

THE IRISH RADIO EXPERIMENT - THE RISE

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As a follow up to Tim Matthews' article on Local Radio in *Elire*, in the January/February issue, we take a closer look at the continuing saga of the Irish pirate stations and in particular the controversy surrounding Dublin station Radio Nova. As an illustrative case study of the battle between government and commercial and public interests in radio broadcasting the story has many twists. Quite how and where it will end even now seems uncertain.

In the January/February issue, Tim Matthews' article 'Local Radio—The Irish Experience' detailed the recent history of pirate radio in Ireland. One of the most remarkable aspects of the story being the rise of the 'super-pirates'. These highly successful, well-financed, professional stations have been so enormously successful that they have forever altered public, government and media attitudes to broadcasting in Ireland.

Currently, Ireland's most successful station is Radio Nova. However, this is only after seven years of progression from weekend radio in bedrooms to the fully professional 24-hour FM clutter free music radio of today. Initially Radio Dublin, then ARD (Radio 257) and Big D pioneered high energy commercial pop radio. Between December 1977 and the summer of 1980, Dublin basically had ARD and Big D as sole competitors on the youth radio market. Big D experimented with a forward looking rock and album format on FM, as QFM. Then in 1979 RTE (the state broadcasting service Radio Telefís Éirann) created a second channel. After the initial great hopes, this turned out to be a considerable disappointment, despite using the top talent from Dublin's fair crop of stations.

Meanwhile, ex-Caroline and RNI, DJ Tony Allan had been working ARD and Big D, and had fully 'voused out' the situation. Brian McKenzie, also a Caroline/RNI veteran had set up Bay City Studios, in Dublin's Herbert Street, as a radio production studio and an agency for Chris Cary's Comp Shop, computer shop. Earlier a project involving Robbie Dale, Chris Cary and some others, using a ship to cruise the Mediterranean holiday beaches, under the name of Sunshine Radio had fallen through. This was when the ship sank in rough seas on its way for a fitting out. In the meantime RTE's new station was proving to be a damp squid, and yet another hung parliament was returned in Dublin.

This prompted the investment of around £50,000 in an Irish land based station, by Robbie Dale, Chris Cary and Philip Solemans, all well known from their previous involvement in offshore radio. This new station, named Sunshine Radio, was to hit England from Ireland's East coast. ARD's Don Moore was approached for a location, and so Sunshine started broadcasting in September 1980 from

the Sand's Hotel, north of Dublin adopting an up-tempo top-40 dance music format. The station overcame initial sabotage, after its 150 ft tower was cut down with bolt cutters. As Cary later said, "I was a bit shocked, especially after we paid for it in good Sterling!" Sunshine quickly attracted local trader advertising as its Collins transmitters produced 700W, ERP 3kW, and was clearly audible on 531 kHz all over Dublin and deep into Northern Ireland and Britain's west coast. Audio processing with Orban Optimised AM brought a loudness and clarity of signal that was considered to be unrivalled in the British Isles.

Initial uncertainty about possible government action restricted investment in studio equipment, and broadcasting hours were restricted to enable the equipment to be used for production work. An Alice STAM desk formed the heart of the studio with Sparta turntables, Stanton cartridges, two Revex B77 reel-to-reel tape machines, Senheiser and AKG microphones, and Sennex cart machines. A graphic equaliser, an Ashly compressor, monitor amp and the Optimised all sat on a shelf above the mixing desk and many DJs were tempted to adjust the Optimised to get their own special sound!

Sunshine quickly established a 30% share of audience surveys, and attracted agency advertisers, who had previously refrained from advertising with pirates due to the less powerful signal and lack of skilled, co-ordinated programming. In early 1981 personnel, managerial and financial difficulties culminated with the withdrawal of Chris Cary from the station's day to day activities although he did retain some financial interest in Sunshine.

Sunshine dominated the dozen or so pirates around the Dublin area, but due to its location, did not get a really satisfactory AM signal into the city. This allowed the two big Dublin pirates, ARD and primarily Big D, with their quality FM signals to hold on to their audiences well into 1981. Had Sunshine gone FM, as advised, and hit the Dublin market harder, its well produced and professional sound would have completely silenced all opposition. ARD (or Radio 257) provided an ever decreasing role as its DJs left for Sunshine. Big D (or Q102 FM) as it was sometimes known on FM, had a final bumper nine months, giving a progressive rock and album mix by night and hard pop by day. RTE Radio 1 and Radio 2 provided stereo FM, but with weak and badly under modulated signals.

