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Free FM Makes AoIP Leap With Wheatstone's IP-12

New IP-based equipment provides leg up for current and future needs

MIKE WILLIAMS AND PHIL GREY - JUL 1, 2019



Wheatstone's IP-12 console

HAMILTON, New Zealand — [Free FM](#), a community access radio station, is part of the Community Access Media Alliance, a network of 12 stations around New Zealand. We have been operating for 28 years, for many as AM-only, but on FM for seven years and are making strong inroads in transmedia delivery.

Free FM is a not-for-profit entity, governed by a charitable trust and we operate as a

non-commercial broadcaster. We have a small staff and content is created by approximately 80 volunteers, representing a very diverse range of communities, individuals and interest groups in our broadcast area (the greater Waikato region of the North Island – population almost 470,000).

Free FM is partly funded by New Zealand On Air (a government agency) to provide access to broadcasting facilities for individuals or groups with ideas, opinions or cultural needs which may not have the opportunity for expression through the mainstream commercial broadcast industry. The purpose of stations like ours is specifically described in the New Zealand Broadcasting Act.

Access radio is, in essence, radio “by the people, for the people,” where the freedom of expression of ideas, values and beliefs is valued and protected. Many of those who come to make content with us have English as their second (or even third or fourth) language and we frequently have people involved who have physical or intellectual challenges. Much of the content created at our studios nowadays is in the form of prerecorded 30-minute or one-hour programs.

[AoIP Applies to Small Stations, Too]

Our philosophy at Free FM is also to stay ahead of the game, by adopting emerging technology where it is clear there are new opportunities to enhance what we do. While radio broadcasting is still our major activity, we have over the last 10 years become our sector's leader when it comes to digital content delivery and embracing new developments (such as smart speakers). We are always keen to see and evaluate what is coming over the horizon in terms of how listeners are accessing content and what they want to do with it.

It had become painfully obvious that our analog studios were barely fit-for-purpose.

There's a limit to how far you can push things and much of what we had was well used before it came to us back in the 1990s. It became obvious that a complete refit was necessary, replacing decades of add-ons, patches and mis-matched equipment.

Naturally, we wanted to find a technically advanced solution, but budget was also a major consideration. In doing our homework, we looked at all the available digital consoles and audio delivery systems available and considered how they might work for us. One of the big factors to consider was robustness and ease of use for nonprofessional people. And because of language considerations, we were also keen to find products that were intuitive and easy to understand.

In our search, Wheatstone kept coming up as a front runner. Marcus Bekker from Southern Broadcast was already known to us as someone who completely understands our sector. He became an invaluable advisor when talking about our specific needs and wants.

[From 2018 – Digital Radio Developments in New Zealand and Australia]

We did comparisons at every level, and everything we saw reinforced the view that adopting Wheatstone's WheatNet-IP Blade technology would provide us with not only what we need right now, but also form the foundation to support whatever future direction we may take.

We locked onto Wheatstone's IP-12 console as an affordable way to get us into the IP audio world. It had the ideal number of channels (12), and it was easy to navigate. We liked that each input module has an LED source display that we could name and that the meter bridge has easy-to-read bargraph meters and a prominent onboard timer. Because the IP-12 is a WheatNet-IP audio networked console, it gives us an in to an entire ecosystem for controlling, automating, processing and routing audio. It's a very

powerful system, and we now we have the capacity to develop other options if we wish, such as video, real-time social media content, or other input sources, with relative ease.

What is important to the future of Free FM, and stations like ours, is that we remain relevant and responsive to our changing environment. Digital delivery options are perfect for what we do, and it makes great sense to be at the sharp end of that platform as it grows and changes.

We are very pleased with the bang-for-buck we get from our new infrastructure as it is, and we look forward to the coming years with confidence that we have made the right choice.

For information, contact Jay Tyler at Wheatstone in North Carolina at 1-252-638-7000 or visit www.wheatstone.com.

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