
RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING AS PUBLIC SERVICE

Imrich Jenča, Zdenka Sekerešová and Helena Zárubová*

*University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Nám. J. Herdu 2,
91701 Trnava, Slovak Republic*

(Received 31 July 2013, revised 6 August 2013)

Abstract

Religious broadcasting represents one of the basic elements of the public service broadcasting (broadcasting for the public benefit). It serves various public needs and purposes - according to the ritual model of communication it serves the intermediary function (it allows to participate in the liturgy at the actual time for that part of the audience, which is unable to visit the actual place), according to the transmission model and reception model of communication in particular, it fulfils the educative function by spreading the common Christian values, creates the space for dialogue inside the Church and between the Church and the world. But above all, the main purpose of religious broadcasting is evangelization and bringing the spirit of gospel into the life of the audience. Each of these aspects of religious broadcasting has a specific audience; therefore the forms of addressing it should be different as well. At least, it requires the cooperation between the broadcaster and relevant church authorities. However, the problem lies in the fact that even in countries with a long tradition of religious broadcasting as a component of public service, the legislation does not specify the role of the broadcaster – should it provide broadcasting space only or should it actively intervene in the broadcasting? Is it allowed to do so according to the documents of the Church? Would it be possible to make the religious acts more appropriate for broadcasting by the use of elements such as a preferred style for the religious texts or special camera angles for liturgical acts in TV transmissions? There are many unanswered questions yet, and the answers to these questions can be found neither in the legislation, which the broadcaster follows, nor in religious documents.

Keywords: religious broadcasting, public service, Christian values, European Union

1. Introduction

In order to examine the form and the role of religious broadcasting in public service media we need to open several related questions from other science disciplines – in particular in Linguistics, Theology, Sociology and Philosophy. These questions are raised due to the absence of a definition of religious broadcasting as a program element of public service – neither religious authorities nor incumbent broadcasters that provide the public service in the field of electronic media expressed themselves on this subject. The definition of the extent of participation is also missing – would the role of public services media

*Corresponding author, e-mail: im.jenca@gmail.com

in this field be fulfilled only by giving broadcasting time? Should religious editorial offices address only believers, or should they be involved within the scope of evangelization in creation of programs for secular audience as well? Is it acceptable for Church authorities in secular professional environment to participate to the content of religious broadcasting and to what extent? Should a representative of the dominant church lead the religious broadcasting in the public service media? Could it be led by a layman? Instructions on how to understand the term religious broadcasting within the scope of public services in the field of electronic media are available neither in European Union legislation, nor in the documents of the Church.

This study emanates from the Roman Catholic Church documents, for it is the dominant religion in the Central European area. The appendix of the instruction *Aetatis Novae* deals with this issue most closely, since it includes elements of pastoral plan for social communication. It does not deal, however with the structure of the program itself. Whereas the Romanian public service media are constituted similarly to the media of European transition countries, we assume that the approach to religious broadcasting will not differ significantly, regardless of confession. This certitude is based on following facts: the organizational integration of the editorial office for religious broadcasting in Romanian radio and television, the definition of the priorities of the radio and television, the definition of the public service in Act No. 504/2002 on audiovisual media, the decision on the regulation of audiovisual services No. 220/2011, problems with financing of religious broadcasting in regional broadcasting, the Shepherd's letter from the archbishop and metropolitan Laurentiu on the relationship between religion and media, and finally the study 'Media and Religion in Romania' [1].

Closer specification of religious broadcasting does not appear in the public service broadcasters' national legislation of European countries. According to the recommendations of the European Commission, the definition of the mandate of the public service has shifted to the competence of the Member States. However, so far none of them have developed a model of religious broadcasting as a program element of the public service. Based on this we can conclude that the issues we raised at the beginning of the article do not apply only to the Central European area and post-communist countries.

2. The audience of religious broadcasting in the public service media

The basic question within the scope of the issue emanates from the sociological aspect – to whom the public service media addressed to? Let us look deeper into the most common structure of religious broadcasting in this context. It can be divided into two types – live broadcasting transmission of religious ceremonies (liturgies) and the broadcasting about religious life, intended for believers as well as the profane audience. The first type of broadcasting (let us call it by a working title from the media program point of view as Type A broadcasting) fulfils the meaning of the term 'ritual

communication model', which is mainly intended to enable the participation of the audience in the communication act (in this case religious). This type of broadcasting is part of the public service. Its objective is to make the liturgy available (at the time) for the believers that are unable to attend it (at the time and place) in Church. Although at the first glance, its function seems to be unambiguous, another dimension – the evangelization – cannot be denied.

