

This is the human situation in which the Christian communicator finds himself today. His task is to make the Gospel relevant to this rapidly changing situation. To do this on a day-to-day operation basis is not the answer. The effective communicator must constantly know his audience and must constantly be searching for the most appropriate means for effective communications.

RADIO AND EVANGELISM DAVID CHAO AND PHILLIP BUTLER

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Radio has been given us by God as one of the most remarkable tools available in this modern age. Radio brings a number of unique characteristics to the challenge of the Great Commission — characteristics that should give radio a major role in our strategy to “let the earth hear his voice.”

The first thing that sets radio apart from most other media is that it deals exclusively with the “theater of the mind” — the individual listener’s imagination. Because there is no visual side to radio waves, the visual is constructed in the listeners’ minds. This characteristic brings a range of creative opportunities to the radio broadcaster that are short-circuited by other media.

Further, radio, lacking the demanding visual treatment of television or films, is much less expensive when it comes to program production. A diversity of ideas can be treated in radio that are simply impossible in other media. Radio’s lower cost, in production and technical expense, is a major reason recommending it to our use in evangelism. A natural corollary with the lower production cost of radio is that it is possible to reach individuals with the Gospel at a much lower cost per thousand.

Wide geographical coverage is one of the unique properties of radio — “omnipresence” in the range of its single coverage. Local medium-wave, and UHF (FM) stations typically have less coverage than do superpower medium wave or short wave stations. However, it is quite typical for an entire nation, in some cases, entire continents, to be covered by a single transmitter.

Unique features of radio

The wide coverage of radio brings certain unique properties with regard to audience penetration. For example, radio knows no geographical, social, political, or ideological boundaries. Radio leaps mountains, national borders, and quite often the barriers men have erected in their minds. The only constraints are signal strength and program content — attractiveness to the potential audience. Muslims, for example, might be unwilling to attend a Christian church. However, they might be curious enough to keep their radio tuned, in the privacy of their home or business, when a Christian program comes on — particularly if that program speaks to the individual’s interest and/or need. The same certainly holds true for “closed” countries, places where the Gospel cannot be preached “openly,” where missionaries or Christian workers are not allowed. In these circumstances, radio becomes a cornerstone of any contemporary strategy — because of its singular ability to transcend national borders and ideological barriers. This massive coverage carries certain drawbacks. The believability of the message tends to decrease the farther the listener is from the source of the signal. (You trust your neighbor’s

word before you do that of a stranger from the other side of town.) For this reason, shortwave stations beaming from great distances are often less credible than a local station known to the entire population in the area.

Despite the problems just mentioned, almost universally radio has become an authoritative voice — for governments and the private sector as well. Because of this, there is an implied authority whenever *anything* is heard on the radio. While this transfer of credibility is severely limited by the type of program, the source of the signal and other considerations, the strength of radio's built-in reputation for authority is another reason it must be considered in our strategy for evangelism.

Hand in hand with the universal nature of radio's signal is the mobility afforded the listener as he or she tunes in. When you sit in a quiet room or atop a silent mountain peak, the air is still filled with the signals of radio — all you need is the right kind of set to tune in or "decode" the signals. Combine this great signal coverage and mobility with the sharply decreasing cost of radio sets and you come as close as the world has ever seen to having the one truly universal medium.

Compare cost with media like television and films, and radio is particularly attractive — especially in areas where education and literacy are low. It takes no education to understand one's own language when it comes from the radio "box." And, while many more things could be pointed out regarding radio's special nature related to the church's strategy for evangelism, these points will suffice to show clearly how radio should be an essential element in our planning.

Determining the goal

However, before plunging ahead with the radio, the most critical issue to be considered is our goal. Time spent in carefully reviewing what we want to accomplish with radio is essential — *the* essential to any strategy.

As I write this paper there is a program of classical music coming from my radio. It is classical music familiar in the West. Listeners to this type of music are quite specific in their interests and background. They listen for specific reasons. This program would be quite out of place in many parts of the world. And, while such a program might be an ideal carrier for an evangelistic message in some places, it would be totally inappropriate in others. Knowing the nature of your goals regarding the use of radio is the foundation for any good use of the medium.

Here are some of the questions we must ask if we are to use the medium of radio properly: What is the audience I am trying to reach? What are the characteristics of this audience — age, education, vocation, religious background and customs? Where is the audience located and can I reach them with my signal? What is the audience's habit regarding the use of radio — when do they typically listen, how often and to what kind of programs? What other media do they use and how — magazines, films, etc.? What is the spiritual purpose of this program? What kind of response do I expect from the programming I produce? (We must realize that if we do not know what we want the listener to do, he most certainly will not know!)

