability of digital signals (World DMB 2014). Second quarter figures for

June 2014 show that 51 per cent of radio listeners listen each week on one or other digital platform (including 34 per cent on a DAB receiver; the remainder predominantly via digital TV or online); 37 per cent of all radio listening is via a digital platform (24 per cent via DAB) while 49 per cent of adults have a DAB receiver at home (Rajar 2014). Described in some quarters of the industry as a 'success story' (Abramsky, quoted in Plunkett 2008) it is instructive to examine the process by which digital radio has grown in this country. Some of the background to this development has been described elsewhere (Jauert et al. 2010; Lax 2011) but more recent developments offer new perspectives on the relationship between the radio industry and government policy.

1995-2003: beginning digital radio

The UK government included radio in its digital broadcasting policy as early as 1995. A White Paper, a prelude to the 1996 Broadcasting Act, laid out plans for a nationwide digital radio service based on the newly-launched terrestrial Digital Audio Broadcast (DAB) system (DNH 1995). While 'digital radio' included the prospect of radio stations being received over digital television services and via the internet, it was recognised that broadcast radio, delivered over a network of terrestrial transmitters, was likely to remain the most effective means of distributing radio – for example, neither digital television nor the internet had the potential then for mobile reception, in cars or on portable radios. Thus 'digital radio' meant a digitised version of the existing analogue broadcast system. Although the DAB system had been developed with the potential for satellite as well as terrestrial delivery, most countries considering the adoption of DAB did so on the basis that it would offer an eventual replacement for terrestrial broadcasting.

In common with most other European countries it was expected that the roll out of digital radio would be led by the public service broadcaster. The launch of DAB broadcasts in the UK, in September 1995, consisted of BBC transmissions from a few selected transmitters across the country. Similarly, SR in Sweden and NRK in Norway began transmitting simulcasts of their existing stations on the DAB system. At that time, no commercial broadcasters began DAB transmissions, but the UK legislation provided for commercial radio to join the BBC on DAB, indeed enabled the expansion of commercial radio. While the BBC was given control of its own multiplex (the transmission channel which can carry around ten radio stations at any one time) a second multiplex was to be operated by a commercial

organisation to carry commercial radio stations across the UK. While, on analogue radio, commercial radio stations were mostly local, with just one national FM station and two national AM stations, DAB offered the prospect of ten or so national commercial stations all at FM quality or better. (The question of sound quality of DAB broadcasts is contested and not addressed here, but see Howard (2009: 3) or Lax (2009: 117-8). For now, I state only that it was *anticipated* then that the quality would be at least as good as FM.) Additional local DAB multiplexes would also be operated entirely by commercial companies and were expected to carry large numbers of local commercial radio stations, replicating the arrangements on analogue radio. (These commercial operators were also obliged to carry BBC local stations, where they existed.)

The involvement of commercial radio companies from the outset in planning for digital radio was unusual – in other countries, only public service radio operated digital transmissions (Jauert et al. 2010). This may be explained by the particular origins of independent radio in the UK: when independent radio was first authorised in the 1970s, it carried a number of public service obligations and thus had a rather unusual hybrid public/commercial status (to such an extent that it was represented at the EBU, normally the preserve of fully public service broadcasters). A former Chief Executive of the Radio Authority, which regulated commercial radio and became responsible for implementing digital radio policy, suggests this meant that there existed within the sector a general, altruistic interest in radio developments, including technology, which was still present by the 1990s, even though many of the public service requirements had been dropped as 'independent radio' became 'commercial radio'. He notes that the commercial radio organisation, the Association of Independent Radio Companies (AIRC), had indeed established its own DAB committee as early as 1991. Stoller nevertheless describes the AIRC's view as strongly conditioned by the commercial interests of its radio company members: it was keen that it should do no more than simulcast existing stations on any DAB service rather than be obliged to launch new stations (Stoller 2012: 152).

Thus, commercial radio was to be included in the early development of digital radio. However, the DAB system did not accommodate commercial radio as readily as its public service counterpart. DAB carries stations in groups of five to ten, known as ensembles or multiplexes, thus quite differently from analogue radio (in which each station has its own unique frequency). Like most public service broadcasters, the BBC ran a suite of radio

stations, Radios 1 to 5 which, complemented by additional existing BBC stations that were not national services but nevertheless offered full time broadcasting (BBC World Service and BBC Asian Network) enabled the BBC to fill its multiplex and offer additional content at minimal cost. In contrast, the commercial radio companies mostly operated single analogue stations operating over limited local areas. Although it was possible to configure DAB multiplex transmissions to map onto local radio coverage areas, there was limited flexibility and in many cases commercial stations, particularly the smaller stations, could not find a suitable multiplex on which to be carried. For the BBC, then, digital radio might be adopted without great difficulty, a reasonably unproblematic engineering development which brought potential benefits to listeners, and its Managing Director of Radio, Liz Forgan, expressed enthusiastic support from the outset (quoted in Williams 1995, for example). However, with its particular organisational structure, it was not so obviously straightforward for the commercial radio sector.

