
RADIO AS A MEDIUM

Its Strengths and Weaknesses

A DEFINITION

The word 'medium' originates from the same word as 'mediate' - meaning 'to come between'. A medium is something that comes between. When we communicate from one person to another, we might be sitting close together, or separated by a great distance. The way that distance (large or small) is bridged is the medium. Radio is one medium among many. Others include Newspapers, Books, Telephones, Television. Some media (such as radio) allow one person to communicate to many others. Such media are called 'Mass Media'

STRENGTHS

Radio has many strengths. The good radio programmer will make sure that his or her programme makes full use of these strengths.

Pictorial

Radio, because it is a medium of sound only, can be very evocative. When you listen to a radio play, or someone describing a scene, you can 'see' it far more vividly than you ever could with television. It is often said that the scenery is better on radio. Although it is a 'sound only' medium, radio uses our imagination to make pictures.

Affordable

For the listener, radio can be cheap. Even for those in the developing world, a radio is often the first luxury that is bought. For the programmer too, the basic elements of programme production are quite cheap, particularly when considered against the size of the potential audience.

Uncomplicated

At its simplest, radio is very easy to produce. It just needs a portable tape recorder and a microphone, and an idea of course. The listener needs only a small portable radio set, with simple controls. People can listen to radio even if they can neither read nor write. It is portable,

Immediate

Radio can, quite simply, broadcast events as they happen with no time delay. The listener may sit at home, and hear events taking place anywhere in the world. It is excellent for news. e.g. Assassination of Kennedy.

Personal

Although it is a mass medium, radio is basically very personal. The listener to a good programme feels that is just for him or her. To this person, then, it is no longer a mass medium, it is one to one. Good broadcasters never orate, or preach, they talk to one listener.

Trusted

Listeners tend to accept much of what they hear on the radio as true, unless they have good reason to doubt what they hear. They trust the broadcaster.

Accepted

Radio is accepted without question, into the home of the listener. In some cases a visitor may not be allowed in. But the radio is part of home life. Many people will have the radio on while they work, at home or elsewhere. Radio does not demand the same attention, as reading or watching TV.

Diverse

It is possible to talk on a wide variety of subjects on the radio. There are also many different ways of using radio (called Formats). One programme may have an interview with a farmer, and the next be a quiz game about sport.

Musical

Many listeners use radio because they want to hear music. That music may be in a wide variety of styles, and not always off a record or disc. Music can be broadcast 'live' as it is performed, or specially recorded. You cannot listen to music from a newspaper!

Widespread

Radio can be broadcast internationally, across boundaries of many sorts, (Political, Geographical, Religious, Cultural) and it is difficult to prevent it getting to its audience. It can also be national, or local. In many countries there are now stations which reach only one town, or even a group of houses.

Uncluttered

In television it is possible to be distracted by the picture, and to miss what is being said. For example if the Prime Minister's hat is crooked, you may miss what is said, because you are looking at the hat.

Requires no reading

Radio can bring enlightenment and education to the people who cannot read or write. It is spoken and audio, so the only qualification one requires is ability to hear.

WEAKNESSES

Radio also has acknowledged areas of weakness. We need to be aware of these in programming. Sometimes we may avoid the weakness. At other times we can use creativity to turn weaknesses into strengths.

Non Visual

We are used to communication where we can see the person who is speaking to us. Without sight we are restricted. For example, we cannot demonstrate how to do something. BUT remember that radio is pictorial, we can describe even if we can't demonstrate. e.g undoing a knot in a rope.

Distant

The presenter and the listener may be a long way apart. This can make it difficult to build up a close relationship between the two. This in turn will mean that the listener will not be as committed to the presenter or the station. He or she will not be embarrassed to switch off.

One Way

One of the greatest difficulties of radio is that it is a one way medium. The listener has no way of answering back immediately. When speaking face to

face, there are many ways in which we use what we see and hear to help us get our message across. With a one way medium, we need to be careful to make what we have to say clear. Although they don't help immediately, listeners' letters and audience research can help to make radio two way. Even then it can be difficult to know if what we say has really been understood.

Ephemeral

That is, not lasting. What is said is normally heard once only, so if the listener misses it then it is lost for ever. When you are reading you could go back and read it again, but there is no equivalent with radio. Programmes go out according to a timetable or schedule, and these times are fixed. If those times are inconvenient to the listener, they won't listen. Programme schedules have to be carefully planned to take account of the potential audience.

Selective

When someone reads a newspaper they can read the parts they like, and they can read in as much depth as they want. The reader selects what he or she reads. With radio this is not possible. There is a limited amount of time, and there may not be time to say all that could be said. The radio producer has to make the selection for all of the audience. Where there are many stations, then they may specialise, and the listener can select with the tuning dial.

Expensive

Radio could be said to be cost effective. Simple equipment is relatively inexpensive, but to set up a studio or radio station is quite expensive. The actual costs may vary considerably, dependent upon the situation.

Mass Medium

Because good radio is really a 'one to one' medium, it is difficult to make programmes that will be listened to by a large audience. This is particularly true if the programmer wants to get a message across. "Broad" casting vs. "Narrow" casting.

Background

Many listeners have the radio on in the background while they concentrate on something else. They are not really listening. Good programmes will gain, and hold, their full attention.

Depends on Technology

Good quality batteries may not be available and there may not be any electricity in the villages. Transmission may break down.

Limited availability

Many countries do not allow Christian programmes on their local stations, so you may have to find another alternative. This could be a Short Wave station which broadcast to your country or where your audience is. It has its own problems, like poor quality or interference, etc.

WHAT RADIO DOES

It diverts from the problems and anxieties, providing relaxation and creates a sense of companionship. It has the advantage of a human voice - the warmth, compassion, anger, pain and laughter.

Entertains

Radio relaxes and stimulates inducing pleasure, nostalgia, excitement, or curiosity. It has music from the best on record to a quite passable church organist. The range of music is wider than any comprehensive record library.

Informs

Radio acts as a multiplier of change, speeding up the process of information about jobs, goods and services. Providing opportunities and contacts, helping the society. News programmes are the most popular programmes.

Educates

Radio works well in the world of ideas. It excels with concepts as well as facts. It reaches out to meet the formal and informal learning needs of people who want to grow in knowledge.

Radio for the Church

In Christian broadcasting, radio may fulfil a number of different roles;

- **Advocating Change:-** Being Change Agents in a broken World
- **Inspiration:-** Hope, Friendship and Companionship
- **Positioning:-** Promoting Awareness of Christian Social Concern and Action
- **Witness :** Testifying to God's Presence and Activities
- **Apologetic:** - Comparing Christian Belief with Others
- **Proclamation:** - Declaring the Whole Gospel
- **Counselling:** - Being Close to our Listener
- **Supplementary** - Providing helpful resources
- **Celebration:** - Celebrating with Joy the Gospel in all its fullness
- **Modelling:-** Demonstrating Christian Community
- **Participatory:-** Interaction and Listener Involvement

(This list is taken from Radio Programming Roles: FEBC Perspectives by Frank Gray & Ross James)

CONCLUSION

To become more effective, radio communicators need to understand the medium - to recognise its strengths, and capitalise on them. They also need to know its weaknesses, to avoid them, or turn them creatively to advantage.