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Radio At A Crossroads

By

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RADIO AT A CROSSROADS

As we are heading for the Third Millennium, radio finds itself in a state of 'healthy unrest' - 'healthy' because the changes taking place around us are forcing us to re-examining our concepts and to question our strategies and structures. For decades, we have taken things for granted: the loyalty of our listeners, the dependency of funds, the viability of our programme philosophies - all this seemed to be there forever. But with the breakdown of monopolies and the advent of competition in the media market, radio organisations are going through dramatic, if not traumatic changes. All of a sudden, we have to fight for audiences and money, for 'market shares' and commercial viability. And this is probably the best that could happen to us. For it is only in times of conflicts and controversies that we are mobilising our creativity and re-awakening our innovative spirit.

Radio, no doubt, is at a crossroads and much will depend on the direction it will take. Where we are standing now, we won't be able to go back to old habitual beliefs and attitudes - much as some of us would like to. Neither can we allow ourselves to stand still and wait. Broadcasting is comparable to riding a bicycle: if you stand still, you fall. So if we don't want to fall, we have to move forward and develop new strategies for survival, new approaches to programming and to broadcasting management.

Radio's True Potential

One of the first and most urgent steps would be for radio to re-define and re-discover its true potential and uniqueness in the media landscape. For much too long, radio has been oblivious or unaware of its multi-faceted strengths and possibilities resulting in a feeling of defeatism and lethargy among many broadcasting professionals. And for much too long, it allowed itself to get sandwiched between TV and the Print Media, trying to compete with them through imitation rather than through innovation. Up until today, we still find radio broadcasters copying the Press by producing programmes that would be much more suitable for newspapers: sophisticated articles that would make interesting reading, but lifeless paper to the ear of the listener. At the same time, others are trying to copy the success stories of TV, especially in the field of entertainment. But it is dangerous - if not suicidal - to compete with others in areas where they are definitely stronger. What radio needs to do is to develop its own success-strategies and rely on those areas where it has distinct advantages over other competitors. And there are many such areas: radio is cheap and flexible, it is immediate and intimate, it is spontaneous and omni-present. These are the qualities that we need to capitalize on in meeting the challenges of the future.

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Local Radio

Another need that we must recognize and incorporate into our future strategies is the growing importance of local radio. While new technologies have spurred globalization, we are witnessing at the same time an increasing demand for decentralization and community-based radio services. Flooded by information about international events which they cannot influence and sometimes not even understand, people are beginning to rediscover their interest in their own little micro-cosm : their town, their community, their immediate surroundings - things they can relate to and identify with. Take, as an example, a piece of news about global warming or about rain forest destruction in Brazil - and compare it with another piece of news about a flood in your home district or a new hospital in your home town. Human nature is such that people will give greater attention to what is close and familiar and of immediate relevance to their own life and environment.

Narrowcasting, therefore, will be one of the areas to be explored and strengthened in the years to come. Radio can no longer cling to the assumption that it is dealing with homogeneous, large-scale audiences which can be served with national programmes from the capital. In broadcasting, we are talking to individual human beings with different cultures and traditions, different beliefs and codes of behavior. As a result radio will have to move away from the centre and become aware of its potential as unique tool of community development. By projecting local culture, local interests and local aspirations, it cannot only give people a sense of belonging and pride, but at the same time help them stand on their own feet and deal with their own problems. As the famous communication researcher W. Schramm puts it : "Local media are of great importance in social and economic development not only because they are in a better position to know and serve the particular needs of local areas but also because they make it easier for more people to have access to the media and therefore to take part in public affairs."

Access Radio

Access and participation are two more catchwords that will have to be given much greater attention in broadcasting than up to now. As it is, radio in most cases still relies on a one-way flow of information from top to bottom, from the elite to the masses, from the presumably informed source to the presumably uninformed receivers. This concept is based on three assumptions :

1. The top knows all - the bottom knows nothing.
2. The top knows what the bottom needs to know.
3. The bottom is willing to receive and absorb whatever comes from the top.

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It is this concept and these assumptions which have contributed largely to the widening gap between decision-makers and people and the declining confidence in the medium of broadcasting. In many countries, radio is losing contact with its public - the very opposite of what it aims to achieve. An audience which finds itself excluded from the radio will find it difficult to trust its messages. If radio wants to regain its credibility, if it wants to achieve its mission of social change and national integration, it will have to move away from impersonal information to interpersonal communication. What is needed is an active involvement of audiences on and between all levels. Radio is an ideal medium of dialogue and interaction with the people. By giving a voice to the voiceless, it can create a new dimension in broadcasting, make it more meaningful to its audiences and bridge the gap between those at the top and those at the bottom.

De-mystification of Radio

This, of course, also implies that we are adopting a more humble and modest approach in dealing with our audiences. What is needed and what we are in fact seeing already is a 'de-mystification of radio', a new image of radio as a visible, touchable, accessible and transparent medium. For a long time, radio has been an 'aloof' institution, a territory reserved to the professionals, to the voices of broadcasters and politicians, of experts and celebrities. Radio has to step down from this pedestal, come closer to the ordinary people, talk to them and allow them to talk back, show them that this is their medium, their friend and companion.

In this context, we should perhaps also remember the meaning of the word "Public Service Radio". It means nothing more and nothing less than just this: we in the broadcasting business are servants of the public. This is our mandate and our most noble aim. But: are we really SERVING the public? Are we really serving the interest of our listeners? How much do we really know about the interest of our listeners? How much do we really care to know? Is it true that people only want to hear about state visits, parliament debates, trade tariffs and genetic research? Whenever I listen to radio - even in my own country - most of the time I hear about 'big issues' and 'big people', about the powerful and the prominent, about the seemingly important topics and seemingly extraordinary personalities. No doubt, they all have a place in radio programming. But: where does this leave room for the day-to day life of the ordinary listeners? Where does this relate to his experiences, thoughts and feelings?

Human Interest Radio

What is clearly missing in most radio programmes today is the 'human interest approach' - programmes focusing on the seemingly small and simple things in life, the every day concerns of people which are normally ignored by broadcasters as being too 'unimportant' and 'boring'. Yet, it is these subjects which sometimes capture the interest of the listener more than anything else. Emotions, spontaneity, the laughter or anger of ordinary human beings - all this could make exciting and fascinating listening.

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But radio is still primarily geared to serve the mind and not the heart. Too much emphasis on the intellectual, too little on the emotional - this is where radio still fails to exploit its potential.

But the good news is that radio is able to change - and it will change dramatically in the years to come. After decades of peaceful cruising in untroubled and sometimes stagnant waters, the ships of radio organisations today find themselves blown out into the open sea, and those who don't want to sink will have to adapt to the winds of change and explore new territories in broadcasting. We are living in exciting times. Never before has radio been faced with so many chances and challenges, with so many options and opportunities as today. It is for us to see the writings on the wall, to be willing to seize the opportunities and meet the challenges ahead of us. If we don't, we will face an uncertain future.