Chris Cary having left Sunshine, borrowed funds from his Comp Shop company, and sank £120,000 into studio and transmitting gear for an FM only station. He was about to hit Dublin with what Big D had tried to do. High energy 'yap free' progressive radio. FM was still a relatively new medium. Cary was to completely change all that.

Radio Nova appeared in the summer of 1981 on 88.2 MHz with a CS1 1 kW transmitter on the top of Bay City's terraced building in Dublin's city centre. The format, though not new, was perfected for Dublin and relieved the city from the inane and often non-stop drivel

that cluttered both radio from Britain, and the local stations. His clutter free format soon caught the imagination of the public. Cary restricted his DJs to one link every three or four records and actually provided them with a short list of phrases which they were allowed to use. He gave them tapes of radio to listen to, and even flew his jocks to Los Angeles to get the ear for tight up-market hot radio. This was combined with their previous experience to produce a uniquely Dublin cosmopolitan sound which exactly suited the new progressive and freer thinking, educated Dublin youth. Cary ran a tight ship. The professionalism achieved is one of Nova's greatest hallmarks, gaining Nova great respect in broadcast circles. Any breach of his regulations could quickly result in the erring DJ looking for work elsewhere. Most of the records were transferred to carts and Orban Optimised FM processing was used, all totally unique in the British Isles. As a lone leader, free advertising was offered to attract clients and soon Nova's distinctive style was the talk of Dublin. RF interference problems forced a move to a higher site in Rathfarnham, seven miles south of the city. Programmes continued 24 hours a day with a distinctly American flavour. Watermark franchised programmes, American Top 40 and Country Countdown, together with a truly professional operation helped to create a sound which had previously not been heard in Europe.

In November 1981 Chris imported a mammoth 3 ton RCA 10 kW transmitter, of somewhat antique proportions. This operated on an irregular basis on 846 kHz, and for a short time on 891 kHz, before being sold. Later in 1982, a CS1 10 kW transmitter was installed to be operated on 819 kHz. After starting with a Teac 4-channel board and an ITC triple stack cart machine plugged into an Optimised and a 1 kW FM, Nova had come a long way. Studies were now in the Bay City premises. Microwave Associates STLs carried the encoded stereo signal to the transmitter site where the AM sum was derived and processed again using Optimised. The studio featured a Pye SM8 desk with EMT948 turntables and two TTC triple stacks.

Station format was strictly controlled with new records chosen exclusively on their ability to fit the station sound, and on a phone-in basis, on a request line. First class promotion and marketing produced an amazing exponential increase in advertising revenue in the Station's first year. Survey figures* for May 1982 gave Nova a week day reach of 53% while the national pop service RTE Radio 2 reached only 32% in Dublin.

In March 1982 a production studio was installed at Nova to meet growing in house dubbing and production needs. Equipment in this studio included a Soundcraft Series 809, 24 into 8 (16) desk, an Otari S050 8-track 3 in reel-to-reel recorder, a Revex PR 99, Technics SP 105 turntable and a jackfield and effects rack featuring an Ursa Major Space Station. At this stage power on FM was increased with the purchase of a 5 kW CS1 transmitter and the ERP increased to about 20 kW, while reception reports flooded in from all over Europe for the

OF THE SUPER PIRATES

AM broadcasts.

To combat Nova's success on FM, Sunshine Radio followed with its own FM service on 91.6 MHz in December 1981. A second hand Pye 1 kW transmitter was purchased together with an RCA valve exciter! New studios were constructed in a large portable cabin to the rear of the original studio and provided greatly improved facilities.

With the completion of the new studios Sunshine commenced 24 hour broadcasting and expanded their news coverage to provide the first ever round the clock news service in Ireland. Extra equipment included another Alice STM8 desk together with four playback and one record Audicord card machines. Two additional Revco 877 tape machines and a pair of Spuria turntables completed the new equipment. Both studios were acoustically treated, as far as the small budget available would allow, and isolation provided by the timber frame, air gaps, plasterboard, rockwool and carpet approach. This proved adequate if not quite up to IBA standards! Each studio was designed to function as an on-air or production area and a custom roasting system allowed for a split service if necessary.