Further, by the mid-1990s, commercial radio was in the midst of a two-decade phase of dramatic expansion. The number of commercial stations had tripled in ten years and in 1995, the year that DAB launched, commercial radio took a larger share of audience listening than the BBC for the first time (Lax 2012: 483-4). Ten years earlier, when digital radio technology was in its infancy, the commercial radio sector had comprised a relatively small number of stations, around 50, all of a roughly uniform size, what might be termed large local stations. By the time DAB launched, it looked quite different. The expansion of the commercial radio sector had proved successful – for example, radio's share of all display advertising rose continuously until 2004, when internet advertising began to make inroads (RAB 2014). It had over this period successfully lobbied a sympathetic government to remove public service obligations, to reduce restrictions on ownership and regulation of content, and had consequently experienced a number of mergers and acquisitions. Now it was made up of a much larger number of stations, some being large regional stations, others quite small local stations, and many in between. Some radio groups owned large numbers of stations but, equally, large numbers of stations remained independent companies. This heterogeneity meant that it was unlikely that there would be a single unified voice arguing in favour of (or against) emerging plans for digital radio. From the outset, a number of disagreements, disappointments and occasional disputes have meant that the road towards any digital switchover has been a bumpy ride.

For commercial radio, there were two key incentives to engage with digital radio. Firstly, it offered further scope for expansion, particularly for the larger groups. Commercial radio began DAB transmissions following the award of, initially, one licence for a national multiplex and subsequently a series of licences to operate local multiplexes. As noted earlier, each multiplex carries a number of radio stations, typically up to ten. So *national* commercial radio was expanded under these arrangements and, for the first time, placed on an equal footing in terms of capacity with the BBC. The local DAB multiplexes also offered the potential for an increase in the number of commercial local stations, while the BBC would continue to offer just one local station in each area. Thus DAB provision enhanced the role of commercial radio in comparison with the public broadcaster, while a further provision of the 1996 Broadcasting Act ensured that the operators of the transmission multiplexes would also be commercial enterprises. In contrast, in other countries launching DAB at that time, such as Sweden, the multiplexes would be operated by a statutory body. During the UK's licensing process all of the multiplex licences were awarded in a bidding process to commercial companies in which the existing major commercial radio groups had a majority stake. Thus the UK leading commercial radio companies consolidated their position in the radio landscape.

A second inducement for commercial radio to embrace digital radio was a more direct financial incentive. The legislation ensured that any existing analogue station that was prepared to offer a DAB service would be entitled to automatic renewal of its analogue broadcast licence rather than facing competitive bidding on its expiry. These 12-year licences were of considerable value given the expansion of commercial radio over the previous years, and so this provided a significant incentive. For example, at the launch of national DAB services, all three existing national analogue radio stations had signed up and they continue to be heard today, having had their analogue licences renewed now on two occasions. Other stations have fared less successfully: none of the new national commercial stations that accompanied these three at DAB launch continue to broadcast. A recurring observation has been that commercial radio companies' support for DAB has been, in large part, less a vote in favour of the new technology than a straightforward cost-benefit analysis of the value of their analogue licences (for example Goddard 2009; Plunkett 2009). Tony Stoller describes this as a 'political fix' that ensured apparent unity in support of DAB from both commercial radio and the BBC. This, in effect, suppressed dissent and, he continues, 'denied [the introduction of DAB] the policy consideration and debate which perhaps it needed' (2010: 280).

This early phase, from 1995 launch to 2003, might be considered the implementation period, with an emphasis on completing the licensing process to prepare the ground for full DAB services to begin. Even so, by the early 2000s, with significant infrastructure in place, growth in digital listening was regarded by the industry as low (for example Kozamernik 1999; Snoddy 2000). The national commercial operator, Digital One, considered one problem to be the high cost and low availability of receivers and in 2002 sought to stimulate the market by subsidising the development of cheaper sets (Howard 2005). The launch of new digital-only BBC stations in the same year, including *6 music*, represented further efforts to increase digital listening. However, listening to digital stations during this period remained too low for the audience research body, Rajar, to measure.

