

Norway blazes global path from FM to digital-only radio

April 29 2015

Norway is tuning out FM radio for good, and becoming the world's first country to put a date on the switchover to digital-only transmissions.

With digital promising better sound quality, easier tuning, more stations and features as well as lower costs for broadcasters, Norway's government has decided its FM airwaves will fall silent from January 11, 2017, starting in the far north above the Arctic Circle and gradually moving south.

"Nobody's ever done this before and it's quite a nervous time for everyone," James Cridland, a British-based radio broadcasting consultant told AFP, adding that many other countries planning the change will be watching closely.

"Norway is testing this out for all of us," he said.

After nearly a century of the analogue system, which revolutionised music listening with high-fidelity stereo sound compared to mono AM transmissions, the changeover to Digital Audio Broadcasting's advanced version (DAB+) will render the country's almost eight million radio sets obsolete.

Although 55 percent of Norwegian households already own at least one DAB radio, offering 22 crystal-clear channels with more on the way, some observers wonder whether definitively pulling the plug on FM will necessarily entice all its listeners to migrate to digital transmissions.

"It will be interesting to see whether they rush out and convert every single radio in their house to a DAB radio or to an online radio," says Cridland. "Or whether they conclude that we don't really need a radio anymore because we've got Spotify, Wimp, Deezer and all of these music services, and we've got Internet."

To further smooth the transition in a country where people tend to readily embrace new technologies, DAB was introduced in tandem with FM in 1995, with all the country's main public and private stations adopting both systems.

Integrate with the Internet

Several countries could follow Norway's example in the coming years, notably Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland and South Korea.

But others may take longer to make that change—if they make it at all.

"The technology is there," said Jean-Marc Dubreuil, a consultant at the industry group WorldDMB which promotes digital radio.

"But you need the full ecosystem in place to make it happen, which is not always the case."

Like Norway, Britain also launched DAB two decades ago. But in 2013 the government announced that it would delay the planned 2015 shutdown of FM due to concerns over the slow spread of the new technology, and costs to smaller stations.

Sceptics, notably in the United States which lacks Norway's well-funded and dominant public broadcasting corporation NRK that has driven the change, continue to doubt in a DAB future.

Critics on the other side of the Atlantic point to the continued popularity of privately-owned AM talk-radio there, despite long predictions of its demise. They say that longevity offers proof that FM too is far from dead.

France introduced limited DAB broadcasts last year with little support from public stations, which were unable to meet the costs of running both systems in parallel.

The French roll-out also received little backing from private broadcasters who were dubious of the merits of a changeover, and more inclined to bank on the Internet being the future of radio.

Xavier Filliol, a French [radio](#) expert, sees DAB as a "transition technology" that will ultimately have to partly integrate with the Internet as people seek greater interactivity with the media they consume.

"I can't imagine that in five years' time there will be DAB without this 'return path' when the Net will have penetrated everything from fridges to cars," he said.

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Citation: Norway blazes global path from FM to digital-only radio (2015, April 29) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-04-norway-blazes-global-path-fm.html>

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