

**British Commercial Radio in the 1980s: the relationship between regulation
and programme content.**

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Introduction

Although the BBC's contribution to the development of radio is well documented, programme output from UK independent, or commercial radio, can also provide an alternative view of the world at specific points in time. This paper, based on doctoral research by the author, examines how UK local commercial radio created – through its imposed regulatory requirements of phone-ins, news and documentaries - a commentary for the study of the social, cultural and political issues that dominated a pivotal decade in British history – the 1980s. The paper sheds new light on the relationship between regulation and programme content which resulted in a unique form of output during this period. By examining sound archives it reveals that programme output on Independent Local Radio (ILR), while restricted by regulation, played a key role for both politicians and the public during an intense period of change during the Thatcher government. Concern for public health became a key issue on the Thatcher agenda during the 1980s via the emergence of AIDS. This paper serves to explore the paradox that speech programming borne out of necessity on ILR during this period formed an important part of the public awareness campaign regarding the illness. This was achieved via a range of documentaries and phone-in programmes broadcast on local commercial radio stations across the UK.

Independent, not commercial?

For the purposes of this paper, the phrases independent and commercial radio are used interchangeably. However, as Stoller suggests, in order to truly understand and examine the concept of commercial radio pre-1990, one must regard its approach as independent model of broadcasting, not commercial: a “fusion of private enterprise and public service” (personal communication, 2009). This is integral to

understanding the complexity in developing non-BBC radio in the UK. From 1973, until the wheel turned in 1990, ILR stations were guided by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) to produce a full range of speech content, including hour-long documentaries, regular features, extended news programmes and phone-ins. A wide range of specialist music was also a requirement – with more than half an ear to musical education – and the stations' schedules reflected this. Every station was expected to broadcast a full range of separate genre specialist music programmes; typically including classical, country, jazz, folk, rock, so-called 'ethnic' and more. This form of programming continued during the 1970s and the 1980s until the Broadcasting Act 1990 which signalled the start of deregulation (Barnard 1989; Hendy 2000; Street 2002).

The political climate in the 1980s

By the end of 1983, political, economic, social, technological and cultural reform was underway. Commercial radio was also going through a quiet revolution. Frustration and concern over the restricted business model was mounting; the desire to create radio for segmented audiences to increase revenue and ratings was becoming ever more urgent, given the imminent arrival of new communication technologies. Yet at this point the sound of Independent Local Radio (ILR) had changed little. Its varied programming philosophy was regarded as "all things to all listeners" (Carter 2003). Despite high unemployment and a decrease in manufacturing output, economic policies meant low inflation and mortgage rates for the first time since the early 1970s. Following the Conservative Party's decisive win at the May General Election securing a one hundred and forty-four seat margin, the party began to pursue their goals of social reform and privatisation (Evans 2004; Marwick 2003; Vinen 2009). For their second term, the Government pledged to remove the power of the trade unions and continue to sell off state assets such as council housing and utility companies (Beckett 2009). Significant on the health agenda was the rise of AIDS, which created shifts in attitude towards sexuality and a "new frankness" (Marr 2007: 409). The paper will return to commercial radio's response to the AIDS crisis shortly. The role and purpose of public service broadcasting values was also under the spotlight:

The new Thatcherite project was highly individualistic: it argued that public interest could only be secured by maximising the capacity of individuals to choose; and that government should seek to abandon controls, not exercise them.

(Curran and Seaton, 2003: 207)

Accounts of British history reveal that 1984 is regarded as a prominent, poignant and prophetic era (Hennessy 1997; Marr 2007; Seldon and Collings 2000). Vinen senses a marked step-change in the Conservative party's approach to policy making in 1984, following its convincing 1983 election win:

Early Thatcherism had often seemed ascetic. There was a sense that economic virtues – thrift, independence, responsibility – were to be encouraged as much because they were economic. After 1983 the economic benefits of Thatcherism seemed more dramatic and more widely experienced. Privatisation, the sale of council houses, rising property prices and deregulation in the City of London sometimes seemed to offer people the very thing that the first Thatcher government had defined as being impossible – money for nothing.

(Vinen 2009: 180)

In his examination of the press, O'Malley contextualises the period as one with sharper divides, which can equally be applied here:

The period 1983-1987 was a particularly turbulent one, during which debates about media policy were forced onto the national political agenda. Unions were laying claim to a right to exercise some influence over the content of the papers they produced, a claim that struck at the very heart of proprietorial power, which, in turn, underpinned the ethos of the Press Council.

(O'Malley and Soley 2000: 84)

Despite a rapidly-expanding media landscape, content regulation was still a key part of the IBA's approach to ILR programming during the 1980s, ensuring local content was the first priority under what Hendy describes as "behavioural controls" (Hendy 2000: 44). The IBA's dilemma in the 1980s was that their tendency towards behavioural regulation focused their attention on the purpose of ILR as a public service broadcaster, to create diversity and broaden choice. Conversely, they also implemented content

regulation and by stipulating what could and could not be broadcast, led them into an “application of essentially paternalistic censorship” without clearly defined rules and rationales (Feintuck 1999: 52). The critical point here is that, ten years after the establishment of ILR, while programme content was still regarded as quality and listening figures were maintained, two major factors crucial for development were overlooked. Firstly: audience tastes and interests were changing; secondly the creation of the free market, which was the political undercurrent by 1983.

