

Learning with The Irrawaddy, No. 42

To accompany the January 2010 issue of The Irrawaddy magazine.

Selected article: **Taking Over the Airwaves**

A. Activities before reading

Activity 1 Discussion: Who is listening?



What is the man in the picture holding?
What does the word 'airwaves' in the title mean?
What do you think this article is about?

Do you or your family listen to the radio?

If yes, what programmes do you like to listen to?

If no, what programmes do you think you would like to listen to?

Activity 2 Technical Vocabulary

The words in column A are key words in this article. In the context of radio, they have a more technical meaning than when used in other contexts. Match them to the correct definition in column B. Use a dictionary if you need to.

A

1. airwaves (*n*)
2. broadcast (*v/n*)
3. frequency (*n*)
4. high-fidelity (*adj*)
5. license (*n/v*)
6. medium / media(*n*)
7. radius (*n*)
8. transmit (*v*)

B

- a. permit or permission
- b. wave-band for specific radio station
- c. channel for carrying broadcast sound (*n*)
- d. send out (information) electronically (*v*)
- e. send out (information) widely
- f. distance between the centre and the edge of a circle
- g. accurate sound quality
- h. The means or method by which something is communicated

Activity 3 Grammar Review: practice with question-forms

Radio and other media, broadcast things they think will interest people.

In this exercise, write down the question you would ask someone, to find out this information.

Remember to use 'you' in the question, not 'they'.

- A. Their favourite singer
- B. The person they admire most
- C. A sport they enjoy
- D. A food they don't like
- E. Whether they are interested in national news

Once you know the questions are correct, go round the room and ask 5 different people one question each. Write down their answers.

B. Activities during reading

Activity 4 Types of programme

As you read through the article, make a list of all the different types of radio programme that are referred to in the text.

Activity 5 True or False?

Here are some statements. Are they true or false?

1. Shortwave radio signals only travel short distances
2. The sound quality of FM radio signals is better than AM signals
3. Independent radio in Burma started in 2001
4. Yangon City FM can be received all over Burma
5. Private radio stations in Burma are allowed to broadcast 24 hours a day
6. Some FM radio stations broadcast programmes in local languages
7. Hi-fi is short for high-fidelity
8. Frequency is measured in Hertz

Activity 6 Comprehension

Answer these questions on the article

- a. What are the names of four FM stations, and which regions do they serve?
- b. What are the names of four foreign stations? What do the initials stand for?
- c. How far away can people receive the FM broadcasts? (Give a distance range)
- d. Why does the article suggest that *Padaukmyay* broadcasts from 5.30 -8.30am and 7.00-10.00pm
- e. "I don't know about other taxi companies, but for us there are clear instructions to keep FM on all day," – why do you think this is?
- f. Make a list of the reasons given in this article why people in Burma are turning away from foreign radio stations to local private FM ones?

C. Activities after reading

Activity 7 Discussion or debate

The article often calls the new FM stations 'independent radio'.

In what ways do you think they are independent, and in what ways are they not?

Activity 8 Radio Programming

If you were setting up a local radio station and had free choice about programming, what mix of programmes would you run, and why?

Use the list of types of programme from Activity 5, and add any more that you need to (eg national / international news and current affairs)

Activity: In groups, draw up **one day's broadcast**. Decide on

- What kinds of programmes you want.
- How long each programme should last, and what time it should start.
- What percentage of each kind of programme in the day
- Think about 'peak listening times', when a lot of people will be listening, and what you want to broadcast at those times.
- At least some specific content – eg if one of your topics is 'celebrity interview', which celebrity would you have?
- Anything else that you want or need to decide on

When you have planned your day's broadcast, present it to the rest of the class, showing your plan, and explaining the decisions you made.

Activity 9 Survey of opinion

Now find out what people want to hear.

Activity:

1. In groups, draw up a questionnaire with 5-10 questions to find out what local people like / would like from a radio station.
2. Each student conduct interviews in their home-language with at least two people (family, friends etc).
3. Put together all the answers from your group, and analyse the results: were some topics more popular than others?

Give percentages if possible, for example 80% of the people surveyed said they would listen to Burmese pop music

Presentation:

Share your group's results with the rest of the class:

- Describe your questionnaire, and the questions you asked.
- Describe what you found out – for example what was most popular; what was least popular.

Reflection: What have you learned about

- a) constructing questionnaires?
- b) analysing the results?

Taking over the airwaves

Ko Htwe

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1 **Private FM radio stations are sprouting up all over Burma, offering listeners a variety of entertainment and, of course, government propaganda**

2 Almost every household in Burma has a radio on nowadays. Many families fight over what program to listen to. Father wants to hear the news and sports; the kids listen to pop music and celebrity interviews; mum tunes in every day to the fortune-teller, while grandmother enjoys the Buddhist monks' recitals.