Even though the Liturgy of the Eucharist will be distant from the profane audience, a sermon or homily is something what listeners are able to confront to. While homily is based on the Holy Scripture and the celebrant explains it, the sermon develops some doctrinal or moral topic whereby it does not have to emanate from the Holy Scripture given at the worship service. This audience may respond to the liturgy of the word more intimately, because part of the reading can be carried out by laymen (lecturers).

Before the instruction 'Ecclesia de mysterio' was issued, a layman could perform even the homily, but at present he can only provide comments to support a better understanding of the liturgy [<http://www.catholicliturgy.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/DocumentContents/Index/2/SubIndex/11/DocumentIndex/454>]. (Even though the instruction 'Ecclesia de mysterio' regulated the participation of laymen in the liturgy, it contradicts itself in the article III, where it admits the possibility of a layman to perform homily beyond Eucharistic Celebration, but at the same time it states that a homily can be performed only by a consecrated person.) Reading by more lecturers during the liturgy is often used in direct radio transmissions from individual religious communities. This is a form of dramaturgy within religious instructions, which, for example, is supposed to make the liturgy of the word more attractive by means of alternating voices. As a result, it may become more appealing to the profane audience. This applies, for example, to gospel groups performing within the scope of an adoration accompanied by worship songs after the liturgy, or to the presentation of intentions.

The second type of broadcasting is more extensive. It consists of programs about religious life, about religious or more specifically Christian issues, but also about the inner Church dialogue and the dialogue of the Church with the outside world (let us call it by a working title from the media program point of view as Type B broadcasting). A part of it is addressed to the sacral audience, although this broadcasting always has the ambition to reach out to the profane audience as well. This broadcasting does not differ from the rest in formal aspects (dramaturgical procedure or genre composition), but only thematically. Therefore, it can be incorporated under several communication models – especially models based on the concept of linear perception of communication act by Laswell [2]. Not many broadcasting programs raise the questions of being, faith and belief as often as religious broadcasting of type B. Even the simple fact of giving the program the attribute 'religious' can evoke the confrontation of faith with life attitude of the profane audience. Such broadcasting is characterized by, in particular, its ambiguity. The specificity of the content of Type B religious broadcasting requires a relatively high degree of

concentration of the audience when decoding. Such audience is called active. The analysis of receiving media content is actually an analysis of reactions of the public. If we take into account that in the context of decoding we need to place the meanings in the vicinity of the public (we are exploring the impact of context and culture on the public), then the religious broadcasting earlier named as Type B is a typical representative of the encoding/decoding model of communication [3]. Ideological and institutional interests of the coder, as well as preferred interpretation of the media are reflected right here. All three variants of decoding the meaning as described by Hall [3] are reflected here equally significantly: decoding according to the dominant code with a favourable relationship to the ideology of the coder, decoding according to an agreed code with partially favourable attitude and decoding according to the opposition code with denying the ideology of the coder. In the audience of religious broadcasting there always will be adherers of all three variants, which is not usual for common radio program. However, the age structure of the audience will have an impact on it.

The oldest generation of radio listeners particularly has a positive relationship to such programs. With the decrease of age, the rate of critical relationship grows. Undoubtedly, the postmodernistic perception of the world has this effect. The world today draws energy not only from shifting social values and from re-evaluation of the common culture, but also from the idea that the nowadays revolution in mass media has given rise to formation of a new aesthetics [4]. And this life attitude is undoubtedly reflected in the perception of religious content in the media.

Let us now address the issue of the receiver of religious broadcasting from the linguistic point of view. It does not deal so much with the content of the term as with the sphere in which this term belongs to. The stylistic layer is what we think of. This is an important point of view, because it should be able to define the general boundaries between the religious and the profane in terms of religious style.

J. Mlacek [5] describes the religious communication as a specific type of communication. He monitors the movements on the axis of sacred – profane. This definition is important in terms of the effectiveness of communication in religious broadcasting. Several Slovak linguists (Pavlovic, Mistrík, Miko) distinguish several basic variants within the religious style. Polish researcher Wojtková distinguishes up to nine style variants, but a special attention deserves the style of religious journalism and news coverage, which show many similarities [6]. Mlacek points out two basic variants of religious style in Slovak language: liturgical and sermonic style. Except for the liturgical style, in all other religious texts there is a tendency to apply the current form of spoken language. Therefore, we can say that in these cases the movement on the sacred – profane axis will be most significant.

