



University of
Sunderland

We are

spark

Best Station

Written Entry

Student Radio Awards 2014



/SPARKSUNDERLAND

THE INTRO

We don't really have a lot to be proud of here in Sunderland. We have a Nandos. That's about it. What we do have though, is a little station that's been making a whole lot of noise since 2009, noise that we are immensely proud of - even if the office next door don't particularly appreciate the sound of 15 samba drummers ringing out of the studio at 8:30 in the morning.

2014 has seen huge changes finally appear across the Spark operation. Changes designed to continue the station's award winning trajectory far into the future, and with a recent license extension from Ofcom, the transmitter won't be falling silent anytime soon.

The wheels were put in motion for the next generation of Spark in 2012, and by the start of 2014, the station was sporting all new branding, a wider and diverse programming schedule, innovative management structure and as of a few weeks ago, we've begun moving out of our temporary office (that's lasted 4 years) ready to inhabit a new office, complete with beach huts, giant plastic cups for chairs and a furry beanbag that looks like a skinned polar bear. A combination of faculty support and tighter integration into University programmes, plus investment into technology and infrastructure has solidified the station's presence within the student community and the wider area, and has set the station on a strong footing in order to tackle the ever-changing future of radio for the next 5 years.



THE FUTURE'S BRIGHT, THE FUTURE'S ORANGE

September 2013 saw the first major implementation of Spark within the University's media and culture curriculum following certain existing modules in place since 2009. This integration involved the Radio Management Masters course playing a major role in the running and management of the station, on a scale unseen before. Course members now form an integral part of the station management, taking existing and newly created roles within the senior management team. The transition to our new management structure and faculty support system has been rapidly adopted and is proving successful in steering the station towards future successes. This includes a new Operations Manager taking over much of the former station manager role, but this time drawn from an existing member of the faculty - providing much more stability and control.

Expansion within the University has led to additional student media opportunities being launched alongside Spark - working as content providers for the new Spark service. These standalone websites generated by journalism students - specifically a local arts, music and entertainment website, a website dedicated to fashion, a sports service and a hyper-local news service - feed into our radio and online offering to provide a deeper level of coverage from across the city. Collaborating on content has proven to be hugely successful, with programmes and events now produced in cohesion with these additional services. News and Sports output is now branded on air using the names of the individual sites (sportsbyte.org and sr-news.com). The addition of a new digital news studio next door to Studio 5 (our main broadcast suite) which will be operational this August, allows us to improve our news offering alongside SRNews greatly. This, in combination with service provider agreements with the lovely people at local newspaper 'The Sunderland Echo' and the opportunity to share content from their journalists (as demonstrated with our coverage of the massive North East Live concert at the Stadium of Light) has led to increased traffic to our news pages, and demonstrated great examples of collaborative news gathering.



ABOVE A mockup of our new window graphics featuring SRNews branding

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Perhaps the most notable change since 2013, is the introduction of our new branding and on air identity. The most major aspect being the change of name. Okay, it's not that major, because it hasn't really changed. What we have done, is shave off a little bit of extra fat around the branding, to give us a cleaner, unified identity to communicate. So, the station name has gradually transferred on air from 107 Spark FM to 'Spark'. Just Spark and nothing else. We know, your mind is blown by such an Earth shattering transformation. Don't worry, we're sure you'll pull through. Although, if you have been affected by any of the issues raised in that last paragraph, there is help available on our website. (There isn't.)



So, why such a radical change? Well, we felt that when talking to listeners, they would refer to the station as 'Spark' not as 107 Spark FM. The same applied to our magazine and visual departments. Chances are, you're aware of the fact that you're reading a magazine, so why do we need to add the word magazine onto the end? We also had a ridiculous amount of logos and brand colours for each department, which just served to confuse things even more. Therefore, the entire brand has come together under one brand colour, one logo and one name. On air production now refers to the Station as 'Spark' with certain elements referencing the frequency as more of a subtle reminder rather than as part of the station identity. Presenters are also required to not drop the 'F Bomb' and avoid saying the frequency as often.

Visual branding is much tighter and uniform, new marketing materials have been purchased - including a massive orange tent (it's more of a marquee really, we didn't realise how big it was when ordering it) all of which are designed in house. The studio has finally received a splash of orange, to give it an on-brand look on camera. A rigorous marketing strategy has also been drawn up and will be implemented fully for the first time at the Sunderland International Airshow following months of research and audience interaction developed through our Spark Internship Programme. This includes a new street team and army of 'selfie takers' - who also act as researchers with a short digital survey on their selfie cameras (Nexus Tablets). The Revolution campaign, consisting of posters, banners, leaflets and shop window/car stickers is also designed to further the station's presence on campus (which has been lacking at the University's City Campus since launch) with posters and banners and interactive events, urging listeners to 'Join the Radio Revolution' and ditch their current station. Our presence during Freshers also followed this campaign - as well as our recruitment drive during the fortnight. Further campus activity includes the Coffee Shop Sessions in the Starbucks and Costa outlets on campus, with the cream of the crop from our Original 6 till 6 Local Music Guarantee playing a free five-hour gig in aid of our chosen charity the Sunderland RNLI.