Elsewhere in Europe, where DAB services began during the 1990s, public service broadcasters took the lead. In Scandinavian countries, where commercial radio was mostly smaller than in the UK, the expectation was that public service broadcasters would secure digital radio's future before commercial stations would join with their own digital broadcasts. In many cases, commercial stations have only begun digital broadcasting in recent years after, at times, some early launches subsequently aborted (Jauert 2010: 106-7). The slow progress resulted in some countries halting DAB services altogether. Finland, for example, ended all digital radio broadcasts (public and commercial) in 2005; Sweden also closed down DAB services in 2006, relaunching services using the superior DAB+ standard in 2009; in Germany, similar reluctance on the part of regional and commercial broadcasters meant the DAB service was effectively abandoned, and a replacement DAB+ service begun in August 2011. Few other countries developed DAB beyond the planning stage, operating minimal services on a pilot basis; in such cases, a lack of support amongst broadcasters has resulted, not surprisingly, in minimal take up of receivers, Bonet pointedly describing total sales in Spain, for example (where DAB services have also now stopped) as adding up to 'even less than a token amount' (2009: 96).

2003-2010: renewal and expansion

In 2003, the UK parliament passed the Communications Act, which introduced a new era of converged regulation in media and communications. The newly-established Office of Communications (Ofcom) took on the role of regulating broadcasting, telecommunications

and spectrum management from three existing separate bodies. In line with the 'modernising' approach of the New Labour government, the establishment of Ofcom was not only a recognition that convergence was proceeding rapidly at the technological level but also that, following a wave of deregulation in nations across the world under earlier conservative administrations, media organisations too were beginning to operate in new spheres. Thus broadcasters were developing online presences while telecommunications companies were offering not only broadband infrastructure but also content and services. Ofcom's brief was to facilitate market competition and to minimise regulation (Hesmondhalgh 2005; Freedman 2008). In 2004 it embarked on a major review of the UK radio industry. A series of consultation documents, headed 'Radio: Preparing for the Future', proposed a number of measures to accelerate the growth of digital radio. This included some spectrum reconfiguration to increase capacity for stations, but emphasised that digital radio would, in general, be less regulated than the fairly minimal regulation that had existed hitherto. Ofcom's predecessor, the Radio Authority, had itself been permitted only to make recommendations rather than stipulations on issues such as audio bitrates (affecting sound quality); Ofcom's proposals suggested that regulation of digital radio stations should be relaxed much further (Lax 2009). So, rather than stating upfront how digital radio should operate, any regulation should be 'output' rather than 'input' based. Limits on how the spectrum capacity should be used – for audio or multimedia data, for example – should also be relaxed. Importantly, Ofcom suggested that *analogue* radio should also be less regulated. This was explained by Ofcom as part of a trend for less regulation as capacity increased (seen, for example, in analogue television regulation a decade earlier). Thus it stated that 'as digital take-up grows, the need for regulation on analogue platforms will decrease, as listeners can experience the wider choice available on all platforms' (Ofcom 2004: 57). Thus, part of helping to assure the future of digital radio involved further deregulation of analogue radio.

So, as noted earlier, while the large commercial radio companies by now had a dominant role in digital radio – in operating the multiplexes and in the content offered on them – a further process of deregulation of analogue radio presented new opportunities. Limitations on networking of content between licensed stations were relaxed while co-location of studios meant 'local' radio stations need no longer be based in their nominal geographical areas. Such measures, while raising issues about the 'localness' of a listener's local station, clearly offered commercial benefits to radio groups. Since these changes, for example, quasi-national

stations have emerged: Global radio's 'Heart' and 'Capital', for instance, are now available nationwide, after networked sharing of a string of separate local stations' output resulted in each being renamed under the Heart or Capital brand. Likewise, Bauer's Kiss FM has become networked nationwide (Ofcom 2014a: 225). Any decision which allowed the commercial groups to cut costs would, it was assumed, make the prospects for those groups' digital radio services more positive given the costs associated with offering broadcasts on DAB.

A renewed enthusiasm, perhaps, for digital radio saw Ofcom securing agreement at the 2006 Geneva World Radio Conference to use additional frequency blocks, offering the potential for new local multiplexes and, notably, an additional national multiplex. This third multiplex, following the BBC's allocation and the 1998 licensing of Digital One's commercial multiplex, would also be offered for bids from commercial operators, in line with the government's pro-market orientation. Despite objections from Digital One, which considered the threat of competition to be a breach of the original licensing agreement, the new licence was awarded in July 2007 to a consortium known as '4 Digital Group', which included Channel 4 television as a major shareholder promising innovative content (in line with its public service remit in television).

As the new local multiplex licences were awarded alongside the third national licence, the expansion of digital radio was now a real prospect. The local licences brought the potential of local digital stations to a number of areas for the first time while the national multiplex plans suggested not just a significant increase in capacity but a qualitative shift in content: 4 Digital proposed a public service speech channel, for example, which sought to compete with the BBC's Radio Four, serious current affairs coverage, and youth-oriented programming to reignite interest in radio among young people (Gibson 2007).

