

## EBU Lessons from Lockdown: Exploring radio broadcasting

### Transcript:

[Graham Dixon, EBU Head of Radio] – Welcome to EBU Lessons from Lockdown. The theme for this edition is radio. And we've had six round tables for radio. We've been looking at various themes, listener needs, audience trends, technology, how to make an exciting summer for our audiences, when so many of the normal events have been cancelled. But actually, we're now gonna take a moment of reflection, stepping back after so many months of extraordinary activity and problem solving. Just stepping back and reflecting on what we've learned, and how we've dealt with the challenges which the situation has presented. I'm really pleased to have with me our distinguished guests. They've kindly taken some space during what, of course, is an extremely busy time in all our EBU organizations. So we have Cathinka Rondan who is Head of Radio in Norway, NRK, we have Giedrius Masalkis, the Head of Radio from Lithuania, Tom McGuire, Head of Radio 1 from RTÉ. And welcome to you all. It's great to have you here. So first, my first question really is just a look back to the very beginning of the crisis. The first days when lockdown was announced, when it was clear that things were not going to be able to continue as normal. And I'd be really interested to hear what you were doing in those first days. What was the first challenge that you had to confront and find a solution for? And of course, I'll go first to Cathinka from Norway, start at the North. And of course, you had only been Head of Radio for about four months at this point. So that was quite a challenge. What was in your in-tray? What was in your inbox on those first days? What were your major challenges?

[Cathinka Rondan] – Well, first of all, we start, what we did in NRK, which was very good move, we started preparing very early. So we had been talking about this could come for several weeks. So we were quite prepared, which was a good thing. But we also, what we did was made the plans for the worst-case scenario where 60% of the radio hosts and people working would be sick, for example. And what was very good about that was that we were, made very clear plans on how to prioritise what was most important, but at the same time we started, decided also to keep things as normal as possible also for the listeners as long as possible and that we're happy we did that because it turned out that hardly anyone was sick and we could continue as normal and be there for the listeners, and can continue quite as normal but have very much to start planning how to make radio programmes from home. Sending out a lot of technical support and things like that, but and then thinking a little bit new about what do the listeners need now? But we prepared for the worst and it turned out quite okay.

[Graham Dixon] – I think you were quite lucky. It's interesting that you say about keeping things normal because that's one of the main themes we've had in our roundtable, that after everyone's news fanaticism over the first couple of weeks, people then wanted to get back to normal life and feel that familiar things were still there. Giedrius you're also new, a new challenge – you've been Head of Radio in Lithuania for about a year. What were you doing in those first days? What were the things you had to do, had to get sorted?

[Giedrius Masalkis] – Well, actually, we've got the same challenge as Cathinka just mentioned, the first place was like to keep the same radio, as it's usual for people first of all to make feel comfortable and I don't know, don't panic, we are here, we are not panicking, we are working, we are delivering news as well as the culture, the music and any other information that they need. So yeah, and it was challenging, first of all, to keep this life like as normal, and the other one to run a lot of operations in the background like plan who is going, who's visiting the buildings and who's not. And then definitely we've decided nobody's

visiting, just a couple of people and technical issues came along. So yeah, it was quite challenging. But I think we've managed quite well because there were moments that people didn't realise that we are working offline and this is really good because we have a lot of people like you know, like young people and not so young and some people working with technologies and lots of them they don't like it. So that's challenging. And I think it was interesting experience for us.

[Graham Dixon] – Have you any thoughts on the technological change? For those people who were less familiar with the technologies or not early adopters?

[Giedrius Masalkis] – Well, you know I was, I was really shocked at the moment and I was afraid that we are going to manage quite poorly because there are really a lot of people that are used to their surroundings like computer – one programme, two programmes, and that's it and they don't have imagination, how to work from home or from another place, but actually, it was a very good experience for us. I've mentioned, not I've mentioned, I have noticed that a lot of people concentrated, they were mobilised by themselves and then they really managed very well. Even those who don't, they're not familiar with the technical things.

