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Response to Format (Music) paper

I may or may not be known to you. I was Senior Program Director, BFBS Cologne, then Program Director of Beacon Radio and, later, Managing Director, in the years 1980 to 1987. After which, I was lead consultant in twenty successful applications to the Regulator and chairman of Star FM Bristol in the UKRD group. My speciality was audience research as European CEO of Paragon Media Strategies of Denver, Colorado. In which latter role, I was responsible for the launch-specific music research for Classic FM.

I don't expect that what follows will appeal because it tends to undermine prevalent thinking. It is almost impossible accurately, or usefully, to describe a music format in words. For example, we might say, "Soft Rock" but the term lacks sufficient precision. Only in the crudest of terms may we classify music verbally. We might agree that there's something called classical music. However, may we propose that BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM broadcast the same format? You may well think not.

Do the terms Soft Rock, or Adult Contemporary convey practical information or data sufficient to govern a station? I think not. To pretend that a few well-chosen words can adequately, or even usefully define formats, confronts good logic. For all practical reasons (especially in terms of law), humans don't perceive music by written or spoken labels; if they did there would be no reason to broadcast a song at all; all that would be necessary would be for the presenter to holler out, "Madonna, or Cold Play".

A format may only accurately be described by reference to a full range of audible samples, which, by broad and schooled agreement, define that format. And it's simplistic and impractical to identify and agree a few representative tracks. Music policy, at the practical programming level, isn't crudely defined or created by reference to a few samples; it is defined by detailed research, much knowledge, creative inspiration and track by track. A strong definition requires detailed reference to an entire playlist: an entire sound. Hence, instead of a written format, scrutinising parties would need to refer to original research, monitoring, and to examine fresh research when a format change were proposed. This isn't a simple task for the uninitiated; each genre or segment of music demands specialised knowledge, feel and schooled judgement.

One might comment or contend that only a regulator with huge resources could possibly cope with the task of examining or monitoring formats containing hundreds of songs by hundreds of stations. However, one might wonder if that difficulty entitles one to pretend that it is possible to describe a living breathing music format in a few well chosen words.

Sincerely
Bob Pierson