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SUE MACGREGOR: Will someone please tell me why we need this mad switch to digital radio?

By [Sue Macgregor](#)

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The old radio sets that are dotted around my house - and, I expect, around the homes of at least half the nation - are like much-loved friends. They provide good talk, the latest news, fierce debate, much intellectual stimulus, plenty of laughter (and also sometimes tears). Perhaps above all, they offer pleasant companionship when no one else is around.

Small wonder, then, that many programmes on British radio have achieved something close to national treasure status, and I expect many of us would happily pay the licence fee simply to have BBC Radios 4 and 3 constantly on tap.

Of course I have to declare an interest here - I've been employed by Radio 4 for much of my adult life. But I expect that even if I'd chosen a different profession, I'd still count good radio as more important to me than anything on the telly.



Sue Macgregor: If British radio ain't broke...

I suspect I'm not alone. Figures show that 90 per cent of us listen to our radios at least once a week in Britain.

But for those of us who love radio - our treasured personal radio sets as well as what comes out of them - these are highly confusing times.

Huge changes are afoot. Last week the BBC, in its infinite management wisdom, announced a roll-out of 60 new Digital Audio Radio (DAB) transmitters - which will deliver, we are told, high quality digital radio broadcasts to 90 per cent of the population by the end of next year. This new technology will mean, among other things, that many more stations can be broadcast.

But bigger is by no means better. Just look at the example of digital TV. Increasing the number of channels - whether delivered through Freeview, cable or satellite - has not improved the quality of the programmes, by any means.

And the debate on digital is hotting up even more now that the House of Lords Communications Committee has highlighted, in its new report, what it calls the 'public confusion and industry uncertainty' on the planned switchover to digital radio by 2015.

It is convinced that there will be a strong public backlash unless, at the very least, this enormous digital switchover is properly explained and planned for.

So far there has been woefully little sign of this.

The switch-off of our muchloved analogue radio services on FM and AM has already been postponed once - from 2012 to 2015 - because the Government realised that with over 50 million radio sets in people's homes and more than 20 million analogue radios in cars, this was not going to be without its difficulties.

And make no mistake, it's going to cost more. Replacing every radio in the house will set most of us back by quite a tidy sum - particularly those on modest pensions for whom the radio is a real lifeline.

Converting analogue car radios to digital will doubtless be expensive, if it can be achieved at all.



Pricey: Converting a car radio to digital will cost, if it's even possible at all

And for what? The real beneficiaries of this huge change will be the firms who make the new radio sets. And as almost all of them will be made in China, it is not even as if British workers will benefit.

What makes all this so maddening is that it's not even as if most of us can spot the improved sound quality that DAB is supposed to offer. Existing FM broadcasts seem to me close to perfect when I listen to music, especially when played through decent speakers.

That's why radio users in their tens of thousands have happily gone on buying their modestly priced analogue radios, perfectly content with the quality of sound they produce. Many don't even realise that in less than five years' time these sets will be useless - unless the Government changes its mind again.

Those of us who doubt the need for a total digital switchover can take heart that the backlash has only just begun. I suspect that what Andrew Harrison of Digital Radio UK calls 'the journey towards digital radio' is going to be far longer and bumpier than he imagines. For when radio devotees get annoyed, they make themselves heard - and any unwise innovations can soon find themselves with a formidable opposition.

In 1992, when the BBC tried to deprive Radio 4 of its long-wave frequency, furious listeners marched on Broadcasting House and saved, among other services, live Test cricket commentaries.

I can also still remember the indignation heaped on the then Controller of Radio 4, Michael Green, in the Eighties when he decided that Woman's Hour needed a new name in the age of equality between the sexes. Angry fans of Woman's Hour - one of the BBC's longest running programmes and still flourishing - soon put a stop to that, though they were less successful in the battle to keep its transmission time to 2pm.

Of course, the promoters of 'change' often like to confuse us listeners with impenetrable management speak. Andrew Harrison supported the change to digital on the Today programme yesterday by stating that 'the way we consume (radio) is changing'.

I'm still trying work out what he meant by this. The simple truth is, nobody I know has drastically changed the way they tune into (or 'consume') radio. Hardly anyone of my acquaintances has a DAB set, and no, they're not all intransigent Middle Englanders.

Even if we set aside emotions, there are two very logical arguments against the relentless march to switchover day. One is that the DAB service, as we know it, is itself already a technological dinosaur.

Far more stations have been squeezed on to the DAB digital spectrum than its original engineers predicted. And so, DAB has already been superseded by a system called DAB Plus, which gives a much better and clearer signal. But this is not the technology that the Government is planning to use.

Other countries have already realised the error of their ways. Finland closed down all of its DAB services in February 2005, while Germany stopped issuing DAB licences in January 2005 on the grounds that 'outdated' technology has been superseded. So why haven't we?

Why indeed, are DAB sets still being promoted and sold, if they are not the Next Big Thing, but the Next White Elephant? If DAB is inevitable, let us at least have the most up-to-date way of providing it.

The other argument, which is bound up with the first one, is that far from offering an improved sound, DAB services are prone to the 'freezing' effect, rendering the broadcast patchy or non-existent. Rather like digital television, which on a bad day can turn a good picture into a series of kaleidoscopic squares, the DAB reception can be notoriously poor.

Don't get me wrong - I'm not against all things digital. It's just that under the banner of 'progress', a great sackful of unwanted change is being foisted on us passionate radio folk. Good technological change is welcome; unnecessary fiddling with what works perfectly well is not.

It's up to us, the listeners - or should that be 'consumers'? - to decide what happens next.

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