

Competing with new Quality: Poland's PULS TV on Air

By Teresa Sotowska

Two white circles with a pulsating green centre: that is the logo for Poland's new Catholic TV channel PULS TV. On air since March 19th, the new station claims to be different from commercial competitors with programmes that are informal, without violence, which shall foster values and strengthen the sense of social responsibility.

Catholic Programmes in Radio and Television

For the last 12 years, in fact since the change from communism to democracy took place, Catholic departments have been present in state media in Poland, both in radio and in TV. At first the presence of Catholic programmes in state media was criticised as the clericalisation of public life. Meanwhile, however, the programmes are well appreciated. The Sunday programmes reach as many viewers as films on other channels. Among the best received programmes on public radio is the weekly review *Czasy (The Times)*, created in collaboration with the Catholic News Agency KAI, and the Catholic magazine *The Human World* as well as the broadcasting of the Angelus with Pope John Paul II from the Vatican.

About 5-7% of the population tune in to these broadcasts. Other Catholic radio programmes also play an important role in Poland: The opinion polls state that the Sunday Mass has had, on occasion, far more listeners than the programmes on any other radio station at the same time.

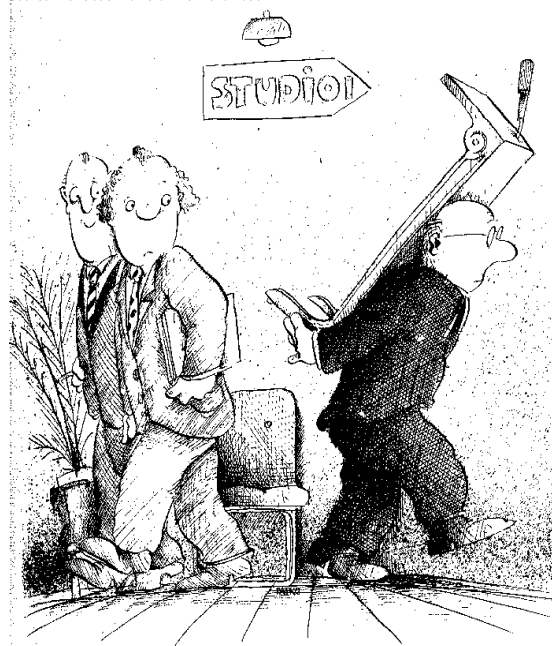
The Catholic radio programmes offer a wider choice than television. In Warsaw listeners can choose between six Catholic radio stations. Two big Catholic radio networks are on air: *Radio Maria*, under the leadership of the Redemptorists, which can be heard country-wide, and *Radio PLUS*, a network of the diocesan radio stations, that covers most of Poland.

The situation is different in TV. Besides the two public TV channels various commercial, private owned stations have started up during the past few years. Both, public and commercial stations, are criticised for their programmes which would not respect human values sufficiently. It is regretted that too much violence is shown and that no educational work is fostered. To counteract these tendencies the religious *TV Niepokalanow* which exists since December 1995, decided to create a new "commercial" TV station.

TV Niepokalanow is a programme from the Franciscans, and is broadcast in a small part of Poland, namely the areas around Warsaw, Crakov, Oppole and Łódz. The Franciscans efforts finally led to the launching of *TV PULS*.

Catholic programmes in public media are well appreciated

Source: *Handbuch für die kirchliche Rede*



TV fostering Human Values

The creators of *TV PULS* would like to fill a niche in the Polish TV scene. They claim that there are no “viewer friendly” TV programmes, where parents don’t have to be afraid that their children will be “bombarded” with violence and sex. They refer to opinion polls which show that a socially acceptable kind of TV is missing in Poland where human values are appreciated, with lively but not over-stimulating programmes.

This project – originally known as *Family TV* and meanwhile renamed *PULS* - shall be able to compete with other TV stations, says Director Waldemar Gasper. *PULS* will be an universal station with documentaries and journalistic programmes as well as entertainment, talk shows, satirical programmes, feature films and children’s programmes.

The journalists and scriptwriters are Catholic but *PULS* will not be a religious station like *TV Niepokalanow*. Religious topics will be covered in various programmes but religion will not be a single topic of a certain programme. The director states clearly: “We don’t want to open-up a so-called ‘Catholic window’ i.e. strictly Catholic programmes, like in public TV, which provide opponents with a cheap excuse to withdraw religion from all other programmes.”

