

Witney Talking News AGM 9th November 2020

Technical Consultant's Report

Good evening. Well. What a year!

Firstly I'd like to thank not only the recording team but the editorial team also who have maintained a consistently high standard and reliable service through the most stringent restrictions on civilian activities since the second world war. The fact that not a single edition has been missed this year is testament to the tenacity and resolve of our fantastic volunteers. The pace of change has been unprecedented and yet there has been not a single complaint and not a single failure.

We all know what happened in the world at large, but what happened from a technical perspective at WTN?

The first three months were uneventful and then in the middle of March it became clear that we would, for the foreseeable future, not be able to meet in person, we needed a way to make Witney Talking News happen remotely. Many options were considered and many were rejected. In the end we decided to keep things as simple as possible as "low-tech" and as familiar as possible and that we would use the telephone for both recording and distribution along side our existing online distribution channels.

This decision led to two new requirements. A telephone based recording system and a telephone based distribution system.

The recording system was achieved through the use of a conference calling system designed to record business meetings. We were able to take advantage of a special COVID-19 deal here and the first three months were free of charge. Since then we have paid £4.80 per month. The system can support an editor, technician and up to 48 readers, but logistical issues in co-ordinating readers in different places led to a reduced number being used.

A telephone based recording system is available commercially for Talking Newspapers at a cost of £600 per year, however at the time no-one was sure how long we may be away for and this was a rather large amount to spend. Ultimately we build a system in house for around £7.50 per month.

All of this activity took place in a period of around 10 days during which time the technical team were teaching themselves sufficient advanced editing skills to process the telephone recordings into editions and the editorial team were preparing themselves for an enormous amount of reading.

There followed a period of letting listeners know what was happening and how to listen over the telephone instead of using a USB stick and whilst the number calling in wasn't huge we saw a dramatic rise in the number listening online. Whilst it can only be a matter of deep regret that we couldn't serve every listener every week as we would have liked to do, it is my earnest belief that we pursued every possible option and supported as many listeners as we possibly could in as many ways as we possibly could.

I am reluctant to provide detailed numbers here as it is impossible to tell online if "10 listens" is 10 people listening once each or 2 people each listening a bit at a time over 5 sessions. What we can say is that between 7 and 10 people listened each week on the telephone and more than twice as many listened online after March than before. My best guess is that we probably reached around 50% of listeners each week (though not necessarily the same 50% every week).

A little later in the year we extended the range of online listening options to include Google Assistant and Apple Siri alongside our long standing use of Amazon Alexa. WTN is also now available on Spotify.

Whilst in-person recording and USB stick distribution has now resumed we have retained the remote recording facility and also the telephone listening line (01993 555 986) for the time being due to the continued threat of a further lockdown. All editions will be available by telephone line until further notice. The service that supports that number is also being used to enable people to join this meeting without Zoom

too. Maybe such a service will be able us to make these meetings more accessible to listeners in the future too.

In the national TN space following the success of WTN's emergency procedures roll-out I was asked by TNF to document how other TNs could offer an online presence and telephone listening service in house and, after some persuasion wrote a guide which is now available nationally.

Staying with TNF I learned in the summer, under sworn secrecy, that Infosound were to cease production of their information articles this year and have been working with TNF since on a replacement service. I am pleased to say that the secret is now out of the bag and that the new service (TNF Soundings) has now launched and I hope that editors here at WTN will find some useful content there to replace that we used from Infosound.

I'd like to conclude by thanking once again all those who were involved in the transfer to remote working and those involved in bringing us back to working more normally. Let us hope that, while the next few months undoubtedly bring more uncertainty, by this time next year we may have returned more fully to normal operation.

Gavin Smalley
28th October 2020