3 FM radio is booming in more ways than one in Burma. The stale government broadcasts of the 80s and 90s have been replaced by popular independent stations all across the country, from Moulmein to Myitkyina.

4 The Ministry of Information renewed licenses in 2009 for eight private radio stations which transmit high-fidelity broadcasts on FM bands. Stations are licensed to broadcast daily from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. and are allowed to solicit revenue from advertising.

5 The first independent station to go on air was *Yangon City FM*, which began broadcasting in 2001. Its popularity prompted a handful of investors to apply to set up private stations outside the former capital, with military cronies being first in line—as always—for licenses.

6 Founded in 2008, *Mandalay FM* broadcasts on 87.9 MHz and can be received in Rangoon, Mandalay and Taungoo in Pegu Division.

7 In ethnic regions, listeners can often tune into programs in their native language. In the Shan State capital of Taunggyi, a radio station called *Cherry FM* broadcasts in Shan and Pa-o languages on 89.8 MHz to villages within a radius of 110 km [70 miles], reaching parts of Karenni State.

8 In Karen and Mon states and in Pegu Division, *Shwe FM* broadcasts on 89.9 MHz from Pegu over a 65-km radius and from Moulmein over a 70-km radius.

9 *Padamyar FM* in Sagaing is aimed at audiences in Sagaing Division and Kachin State, and regularly broadcasts Naga folk songs.

10 "Before, we all used to listen to the *BBC's Burmese service*, *Voice of America (VOA)* and *Radio Free Asia (RFA)*," said Myo Maung, an office worker in Rangoon. "But it's boring just listening to political programs all the time. Our lives are a daily struggle, so some light entertainment can be refreshing."

11 Another Rangoon resident, 50-year-old Kyaw Shwe, said he listens to shortwave news from abroad in the mornings, "but in the afternoons, I tune into FM and listen to music and celebrity gossip on *City FM*."

12 Perhaps the most popular programs in Burma, a country where many avidly follow the advice of fortune-tellers, are the daily astrologers' predictions.

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Most of the FM stations run similar programs mostly featuring local news and weather, sports, traditional folk songs, recitals of Buddhist texts and chants, Burmese and Western pop music, celebrity interviews and gossip, movie reviews and even science and technology programs.

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Despite the independent nature of FM radio stations, few DJs or announcers dare to criticize the military government or broach sensitive topics, such as Cyclone Nargis, education or health care. References to detained Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi are all but unknown.

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While most FM radio stations merely seek to engage their listeners with popular programming, several strive to draw attention away from foreign-based radio stations such as *BBC*, *VOA*, *RFA* and the Norway-based *Democratic Voice of Burma*.

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Padaukmyay, which broadcasts on shortwave from 5:30 to 8:30 a.m. and 7 to 10 p.m., attracts young audiences with the latest pop songs, interspersed with turgid propaganda promoting government policies. Not coincidentally, the station broadcasts during the same time slots that the overseas shortwave stations use for news programs.

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However, listening to shortwave radio in Burma is often considered a dissident pursuit. In December 1999, a 70-year-old farmer from northern Burma was sentenced to two years in prison after being caught listening to a VOA broadcast in a public coffee shop.

18

Another factor discouraging would-be listeners to overseas broadcasts is the poor sound quality. Shortwave stations broadcasting from neighboring Thailand have weak and hazy reception at best, and broadcasters have to constantly adjust the frequency band they are transmitted on because of atmospheric conditions.

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"It is hard to find the BBC or VOA on the radio," said Myo Than, a trader in Shan State. "Sometimes we get frustrated and just change the dial to another frequency. The FM broadcasts are loud and clear."

20

With an election scheduled for 2010, FM radio presents the military junta with an ideal medium to coax, confuse and intimidate the general public, especially rural villagers who do not have TV sets or other sources of information.

21

"The election is coming soon and we are preparing to lengthen our news programs to cover the political parties and to educate the public," said Than Lwin Tun, the head of the Burmese section of VOA in Washington.

22

The head of BBC Burmese radio, Khin Htar Shwe, does not doubt that they will have an uphill battle to win over listeners from local FM stations. "FM radio in Burma mainly focuses on entertainment. The audiences like that," she said.

23

In Rangoon, public bus drivers and taxi drivers from the Parami Taxi firm were ordered to keep *Yangon City FM* on when they have passengers. Parami Taxi is wholly owned by the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd, which is involved in the gem, banking and construction industries, and is currently on the US sanctions blacklist.

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"I don't know about other taxi companies, but for us there are clear instructions to keep FM on all day," a taxi driver for Parami said, before pulling out into the traffic and the racket of Burmese hip-hop.