

Teleboconó - Television Made by Children, but not only for Children

by Hans Peter Gohla, CAMECO

Exactly sixteen years ago, the TV channel Teleboconó in the Andes of Venezuela, came into existence. It was the first TV station in this country operating in colour, and - believe it or not - exclusively run by children. Children between the ages of 6 to 16 operating the cameras, sitting in front of master control and transmission, and mixing images and sound.

This was also the case on the 21st January 1995. Boconó celebrated, as did the whole country, the 35-year existence of democracy. The people of Boconó had invited the ex-President of Venezuela, Herrera Campins, to be orator of the day. Of course the whole event was shot by TV Teleboconó. Behind the camera, a 12 year old boy assisted by an 8 year old child. The lighting operator was a young man of sixteen. No member of the illustrious assembly found this odd or surprising.

The man in the background to whom Boconó owed all this is Pablo Miliani. On his visiting card you can read Engineer, Frigate Captain, President, but he could also have added some other titles such as for instance Ex-Senator or Ex-Minister.

Don Pablo, today 73 years old, was Minister of Telecommunications in the early sixties. As an experienced pilot and a passionate radio ham, he flew over the whole country in his own plane, piloting himself. If he wanted to touch down somewhere but there was no airfield, he ordered his Ministry - via wireless - to close off a certain piece of road so that he could use this section as a landing field. Thus he became more and more acquainted with the people in the most remote areas. The poverty, especially the cultural poverty, the isolation of the people in the villages, the "incomunicación" and desinformation of his countrymen struck him deeply.

After a very successful professional life, he returned to his birthplace where he decided to tackle in particular the educational and cultural needs of children and young people. In 1979, together with some friends, he established a cultural foundation on a non-profit basis "Fundación Televisora Cultural Boconesa". His own large house served as the starting point for a TV station. He himself together with the children and some experienced people constructed a studio and rooms for the technical equipment, etc. Via a narrow staircase, which reminds one of the restrictions on a ship, one finds the way from his house to all the rooms of the TV station. The house is open from 04.00 early in the morning until 22.00 in the evening.

As an old and experienced Captain he knows exactly how to organise life aboard ship. If everyone mans his place and knows what to do as a well coordinated crew member, then everything functions practically without problem and big noise. When the TV station starts working at 16.00 in the afternoon, all the important positions are held by the kids.

More than 200 children are connected to the TV station in one way or another. They can come and go when they like. There is no fixed planning. There are only certain times when the TV station broadcasts its programmes, which is from Monday to Friday, between 16.00 and 22.00 hrs. The first two hours are programmes for children, between 18.00 and 20.00 programmes for young people are screened, and after that the adult programmes. There is enough to be broadcast. Camera teams consisting of young people travel around the villages, towns and small places in order to shoot interesting stories, festivals, music, processions and all manner of activities. These programmes are a great attraction to the viewers as they are primarily of local interest, starring local folk.

The man in the background

Fundación Televisora Cultural
Boconesa

Everybody knows what to do

An ideal place for learning by doing

A tremendous amount of requests are received to produce certain programmes. These requests deal mostly of course with folklore-connected activities, performances of local orchestras, feasts of the local patrons, political speeches and so on. When politicians are allowed to speak on the TV programmes they have to accept certain rules. They are not allowed to talk about other politicians in bad terms, and they have to explain in what way, and how they would carry out and realise their programmes.

Another way to reach self-financing

A visit to Teleboconó is certainly something of an adventure. The rooms are full of electronic equipment, master-control systems, recorders and computers operated by children. It is rather difficult to discern whether this is a game for them or whether serious work is being carried out. If there are problems, they can approach Don Pablo who is always close by, and will have a solution for all their difficulties. The children have access to all the systems and to all the computers, and can learn things at the station without missing the formal classes at school, because the TV station starts in the late afternoon.

The equipment is not highly professional, but modern. There are no moderators no presenters, no anchor-men or anchor-women because Teleboconó does not transmit news, but instead of that illustrations and comics which are all produced with virtual computer technique, and this right from the very beginning. As an experienced electronic engineer, Don Pablo invested in modern computer techniques because he wanted to teach the children the most modern techniques of the year 2000, as he points out.

With its specific profile, Teleboconó reaches the people

The TV station Teleboconó has practically no employees receiving fixed salaries. When the camera teams travel around they find free accommodation and lodging practically everywhere. Payment for hotels and restaurants is made via advertisements. Even the ads for Teleboconó are produced by the children themselves. Teleboconó does not ask for fixed payments for productions, and when an event is being filmed it is practically normal procedure when the sponsor appears in the picture handing out a cheque for Teleboconó. The TV station does not make any profit, but it seems that the main expenses are being met - not taking into account the personal engagement of Don Pablo. How scarce funds actually are is demonstrated by the fact that there is almost no conservation of programmes. Only a very small archive exists.