[Graham Dixon] – I guess at this point, they didn't have much of a choice did they? I mean –

[Giedrius Masalkis] – Yes (*chuckles*)

[Graham Dixon] – And I think I've jokingly said on one of the round tables that in terms of digital transformation, the last few months have been better than five years of strategy documents, planning, seminars, workshops. It's just had to happen, which is interesting. Tom, what about you on those first few days?

[Tom McGuire] – Yeah, there were four things there. There was audience and content. It was staff and the studios. So we wanted to secure the studios because we had this fear of them becoming compromised and infected. And thankfully, that didn't happen. With staff, we were worried about their health and their availability. So people who are immunocompromised, we asked to work from home from very early on, and that had its own challenges then of remote working. And for the audience, it was the familiarity of radio, and I think it's been proven across the EBU and across the world, that radio has been the friend of the public at this time, and it remained a friend. But the loss of content, particularly of sport was a big gap in the schedules. So we needed to figure how we were going to address that. So they were the initial challenges.

But it's interesting what Giedrius says about technology, that the one thing that really surprised me and particularly with younger staff is that people had tablets or iPhones, but they didn't have laptops or PCs at home, and our edit suites and our edit packages needed to run on a laptop or a PC. So we then finished up having to compromise and find ways of giving people laptops at home to be able to edit and put their packages together. But it was really surprising how few people had laptops or PCs and how dependent they were on the phone or the tablet.

[Graham Dixon] – That's really, really interesting as a reflection sort of moving beyond what actually is the sort of necessity for editing. But Tom, you also on another occasion, at a roundtable, shared with us some of the ways that you came alongside the audience, commemorating the audience, for instance. People who haven't been at the roundtable won't have heard that. I think that's a really moving thing. If you could tell us what you were doing in terms of solidarity and community.

[Tom McGuire] – I think we needed to marry both the visual and the audio in some ways. So we took an opportunity because as the lockdown began in Ireland, it was our national holiday, St. Patrick's Day. So we used videos from home for people to celebrate together then and that had a really good response. And we also at Easter then ran a Shine a Light campaign to give some light and some hope to those who were at home. And for those families and funerals, and death is very central to the Irish culture and the memory of that, we set up a campaign called Ireland Remembers which was online, on TV and on radio and it allowed families to publicly remember their lost relatives. And that has become very central and has three points in the schedule on radio, on TV and online each week, and we're still running that, but thankfully the level of death has reduced to single figures at the moment in Ireland. So there are less submissions. So that's one project we were glad to be part of, but we will really be happy when there is no need for it again.

[Graham Dixon] – Absolutely. Just thinking about those early days and the early reactions and asking you for a moment of honesty, but which is, you know, were there things that you've started to do and then stopped? Cathinka coming back to you. Were there various reactions you had and then felt actually this isn't working, we need to change, we need to adapt again, or was your plan so perfect?

[Cathinka Rondan] – No, but I think, I think part of the thing that worked because in the other...I know for example Denmark started early shutting down some of their channels and then they had to go back up again and I think one of the things that worked well was that not taking too quick decisions so just trying to keep the things as normal and see if it works before you decide to stop doing something. In a way, we didn't have anything that didn't work. We had the music discussion that I know many countries have had, of how much Norwegian music to play, which always is a difficult communication subject also and whose responsibility is what, so, in retrospect, maybe we could have communicated our decision in a better way than we did. But in terms of programming and... things went so normally and well and worked for the public.

[Graham Dixon] – I have a question for you 'cause just I'm personally interested, which is, at the very beginning of the crisis, you launched a humorous, a comedy podcast.

[Cathinka Rondan] – Yes entertainment comedy podcast because we had the same as many others have had, that we of course had the big rise on our news channel. And we also had news from all around, but we share sometimes the TV and radio news. So we're able to have more news in a way when you use it both for TV and radio and concentrate on things that work for radio when you send it on radio. But then we also quickly saw that people needed like a debrief or place to just sometimes gather together and be not be just the hard news. So we had a podcast very early called In Quarantine, with two of our entertainment personalities profiles, it ended like a week ago because then things are starting to go back to normal. But it was the moment it came in, came right on the top list of podcasts in Norway. We launched that and we launched also a health podcast with the panel and then did more with our news podcast. So we thought that the combination of a news podcast and the entertainment comedy podcast and also health information was a good package.

