

RTÉ Long Wave Radio – why it matters to us all

SINCE 1926 and until 2008, RTÉ Radio 1 was available on a standard radio to much of the Irish in Britain on their famous Athlone Medium Wave frequency.

On ending MW, RTÉ's Director of Operations, JP Coakley, then promised the Irish in Britain - and indeed Northern Ireland - that RTÉ Radio 1 would remain on 252 kHz Long Wave as part of their commitment to serving the Irish across the island of Ireland and overseas - a promise soon to be broken at short notice in 2014 with a sudden attempt to close the Long Wave frequency in a move to digital.

But RTÉ had no intention of providing Radio 1 on Digital Radio in Britain or Northern Ireland. Instead, listeners would be expected to migrate from familiar transistor or car radios directly to satellite or the Internet.

As soon as RTÉ announced the closure, there was a strong backlash from the Irish in Britain. RTÉ had not banked on the Long Wave listenership getting together to protest at the closure and to lobby TDs, Senators and even the President of Ireland on this issue.

Conor McGinn, MP for St. Helens in Merseyside, directly lobbied his Irish counterparts: Jimmy Deenihan, the former Minister for State for the Diaspora, received hundreds of letters and emails on the subject, groups at major Irish centres across Britain got together to protest the closure and a major campaign was launched - orchestrated by the Irish in Britain group and assisted by Enda O'Kane, a retired RTÉ engineer, who offered valuable technical advice.

The campaign made a difference but with a compromise and a sting in the tail; the transmission power of the Long Wave signal was to be progressively reduced up to the final closure date. Now the reception of Radio 1 is difficult in the daytime and almost impossible at night.

RTÉ's much weaker signal is often swamped by Radio Algeria on the same frequency, and even in Ireland the signal is weak and interfered with. Compare and contrast this with the powerful signal put out by the

former pop station Atlantic 252, with robust UK wide coverage when they transmitted at full power on the same frequency.

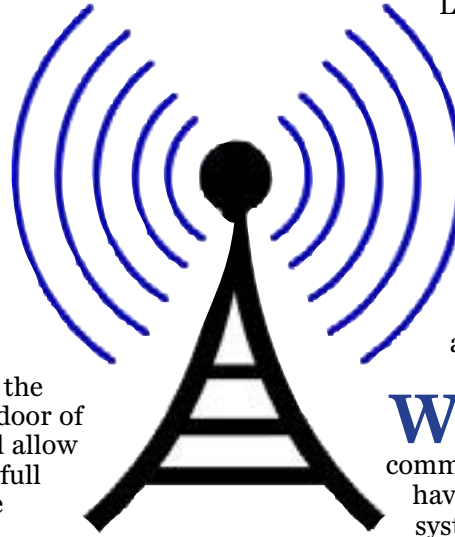
The old 252 kHz frequency is no longer fit for purpose. It would make a lot of sense for RTÉ to move to the clear channel next door of 261 kHz, this would allow RTÉ to transmit at full power, allowing the station again to be clearly heard in Britain, over much of Europe and southwards towards the Alps.

As RTÉ is about to fade out its longwave service, Richard Logue outlines the campaign to keep RTÉ Radio 1 on longwave for the diaspora in Britain

FOLLOWING THE announcement of the extended closure date, the Irish in Britain group, led by their former CEO Jennie McShannon agreed with the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs to co-ordinate a mass survey on the Irish diaspora in Britain listenership.

During 2016, over 3,000 people responded, and when the survey was published it was crystal clear that the majority of people who responded wanted to keep RTÉ Radio 1 on their Long Wave radios.

RTÉ claim that Long Wave radio, being old technology, is obsolete in today's digital world, but nothing could be further from the truth. The current RTÉ Long Wave transmitter is digital ready and at times has transmitted in the new DRM (Digital Radio Mondiale) format being received loud and clear in



London. Indeed, the supposedly old and obsolete Long Wave band has characteristics that FM Radio and DAB Radio cannot match - the ability to send a signal a very long way with a single transmitter.

What's more, TDF, the French communications company have developed a new system for Android tablets and phones that use the Long Wave and Medium Wave bands to send music, video and data. It would seem that there's plenty of life in the old dog yet!

RTÉ's bid to get RTÉ Radio 1 on the Digital Radio Multiplex (group of stations) here in Britain failed. A second attempt in Manchester, also failed both due to regulatory difficulties with the British regulator Ofcom.

Clearly, if RTÉ maintain the Long Wave service then they are only answerable to the Irish authorities, avoiding going cap in hand to the British to seek permission to transmit.

We in the Save RTÉ Long Wave Radio campaign believe that far from being an obsolete technology, LW252 has a digital future. At this time of Brexit and international instability, why wouldn't Ireland keep and strengthen its voice to the world.

I and many others hope that RTÉ will do the right thing by not only keeping its Long Wave service, but strengthening it and putting it onto a clear channel so all can listen. If funding is an issue, perhaps the money could be ringfenced as part of the budget for diaspora outreach. ■