

## **Beyond the Playlist: Commercial Radio as Music Culture**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents the historical transformation of Finnish commercial radio popular music policies from 1985–2005 and contemplates the role of terrestrial radio in contemporary digital age. It argues that a sender-centred paradigm of early commercial radio was replaced swiftly by receiver-centered paradigm, which has been applied since the early 1990s. The change of radio music cultures is described in detail by dividing it into three different eras: *Block Radio*, *Format Radio*, and *Media Convergence*.

The study draws on the research project consisting of case studies analysing the music content of various radio stations. The primary empirical data is composed of thirty-two interviews of radio personnel and the analysis of 4,500 individual songs broadcast by popular music radio stations with newspaper and journal articles supporting the primary data.

Radio music culture is approached theoretically from the ethnomusicological perspective and thus defined as all practices that have an effect on broadcast music, including the processes of acquiring, selecting, and governing music. The empirical results of the study show that the transformation of radio music cultures is affected by economic, technological, legal, organisational, and cultural factors.

## Introduction

In 1985, the first local and commercial radio stations in Finland were granted two-year experimental licences. This resulted in the publicly funded Yleisradio (Finnish Broadcasting Company) losing its broadcasting monopoly, as new ways of operating radio stations emerged in the commercial media environment. A significant change that occurred due to this development was that for the first time popular music was being utilized as the fundamental content of an individual radio station. Especially during the first five years of commercial broadcasting, the possibilities for listening to various genres and artists on the radio were thus multiplied several times over.

The new radio stations – initially called “local radios” – were founded upon the rhetoric of democracy, freedom of speech and diversity of content. In spite of this within the following thirty years of commercial radio in Finland, the professionalisation of the radio industry has *de facto* homogenised the content especially regarding popular music. This somewhat controversial development has been explained by the receiver-centred paradigm replacing the sender-centred approach and the introduction of American style radio formatting. Adopted in the early 1990s, format radio caused the streamlining of the broadcasting content of the stations, thus reducing the diversity of music genres and songs being represented. Individual parameters in broadcasting - such as programming and music selecting - were now integrated more closely to the business strategy of the station. This new foundation for radio formatting was built on identifying consumer segments through studies of the music preferences of radio audiences, centralised music selection, and surveys of listeners’ music tastes.

Although music is the major programme content of commercial stations, far too little attention has been paid to it among radio researchers until recently. This can perhaps be explained by

the lack of proper methodological tools for music analysis in the communication scholars' toolbox (Kurkela, Mantere & Uimonen 2010, p. 7). Conversely, music scholars have been mainly interested in radio as means of disseminating music, i.e. radio being a link in the supply chain extending from the recording studio to the listeners' ears. A notable exception is Krister Malm's and Roger Wallis' research *Media Policy and Music Activity* (1992), concentrating on radio music policies as part of the music industry. Also, scholars of music research have recently focused on issues such as music diversity and how it relates to political decision-making and the regulating of commercial and publicly funded radio stations (Kurkela and Uimonen 2009; Uimonen 2011; Stiernstedt 2013).

The point of departure for this article is to present how ethnomusicological theory can be applied to the study of commercial radio music content, i.e. to approach commercial radio as music culture. According to Jeff Tilton "music-culture" consists of 'ideas, actions, institutions, material objects - everything that has to do with music' (Tilton 2009, p. 4). Drawing on this ethnomusicological definition, radio music culture covers all practices that have an effect on radio music content. Among other issues, it includes the processes of acquiring music, music selection and the governing of music.

This article explores the transformation of Finnish commercial radio music policies by drawing from the three-year research project "Music and Corporate Cultures in Finnish Radio 1985–2005" (Uimonen 2011). This research, financed by the Academy of Finland, extensively analysed the music contents of individual stations and semi-national radio station chains targeting different audience segments, and airing identical music content in several towns. The study was contextualised within a reorganisation of the national and international media environment, including the centralisation of media ownership.

The primary empirical data covers the years 1985–2005. It consists of thirty-two interviews of radio personnel and quantitative analysis of 4,500 individual songs broadcast by popular music radio stations. Statistical information on broadcast music of selected radio station from 1994 to 2005 was provided by Gramex, the Copyright Society of Performing Artists and Phonogram Producers in Finland. Research material from the mid-1980s was collected from the reel- to-reel and cassette tapes and copyright society's music reports provided by former radio hosts. Interviews and newspapers describing the changes in radio are of major importance, since music cultures are constructed from, and represented by, not only their music, but also through verbal communication and printed matter.

In addition to its connection to ethnomusicology, this work leans theoretically on Malm's and Wallis' notions of the music industry. They consider it to be a system operating on different levels, which are: local, national, and international. The transforming factors affecting this system are economic, technological, legal, organisational and cultural (Malm & Wallis 1992, pp. 25–28). Although radio stations operate on a local and national level, they are also part of the international media industry. This transformation from strictly regulated national radioscape of early-1980s to the contemporary, deregulated, global media environment still poses a challenge to individual radio stations, both publicly-funded and commercial.

In addition to the introduction and the conclusion, the article is divided into four parts. First, the article introduces the tug-of-war between publicly funded radio and pirate channels, which changed the radio music content in several European countries for good in the 1960s. This is followed by a description of media deregulation in Finland, finally leading to centralised ownership and the standardising of music content.

Secondly, to illustrate the transformation of the Finnish mediascape and its broadcast music, the article introduces *Radio 957*, founded in 1985 in Tampere. It represents the changes in popular music radio content, and its relation to changes both in media ownership and in the wider context of the evolving media market. The station was one of the first local/commercial radio stations in Finland, and the only one broadcasting under the same name for almost a quarter of a century. After changing hands and being re-formatted a few times during its existence, it was finally forced to abandon its name when integrated into a semi-national radio station chain.

