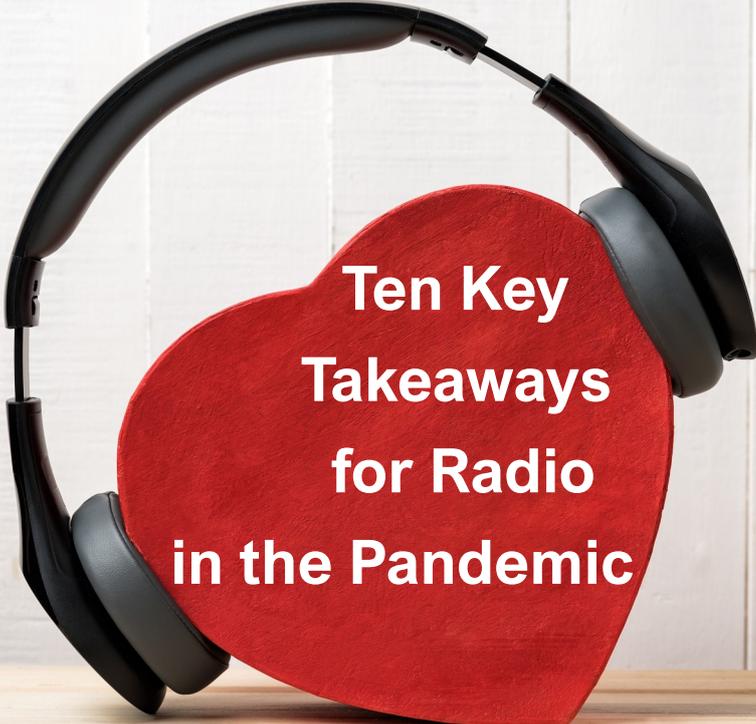




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Ten Key Takeaways for Radio in the Pandemic

By Mikkel B. Ottesen & Bill De Lisle, RadioAnalyzer

Since the Corona Pandemic started sweeping the Globe we have seen Doomsday headlines about Radio losing listeners in huge amounts to tv and websites – side by side with triumphant messages that digital listening is up 20-25%. We have also seen interpretations that digital listening is just taking over somewhat, but that radio stands to suffer a big blow during the crisis.

None of the messages makes sense on their own. That is the conclusion by the RadioAnalyzer analytics team, holding a unique position to dig deep into several electronically measured markets that use PPM-style meters while also examining digital logs from the largest broadcasters in Europe to weigh the datasets against each other.

In this article we are not able to share detailed information from individual broadcasters or markets since the ownership of the datasets is naturally different from place to place and our rights differentiate. We have collected the main points of knowledge and created anonymous “trend graphics” to illustrate our findings.

The findings are partly derived from the rich data available through the electronically measured markets, partly from the enormous amounts of datapoints in the streaming logs to secure an unprecedented validity and a closer look at Pan-European radio trends than we have ever seen anywhere before.



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What is happening is more than a platform shift and the general picture is not as simple as “radio is losing listeners”. A total market reshuffle is happening, and it seems the composition of the individual market “pre-Corona” plays a big part in where the market is going to be when this is all said and done. Explanation to follow in the takeaways we are listing here – but as the overall message we can say:

*Radio as a media platform will survive and thrive again. Some channels will get a revival from this ordeal. Others will die. **Relevance** is the deciding factor.*

Setting the shift in listener patterns aside for a moment, the main problem for the commercial part of the radio industry is obviously the lack of advertiser interest. Our database shows dramatic drops across the board for commercial stations in advertising volume, and some broadcasters tell us their income is down by 90-100% for April. Some stations will succumb to the lack of cash and everyone will need to have a comeback plan ready with smart advertisement packages to sell once the lockdowns are lifted and things slowly return to normal.

Other companies and sales experts are better equipped than us to advise on those aspects, so we will focus on the programming and the listener behavior here – we just needed to underline the importance of a commercial plan and put emphasis on the fact that none of the other observations matter, if sales do not perform once the markets open again.

Divided into four categories of observations, in the following we go through Ten Key Takeaways for Radio in the Pandemic. We have identified the points while writing a round of free reports for our clients for them to navigate by, going through what is most likely the largest Pan-European amount of radio data anyone has ever digested for a single project.

