Why they're not afraid of government threats on Radio Nova

THERE ARE thirty pirate radio stations operating in Ireland, twelve in Dublin. Between them they have captured more than 30 per cent of the listening public, and for the last decade they have been operating outside the law, but free from any interference apart from several raids made in the early days of Irish pirate radio.

Last week the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs re-introduced the threat of closure. He favours a community radio system which would shut out the commercial interests altogether and give RTE Radio a clear field with virtually no competition.

The penalty for any commercial pirate station attempting to stay on the air will be a £10,000 fine.

The Minister's determination to shut down all of the pirate operations has caused extreme bitterness among the pirates who say they are providing jobs for hundreds of people and healthy competition for RTE. There has been a suggestion that it would be far better for the State to allow the pirates operate provided they paid part of their profits to support the state radio. Today we look at the operation behind one of the newest stations, Radio Nova, and meet the man who runs it.

MARY GLENNON REPORTS

Station boss Chris Casey (centre) with, clockwise from top right, DJ John Clarke, computer manager and librarian Jack Benson, DJ Tony Fenton, accountant Anne Laird, and Terry Riley.

The pirate chief who just wanted something to do

THE GOVERNMENT promise of the chop, last week's Christmas present of doom and gloom, has caused a severe case of rising panic among Ireland's bedsit and backroom pirate radio stations. But all wa s calm and briskly efficient at Radio Nova, as it has been for the last six months since the station broadcast its first round-the-clock dose of music from elegant offices in Herbert Street.

Panic is not on Chris Carey's itinerary. He has sunk a lot of money and work into setting up Radio Nova. But if the New Year Bill sinks the pirate station without a trace it will cause little more than a mild hiccup in the life of the man behind the most popular and talked of station here.

"I don't see how they can give me, an Englishman, a licence," he said when we had settled ourselves in the unoccupied office of the advertising staff of Radio Nova. The empty state, he explained was due to the fact that advertising is booked out up to Christmas and the staff were taking a breather.

"If it is necessary for 80 per cent of the company to be sold to Irish interests, I would certainly do that. I think that is fair enough. In fact I have had plenty of offers already. Up to now I would have been selling fresh air, but I have kept a note of those who were interested when things were risky.

"If we are forced to close down, I will. At the moment as far as the law is concerned we are just committing a misdemeanour. I am probably down on record somewhere as a naughty alien and no worse than that.

"But I will be very sorry to see it happen. I think it is also very unnecessary. Has Ireland learned nothing from America which invented the concept of commercial radio in the 1930's. Why doesn't the government take example from across the water where millions of pounds were wasted finding out that Radio One was not the answer to the pirates, and that what people want is free commercial radio, where they can switch from one to another according to their tastes.

"I think it is crazy to imagine that radio can get along without commercial interests. What are they going to do for money, carry out collections outside Superquinn? They found out to their cost in Britain that you need to have the commercial interest.

"I cannot understand why they didn't stick with Reynold's Bill which was in favour of commercial enterprise on the airwaves.

"But for the moment we will continue as if nothing is wrong. We will carry out a campaign to see if people want commercial radio and try to work up a lobby in favour of making the pirates legal. But I won't even consider the possibility of paying £10,000 fines because I wouldn't go againstthe law to that extent."

"If the worst happens, I have £150,000 worth of the best equipment in the business and a highly efficient operation, which would be snapped up by anyone interested in radio."

Whatever happens, Chris Carey feels his time will not have been wasted if social historians look back on Radio Nova as an innovation in Irish music, a precedent which showed how it is possible to be different.

If that sounds like arrogance from a "blow in" it is patently not intended as such. He makes no bones about the fact that Radio Nova is different from the rest, and it was with that intention in mind that he settled on Ireland.

He talks about his brainchild in an avalanche of enthusiasm. He fits the stereotype of neither pirate nor self-made millionaire, but rather a very high-powered and ambitious salesman accustomed to finding his own opportunities and grabbing them. So it is not really surprising to find that selling is his talent — a talent that has made him a millionaire in his thirties. He drops the fact casually into the middle of the conversation as though a minor detail was being tossed in. A company which he started with £100 six years ago made the £4 million mark this year.

"What does someone like me, who has everything, do with his money" asks Chris Carey. "I have a Rolls Royce, houses all over England and America. I have a business in Britain, specialising in computers, which runs like a Swiss watch. I earn £1,000 a day from a chain of shops I don't even own anymore."

It was the manager of the Dublin branch who aired Chris Carey to "the odd situation in Ireland."

"My manager just mentioned to me one day about this strang situation where all the pirate radio stations were operating illegally but with no interference from the State.

"But no one was really exploiting the situation. So I decided to have a try. If I hand't spent the money on this it would have gone to the British Inland Revenue."

Chris first set up Radio Sunshine — eventually sold his shares in that and started turning out the distinctive recipe that has become instantly recognisable as Radio Nova.

He wasn't just a rich man buying expertise either. Anyone who started out at 17 and spent the next decade and a half working between Radio Caroline and Radio Luxembourg in their heyday, has to know a lot about radio.

"It wasn't until I was twenty-five that began to realise that you could actually win and lose audiences on the radio by your approach."

But by then he was already beginning to spread his wings in another direction, towards becoming an entrepreneur who would take the computer world by storm. "I thought the radio world was just a pleasant set of memories from my youth."

But he kept in touch, particularly in America from where he believes, the most dynamic ideas come. And when he had made his fortune he was ready to prove his theory.

