

## **The radio university as a public service: programming models in Spain**

Lcda. Paloma Contreras Pulido  
University of Huelva (Spain)

Dr. José Ignacio Aguaded Gómez  
University of Huelva (Spain)

### **Abstract**

As media education emerges as a worldwide field of knowledge, more training and research is needed in media literacy in the fight for a more democratic, plural and participative media that is mindful of social and civic issues. The aim of media literacy is to educate the audience into becoming more critical and adept at deciphering the media message. In the current media context, university radios are now a consolidated reality. Internet and the new technologies have contributed to their expansion, transforming traditional radio into a new interactive concept. Although university radios have existed for years, it is only now, thanks to Internet and the commitment of universities, that they are endowed with new communicative, transformative capabilities without succumbing to commercial demands. This paperwork discusses the programming of seventeen Spanish college radio stations. For this, websites and blogs have been revised, highlighting programs and advertising that are dedicated to developing content with a social turns and civic participation. Today's university radio provides a perfect framework for media education to show that an alternative medium that differs substantially from commercial radio is possible, with public service, citizenship training and focus on social development as its main goals, avoiding the tyranny of listener share and the business pressures imposed on commercial broadcasters. It also analyzes the social intervention in college radio charts, as an opportunity to present an alternative dialogue, in terms of the development of a bigger critical audience, all as a practical example of what media education can achieve.

### **Keywords**

Radio university, public service, podcasting, Internet, education, communication.

## **1. Introduction and context**

For more than a decade there has been a strong, progressive, intellectual, academic and institutional drive towards media education due to, among other reasons, the emergence of the «digital world» and Internet in society. This environment has also seen important changes. Until recently, media education basically centred on education of the mass media – press, radio and television – but for a while now and above all thanks to the impact of new technologies and the Internet, a more universal rethink has been taking place.

Even so, the didactic model that currently prevails in classrooms across most of the developed and developing world is still highly traditional, with a form of teaching that informs and transmits conceptual content far removed from the needs and expectations that society demands for its 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens who deal with global media and highly advanced technologies – interactive and audiovisual – in every space of their lives. In this way, the absolute dominance of content transmission by the teacher, the passivity and uncritical attitude of the students, the system of continuous assessment, the rigid curricular structure and timetabling – the lack of flexibility even extends to physical spaces – is a paradox at all levels of education, especially at university, when compared to the real world outside the classroom (Aguaded, 2005). International organizations have warned on many occasions that the education system is falling behind, and its adoption of new social thinking is slow and even traumatic. Pérez Tornero (2000) pointed out that society's consideration of the school as transmitter of the precise knowledge needed for an appropriate socialization has changed in that the school is now seen as just one of many knowledge sources, some of which are deemed more influential and effective. Likewise, the literacy needed in an audiovisual society is acquired through non-formal and independent channels away from school, which represents a system that does not provide the free environment required in order to join an audiovisual society in which knowledge sources are much more diffuse.

Education in the audiovisual society must adopt media literacy as essential at all levels of the educational system worldwide, because this reality is now universal: from China to Chile and from Spain to Australia. So now more than ever, the media must take on a fundamental role in the teaching-learning processes. Education must aspire to be «reflective experienced-based learning», rather than the more technical-termed and pragmatic styles that have dominated as educational models. It must overcome the idea of education as a bank (Freire) for depositing knowledge inside the heads of students, and must develop a student mind that is more critical and creative

within their environment, aware of their reality and capable of acting freely, independently and judiciously. The role of the media in this form of critical and value-based teaching is crucial (Aguaded, 2005). Today's students must be the protagonists in the construction of their own knowledge, and the instructor, teacher or lecturer must become the guide or facilitator of this process.

This work focuses specifically on the possibilities of radio as a medium, especially in light of the enormous surge of new technologies, and Internet in particular, in the effective development of radio within the educational context. This type of media, which not only uses the spectrum of traditional radio broadcasting for its diffusion, also sees Internet as its main ally for its transmission worldwide. It is an example of good practice in the service of media education, and also has a second role to play as an alternative voice that occasionally rebels against the prevailing alienating discourse of conventional commercial radio. This new radio is an indisputable example of the public service traditionally expected of these established media; however, it increasingly seems that we can only count on the former to continue performing this role.