Thirdly, the change in radio music cultures will be described in more detail by dividing the twenty-year period researched into three different eras. The eras of *Block Radio*, *Format Radio*, and *Media Convergence* are analysed through ten parameters including *music content*, *music audience*, *selecting music*, and *music evaluation*. The fourth section presents radio as a music mediator, and its relation to on-line radio stations and music streaming services such as Spotify, which have challenged radio stations as music disseminators. Finally, the article sheds light on future ethnomusicological challenges in radio music research.

### **Public service & commercial radio**

The content of the American style commercial radio in Finland is composed, for the most part, of advertising and music. Leaning on the well-known definition by media scholar Dallas W. Smythe, it is not the items advertised that are being sold to listeners, but the listeners who are being sold to advertisers, in the form of rating numbers. In music radio the programmers are using the sounds to put together an audience for delivery to advertisers. (Smythe 1981, p. 27; Frith 1996, p. 79.) In most

radio station formats music is selected in order to attract an audience to listen to the station, and to ensure that they also remain loyal listeners to the channel. Different types of music are the main attractors of the stations, and the success of the business is measured by its ability to fulfil - or not - the genre expectations of a radio listener.

Unlike commercial radio in the United States, in most European countries radio was initially founded on the public service and on licence fees. In this context music had a significant but nevertheless somewhat secondary role. Historically, classical music was preferred, something which is underlined by the fact that most publicly funded European broadcasting companies housed their own symphony orchestras. Alongside classical music, a certain amount of popular music was allowed. The music policies of the public service radio stations were soon challenged by the commercial stations and their different music contents. Commercial Radio Luxembourg began to broadcast to Britain in December 1933, becoming popular amongst female and working class listeners. The first symptoms of the decline of the BBC monopoly were the commercial radio Sunday listeners, who eventually exceeded BBC rating numbers (Kurkela and Uimonen 2010; Kemppainen 2010, p. 17).

In the late 1950s, the hegemony of public service radio broadcasting was further challenged by the pirate radio stations. Offshore commercial radio stations such as Radio Mercur (1958), Radio Nord (1961), Radio Veronica (1961), and Radio Caroline (1964) were broadcasting to Copenhagen, Stockholm, Amsterdam, and London respectively. The effect was twofold: on the one hand, Nordic countries took legal actions against these pirates with anti-piracy laws, and prohibited their broadcasting. In the UK government responded to pirates by outlawing advertising on them. On the other hand, the public service radio stations were forced to respond to listeners' demands and increased the amount of popular music in their programmes (Kemppainen 2010, pp. 23–8; Rudin 2015, p. 339).

The public service Finnish Broadcasting Company also had to react. It founded a programme called Sävelradio (Melody Radio) in 1963 to meet the audience's demand for popular music. This was further enhanced by the addition of other pop music-oriented programmes in the 1960s and 1970s. Partly out of fear of losing its young listeners, and partly due to the demand for more rock music, the Finnish Broadcasting Company founded a programme called Rockradio in 1980, which was first aired six hours weekly on three afternoons. A change in content policy introduced a new, somewhat informal, speech mode previously unheard on the public service radio. This style of speech was criticised by conservative radio journalists and the friends of highbrow radio talk, in both the printed press and in listener feedback. Rockradio was accused of obscenities and using coarse expressions which, alongside straightforward rock music lyrics, were considered inappropriate and were feared of leading young listeners astray. The practice, which resulted from the combining rock music and informal parlance, effectively established a new speech mode, which later trickled down to first commercial radios such as *Radio City* in Helsinki, when they were founded five years later (Kurkela & Uimonen 2009; Uimonen 2011, p. 73).

Kleinsteuber and Sonnenberg recognised three types of non-commercial local radios in Europe - , the Anglo-Saxon type growing out of a predominantly commercial environment; a Southern European type born out of protest against public monopoly; and a Northern European type coexisting with an ongoing monopoly (Kleinsteuber & Sonnenberg 1990, p. 87). In Finland both non-commercial and commercial local radios needed to cope with all of these environments. In the beginning they were declaring an alternative paradigm to the public service monopoly, and later needed to not only coexist with it but also to take their commercial contenders into consideration.

These multiple challenges can be detected in changing music content. Commercial radio stations introduced music genres such as punk rock/new wave, world music and progressive rock all of

which had previously considered irritating or counter-cultural to mainstream and prime time broadcasting. In mid-1985 *Radio 957* in Tampere had special programmes on different genres whereas *Radio City*'s music content in Helsinki was defined by DJ's and radio hosts' preferences on e.g. jazz, classical music or rock. By no later than the early 1990s, these subversive and aggravating types of music and style of speech were judged as interrupting the cash flow by scaring away radio listeners. As a result, they were first removed from prime time broadcast and later discontinued permanently (Uimonen 2011, pp. 80; 201).

### **Radio 957 and the changing media environment**

In 1985, the first experimental two-year broadcasting licences in Finland were granted to local and commercial radios stations. The fundamental structural change in the broadcasting environment caused the Finnish Broadcasting Company to lose its monopoly on radio broadcasting. This de-monopolisation is being referred as deregulation, although broadcasting was not deregulated permanently: radio licences are still being regulated by the Ministry of Transport and Communication. Hence it would be more appropriate to talk about re-regulation of broadcasting. As a result a competition between two types of corporate cultures and radio practices was introduced: European public service radio and American commercial radio (Ala-Fossi 2005, p. 29; Hujanen 2001, p. 95).

In the US, deregulation had a profound effect on broadcast programming content in 1980. Regulatory requirements were removed on non-entertainment programme guideline, which had previously required all stations to devote a small portion of their programming to news, public affairs and information offerings. Furthermore, the Federal Communications Commission no longer enforced the 'Fairness Doctrine' referring to opportunity for the discussion of conflicting view on



issues of public importance. (Fairchild 1999, pp. 555–6.) Such deregulation was a result of a “growing liberalist confidence” in market system in guiding the broadcast content, whereas in Finland the change of regulation was about abandoning the idea of national, non-commercial broadcaster to guarantee democracy and social and regional equality. (Ala-Fossi 2005, p. 166.)

