

Radiolnsight Tech:

WBZ's Big Move Part 2 – A Shiny New Home

By Lance Venta on September 26, 2018

If you want to see the future, take I-93 north from Boston to the Wellington Circle exit. Turn right and then hope your GPS is up to the challenge – it's a twisty set of access roads that wind their way around to the generic-looking office building at 1 Cabot Road. Take the elevator up to the second floor and – why yes, that is an incredibly red, incredibly glossy lobby welcoming you to the new home of iHeart Media's expanded Boston radio cluster.



iHeart's very very red lobby

It was just a couple of years ago when iHeart relocated its existing cluster here from another office building across the street. And if you get lost on your way around the road spaghetti here (and you probably will), you might also find yourself driving by a smaller building nearby that was the original home of the station at the core of this cluster, the legendary CHR “Kiss 108” WXKS-FM. (The company still owns that building, where it runs its Total Traffic and News operation for the region.)

As clusters do, Kiss 108 acquired sister stations along the way: Rhythmic CHR “Jam’n 94.5” WJMN, Country “101.7 The Bull” WBWL and a pair of smaller AMs, too. And then, of course, the world of Boston radio turned upside down in 2017 when CBS Radio sold to Entercom. With more stations than could legally stay under one roof, Entercom turned around and spun off a package of stations to iHeart: from CBS, News 1030 WBZ and Classic Rock 100.7 WZLX, and from Entercom, Talk 680 WRKO and Urban AC 97.7 WKAF.

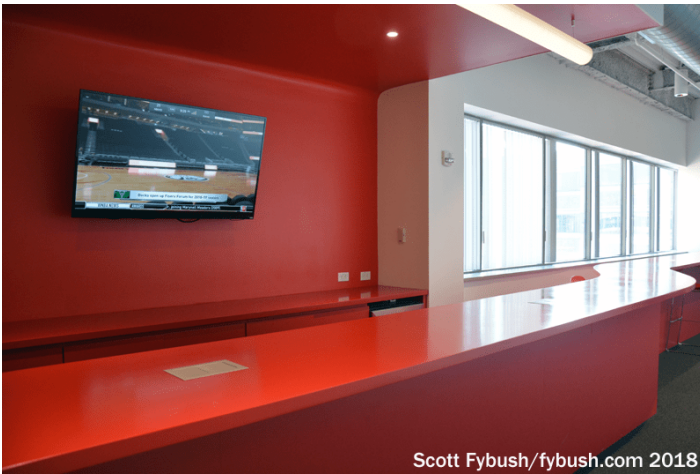
Suddenly, iHeart had to grow – and grow fast. Even though its studios still had that new-studio smell about them, they had room for only four stations where they needed to fit eight. In a stroke of tremendous luck, that didn't require another move: the health insurance company that had been in the other half of iHeart's floor at 1 Cabot Road moved out, providing instant expansion space for new studios and offices to handle more than a hundred new employees.



Performance studio at iHeart Boston

Some of that space was shared with what iHeart already had in place. Just beyond the lobby, iHeart had built a performance studio/meeting space, complete with all the lighting and video and streaming that you need in 2018 when you're doing more than just radio. All set for Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran? Sure – and now, with two big spoken-word stations in house, just as ready to host a gubernatorial debate or a “WBZ Business Breakfast,” too.

Across the hall from the performance room, designer Michael Beneville created one of the signature pieces of the expanded 43,000-square foot space: a long (and yes, shiny and red) bar extends down one side of the hallway from a picture-window view south to the Boston skyline. Video screens behind the bar can display logos from any of the stations – or any other custom digital content, too.



Scott Fybush/fybush.com 2018

The bar outside the performance studio

Turn the corner here and you're in the original studio area that opened a few years back. The undulating facade of the building created a floorplan with corners for just about every station to have its own studio, each boasting a Wheatstone LX-24 console, all connected by Wheatnet-IP and Blades to the engineering core at the center of the building. As with the rest of the facility, each of these studio corners is shiny, clean and mostly white. Each station got a distinctive accent wall; at WJMN, for instance, it's a tromp l'oeil mural that looks like a wall lined with shelves full of LP records. Most of the stations ended up with big glass walls looking outside; two of the smaller FMs are on the inside of the floor, with their glass walls looking out on two huge open office areas. Outside the Kiss 108 studio, we catch up with the dean of Boston morning radio, Matt Siegel, who started at the station way back in 1981 when it was in a windowless bunker of a studio in the old building across the street. "This is much better," he says – and he's right.



Scott Fybush/fybush.com 2018

WJMN's studio

When WZLX and WKAF joined the existing FMs here, iHeart more than doubled its open office area. Just about everyone, up to and including the programming VPs, works out in the open here at the long rows of white desks. When the record companies come to visit, they get a glassed-in room at one end, nicely equipped with comfortable chairs (and, of course, painted red and white.)