In terms of perception of radio broadcasting this situation represents an advantage. Theological texts can be classified under educational style as well, which in terms of transmission of the information in audio form is the most problematic. The need to change the language in religious program was drawn to

attention on the EBU Conference, which took place in Prague in 1999 under the title: 'The new strategies for religious broadcasting in the digital age'. Recommendations to improve the content of religious broadcasting in relation to the style include several suggestions: to find a language comprehensible even to the profane audience, to use differentiated language with regard to different groups of listeners and to change the style of approaching the audience, what could be described by the words 'from mentoring to telling the story'.

3. Legislative background

As for the Church documents, religious broadcasting of the Roman Catholic Church in public service media is based on three main documents: Decree II of the Vatican Council, 'Inter Mirifica' (1963), pastoral instructions 'Communio et progressio' (1971) and 'Aetatis Novae' (1992) and the call of the European Bishops Media Commission (CEEM) for Bishops' conferences of Europe entitled 'About the importance of media work in the Church' (1995). The results of the EBU Conference on religious broadcasting 'New strategies for religious broadcasting in the digital age' (1999) cannot be regarded as a Church document. Its conclusions contain only recommendations, but we can say that they fully describe the current status in religious broadcasting. In regard to the dynamics of technological processes in mass communication, innovation of the Church documents on mass media is needed, since at the time of the adoption of the Decree 'Inter Mirifica' dual broadcasting environment was not even taking into consideration yet and no one had anticipated the future expansion of social networks and the Internet. From a certain viewpoint, the cited church documents on mass media have a timeless character, but today they do not reflect the essential feature of nowadays communication – the technically unlimited spreading of information, opinions and ideologies beyond the mass means of communication, the speed of this method of communication and its impact on the sacred and the profane audience.

The broadcasters tend to consider religious broadcasting mostly as type of programme in general. They refer to the documents of the European Union. In most of them, the religious broadcasting is included in the definition of public service, but without closer specification of the content and tasks. However, this is not the norm. The main European document on broadcasting in the scope of public service is the declaration of the EBU Conference entitled 'Public service broadcasting – an opportunity for Europe', 1993. The term 'religious broadcasting' does not appear specifically in this document. However, we could find secondarily it under the term 'broadcasting for minority audience' and 'support of spiritual and cultural life'. The document adopted a year later is more specific. The Member States of the Council of Europe in the document entitled 'Future of public service broadcasting' in 1994 confirmed their commitment to reflect the diversity of philosophical ideas and religious beliefs. Despite several documents, the model of the public service broadcasting remains of the competence of each Member State of the European Union, and in the spirit of

the cited recommendation of the European Union, the requirements of this mandate should be met by every Member State. However, this approach did not solve the situation in the field of broadcasting as an important element of public service.

This was demonstrated at the EBU Conference in 1999, which emphasized fundamental problems of the current religious broadcasting. The participants agreed that current religious broadcasting uses archaic language, its audience is aging, public service media perceive it as an obligation imposed by law, and that professional cooperation between the community preparing religious broadcasting and the community deciding about religious broadcasting still has a lot of potential for improvement [*Recommendation No. R (99) 1 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on measures to promote media pluralism*, online at www.ebu.ch].

4. Religious broadcasting in the context of the media legislation of the countries V4

The absence of a clear definition of religious broadcasting in the program composition of public service media is obvious even in the media legislation of the Member States of the European Union. Excerpts from the media laws of the Member States of the Vysehrad Group countries (V4), that is Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, can be used as examples. In terms of political development, they can in fact be regarded as the countries with the highest rate of transformation after the collapse of the socialist system.

In Slovak Republic, the public media is regulated by the Act No. 532/2010 on Radio and Television Slovakia (RTVS). RTVS is the broadcaster whose mission is to provide service to the public in the field of radio and television broadcasting. This law does not apply specifically to religious programs. These are defined together with the rest of the wide portfolio of services supplied by the broadcaster. The mission of the RTVS is, among other thing, “to develop the cultural identity of the inhabitants of Slovakia regardless of gender, race, colour, language, age, religion, political or other beliefs and sentiments, national or social origin, affiliation to a nationality or ethnic group, property, family, etc. so that the program reflects the diversity of opinions, political, religious, philosophical and artistic directions, and supports the development of a knowledge-based society” [Act No. 532/2010 on Radio and Television Slovakia, online at <http://www.rtv.slovensko.sk/o-rtvs/dolezite-dokumenty-rtvs/zakon-o-rtvs>]. The article 5 sets out the activities of RTVS, which is supposed to provide broadcasting space for activities of registered churches and religious societies. The Act No. 308/2000 on broadcasting and retransmission, by which the regulatory authority for radio and television broadcasting was established, does not further specify religious broadcasting or the term ‘religion’ in the program of television and radio stations.