Sunshine later acquired a pair of 1 kW AM transmitters and in late 1982 a 5 kW FM CSI transmitter was installed in an attempt to boost the signal into Dublin from the sea level site. This proved only marginally successful and the 5 kW (now 100.5 FM) transmitter became an expensive link to the relocated and renovated 1 kW (now 101.5 FM).

Moves towards legislation of the airwaves and a clamp down on the pirate stations were always slow, as the governments concerned seldom stayed for more than six to nine months. In any case Big D Radio had set a legal precedent in April 1978. Since that time when Bid D wheeled its gear out of court in a blaze of public support, no station had been raided. In any case the politicians had realised how popular the stations were, and used them accordingly, much to the embarrassment of the Ministers for Posts and Telegraphs, especially during elections!

September 1982 saw the first concerted effort to hinder Nova's runaway success. The STL frequencies were interfered with from a source said to be the RTE National Broadcast Museum. To combat the jamming, the studios were relocated within 12 hours to a temporary building at the transmitter site. Because of RPI interference problems news bulletins and features were recorded in Herbert Street and taken to the new studio by courier every hour.

Attempts to end the jamming by legal action had no success and it was only when the engineers responsible 'lost interest', after a few weeks, that a return to the city centre studios was possible.

After the jamming was disposed of, Cary opened a second station, Kiss FM on 102.7 MHz. This was to fully 'FM educate' the public. Kiss was a chic, hard hitting and fast action station. It gave Dublin four hours of rock at night, the first time since Big D's close, and then clutter free easy listening 'good late night FM'—all totally unheard of anywhere else in

Europe. Many Nova personnel feel that it was Kiss that was the 'creme de la creme' of Dublin city radio. It became Europe's finest and most progressive, popular FM signal. This left RTE with almost nothing in Dublin.

Cary, having privately expressed his wish to have a second Radio Luxembourg, announced plans for a 200 kW LW station, out of the Dublin's holiday camp, well north of Dublin. However, as February 1983 passed the LW idea was dropped. A new government was elected, with a long run ahead of it. It had announced that it would give the stations a month to wind up, before new legal stations were licensed, following new legislation which was to be passed by Parliament.

Cary proceeded with plans for a new big station. Sales teams were planned for Belfast and Liverpool. A 250 ft tower was bought and a 50 kW AM transmitter imported.

Nova and Kiss together provided a reach of 65% in the 18 to 20 age group with RTE Radio 2 at 19% and Sunshine at 12.4%. These figures reflected the dramatic decline in advertising revenue for the National pop service, which was also partly funded by licence fees. Thus, intense pressure was put on the government to stop the demise of RTE.

Though denied in public, but admitted in private, it is alleged that under no circumstances would the ILR stations in Ulster and Britain's west coast, ever allow Cary to hit them with a saleable signal. Already RTE was badly hit. Sources in Blackpool explained that Kiss FM had been relayed on AM, over the top of the local ILR station Red Rose Radio. It is believed that, even though Cary had nothing at all to do with the relay, this was used as the lever to crack Nova.

The Department for Posts and Telegraphs acted, without cabinet approval and so government action came as a total surprise, despite frantic warnings after a major tip off. Nova staff ignored this tip off and when a

Dennis Murray 'Rockin' on Kiss FM

warrant was served on 18th May, 1983, Nova was off the air within hours and over £500,000 of equipment was seized. Stories of the raid tell of government officials having to borrow a low loader from Nova to transport all the equipment. One engineer was keen to cut through a live feeder on a 5 kW transmitter! Cary co-operated calmly, and politely, even offering the officials coffee.

As Nova had so much equipment a planned raid on Sunshine Radio was postponed. The government cited interference to essential services as the reason for its action. As news of the raids spread, small stations all over the country closed voluntarily.

