

25. March 2024

Dear Sirs,

I am writing in response to your Consultation on the BBC's proposal to launch four new music radio stations on DAB+.

My personal interest in (and indeed fascination with) Radio goes back to the 1960s, so I can clearly recall the previous seminal developments in the Corporation's national services; namely the launch of BBC Radio 1 and the renaming of the Light, Home and Third; BBC Radio Five in the 1990s; and the digital services in the early 2000s.

From the 1970s onwards commercial competition was introduced, initially on a local 'full service' basis and then nationally, with the further addition of DAB capacity enabling a plethora of services to be launched as 'spin off' stations or niche offerings. It goes without saying that the competitive landscape today is very different to that which pertained in earlier decades.

Progressively lighter regulation in the commercial sector has allowed large radio groups to form and introduce branded services across the UK. They are well able to make their case as to whether the new BBC plans for the Radio 1 Dance, Radio 1 extension, Radio 2 extension and Radio 3 extension are likely to largely duplicate what has come to be already provided by this sector. The groups in furthering their own commercial interests could be said to have built resilience against competition.

In my comments I wish to focus particularly on Question 3 with regard to one of the proposed services, the Radio 2 extension.

As described, it appears to be very similar to Boom Radio, which came on air in February 2021 to serve an audience aged 55 and over with music drawn from the 50s, majoring with a deep dive into the 60s and 70s, and up to the present day if the style matches the overall sound of the station. The presenters, broadcasting from across the country, know and relate to their audience, providing company and a sense of context and community. The station also regularly offers 'specials' to tie in with significant music and radio anniversaries.

The BBC plans stress the availability of unique 'live music' and interview content, but in everyday practice this is likely to be the icing rather than the cake, with the vast majority of output being music from the 50s, 60s and 70s.

At this point I should declare a professional interest; I have been a music radio programmer and presenter since the 1970s having joined Downtown Radio ahead of its launch in March 1976, and becoming Head of Programming in 1979, those duties expanding with the arrival of Cool FM in 1990. In 2000 I moved to Belfast City Beat as Station Director, and in 2004 to U105 as Managing Director until 2008. From 2012 to 2018 I was involved in the application for and then the running of Belfast 89, a Community service for the 55 plus age group.

Over my time in the radio industry, I have got to know many of the people in other stations across the UK and Ireland. Not least are those behind Boom Radio, who having identified a gap in radio provision applied themselves by devoting huge amounts of time and personally invested funds to make this a reality, using novel techniques to ensure that a variety of known professional voices could broadcast regularly from their own homes. It is, in two words, a 'passion project', but those behind it are highly experienced and realistic, and deserve appreciation and support for their initiative and dedication.

This is all now being provided by the market, and any proposal to replicate the essence of Boom Radio using public funds has the potential to be a destabilising intervention in the radio ecology.

There is an aspect to the BBC proposals which needs clarification however. If existing capacity on the BBC National Multiplex is to be used for any new DAB+ stations that may be given the green light, does this mean that some current BBC services will move from standard DAB to DAB+ to free up the necessary capacity?

If so, this should be stated, as there are listeners with older DAB sets that do not receive DAB+ and they would thus lose access to their favourite stations on that platform.

I trust that these thoughts will be helpful, and look forward to following the outcome of the Consultation.

Yours faithfully,

John Rosborough