The transmitter is situated on a mountain 3,200 metres high, not far from Boconó. From there and via a few other converters, Teleboconó can cover most of the western part of Venezuela. More than 2.5 million people can receive the Teleboconó signal, and research shows that the viewing figures are quite high. One can guess why this is the case. Because of American TV series, Sitcoms and VHS-films (VHS = Violence, Horror, Sex)? Obviously not... Via channels 12 and 13, Teleboconó covers the provinces of Portuguesa, Barinas and Trujillo and reaches parts of Lara, Zulia, Merida, even finding its way into Colombia.

RESUMEN

Exactamente hace 16 años, se fundó el canal de televisión Teleboconó en los Andes de Venezuela. Fue la primera emisora en color en Venezuela, operada exclusivamente por niños. Niños entre 6 y 16 años manejan las cámaras, el master control y la transmisión, mezclan imagen y sonido. Parece ser un milagro, pero la emisora existe todavía. En el trasfondo un Ex-Ministro para la telecomunicación, e ingeniero, Pablo Miliani. La mayoría de los programas son producidos por los niños para los que Teleboconó casi es una escuela. De lunes a viernes está al aire, entre 16.00h y 22.00h. No hay ningún empleado que obtiene un salario fijo, pero sí muchos donadores y algunos ingresos publicitarios.

There is an agreement with the TV station TeleVen, which uses the Teleboconó channels during the time when the station is not on the air. In return, TeleVen maintains the technical equipment, finances the depreciation of the equipment and provides technicians and engineers in urgent cases, free of charge. Teleboconó cooperates with almost all universities in Venezuela, inviting students to practice there and also for research work, especially in the field of communication. Because of distance and the geographical situation it is difficult to reach Boconó. With pride, Don Pablo mentions the visit of his probably most famous and most impressed visitor, the ex-President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere.

There is no doubt that Teleboconó is an incomparable and unique experience, which would never have come into being and never could have survived without the extraordinary and most impressive personality of Pablo Miliani. But it shows and proves something else: that magnanimity and confidence pay off.

Some of the children of Teleboconó have become engineers, communicators, scientists and journalists working in the capital of Venezuela holding interesting positions. Among the almost 300 children who have been formed by the TV station throughout 16 years, only two had to be dismissed because they didn't

adapt. Don Pablo's philosophy is this: man is good, and so he justifies the trust he places in the children. Experience seems to prove the point. At the moment slightly more than 200 children are connected to the TV station, where they - besides computer and TV techniques - can learn even music. They have an own "Estudiantina de Música Teleboconesa". The school has brought forth quite a number of good musicians for the national philharmonic orchestra and the national youth orchestra. In addition, they give concerts in and around Boconó.

With Boconó, Pablo Miliani wants to show to the world the other face of Venezuela, the positive side. And so the motto which describes Teleboconó: optimism and trust.

When Teleboconó celebrated its 10th anniversary, a delegation appeared from a remote village. The head of the delegation, the Kazike, one of the few Indio mayors in Venezuela, entered the studio and asked for permission to perform a song especially composed by him for the anniversary celebrations. The people first of all considered this a joke, but soon realised that it was a serious matter.

The song was a sign of gratitude for all that Teleboconó had done for the people in this remote village. "In former times" - so the content of the song - "we were uneducated and without culture. But today we know what our identity and culture is. And this we owe to Teleboconó". At the end, the Kazike handed over quite a large amount of money to Don Pablo, large, considering the possibilities of the Indio village. "That is all that we had in our cashbox" the Kazike declared, "and the whole village agreed to give this money to Teleboconó".

(It was our friend Jerry O'Sullivan from Caracas, who kindly introduced me to Don Pablo Miliani and Teleboconó. I acknowledge this with gratitude!).

RESUME

Depuis 16 ans, dans les montagnes du Venezuela à Bocono, des enfants de 6 à 16 ans dirigent une station de TV qui émet du lundi au vendredi de 16 à 22 heures et touche un public de 2,5 millions de téléspectateurs. Plus de 200 enfants et jeunes sont caméramans, monteurs, opérateurs en régie... Télébocono, une station de TV aux mains des enfants. Télébocono diffuse des programmes produits par des enfants, mais pas seulement destinés aux enfants. Les programmes de Télébocono ayant une coloration locale très forte attirent de nombreux téléspectateurs. Derrière cette expérience unique se cache une personnalité locale forte et généreuse, Don Pablo Miliani, ingénieur et ancien ministre, natif de la région. A la fin de sa carrière il a créé la "Fondation Télévisuelle et Culturelle de Bocono", en faveur de l'éducation des enfants et des jeunes de la région, convaincu de la bonté fondamentale de chacun et des capacités des enfants. C'est par l'action, par la production et le maniement des technologies modernes de l'audiovisuel et de l'informatique, que les enfants apprennent et se préparent à participer à un avenir meilleur. Certains enfants de Télébocono sont aujourd'hui ingénieurs, communicateurs, journalistes, chercheurs dans la capitale du pays: c'est à Télébocono qu'ils ont forgé leurs armes...