

# Europe's digital radio industry makes push into the car



**AMSTERDAM** – Digital radio is gradually making its way into the car across Europe, but automakers aren't convinced yet that the technology will become a core component of in-car infotainment systems. In a panel discussion on in-car digital broadcast radio at the IBC broadcast exhibition here, digital radio executives made a strong case for the technology. Digital radio offers better sound quality, wider choice and a broad range of possible extra features, said Patrick Hannon, president of WorldDMB, the global industry forum for digital radio. "The key is to have a highly-diversified quality offering with a stronger content proposition," he said.

Most major car brands offer DAB or DAB+, the European digital radio standard, either as an option or as a basic radio feature. According to WorldDMB, 63 percent of new cars sold in Norway and 55 percent in the UK come with DAB and DAB+. The two countries so far are among the most successful in pushing digital radio.

In the car industry, executives are hedging their bets, with many expecting internet radio and IP-delivered information in general to become the standard for in-car infotainment delivery in the future. "The internet potential is bigger," said one automaker executive who didn't want to be identified. Also, in the views of auto-industry executives and most potential car buyers, digital radio isn't something that stands out as a coveted function available in a new car. That's because it's, at best, seen as "improving on an existing feature," said Kevin Hamlin, an analyst at market researchers IHS. "It's not something that's new and exciting to the buyer."

According to a recent IHS survey, slightly more than 20 percent of respondents indicated that digital radio was a "must have" when buying a new car. By comparison, more than one-third said factory-installed navigation and smartphone connectivity fell into that category.

The auto industry – and car buyers - may be underappreciating the potential of digital radio, broadcast executives say. For example, one of the benefits would be improvements in connected safety systems, a key automotive focus. Using the so-called TPEG (Transport Protocol Experts Group) specifications, digital radio can deliver more information faster and more reliably than internet-based technologies, said Thomas Kusche, who is the president of TISA, the global association that deals with traveller information services. "We're talking about reliable coverage at low delivery costs," Kusche said in the panel discussion. He cited in particular TPEG's improved ability to warn drivers of traffic incidents quickly and provide them with better visual information. TPEG would replace the widely used TMC technology, which relays traffic information using FM signals.

Ford Ennals, CEO of Digital Radio UK, said digital radio can address driver distraction, one of the major preoccupations of the global auto industry. "How do you keep it simple for motorists is a key issue," Ennals said. The complexity of radio menus, clear both in the home and in the car, could lead to a loss of listeners in the car, he warned. "The way radio is delivered needs to be simplified."

That issue was specifically addressed by Michael Hill, managing director of Radioplayer UK, whose stated goal is "to make radio listening easy on connected devices." Hill has developed a prototype automotive module that takes digital radio and traditional FM and combines them to show a user just one station list. In infotainment systems today, car brands force users to look for a specific radio category, such as DAB, FM, or internet radio. "We've

developed a multiplayer hybrid radio adaptor that hides all transmission complexity from the listener," Hill said.

Jacqueline Bierhorst, who runs the campaign to promote digital radio in the Netherlands, underscored how important the car is for the broadcast industry. She cited research that shows 19 percent of all radio listening takes place in the car.

The question of whether or not to have DAB in the car is likely to become more acute in coming years as more countries' official broadcasters move from FM to digital transmissions. Norway's official broadcasters will no longer transmit FM signals from 2017, leaving the spectrum to smaller, private players. Other countries are likely to follow suit, attracted by the broad options offered by the new technology and its lower transmission costs.

Broadcasters at the WorldDMB panel discussion agreed that 3G and 4G mobile coverage today remains too unreliable for high-quality connected services in the car. That opens the car door for digital radio. Several European countries, including the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland, have nearly full DAB coverage, which they achieved in only a few years. In other markets, digital radio coverage is expected to grow sharply as governments officially endorse the new standard. The European Broadcast Union is calling for pan-European adoption of the technology and the inclusion of digital receivers in all radios.

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Photos: WorldDMB



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