In a couple of weeks we are doing it all again to see which changes have stayed and where patterns have potentially turned in a different direction. Once completed, we will also make a second wave of observations available for non-clients in an attempt to help radio producers World Wide stay afloat.



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Rhythm of the Day Has Changed



1) Mornings are generally down 20% – especially before 8, some up to 9

This is not exactly counter intuitive. Most people do not have the commute to deal with, so the traditional in-car listening will naturally suffer, and no one needs to rush the kids to the school bus at 7AM either. Besides, other studies have revealed that people start the day with a series of website visits to update themselves on the corona impact on particular subjects or areas they are personally interested in and then turn to tv for a general round of news.

The first part of the equation is not surprising and hard to do anything about, but the second part – listeners relying on websites and tv for the updates – is bad news. Not surprising given the diverse interest of listeners, but still something to worry about and perhaps work on after the pandemic. There was a time when radio was the preferred “quick update”; so the listening minutes we lose here on account of listeners using other platforms for that purpose, is a result of losing that position.

There are exceptions, naturally. Out of all the stations (+50) we examined, we found 4 or 5 that can be said to still hold that position.

2) Mid Day 10-14 is thriving, growing 15-20% with special booms for 12-14 where some hours are up 40%

Once updates and working from home, people turn to the station they trust and enjoy the most to be the “friend at the desk” during the workday. Most radio stations have shorter news updates and shows with a musical focus in these hours and that seems to fit the purpose of listeners during the pandemic.



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However, we see stations who have chosen to send their hosts home and just play 100% music lose listening in these hours. Just as we see stations who have broken the format by going almost all-talk lose listening.

We believe the mid day hours serve as “a sense of normality” to the listeners and based on the most successful mid day shows we have analyzed, we have advised our clients keep a steady but gentle news-flow only of “important updates” while serving as a friendly distraction to put a smile on the face of the listeners.

3) Most drive shows 14-18 are up a little - region 5-10%

The drive daypart obviously suffers from the same lack of commuting as mornings do. But contrary to mornings, drive is up on most stations. The natural explanation is the fact that working from home drags on a longer than 14 and that the general need for information and entertainment is higher than normal. Again, we think striving for a sense of normality plays a part too – just as the general popularity of the afternoon DJ’s does.

The best examples of how to program the afternoon includes projects where listeners share with each other how to pass time when lots of activities are shut, tips and tricks to keep the kids entertained and Q&A with health experts.

What-not-to-do includes endless repetition of death counts, advice from public authorities and dark stories of sickness and despair.

Fewer Unique Listeners - But They Listen More



4) Unique reach is down on most channels – general level is 10%, but some stations are halved



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The movement we see is that people flock to stations they already enjoy, trust and love. There is less “zapping” going on; it’s a kind of “going back to basics”. At RadioAnalyzer we work with a term we call “Regulars” and another group of listeners we call “Casuals”. We put listeners into the categories by looking at how many times they return week by week, thus finding out who the “always there-listeners” are.

What we see currently is that stations with a large group of “regulars” are doing well when it comes to unique reach. The regulars are still listening, and they listen even more than they normally do.

The “casuals” on the other hand are fewer and less frequently listening, impacting the listening negatively.

We sometimes compare “regulars” on a radio station to the 10 people who are always at the bar in your club while the “casuals” are the ones that drop by when other things they are doing lead you to your location.

We have always told radio stations to take good care of their “regulars” – and the ones who did are now getting rewarded. The ones who always strived to program after someone who weren’t listening in the first place, are losing big time.

5) Time Spent Listening and number of listening sessions by each listener go up on most stations. TSL is improved between 10 and 30% while the number of listening sessions pr. listener is up 15 to 50% depending on the type of station

It is an old truth in radio that when the audience grows, TSL drops – and vice versa. The Pandemic listener patterns are not exception to this. However, we see larger TSL increases on stations who have a mix of content to offer, smaller increase on stations that are very one-dimensional; both when it comes to music and spoken content.