TV PULS was established in agreement with the Polish episcopacy, with the reservation from the bishops that it will not be a religious TV station. Programmes don’t need the support of the Church authorities or the episcopacy. The programmes of *TV Niepokalanow* which has been the only Catholic TV station up until now, will be broadcast via satellite and cable as *Niepokalanow II*. This channel will keep its strict religious character and will broadcast programmes like the Holy Mass, the Rosary, prayers, broadcasts from important religious occasions, and religious films.

At present *PULS* transmits from Warsaw, Cracov, Łódz, Opolo and Skierniewice and plans to increase its transmission range. It can be received by 13,5% of the Polish population. The figures should be raised by 3-4% in the first year and by 6-7% in the next three years.

Of the 110 employees at the station, 20 are journalists and producers. Local Studios were opened up in Gdąnsk, Crakov, Katowice, Łódz, Posnan and Wrocław. On the spot reporters prepare the local news which is sent via satellite to the central station. *PULS* plans to broadcast the greater part of its programme live.

Seven Years of Catholic TV

The plan to create TV PULS was outlined about seven years ago, when the Franciscans received a licence for the TV station *Niepokalanow*. A three hour programme was broadcasted in the area close to Warsaw, where their religious centre is situated. With the years, and by using satellite and digital techniques, the range was extended. In 1999 *Niepokalanow* was already broadcasting 14 hours daily and one third of all households in Poland had access to it.

However *Niepokalanow* had no stable financial or technical basis. A few people, a small studio in Warsaw – there was not enough material to fill a 24 hour programme. This TV station was financed through donations from the devout, which would not allow costly investments. Therefore, in 1996, a planning group started on the project *Family TV*, under the leadership of Waldemar Gasper, the present director of *PULS* and deputy director of the Catholic Radio Network *PLUS*.



Source: *Handbuch für die kirchliche Rede*

Step by step increasing its transmission

Gaining experience with TV *Niepokalanow*

“The opinion that ‘Evil’ can be better marketed than ‘Good’ – this is a superstition”

After discussions with the Polish episcopacy a contract was signed on March 14th 2000. The partners are the Franciscans, and some larger enterprises, such as insurance, petrol, copper and electricity companies. The main shareholders are Polish with investments of 120 million Zlotys, which compares to roughly 26 Mio. US-\$. They expect the new channel to be self-financing in the next three or four years.

TV PULS is a commercial enterprise which should be self-financing. The founders of the new channel as well as the Polish Media Bishop Jan Chrapek are sure, that violence or sex are not needed to make a programme attractive. As Director Gasper says: “The opinion that ‘Evil’ can be better marketed than ‘Good’ – this is a superstition which has been spread by those who use this as a recipe for success”.

Bishop Marian Blazej Kruszyłowicz, responsible for *TV Niepokalanow* on behalf of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, would prefer as the best solution to have two Catholic channels: one based on the model of *Radio Maria*, with a “typical religious” character and a second, more universal one. The bishop is not afraid of the existing competition from other TV stations. In his opinion Catholic TV should complement the commercial channels, which follow the beaten track, and *PULS* should become “the new quality TV on the media market in Poland”.

Survival Strategies

A difficult start in advertisement

The new TV station starts into a highly competitive market on the already lively TV scene. To prove that they will not belong in the “second row”, *PULS* engaged several famous Polish TV stars, journalists, moderators and artists. All are prepared to serve “the good cause”. In the initiation phase of *PULS*, it is difficult to say how the channel will develop, but already there is no shortage of pessimistic predictions. Besides, it was not an easy start. Opposition can even be found in the Polish Radio and TV Council. Shortly after the first programmes were transmitted on March 26th, the council decided that *TV Niepokalanow* may not change its name into *TV PULS*. The council also refused to raise the time limit for advertising on that station from 2% (the usual limit for non-commercial stations) to 15%. This is a particularly hard blow, especially in the beginning, when *TV PULS* will find it difficult to compete with commercial stations, who may use 15% of the air-time for advertising. However, as the financial experts say, even then *TV PULS* could still earn from advertising, but – of course – everything depends on the viewers.

Advertising agencies stress that *TV PULS* is starting up at a particularly difficult time, when the contracts for TV advertising have already been issued. *PULS*’ own advertising office targets people between the age of 25-49, living in cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants. The specifications of this broad profile of the audience might be a decisive factor for the advertising market. Some advertising agencies don’t want to “take *TV PULS* out of the running right from the start”. They assume, that the channel could be a way to reach a totally new target group.

Source: aler/La Risa



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