With this new momentum, the UK government established the Digital Radio Working Group (DRWG) in November 2007, bringing together senior figures in the radio industry and ancillary partners, in order to consider the prospects for switchover, the point at which digital delivery would become the predominant means by which radio was received by listeners. So, in addition to broadcasters, radio manufacturers and the regulator, other parties included the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, since the lack of DAB receivers in vehicles was

a key consideration in switchover decisions, and, formally included in debate for the first time, representatives of listener groups.

In between the formation of the DRWG and the delivery of its report, a year later in December 2008, two significant events occurred that threw into doubt the belief that digital radio had passed some kind of threshold in its development. In early 2008, GCap, the main shareholder in Digital One, the national commercial multiplex operator, announced its withdrawal from all digital radio activities, closing immediately two digital radio stations and subsequently selling its Digital One stake to Arqiva, Digital One's other shareholder. This decision was taken purely on commercial grounds – GCap was under threat of a takeover by Global radio – and underlined the fact that possession of a DAB licence remained a financial liability for existing radio groups. Multiplex operators struggled to break even, while most radio stations' digital transmissions lost their owners money but, as noted, secured the longer term advantage of holding onto analogue licences. The second unwelcome surprise was Channel 4's announcement in October 2008 that it was cancelling all plans to launch digital radio stations, thus effectively ending 4 Digital's involvement in the new national multiplex. That licence was returned to Ofcom and plans to re-advertise it were shelved. Both GCap's and Channel 4's decisions were consequences of the financial meltdown that hit all sectors of the economy from 2008, of course, and so, while not necessarily attributable to any inherent deficiency in plans for DAB radio in the UK, they nevertheless revealed a fragility in the belief that there might one day be a switchover (while digital television's progress was relatively unscarred by the crash). These setbacks were noted in the DRWG's final report, whose chair welcomed the commitment of those radio companies remaining enthusiastic about digital radio's prospects. However, he continued, 'such commitment and belief will not last for very long without the support of government and Ofcom,' declaring this a key moment for the UK government to decide on radio's future (Cox 2008).

These events actually had little impact on digital radio sales and the consequent growth in household ownership of DAB receivers and digital listening share, which continued to be slow and steady. This is not surprising – of the two digital stations withdrawn by GCap, *The Jazz* and *Planet Rock*, the latter was sold and continued to be transmitted – and so the overall digital radio offering was largely unaltered. But the anticipated fillip of novel stations on a new national multiplex, and a consequent acceleration in sales and listening, were no longer to happen. While, until this point, digital radio's growth had relied largely on the regulator,

Ofcom, managing spectrum provision and licensing, relying on the industry to promote DAB through the radio market, the industry was now, through the DRWG, arguing that it was time more than ever for the government to take action. It was urged to suggest a date for switchover, in the belief that a similar declaration in 2005 had catalysed digital television switchover (Starks 2007: 111-13; Fenton 2008).

In 2008 Stephen Carter, Ofcom's Chief Executive from 2003 to 2007, was made Lord Carter by the government and then appointed Communications Minister, with a brief of drawing up the Digital Britain report, a White Paper precursor to the Digital Economy Bill. One chapter – actually half a chapter – was devoted to digital radio. That half chapter, '3b', sits rather uneasily in the document alongside others on broadband provision, intellectual property, creative industries and so on, suggesting its inclusion as something of an afterthought (no other chapter was separated into a and b sections, and Chapter '3a' addressed the rather unrelated issue of digital infrastructure investment). Nevertheless, Chapter 3b endorsed almost all of the DRWG's recommendations and announced the criteria to be used to trigger a digital switchover of national and larger local radio stations to DAB-only provision (other stations to remain on analogue for the time being). It stated that, following the passage of the Bill, a 'digital radio upgrade programme' would be launched similar to the plan undertaken with digital television switchover. This would include provision for the BBC to extend coverage of its national stations, local multiplexes to merge to free up spectrum for additional local multiplexes, and the encouragement of the motor industry to fit DAB receivers as standard (DCMS 2009). The switchover timescale was even more ambitious than the DRWG had proposed: the hope was that the switchover criteria would be met by the end of 2013.

2010 onwards: rescue?