Our new Online and Social Media strategy has seen an increase in interaction and engagement, with Facebook likes and impressions seeing a weekly rise since the strategy was put in place. A unified voice for posts, creative content and live tweeting of events and promotions has greatly assisted this. The strategy also includes the development of a new web presence, which we hope will be launching in September 2014. This new website is designed to be completely user-customisable - allowing visitors to perfectly tailor the content they wish to view across radio/audio, video, magazine and blogs. Smart filters and content pushing will lead visitors to additional content, listen again opportunities and interaction on social media. Inclusion of services including music/playlists from Spotify, Instagram and Tumblr will also feature heavily, with increased visualisation (using services like YouNow for instant video streaming), and bespoke online content, both audio and visual, like our award winning NewTube music series, which is also simulcast on air. This will hopefully further place the brand within the sights of an increasingly digital audience. The site will be fully responsive and mobile friendly, and will include a mobile app for download too.



^ ABOVE The PSD plan of the new sparksunderland.com

PROGRAMMING AND RECRUITMENT

Our new management team have moved very quickly to solidify and diversify the station's output. These changes have seen an increase in participation, speech output and diverse programming across the board; with a focus on special events, themed weeks and dedicated news, current affairs, documentary and drama slots.

The Local Music Show and our Original 6 till 6 Local Music Guarantee have remained an integral part of the schedule, having been built on and expanded this past year to further cement our position as the home of local music in the North East. Our pledge to play a song from a local artist every hour between 6 in the morning and 6 in the evening, and the 3 hours dedicated to the local scene on Sundays, coupled with countless live sessions, an award winning online TV show (simulcast on air) and our 'sessions' events have continued to enjoy success, as relationships with artists, venues and supporters continues to grow. We also work closely with Generator and local music initiative The Bunker in supporting local talent through Evolution Emerging, providing judges and coverage for the event and running a week long live session series from our TV studio (simulcasting it on air and online). Previous artists from Evo Emerging have gone on to play the mainstage at the North East's biggest festival in Gateshead – Evolution, alongside Ellie Goulding, DJ Fresh, Paloma Faith and The Vaccines.



^ ABOVE Jess chats to Evolution Emerging artists after their live set in the TV studio.

With the integration of our Radio MA students into the management team and with our FM license reapplication now approved, this past year has seen a major focus placed on the quality and diversity of our programming output, particularly in the way of speech content. Whilst most dayparts were hitting the desired level of speech as agreed in our Key Commitments with OFCOM, we felt that the speech being delivered wasn't necessarily fulfilling our remit as often as hoped. We also recognised however, that any increase in speech content had to be done carefully. We were reluctant to enforce larger gap-times in clocks without first ensuring that the extra speech content being delivered in the programme was worthwhile and not just there to fill talk time. Basically, we didn't want someone prattling on about the importance of an adequate biscuit dunking technique for 40 minutes. Unless of course, they make it incredibly entertaining and groundbreaking in which case - who are we to stop them?

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Daytime programmes between 10am - 2 pm remained largely unchanged, although most clocks have seen an increase from an average of 7-8 minutes talk time to approximately 10-12 minutes. Programme teams are now encouraged to actively source interviews and guests - with a target of at least 1 guest or slightly more speech heavy feature a week being desirable. Drivetime and breakfast shows have also seen an increase in talk time, depending on the presenter's preference. For example, Dom's breakfast clock can have up to 20 minutes gap time in certain hours, as likes to waffle on an awful lot, whereas Jonny's drivetime clock features a gap time closer to 13-15 minutes.

Specially commissioned speech programmes have also formed part of the schedule shake up, in order to up our speech output. Once again, we have been careful to schedule these programmes in a way that hopefully won't deter listeners who are used to more music output during the daytime. We don't want to ram speech down their throats - because, well, that wouldn't be very pleasant for anyone involved.

