



DRM Matures

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 Networks 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 happening in the world of DRM?

A: The consortium is doing extremely well. As an organisation, we are working much better together and I

think our communication and general profile is increasing. This is very welcome because, after a period of almost going totally silent, people were really wondering if the DRM Consortium was still in the business and were concerned about what was happening with the standard. We are quite excited about a number of things we have done since the summer. We have had quite a good presence at IBC in Amsterdam. There, for the first time, we had an event where we were clearly demonstrating, exactly what the benefits of DRM were. DRM uses spectrum more effectively than analogue, has better audibility and the ability to adapt which gives advertisers or the interested broadcasters the chance to complete their broadcasts with important or interesting information on either the content of the programme or with extra information for programmes. We have done all that and IBC was a very successful event.

Q: What else has been done?

A: That was then followed by a further plank in our strategy. We think that DRM or any digital radio will only attract the attention of listeners if there is enough interesting content. So, at the beginning of December, Deutsche Welle and the BBC went together and launched a DRM channel for Europe. This is an eighteen hour-a-day English channel pooling the best in programming from two major international broadcasters. That received a lot of attention in the press and also extremely good feedback from listeners in the target area – Western Europe including the Czech Republic and Poland. In addition, we also got feedback from Ireland, Brazil, Norway, Sweden - all countries outside the expected coverage area. That was quite interesting although no-one checked if the signal reached those countries, eighteen hours a day, every day.

Q: There has been considerable interest in the standard from outside Europe. How is that progressing?

A: Another idea we at the DRM Consortium are absolutely wedded to, is that while the standard will likely

be a complimentary solution in Europe, it can be a major solution in parts of the world like Latin America and particularly Asia. We went to the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) General Assembly in Bali in November had a very good presence at the technical committee there, again talking about various aspects of the DRM standard. A key advantage to DRM is that it requires much less up front investment than analogue: you don't need to buy land or build new transmitters and electricity consumption is lower too. We were struck by the great interest in DRM in some Asian countries like India, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Q: How have these countries followed up that interest?

A: In the case of India, we received an invitation to attend the Broadcast Engineering Society of India's (BES) annual event in February this year, which covers India's state and commercial radio and TV entities. We had a very strong presence there. I gave the key note speech on our vision for a digital future. We also organised a workshop with some of our key speakers, tackling some of the questions that had come from the Indian engineers, a significant and very well attended session on DRM. The main thing that came out of that was that our presentations were very well received by hundreds of engineers. I was also quite struck by the presentation given by the Chief Engineer of All India radio, which confirmed that the government of India had decided to go digital for both radio and TV broadcasts and has proposed to do so in a big way, commencing with the 11th Plan. The plan will use the DRM standard for short and medium wave as well as FM transmitters. They propose to simulcast analogue and digital transmissions, for easy switch over to digital. The proposal is to increase current FM coverage from 40 percent to 75 percent of the population, using DRM plus compatible transmitters. They also envisage the option of leasing out transmitters providing an opportunity to private broadcasters. India started broadcasting DRM in

► January, initially to continental Europe and the UK to cater for India's Diaspora. The plan has been approved, but there are still a few hurdles to overcome including obtaining finance for this very ambitious plan.

Q: What is your organisation doing to help the overall process?

A: The next step for us is to try and bring together, as a dispassionate and objective broker, the content providers in India, mainly All India Radio (AIR) and the receiver manufacturers and see if there is interest in local production. Spectrum analysis, involvement of the specialised authorities, the involvement and attraction of commercial radio operators – these are all areas of study and possible activity to which the DRM Consortium could contribute. Ultimately in India, as in other parts of the world too, there is a need for relatively cheap receivers, which I think will need to be produced locally.

Q: India is just one, albeit very large country. In regions such as Africa and South America are you seeing a more multi-lateral approach?

A: In Africa, we were present in November 2008 at Africast in Nigeria. That was interesting because of the interest of some public and private African broadcasters in DRM. They have the whole issue of ensuring coverage for a wide geographic area, relating to getting information to large areas and large populations. In Africa, we definitely see scope for DRM but not necessarily on the same business model that would work in India. In Africa, we might expect interest from big organisations and non-profit organisations to either invest or buy receivers and make available these to populations to which either local governments or international broadcasters or international donors might want to take messages. We need to stimulate more thought and activity going around these ideas.

Q: What about DRM+?

A: We are in the final stages of presenting our DRM+ work to the international bodies that will standardise the standard. We think that in the third quarter of this year, we will be able to announce the standardisation of DRM+, which is in a sense the FM option for DRM for frequencies of up to 174Mhz. This will complete the DRM family of standards becoming thus the only radio digital solution for AM bands (SW, MW and LW) and FM (Band II and Band I, unused in many parts of the world). This is something that countries like Brazil have been clearly asking for some time. They don't want to have a mixed economy by beginning with DRM and then moving to DAB or DAB+ later. However, that is still possible and in some parts of the world, like Western Europe for example, almost advisable. We live in a world of several digital radio standards but no matter which one or which combination countries choose to go for, at the end of the day we have to provide a better experience for listeners for whom choice and quality need one name only: digital radio.

