

INTRODUCTION

Barbara had noticed a radio sitting on the bedside table by the window during her entry to the ward. The radio was tuned in to Radio Maryja. There were three women in the room listening to the programme. As I entered, I thought I am safe here, I am amongst of my kind¹ and greeted them: ‘May Jesus Christ and Mary ever Virgin be praised’². All the women gave her a sincere welcome (Maria, Franciszka. 2001: 64).

Barbara’s testimony draws attention to a sociological connection between listeners of Radio Maryja, which is expressed by the need of the community and the sense of belonging. However much has been said about Radio Maryja and charismatic leader, when it comes to its listeners, people tend to categorise it without engaging into real discussion concerning who listens to Radio Maryja and why? Listeners call themselves Radio Maryja’s Family³ (see appendix F), the public calls them ‘mohair berets’⁴. Despite the negative associations, Father Rydzyk the founder of the radio saw in the latter term a success for the movement, which has been recognised by the rest of the society (Lis, Tomasz. 2006). Therefore, he considered it an acknowledgement for his work and turned the irony into a propaganda tool.

Everyone with a mohair beret, put your hands in the air! Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, the station director, shouted to the crowd in Torun...as Radio Maryja celebrated its 14th birthday. A host of hands went up. One listener had written an anthem for the occasion: Put on your mohair beret. And stand by your radio like a guardian angel (Kohn, Marek. 2005).

During the early 1990s it didn’t occur to members of National Council of Radio and Television Broadcasting (KRRiT) that Rydzyk’s actions may be subversive, content of the

¹ Reference to Radio Maryja’s Family. See more in 3.

² Instead of the official greeting used by Roman Catholics ‘May Jesus Christ be praised now and ever’, Radio Maryja’s listeners and presenters alike use this one to emphasise the cult of Mary and her role for the Roman Catholic faith in Poland.

³ Radio Maryja’s Family (RMF) (in Polish: Rodzina Radia Maryja) is a community of individuals and listeners that identify with opinions voiced on air of Radio Maryja. Its core is made up of local parish organisations existing with the permission of the reverend. Every second Sunday in July, RMF conducts the pilgrimage to Czestochowa (sacred Pauline monastery, home of The Black Madonna painting, shrine of the Virgin Mary). On the 13th Pilgrimage 9-10th July the estimated number of pilgrims was 500 000 people. Members of RMF also meet on weekly basis within structures of local organisations. Foundation Our Future (Nasza Przyszlosc) publishes monthly magazine Radio Maryja’s Family that is a media outlet for the community and Radio Maryja.

⁴ The phrase after circulating on the Internet forums, and then used by one of the Polish MPs Donald Tusk, entered Polish vocabulary standing for Radio Maryja’s listeners. At first, it represented the humoristic take on the radio’s audience and only gradually gained more pejorative connotation of fanatic Catholics. Mohair berets are people believed to be 50 and over, wearing headwear made of special type of wool - mohair.

programmes politicised, often situated in the false context and witch-hunting ‘The Other’⁵. Sadly, that is how foreign media perceived the station and still do. Quoting a member of the council that once wondered ‘who is going to listen to these prayers anyway (Subotic, M. 1994)’ reflecting a scepticism the authorities of the Council and much of the public held towards the emerging radio’s future. Only recently did it become apparent that Radio Maryja might have a bigger influence on people’s opinion than first assumed. During the parliamentary election in 2005 the 5% that helped the party *Law and Justice* win parliament elections is believed to be due to the Radio Maryja listeners’ engagement (Fras, J. 2006).

Such developments suggest that there is a need for an inquiry into the relationship between the media and religion. No longer can religious formations and media be ignored and the centre of the research should be focused on people living by the rules of these emerging ‘airwave Churches’. It would be beneficial to investigate the reasons accounting for the popularity and appeal of Radio Maryja in Poland. Therefore, it is necessary to learn what listeners have to say on the radio and its programming. This study will be the first one to investigate Radio Maryja listeners’ experiences and choices, looking at them as meaning creators rather than a mass subjected to manipulation.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study is to expand the public knowledge of the radio’s audience and its uses. Since it is Polish and Catholic broadcaster the thesis will contribute to general comprehension about the country, its religion and recent social phenomena that embraces Radio Maryja’s listeners. Moreover, it will attempt to explain the popularity of medium, and portray a better understanding of how radio fits into Polish society, and thus what values offers to the people.

⁵ Here referring to anyone with different opinions to that of Radio Maryja.

The study will also contribute to the current debate regarding Radio Maryja in Poland as well as shedding light on the issue in the international context. Moreover, it will be first study to inquire into the experiences and context in which listening of Radio Maryja is done. Therefore, the general objective is to show how analysis of Radio Maryja's consumption could facilitate or confront the notions of media and religion or religious broadcasting. It will lastly add to the public acknowledgement of religious broadcasting and its consumption.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since the study will focus on the audience, the research will consider questions of faith and spirituality, as well as national identity that might have influence such media consumption choices. Having not outlined a particular hypothesis, which could have resulted in drawing an incorrect and unobjective conclusion, the main three research questions are well suited for an open discussion and unforeseen results, and are structured according to the ideas on religious broadcasting and Radio Maryja.

The main question seeks to discover the principle reason of the station's popularity. The appeal of Radio Maryja needs to be investigated in terms of the listening encounters. Although social scientists identified the audience's demographic criteria, there is still very little known about these people. Through the data provided by social research projects in Poland, a typical listener of Radio Maryja is said to be a pensioner, very likely to live in the remote countryside and live on a low income. However, data obtained by both OBOP⁶ and SMG/KRC⁷ included only people aged between 15-75. Hence, this excludes the voice of the over 75 age demographic, and may distort the findings about the radio.

In addition to the key research question there is a great need to address questions of national identity and role of the religion in people's lives. What national value or religious

⁶ TNS OBOP is the research agency in Poland.

⁷ SMG/KRC is also marketing research company.

identity does Radio Maryja embrace in its broadcasting? How strong are ties between religion and patriotism for listeners? Is religion a significant part of their identity?

Lastly, it is also important to debate how the listeners perceive themselves in relation to social context and what is the nature of their listening? Do they feel that media noticed their voice?

SCOPE AND METHOD

The paper will structure the research on focus groups interviews with members of Polish society. The focus groups will look into opinions of people who listen to Radio Maryja as well as those who don't. From these sessions this thesis will uncover and outline how Polish people perceive Radio Maryja and what is the appeal of the station. The contrary groups may bring some insights to the notions of the consumption and perhaps reveal what lies at heart of the popularity. Furthermore, the research includes a listening analysis of the Radio Maryja's programme 'Unfinished Conversations' to exemplify the style and the language used during radio programmes, and also to depict the very nature of the broadcasts that rely on the public's interactivity and participation in the discussion (in the appendix B). This work should be considered as the first in the field and hopefully to stimulate further discussion upon this paradigm.

THESIS OUTLINE

The study is divided into four chapters. First one outlines review of the literature on audiences, media and religion and Radio Maryja in context of Polish society. Second chapter highlights the methods used for the research as well as its limitations. Third chapter presents the results of qualitative research and provides with the main factors of Radio Maryja's appeal. Lastly, the discussion chapter overviews the thesis findings in terms of existing research, and offers recommendations for further work in the field.