The raids came out of the blue, and completely stunned the public. Their most popular radio stations were just ripped off the air. The size of the political blunder was massive, as every MP was bombarded with mail and phone calls, RTE was blamed as well. The raids came days after a major charity fund raising campaign by Nova. Operation Novacare had raised over £30,000 for the Central Remedial Clinic. Sunshine also raised a slightly smaller sum, later. Cary and Dale were not slow to fight back and both sought injunctions against infringement of trade, but were unsuccessful. With low power transmitters Nova resumed its transmissions within 24 hours. As in the early days, when raided, the old pirates just got back in business as fast as possible. Later, the Minister announced he would raid Nova again. With this news, Cary decided to close at 6 pm that day. Unprecedented scenes greeted the final few minutes of Nova. The street outside the station was filled with angry, tearful, and disbelieving fans who could not believe their favourite station was being taken away from them. An emotional farewell link by DJ Tony Allen appealed for car drivers to blow their horns and the chorus was taken up all over the city with Civic Guards forced to retreat from traffic jams near the station. For well over an hour



everything stopped in Dublin, as people left buses and shops screaming 'Leave Nova alone'.

In the following days, adverse public reaction to the closures forced ministers to reconsider their actions. Nova quickly returned after its official closure down to a complete turn around on the Friday by Mitchell and Nealon, the two Ministers involved.

Sunshine, which had also been raided, remained silent. The raids served only to increase support for private radio. Government proposals for local radio were made to seem irrelevant in the flood of emotional support which was released. First of all, 30 stations in one month time, then six months, and now this has increased to a year or two. In early 1984, there is still no legislation.

When the Nova and Sunshine closure cases finally came to court in October 1983 the maximum penalty was imposed. This consisted of a fine of £25 for Nova and £20 for Sunshine and the return of all equipment in working order! Radio Nova had now got its 50kW transmitter back.

Flushed with this complete climb down by the Government and with his 50kW transmitter finally installed and working, with calls from Norway to Holland, Cary decided to get even bigger. After years of prodding, and always willing to try new things out, Cary got in to TV. Dublin had already seen a pirate TV station, Channel D, which was producing breakfast TV, and late night films, to a small Dublin audience in 1981. Cary ran a test card, and one night's programming, albeit as a test, on Channels 60 and 66, in December 1983. He ran 100 W out of Herbert Street, up to a 9kW UHF Italian transmitter. This was just too much for Minister Ted Nealon, who ordered a raid. Even though Cary turned all the gear off, officials removed it a week later. Many commentators now feel that this action lost Cary a great deal of public support, and it also reawakened the dormant fury of RTE.

In the week up to Christmas 1983, Nova and Kiss FM were sporadically jammed by RTE. A public campaign on the air waves, ended up with all RTE's phones jammed by irate Nova and Kiss listeners. The jamming stopped for Christmas. During December, Nova took in between £96,000 and £200,000 of advertising. It was on full power at 50kW and its sister station Kiss was also doing extremely well.

In January this year, RTE was given authorisation by Nealon to use 88.2 MHz, 102.7 MHz, and 819 kHz, for test transmissions, and also 190 to 400 MHz and 900 MHz—the Nova/Kiss link channels. Just before this, Cary had been warned, take the 50kW transmitter off or we raid. By the second week of January, Cary just walked in and closed Kiss. Within days of this, Nova was being completely jammed with rebroadcast RTE 2 on AM and FM. As before, the studio (the redundant Kiss one) was moved to the site of the 50kW, 1kW back up and 10kW AM rigs. A reliable tip off said Nova would be raided and permanently put off the air, in a matter of days.

During fierce snow storms, the 50kW transmissions drifted slightly on top of BBC Radio Scotland. Engineer Brian Edgar turned the transmitter off. This probably saved Nova from the raids—due to happen the next day. However, despite every effort Cary had yet to

get a sustained signal out of his FM sites. RTE was determined to destroy Nova this time, and with it the lives and careers of the 47 journalists and broadcasters it employs.

During January and February Nova was relentlessly pursued across the entire FM band by RTE jamming, despite disapproval of this illegal action by government ministers in the Dail, the Irish parliament. Nova on each occasion was massively jammed on the four surrounding FM channels every time they moved to a different frequency. Dublin listeners were in the situation where despite getting a full scale reading on their tuners, all they could hear was noise, or silence from the jamming carrier.

Advertising collapsed as it shifted to the as yet unjammed Sunshine. The result was a round of staff sackings during February. Cary refused to pay redundancy, back pay or holiday money to the sacked staff and this inflamed the NUJ (National Union of Journalists) staff involved. Immediately the entire remaining news and production staff walked out and picketed the Nova offices. Nova was now down to a minimum of staff. A full union embargo exists on Nova, much to the delight of RTE who sent a film crew to film the picketing ex-Nova staffers. Many of the striking staffers failed to see the paradox, as it was RTE who had caused the sackings to begin with!

