

REGGAE SUMFEST SYMPOSIUM

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SESSION 2: “HAVE SOCIAL MEDIA KILLED THE RADIO STAR? RADIO STILL RELEVANT?”

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SPEAKING NOTES

I start with the observation that radio was predicted to kill print but our experience is that platforms do not always kill platforms, they often extend or complement each other. So, I approach this topic with my hubris in check.

It is true that social media has become the world's largest source of news, information and entertainment. But, our expectations of social media should be tempered by a number of considerations.

The first consideration is that the global digital experience has been very uneven; Africa is still largely off-line, and radio remains a very important medium for half the globe's population. When those people eventually come online, it will be a green-field for all content providers, including radio which is delivered via the Internet.

Secondly, we live in a bi-furcated digital society. On one hand there is the "Digerati" (the Digital Elites) and on the other, the "Digital Commoners". Their engagement with technology diverge along the axes of age difference. Those over 40 have different experiences and expectations than millennials and generation Z. So, older persons are more likely to be familiar with and consume traditional

radio than the young, many of whom do not even own a 'traditional' radio set.

Age is therefore an important measure of platform relevance and engagement.

The third consideration is that there are 285 million people in the world who are visually impaired, many of them are not digitally savvy and for most of them radio plays a very valuable role. So, again, I make the point that value and relevance of one or the other platform is a matter of perspective. So, our analysis must include a taxonomy of consumer needs which reflects their different and differing experiences, perceptions and expectations.

The fourth consideration, is that the future of social media is uncertain. Many governments now feel that it is dangerous to allow a handful of global tech giants, the "BAT-G-MAFIA" (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Google, Microsoft, Apple, Facebook, IBM, and Amazon), to continue to wield disproportionate power.

It is also now clear that it is not realistic to rely on self-regulation by social media companies. Major stakeholders such as broadcasters and internet service providers in the UK are now urging

government to create an independent regulator to help tackle the growing issues with social media.

The technology companies are also modifying their own position on oversight. Facebook, specifically, has joined the call for regulation of the Internet and social media.

The nature of the regulation, which is to come, remains unclear, but the existing social media model will certainly be disrupted. That model which is based, ostensibly, on "free" access to all, worked because in reality it was free access by platform operators to the personal data of users, which was then commercialised.

Regulation is already disrupting that model. The European Union, most notably, has promulgated extra-territorial rules on data protection and other governments around the world now understand the importance of developing the new regulatory frameworks required for the digital age. At the World Economic Forum in 2019, world leaders called for global rules on data governance. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan vowed to use his chairmanship of the G20 to push for this to be within the aegis of the World Trade Organization.

Quite frankly, the long-term viability of the data gobbling and ad-free social network is now highly questionable - a stark example being Whatsapp which, in 2019, remains unprofitable five years after it was acquired by Facebook for \$19 billion.

The fifth consideration is that whatever the origin of content, everything is morphing into a single internet platform. The Internet is one huge emporium, digital container and conduit for content which flows across social media, over terrestrial broadcast transmitters, over satellite, over cable, over fixed broadband, over mobile broadband, over fixed wireless - to an ever widening range of reception devices – the TV sets, radio sets, games consoles, mobile phones, tablets, Kindles, PCs.

So radio has an opportunity and is extending its reach through the Internet and social media. The radio announcer not only spends time 'on-air', she is also on Facebook and connects with her listeners through the other social media and digital platforms. This puts radio in a privileged position. It can move freely through the social media space while monopolising the airwaves. The reverse is not true. Social media cannot freely trespass on the airwaves. This may prove to be a strategic advantage for the future sustainability of radio in the digital age.

My sixth point is that radio is the beneficiary of a new pivot to audio, particularly among the youth. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 details the growth of podcasts and notes that podcasts offer very similar benefits as radio.

Admittedly, if podcasts are to supplement radio and extend its reach, everything on radio will need to be available as a podcast and radio needs to be refreshed with more authentic voices, which is a great appeal to younger users of podcasts.

The seventh consideration is that radio is reinventing itself. Take NPR (National Public Radio), for example: It has broken away from location-dependent broadcasting and re-positioned itself by launching NPR One — an app that lets audiences listen to their favourite shows and podcasts anywhere, anytime and everywhere.

Similarly, the BBC has rebranded its on-demand radio app as "BBC Sounds" to reflect the shift to on-demand consumption and the growing interest of the podcast generation. BBC Sounds brings together live and on-demand radio, music and podcasts into a single personalised app, which is designed to learn from the user's listening habits.

BBC is also capitalising on a desire by younger audiences for media which help them to understand complex issues. This desire has birthed 'explanatory journalism', an example of which is "BBC Reality Check" – which fact checks the most popular outliers on Facebook, Instagram and other social media. The BBC's news chief, James Harding, is quoted as saying "We want Reality Check to be more than a public service, we want it to be hugely popular. We will aim to use styles and formats – online, on TV and on radio – that ensure the facts are more fascinating and grabby than the falsehoods [in social media]". Social media is therefore being positioned as an unsafe, scary and unreliable space and contrasted with traditional media which is being branded as the trusted alternative.

There are also other tools to expand radio beyond the boundaries of the airwaves by allowing it to repurpose content for presentation on search, on-demand and social-media services. "By sharing broadcasts online, stations can get more ears on segments, showing more value to advertisers and drawing in new listeners."("Radio Just Got Smarter Thanks to AI" - <https://www.radioworld.com/columns-and-views/radio-just-got-smarter-thanks-to-ai>).

The eighth consideration is that although people are more "connected", there is more loneliness than ever, partly because the lives being portrayed on social media often bear no relation to reality. This problem of loneliness is so serious that the UK established a Commission on Loneliness and Prime Minister Theresa May, appointed a Minister of Loneliness. Radio is well placed to be an antidote to this epidemic of loneliness - because the real secret to radio's success is its human touch. That is why radio has such an enduring and special relationship with music and politics.

Radio is also well positioned to ride the wave of tech nostalgia which is driving a resurgence of interest by young people in old technology such as Vinyl, as they seek an escape from the overwhelming effects of modern tech. ("Tech nostalgia: Why are young people so obsessed with old technology?" - <https://thetempest.co/2018/10/08/now-beyond/tech-money/tech-nostalgia/>)

Conclusion

The gravamen of my argument is that the future of radio depends on how functional it continues to be. And I also suggest that any

speculation about the future of radio vis-à-vis social media requires a more sophisticated and nuanced approach than to see one as displacing or extinguishing the other.

I have seen no death certificate and I expect to see none because radio and the radio star are not in a state of death but, perhaps, transfiguration. I should add, that given the growing acquaintance of human beings with super intelligent machines, the real dilemma might well be whether the future radio star will be a being or an artificially intelligent machine. But that's a whole other subject.