



Recent Developments in ILR Programme Sharing

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DYING FOR A DRINK was the title of an ambitious series of documentaries on alcoholism produced by one ILR station – Radio Hallam in Sheffield – in 1978; recognising its quality and importance, most of the other Independent Local Radio stations then on-air subsequently also broadcast it. This early example of ILR programme sharing had a widespread impact, and in due course led to questions being raised in Parliament about the vast sums lost to British industry every year through excessive drinking.

At that time there were no centrally organised arrangements – or formal systems of any kind – for the sharing of programmes produced by individual ILR companies, although a few programmes like *Dying for a Drink* had been made available to the rest of the network through the provision of IBA secondary rental funds. Nevertheless, the logic of programme sharing was already apparent to the stations themselves. Although ILR stands in sharp contrast to ITV (where systematic 'networking' arrangements, built into contractual obligations, are a cornerstone of the service), the potential benefits of a limited but effective scheme for making programmes of merit more widely available to ILR listeners throughout the UK were evident.

The Value of Exchanging Programmes

Certain stations have a reputation for specialising in the production of high-quality programmes of particular kinds, and it makes sense for this output to be made available to the rest of the ILR network. Examples include BRMB's expertise in documentary making; Capital Radio's commitment, access and financial resources for recording or staging major music events (both popular and classical); and Radio Clyde's first-class drama productions. To be able to share this sort of programming can broaden and enhance the schedules of the smaller, more financially constrained stations who, for example, cannot themselves afford to produce drama.

The very localised nature of ILR helps to make a vital contribution to programming excellence. When local radio journalists and producers are working in their own backyard they may be expected to tackle a problem with more understanding and perception than, say, reporters brought in from the capital city. If, moreover, the local station is covering a local issue with national implications – such as the Merseyside riots, unemployment on Teesside, industrial unrest in the Midlands or North East – the case for making its well-informed coverage available to listeners elsewhere is particularly strong.

For a programme to get a hearing outside its own locality is a boost to the prestige of the individual station and provides a spur to the creativity of its producer.

Most importantly, all this can take place without detriment to the essential 'localness' of a station's output. Only material which is likely to be of some interest and relevance to listeners in other areas is normally offered and, in any case, each station retains its sovereign right to accept or reject material.

In any discussion of programme sharing the invaluable contributions from LBC and Independent Radio News loom large. LBC has produced a large amount of outstanding documentary and current affairs programmes, while its subsidiary IRN provides up-to-date national and

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international news and information to the ILR network, on a continuous 24-hour basis. These organisations also act as the pivot for concerted ILR coverage of national events, such as the Royal Wedding in 1981, the recent D-Day anniversary ceremonies, and General Elections.

The Development of Programme Sharing

Programme sharing continued on a limited *ad hoc* basis until 1980, when the first formal scheme was set up by the IBA. Under the Broadcasting Act the IBA has an obligation to 'secure a wide showing or (as the case may be) hearing for programmes of merit'. The arrangement was that a station with programme material to offer contacted IBA staff, who in turn notified all stations through a prepared list issued on an approximate monthly basis.

It had long been recognised by the stations, the IBA and AIRC that programme sharing, organised from a central source and publicised, provides a valuable opportunity to demonstrate that ILR can compete most effectively with the specialised BBC networks in undertaking a broad range of programming. Witness the copious array of programming awards captured by ILR in direct competition with the BBC, both at national and local level. A most eloquent recent example of this is Piccadilly Radio's winning of the classical music category of the 1984 Sony Awards, which was also of course open to entries from BBC Radio 3.

As the network expanded and developed, the newer and smaller ILR recruits joined with the older-established and larger stations to affirm their commitment to the concept of programme sharing under the IBA scheme. During 1982-83, documentaries were offered from Mercia Sound in Coventry (*The Falkland Islands – The Fight for Peace*), from Red Rose Radio in Preston (*Jane and Jo Fly to Fame*, which followed two Lancashire girls to the world-famous School of Performing Arts in New York), and from Gloucester's Severn Sound (*The Buddy Holly Story*). Among other contributions from the smaller ILR companies were Moray Firth's examination of the local village of Pennan in North East Scotland, the location for the film *Local Hero*; Radio Wyvern's interviews with teenagers expressing their views on today's important issues in *Sex and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll*; and 2CR's *Lovers All*, a miscellany of words and music on the subject of romance.

However, the task of offering material to the network was becoming more and more onerous, largely because the offering station was responsible for the costs of copying and distribution of programme tapes to all the requesting stations; these could be very high if the programme was in wide demand. This factor began to discourage some of the smaller stations from offering material.

The Establishment of the AIRC Programme Sharing Unit

The belief throughout the industry that there should be a more streamlined and efficient centrally-administered system of programme sharing came to fruition when AIRC decided in 1983 to set up its own Programme Sharing Unit. It was also envisaged that the unit could have a far more extended and ambitious programming role.