In the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communication the prerequisite for granting the new radio licence in the mid-1980s was locality. In terms of transmitter range this locality was relatively easy to measure, unlike in printed media discourse. The new radio entrepreneurs with their diverse backgrounds in civic organisations, trade and student unions and printed media had founded the first local radio stations with practically no experience on running them. Their comprehension of concept of locality was defined somewhat loosely: the radio managers’ comments in printed and electronic media were spiked with arguments about freedom of speech, the local-global dichotomy in radio content, and issues of self-expression and democracy (Kurkela & Uimonen 2009, p. 85).

The Finnish Broadcasting Corporation was accused of having a hegemonic status in promoting the public service radio culture, which would now be contested by local radio stations. The media discourse on hegemonic public service station or other ideological topics waned somewhat quickly, and was replaced by more commercial-oriented rhetoric dealing with issues such as how to run a profitable business in competition with local newspapers and with new radio entrepreneurs entering the market. For instance, *Radio City* axed citizens’ organisation’s programmes temporarily, since it feared that listeners could not distinguish between opinions of the citizen’s organisations and those of the station itself (Uimonen 2011, p. 73).

Nevertheless, the music content – and especially the popular music content – of the Finnish Broadcasting Company was being challenged. In three major cities, Helsinki, Tampere, and Turku, the musical atmosphere was refreshed by the appearance of new radio hosts and special music

programmes. The commercial stations *Radio City* (1985), *Radio 957* (1985), and *Radio Sata* (1989) were capable of airing the latest music immediately after their release – and in some cases even before the actual release date. Increased airtime meant that for the first time, radio stations were also willing and able to broadcast individual songs several times a day. This was unheard-of at the Finnish Broadcasting Company whose music policy led to certain forms of music, such as rock, only being broadcast at a certain time and days of the week.

Since founding in 1926 music had been an essential part of Finnish Broadcasting Company's radio content including their endeavours in educating listeners via classical music. This policy of enlightenment was embedded in company's rock music programmes, partly because of limited airtime: the aforementioned Rockradio aired for only approximately ten hours a week, which was sufficient to introduce only the selected few of the new rock releases. Prior to commercial radios and their practically unlimited broadcast time for popular music, the recurring airplay of an individual song was somewhat scarce (Uimonen 2011, p. 77.)

*Radio 957* started to broadcast in Tampere on 15 August 1985. The licence was granted to the Student Union of the University of Tampere. Contrary to the common trend among the licence applicants emphasising economic factors, the Student Union's application actually specified their communication policy and radio content, underscoring 'the new cultural trends quickly absorbed by students' and the active role of the Student Union on the local music scene (Uimonen 2011, p. 55). Despite this, the programme content and music were in fact targeted to all listeners in the Tampere region within the range of the transmitter, not specifically to students. This is verified by the station's broadcast schedule from the first five years of operation. Diverse music genres, artists, and individual songs were broadcast not only in evening special programmes, but also during prime time.

Although music content was considered irrelevant by the Ministry of Transportation and Communication when granting licences for the local radio stations, it soon became evident that young music listeners and the music industry greeted the new commercial stations with delight. The time was ripe for effective music dissemination, and there was also a change in the musical tastes of Finnish music consumers. Starting from the mid-1970s, a form of domestic rock music, called *suomirock*, which combined Anglo-American influences and Finnish lyrics, became the most successful individual musical genre. The record companies had won new audiences, not only among the young, but also among the adult listeners. While there was no cause and effect relationship between new radio stations and the success of *suomirock*, the new dissemination channels definitely enhanced its popularity. New radio stations were noted also in collecting societies which had constant disagreements with them about the amount which should be paid for the right to broadcast music. This is verified by the fact that contemporary commercial stations contribute significantly to the income of established Finnish artists, especially those whose music is aired regularly (see Sirppiniemi 2014).

*Radio 957* changed hands in the early 1990s, after facing serious economic and professional challenges. Competition was increased because the Ministry of Transport and Communications granted two more radio licences within the same broadcasting range. Professionally *Radio 957* needed to adapt to the new market situation, when new contenders started to reach for their audience. As a result they started to air more hits and pay more attention to prime time music. In addition, the economic recession of the early 1990s made future prospects very challenging. Eventually, in 1992 *Radio 957* decided to sell 75 percent of their shares to *Radio Sata*, which had been founded in 1989 (see Figure 1).

The new owners from *Radio Sata* were pioneers in introducing American-format radio to Finnish radio entrepreneurship. According to their former music director, the idea of audience segments

embedded in the commercial radio business of the 1990s had its origins in the background music business. During the economic boom in the 1980s restaurants were eager to polish their commercial brands by investing in interior design, which included selecting and targeting music to their clientele. The individuals responsible for this were later employed by *Radio Sata*. This can be attributed to an early form of music formatting and placed on a continuum of change of music listening, music consumption and transforming sonic environment. Instead of being tied to festivities, concerts or other social events music had become consumer's everyday companion starting from portable gramophones, compact cassettes and transistor radios (Uimonen 2010b, p. 4).

At *Radio 957*, the new owners re-defined the radio station's target group, and by doing so re-structured the music content as well. To fulfil the expectations of the vast majority of radio listeners, the music content was steered towards mainstream genres and artists. It should be noted, however, that although *Radio 957* and *Radio Sata* were operating in different towns, owned by the same company and planning their play lists in collaboration, local music tastes were still taken into consideration when compiling individual playlists. *Radio 957* was broadcasting predominantly rock music and *Radio Sata*, was branded as a radio station airing primarily *iskelmä* (Finnish schlagers). Local artists, albeit also nationally known, were aired recurrently in both towns.

