

Poland:

Church in Public Service TV

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During the Polish communist regimes in the years 1945 to '89, the state-owned media – and starting in the sixties the state-owned television – were the means of anti-religious and anti-Church propaganda. Even if some presence of the Catholic press and publications were allowed, their circulation was very limited and the contents strictly controlled by state and party authorities. Officially declared „freedom“ was subject to many forms of limitations. In broadcasting, not only the content of the programming was planned according to propaganda rules, the same applied to the „human resources policy“. People who openly confessed to be Catholics and/or were not members of the communist party (or its ally) could not work in any state-owned editorial. The journalistic departments of universities were just propaganda formation courses. They were also regarded by intelligence and secret security services as the base for recruitment of their new functionaries.

Biases in Church presentation on mass media

The conditions mentioned above can explain the genesis of an important actual problem of the Church communities in the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe. The understanding of the Church in communist media was obviously one of a hostile ideological force which had a big potential power over the working class. The communist ideology collapsed, but the paradigm of the Church as a purely sociological group empowered with big influence upon the people has remained. Even in countries like the Czech Republic where Catholics form a minority, and where Church practices are very limited, the paradigm has been preserved. In most countries, where communist ideology was replaced by extreme liberalism, the media coverage tends to prove that the totalitarian structure of the ancient regime was replaced by the Church. According to popular saying „reds have gone – blacks have come“, independent media see their role in uncovering the threat of Church dictatorship.

Another tendency is to focus attention on Church hierarchy and clergy only. The lay people are often forgotten as active Church members, with the exception of some coverage of liturgical events or folk traditions connected with feasts and solemnities.

Both biases have to be taken into account by those now involved in Church broadcasting.

The Church's own problems with mass media in Central and Eastern Europe

The experience of the last ten years shows that not only the use of the media and the presentation of the Church in the media need to be corrected. A profound change in understanding the media as such is still urgently needed. This change should be achieved on both sides: on the one hand by media managers and journalists and on the other hand by the Church herself. The propaganda model of viewing mass media as a kind of one-way transmission is still present in the minds of people. In Polish it has its linguistic shadow in the term „śródk masowego przekazu“ (= *media for mass transmission*). The word „przekaz“ means „order“, „ordering“. So it is a pervasive element which is seen as dominating in media understanding. The notion of *mass communication* doesn't seem to be very present in the consciousness of all. In the present situation it may be in danger of deforming the evangelising mission of the Church into a new kind of propaganda activity confirming the biases of Church presentation in mass media.

After the break-through of 1989

The Church in Poland got the government's guarantee to have access to state-owned media shortly before the elections of June 1989 took place. The communist party, seeing the unavoidable crisis, was trying to seek a dialogue partner within the Church. One of the agreements, stated by the „Law on the mutual relationships between the Catholic Church and the People's Republic of Poland“ of May 1989 stated that the Church has the right not only to be present in state-owned radio and television, but also to establish her own radio stations and television network. Accordingly, in autumn of 1989 the first departments for radio and television programmes started their work.

The further base was a special agreement signed by the Secretary of the Polish Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Bronisław Dąbrowski, and the head of the Committee for Radio and Television Broadcasting, regulating concretely the air times and the types of programmes allowed to be aired. The staff was first paid by the Church, slowly being passed on to be financed by the state



Source: „Wie sag ich's“, gep. Buch 1994

television (or radio) budgets, and from there to be acknowledged fully as an interior part of the structure of both: Polish Television and Polish Radio broadcasting houses.

The presence, even if established, was however not deprived of problems. Two major phases can be distinguished here:

Antagonism/conflict period of 1989–1993

People working on Church broadcasting were seen as „Church agents“, new „apparatchicks“ and „Church propagandists“. Budgets were limited, all sorts of obstacles were found to make the production more difficult. The situation was also connected to the political power-play. This period was in the years of the first term of Solidarity governments. Mass media milieu was a kind of open opposition against it.

Indifference/acknowledgement period of 1994–1997

„Time is the best medicine“ – people say – to cure human problems. This was also the case in the overcoming of hostility in the case of religious programming on Polish broadcasting. As time was passing, even the greatest opponents got used to the Church's presence on state media.

In 1993, the Bill on Public Broadcasting was passed in Parliament, giving new status and new responsibilities to the former state broadcasting companies. The public service ideal was slowly changing the mentality of producers and media managers, giving more and more space for Church programmes.