We are considering radio and its relationship to evangelism. This immediately narrows the possibilities for our goals. But even here we too often think in traditional terms — that evangelism means the listener "makes a decision for Christ" as a direct result of the program while listening, or later as he/she refers back to the program content. However, this type of goal for the evangelistic use of radio is far too narrow — too restrictive for effective use of the medium in a strategy of evangelism.

It is possible for us to develop a strategy in which radio is simply a means to establish contact with an otherwise unreachable listener. Our plan may be to carry little "evangelistic" content (i.e., Scripture, preaching, etc.) on our program but, rather, use the program to make contact with the listener — allowing literature, personal follow-up, or other media to carry the process of evangelism to its conclusion. Is this a lesser evangelistic use of radio? Of course not!

Too long the church has seen radio as an "end" in our evangelistic enterprises rather than seeing it as a "means" to the end. Once this idea is sorted out in our minds, we are then open to a whole new range of possibilities regarding use of radio. One group using radio saw the programming as a tool for building up the local church in its listening area — giving them instruction in evangelism, prayer, and other essentials. In turn, the radio producers worked closely with church leaders to insure wide listenership — seeing the local, individual believer as the main element in personal communication of the Gospel to the unreached in that area. In this case, radio was clearly seen as a means to the end of evangelism. Well-defined goals and a plan for execution of these goals are essential.

When considering radio and the total task of evangelism, especially in the light of the local church's role, we must carefully consider if we are going to sow, water, or reap on the air. Reaping is by far the most often found program content when one thinks of evangelistic programs. But is sowing or watering any less evangelistic? If sowing or watering is our prime goal in the use of radio, we must have a careful plan for how radio fits into a complete picture which, ultimately, will allow for the reaping. Sowing and watering are much less "popular" ways to use radio; produce less specific, visible evangelistic results; and are often more controversial than the more traditional forms of radio. Further, such efforts are often hard to finance — it being difficult to explain to the supporting constituency what the results of such programming have been — particularly when the constituency has been used to the more traditional forms of Christian radio.

An ongoing process

The listener is not a tape recorder. He/she does not retain everything heard. And, if the listener could retain everything, it might not be a time when they could act on the information. This brings us to the issue of time required for spiritual change. While conversion takes place in a moment, the process of coming to that moment may require a great deal of time. We only have to read New Testament passages like Luke 2:52, I Peter 2:1-5, or John 14:9 to realize that the Lord spent great periods of time with his disciples explaining to them the way of life. Even then, they

often misunderstood his message. We too, then, should be prepared to use the medium of radio over extensive periods of time — particularly if we are involved in a sowing and watering ministry. For, fortunately, we do not know who in the audience is ready to accept Christ as Lord: That knowledge is the sole privilege of the Holy Spirit. Our task is to be faithful and consistent.

Three elements make up our ability to deal with this issue: when the listener listens, how often he/she listens, and how long they listen when they *do* listen. Combine these elements and we have a clue to our ability to affect the listener over a long period of time. Multiply the frequency of listenership by how long the listener tunes in and you have a good idea of the potential period of time you might have access to the listener. (Example: a listener listens one hour per day, five days per week. The "exposure span" for this listener would be five hours per week or twenty hours per month!) Such a simple revelation should have drastic effect on our use of radio for reaping. For typically, radio listeners are "repeat customers." If the programming is attractive, they will return time after time often for years.

Control of radio

Around the world radio has developed typical styles. Radio may be either in the hands of government control or the private sector. Usually, programming is either commercially supported (advertising, etc.) or it is non-commercial (quite typical of state broadcasting systems). Finally, those using radio generally fall into two categories — those producing programs, or those actually operating complete stations.

We must carefully weigh the circumstances in our geographical area with regard to radio. If all broadcasting is government controlled, our ability to use radio may be limited to certain types of program content and, therefore, very specific audience and response goals. If, on the other hand, radio in the area is controlled by the private sector, there may be a wider possibility for programming — providing materials the stations badly need. Or, in some cases, it may be possible to buy time for religious programs. In Latin America and certain places in Asia this is particularly true.

Christian radio programming has generally taken two forms: the ownership and operation of actual broadcasting stations or the production of programs for release on stations owned by others (Christian or non-Christian).

Station ownership and operation particularly suits itself to control of the complete schedule. If you control the entire station and its policy, you can generally control the purpose and content heard on the air. This approach to Christian use of radio, however, has severe limitations. One of the problems is that such an approach demands a high volume of program production — the day's schedule "must be filled." And typically, there is compromise in quality of content to meet the necessary demand of quantity. Additionally, there is the issue of costs. Providing equipment, creative staff and maintenance for a full radio station is an enormous task — even in local coverage. The complexity of the task and the financial responsibilities when considering super-power, wide-coverage

facilities become formidable. Despite these problems, such stations have often been the only source of the "Good News" to large sections of the world who, otherwise, would be cut off. So, we must be thankful for the vision and faith of those who have mounted such operations!

