

## THE PROS AND CONS

IN THE UK, digital radio is spruiked with five catchphrases: No Hiss and Crackle, Spoilt for Choice, Tuning Without Numbers, Stay Tuned and Read All About It.

## This is what the Brits claim:

- ▶ NO HISS and Crackle: better-quality sound.
- ▶ SPOILT for Choice: new digital-only stations.
- ▶ TUNING Without Numbers: identify stations by name instead of frequency.
- ▶ STAY Tuned: single frequency networks that allow you to listen to the same station on a long drive without having to find different frequencies.
- ▶ READ All About It, Pause and Rewind: extra information displayed on a screen.

## Why we might not get it down here:

- ▶ NO HISS and Crackle: broadcasters are still grappling with the technical challenges of getting good-quality signals right across their coverage areas.
- ▶ SPOILT for Choice: smaller audiences here will make paying for new content more difficult.
- ▶ TUNING Without Numbers: some FM stations are already doing this, if your receiver can read the information.
- ▶ STAY Tuned: the first phase of digital-radio services in Australia will only reach the state capital cities. Even big regional centres such as Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo are going to miss out.
- ▶ READ All About It, Pause and Rewind: you'll pay more for receivers that can do it well.

# Content to be different

Digital radio must offer listeners something different if it's going to survive, writes Jock Given

**N**EXT year Australians will receive a new kind of radio — digital radio. Depending on whom you talk to, it's either the biggest thing since FM or a looming fizzer.

The biggest-thing-since-FM people say all media are going digital and radio has to be part of it. Australia's broadcasters have chosen an upgraded version of the digital-radio technology already in place in many overseas countries, especially in Europe.

This will put them at the forefront of digital-radio developments, allowing more services and richer multimedia possibilities.

The looming-fizzer camp cite overseas experience. In the UK, where services started in 1995, one of the biggest commercial-radio operators has just announced it is selling its stake in the founding national digital operator and closing its digital-only stations.

In the UK only 10 per cent of radio listening is now digital, and less than half of that is to stations only available on digital.

In the US, two satellite subscription operators each have more than eight million subscribers, but they are losing a fortune and will merge if regulators allow them to.

Local digital services started in Canada in 1998, but some have closed and others are not being extended.

In between these positions, some of the people who will be providing services in Australia are optimistic about the possibilities but cautious about the early stages.

They know convincing audiences already spoiled by digital audio choices to find cash for new radio receivers is going to be tough, especially when there are so many other gadgets they could spend it on.

Consumers have not sat still waiting for digital radio since the Australian government announced a policy 10 years ago.

Online streaming of internet radio stations, file-sharing music and podcasting are now well-established habits for many listeners. MP3 players — especially iPods — are everywhere.

Radio programmers relinquished the job of generating music playlists to computers long ago. Websites and online tools now do the same for individual listeners. You want cool jazz? Hip hop? Download a selection of stuff you've never heard and listen as you like.

Commercial Radio Australia chief executive officer Joan Warner is keen to differentiate between overseas experience and Australian opportunity.

