NAB Radio TechCheck

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Olinda – Prototype Radio of the Future

A prototype radio called “Olinda” has recently been built with the goal of provoking “...discussion on the future and design of radios for the home.” Commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC’s) Audio and Music Interactive division (www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/radio/network/interactive.shtml) and designed and built by Schulze & Webb Ltd. (London, UK, http://schulzeandwebb.com/2008/olinda/), the two defining features of the Olinda radio are its modular design (allowing for new functionality and encouraging innovation) and its ability to promote social networking among radio listeners.

The “exploded view” photo at right highlights the modularity of the Olinda design. There are three parts to this prototype: the base (largest part, at right), which consists of a DAB digital radio tuner, speaker, and integral collapsible antenna, and which provides a mechanical and electrical interface to the Olinda modules; the social listening module (center part) which is discussed below; and, the transparent end cap (at left) which makes visible the connectors available for additional modules, acting as a constant reminder to the users that this is an expandable device.

On the base unit, there are two displays and two knobs. The front display shows the station being listened to while the one on the top shows either the list of available stations alphabetically (when the outer knob is turned), or, a list of the most listened-to stations when the inner knob is turned. According to the Olinda pamphlet, the designers elected to not include preset buttons so that the design would be based “...not on the features list of the radio, but on the motivations and experience of the people using it.”

So far the only module which exists for the Olinda radio is the Social listening module, which allows the listener to share listening with up to six friends who also are using Olinda radios. This module has built-in Wi-fi Internet connectivity and when in range of a Wi-fi network, accesses a BBC social listening central Web site and downloads information on the six friends that the listener has entered into the Web site database. When these friends listen to their Olinda radios, the button corresponding to the listening friend lights up (as shown in the photo, where the three lit-up buttons indicate that three of the pre-selected friends are listening), and if the listener presses the lit-up button, the station that the friend is listening to is displayed on the top display and can then be tuned to. Olinda’s designers believe that the shared radio listening experience will be “...the start of many conversations, either because people experience it together and feel closer, or because they use it as a prompt to start an interaction.”

Other modules (none yet built) besides the one for social listening are imagined in the Olinda pamphlet:

- **Klipit** – would consist of a large button which the listener pushes, causing the module to send the station ID and the current time to an online "Klipit" service. Later, this service figures out what to do with this information, for example, songs could be added to the listener's facebook profile and offered for purchase. (This module could function similar to the 'iTunes tagging" feature now available in some HD Radio receivers – for more information about iTunes tagging go to www.hdradio.com/iTunes_Tagging/).

- **Volume voting** – using Wi-fi connectivity, would communicate the radio's volume setting to the DJ, allowing the DJ or program director to see the average volume (anonymously aggregated) of every connected, tuned-in radio being listened to.

- **Whatson** – would track and in some instances control (by selecting a station) the listening which is done using the Olinda radio, helping the listener achieve a healthy balance of program formats (*e.g.*, news, classical, talk and pop).

- **Push-to-talk** – in essence, an intercom that would allow the listener to talk (and listen) to one of the six friends selected for monitoring with the social listening module.

- **Recommendation buddy** – a modification to the social listening module such that one of the six friends would be the listener's recommendations "robot," keeping track of which stations the listener likes and recommending similar stations.

- **Children's tear-off** – a module for kids which would glow when a program that the child is interested in starts, alerting the child that it's time to listen. As imagined, this module would connect wirelessly to the Olinda radio base, have a built-in speaker and be removable, allowing the child to take it elsewhere for more comfortable listening.

- **Pause module** – a feature that is available in some radios already, often called "TiVo for radio." With this module, the listener could pause a live radio program for later listening; when "paused," the radio is actually storing the program in local memory for later playback.

- **Mobile phone/MP3 player dock** – with this module the listener could recharge their portable MP3 player and/or cellular phone, and also provide for transfer of audio programs from the Olinda radio into either or both of these portable devices.

- **Home alert base station** – other devices in the home would communicate with this module to alert the listener to such things as a smoke alarm battery needing changing, or the microwave oven just finishing a long defrost cycle, or someone ringing the doorbell.

- **Profile key fob dock** – each listener in the home would have their own USB flash memory key fob which stores the listener's station (and perhaps other) preferences and is transportable between the Olinda radio dock module and other compatible radio devices, for example, an automotive radio with a similar dock.

A pamphlet discussing the Olinda prototype and concept in detail is available on the Internet at: http://schulzeandwebb.com/2008/olinda/Olinda_pamphlet_for_screen.pdf. For more information visit the BBC Labs Web page at www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/radiolabs/2008/05/olinda_a_new_radio.shtml.

***Radio TechCheck* will not be published on May 26 but will return on June 2.**