The Digital Economy Bill was presented to parliament as part of the 'wash up' of legislation rushed through in time for the May 2010 General Election. The resulting coalition government duly followed the strictures of the Digital Economy Act and set up a Digital Radio Action Plan (DRAP). Plans included the establishment of a body, Digital Radio UK (DRUK) that would help to promote digital radio to the public, offer advice and generally act as the interface between listeners and the industry. Again, this was modelled in part on the television experience: by 2010 much of the television switchover had been completed with just a few areas of the UK still running analogue signals alongside digital. Digital UK, the

television counterpart to DRUK, had operated roadshows and advice sessions around the country, offering advice on how to receive digital television. DRUK had a different role: digital television had been widely acknowledged and often well understood by television viewers; indeed, a 'help' scheme to assist those struggling with the transition consumed less than half of its budget (Digital UK 2012: 43). However, public knowledge of and support for digital radio is lower. Ofcom's 2014 figures show that although 'awareness' of digital radio is relatively high (86 per cent of respondents had heard of it) of the 59 per cent of respondents who *did not* possess a digital radio, just 7 per cent said they are certain or very likely to buy one while 60 per cent felt they had no need for one, suggesting either a lack of understanding of DAB's benefits or, indeed, that no benefit is perceived. This is borne out in sales figures: the number of DAB receivers sold annually has declined to 1.7m by 2014 from 1.9m in each of the three years to 2013, whereas sales of analogue receivers, though also falling, remained around twice this number (all figures, Ofcom 2014b). Similarly, while the number of new cars fitted with digital radios has increased, by 2014 there were still more being sold with analogue-only radios (Radio World 2014). Again, this is in contrast with progress in television: from the point that digital television became widely available, sales of analogue sets declined rapidly and soon simply became unavailable in the shops – if you wished to buy a new television set, it would naturally be digital. This data, and trends over recent years, suggest that there is a substantial body of radio listeners who either do not know about or understand digital radio, or do know about it but have no interest in nor desire for it. One interpretation, expressed by sections of the industry including RadioCentre (the body representing commercial radio companies) is that listeners only appreciate digital radio once they have tried it – similar doubts, they argue, were expressed by television viewers prior to switchover. Thus a key role of DRUK is to *promote* digital radio, to *persuade* listeners to switch to DAB, a role that is distinct from the more impartial advisory position of the Digital UK television body.

An alternative, perhaps more blunt, interpretation of the slow rise in sales of and use of DAB receivers is that if, from Ofcom's figures, we deduce that digital radio does not offer listeners any particular added value in comparison with their existing FM receivers, then purchase of a DAB receiver for many represents more a default, future-proofing choice – 'why wouldn't you?' – rather than an emphatic expression of support for the system. Certainly, the Ofcom data reported above includes a large response expressing satisfaction with current, FM provision, and Ofcom reports elsewhere an *increase* in the proportion of analogue-only

listeners who have no intention of embracing DAB – up from 64 per cent in 2013 to 67 per cent (2014a: 241). Talk of digital switchover thus appears at odds with such evidence of listener habits. This sense that digital radio is being 'imposed' on an unwilling public, one that can certainly be found in some sections of media commentary, featured in two reports published during 2010. The UK House of Lords Select Committee on Communications conducted an inquiry into digital television and radio, reporting in March. It concluded that it did not follow from the success of television switchover that digital radio would prove equally attractive to listeners: 'There is no such evidence for radio. The gradual rate of take-up of digital radio services does not suggest that consumers are enticed by the reception quality, extra functionality or the digital-only content so far available'. While expressing such doubts about the attraction of DAB, it follows with an acceptance that 'the path to digital has already been taken' and that 'to go back on this policy now would risk turning confusion into an utter shambles' (House of Lords 2010: 34-5).

More pointedly, the Consumer Expert Group (CEG) expressed vociferous opposition to plans for switchover. It echoed the House of Lords committee view that there was little evidence that DAB offered compelling advantages to listeners, in stark contrast with digital television, and that any move towards replacing FM transmissions with DAB were fraught with problems for listeners. It argued that the main driver for switchover was the commercial radio industry's desire to cut the costs of simulcasting content on both platforms and therefore, it said, the role of the industry and DRUK was to persuade a reluctant audience to switch. Describing some of the information from the industry as 'misinforming and misleading', the CEG said it was 'concerned that consumers are being panicked into adopting digital radio rather than convinced by the digital offering' (CEG 2010: 45; see also Lax 2011: 151-2). Unsurprisingly, the CEG urged the government to abandon switchover plans and to revise the threshold for any future switchover, to be triggered only when 70 per cent of listening was via a DAB receiver rather than the government target of 50 per cent via any digital platform. The CEG was made up of representatives from listener and consumer groups, and had already had an input into the Digital Radio Working group's work two years earlier. It had also had an advisory role in digital television switchover, about which it had been supportive and so, with that background, these objections to radio switchover plans had some credibility. The government's Department of Media, Culture and Sport's response rejected a number of the CEG's concerns (for instance on listening thresholds) and stated that work under the Action Plan would address others (on transmission coverage or in-vehicle listening, for

example). There was little evidence that the CEG's observations impacted upon the detail of the plans for finalising digital radio roll out.