## **2. Media Education experiences today**

Although the educational system is moving towards adoption of the media's tools and discourses for a better understanding of their dynamics, it is still incapable of making effective use of the huge didactic potential and, above all, of the autonomous learning and participation that these technologies offer, which enable, for example, the creation of media within the educational context. This is undoubtedly a formula that benefits the ultimate aim of the teaching-learning process and which departs from the traditional view of the teacher as the sole provider of knowledge and the student as nothing more than a recipient. In addition, other values and competencies are transversally promoted that are hard to acquire in the traditional environment: communicative skills, personal development, integration within the group, the ability to search out resources, a critical attitude towards the media, team work and knowledge transfer.

So, thanks in particular to this impetus from the digital world, experiences are now taking root that allow the educational community and citizens in general to participate, create and develop vocationally. Whereas it was once difficult to be part of traditional media, citizens now see the fulfilment of their need to contribute to current discourses and tendencies transmitted by the mass media. Proof of this lies in UNESCO's long-running promotion of the educational and cultural dimension of communication technologies, as well as fomenting the creation of media among

disadvantaged communities as (a-) means of self-expression and self-definition, to avoid becoming mere consumers of content and images that reflect remote values (Zaragoza, 1997).

In Latin America, the media in general and radio in particular have contributed to the development of democracy, and their ability to instruct and educate is evident across the continent. Unsurprisingly, this type of communication models set up in educational institutions such as universities has proliferated in recent times in Europe, and especially in Spain.

Our study focuses on the experiences of university radio in Spain, where stations are now broadcasting in growing numbers.

### **3. University radio in Spain: a commitment to public service**

Spanish university radio stations have been broadcasting since 1987<sup>1</sup>, but have only started to appear in greater number(s) this decade. There are currently 25 stations linked to universities in Spain. They vary considerably in terms of programme structure and content, and survive in spite of their ambiguous legal status. They are not legally recognized in Spain and so have to coexist with conventional radio stations, which undermines their ability to expand and draw closer to society due to the lack of a designated space for them within the national radio panorama. Therefore, it is only logical that, by adopting the new communicative tendencies linked to technological advances and the Internet, these new radio stations should use the latter as a means of reaching out to a public that uses the Internet more and more to get information. In this way, the horizon is not so dark, and the potential for creating forums within universities is huge which in turn serves to draw closer and connect with society.

Should university radio stations and any media based at an educational institution follow conventional communication models? They undoubtedly work and their influence on the collective is increasing. However, these models are configured around one single premise – which has to a certain extent infiltrated the public media – profit. Communication is a business like any other, as Debord (1999) stated, in which consumer society stands for the programming of everyday life; it manipulates and determines individual and social life in all its interstices; everything is transformed into artifice and illusion in the service of the capitalist imagination and in the interests of the ruling classes. So it is that the media, the big business conglomerates and their wide range of commercial activities, must increase audience share to satisfy demand in a productive system that is more and more voracious and in which advertising marks time, space and even content. That is why today's radio is highly commercial and very

narrow in scope, subscribing to, according to Gutiérrez and Huertas (2003: 134), «the dominance of programming policy based on direct competition».

University radio must distance itself from this premise. Firstly, because what little legislation there is on the configuration of cultural media, and this type of radio station<sup>3</sup> would undoubtedly fall within such legal norms, states that it must be so; and also that commercial advertising is prohibited. Also, because as part of a public service institution that generates knowledge and is responsible for transferring that knowledge to society, university radios must be an extension of those principles. They must be the protagonists in social communication, particularly in communication that is free from the influence of commercial objectives or political interests. Its aims must be directed towards solidarity and true public service. This requires total commitment, as this type of radio broadcaster represents agencies whose aim is to promote the fundamental causes of science, culture, critical analysis and responsibility in society. For this reason, the humanistic role of university media is now so important (Fernández, 2009).