[Graham Dixon] – Yeah, really interesting. Giedrius you've also been launching new things for listeners and serving them in new ways. Just, why don't just say a few words about that I think will be interesting.

[Giedrius Masalkis] – I would say me personally, but not necessarily the whole radio but me personally I regret that we postponed the ending of never ending conferences because

some conferences were just became, like never ending talking about this and that and round and round and round and again and again.

[Graham Dixon] – These are the government conferences are they?

[Giedrius Masalkis] – Yes, this is very important because in Lithuania, we had a very quick response and the response was very sharp, like, we closed everything, we just stop everything and then we will see what happens. I don't think this is bad, but I think that, you know, it's like driving to work and then suddenly stopping down the highway, all the cars at suddenly. So sometimes, you know, find yourself out of the road. So it was a bit scary for people, for our audience. And then, in some period of time, we've started to notice that it's a bit stressing our audiences. That's why we've shortened them and we've cut the amount of those conferences and then we got back to normal life, to normal shows, which were cancelled at the moment when we started the quarantine. But other projects are really nice. We are playing Lithuanian music. We don't have that like deep traditions for music, which is modern or interesting for everybody. But yeah, we have it. So that's the way we support our performers. Also, we've started the project with Midnight Lyrics. It's like calming down before sleep. Our actors, our performers, our known people, they were hiding from their families in the, I don't know some places in the car or garage or somewhere else. They were reading lyrics from our famous writers from our famous poets, and it was midnight lyrics and we're still continuing this project, and other projects are quite okay. And also we've managed to keep the same programmes as it was before quarantine.

[Graham Dixon] – And just because it's great fun. And just because the whole of Vilnius I understand is now one enormous cafe. Just tell us in one sentence about Beethoven because I think it's just inspiring.

[Giedrius Masalkis] – It's very inspiring. And thanks for our municipality, because our municipality have decided that if you have any permission, because we have permissions only in one part of the city to sell, like, you know, if you have a food truck or something, only there you can sell your goods. So now you just have a permission and you can sell it wherever you want. So it's open cafe and you can operate wherever you want. So actually, from Monday to Thursday, which is like you know, not very busy, regular city hours. We have a lot of people outside, so I'm afraid that the (*chuckles*) second wave is coming. So we are now preparing for the second wave, but it's very good idea.

[Graham Dixon] – And of course, you are going to be broadcasting Beethoven into the streets of Vilnius, which I think is fantastic and interesting commemoration. Tom, coming over to you again, I mean, I think we all know somehow that in many ways, life won't go back to being what it was before. And probably that means that media organizations won't go back. We won't see life as it was back in February, in terms of homeworking, in terms of the flexibility of meetings. What do you think that you've learned that you will be doing in the longer term, things that you've started as innovations during this period?

[Tom McGuire] – I think we'd certainly be doing a lot more remote working. I think it's gonna need some training because some people are challenged by working from home, some people are energised by it. So we need to balance that and look and see how we can support those who are challenged and how can we support those in the office who also miss the collaborative nature of the work we do. But I think certainly, we will have smaller offices. I think that our grades and the type of people how people work is going to change, I think it will be more circular, than it will be hierarchical, and that the teams and groups will work in pods. And that has been somewhat successful for us in what we're doing. But definitely there will be an element of that there that we will have a lot more home working. I think we

will get better use from the day as well. We will not be confined to office hours and that if it suits people to work in the evening, or if it suits people to work early morning and take a break and come back. I think that's going to work as well. And we have found really good examples of people remote working that has contributed particularly to programmes. And we have found also people who are challenged by that. So I think that is going to be the reality. But there is an amount of training and work and lessons to be learned there.

[Graham Dixon] – And of course for many people who would value having more flexibility for all sorts of reasons during the day, that's going to be a real advantage to people who otherwise might have had you know, find it difficult to actually be in the workplace. So, yeah it's a, it offers new possibilities too. Cathinka, what about Norway and the lessons, things that you will be doing in the longer term? I appreciate that Tom having spoken this gets more difficult in the order that I call upon you, because clearly home working and staff is one of the main things.