The Digital Radio Action Plan, first published in July 2010, set out a programme for DAB that would conclude in 2013. At that point, consideration would be given to whether a decision to begin digital switchover might be taken. Numerous activities have taken place since 2010 in accordance with the plan, such as: detailed proposals for building transmitters to extend signal coverage (agreed only after some fraught discussions about how this was to be funded); agreement of car manufacturers to fit DAB receivers as standard; and a 'tick mark' approval scheme for receivers meeting a minimum specification, to aid purchasers buying new radios. While all such preparatory work was necessary it did not affect the pace of digital radio adoption or listening and, as noted earlier, at the December 2013 deadline, government minister Ed Vaizey declared that it was too early to take a decision on digital switchover as the criteria had not been met, and were unlikely to be so until the end of the decade (DCMS 2013a; Plunkett 2013a).

The state of DAB digital radio in the UK continues to remain in a state of flux and uncertainty. In the months leading up to the government's December 2013 announcement a number of commercial radio companies declared their opposition to switchover (Plunkett 2013b). The response to concern among smaller commercial and community stations as to their post-switchover position remains unclear; the current government position is that they will be able to remain on FM, but final decisions will not be taken until switchover is announced (DCMS 2013b: 30). Meanwhile, Ofcom has been allocated funding to extend its trials of small-scale DAB services (Ofcom 2013).

A further complication arose in 2014 when Ofcom announced plans to license, once again, the second national multiplex. The successful operators were to be permitted to use up to 30 per cent of the multiplex capacity to transmit on the DAB+ standard rather than DAB. DAB+ has been selected as the digital radio standard in a number of countries, of course, for its well known advantages over 'standard' DAB such as more efficient use of spectrum and, potentially, better audio quality (see for example Herrmann et al. 2007). Services in Australia, Switzerland and the re-launched services in Germany are some of the more recent adopters of DAB+, while Denmark, which has a long established DAB service, has put in place plans to migrate all DAB services to DAB+. Meanwhile, in the UK, the 2009 Digital

Britain report confirmed DAB as the standard for digital radio, on the basis that a relatively large number of DAB receivers had been bought which were not compatible with DAB+. Many critics of DAB in the UK have of course made repeated calls for DAB+ to become the preferred standard, but the introduction of DAB+ in this limited way, if it should point a way to a future wholesale migration from DAB to DAB+, could add further complexity for consumers considering a digital-only future, although of course most receivers bought in the recent past are likely to be multistandard and thus able to receive DAB+ as well as DAB.

Conclusion: cultural policy or industrial policy?

The lengthy narrative detailed above of the emergence of digital radio in the UK demonstrates a number of points. Digital radio's development has been predominantly market-driven, with only limited policy intervention, particularly in comparison with digital television. In the case of television the government established working groups and industry bodies at an early stage with a clear understanding that switchover was a very likely outcome; the Digital Television Action Plan, for example, began its work in 2002, some three years after digital television's launch (Starks 2007: 87). More than a decade separated the commercial launch of digital radio and the establishment of *its* action plan. Moreover, the Digital Radio Action Plan is evidently a policy intervention in response to what might be termed market weakness if not actual market failure. Industry forecasts have continually overestimated growth, sometimes dramatically – in 2008 the DRWG anticipated digital radio sales would exceed analogue within two years, for example, whereas they remain notably outnumbered six years later (DRWG 2008: 24).

For the broadcasters, and especially the commercial broadcasters whose revenues have been hit by recession and loss of advertising to other media, the costs associated with simulcasting digital and analogue transmissions are unwelcome. For commercial radio companies, they are bearable, it would seem, only while they guarantee the unchallenged renewal of their analogue licences, a situation which clearly cannot endure. Thus, either digital terrestrial radio has to end or switchover be embarked upon and completed. The Digital Radio Action Plan, its associated deliberations and ongoing works, are aimed at the latter outcome. This is despite some division amongst broadcasters and, more so, amongst listeners. While some individual listeners and commentators are vocal advocates for digital radio, others, including those that seek to represent listeners through organisations such as those making up the

Consumer Experts Group, are far more cautious. Their position is made notably more compelling by the low, and slowing, rates of adoption of receivers and their use.