It has previously been suggested that an individual's "genre map" develops from the years of puberty through courtship to early adulthood (Gjerdingen & Perrott 2008, 94–5). This notion was evident in *Radio 957's* new music policy. Musical content – including genres, individual performers, and songs – was selected from the years during which the target group of the station was in their teens and listening to music actively. Due to this, the music selection process leaned heavily towards nostalgia. 25-year-old listeners who were assumed to listen to the music that they listened to when they were 13 to 15 years old, and the playlists were thus compiled mainly from that era's music (Uimonen 2010a, p. 143).

The aforementioned owners of *Radio Sata* had acquired their expertise on American-style format radio while regularly visiting the US. In Finland they updated their studio equipment by, for example, developing and introducing a system enabling unmanned broadcasting, thus making evening and night hours more cost effective. Apart from operating their own business they also founded an enterprise offering consulting services to other radio stations. Their customers included various local and semi-national stations such as Kiss FM/Voice, and they thus had an effect on radio content throughout the country (Uimonen 2010a). *Radio Sata* personnel did not restrict themselves to only popular music, but also applied their knowledge and skills in radio formatting to Western classical music. *Classic Radio*, founded in 1992, which was the first formatted radio station broadcasting only classical music, primarily for the Helsinki area.

The personnel of *Radio Sata* set the pace for the radio stations, by making them an offer which was hard to turn down. This consisted of the strategic planning of the business, constructing the broadcasting studio and other premises at the station, training the stations' personnel, planning the programme profile, and finally taking care of sales and image marketing. This all-inclusive package was tailored to meet the requirements of the prevailing competitive situation. In 1989 *Radio Sata* personnel consulted for twenty-eight radio stations all over Finland, with the total amount of stations in the country at that time being thirty-four. Thus their overall impact can be considered as being quite remarkable (Uimonen 2011, p. 125).

In 1994 there was another change of ownership at *Radio 957*. Together with *Radio Sata*, they were acquired by the multinational Scandinavian Broadcasting Systems, which in due time was acquired by the ProSiebensat 1 media conglomerate (see diagram). Finally, in December 2012 the SBS Nordic ProSiebenSat 1 Group was acquired by Discovery Communications, for the total sum of 1.7 billion US dollars. The deal included two Finnish television channels, and several radio stations including *Iskelmä*, *Voice* and *Radio City* (HS 2012). *Radio City*, *Radio Sata*, and *Radio City* – operating in different cities with identical music contents – were given an identical name, *Radio*

*City*. This also put an end to *Radio 957* as a brand, which had been the longest running commercial local station in Finland, having broadcasted under the same name since 1985. Finally, SBS Discovery Radio with its stations *Iskelmä*, *Voice* and *Radio City* was acquired by Bauer Media in 2015.

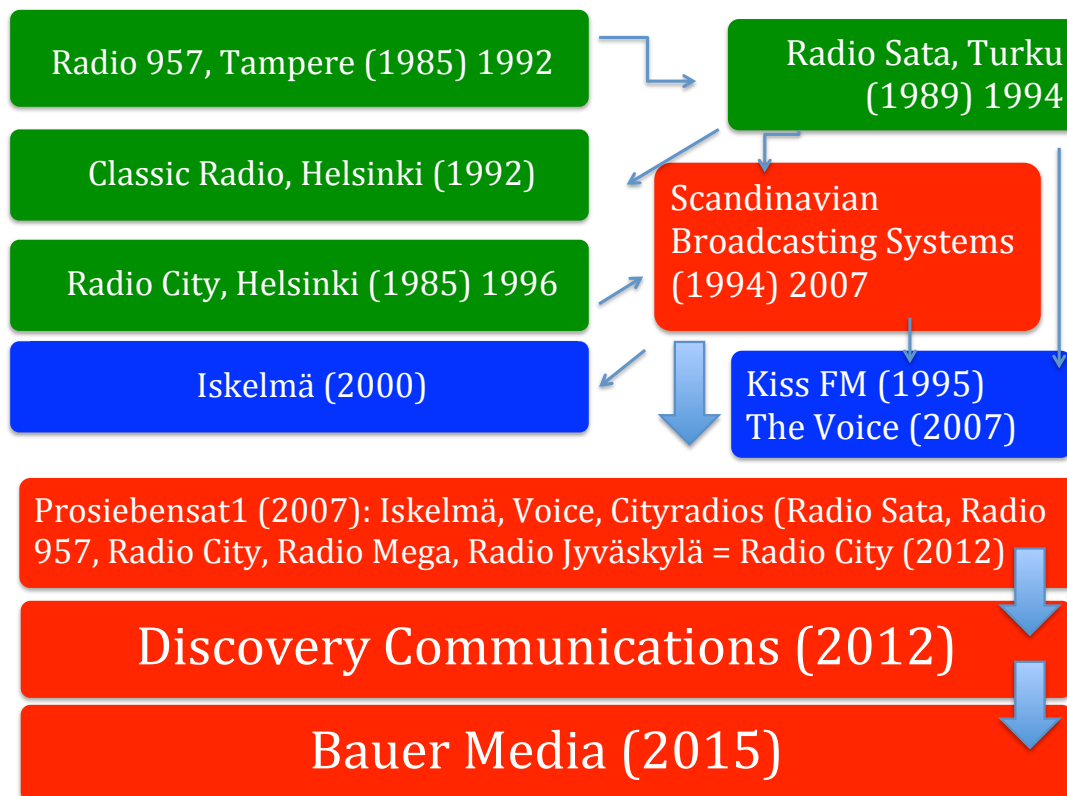


Figure 1. The Ownership of Radio 957 (1985–2015)

Figure 1 sums up and elucidates how changing ownerships and consolidation transformed the music content of aforementioned commercial radio stations in Finland. In 1985 *Radio 957* was granted a licence for terrestrial broadcasting in Tampere region. In 1992 it was acquired by *Radio Sata*, which formatted it to American-style commercial radio. New owners also applied their expertise on several music genres e.g. by founding *Classic Radio* and consulting *Kiss FM* (later *The Voice*) broadcasting, respectively, classical music and contemporary pop.

