

## Media Ownership: Are we on the wrong track?

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Some twenty years ago and even much later, the debate was whether the Catholic Church, dioceses and religious congregations should own and operate radio stations. Then, for one shining moment when Radio Veritas rallied the people in the bloodless EDSA Revolution, that was taken to end the debate. Radio was supposed to have demonstrated its power to influence people, giving evidence to its potential for evangelisation.

Now, let me quote Jerry O'Sullivan-Ryan, a scholar at the Catholic University in Caracas, Venezuela, on what he says about the issue:

*"For more than fifteen years I have worked in the field of communications with the Bishops' Conference of Venezuela. As Director of the communications department and as an advisor to the same department within the Latin American Bishops' Conference, I have travelled throughout the continent, attending many meetings, seminars and courses. Almost invariably Bishops and other Church people speak of the need of having ownership of communication media. The Church in this continent already has ownership of several hundred radio stations, and in recent years more and more countries are getting Church TV stations. Already in Venezuela, four dioceses have Catholic TV stations.*

*"The more I see of this tendency, the more I feel we are on the wrong track. Most Church-owned media stations today are maintained by advertising. The basic programmed format is similar to any other commercial station. Some seventy percent of the airtime is filled by imported programmes, almost exclusively from the U.S. There is a daily diet of children's programmes, soap operas, American series of cops, crime and law, most of which has a high content of violence and sex. It is probably true to say that there is less violence on the Catholic TV stations, which also generally means less audience and less advertising income".* (Information Bulletin 1/1995 CATHOLIC MEDIA COUNCIL)

Jerry O'Sullivan-Ryan's observations describe not only a parallel situation, but the very reality of Catholic broadcast operations in the Philippines.

Not only that continued viable operation of Catholic broadcast stations in the Philippines must depend on advertising, there is even more bad news. Large broadcast networks are expanding exponentially establishing new radio stations and buying up losing or struggling ones. One recent example is the entry of ABS/CBN into nationwide AM and FM broadcasting. It's strategy is to swamp competing stations by using newer technology to have better sound and pirate recognised talents and personalities from other established stations, offering double or triple the salary scale of former employment.

The developments of the broadcast enterprise in Cebu will eventually be duplicated in other developing business centers in the country. Metro Cebu, with the population of hardly two million, has now 14 AM and 24 FM stations. All available radio frequencies are taken. In the DYRF-AM service area of about 150 kilometers radius, we are now 14 stations blanketing the same area. Considering frequency bandwidth limitations and radiation power, we cannot equally compete with those using the lower frequencies and those in the higher frequencies, with more radiating power. Thus, on technical basis alone, we are at best a middle player.

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The way to survival is in competitive programming. Here is where the battle royal for ratings is fiercely fought. There is no other equation more vital in the broadcast industry than ratings equal advertising sales. To rate, especially in radio, programmes must have the voice, sense and humour. Enjoyment of radio is by hearing and imagination, so achieving the balance of good voices, sensible (credible) appeal in talk-shows and overall entertaining presentation is the key. To fulfil this balance means hard work in identifying personalities and talents, and training them to come up to the peak of their performance coupled with exploring creative programme formats. But most difficult of all, is to keep a high rate of satisfaction among key radio people, so as not to be easily attracted by tempting juicy offers of the competition. Here good human relations and a rather deep pocket are necessary. The former can be managed rather easily, but the latter is frequently beyond our economic resource.

Media buyers favour network

How to survive even only relatively in this situation? Anticipating such eventualities, Word Broadcasting Corporation and Masaradyo went into syndicating drama programmes to enable us to propose network sales. As broadcast networks become large and extensive, media buyers favour network buys rather than sales to individual stations. Thus, already for years, it has been proposed that the Philippine Federation of Catholic Broadcasters (PFCB) should go into network programming to achieve network sales. PFCB has a sales office, but it is still hobbled by not having even a single network rating programme that sells. Here I don't intend to tackle how PFCB should plan and execute network programming. Suffice it for me to bring openly to those responsible to see this point as one of the key realities of the broadcast industry in the country.

Maintain a continuous promotions programme

Another strategy that we employ is to maintain a continuous promotions programme backed up by what we call a "research team". This team is composed of about 10 people who walk daily the streets, section by section of identified survey areas and beyond. They identify regular DYRF listeners, ask these listeners what programmes are their favourites and why, as well as receive from listeners suggestions how to improve the programmes. This feedback is shared with our stations personalities and talents.