The evidence from policy documents is that digital radio policy is best viewed as industrial rather than cultural policy. That is, it appears that the interests of sections of the radio industry have held more sway in government decisions than the needs or desires of radio listeners, as might be expressed in cultural policy, in which their interests as *citizens* might be emphasised over consumer concerns (see, for example, Hesmondhalgh 2005). To some extent this was also true of digital television, but given the limited public support for, or even in many cases interest in, DAB, this tendency appears more evident for radio. Indeed, the 2010 Digital Radio Action Plan was jointly published by the Department of Culture Media and Sport and the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills as was the Digital Britain report outlining policy in 2009. This may explain the limited role of consumer groups in DAB policy up until the formation of the Digital Radio Working Group and, as Stoller says (above), the absence of public debate about DAB development. Adding to a sense of lack of openness about digital radio policy is the absence of a DRUK website. The television switchover group, Digital UK, maintained (and continues to maintain) a comprehensive website, digitaluk.co.uk, detailing personnel, its funding streams, policy statements and a library of reports including annual reports, much as one would expect of a public body. In contrast, Digital Radio UK does not identify itself with any website: it cannot be found through web searches, for instance. Instead it maintains a consumer site, getdigitalradio.com, behind which sits a hidden 'industry' site with minimal information. Thus it is not possible for the public to determine who works for DRUK, how it is funded, to see its reports, nor even readily to identify the lead body behind the promotion of digital radio in the UK. While this may not mean a great deal, it does not aid informed public debate and stands in stark contrast to the relative accessibility of documents and details of developments through, for example, the Ofcom or Digital UK sites.

To some extent, this lack of prominent debate reflects the different cultural role of radio, again in comparison with television. Radio's role as a secondary medium, one which can be consumed while doing other things, has been a weakness as well as a strength. While the strength is its mutability and universality, the weakness is its oversight in policy terms and also its undervaluing by listeners. Thus, while digital television was subject to international collaboration and agreement, and a matter sufficiently important for the European Union to

16

engage in policymaking and to issue directives over the harmonisation of switchover dates, digital radio was ignored in this respect and all decisions left to national governments, much to the disappointment of the early developers of DAB (O'Neill and Shaw 2010; Iosifidis 2011). For this reason, perhaps, we have witnessed widely varying approaches to digital radio in different countries, even within Europe. The EBU has urged governments to harmonise switchover plans and adopt similar standards but of course has no authority to make that happen (EBU 2013).

At a time when the interface between cultural and industrial policy is likely to become contested as broadcasting spectrum is claimed by telecommunications companies for the expansion of mobile networks, any confusion or absence of debate about how broadcasting should develop might see it come under pressure. Radio's traditional sidelining increases that risk, although its operating frequencies are less coveted by mobile operators than those used by television (radio broadcasting transmissions, being lower in frequency than their television equivalent, have propagation characteristics that do not make them valuable for mobile telecommunications networks). The EBU continues to promote digital radio – and broadcasting more generally – as a way of maintaining radio's status or perhaps asserting its place in an augmented media landscape. Its 'smart radio' initiative, aimed at encouraging mobile phone manufacturers to include digital radio chipsets in devices, coupled with challenges to the idea of replacing broadcasting with delivery over mobile networks, is, in its words, 'a campaign to ensure the future of radio as a free-to-air broadcast service' (EBU 2014). These initiatives, together with the disrupted and rather diverse histories of digital radio in the UK and elsewhere, suggest that, although it seems unimaginable that radio will disappear or even become substantially diminished as a popular medium, its future direction is being influenced by a number of, at times, competing forces. In the midst of such turbulence, the UK government's policy thus far has failed to emphasise radio as a cultural resource, one worthy of protection in the public interest. If any transition to digital transmission, whether favoured by sections the industry or not, is in conflict with that public interest, it may be that 'protection' here means reaffirming broadcast radio's future, for now, as an analogue medium.

References

Bonet, M (2009) 'Keys to the failure of DAB in Spain.' *Journal of Radio and Audio Media* 16(1) 83-101

CEG (2010) *Digital Radio Switchover: What Is In It for Consumers?* London: DCMS

Cox, B (2008) 'Foreword' in DRWG *Final Report* London: DCMS

DCMS (2009) *Digital Britain: Final Report* London: DCMS

DCMS (2010) *Digital Radio Action Plan v.1* London: DCMS

DCMS (2013a) 'Minister's Speech to GO Digital Conference.' 16 December 2013 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/go-digital-conference-16-december-2013-check-against-delivery (accessed 20 August 2014)

DCMS (2013b) *Connectivity, Content and Consumers. Britain's Digital Platform for Growth* London: DCMS

Digital UK (2012) *Digital TV switchover 2008-2012*. Final Report http://www.digitaluk.co.uk/finalreport

DNH (1995) Digital *Terrestrial Broadcasting: the Government's Proposals* London: Dept of National Heritage

DRWG (2008) *Final Report* London: DCMS

EBU (2011a) *Public Radio and New Media Platforms* 2011 Geneva: EBU

EBU (2011b) *Viewpoint: Digital Radio* Geneva: EBU

EBU (2013) *Digital Radio Distribution in Europe: recommendation R138* Geneva: EBU

EBU (2014) *Smart Radio* http://www3.ebu.ch/advocacy/initiatives/digital-radio (accessed 28 August 2014))