In 1994 multinational Scandinavian Broadcasting Systems (SBS) acquired *Radio 957*, *Radio Sata* and *Radio City* among other radio stations, chained them, and branded them as *Radio City*. In 2007 Scandinavian Broadcasting Systems were acquired by ProSiebensat 1, which in 2012, sold SBS Nordic to by Discovery Communications. In 2015 Discovery Communications sold the radio stations to Bauer Media.

The transformation of Finnish radioscope resembles the one in the US both in terms of consolidation, centralised ownership and homogenised content (see Fairchild 1999). In the US consultants were offering automated playlist to radio stations, which ‘need not to worry about selecting the music’ as one business reported pointed out (Fairchild 1999, p. 559). Somewhat similar evolution took place in Finland, too, when music content was composed in SBS stations belonging to the same radio chain. Cost efficiency was increased by introducing an individual music programmer responsible for selecting music to all radio stations instead of employing several music directors in different towns (Uimonen 2010b, p. 11).

### **The transformation of commercial radio music cultures**

Like *Radio 957*, several Finnish commercial radio stations have gone through a major restructuring since 1985. This transformation applies to local commercial radio stations, radio chains, their ownership, and music content. The findings of research published in 2011 suggest that they can be used in characterising the overall transformation of the commercial radioscope in Finland.

The transformation of commercial radio music culture during 1985–2005 can be clarified by dividing the twenty-year period into three different eras, and then inspecting each in more

detail with the help of ten individual parameters. The three periods are as follows: the era of *Block Radio* (1985–1990), the era of shaping *Format Radio* (1990–1995), and the era of *Media Convergence* (1995–2005). Each period, and the changes in music culture, are elucidated with the help of ten individual parameters, which are as follows: *music content*, *music audience*, *music as an attractor*, *acquiring music*, *selecting music*, *music evaluation*, *music platform*, *governing of music*, *overall channel sound*, and *music diversity*.

### ***Block Radio (1985–1990)***

The era of *Block Radio* can be characterised as period during which local radio enthusiasts and future entrepreneurs were educating themselves in the radio business. The profession had to be learned practically from scratch. It was modelled after the public service station, as no such thing as commercial radio existed in mid-1980s Finland. The *music content* of the *Block Radio* era can be described as one segment of radio broadcasting, which was targeted to the radio listeners within range of station's transmitter.

The concept of block programming refers to the mixed content programming, individual programmes and their musical content, which are broadcast at a given time of the day. The individual programmes aired during the day were targeted to a heterogeneous group of radio listeners, constituting a *music audience*. In early years of Finnish commercial radio, music functioned as a major *attractor* to induce the listeners with diverse music tastes to select and remain on the given channel.

The localness of the 1980's radio stations was defined somewhat broadly, given that the programmes consisted of national and international content. Broadcasting only local or regional music within a one-hundred-kilometre broadcasting range would have been a



commercially risky alternative. Compared to Central European or American metropolitan areas the somewhat sparsely populated area of a Finnish town could not provide an audience large enough to run a successful radio station, especially if it broadcasted solely local music. Still, commercial stations promoted local music happenings, aired demo tapes of the local bands, and interviewed local artists. The local stations not only broadcast the latest releases and diverse genres, but also back catalogue music, thus having an effect on the local economy by indirectly supporting the sales of the local record retailers.

The stations *acquired* their music first at their own expense, and needed to invest especially in a back catalogue of the popular artists. Promotions were received from the record companies, recording artists, and major and minor music publishers. The symbiotic practices between record companies and radio stations began to take form during the Block Radio era.

Especially in the early years, these informal relationships advanced the quick airing of the latest releases - in some radio stations even before the official issue date. The representatives of the radio stations and record companies visited each other's premises on a regular basis and attended the same parties. A former *Radio City* show host admitted this close-knit relationship to be a 'somewhat naïve one', but on the other hand a radio station operating on a shoestring budget could not turn down an offer of a record company to 'fly to Stockholm to interview a world class artist' on their expense. In addition broadcasting the latest folk and world music releases was enabled by this symbiotic relationship, or as a manager of a small record label put it: "You could just walk into the studio and before getting out, your latest release was on air". (Uimonen 2011, p. 76).

Accordingly, the show hosts and DJs were responsible for *music selection*, with practically no guidance or supervision. It was also they who were responsible for *music evaluation* and determining its suitability for prime time. To some extent, this policy began to resemble the

enlightening music policy familiar from the public service station. The practice might even be called “neo-enlightening” as the publicly-funded enlightening attitude, which was combined with new commercial parlance (Uimonen 2010a, p. 127).

However, music selection was not only a matter of enlightening or civilising the listeners, but also a matter of distinction. The DJs of the new radio stations claimed to know exactly what was good music and what was not, and were also willing and eager to share this information. Furthermore, music selections by the individual show hosts were fuelling the professional ambitions of their colleagues, thus leading to more diverse music broadcasting in terms of genres, artists, and individual songs. According to a Radio 957’s DJ Madman: ‘When morning news was followed by Frank Zappa’s music... the music programme hosts responded by airing reggae, Latin American or African music’ (Uimonen 2011, p. 102).

The *music platform*, being a tangible artefact to which intangible sounds are attached, had a profound effect on radio music culture. Different platforms enabled different practices in selecting and governing the broadcast music, especially when digital music started to gain foothold in broadcasting. During the first five-year period, the radio stations utilised mainly analogue gramophone records, vinyl records such as singles, EPs and LPs, compact cassettes, and NAB cassettes for airing jingles and radio commercials. The popularity of the new consumer technology had an effect on music content too, especially when demo tapes of the emerging rock bands started to get airtime in special programmes during the 1980s.

