



Digital Radio Mondiale

Ruxandra Obreja, Chairman, Digital Radio Mondiale (DRM) Consortium Controller Business Development, BBC World Service talks to Intercomms about the future of digital audio broadcasting technologies



Ruxandra Obreja, Controller, Business Development, BBC World Service DRM Consortium Chairman.

Ruxandra Obreja is the Controller of Business Development for the BBC World Service. In this role she provides leadership to the business development teams in London encouraging them to build special relationships with the business communities around the globe.

Ruxandra first joined the BBC in 1985 as a producer and presenter and was appointed Head of the BBC Romanian Service in 1990. In 1997 Ruxandra was appointed Editor for the BBC European region and later became a Commissioning Editor with BBC English Network and News.

In March 2008 Ruxandra was elected Chairman of the DRM Consortium where she hopes to give coherence and strategic direction by ensuring that the various stakeholders work towards the same goal - that the DRM standard is taken up on a mass scale.

Q: What's your role in the Digital Radio Mondiale (DRM) Consortium?

A: The DRM Consortium elected me unanimously as chairperson in March this year. My day job is as Controller of Business Development for World Service. My election signalled a change in the leadership of the Consortium. The DRM Consortium started as a very enthusiastic and a very interesting technical puzzle, which was then brilliantly solved by the engineers. The standard was accepted by the ITU and it is now a global standard. The technical part of establishing the DRM is now over. What needs still to be done is getting the standard accepted on a mass scale by getting it known by the listeners and the receiver manufacturers. With the endorsement of its members, the DRM consortium has gone from a technical to a business development phase. My role in the consortium is to get it to the market and create enthusiasm both within the consortium and outside, so that DRM takes off. It is not for me to find the deals and it is not for me to promote DRM nationally, or try to sell it in the shops. It's for the chairman to energise everyone in the consortium and get solid links to industry, the regulators, stakeholders and the listeners, so it is a success. I see myself as an agent of change and also as an organiser, co-ordinator and certainly a leader.

Q: What were the reasons for the lack of acceptance previously?

A: There is a natural progression. If you look at the digital television model, it takes that long from the idea and technical innovation to its acceptance and mass take up. You might say that the digitization of radio is in itself a much more complex and long term process than for example TV digitization. We are not behind but we have to push hard at the moment, because a lot of countries are looking at the digital landscape and are taking decisions which will impact on receiver manufacturing, on the provision of services and choice and on what will be available for the listener.

We have quite a big role because we are promoting the DRM standard, but at the end of day, we are the pioneers of digital radio. In a couple of years or already

the listener does not care whether the audio comes via the DRM system or another digital system. The listeners will know that the audio is of good quality that there is a lot of content choice. How this is done technically, it doesn't matter to the wide public.

Q: What are you doing to build awareness?

A: We are looking at everything we have done. We are ready to keep the things that have worked and ditch those that are not delivering results. For many years we have been present at fairs but we think that DRM now has to be promoted by the manufacturers of transmitters or receivers.

The DRM Consortium has always been present at IBC in Amsterdam but we have changed our approach altogether this year. We were present at the EBU Digital Pod in parallel with DAB so people could experience digital radio. But we decided that this was giving us enough exposure at the stand, so to speak. And instead of having another DRM booth (apart for the EBU one), we decided to create a two hour event, where we demonstrated DRM in car and the surround sound provided by DRM with EPG and text possibilities. We showed that DRM is much more than just radio in digital format, which makes it very attractive. We targeted stakeholders and other interested people including regulators, manufacturers and broadcasters. We used this event to announce a very interesting and exciting initiative: linking two top broadcasters BBC and Deutsche Welle to launch a DRM channel for Central Europe with content that is not available in any other way. At the end of the day, I believe there must be reasons why listeners will switch from FM to a digital radio and the reason has to be choice and quality of content as well as good audibility.

Q: Is DRM perceived as a Euro-centric solution?

A: It is correct that the lab for DRM is in Europe, but the DRM takeoff might be very far from Europe and I am looking especially at Asia and Latin America. The BBC-DW channel being launched at the beginning of 2009 will

- ▶ showcase the best English programming that these organisations have to offer. We could put the same channel and beam it towards DRM markets in Asia. This is not a channel that satisfies just the needs of Central European listeners, it is the best these organisations can offer to a global audience.

Q: What can commercial interests such as chip manufacturers do to push DRM forward?

A: On the chip manufacturer side, we have very interesting news. Big companies like Analog Devices, Mirics have recently announced the creation of multi-standard chips which could be incorporated into global radio receivers catering for all standards, not just DRM. These chips have the DRM standard in them. The standard is not only very economical but also friendly to other standards.

On the regulatory side, countries in Eastern Europe, Germany, Brazil and Mexico, all have regulators who are looking at drafting recommendations they would like to see in law. Their decision isn't easy. There are all sorts of pressures and considerations and the DRM Consortium has to be more present and explain in much simpler terms what the options are and what it means for the users of the spectrum and commercial and public services. We will have to be a good ambassador for digital radio in general and explain very clearly the advantages of DRM. Our role cannot be to talk down other digital standards, but to give

regulators the full picture so that they can take a judicious decision that is right for their jurisdiction. It might seem very obvious and regulators in various countries are very knowledgeable, but it is amazing how difficult the digital question really is.

Q: How is DRM+ progressing?

A: DRM is the only digital system for all AM bands; short wave, medium wave and long wave. DRM+ is the FM equivalent. DRM+ is a complement and extension of the DRM family. At the moment we are at the stage where we can tell people that DRM+ works. During May in Germany in conjunction with the University of Kaiserslautern and Hannover, we asked participants to experience trials, both in car and terrestrially DRM+, proving that DRM+ works, it does not suffer from the dreaded interference. Now it needs standardization and of course proper equipment and receivers. There is great interest and we are organising further practical technical demonstrations just to prove that DRM+ is a robust, good system. It still needs testing, but we hope it can be standardised by the ITU and ETSI in 2009. DRM+ is not a development of DRM, it is just another side of DRM. A lot of people ask whether they should introduce DRM or wait for DRM+. They are actually two different things catering for different needs. Some broadcasters are interested in both, others just one, but the standard exists and operates with very good results.

Q: How does DRM compare to DAB and HD?

A: I won't go into technical differences, because that would suggest there was a considerable competition between the three standards. DRM+, like DRM itself, is a very robust single-frequency system that is user-friendly and allows for a very economical use of the spectrum. I might even say that when all the tests have been done, DRM+ will provide small commercial or community radios with a unique solution.

Q: What role do consumers play in generating demand for DRM?

A: It goes back to whether we market DRM or whether we market the benefits of DRM, without making people very aware of what DRM is. My answer, a very personal view point, is that promoting DRM as a system to listeners is bit of a waste of time. People seldom choose among different or competing technical standards, they go for something that satisfies their need for choice and good audibility. That is why to promote DRM from the perspective of the listener is to provide choice. I do not think that the technical details about DRM or DAB or HD would really swing it for me. What swings it, is how many stations I can listen to, how good the audibility is, whether it gives me access to the entire spectrum and whether it is mobile, i.e. in car. That is what is going to persuade the listener to ditch a tried and trusted FM only kitchen radio and invest a bit of money into something new and digital.