[Cathinka Rondan] – From, if we look at the audience, one of the most important things we've learned is that we started the... very early only after a couple of days, we started the stream on our web page NRK.no. That was called NRK Are Always Together, which was meant to be free room from corona, where people can be together where we had a lot of visual radio and some of the TV, specific TV made live and when we didn't have anything and maybe in the night we have kittens and birdhouses. But the main thing there was that there was a lot of dialogue with the listeners and the public where they could write to each other and feel together and we've had that as a strategy for the whole of NRK now this year that to have a better dialogue with our audience. And then, so that was a very quick period learning in both working with people you haven't worked before is almost sometimes easier on the agility on Teams, which we use but there was big and much more positive because... And not so harsh audience dialogue. Which we were looking more into and also looking into that has been so positive that we want to see how we can do that even better and have interaction with our listeners in our radio app.

[Graham Dixon] – Yes so actually, this has enabled you to make a deeper relationship with listeners. And I'm sure you don't want to reverse that trend.

[Cathinka Rondan] – No, it's been a quick learning and we want to go quickly from there, yes.

[Graham Dixon] – Yeah and Giedrius I said, this gets more difficult. The order I asked you but what for you would be the things that you would keep for the longer term from your experience?

[Giedrius Masalkis] – Well, I think you know, never mind you what you are, journalists or cultural personnel or DJ or whatever I mean, I think this is, this situation shows that we can, we can actually work much easily from other place that is not office or pub or whatsoever, as Tom mentioned, and I think this is very good because working hours is not like, in some factory, working hours is like 24-7, and we're working very differently. And we have our shifts and situation like that. So I think we should rethink our policy of when you have to be at the office because I think socialising is necessity for everybody, for journalists, for cultural people, for everybody but we found out that there is a very good possibility to supply those people with technology and they can work from wherever they want, because it's actually possible to work from your lakeside of your, from your summer house or from I don't know which place you like, and I think this is good. Also with, shows that our people are creative, and I really like this. So we're going to keep up.

[Graham Dixon] – Just had the thought listening to you all, that there's a sense in which the flexibility of where you work could combine with the feeling, the desire to be closer to audiences. So you could actually be taking shows out, you could be more on the road, you could actually be in different places. And actually the two themes that somehow come together the flexible technology and working plus the, plus the audiences, but we have to see how that develops. But look, thank you all. But just in finishing, I have one final question. And really, this is in one sentence. So this is gonna be difficult, but not too much of a challenge for you, I'm sure. Which is if you had one piece of advice to give to other Members in coming out of lockdown. What would it be?

[Tom McGuire] – I would say Graham that it is always be prepared for the unexpected.

[Graham Dixon] – I think that's true. I must say back in January, we didn't think we would be here now, did we? Giedrius what about your one sentence of advice?

[Giedrius Masalkis] – Tom said it very correctly, always be prepared for unexpected. But at the same time we have to be, we have to understand that this situation and similar like this situation brings us together, for one aim, for one purpose to be together with each other. And as a public broadcast we one more time are convinced that we have to serve and to be close to our audience.

[Graham Dixon] – Yeah. And Cathinka what about you, your one sentence?

[Cathinka Rondan] – Yeah, to follow up the last thing you said always be in tune with your listener and close to your listener and their lives and that we've had a special occasion for that now, and we've seen that that works.

[Graham Dixon] – Great look, thank you. And really thank you all for a great conversation, which I'm sure our Members across the EBU are going to find really interesting. I mean, I think what you've shown is how much radio has risen to this extraordinary challenge. The challenge of a century probably. And you know that we can work in ways that we can never even imagine. Working at home, new technologies, new flexibility, new audience understanding and I think we can be really proud. We've had so many seminars telling us to be agile and to work in a flexible way. But I think we can be proud as radio that we've been seen to be a really agile industry. And, you know as in the statistics, the research is showing that we've really been maintaining audience trust as well. So, you know, well done all of you. I think you've done a fantastic job. So thank you Giedrius, thank you Tom, thank you Cathinka and goodbye, and thank you, audience for listening.

[Cathinka Rondan] – Thank you.

[Giedrius Masalkis] – Thank you, bye everyone.

[Tom McGuire] – Bye.