Acts on Czech television No. 483/1991 and on Czech radio No. 484/1991 define, similarly to the public service broadcaster in Slovakia, the mission of Czech television and Czech Radio. They are supposed to spread and provide a wide range of programs for all groups of inhabitants, with regard to freedom of religion, belief, culture, ethnic or national origin, identity, age, and gender. While previous definitions are very general, the Code of Czech Radio deals closer with the issue of religion in the program structure. "In relation to religious issues, the program of Czech radio emanates from the principle of openness and tolerance of diverse religions of registered churches and religious societies. Czech radio refrains from broadcasting programs, which would spread intolerance between people or groups with different religious orientation. Program space dedicated to religion is based on the segmentation of the society and its current relationship with the spiritual realm. Czech Radio deals with biblical topics, their importance for the cultural development and moral attitudes or for historical and present interpretive programs in various genres and programs." [Code of Czech Radio, online at: http://media.rozhlas.cz/_binary/00730694.pdf] Among the analyzed documents this is probably the most detailed definition of 'religious broadcasting'.

In Hungary, public service media are not defined in separate acts. The media act adopted in the year 2010, CLXXXV on media services and telecommunications (2010 évi CLXXXV, Törvény a médiaszolgáltatásokról és a tömegkommunikációról) addresses the wide issue of the whole Hungarian media market. The third part of this extensive act entitled "Public service media" describes objectives that should be respected by the public service broadcasters. Among other things, "they should provide media services in the social and cultural context with a view to reach as many of the social and cultural groups and individuals as possible; preserve national identity and culture; strengthen national cohesion; meet the needs of national minorities and ethnic groups; and meet the needs of the physically, mentally, and socially disabled persons" [http://hunmedialaw.org/dokumentum/153/Mttv_110803_EN_final.pdf]. The general definition mentions the programs for ethnic and religious communities only marginally, without closer specification.

Poland has never approved the draft law, which would set out the role and the mission of public service media directly. Therefore, constitution applies here: USTAWA from December 29, 1992 o radiofonii i telewizji (the Law of Television and Radio Broadcasting). The public service radio and television (Publiczna radiofonia i telewizja) is defined in the fourth part of mentioned law. Public service broadcasters include Telewizja Polska - TVP and Polskie radio. According to the law, "the public service of television and radio broadcasting carries out the mission of the public service to the whole society, provides a variety of programs in the field of culture, entertainment, education and sports, and is characterized by pluralism, objectivity, balance and independence, providing the quality and integrity of communication" [Broadcasting act of December 29, 1992, online at <http://www.krrit.gov.pl/en/for-broadcasters-and-operators/legal-regulations/>]. Poland is a country that is seen as strongly

religious within Europe. The absence of closer specification, organization and management of religious broadcasting in the legislation on public service media can therefore be described as surprising.

5. The BBC as a media role model?

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) still remains the role model of public service broadcasting in Europe, in particular because of following attributes – independence guaranteed by the legislative and accepted by the society; the method of designation of regulatory authorities; the method of financing; an endeavour to ensure objectivity in the broadcasting; respect; and response. (This reputation has not been undermined in the recent decades.) The functioning of the public service media British Broadcasting Corporation is determined by several authorities and documents. The most important is the Royal Charter, which sets out the editorial independence and the obligations of the BBC towards public (Public purposes) in detail. The current one was signed by the management on September 19, 2006 with effect from January 1, 2007. It is valid until December 31, 2016.

The Royal Charter consists of a preamble, 10 heads and 65 articles. Among other things, it sets out six most important points, through which it strives to achieve its mission. This document is entitled ‘The Agreement’.

According to this document, the BBC Trust should to oversee the proper presentation of the different religions; there is nothing more mentioned in these documents on this issue. It is surprising, since the Commonwealth countries, for which the BBC broadcasts, represent multi-religious society. On one hand, the general model of religious broadcasting (or more precisely its definition) could bind the editorial offices of this broadcasting in relation to minority religions in Europe, on the other hand, total freedom in the approach to questions of religious programs and their creation can cause embarrassment with a part of the public.