Creating a sort of network programming

Similar teams are also formed in all radio stations where DYRF dramas are played. We do not rely on the PSRC or Media Pulse surveys, which are often manipulated in one way or another. With our own data, we approach big clients like San Miguel, PRC and others who maintain their own monitoring system. Thus, even if we do not appear to be first or second in PSRC or Media Pulse survey, we have nevertheless, our objective data confirmed by client advertisers' own monitoring. Creating a sort of network programming, and building our own credible survey data entail very hard work and additional expense. But the reward is that we can still have a good bit of the advertising pie of what is left after the big networks have their major shares.

The big networks can go hi-tech

To the question of how far we can continue fighting against the encroachments of the giants of the Philippine broadcast industry, we are giving ourselves, at the best, 10 years. The big networks can go hi-tech through satellite multi-channel radio transmission using digital audio broadcasting, beyond what MBC's DZRH does with its one-station, one-nation radio programming and ABS/CBN's Radio Romance is doing with FM programming. Then, not too long from now, the big networks will invest in digital broadcasting requiring digital transmission and studio systems. Where do PFCB stations get funds for such new capital investments to be competitive?

Faced with that threat however, we must not forget that in the Philippines AM radio programming will long remain local or regional for so long that local or regional languages continue to flourish together with English and Pilipino. In fact, realising this ABS/CBN TV network has established a regional production center for language-based TV drama and entertainment shows. Thus, their plan in Cebu, for example, is eventually to simulcast TV dramas in DYAB, their AM station in Cebu which covers the same area as DYRF. Not succeeding in this double-edged strategy, they can opt for purely radio drama production separate from their TV production. ABS/CBN has the financial clout to do this.

Considering all those circumstances accompanying developments in terrestrial broadcasting in the country, we poor and financially strapped members of the PFCB, cannot but ask: Is ownership of media facilities the wrong track we have followed in fulfilling the Church's programme of evangelisation through media?

On the long range, what is the alternative? Perhaps, media education? How? ■

RESUMEN

Con 14 radios AM y 24 FM en el área urbana de Cebu (Filipinas) con cerca de dos millones de habitantes existe gran competencia entre los medios de comunicación a la vez que las redes como ABS/CBN están ampliando su área de influencia. Padre Mar Alingasa de la radio católica 'Word Broadcasting Corporation' comparte las observaciones hechas en otros continentes: que las estaciones de radio y televisión conducidas por instituciones eclesíásticas tienen menos audiencia y menos ingresos por publicidad. En estas circunstancias la única forma de sobrevivir es ofrecer programas competitivos. Hay que presentar al oyente una programación imaginativa, sensible y veraz. Entonces es necesario contar con un buen equipo humano entrenado y motivado, lo cual requiere suficientes recursos financieros. World Broadcasting Corporation ha desarrollado estrategias para asumir este reto: produce programas entrando en red con otra productora y trata de venderlos conjuntamente; al mismo tiempo investiga a la audiencia de forma continua. No obstante, ante el poder financiero de las redes comerciales y la debilidad de las radios católicas el autor termina preguntando: ¿la estrategia de adquirir medios de comunicación por parte de la iglesia ha sido un sendero equivocado? ¿O qué alternativas habría?

RESUME

Le Père Mar Alingasa de la radio catholique "Word Broadcasting Corporation" (Philippines) partage ici les observations faites dans d'autres continents: Les stations de radio et de télévision appartenant aux Eglises ont une audience limitée et reçoivent moins de publicité et donc moins de recettes que les médias séculiers et commerciaux. Dans ces conditions, la seule alternative consiste à offrir une programmation compétitive, imaginative et créatrice. Cela exige une équipe bien formée et motivée et donc pour ce faire des moyens financiers suffisants. La Word Broadcasting Corporation a développé des stratégies pour assumer ce défi: Ils produisent et vendent des programmes en collaboration avec d'autres stations; en même temps ils poursuivent sans relâche leurs efforts pour étendre leur audience. Malgré cela, devant le pouvoir financier des réseaux commerciaux et la faiblesse des radios catholiques, l'auteur s'interroge: la stratégie d'acquisition de moyens de communication par l'Eglise n'est-elle pas une impasse?



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