People were very sceptical when he proposed trying out these ideas here. "I decided to adapt a lot of Californian ideas, and I was told Irish audiences wouldn't go for them at all. In fact I have found great similarities between the people of the West Coast of the U.S. and here. Irish audiences have taken to the kind of radio station which plays a lot of music and has very little talk from its disc jockeys.

"Someone accused us of being a hamburger station, but that doesn't offend me. For instance you can go into MacDonalds anywhere in the world and you known you will get a certain type of food, of a very limited choice, to satisfy your hunger.

"That is what Radio Nova is for. Instantly recognisable sound, suitable for a couple of hours listening. No one was providing this sort of service."

So it was not an apochryphal story that he sacked someone for talking too much on the air? "It is true. I sacked a few people, and I would do it again if they refused to obey the order to say nothing if there is nothing worthwhile saying.

"In the Sixties, the disc jockey was the chat superstar, the listener's friend. But too many 'jocks' just prattle on nowadays. They talk junk, just for the sake of talking, which is why we cut talking to a minimum."

"We play no head-banging music, no Adam and the Ants or anything like that, because it is dreadful. We don't take smoking or drinking advertisements, and we give free spots for jobs in the mornings. We have found jobs for scores of people, including someone who has been out of work for two years.

The banks and some big State companies advertise with them, and some politicians have come onto talk, including Albert Reynolds, a couple of weeks ago.

It all sounds like the height of responsible broadcasting, just the sort of outfit that should get a licence.

"Even though it suits us to be in this limbo where there is a sort of free-for-all of the airways, I knew when I started it couldn't go on forever.

I do not think that there should be some control on what goes out on the air.

"None of the radios have done anything controversial but the fact remains that they could if they wanted to. I would like to see something like the I.B.A. in Britain to which we could look for guidance. It is much more difficult to run a station when all the responsibility is left on your own shoulders.

"Even if the Government Bill is slow in coming I think there should be some interim body who could be consulted on standards."

Chris Carey also believes that the stations who do get licences should be forced to pay part of their profits to support RTE.

"Radio Eireann will always be there. As a responsible national radio with commitments to all tastes, minority, and otherwise, I think it does an excellent job and that it is very necessary.

"People go in for a lot of RTE-bashing. It has to be very good to compete with the best in the world, just across the water, but if it falls to standards less than excellent, the bashing begins.

"I think that profits of up to 25 p.c. should be paid by the Independent stations to support RTE. It is much easier for a station like Nova to be profitable. Looking after the minorities is expensive. I'm surprised in fact that RTE doesn't spend much more than it does because they are carrying out a very expensive operation.

"I know that RTE would like a situation where all the commercial stations would be replaced with community radio. No competition. But that would be very unhealthy. Neither would I like to see RTE go downhill continuously, while the independent stations followed the trends and scooped up all the profits. I think there is room for the 12 pirate stations and RTE. But RTE do need some financial support."

"I don't like the connotations of the word pirate. We adopted squatters rights, but I don't consider we are abusing the law. We are just taking advantage of the situation. We pay huge bills to Posts and Telegraphs and we employ over 20 people.

"If we had a licence we would increase the staff. For instance we would need a much bigger newsroom. At the moment we comb the airwaves for news."

Where the personality cult is banned

WHO are the people behind the scenes who have made Radio Nova so popular in such a short time?

Anne Laird is the girl who'll usually talk to you if you ring the station.

The phone rings all day long, says Ann, who loves this hive of activity. She has compiled a chart from letters from as far away as Sweden and Denmark from people who have written in to say they pick up the Nova signals which are transmitted from the Dublin mountains at Rathfarnham.

And she deals with hundreds of letters every day addressed to the disc jockeys. For a station which bans the 'personality cult', it is amazing how many letters the individual disc jockeys get.

Jerry Fenton has just come off the earlybird stint, 6.00 a.m. to 11.00 . That's a tough one with all the time checks and traffic news and employment spots, but Jerry is rushing around making coffee for everyone and relaxing.

John Clarke is down below in the bright control room ready to keep going for the next five hours. He is a seasoned D.J. having apprenticed himself through most of the other stations including Radio Dublin, Big D, Ard which became 257, and so on.

He loves Nova, he says between records, simply because it is so good.

"It's a natural progression to go to the best one," says John swinging around on his stool as he pickets out the advertisement tapes for the next add spot.

"I have worked in some atrocious conditions. In one place the roof leaked and talking on the air would be punctuated by the sound of drops falling on the floor."

Upstairs Sybil Fennel has just arrived to join the happy throng, and she arrives in, notes in hand to deliver quite a lengthy news bulletin in that crisp style, completely undaunted by her audience. Her fellow newscasters are Terry Riley, Peter Moss, and Brian Dobson.

Each of the 'jocks', as boss Chris Carey calls them, work a five hour shift, another American idea which appeals to them, John says. Because the chat on air is cut to a minimum the strain of being on air for five continuous hours is not too bad. The worst stint of all is the middle of the night one up to the time Jerry Fenton comes on air at 6.00 a.m.

In spite of the anxiety about the latest news, the atmosphere in Nova is very good.

Chris Carey expects a lot from his staff but he pays them well—just under the RTE rate – the hours are good, and if the Radio survives and Nova continues he intends to apply all the business ideas which work in England here.

I left John Clarke surrounded by L.Ps, sitting under a big sign over his controls console which said simply 'Smile'. A chin-up philosopy for whatever comes in the New Year.