#### **4. Content**

Although universities have traditionally used the radio as a medium of communication with society, a new formula is now needed to extend its reach and find a niche to counter the impact of commercial stations. The problem lies in the generation of products that are unprofitable, and this reality demands new ideas and content. As Da Cunha-Lima<sup>ii</sup> has stated, «what sells in commercial television and radio is audience. What sells in the public stations is the programming».

The university radio stations have a fundamental role to play. Experimentation with new formats and the inclusion of more specialised content – albeit for minority tastes – would lend their programming a certain complementarity, which perhaps is the ultimate aim in their attempt to become an alternative medium for their listeners. Currently, the main national radio stations dedicate about 70% of their broadcasting time to news and entertainment, with sport taking up around 10%. The remaining 20% is for music and audience-participation and, to a lesser extent, culture, education, religion and other minority macrogenres such as fiction, whose appearance is sporadic and testimonial among public broadcast networks (Perona, 2009).

With this outlook, and with few resources available to make a greater impact on the public, university radio stations have no alternative but to find a niche within the generalized radio content in order to achieve that complementarity.

The search for alternative or specialized content must not mean that the medium created at the heart of a higher education institute becomes «intermuros». One of the fundamental characteristics and objectives of university radio stations must surely be to bring the institution – viewed historically as a select space for the intellectual elite – closer to society, making itself known, explaining and, if you will, «humanizing» its activities. But it should not be an obstacle for this content to alternate with other programmes covering many other varied topics.

Finally, if we understand that university radio programming should not just satisfy the demands of the institution to which it belongs but must also be open to broader content, then a symbiosis must be found to unite both aspects so that the greater part of society feels represented.

## **5. Providing a public service**

It is vital that the programming is underpinned by the idea of public service, understood as that which must be provided to cover the necessities of the general, not private, interest, and whose motive is not to turn a profit.

To achieve this, as well as satisfying the demands of the university community itself which, in the end, is the one whose voice will broadcast on the university radio station, programming must be structured to foment study and scientific investigation in addition to covering topics and providing an outlet for collectives who would, were it not for this type of media, be almost invisible to society. In the end, taste is aroused not by demand but by supply (Pérez Tornero, 2010).

Undoubtedly all university radio stations subscribe to these premises, firstly because the «prime movers» behind their content are mainly young people, one such collective that demands more attention for being fairly invisible.

Likewise, many radio programmes complement subjects studied at university, and they can even act as a form of student qualification.

And besides this, the specificity of much of the content enables many listeners to find a place where they can learn in a non-formal way via the radio. It is also a good formula for developing a greater social sensibility towards people and collectives who are generally ignored by the mainstream media; and if they are portrayed, it is only to describe them in a biased and pejorative way as generators of negative news stories.

But if we review the programming of the university radio stations that currently operate in Spain, we see that their content is centred mainly on topics related to some public service or to a degree subject taught at the institution. Music of the alternative variety is also present, along with programmes that deal directly with the lives of those

groups we referred to earlier, who can only find a voice<sup>iii</sup> on university radio. For example, «Ahora tú cuentas» (Now you speak) on Radio Universidad de Salamanca, a programme for people with physical and mental disabilities; «Un mundo mejor» (A better world) on 98.3 Radio Universidad de Navarra, «Mosaicos de Paz» (Mosaics of peace) on Vox UJI Radio, and «Horizontes» (Horizons) on Radio URJC are just a few examples of programmes that analyse social exclusion, the roots of poverty and injustice in the world (iv).

On Uniradio, the radio station of the University of Huelva, the experience with various collectives who face social marginalization merely confirms that radio is the only outlet these people have to express themselves and connect with society. For the last four years, Uniradio's «Campus en la Prisión» (Campus in the prison) has broadcast live once a week during its morning magazine section, in which inmates and teachers set the agenda. The inmates are not called on to relate their personal experiences but are treated as equal members of the panel that discusses politics or current social issues, but from the perspective of people behind bars. In this way, the radio station presents a reality that is different from the one we are accustomed to. This reality is humanized – without judging the conduct of those who take part – and typical prisoner stereotypes are broken. It is true that these experiences also feature on mainstream radio but with a more biographical slant on the inmates who take part.

