# Spectrum Brings World to London

**BY WILL JACKSON**

**LONDON —** Spectrum Radio's studios in an office block hidden down a suburban side street in south London don't give any indication of the global broadcasting network within.

First licensed by U.K. regulators in 1990 to provide a "multi-ethnic" service for London on a single medium-wave frequency, Spectrum has now grown to provide five separate streams: the original 558 kHz AM, two 64 kbps mono DAB digital radio channels on the London II multiplex, Channel 0185 on the Sky digital satellite to western Europe and an Internet stream at *www.spectrumradio. net*. Additionally, many of the programs are made available for online listening or to download as podcasts.

## WORD OF MOUTH

Network Director John Ogden says the service is like the BBC's World Service in reverse. "Rather than us broadcasting to the rest of the world, the Spectrum Radio Network brings the rest of the world here and broadcasts it to London and the U.K."

Ogden is clearly passionate about the station and its different clients, saying



Spectrum's Chief Engineer Ben Goodman (left) and Network Director John Ogden.

"for all of us at Spectrum, it reminds us why we got into the radio business — for the thrill of communication and the feeling that one is the conduit and really entering into people's lives. Spectrum is the facilitator for that."

Ogden explains that Spectrum's clients fall into two categories. "The local ethnic groups based in London who come to us from within their communities — the Somalis, Bangladeshis, Ghanaians," he said. "We give them all the training they need to get on air. The other group of clients are the national broadcasters who send their signals into London and want to talk to their communities here, for example Polski Radio from Warsaw."

Some broadcasters take just a few hours on one of the network channels, while others such as Sout al Khaleej in Qatar broadcast 24 hours a day.

The varying requirements and level of experience of each broadcaster present a number of challenges. Ogden explains that the station works with clients to sort out issues such as compliance with what might be an unfamiliar regulatory regime in the U.K. "It's important for a foreign broadcaster to have someone with their best interest at heart. Spectrum Radio acts as their agent in London," he said.

"All of the services present unique radio programming to the diaspora in London, giving them a huge impact. It becomes 'destination radio.' Our radio station succeeds because the very tight-knit communities we serve work on word of mouth. They know when their programs are broadcast and will tune in specifically for it."

## CUSTOM SOLUTION

There are obvious technical challenges, with some programs broadcast from Spectrum's six studios in London, and others fed from around the world via various platforms including satellite, ISDN and the Internet. Chief Engineer Ben Goodman's job is to make all of this as simple as possible for both the
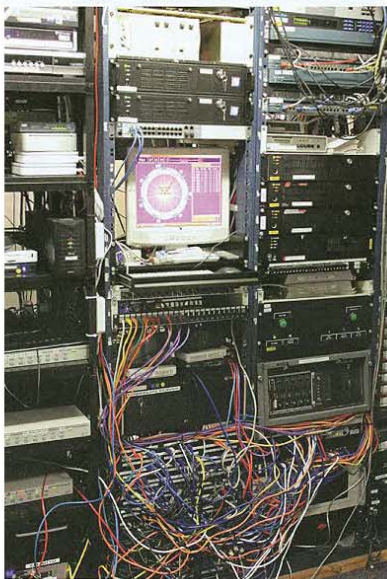
# Spectrum

clients and the station's small management team, while guaranteeing that the wide variety of programs go out seamlessly across all platforms.

"We need to be able to organize the traffic of studio users — to have a show coming on air live from a studio in the middle of the night without requiring us to be here, but also knowing that whatever happens it's all going to go out smoothly, and it's all going to sound good to the listener," said Goodman

Goodman explains that they wanted to do away with the traditional "offer and accept" studio switching system, but retain the professional sound without the risk of programs being cut-off in mid-flow. "It all came about because we wanted to do switching when no one was around, we wanted to do accurate switching in a way that the existing software packages wouldn't allow us to do. Our unique needs meant we decided the way to go would be a custom solution, and once we opened that door, we were free to ask what we actually want it to do."

He set about writing a custom system that not only switches program sources but also monitors itself and provides alerts when required. It can provide different responses to silence detection depending on the time of day and partic-



The Equipment Room at Spectrum Radio's London Studios



Spectrum's own software drives the display of forthcoming programs on each of its platforms.



Studio 2 at London's Spectrum Radio, with the station's own switching system.

ular circumstances. It also provides other functionality, such as clear information screens for studio operators displaying what's being broadcast, and also provides more traditional functionality, such as play-out reporting for advertisers and statutory program logging.

Goodman says that he started development of the system in 2001, and it's remained flexible since then to allow functionality to be added as the station grows, and new requirements from clients arise. The system has recently been upgraded to automatically generate listen-again functionality for the website and to make programs immediately available as podcasts via iTunes.

## COMPLEX CHALLENGES

One of the most complex challenges for the system was presented by the calls to prayer broadcast at sunrise and sunset in Doha on the Sout al Khaleej service.

For Spectrum, these needed to be time-shifted to local sunrise and sunset times in London — which also vary considerably across the year. Goodman's system manages this rebroadcast automatically, and additionally replaces the Doha call to prayer with alternative content.

Alongside their own systems, Spectrum's studios feature P Squared's Myriad playout, Alice Air 2000 mixers and Sonifex Redbox RB-SS10s for switching and mixing.

What does the future hold? John Ogden isn't worried by the growth of Internet radio streams from around the world, and wants to set up bespoke Internet radio services. "I'd love to see a really vibrant Internet radio market — we're very happy to set people up with 24-hour Internet radio stations. It's another platform for us," he said.

And with London's multicultural community continuing to grow, it seems Spectrum Radio is well-placed to be bringing the world to London for a long time to come.

*Will Jackson reports on the industry for Radio World from Manchester, England.*