The emergence of Thatcherism was then fundamental to ILR for two reasons. Firstly, her ideology was in contrast to the traditional notion of ILR as private radio with public service obligations. The industry would use this point to lobby for lighter regulation, as Stoller's (2010) and Wray's research (2010) reveals in events leading up to and after the 'Heathrow Conference'. Secondly, ILR programme content bears witness to the enormous level of change underway in the UK. The creation of an online sound archive, featuring material from local radio stations as well as Independent Radio News (IRN) provides a unique insight into how society, through commercial radio, responded to challenging issues during what is considered a pivotal decade in social and political change – the 1980s. This digital archive was developed by Bournemouth University in partnership with the British Universities Film and Video Council. It documents a unique sound of ILR, from its genesis in 1973, to 1990, when the Broadcasting Act radically changed radio regulation, thus altering forever the style and nature of future content. The new act, legislated under the previous Conservative government, was a catalyst for change in the development of UK commercial radio. A new 'light touch' regulator – The Radio Authority, a non-government department – was created to replace the IBA who had previously regulated both television and radio under similar principles under the jurisdiction of the Home Office. The Radio Authority's remit instigated significant changes to the sector. Adopting a market-driven approach, they began awarding radio licences to the highest bidder, extended commercial radio choice with the introduction of station content formats and specific target audiences; and supported new ownership, consolidation and acquisition rules. They also introduced three national commercial radio stations: Classic FM, Virgin and Talk Radio. This paper will now draw upon material within this archive to present a paradox; that heavy regulation imposed upon the commercial radio industry created quality programming across a range of genres.

This in turn offers an important, alternative (non-BBC) view of key events and reflects a shift in the public sphere.

1984 – Brave New World

Critical political economic, social and cultural events that took place in 1984, confirm its prominence in history. The Miners' Strike, the emergence of AIDS, the Ethiopian Famine, that culminated in rock concert, Live Aid and US President Reagan's endorsement of the 'Star Wars' nuclear defence system, are global examples. The AIDS crisis and the government's response to this presents an important example of the link between regulation and programme content and the backdrop of change in which commercial radio operators and their audiences, found themselves among. Commercial radio played a key role in education and information regarding health issues. One notable example is the discovery of a then new illness, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in the early 1980s. LBC was one of the first ILR stations to discuss the disease and preventative measures, during its *Nightline* discussion programmes in the 1980s (bufvc.ac.uk, 2009). Other ILR stations ran documentaries and features regarding public concern. This is an interesting point. One paradox of the continuation of the meaningful speech philosophy within ILR was that while stations were fighting for less programme regulation, they were also able to play an important part in educating the public in a practical manner, because of the speech obligation. ILR was part of the multi-million pound government awareness campaign, 'Don't Die of Ignorance'. LBC and Capital made programmes distributed to all stations via an initiative known as the Programme Sharing Scheme, to accompany the government's multimedia campaign. This was launched in 1986/7 and included stark television advertisements and a leaflet drop to every home in the UK. Marr suggests that "coping with AIDS was one of the most effective public information and healthcare stories of modern times". Its approach was to avoid traditional conservative messages regarding moral values, focusing on a more factual and pragmatic approach which would "shock the country into changing sexual habits" (Marr 2007: 410). This became apparent by the 'safe sex' message that was promoted during the campaign by encouraging people to use condoms, rather than take the moral high ground and abstain from sexual activity (Marr 2007). ILR content therefore, through its documentary-making, news bulletins

and phone-in / advice programmes, such as LBC's *Nightline*, appears to have played a key role in creating a marked shift in the public sphere. During *Nightline*, medical experts and counsellors regularly discussed listeners' concerns over the illness. The archives reveal changes to the nature of the language and tone of both broadcasters and the general public when discussing AIDS awareness. The language appears to move from shy and conservative to graphic and frank.

Much of the work created by individual ILR stations during the 1980s is contained within the Programme Sharing Scheme. The change since the period covered by material in this collection is remarkable, not least because the truly local stations of the 1970s and 1980s have since been absorbed by larger radio groups (Street 2007). The Programme Sharing Scheme is an important example of commercial radio innovation for three reasons: it demonstrates a unique breadth and range of independent programme and production skills; it can be regarded as an early form of syndicated programming; it serves as an historical document. Yet it also appears paradoxical. The Scheme came at a point in the industry's history where stations were challenging the nature of the regulatory model, as Stoller's (2010) and Wray's (2010) work outlines. Both suggest that 1984 was the pivotal moment in provoking change. The Programme Sharing Scheme, was on the one hand, borne out of regulation and the regulator's demand for meaningful speech; conversely, some producers regarded it as an opportunity to develop their skills and ideas, *in spite of* regulation (Bernard, personal communication, 2009). The uniqueness of the programmes was its local origination by individual ILR stations and ranged from music and entertainment, interviews and reviews, dramas and documentaries, with national appeal:

When local radio journalists and producers are working in their own back yard 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 is particularly strong.