In early March, Nova Media Services, which owns and operates Nova, was served with a VAT bill of £150,000 backdated over two years. Cary, who claimed that Nova was broke due to the RTE jamming, paid only a portion of the bill. The result was the liquidation of Nova Media Services on March 9th, and the paying off of all the DJs. However, the managing director, Mike Hogan, refused to issue notices to the staff and resigned in disgust at what had happened. Despite these developments Nova remained on air pending an official winding up of the company. Then in a dramatic behind the scenes move on March 10th, a new company was formed, backed by English and Irish businessmen, with the aim of "ensuring that Radio Nova would continue to broadcast". Cary, meanwhile, hadn't been seen for weeks and had effectively left Ireland and Nova. However, it is understood that Nova's new backers have retained Cary's services as a consultant.

Nova by now had switched off all its FM transmitters, so RTE began jamming Sunshine Radio in the last week of March on both its FM frequencies—100.5 and 101.5 MHz—and is due to jam the AM service in early April. As the leader of the Irish opposition party, Charles Haughey, has an interest in Sunshine Radio, this further jamming by RTE has begun to cause considerable political aggravation. For 10 days (as the time of writing, the duration of the RTE jam) the question of RTE's illegal jamming has been raised daily in the Irish parliament, but each time it has been ruled "out of order".

It is ironic that now that RTE is jamming Sunshine, the Nova channels are free. Chris Cary, therefore, is expected to go back on FM shortly, probably on the Kiss frequency as another Dublin pirate is operating on the old Nova 88FM channel. This development dispels RTE's excuse that they are carrying out test transmissions on these frequencies, as they no

longer jam 88FM and having hounded Nova on every frequency and driven them off FM, have now gone after Sunshine. This leaves the following Dublin FM stations remaining: Annabell, 88FM, K-FM 104, Capital, or C96FM/AM 1017, and the country station Treble T Radio.

RTE's tactic of jamming has been by far their most successful means of eliminating the pirates. Two large stations in Cork, ERI and Southcoast, who both operated 10kW transmitters have been jammed for a considerable time and they are now facing closure and have already sacked most of their staff. Faced with the jamming, it is probable, despite complaints to the EBU in Geneva, that Sunshine and Nova will be back on air sharing transmitters on FM. RTE will therefore have to invest heavily in jamming transmitters in order to jam all the FM signals. From RTE's point of view, the jamming is an act of desperation and anger at the government delay in introducing local radio legislation.

It had been hoped that the Dublin Radio experiment would have come of age peacefully. That is: a) an announcement of legal stations; b) a period for these to be planned, financed and built; and c) a closure of all non-licensed stations. In this way, continuity of employment would be granted to the broadcasters. These are, after all, the people who will be on the air regardless of format and controlling bodies.

It is hoped the respective bodies will resolve the situation. RTE can easily jam forever. It must in so doing measure carefully the cost of the animosity felt by the public, and more acutely that of the broadcasters, especially those out of work, whom it will ultimately have to face. Jamming Nova and Sunshine off air will only result in empty vengeance, a shallow victory, and confirm that they did a better job anyway.

Progress towards a Local Radio Bill is slow. It is suggested that a complete restructuring of broadcasting in Ireland is being considered because of the demands of cable TV, satellite TV and economic factors. The implications must wait for a future article. However, it is undeniable that Nova and Sunshine have shown that the transition between pirate radio and commercial local radio can be made and that stations can be professional, technically sound and make money as well!

These stations operate outside an imposed regulatory framework yet they pay taxes and VAT, MCPS, and employ a large number of dedicated staff. They are extremely popular and supply a service which is in demand but cannot or will not be met by RTE.

This highly competitive, functional radio, which has developed multi-station markets all over Ireland, holds considerable implications for Britain's highly controlled, over regulated and restricted radio services. As many of Britain's pirates go weekday, they shortly will face a new Telecommunications Bill promising severe penalties. Hope of deregulation and a real choice of music FM must now be dismissed as a fantasy—in Britain anyway. □

References

1. Lansdowne Market Research: May 1982.
2. Dial A Directory: November 1983.