The *governing of music* content was carried out mainly by recruiting suitable personnel to work at the station. Stations hired music enthusiasts, whose interest and expertise on music were suited to the channel's policies. After the first couple of months of trial and error this resulted in diverse and unpredictable musical content. For a listener searching for diverse

music and various genres and artists, the era of *Block Radio* was good news, although somewhat risky in terms of running a profitable business.

The *overall channel sound* of the stations was constructed from different genres aired in individual programmes. The music selections of the individual DJs and programme hosts increased or decreased the *music diversity* of the station. These “minor Finnish Broadcasting Companies” aired various genres during prime time in order to please the musical tastes of as many radio listeners as possible. On the other hand, the special music programmes of the era also introduced diverse music cultures and genres – unheard of in Finnish commercial or publicly funded radio stations – to their selective listeners. The individual programmes sounded as their host intended them to sound, and were thus contributing to the channel sounds of the 1980s.

### ***Format Radio (1990–1995)***

In the era of shaping *Format Radio*, commercial stations were forced to react to increased competition due to changes in the deregulation policy of the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications. The issuing of new broadcast licences, combined with the deep economic recession of the early 1990s, further advanced the reorganisation of the ownership of the radio stations. During this transition period, recorded music became the main content of commercial stations, thus strengthening the symbiotic relationship between the radio stations and the music industry. The reactive Finnish Broadcasting Company also needed to reconsider its programme content, again for fear of losing the younger audience. As a result, an entire public service channel for rock music and the young audience, called *Radiomafia*, was introduced in 1990, five years after the first commercial stations.

Additionally, American-style commercial radio broadcasting, targeted to a given listener segment, began to gain a foothold in the Finnish market. The broadcast *music content* began to exceed the limits of the transmitter range and local market, because the content was developed in collaboration with other local and semi-national stations. The stations were formatted to air different genres such as nostalgic rock or contemporary hit music to different listener groups in different towns.

Based on listener survey data, the listener's daily rhythm began to have an effect on the music selection. Accordingly, the *music audience* consisting of heterogeneous group of listeners was transformed in to an individual listener representing the entire focus group of a radio station. In addition, the nature of *music as an attractor* was changed from a centripetal to a centrifugal one: instead of attracting the heterogeneous group of audience, it became increasingly important to keep the already achieved listener on the channel and not to give them any reason to switch to a competing channel (Frith 1988, 130). Accordingly, much attention was paid to the individual elements constructing the overall channel sound. If the listeners considered some of them disturbing, they were removed. This included individual songs, given artists, and in some cases whole music genres. *Radio Sata* took this to extremes by exiling heavy rock, rap, old *iskelmä* music, disco, classical music, folk music, jazz, and religious music from its prime time (Uimonen 2010b, p. 9).

When broadcasting is limited to a comparatively small number of listeners as in Finnish towns, a station cannot afford to lose any audience to competing stations. According to a study carried out among American first-year psychology students, it takes 0.25 seconds to recognise a genre and thus to trigger a "friend or foe" response (Gjerdingen and Perrott 2008, p. 93). The radio channels of the 1990s were well aware of this quick recognition of liked or disliked music. New consumer technology, such as push-button selectors for the radio

receiver, contributed to the rapid change of stations when needed. The music programmer of *Radio Sata* stated that the new technology ensured that the listeners were able to select a new channel in a second if they found music irritating (Uimonen 2011, p. 123).

In the era of *Format Radio*, professionalisation was extended to the *acquiring* and promoting of music. The record industry adjusted its promotional strategies to new radio programming policy learning that it was futile to plug each and every new release of different genres to radio stations formatted to broadcast music for a strictly defined listener segment. Music directors composing their playlists mainly on well-known *iskelmä* artists showed little or no interest in the latest rock music releases. Also, the chances of launching an unknown song or an artist without testing it by airing it first outside prime time became practically non-existent.

The responsibility for *music selection* was moved up the hierarchy of the organisation and taken over by a few individuals, such as the music directors of the radio station. This change in music culture resembled the practices introduced in American commercial radio stations after the mid-1970s. As early as 1957 Top 40 pioneer Todd Storz stated somewhat bluntly, that: ‘The disc jockey is not representative of the public. Because he is usually above the audience mentally and financially, and lives with popular music, his own preferences are a dangerous guide’ (Barnes 1988, pp. 9–10).

The DJs and show hosts professional competence and knowledge of different music styles which were characteristic of the era of *Block Radio* became a burden, when radio stations started to search for music to please the tastes of their target groups. This led to the abandoning of individual programmes dedicated to different genres: they were first removed from prime time, and then finally discontinued.

During the emerging of *Format Radio*, *music evaluation* was given systematic attention for the first time. The first attempts at surveying the music preferences of the listeners were carried out by collecting audience feedback, later to be refined through the use of thematic questionnaires and personal interviews. Telephone interviews were sometimes supported by music samples, which were played to participants over the phone. Music auditorium testing was introduced and tentatively applied, although this method of testing several hundred few-second music samples by playing them to a group of listeners was only effectively launched in the latter half of the 90s.

The first digital *music platform* in radio stations was self evidently the Compact Disc. At first, record companies were slightly reluctant in promoting music on CD, because of its higher price compared to vinyl records. This policy was reconsidered quickly after stations realised that CDs got more airplay, since they were more convenient to handle than records.

Furthermore, the CD was actually the first format, which could be put to use in automated players, thus advancing the practices of broadcasting music from the unoccupied studio during the night-time. The decreasing prices of computer hard drives in the 1990s enabled the first versions of digital *governing of music*, and thus contributed to the development of music selection software such as Radioman and Selector, which became a standard for music scheduling in the stations.