Program production inherently has certain aspects that recommend this approach. First, of course, reduced cost and complexity of operations in contrast to station operations. But, beyond this, there is another factor that is often overlooked. If radio program producers are to get on the facilities owned by others (particularly non-Christians), their programs must be of sufficient quality and interest as to attract a wide audience. Unfortunately, too often Christian program producers prepare programs for stations where the standards are low, or by simply buying the time they are able to get on the air — the station operator being more interested in the revenue per quarter hour than he is in total penetration of the audience! This latter situation has most frequently been exported from the West and, lamentably, has been carried on in other areas of the world.

Radio and the local church

Flowing naturally out of these considerations regarding radio is the issue of integration of radio with other media, with the local, visible church. We must ask ourselves, how does our use of radio for evangelism tie in with personal witness, prayer, the "community" of the local church, Christian literature, films, etc.?

Radio faces certain characteristics that make it difficult to firmly identify answers to this question of integration — particularly with the local church and its witness. First, radio is a medium of wide coverage; the local church is — local. Second, radio tends to appeal to individuals — not to communities — and the local church is a community of believers. Third, radio typically in its large coverage will have many local churches within its coverage area — with no specific responsibility to any one of them.

No one has ever made a "decision for Christ" as a result of listening to a single radio program. Rather, such decisions are the composite of many media influencing the individual's life. Paul states in Romans that man is without excuse for God has revealed himself in the world around us. In other words, God has already used the medium of natural things to communicate. Radio, even in the most isolated circumstances, builds on what God has already done in communicating to man. Typically there is prayer, personal witness, and sometimes a host of other factors that have brought the individual to the place where the message on the radio brings that decision. This points up the essential element of consistency in our Christian communication. If one message is heard in personal witness, another heard on the radio, and still another heard when the person is invited to a Christian home for hospitality, there is a great problem in communication.

To insure integration with the church in our listening area, those involved in radio programming should consider: (i) The possibility of establishing advisory people, laymen and church leaders, who can make recommendations or suggestions regarding need in their area; (ii)

Whenever consistent with our goals, aid the churches in communication between themselves — often an important service in remote or rural areas; (iii) Deal with the local church's problems realistically — know them first-hand through personal contact and feedback from the church; (iv) Consider making the local church part of the follow-up plan in your strategy of evangelism; (v) Consider making the local church a distribution center for literature or other materials offered by radio; (This is particularly difficult in areas like Muslim countries and Latin America, where the Roman Catholic church membership finds entering a Protestant church offensive; however, it must at least be considered.) (vi) Consider making radio the central, coordinating element in a national or regional strategy for evangelism. Radio's efficiency of cost, speed of communication, universal coverage, and flexibility for last-minute change in content make it ideal for such a role.

Combining resources

One of the major problems confronting Christian use of radio is the "bits and pieces" approach to program production. There are literally hundreds of agencies producing programs varying in length from one minute to one hour. In turn, these programs are aired on Christian or secular stations — typically with little thought as to how they relate to each other. So quite often there are a few minutes of this, a few minutes of that, and a few minutes of something else. Nothing could be less attractive to the non-Christian — an issue of prime importance if we want to attract, hold, and convince the unreached.

Seemingly the only course for action in this case is for program producers to form cooperatives. Some producers have fine talent, others exceptional strategies and planners, still others have financial resources. Combine these elements and it would be possible to produce programs of greater length and more frequent schedule — both essential for evangelism. We have seen how in countries like Nepal and Afghanistan Christian agencies have been forced to band together, combining the best of their individual resources into a cooperative in order to work in the country. Certainly broadcasters must consider the same approach in order to get maximum benefit from the massive resources required for optimum use of the few available frequencies!

So, then, radio brings unique properties to the challenge of evangelism. However, there must be carefully defined goals and a plan for implementation if these unique capabilities of radio are to be captured for maximum effectiveness. Finally, there must be more careful integration of radio's efforts — with other broadcasters, with other Christian media, and with the local church.

FILMS AND EVANGELISM ... "COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL BY MEANS OF THE FILM"

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This is our world

What makes our generation different from those which have gone before? Many things; but among the phenomena which have shaped the twentieth century is communication — the media. We can scarcely imagine a world without radio, television, film, the telephone, the press. The destinies of men and of nations are swayed by the rapid transmission of news and ideas. Fashions and life-styles are transmitted from country to country and from continent to continent with bewildering speed.

These changes often leave us groping and confused. Old landmarks of morality and standards of behavior often crumble and vanish before we can discover where the cult or change began.

Another important factor in understanding the media and the role which they can play in world evangelization is the staggering increase in the population of the world.

This then is our world