Fenton, B (2008) 'Crisis talks seek the tipping point for digital radio' *Financial Times* 5 March, p.23

Freedman, D (2008) *The Politics of Media Policy* Cambridge: Polity

Gibson, O (2007) 'Crisis talks seek the tipping point for digital radio' *Guardian* 7 July, p.19

Goddard, G (2009) 'Classic FM - always check the expiry date before purchase.' http://grantgoddardradioblog.blogspot.co.uk/2009/01/classic-fm-always-check-expiry-date.html (accessed 15 August 2014)

Herrmann, F., Erismann, L. and Prosch, M. (2007) 'The evolution of DAB' *EBU Technical Review* July

Hesmondhalgh, D (2005) 'Media and cultural policy as public policy: the case of the British Labour government.' *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 11(1) 95-109

House of Lords (2010) *Digital switchover of television and radio in the United Kingdom* HL Paper 100. London: The Stationery Office

Howard, Q (2005) 'DAB digital radio, a recipe for success.' *EBU Technical Review* 303

Howard, Q (2009) 'One digital radio across Europe.' *EBU Technical Review* 317

Iosifidis, P (2011) 'Growing pains? The transition to digital television in Europe.' *European Journal Of Communication* 26(1) 3-17

Jauert, P, Lax, S, Shaw, H & Ala-Fossi, M (2010) 'DAB: the future of radio? The development of digital radio in Europe.' In B O'Neill, M Ala-Fossi, P Jauert, S Lax, L Nyre, H Shaw (eds) *Digital Radio in Europe: Technologies, Industries and Cultures* Bristol: Intellect

Kozamernik, F (1999) 'Digital Audio Broadcasting – coming out of the tunnel.' *EBU Technical Review* 279

Lax, S (2009) 'Digital radio and the diminution of the public sphere.' *In:* Butsch R (ed.) *Media and Public Spheres* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Lax, S (2011) 'Digital radio switchover: the UK experience.' *International Journal of Digital Television* 2(2) 145-60.

Lax, S (2012) 'Radio in the UK: technology and policy for an industry in transition.' In J A Hendricks (ed.) *The Plagrave Handbook of Global Radio* Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan

O'Neill, B & Shaw, H (2010) 'Radio broadcasting in Europe: the search for a common digital future.' In B O'Neill, M Ala-Fossi, P Jauert, S Lax, L Nyre, H Shaw (eds) *Digital Radio in Europe: Technologies, Industries and Cultures* Bristol: Intellect

Ofcom (2004) *Radio: Preparing for the Future. Phase 1: Developing a New Framework* London: Ofcom

Ofcom (2013) *Small Scale DAB. The potential for Lower-Cost Transmitting Stations in Support of DAB Rollout* London: Ofcom

Ofcom (2014a) *The Communications Market Report 2014* London: Ofcom

Ofcom (2014b) *The Communications Market: Digital Radio Report. Fifth report* London: Ofcom

Plunkett, J (2008) 'BBC and Channel 4 stand by DAB radio.' *Guardian* 11 February.

Plunkett, J (2009) 'Big noise in radio: interview with Scott Taunton.' *Guardian* (Media Section) 26 October, p.5

Plunkett, J (2013a) 'Digital radio switchover may not happen until after 2020.' *Guardian* 16 December http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/dec/16/digital-radio-switchover-2020-ed-vaizey (accessed 28 August 2014)

Plunkett, J (2013b) 'Abandon digital radio switchover plans, stations tell ministers.'
Guardian 11 November http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/nov/11/abandon-digital-radio-switchover-stations (accessed 18 August 2014)

RAB (2014) 'Annual display marketplace.' http://www.rab.co.uk/annual-display-marketplace/ (accessed 28 August 2014)

Radio World (2014) 'In UK, 45 percent of vehicles sold have DAB.' *Radio World International* June, p.5

Rajar (2014) *Data release, Q2: all digital radio listening* www.rajar.co.uk (accessed 22 August 2014)

Snoddy, R (2000) 'Digital radio is here. No, honest. It just needs better marketing.'
Marketing 26 October, p.28

Starks, M (2007) *Switching to Digital Television: UK Public Policy and the Market* Bristol: Intellect

Stoller, T (2010) *Sounds of Your Life: the History of Independent Radio in the UK* New Barnet: John Libbey

Stoller, T (2012) 'Foresight, fudge or facilitation? The making of United Kingdom digital radio policy 1987-2008.' In M Mollgaard (ed.) *Radio and Society: New Thinking for an Old Medium* Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars

Williams, R (1995) 'BBC switches on CD-quality radio.' *Independent* 28 September, p.6.

World DMB (2014) *Country Information* http://www.worlddab.org/country-information (accessed 3 October 2014)