



Sounding off: Communicorp chairwoman calls for regulator with 'vision'

Independent broadcasters express concern over digital radio project

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STRONG CONCERN was expressed at the inaugural Independent Broadcasters of Ireland conference in Dublin yesterday about the digital audio broadcast (Dab) project for radio transmission.

RTÉ and a number of commercial operators are currently involved in a pilot project for the new transmission system, but a number of senior representatives of the independent broadcasting sector expressed scepticism.

Communicorp chairwoman Lucy Gaffney, meanwhile, said the radio sector needed a new regulator who had a "clear vision" and who consulted with the members. "We need productive dialogue", not a regulator who adopts "a policing role", she said.

"Are we going to have a regulatory body that will let us make money?" she asked, referring to the proposed new Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

She queried whether youth stations should be required to have the news and current affairs content that they broadcast at present, and said it would be a "disaster" if over-regulation drove listeners away.

Ms Gaffney expressed concern that Dab would allow the distribution of "targeting offerings" not subject to the constraints that currently applied to commercial radio licence holders.

She said this could undermine the millions of euro and intellectual capital that those represented at the conference had invested in their businesses.

Other much-trumpeted technological developments in the past had turned out to be "my arse", she added.

Wilton Radio chief executive Dan Healy said it was time to stop the Dab project, "or our industry will tank". He said that £400 million (€263 million) had been spent on Dab in the UK, but it was a failure. While 10 per cent of listeners in the UK used Dab, 94 per cent of them could get the same signal using analog delivery. "What problem does digital solve?" he asked.

He said young people were interested in news and current affairs content that they believed was relevant to their lives, and it allowed stations develop a distinctive identity in a fragmented market. "News and current affairs doesn't have to be 10 minutes at the top of

the hour," he said.

Pat Donnelly of Channel 6 warned that Dab would be used by UK radio stations to "swamp" the Irish market.

The deputy chief executive of the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, Celine Craig, said policy on digital radio transmission would be developed in consultation with the industry.

"There is no switch-off date for analog at the moment and we are not anywhere near that," she said. Other fears that had been expressed by the industry in the past had not been realised, she added.

It was not that existing FM content would simply be transferred on to digital but rather that content could be offered in a variety of ways. "There are lots of different opportunities there," she said.

A speaker from the floor from RTÉ said he was disappointed with the level of the debate on Dab.

The chief executive of Co Mayo-based Midwest radio, Paul Claffey, said the radio cake was "being sliced smaller and smaller" with each new station that came on air but that "when local radio fulfils its brief, it beats the competition hands down".

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Lucy Gaffney, chairwoman Communicorp Group, at the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland inaugural broadcasting conference, in Dublin, yesterday. Photograph: Eric Luke