The *overall channel sound*, especially during prime time, was defined solely by the preferences of the radio listeners. Block Radio's sender-centred music content was replaced almost entirely by receiver-centred music content, consisting of songs and artists familiar to the radio station's target group. These "nostalgia stations", airing music that their audiences listened to in their teens, have applied the same music selection guidelines for almost two decades now in major towns in Finland. Judgements regarding prime time suitability had an

effect on *music diversity* as well. Special attention was paid to mornings, afternoons, and commuting hours. To put it bluntly: the broader field of diverse genres was replaced by an individual genre labelled as “a hit”. This was especially notable in Kiss FM, founded in 1995 and targeted to broadcast contemporary hit music with a heavy rotation aimed specifically at young listeners. Apart from pop and rock contents this holds true with classical music radio stations too, which relied mostly on well-know works of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart.

### ***Media Convergence (1995–2005)***

*Media Convergence* refers to the process whereby different mediums, such as newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet become less separate, as technology develops (CDO 2013). In the era of *Media Convergence*, the individual radio stations were merged economically, strategically, and operationally into radio chains and media conglomerates. The local market areas were expanded from local to semi-national, and in some cases national and international, multimedia markets consisting of terrestrial radio, television, Internet radio stations, and mobile phone services. In addition, *music content* was fitted to the demand of the expanding target group.

The *music audience* of the *Block Radio* era consisted of a heterogeneous group of listeners, which was followed by the *Format Radio* era and its focus on the individual prime time listener. During the age of *Media Convergence*, these were in turn replaced by a virtual listener. The virtual listener was constructed by combining data on demographic facts, hobbies, consumer habits, musical tastes, and other interests. Virtual listeners were given a name and age, which is a practice familiar from public service stations, such as BBC’s “Dave and Sue” (Kelner 2008). The straightforward attitude towards the market was described by the CEO of one of the biggest semi-national radio chains in Finland in 2009: Selling radio is like

selling chocolate bars or automobiles. If you want to be part of the business, the first thing to do is to find the target group, such as men who go hunting and buy over-sized cars. If there aren't enough over-sized cars available, your job is to start selling them' (Puntila 2009).

This transformation of media culture was marked by the new *attractors*. Previously centrifugal genres such as heavy metal – or more likely, individual artists or songs – were returned to prime time and thus reconsidered as being centripetal. This can be explained partly by nostalgia and by the fact that given radio stations were now targeting their contents to more precisely defined groups such as males between the ages of twenty-five to forty-four. The already established methods of *acquiring music*, such as informal industry relationships and station-visiting song-pluggers, were supported by new all-digital innovations such as delivering music files over the Internet. The process of *selecting music* for the individual stations, and for entire radio chains, were centralised to still fewer individuals such as radio chain's music director and music programmer. According to the programme director of Kiss FM from the mid-90s: "The DJ's used to feel that airing a song that the audience liked was reducing their professional credibility". This also set the standards for recruitment policy: a station relying on playlists decided not to have "radio stars" in their payroll (Uimonen 2011, p. 161). In other words, DJs or radio hosts famous for their individual music tastes or expertise in given genres were considered unfit to work with standardised playlist.

In the era of *Media Convergence*, *music evaluation* was based on auditorium music testing, during which few-second samples of song fragments were listened to and evaluated by the group of people belonging to the target group of the radio station (Uimonen 2010a, p. 11). No song was broadcast before testing. The results were supported by the data received from station's Internet music panels and consumer research. The *music platform* was composed of all-digital contents, expanding the *governing of music* to speech content as well, such as recording and editing the incoming phone calls before broadcasting them. In addition,



undesired phone calls were simply left unanswered, which was enabled by technology revealing the number of the incoming call. Such a practice might not stand very close examination if evaluated by the criteria of democracy and freedom of speech that were the hallmarks of the mid-1980s radio rhetoric.

The *overall channel sound* of the 1980s was constructed by different genres aired in different programmes, and in the early 1990s by the preferences of the listeners, especially during prime time. To some extent, this still holds true in the era of *Media Convergence*. The stations and radio chains are building their content on music, and responding to the changing musical tastes of their listeners. New combinations of songs categorised according to various and previously exclusionary genres are selected from tunes already familiar to the target group of the station. Therefore, it is not surprising to hear, for example, 1980s heavy metal bands from a semi-national radio station chain named *Iskelmä*, which was theoretically formatted to air *iskelmä* music and contemporary popular tunes. This paradox is explained by the fact that Finnish radio is not subject to quotas for domestic music.

In the latter half of the 1990s the brand and the image of the radio chain were developed hand in hand with actual music content. The radio stations were constructing their image by sending somewhat contradictory messages of music content becoming diversified without actually changing anything. The song requests were for instance selected from the established playlist. Representation was considered more significant than presentation, or as a Finnish radio entrepreneur and consultant responsible for formatting local, semi-national, and national commercial stations put it: ‘More important than what the station is broadcasting, is what the stations is *presumably* broadcasting’ (Uimonen 2011, p. 176, emphasis interviewee). As a result, the slogans and advertising campaigns were not always required to meet the actual music content of the station. It should also be noted, that in the age of *Media Convergence* an

individual song not only needs to meet the prime time standards of the station, but also the standards of the conglomerate's other mediums such as television and websites. This, in turn offers multiple opportunities for constructing and reinforcing the desired image of the radio station.

### **Disseminating music in the digital age**

Since the first commercial radio stations were introduced in Finland, the diversity and dissemination of music has changed tremendously. New ways of consuming and listening to music, such as Spotify and YouTube, are challenging not only the recording industry policies, but also terrestrial and Internet radio stations. Spotify has its own radio function, which selects songs according to music the user has previously listened to. YouTube was the most-listened to source (64%) among of the teens in the United States in 2012. On the other hand, other demographic groups still prefer radio as the dominant way to discover music (Nielsen 2012).

That being said, it is no great surprise that Finnish Radio Nostalgia, founded in 2011, increased its market share and broadcasting range already next year. According to their media card, over this brief time it expanded from being a local station in Helsinki to operating in seven towns all over the country. The play list is compiled mainly of hit music from the 60s and 70s, and is targeted to the age group from forty to sixty-four years, which has a high degree of purchasing power (Nostalgia 2013). The music content is practically identical to what was considered to be the most attractive one when American-style format radio was introduced in Finland in the early 1990s. The listeners are also considered to be practically the same, only twenty years older.