The last step that the BBC’s management made was to appoint the Muslim Aqil Ahmed as head of religious broadcasting of BBC. This choice caused a polemic debate, since in the UK 70% of the population represent the Christian community (only 3% of the population claim Islam as their religion). The representative of the Anglican Church Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams as well as Presbyterian Robert Coulter protested against the surprising decision. Some Church leaders, however, do not question the competence of Ahmed Aaqila, for he previously prepared programs about Christianity and Islam on Channel 4. In order to avoid similar discussion on the topic, Ms. Christine Morgan, did not state her religion when she was appointed as new Director of religious broadcasting of BBC. From the BBC’s management point of view, there is nothing surprising in this approach since in the years 2002 – 2006 the BBC’s religious broadcasting was led by atheist Alan Bookbinder. The only mention of the broadcaster's obligations in relation to religious programs is found in the Programme Code Standards, which require creators’ responsibility for their content. For the rest of the European broadcasters a deeper analysis of

the BBC's religious broadcasting would be undoubtedly very inspiring exactly for its essential diversity. However, since the Bishop of the Anglican Church, Nigel McCulloch suggested the need for monitoring of religious broadcasting, and, in particular, the development and the impact of it, even at the BBC the religious broadcasting is not without question marks.

6. Conclusions

Increased interest in religious themes is characteristic not only for the Romanian or Slovak media. It seems to be the contrary of the secularization tendency of the contemporary society. For media, the religious media products become a commodity, fact which is obvious when looking at their editorial content in any country of the European Union during the period of celebrating major religious holidays. At that time, even secular audience considers these topics in media as a natural phenomenon; they become consumers without looking deeper into the spiritual content and message of the topics. Religious traditions could be found on the media trade counters, there is no doubt about that. The consumer society has no problem with commercial use of religious symbolism and traditions.

Although there are more topics on religion, paradoxically, the Christian spiritual heritage is fading away. In this context, H. Pravdová draws attention to the increasing number of opinions that "the democratic system and its social relationships find themselves in crisis. It causes the loss of functionality of traditional democratic mechanisms and institutions as well as the destruction of traditional values and ideals". [7] The breakdown of traditional cultural values is characteristic for the current society. Moral ideals are disappearing. Authority figures, whether institutional or personal, are losing respect. Topics that were once naturally tabooed emerge in religious media, the lay public usually did not comment on internal church issues. Today, life inside the Church becomes a secular theme. Religious communities are marginalized; evangelization is not accepted as one of the possible forms of spreading spiritual values, by the profane audience it is seen only as spreading of ideology. The status of religious broadcasting in the program of public service media is regarded in the same way.

The spiritual, ethical, and cultural potential is usually not acknowledged aloud. The majority of public service media in Europe currently handles religious topics by the religious editorial office for religious audience and by other editorial offices for secular audience. Forces are joined rather rarely and only in exceptional events. Yet, the secular audience accepts the model, when religious topics are processed by laymen with a religiously educated person as a supervisor. This was confirmed, for example, during the media coverage of the farewell ceremony to Pope John Paul II, the resignation of Benedict XVI, as well as the election of the Pope Francis. In such moments, media audience does not divide into believers and atheists, and this proves that the cultural values of Europe are based on Christianity. The potential cooperation between secular and religious departments and institutions was well documented when monitoring

the all-day program of the Slovak public service radio called the 'Day of silent mourning' that was broadcasted on the day of the farewell ceremony to John Paul II. The positive response to this broadcasting confirms that religious broadcasting does not have to be just a tolerated element of the public service. And there are other examples of a positive approach to the media, for example, the inspiring establishment of the institution Basilica Press Centre. In principle, however, even the Orthodox Church does not achieve a more fundamental penetration into the public service media.

From the presented overview it is clear that the religious broadcasting should not be just filled with agenda of church institutions and it is equally important that religious topic can be processed in a professional way, also by the profane environment. Ultimately, it does not matter who brings broadcasting that expands spiritual horizons and gives insight into the ethical and cultural values. It is more important that this broadcasting receives adequate space mainly (or especially) in the public service media.

References

- [1] R. Surugiu, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **8(4)** (2012) 205-213.
- [2] D. McQuail, *Úvod do teorie masové komunikace (Mass communication theory: an introduction)*, Portál, Praha, 2007, 65.
- [3] S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis, *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies (1972-79)*, Hutchinson, London, 1980, 128-138.
- [4] J. Považan, *Postmoderná doba? in Slovensko, materializmus a desocializácia*, M. Kuna (ed.), Katolícka univerzita v Ružomberku, Ružomberok, 2006, 136.
- [5] J. Mlacek, *Štylistické otázky náboženskej komunikácie*, Verbum, Ružomberok 2012, 159-163.
- [6] M. Wojtak, *Today's prayer in the eyes of the linguist*, Biblos, Tarnow, 2011, 286.
- [7] H. Pravdová, *Determinanty kreovania mediálnej kultúry*, Fakulta masmediálnej komunikácie UCM v Trnave, Trnava, 2009, 190.