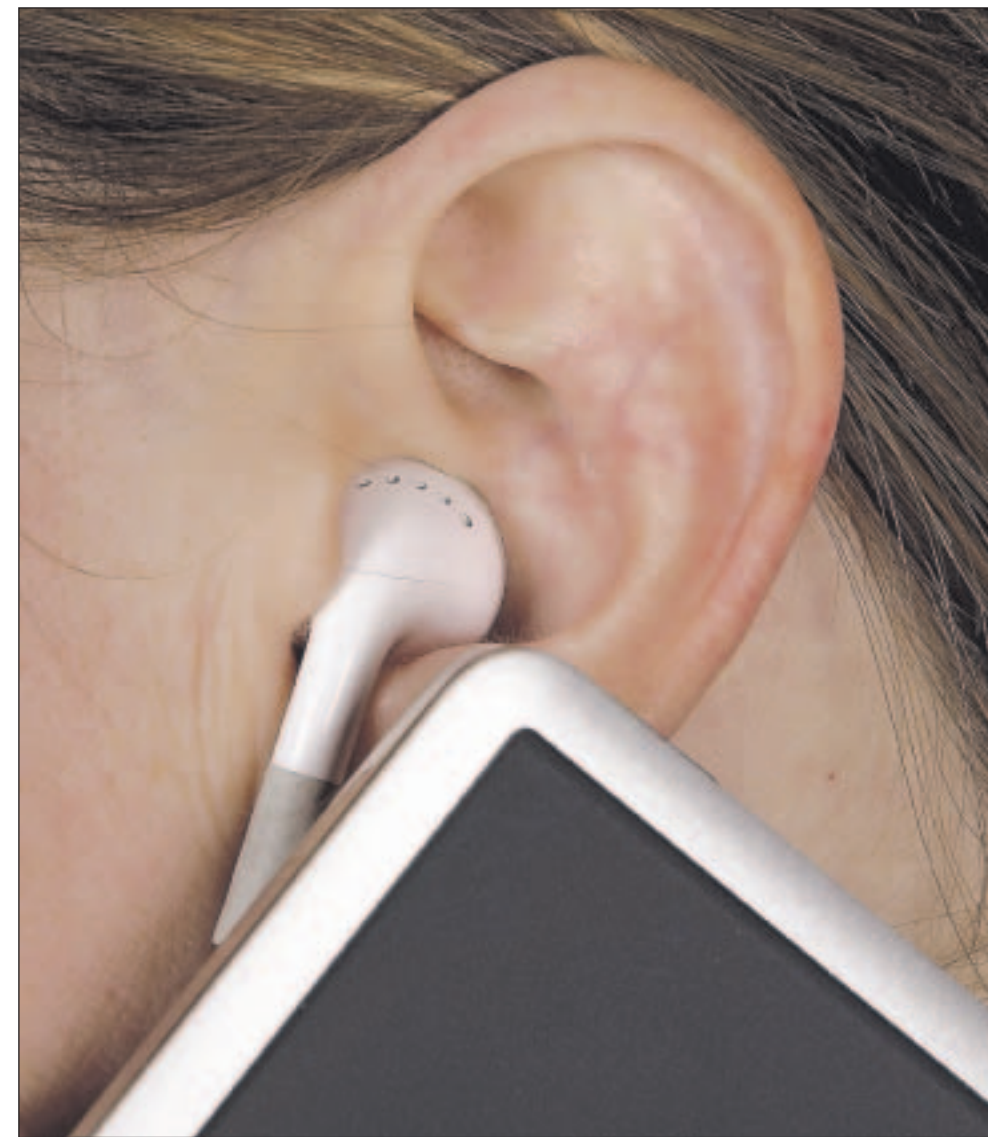
"We think digital radio in the UK has been a slow burn because they only offered more choice, not new kinds of experience," Warner says.

"We think it has to be a richer experience — better quality, a more robust signal, more graphics, some additional information, as well as more stations."

The ABC, according to its head of radio development, Russell Stendall, has lots of content that "wrestles for airtime", such as jazz on Classic FM, specialist music shows on Triple J, sport on local radio and parliament on NewsRadio.

"We are keen on the potential of digital radio to allow us to unbundle that content and deliver discrete services," Stendall says.

3RRR station manager Kath Letch says "the community sector is short of money, but not of people who are interested in developing new content".



**Air of uncertainty:** will listeners unglue their iPods long enough to give digital radio a go? Picture: ANDREW TAUBER

Her station is talking with "like-minded stations" in other cities — including 2SER in Sydney and 4ZZZ in Brisbane — about a collaborative national service that would draw on and supplement the things they already do, such as specialist music and social and cultural talk programs.