Under the new scheme it was planned that stations would be able to schedule selected programmes, confident that the tapes would arrive to order. A more complete record of usage could be kept (previously, while the administration of programme sharing was undertaken by the offering station only, it had been very cumbersome to gauge how many hours of programming were taken up each month, and by which stations). Broadcast tapes would arrive in a standard form, to minimise the workload of the receiving



Tim Lyons and Martin Schimmer, presenters of Radio West's pioneering Datarama, for micro-computer enthusiasts, which was offered for broadcast by other stations.

station. A cassette service for the pre-hearing of programmes would be introduced, and a publicity campaign for programmes could be mounted.

Added to this more flexible and reliable service, the unit would also become the first point of contact for approaches from independent producers, now steadily increasing in number, keen to offer material to ILR. Advantage would gradually be taken of the extensive availability of programme material from outside and international sources, such as the wealth of free, high-class classical music on offer from the European Broadcasting Union. The unit would also develop further programme co-operation between stations; not just for 'programmes of merit', but perhaps, for example, on outside broadcasts or regional programming ventures, and generally attempt significantly to enhance ILR's programming opportunities.

The AIRC programme sharing unit began operating in April of this year. Companies are notified monthly of the various programmes on offer, but where circumstances dictate, programme offers are despatched more frequently. This is exemplified by BRMB Radio's sudden coup in April of clearing the rights to broadcast extracts from the classic Tony Hancock shows and speedily producing a one-hour tribute to coincide with the 60th anniversary of Hancock's birth. Mercia Sound also managed to complete a half-hour programme on a Coventry man who died in police custody, *The James Davey Story*, at the close of the inquest one Friday, and details of the programme were with all stations by the following Monday.

A nominal charge is made to cover tape, copying and distribution costs, but the IBA have made a grant available to AIRC which the stations have agreed should be used to offset programme costs for the smaller stations.

In the unit's first five months of operation, over 100 hours of programming have been offered. Take-up of material has, as a monthly average, involved some 26 stations using around 115 hours of programming. Virtually every station has taken material at some time, and over half have offered material. There will obviously be seasonal fluctuations in the number of programmes offered and the number taken up; traffic increases at Christmas, Easter and bank holiday time. For example, under the IBA scheme an average of 25 hours of programming per month was offered during 1982-83, but this rose to 116 hours in the Christmas period.

The choice of programming material has widened as more (smaller) companies are able to offer material. A wide range of music has been offered: classical concerts from Radio Trent, jazz from Essex Radio, country music

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from Radio Hallam, a centenary tribute to the tenor John McCormack from Radio Clyde and opera from Radio 210. At Easter, Two Counties Radio (Bournemouth) made available a rock musical based on the life of St. Paul, and Radio City have recently offered a series on some of the world's greatest entertainers in *Hall of Fame*. Drama continues to be popular, and Capital Radio recently offered their first venture into science fiction, *The Kite Lords*.

Viking Radio on Humberside, which began broadcasting only in April, has already offered two documentaries, one of them featuring the new Viking museum in York; BRMB made available their documentary investigation of new evidence on the murder of Staffordshire newsboy Carl Bridgewater; Chiltern Radio offered their documentary on the Quainton Steam Railway, where sequences from *The Jewel in the Crown* were filmed; and from Metro Radio there was a documentary on experiments using live animals entitled *Tested to Destruction*.

Interviews with celebrities who are unable to travel around the country remain invaluable as programme material, as this ensures that stations are not penalised by geographical location. These have recently included an interview with Johnny Mathis from Red Rose Radio, chart-topping Frankie Goes to Hollywood from DevonAir, John Gielgud from LBC, Simon Le Bon, Ray Stevens and Emmylou Harris from Metro, and Torvill and Dean, Chris Bonnington, Eartha Kitt and Ranulph Fiennes from Clyde.

The AIRC programme sharing scheme has got off to a very

encouraging start; what of the future? Some within ILR feel the most logical progression is towards the networking and syndication of programmes. There is a difference between these: networking is defined as the simultaneous transmission of one programme, such as the *Independent Chart Show* soon to begin, by all or most of the stations; syndication is the broadcasting of a particular programme by a number of stations, but scheduled as each individual station feels most appropriate.

The AIRC Programming Committee is currently sifting through many proposals, which have either originated from within the ILR system or from an independent source, with a view to possible networking or syndication. There are those who believe that financial benefit will accrue from an advertiser's ability to buy time around or during a programme which is networked or syndicated on ILR. Others hold that this contradicts the essentially local nature of the stations, that it will not in any case bring increased revenue and will rob stations of their editorial sovereignty. Only time will tell. Because ILR is *local* radio, the amount of networked or syndicated programming found to be acceptable will necessarily be limited to a relatively small proportion of total output. Yet although the AIRC Programme Sharing Unit is in its infancy, and has not yet begun to implement some of its appointed tasks, there is vast potential – through existing channels and those as yet untapped – for the unit to play a part in contributing to the richness of ILR's programming mix.

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