The key here is “don’t change too much”. If your regulars keep coming back they do not expect or want you to sound too differently. And the casuals are not dropping by anyway, so no point in programming for them.

The increase in number of listening sessions pr. listener is tightly connected to the excess of time people have on their hands during the pandemic and most likely will diminish once the lockdown is over.

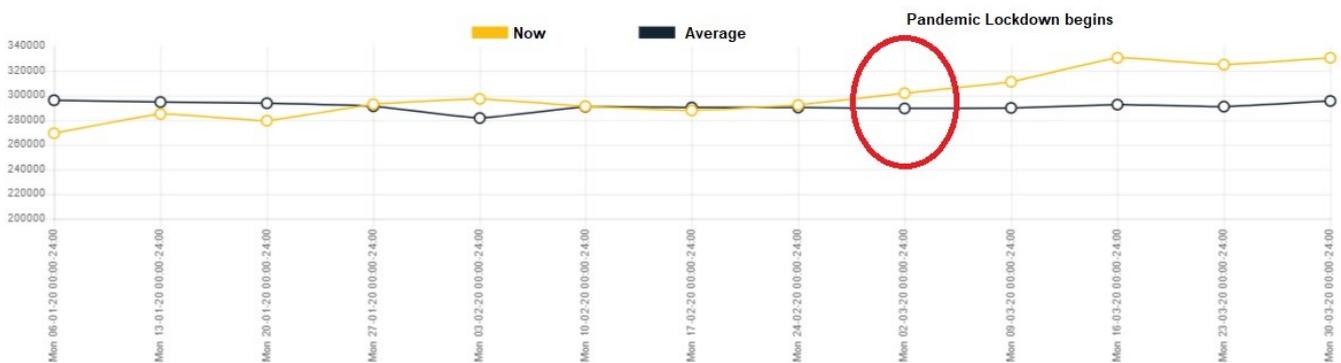


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We do believe, however, that the increase in TSL pr. listening session could stay higher if you stay loyal to your loyal listeners. Lasting connections are made in times of trouble – also between radio stations and their listeners.

Different Formats Are Impacted Differently

AC Station with credible news service - Week by week latest 3 months



6) AC stations with a credible news service and hosts that do more than “just play music” gain a lot of traction. Some of them are up as much as 30% with no loss in unique reach

We have seen several articles written and surveys made in the past couple of weeks on how listeners turn to radio in times of crisis. Seen from the perspective of an AC station with a +40 audience and a high credibility, that is 100% correct, but it is not the whole picture.

We can see that both commercial and public service AC’s get big increases in listening during the pandemic, but with a clear advantage for the public service channels. Some of them have managed to not only get more listening minutes, but to also lower the age of their average listener from the 67-68 are to below around 60 while growing up to 10% in unique reach.

The story is not quite as rosy for most channels, though. Solidly driven commercial AC’s are gaining in listening minutes but dropping 4-6% in unique reach.

There is a big potential upside to be found in the demo-shift. The number one challenge for radio stations in the past few years has been to attract a younger audience with the built-in dilemma that broadcasters did not want to scare away the older listeners, even from CHR channels. The movement we see now is that 50-60’s are moving on to AC-formats with more news instead of listening to CHR, so in our opinion that paves the way for CHR formats to “go younger” and for AC stations to remain relevant in the future.



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7) CHR stations with a credible news service and host that do more than “just play music” are growing in their primary demo but are down or stable on total listening

Following the notion that there is an upside to be found in the demo-shift on AC stations, we have further found signs that some CHR stations are growing in the 12-34 demo. This goes for CHR stations who have “something more on offer” than just a joke-cracking DJ and a bunch of records. The idea that younger listeners aren’t interested in what is going on around them, has simply proven wrong. The clear pattern we see is that stations with an intelligent heartbeat and a mission of providing a flow of relevant information besides being entertaining, are doing better than the ones who are not.

Trying to make a lasting improvement on the demo-shift caused by the pandemic, we have advised clients with CHR stations that may have sounded “a little too old” to go younger on the music. That way we think they may be able to retain the new listeners coming in and get more listening minutes out of them.

We do see small drops in unique listening even on well-driven CHR’s – but they combine with higher TSL to create an increase in total listening.