Another programme on Uniradio, «Mentalízate» (Move your mind!), also fits into this category. Its gestation was long and hard, since it required convincing the entire Mental Health hospital area in Huelva, but the outcome is a monthly programme now in its third season that is run by a group of people with mental disabilities, mainly schizophrenics.

They themselves decide on content and music; and the programme is not about relating personal experiences but a space in which they can participate and give an opinion on events in daily life, and discuss issues with health professionals and even family members. The programme was recently awarded a prize by the Andalusian Federation of Associations of Family Members with Mental Disabilities.

Another example of programmes with a social perspective, and hence as a public service, are those produced with groups of children or young adults, students in primary and secondary education who have special learning needs. Uniradio has several long-running programmes that are prepared and put together with a team of teachers and instructors from various schools in the province, and this process has now become part of the regular curriculum in some subjects.

One of the most effective means at this radio station's disposal has been to invite those social institutions that work with the University of Huelva on projects to use the radio as a way of making a closer connection to society. For example, Uniradio broadcasts a weekly programme with Valdocco, a socially-concerned entity that operates in one of the most marginalized neighbourhoods of Huelva. The broadcast does not focus on what Valdocco is or does but rather acts as an extension of the objectives of that social institution. The coordinator is a Gypsy woman who works as an intercultural mediator, and on the programme she interacts with foreigners in the province. The process is a way of breaking down the stereotypes and prejudice surrounding Gypsies in general and Gypsy women in particular, and about the possibilities of them becoming a social reference point. These programmes clearly underline the difference between university and conventional radio, in performing a public service and bringing society closer together.

## **6. Is non-profit making advertising a utopia?**

One experience that has generated a lot of interest, and which set in motion a flurry of creative group activity with experts and institutions specializing in public service work at local and national level, is the production of socially-minded but non-profit making advertising slots on Uniradio, whose quality has been publically acknowledged by several social and educational institutions.

Radio stations of a cultural nature cannot broadcast commercial advertising, as set down in the laws on the subject in Andalusia(v). Nevertheless, advertising slots have their place in the structure of any daily radio programming.

Another formula would be to use these slots to promote the radio station itself or the university. But why not use them to broadcast messages that stir the conscience? For example, during Uniradio's first season<sup>vi</sup> (2007-08), the station tried to encourage healthy lifestyles through sport, reading, cinema, friendship, respect for animals and nature, for young children, etc. In the seasons that followed, it ran campaigns such as «¿Realidad o ficción: de qué lado estás?» (Reality or fiction: which side are you on?), in order to foment among listeners respect for life, individual freedoms, democracy, social coexistence and other fundamental values underwritten by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The protagonists of these slots are those people with something to say, who tell their own stories: the homeless, students and teachers, children, immigrants....

During the previous season (September 2009-June 2010), the central theme of these social advertising slots was the Millenium Development Goals. The aim was not

only to make these goals widely known but also to promote a new form of cooperative work and continuous contact with those social groups involved. Far from treading common ground, the radio station wanted to present the real protagonists in the struggle to achieve these goals rather than the institutionalized view that characterizes traditional campaigns. In this regard, the station used material gathered the previous season (interviews, debates and special programmes) in which the guests openly and spontaneously expressed their views on the reality of each of the eight goals.

