Internet radio...Now where were we?

By [Richard Hardiman](#)   7 Sep 2012

Some time has passed since the finger-pointings of internet radio's "numbers-gate" (sessions-gate or netdynamix-gate) and the Earth, thankfully, seems to have continued moving in its orbit.

But what are we left with after the numbers write-down? After all, it was a fresh start for broadcasting. Something untried and untested within South African borders - a seemingly giant wave of a new way to interact with the medium. New ideas of how we engage with listeners and push content (strictly not new ways but perhaps a rebirth of how it "used" to be - but with a new edge). Then the finger-pointing came. With it came perhaps a more level playing field and a home closer to the truth.

What Shaun Dewberry's "expose" did do was call into question how we count listenership. How we divvy up the numbers, what we can claim is real, and what are just ones and zero's that may look good but ultimately mean nothing. As someone who sits in the industry and has a lot at stake I am still somewhere in the middle on the initial calling by Dewberry.

Some of his research was very valid. A lot of it, in my opinion, was grandstanding and still leaves a number of unanswered questions from his side, as well as some seemingly deliberate misleading quotations and figure-pushing. Be that as it may, the fact remains that he spotted a flaw and thanks to him, we have been forced into finding a solution that better fits the industry as a whole in this country.

A new industry

We also have to take a moment to examine where we truly are. It's a new industry in South Africa. It's been just over two years since its introduction and it's not even close to its real potential. I continue my argument of data becoming only cheaper and faster - never the other way around, and as such, access to these new platforms will gain momentum.

With the release of Simfy.co.za, closely modeled on the success of streaming services like Pandora and Spotify, we are already seeing moneyed players taking a gamble on the data access model to entertainment. In my opinion we are still a year and half away from seeing where this can really go, but the fact that it is already happening can only be encouraging.

The key to these online platforms is not replicating current terrestrial trends and content execution but rather offering an alternative.

One of the key USPs of online radio is the very fact that you don't get what you hear in the tailored and sterile environment of modern commercial radio. Boundaries are pushed via less legislation and oversight, a need to build an audience (and therefore, perhaps, less of a need to pander straight to the client), and a music selection that more mimics your current

iPod than that of a cleverly selected playlist that makes "everyone" happy - read mass market. It's a niche shot. Not an all-encompassing behemoth that wants to swallow up millions of ears and then deliver badly scripted ads on high repeat. There is obviously room for that and it remains a very successful model.

Now let's look at loyalty: Let's be honest, even those of us with 500 or more Facebook friends could not count on more than a handful of those "friends" for loyalty. And that is where niche products and online radio meet rather elegantly. Loyalty. People are able to find the station they want and stay there. Times spent listening remain some of the highest in the broadcasting industry worldwide because there is a distinct lack of channel hopping. The scope of online radio is such that, should you wish to engage on hard German metal, but the alternative kind, somewhere out there is a station for you. The end result is fewer listeners but we also need to move away from the client and media buyers mentality of quantity and start looking very seriously at bang-for-buck and quality of audience.

Broadcasting data on steroids

Current broadcasting statistics software that we have employed in our own business (Triton Digital) has given us access to unprecedented breakdowns of geography, listenership trends and data usage. While I can't elaborate on numbers at this stage (I am not avoiding the issue but there is a huge task involved in moving streams and links across all our platforms and that is currently in process) even if one goes by trends alone, it is broadcasting data on steroids. Immediate, verified (Ernst & Young USA if you are asking) and strategically a boon to advertisers.

Why advertise a Joburg business on a national platform? Well, simply because we can now give you the best time statistically to flight your ad when the most Joburgers are listening to the online station. Heck, if your restaurant is in Pretoria or Benoni we can pinpoint that for you as well.

And not only do we know when they are listening but we also know that, given their loyalty and the fact that they pay to listen, our product is an influencer and not a shot in the dark and a massive cost.

So where were we?

A few months back bigger terrestrial stations were getting ancy over these "numbers" and personally I cannot tell you how many people in the "industry" have said to me after the whole debacle that "they knew they were to good to be true". And to them I say, "well it turns out you were right. But don't tell me you weren't worried?"

The truth is, I believe broadcasters can see this as a slight reprieve. A major disruptor became a near-miss; however, the problem is not going away. We are going digital. The rapidity of the mobile market growth and the massive consumption of data, which is costing less by the day, can only point in one direction. Can you counter that and simply take your current product and put it online? My gut says that is perhaps the quickest way to let your audience explore what really is out there. Let's be honest, even with limited choice they are already channel hopping.

It's not the medium of radio that will be the long-term demise of how we do commercial radio now. It won't be the fact that transmitters will be turned off and we will all have to go "online" or digital to get a signal. It will be that people will seek out what suits them and find it. The problem is content and engagement. Not AM, FM, or the internet. The internet is just the conduit to explore - as was AM and FM.

Numbers: While we await new and audited figures, Mybroadband.com, in an independent investigation based on raw log-files via Shoutcast indicated a listenership of between 2000 and a peak of 4000 daily. (www.mybroadband.co.za).

ABOUT RICHARD HARDIMAN

Richard Hardiman is a founding partner of 2oceansvibe Radio and a consultant to the industry via his business iCastAfrica with over 15 years in broadcasting and online background. Contact him via email on richard@icastafrica.com or follow @RichardHardiman on Twitter.
▪ Internet radio...Now where were we? - 7 Sep 2012

View my profile and articles...