These programmes therefore are designed from the ground up to be as relevant and engaging to the audience as possible - with a brief to ensure that the programmes transition seamlessly from the music-heavy hour beforehand. Voicing Views for example was a series of speech programmes, specifically focussed on student issues and advice, covering everything from accommodation, to fees, funding and coping with the stresses of student life. Drawing opinion from expert guests from across the University, local colleges, schools and support services within the city - which is heavily populated by students - the programmes received significant interaction on social media, with repeats and clips of the show topping our 'most listened to' list on Audioboo. Alongside Voicing Views, rotational slots have been added following our consultation with other stations from around the country, occupied each week, by a different speech based programme. These include 'Get Your Foot In the Door' a show dedicated to finding jobs and employment for students and recent graduates, and 'Wear Talking' - an issue lead magazine show. Each of these programmes had at least 25-30 minutes gap time. The hugely successful 'Telling Tales' presents groundbreaking documentary and drama programmes in prime time slots, drawn from student work and specially commissioned pieces. Careful consideration has been given to selecting and commissioning engaging and relevant speech content, to ensure its place within the daytime schedule.

We are conscious that we have to cement our position as 'that one amongst the group of friends that's been listening to that band with the skinny jeans loooong before anyone else', and therefore Specialist programming has also seen significant change and expansion across the schedule.

Our multi-award winning existing specialist music shows have been joined by a cohort of new programmes designed to compliment the existing output. Each evening after 7pm is themed towards a particular genre or subject, as follows: Monday - Urban, Hip Hop and R&B. Tuesday - Indie, Electro, New and Undiscovered Music. Wednesday - Uni and Local Sports, International and Drum and Bass Music. Thursday - Rock, Metal and Punk. Friday - Dance, House, and Live Mixes through the night; with Saturdays being entirely dedicated to huge hits, floorfillers, 90s and anthems. We like to think of Sundays as that super cool bar where everyone has a beard and drinks expensive Gin from a teacup. Sundays take a much more eclectic approach - with specialist speech shows covering arts, theatre and entertainment, Spark Gold (playing anything 5 years or older) with further programmes playing album tracks, B-sides, and chilled sounds through the night. The Local Music Show remains at the helm of our Sunday evening output.

Our specialist shows, particularly long standing brands like The Takedown, Juicebox and Dance Revolution have continued to build their loyal fanbases, praised for their reliable delivery of cutting edge music and huge giveaways like our 'Scream for Sonisphere' competition. These shows have become routine listening for much of our audience owing to their long standing nature. The addition of extra specialist programming around these only helps propel our specialist offering. This year has also seen the introduction of an Executive Producer to focus on how we represent our international student body we were now able to introduce shows that catered better to the universities broader student body. 'African Groove' is excellent example of this.

The success of our Freshers Takeover - which saw a different fresher host part of the Breakfast show each day over the fortnight (provided they weren't horrifically hungover/still drunk/a complete lunatic), lead to the creation of Spark Futures, another hour long rotational slot, specifically for new members to get on air in either a presentation or production role. Spark Futures is designed so that new members can integrate themselves into the station as quickly as possible, gain valuable on air experience and at the end of their four week period in a Futures slot, stand a better chance of applying for a full time slot at the station. It has long been felt that getting into Spark wasn't always easy - mainly because of the lack of available time and training before Futures was developed. Now, many 'Futures' members have quickly become integral parts of the station, most of whom have entered for Best Newcomer at the awards this year.

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Our presence at Freshers and our meticulously planned programme of recruitment and training coupled with Spark Futures and expansion at the station has meant that more students than ever before have had the opportunity to take part in Spark. We ensured that Spark had a huge presence at every single Freshers event; with cameras, diary room booths, DJ sets and giveaways at all night-time events. Live broadcasts throughout the fortnight and a huge leaflet, email and poster campaign across campus saw over 200 people turn up to our initial recruitment welcome event, many of whom have remained at the station throughout their first year.

Alongside programming, the overall station sound has been completely overhauled to further reflect the zeitgeist of the University, its student body and the wider community. Multiple local voices have finally added a 'Mackem' twang to proceedings, with production elements becoming much more informal and youthful. Being that a large proportion of the student body is made up of local students, more student voices are now featured within idents and production - combined with accentless voices for information elements.

The introduction of an executive producer for Competitions and Promotions has seen a significant increase in the number of exciting prize giveaways and promotions in collaboration with local business and agencies. Sponsorships and tie-ins have led to amazing opportunities for listeners, including the 'Scream for Sonisphere' competition (see audio entry), family passes to an all new Battlezone Laser Tag, numerous North East Live tickets - to see artists like Jessie J, Jason Derulo, The Vamps and Rizzle Kicks at the Stadium of Light and more. Continued relations with the football club have also given us access to One Direction's Where We Are Tour and further paid opportunities, including bespoke OB services with the club.

Listen again availability has seen a huge leap forward over the last year, thanks to the amazing support of Audioboo. The service is now our preferred provider for listen again content, with posts regularly featured on the site's homepage and social media feeds on an often daily basis.