## **7. Conclusions**

We can declare that today's Spanish university radio stations are fast becoming a reference point inside and outside the country for communicating an authentic philosophy of public service that is in line with the concerns and interests of their listeners. What is more, this type of radio offers people small «islands» from which to enjoy broadcasting that is more reflective, with a different outlook and objectives. Likewise these media, whose very nature is an educational mission, enable the population to exercise its right to participate in public media and to be heard. As the World Bank's study on broadcasting for education and development at the start of the 1970s indicated, the goals that radio must set if it wants to promote progress through communication would be:

- Motivation. To get individuals to reflect and even act on the object of their reflection.
- Information. This includes programmes that provide local, national and international news, as well as activities and spaces to promote public services.
- Teaching. Referring to the use of radio to acquire those more generalized cognitive skills. The most important aim is to impart non-formal education, according to the World Bank.
- Public participation means those programmes that are produced by the community and are distinctly participative in nature.

What the World Bank proposed in the 1970s is what this type of university radio broadcasts today.

In today's media landscape, the words of Noam Chomsky ring louder than ever in Uniradio's programme «Señales de Humo» (Smoke Signals), in which he declared that the alternative media could become a force to be reckoned with, and that it all depended on people's concerns and commitment.

So, by way of a conclusion, university radio must enable human and cultural development. Its duty is to contribute to the moderation of certain undesired

consequences of the influence of other communication systems on the community, and to become a more powerfully persuasive option (Fernández, 2009). Perhaps we cannot expect to create new infallible formulae for producing perfect programming that fulfils the requirements demanded of a public medium. But university radio does represent a valuable opportunity to restore the social function to the media that has been lost in the wake of dominant commercial criteria. Maybe it is only a question of creativity; of thinking that things can always be done differently.

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## **Notes**

<sup>i</sup> Spain’s first university radio station was launched at la Universidad de La Laguna. Radio Campus ([www.rcampus.net](http://www.rcampus.net)).

<sup>ii</sup> Jorge Da Cunha Lima, is President of the Board of Cultural Television of Brazil, and participated in the Congress of Media Literacy held in Seville in 2010

iii We arrived at this conclusion after reviewing the programme schedules of the following Spanish university radio stations:

- UPF ([www.upf.edu/upfradio](http://www.upf.edu/upfradio)).
- Radio Universidad Salamanca (<http://campus.usal.es/~radiouni>).
- Radio Universidad Almería ([www.radiouniversidad.es:81](http://www.radiouniversidad.es:81)).
- Uniradio Jaén (<http://uniradio.ujaen.es>).
- 98.3 UNAV ([www.unav.es/98.3](http://www.unav.es/98.3)).
- Vox UJI Radio ([www.radio.uji.es](http://www.radio.uji.es)).
- Uniradio Huelva ([www.uhu.es/uniradio](http://www.uhu.es/uniradio)).
- iRadio de Universidad Católica de Murcia (<http://iradio.ucam.edu/programacion.html>).
- Radio Campus ULL ([www.rcampus.net](http://www.rcampus.net)).
- Radio UNED ([www.canaluned.com](http://www.canaluned.com)).
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- Radio URJC (<http://radiourjc.com>).
- Radio Universidad Miguel Hernández (<http://radio.umh.es>).
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- UPV Radio ([www.upv.es/rtv](http://www.upv.es/rtv)).
- Radio Complutense ([www.ucm.es/info/radiocom/index/INICIO.html](http://www.ucm.es/info/radiocom/index/INICIO.html)).

iv Ahora tú cuentas (<http://campus.usal.es/~radiouni/cuentas.html>).

- Un mundo mejor ([www.unav.es/98.3/auto/unmundomejor.php](http://www.unav.es/98.3/auto/unmundomejor.php)).
  - Mosaicos de Paz ([www.radio.uji.es/programa.php?id=54](http://www.radio.uji.es/programa.php?id=54)).
- «Horizontes» ([www.urjc.es/labexradio/asociacion/sinopsis/horizontes.htm](http://www.urjc.es/labexradio/asociacion/sinopsis/horizontes.htm)),  
«Campus en la prisión» y «Mentalízate» ([www.uhu.es/uniradio](http://www.uhu.es/uniradio)).

v By order of the Boletín Oficial de la Junta de Andalucía, 190. September 24, 2003.

vi [www.uhu.es/uniradio/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=16&Itemid=5](http://www.uhu.es/uniradio/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=16&Itemid=5).