To listen to the digital stations launching in state capitals next January, you'll need a new digital radio receiver. It might be a stand-alone



**That old-time look:** the Bush TR82DAB+ is a digital radio in a retro casing.

radio player, a hi-fi component, a car stereo with a built-in digital receiver or a portable pocket-sized device.

Britain's biggest digital-radio manufacturer, Pure, says they'll have up to a dozen products on sale in Australia by the time services are launched.

Graeme Redman, managing director of

stations do with their capacity will largely be up to them, but unlike digital TV the government will not require simulcasts of the same content.

Commercial Radio Australia won't comment on individual station plans, but says 128kbits/sec will allow two FM-quality services plus extra data.

This data might be used to transmit song titles and artists, an electronic program guide, slide shows of still images, or traffic and travel information.

Extra information might be a completely separate service, such as weather information, or related to the audio programs, such as race scratchings.

There'll be a trade-off between quality and the number of services.

Music stations might use more of their capacity to deliver a super-quality version of their existing service. Some say it will be possible to transmit AM-quality talk at just 28 kbits/sec, a significant threshold in a city where two of the consistently top-rating stations are AM stations 3AW and 774.

Consumers will want to know whether all existing AM and FM services will be available on digital, so they don't lose choices by going digital.

## WHO WILL DELIVER DIGITAL RADIO IN MELBOURNE

▶ SERVICES transmitted on VHF channel 9A, the sliver of spectrum between TV channels 9 and 10.

▶ MOST existing city-wide radio stations get access to digital capacity on one of three "multiplex" transmitters

▶ COMMERCIAL stations: AM (3AW, Magic, Sport 927, 3MP, SEN) and FM (FOX,

Triple M, Gold, Mix, Nova, Vega) each get 128 kbits/sec capacity + the ability to bid for three unallocated slots

▶ CITY-WIDE community stations: AM (3CR, KND, RPH) and FM (Light, MBS, PBS, RRR, SYN, ZZZ) share 4x128 kbits/sec

▶ ABC and SBS share 9x128 kbits/sec

Joan Warner says, "I expect so". Russell Stendall says, "It's my view that if the platform is going to work, it has to be a one-stop shop".

But it won't be a one-stop shop for community radio, which is unhappy there is not sufficient capacity even for all its city-wide stations to transmit in digital using the same data rate as commercial stations.

And at this stage, there is no capacity at all for the smaller micro-stations transmitting on lower power to some suburbs.

There are plenty of challenges for digital radio to deliver its full potential.

Manufacturers have to build receivers for the

small Australian market at prices that make digital radio attractive.

Because "radios" are often bought as part of other devices — MP3 players, mobile phones, home-entertainment systems, clock radios — this means getting the right mix of functions and feel into all these potential combinations, not just building nice radios.

The history of digital-radio services overseas and digital-radio policy in Australia, suggests economics is still going to play a big part in constraining how much broadcasters do.

DMG has had great success with its Nova stations, but has struggled to find a satisfactory

format for Vega. Now it has to find two more new formats, or something else to do with its new digital capacity, and make a profit from audiences that are initially likely to be microscopic.

Triple R's Kath Letch is enthusiastic about the possibilities, but conservative about how to judge the early take-up.

"It's inherently a slow process," Letch says. "If you're the kind of person who likes Triple M, or who listens to a few shows on Triple R and a bit of 774 and gets a bit of online news, you might buy a digital radio in the first two years."

"But unless you find something that's not already available, what's the motivation?"

"After the first two years, where does it go? It has to be about additional content. If you have found something you like, maybe you buy another digital radio for the office, or the study, or the back veranda."

"It's still going to be driven by how you live day to day."

**Jock Given was a member of the government's Digital Radio Advisory Council in 1995-97 and published a book about digital radio and TV in 2003, Turning off the Television: Broadcasting's Uncertain Future. He is professor of media and communications at Swinburne University's Institute for Social Research.**

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