WE BLOODY LOVE MUSIC YOU KNOW...

Music will always be at the very heart of everything we do, as it is for most of our listeners. Our commitment to provide only the best line up of the biggest hits, cutting edge artists and aching cool new music has led to an overhaul of our playlisting and music policy. The sheer amount of music which we now receive on a daily basis, due to an ever increasing contact book of labels, pluggers and Indies, has led to an expanding music team curating additional playlists and clock elements dedicated to new music, spot plays and specialist music in daytimes. Specialist Presenters from the night before now carefully select a featured track from their show, for broadcast again during breakfast, drive and select daytime shows, recording their own introductions for each. Not only does this increase traffic towards our specialist offering in the evenings, it makes the transition smoother for music featured on specialist shows to move into the regular playlists. Breakfast and Drive teams also select Tracks of the Week from the New Music and Spotplay playlists, with a heavy emphasis on these songs during broadcast. Presenters are also encouraged to actively seek out and research their tracks of the week and go wild on social media about them as well as actively contribute to music suggestions on our facebook group and weekly playlist meetings. Criteria for playlisting has continued to take into account the song's performance digitally on streaming services, YouTube, and within traditional radio.



^ABOVE: Awkward photos with 30 Seconds to Mars, Reverend and the Makers and Peter Dixon & Alan Dediccoat

Our music team have excelled themselves this year, in bagging some of the biggest artist interviews we've ever had on the station. Not content with a Live Session from John Newman in the Studio last year, this year has seen our super-secret 'contact book of famous people' go through the roof (heaven forbid if someone tried to hack our phone). The likes of The

Vamps joined Jonny on his first Drive show (needless to say we couldn't get a word in edgeways) and we've also had the pleasure of chatting to Katy B, Sigma, George Ezra, Gorgon City, Peace, Duke Dumont, The 1975 and another chat with John Newman. We like John Newman. Oh, and, er, it wouldn't be Spark without the occasional visit from Barry from the Futureheads. We swear he lives in the cupboard behind the office or something.

IT'S NICE TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE...

Thanks to investment on the Uni's part, we've been able to get out of the studio a lot more. We now use ipDTL and Luci Live to take the station places we've never been before, on a considerably more rapid turnaround. Being able to contribute in quality from an iPhone or a laptop has led us to celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Pirate Radio in the aboard a ferry in the middle of the North Sea, have breakfast in Bed with Dom, from his actual bed (apparently he washed the sheets especially) and, for the first time, we were able to cover the entirety of the Tees Wear Varsity live as it happened from the venues.

Our Varsity coverage was no mean feat, with over 16 hours of live outside broadcast from the venue, in combination with full visualisation of certain sporting events and of radio output in our OB studio streamed to our website. Using ipDTL for the main body of the broadcast from a static studio in the Uni Sport building, an army of roving reporters provided commentary via iPhones and Luci Live throughout the day, with a team of producers and researchers holding fort back at Spark HQ and operating the playout system and desk feed from the OB site.

Our celebration of 50 years of Pirate Radio was perhaps one of our most ambitious OBs to date (well, apart from that time we broadcast Breakfast and Drive from New York City - not that we like to brag or anything). Somehow, Thomas and Anthony managed to blag free tickets on a ferry to Amsterdam, and on the way there, broadcast an entire show featuring the most iconic music of the time compared to the biggest artists of today, complete with authentically produced sung jingles, interviews and features with legends of the Pirate Radio world and the odd 'Boat That Rocked' reference. Despite some slight reception issues - they were in the middle of the North Sea for God's sake - the programme received plaudits from listeners and radio folk alike.

Once again, we were the envy of some of the bigger broadcasters at Europe's largest free airshow, with an entire weekend of live radio and video broadcasts from our commercial partner The Marriott Hotel on the seafront. Our online service featured unedited, live streaming of all of the air displays, as well as specially recorded content with pilots, exhibitors and more. Again, our coverage received worldwide listener and viewership and great interaction on social media. Our street level presence was also our most extensive, with the aim of creating a party on the streets for the thousands of spectators, many of them at the younger end of our demo. Blasting Spark through the PA, giveaways and promotions complemented our on air output to generate one of our most successful airshows to date.

The increased OB capacity has also led to mini broadcasts from the Leeds and Reading Festival launch, creating huge excitement and atmosphere around the announcement. This allowed us to make the line up announcement only moments after Zane Lowe on Radio 1. We had to let him have the exclusive after all.



All in all, we believe Spark has built upon its previous successes and through continued support from the faculty has opened up entirely new avenues for the future to create a station that's exciting and passionate and fearless about what it does.