The passing of time also gave the chance to find more professionally skilled people to work in religious

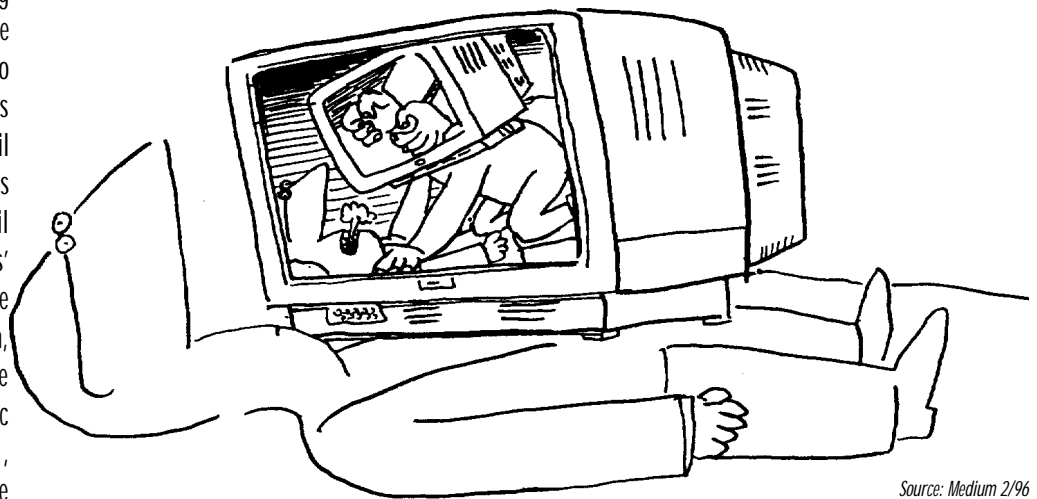
programming as well as to develop television formats and genres.

Active co-operation since 1997

Another breakthrough was the visit of Pope John Paul II in Poland in 1997 and the record ratings achieved by live coverage and other Church programming gave new impulses to strengthen and normalise the position of Church departments working in public television and radio. Although all obstacles and problems have not been solved, yet since then, the general climate is very close to normal.

Television programmes are important not only because of the larger number of people being able to receive them (compared to the number of press readership) but also because of their mission of changing the biased vision of the Church by the structure of the programming itself. In Poland, like in other countries of the region, Church broadcasting on public media has not been closed into narrow „sacristy issues“. The programming includes a variety of genres. Not only live worship transmissions but also talk shows on culture, society, education or problems of human existence, music programmes, features, radio drama and entertainment are on air. The programming intends to show how the religious dimension enters into the normal life of every man and woman.

The Church's presence in public broadcasting however does not limit itself to the programme times. Since 1993, due to a reform intending to reshape state radio and television into institutions of public service, and after the National Council for Broadcasting was founded, regular meetings take place every six months between the Council members and a delegation of the Polish Bishops' Conference. The meetings do not primarily serve to achieve specific goals on the part of the Church, but rather, to promote the reflection on the role of media in the society. Issues like mission of public broadcasters, media ethics, new media, multimedia as well as the perspective of the information society were taken into consideration, leading to a profound exchange of ideas and insights. Additionally, for the Church it is very important to keep in touch with media people as well as shaping formation projects for journalists (one of them is going to be realised on European level, guided by the Polish Province of the Society of Jesus in Warsaw). Programmes like this should serve as inspiration for a deeper understanding of a journalist's task within European societies as well as his/her ethical responsibilities.



Source: Medium 2/96

What is still to be done?

Even if the work done by the Church up until now in our region really seems to be a giant achievement, new challenges still have to be taken. I would like to enumerate briefly on the main issues which seem to be of crucial importance in the future:

- a. contribution to mass media research: inspiring new mass media philosophy with ethical insights, stressing their role as the important part of social processes and communication,
- b. confronted with commercial media, participating in the debate on the role of public broadcasting within the range of social processes,
- c. developing of the Church's own media production as the free offer for other broadcasters,
- d. media education programmes for pastoral workers, as well as for clergy and, last but not least, the hierarchy!
- e. forming an active attitude of the Church towards all kinds of mass media: „public relation art“.