

Education Radio: The BBC's Virtual Fifth Network

Home, Light and Third

BBC Radio broadcast programmes for Schools almost from the beginning, starting in 1924. With the advent of the Home, Light and Third networks, Schools programmes became part of the Home Service, starting Monday to Friday between 0900 and 0945, breaking for the 15 minute Daily Service and continuing until 1200. There was then an extra hour in the afternoon: 1400-1500 Monday to Friday. This pattern continued through the Radio 4 era into the seventies.

Adult education programmes formed a separate service, Network Three, broadcasting on the Third programme's transmitters from 1830-2000 Monday to Friday. When the start of the Third programme proper was brought forward to 1930 in the sixties, Network Three was cut back to an hour a day and a Study Session introduced on the Home Service on Saturday mornings 1030-1200. With the advent of Radio 3, the Network Three education programmes also went under the Study Session banner.

The Virtual Network

When the Open University was formed at the end of the 1960s, it applied to the Government to build an FM transmission network for its radio programmes. This would have used the remainder of the then European FM band, the frequencies now used by Radio 1, but then temporarily allocated to the emergency services. However, this would have taken time and money to develop, so space had to be found on the BBC's networks. At the same time, the BBC was rationalising its Radio networks. Radios 2 and 3 were to become mainly music stations, with the speech programmes consolidated on Radio 4. The BBC's schools and education programmes were an obstacle to this and needed a new home. The solution proposed in the report *Broadcasting in the Seventies* was to set up a new part-time education station on Radio 4's FM network, with the idea that this would eventually move to a new FM network. However, to implement this, Radio 4's night-time reception on AM had to be improved as a number of East European transmitters opened up in the 1960s had reduced coverage after dark. The proposed solution was to transfer Radio 3's main AM frequency over to Radio 4, leaving Radio 3 with much reduced AM coverage or none at all. However, protest from Radio 3 listeners put a stop to this, so Radio 4's FM network could only be used for educational programmes during the day.

Open University radio broadcasts began in 1971. The BBC broadcast these on FM only as planned, but as they had to broadcast outside normal working hours, they were split between Radios 3 and 4. Initially, the Study Session slots on both networks were chosen, plus 0930-1030 Sunday mornings on Radio 4. However, OU broadcasting expanded quickly and by 1974, it was broadcasting in many more slots:

- Mon-Fri 1745-1930 on Radio 3 FM, displacing 45 minutes of music programmes as well as the Study Session,
- Sat 0700-0800 and Sun 0640-0800 on Radio 3 FM, both before the start of regular programmes,
- Sat 0900-1200 and 1400-1700 on Radio 4 FM,
- Sun 0900-1030 on Radio 4 FM.

Meanwhile, the BBC went ahead with moving Radio 4's educational programmes to FM only, providing a continuous service of regular programmes on AM. The Saturday morning Study Session was moved to Sundays 1430-1600 in October 1972, with the Schools programmes becoming FM only the following year, making room for Woman's Hour and Morning Story to be moved from Radio 2.

Following the re-organisation of the BBC's AM networks in November 1978, Radio 3's nighttime coverage was severely curtailed, whilst Radio 4's was improved. Thus, from a few weeks before the frequency changes, the adult education programmes were concentrated entirely on Radio 4 FM, extending the Sunday afternoon slot to 1400-1800 and adding a 2300-2330 slot on weekdays. A year or so after the changes, an hour of Open University programmes were moved from the early evening slot on Radio 3 to early morning and late night slots. OU broadcast hours in 1980 were:

- Mon-Fri 0600-0700 on Radio 3 FM, before the start of regular programmes,
- Mon-Fri 1820-1900 on Radio 3 FM, displacing music programmes to AM,
- Mon-Thur 2330-0010 on Radio 4 FM,
- Sat 0600-0800 on Radio 3 FM, before the start of regular programmes,
- Sat 0905-1030, 1120-1200 and 1400-1750 on Radio 4 FM,

- Sun 0600-0800 on Radio 3 FM, before the start of regular programmes,
- Sun 0715-0815 and 0855-1015 on Radio 4 FM,
- Sun 0000-0100 on Radio 3 FM, after close of regular programmes,
- All Radio 4 FM slots displaced regular programmes to AM.

Altogether, there were up to 58 hours a week of educational programming on Radios 3 and 4 FM, more than the number of separate programmes on Radios 1 and 2 when they started in 1967. So, the education programmes effectively made up a fifth radio network. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where regional stations had displaced Radio 4 from FM, the educational programmes opted-out on the regional stations. Radio Cymru, as an FM only network, was thus constrained to be a part-time service for its first decade.

During the early 1980s, OU radio broadcasting was cut right back as it became easier to distribute audio programmes on cassettes. The early evening slot on Radio 3 went first as it was most disruptive to regular programmes. By 1985, the OU had dropped back to just three slots: 0635-0655 on Radio 3 FM, 2330-0010 Mon-Thur on Radio 4 FM and 0700-0800 Sunday on Radio 4 FM. Meanwhile, the Study Session was renamed Options and split into two hour segments late on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Schools programming was also reorganised with Morning programming starting at 1100 (except on Thursdays) and a new overnight download slot introduced 1230-0110 Monday to Friday for secondary schools programming.

Radio 5

On 27th August 1990, the BBC's education programmes went from a virtual to an actual fifth network. Radio 5 was set up in response to the forthcoming ending of FM and AM simulcasting as a home for Radio 4's educational programmes and Radio 2's sport programmes, which opted out on FM and AM, respectively. With a new network to fill and little in the way of new money, educational broadcasting was totally re-organised. Schools programming was cut by more than half to just 7 hours a week, broadcast 0900-1025 Monday to Friday. As Radio 5 was on AM and many schools had FM only radios, the schools programmes were repeated overnight on Radio 3 FM after closedown. The money saved was invested in new childrens programming, mostly in the early evenings. Adult education was re-arranged into sequence shows with music in the late morning on weekdays and a half hour lunchtime slot, with repeats on Sundays. OU programmes were initially broadcast 1200-1400 and 1900-2100 on Sundays, later changing to just 1900-2200. Adult education language programmes filled the gaps in the OU calendar. The OU slot on Radio 3 FM was retained as it did not disrupt regular programmes.

The Decline

When the BBC's plans to launch a rolling news network on long wave were abandoned after fierce opposition from Radio 4 listeners, Radio 5 was replaced by a combined news and sport network, Five Live, in March 1994. As a result, the Sunday evening OU and language course slot was moved to Radio 4 long wave, whilst the rest of the adult education programming was axed. Schools programmes were broadcast overnight on Radio 3 only and childrens programming was slashed to half an hour a week on Radio 4.

By 1997, the Open University programmes and the BBC's language lessons had ceased, moving entirely to cassette/ CD distribution. Schools programming effectively ceased in 2003, when the overnight download was moved from Radio 3 (by now a 24 hour station) to Radio 4 digital (DAB, DTV and internet), with the World Service relay continuing overnight on FM and long wave. However, like many BBC radio programmes, they are now available on demand via the internet.

Paul Groves 2004 (reformatted 2015)