Scott Fybush/fybush.com 2018

iHeart Boston's open offices

Expanding here took more than just adding more music FMs, of course. Turn the corner from those studios and you're in an open corner area with lots of room for visiting TV news crews to shoot into the new glassed-in talk studio. What happens in here would have been unthinkable in an earlier era of Boston radio, when a fierce talk radio war pitted WBZ against archrival WRKO. Those former competitors became sister stations when iHeart acquired them both from Entercom. And because WRKO's local talk happens in the morning, while WBZ doesn't go to talk programming until 8 at night, both stations can share the same talk studio, with a video wall that changes logos when the studio hands off from one to the other. (Behind the scenes, Wheatnet-IP networking makes it simple to do this transition on the fly, bringing up studio mics in the appropriate control rooms and handling headphone mixes and all the other little details that make talk radio work.)



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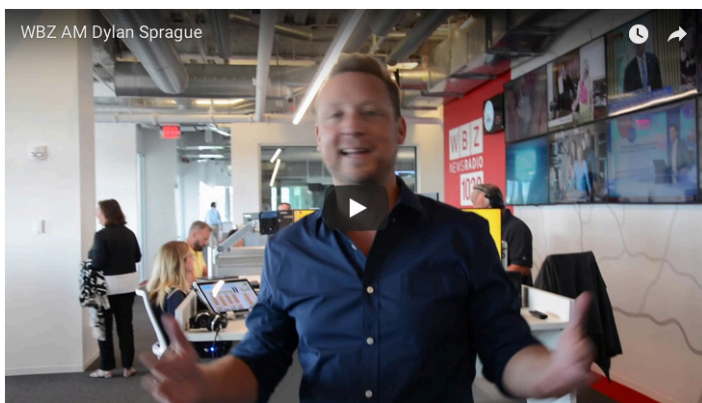
Shared talk studio, in WRKO mode

It's the WRKO morning crew finishing up their show when we're visiting, looking into a control room specific to their station – but the studio also has sightlines into the adjoining WBZ control room, along the hallway that leads down to WBZ's new newsroom.

When I worked at WBZ, we never really saw daylight. Our original newsroom and its later replacement were deep in the bowels of the building, which makes the new version a remarkably different experience. The new newsroom is dominated by a big glass wall looking south over the Mystic River toward the Boston skyline. Reporters and writers work at several rows of desks along the window, while editors and producers sit on stools at a long table by the (very red and white) back wall. The news studio faces the editors' area and looks into the WBZ control room, all glassed in for maximum visibility.

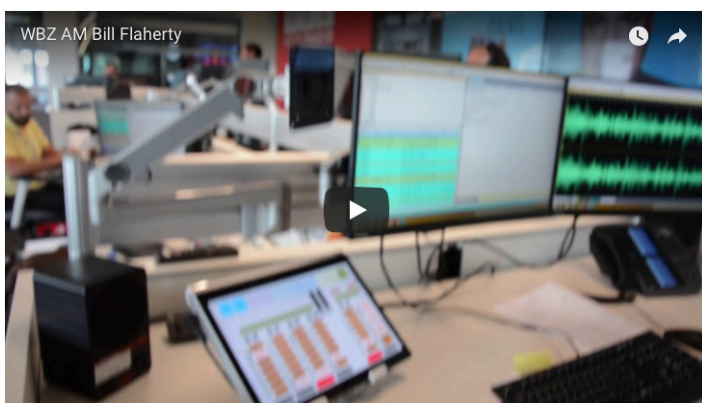
WBZ's news studio, with anchor Nichole Davis on the air at one of the two paired Wheatstone LXE consoles

In this video, iHeart senior VP/programming Dylan Sprague talks about the design of the newsroom...



To see this video, please copy and paste this link into your browser: https://youtu.be/LeQ3_JuCAtw

Back in my day at WBZ, it was a big deal to get a heavy ITC Delta cart recorder at my desk so I could cart up actualities and run them right into the studio. Later, our first digital router system let us bring up multiple network sources at each desk. Today, the WBZ newspeople have flexibility we could only have dreamed of: at each workstation there's a Surface tablet customized using Wheatstone's ScreenBuilder virtual development platform, so every writer, editor and anchor can bring up any source in the system instantly to preview a news cut or record an interview into Audition or straight into the NewsBoss newsroom system.



To see this video, please copy and paste this link into your browser: <https://youtu.be/6b9rcFoF6Kk>

It's a stunning new space, and I can't wait to get back there in a few months when my old friends have had a chance to settle in and really make the most of all the new technology at their disposal.

And all of this is only one piece of some huge changes in my old market...

In part three of our Boston visit: Beasley jumps headfirst into the nation's fiercest sports radio battle with a super-versatile new studio complex for its "Sports Hub"



WBZ's new control room, looking into the shared talk studio