Hot AC station with strict entertainment focus - Week by week latest 3 months



8) Music-only channels (and channels with strict entertainment focus) of a general nature are down on all measuring points

The radio industry has been economically into more and more automated programming, fewer and fewer live hours, less and less capacity to provide unique local or regional content. That turn of events is not killing or at least seriously damaging stations that have “gone too far” to have a relevance in these pandemic times.



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We see music-only channels that do not have a specific purpose or style and both CHR and AC stations with generic “not personal and not live” hosts drop big time on all possible scales.

TSL is down, unique listening is down – and not just by a few percent. We see some stations dropping in up to half of their listening in primetime.

Whether listeners will return after the pandemic is over is an open question, but we have already argues that lasting connections are created in times of trouble, and knowing that radio is very much a habitual media platform, we doubt it will be a smooth and fast process to get to the levels of listening those stations have been used to.

9) Music-only channels with “niche music” or catering to narrow demos, are stable or up a little, especially in off-prime

The “specialists” – like stations who only play local language music or have a tight focus on a specific and narrow demo like “urban youth”, are almost flatlined in the curves we have seen.

There is, however, small drops in listening to be seen in primetime, while off-primetime is up somewhat. This probably has to do – at least for the stations with a very young audience – that listeners have little else to do at night and during weekends.

For stations like this the advice is simple: stand with your audience. Be you.

Digital Listening *is* Growing



10) Looking at the digital streaming only, it is up between 10 and 30% depending on the nature of the station



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The digital transformation – or at least the part of it that has to do with listeners turning to online streams to listen to radio – has been an ongoing process in the past 15 year. Growth has been linear and steady, but very much aligned with the availability of cheap unlimited data plans for consumers on their mobile devices.

The pandemic has created a new need for online listening. Both at home and on the go we see much faster growth in online listening, than any one single event has ever cause before. Growth rates of 15-25% are not uncommon and we have seen some stations grow up to 30% almost overnight; so something that would have taken 2-3 years has happened over just a few weeks.

Some are calling it just “a platform shift”, and it is, but for stations that are following the successful routes outlined above, its contains a portion of new or renewed listening and listeners. This is a once in a generation chance for broadcasters. Our core audience has need of us for our (local and regional) news and competency and our friendly hand holding during the day. They are also using our future platform of choice to get to it, and doing it at a time when there is a forced and prolonged change to their daily habits that gives us time to become part of those new habits instead of just for a short time driven by a promotion or incentive.

So please, please, take this gift and use it responsibly. Listeners will only continue to prefer the platform if we take care not to overload it with even more commercials that the over the air channels and endless pre-rolls and popups littering our websites and apps.

The advantages of keeping the digital listening high are many. Among them is lower broadcasting costs when listening reaches critical mass, the option of personalizing the commercial selection to make it better targeted and more valuable, but also the ability to track closely what listeners like and dislike in your on-air-product to better align the shows and the music with their preferences.

Take Good Care of Radio

At the brink of turning (too) corny at the end, we’d like you to remember what happens when nature burns. It’s ugly and not very welcoming for a while. Hostile, even. But with the passage of time and the removal of old and partly dead vegetation comes a new chance for fresh plants to grow where the soil was once burnt and exhausted. A beautiful new landscape of even more colors slowly appears before our eyes.

Our world is on fire right now. People as well as companies are dying. Habits are changing and who knows how much of what we knew to be true a few weeks ago will remain the same in the aftermath of all this?

But one thing is for sure. Radio will still be there. In force. Take good care of it by being there for your listeners and your advertisers. Their world is on fire too, and they won’t forget who was there for them when things were looking grim.



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RadioAnalyzer is the Global leader in data analytics for radio.

Built by radio people for radio people, their purpose is to enable decision makers to create better audio products, adjusting the content and music to listener preferences.

RadioAnalyzer saves time and money while creating more listening. The system rates performance on music, benchmarks, newsbreaks, journalism formats, or comedy: whatever your content is.

The answers come straight from listener reactions using real, minute by minute data.

RadioAnalyzer also provides state of the art market surveillance on content and music for almost a thousand radio stations around the world.