(Felicity Wells, *Independent Broadcasting Journal*, September, 1984)

The Scheme presents evidence of a whole new sound for commercial radio, in contrast to the formulaic, predominately music-based programming that exists today. New generations of radio producers and managers are often unaware of the quality of ILR production, both technically and conceptually and the Programme Sharing Scheme is therefore a major part of its history. Secondly, the Scheme was arguably the fore-runner for syndicated and networked programming in the UK. "It's pre-packaged network ILR" reported media commentator Nick Higham in *Broadcast* in August 1983. At this point no programmes were shared across commercial radio: "While the Authority had long encouraged a modest degree of programme-sharing, it had never favoured national syndication of programmes because of the paramouncy of local output" (Barnard 1989: 85). However, the experience of the Scheme would change some perceptions among the radio stations of the value of syndication. Pressure and lobbying from the AIRC would eventually lead to the IBA's acceptance of the first networked and sponsored programme. *The Network Chart Show*. The format of the show was a top forty rundown sponsored by Nescafé, launched on Sunday 30 September, 1984 in a deal worth over half a million pounds.¹ It also enabled ILR to compete with Radio 1's *Top Forty*.

The legacy of programme sharing was that it demonstrated the breadth and range of the talent within ILR both technically and editorially, it helped create diversity, it helped develop an early form of syndication and importantly, its content provided a voice and perspective on many key cultural and social issues. It was held in high regard by the IBA and deemed to be 'quality' programming. Most notable was that these programmes were produced despite financial and resource constraints. Stations were encouraged to enter programmes, via the IBA, to radio awards, such as the Prix Italia. As Johnson and Turnock point out however, "Industry awards such as BAFTAs and the Prix Italia, were seen as particular identifiers of quality: ratings were not so highly considered" (2005: 110). However, there was, as Hendy describes in the context of BBC, an issue of programming for 'pleasure', which provides a useful context to the perceived success of the Programming Sharing Scheme:

There was also an inherent tension between what producers wanted and what listeners wanted. Those who wanted programmes valued creativity, by which they meant the opportunity to offer something unfamiliar, or something up to date in subject matter and

¹ All ILR stations were contracted to take *The Network Chart Show* between 5-7pm each Sunday.

style, perhaps something even a little challenging or unsettling. Listeners on the other hand, were strongly attached to familiarity.

(Hendy 2007: 369)

Conclusion

1988 would prove to be a defining point in the end of IBA regulation. Ironically, the demise of the IBA – the safeguard in ensuring traditional programming standards, came as Thatcherism also peaked. Marr (2007) uses a term to refer to British politics in 1988 which appears relevant to commercial radio: “The Year of Hubris”:

In the late eighties the Thatcher revolution overreached itself. The inflationary boom happened because of the expansion of credit and a belief among ministers that, somehow, the old laws of economics had been abolished. Britain was now in a virtuous, endless upward spiral.

(Marr 2007: 464)

In January 1988, following consultation over the 1987 Green Paper: *Radio: Choices and Opportunities*, Douglas Hurd announced that a new separate radio regulator would be appointed. To say the IBA was disappointed was an understatement. “We regret the Government’s announcement of its intention to remove regulatory responsibility for radio from the IBA” commented John Whitney in the IBA press release issued the same day (Ofcom archives, 19 January, 1988). Chairman Lord Thomson went further and suggested the Government’s decision was a mistake: “The political irony is that the IBA, historically, is one of the ingenious creations of British Conservative governments” he said, outlining the IBA’s role in 1955 with ITV and in 1972 with ILR, in a personal letter to Douglas Hurd in *The Guardian*, on 25 January, 1988. Of course Thomson may have missed the point. It was the fact that the Government wanted to break free from the traditional stalwart of Conservatism, which had by now been replaced by Thatcherism and the rise of the free market ethos that influenced Hurd’s decision (Marr 2007).

The continual shift in the role of the audience and the use of the public sphere is likely to have also acted as a catalyst for change. There appears to have been a shift in the traditional regulatory philosophy. Initially programming was based on IBA perceptions regarding what was deemed ‘good’ content. Stoller (forthcoming 2010) refers to this in

his chapter "Doing well by doing good". The Peacock Report's notion of 'consumer sovereignty' may have influenced opinion in the public sphere and led to increased awareness of and demand for new styles of broadcasting. By 1990 however, the effect of the actions of the industry during the Heathrow Conference in 1984 led to what can be regarded as the start of deregulation for commercial radio (Stoller 2010; Wray 2010). The Broadcasting Act 1990 removed a number of constraints and the majority of stations chose not to continue with speech programmes, preferring to fulfil their desire to concentrate on music formats for target audiences.

What is clear that the nature of the relationship between regulation and programme content shows that the obligations imposed by ILR's public service remit appear to have had a positive effect on content quality. This in turn reveals three significant points that serve as ILR's legacy: its role as a social commentator; the quality of its programme-making skills as comparable to the BBC; and in sharp contrast to today's programming model.

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