In terms of reaching the listeners, terrestrial radio is still the most important channel in Finland for disseminating music. In a country of 5.4 million inhabitants, the commercial and public service radio stations reach 3.7 million listeners daily. Radio is being listened to for over three hours per day, mostly from tabletop (40%) and car radios (45%). The listeners are divided almost equally between commercial and public service stations. According to Finnpanel research, FM radio's daily reach is four citizens out of five, and the weekly reach of FM radio is ninety-four per cent of those aged over nine. Although radio listening over the Internet has steadily increased during the last five years, it currently reaches only twelve percent of listeners. The reach of mobile phones is only eight per cent of the radio listeners (Sirppiniemi 2014; NRS 2014).

Another way to shed light on the changing media environment, and how it relates to music dissemination and the domestic music market, is to look at royalties paid to Finnish music publishers for radio airplay. Teosto, the Finnish copyright organisation for composers, lyricists, arrangers, and music publishers stated that in 2012 they collected revenues in the total amount of 46.3 million euros. The revenues distributed to rights holders from radio airplay was 13.5 million euros (Sirppiniemi 2014). Royalties collected for music used online amounted to 4,2 million euros, so in terms of revenues radio retains the upper hand. However, it should be noted that in 2012 the 4.2 million euros of revenue from online services increased by 75 percent, whereas the 3.0 million euros of revenue from commercial radio decreased by 1.6 percent. This is partially explained by the increase in talk programming in radio (Teosto 2012).

How does this relate to music, the interest of copyright owners, and to the selection process of the commercial stations? The longest running national commercial station is Radio Nova, founded in 1997 and boasting almost half-a-million daily listeners. Getting a song aired on

Nova's play list has more impact on today's copyright owner's income than a play list from a minor radio station. Teosto collects revenues from commercial radio stations, which represents 4.5 to 9.6 per cent of their turnover. A four-minute song thus costs approximately 20 euro for national commercial station Radio Nova, whereas the same song aired by smaller companies costs 1 to 10 euro per song or less (Sirppiniemi 2014).

Drawing on this data, it is obvious that getting a song on Radio Nova's play list becomes alluring for copyright holders and music makers. This is further enhanced by the fact that when Radio Nova in their own words "sign" an artist, they are committed to air a given song the total amount of 200 times (RT 2014). Also, it should be noted that domestic music has a strong foothold in Finnish commercial and public service radio stations. According to Teosto statistics, every third song aired on the radio is of domestic origin. In addition, 70% of the Top 10 radio songs are domestic, and of the Top 100 the share is 53% (Sirppiniemi 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The point of departure of this article was to apply ethnomusicological theory to commercial radio music content, and to approach commercial radios as music culture. The paper has argued that ideas, actions, institutions, and material objects are sonically manifested as the final outcome of radio music culture, which is radio music content.

In Finland the reregulation of the radio stations became a struggle between two opposing strategies on music content. The sender-centered approach was founded on notion that diverse music should be introduced to audience, whereas the receiver-centered strategy was underlining the fact that the audience should be kept satisfied by offering them precisely what they want. The latter was criticized by a former Finnish Broadcasting Company director and composer Henrik Otto Donner,

who asked how is the audience able to know what they want, unless they are offered alternatives. (Uimonen 2011, p. 13.)

The study of the transformation of the music cultures at local/commercial radio stations was based on research carried out in radio stations in Helsinki, Tampere, and Turku, Finland. These stations, targeted to different audiences, were the trailblazers of commercial radio over the twenty-year period from 1985. The evidence from this study suggests that they introduced American format radio commercial practices that changed not only their own music cultures but also influenced other commercial and publicly funded radio music content. In a country with a relatively small number of inhabitants and native speakers, radio stations are not in a position to broadcast diverse music. Specializing in marginal music styles does not pay either, since advertisers have no interest in investing in small audiences or music considered to be non-commercial.

In 2012 the first eight-year commercial radio licences were granted, for the period 2012–2019. Twelve licences were granted for national broadcasting, two for broadcasting in cities, and seventy-three for regional and local broadcasting (MTC 2013). This new policy of the Ministry of Transport and Communication redefines not only the business environment of the radio entrepreneurs, but also the role of commercial radio as a disseminator of music. Eight-year licences allow the radio stations to strategically plan their business for a longer term than ever before. It remains to be seen how they relate to increasing competition from online music services, and what amount of domestic music will be broadcast. Considering that the recording industry has lost a large share of its revenues to Internet piracy, radio might offer one solution to regain at least some of these financial losses through broadcasting royalties.

Methodologically, the research presented here is primarily based on interviews and analysis of broadcast music and contextualised with newspaper and journal articles. Further studies, and

specifically the methodological choices, should not be limited only to these methods, but extended to other ways of acquiring information applied in qualitative research. Suitable methods for elucidating the music selection practices would be observation, participatory observation, and related audio and/or video documentation taking place at the radio station, possibly shedding light on matters that might go unnoticed e.g. in interviews (see also Stiernstedt 2013).

A further study might investigate the actual construction of live studio broadcasting. The need for more detailed documentation emerged when *Radio 957* radio hosts demonstrated how live broadcasting was being constructed in the radio studio, by digitally combining the phone-in and a song request. The illusion of a live and interactive show was created by recording the incoming song requests to a hard drive, then editing and broadcasting a few minutes after the actual call took place. This procedure assured that elements such as undesired phone calls or the silent moments i.e. “dead air” during the conversation could be avoided. According to show hosts, the procedure in general, and editing in particular, was carried out to maintain the “pulse” of the station's channel sound (SBS 2008). With participatory observation, the scope of research could be expanded from music selection to an analysis of the actual techniques applied in radio broadcasting in contemporary radio studios.

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