
THE CHRISTIAN MEDIA AND ITS CRITICISM

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Abstract

Complaints about the Slovak Christian electronic media broadcasts (TV LUX and Radio LUMEN) demonstrate how some of their programs may evoke negative response and disapproval of a part of the public. They will also show which social groups mostly disagree with the Church's point of view. The case studies show how the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission (CBR) handles these situations. The strongest negative response to some Christian media programs was noted in the area of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and intersexual (LGBTI) persons. The CBR considered the complaints to be justified because the Christian media presented only a one-sided opinion and did not allow for any opposing views. That was also confirmed in the case of a political journalistic broadcast featuring one-sided opinions of some Christian democratic politicians before the parliamentary elections. Christian media in Slovakia still want to lead their flock, show them the way, which seems to perpetuate the old approach based on dogmas. However, in the current world of media, transparent discussions and persuasive arguments appear to be much more convincing.

Keywords: Christian electronic media, criticism, gender studies, LGBTI

1. Introduction

Let's try the negative approach. We know that the Christian electronic media (radio and television) have a specific mission, which has been given to them by their owners and programmers acting primarily on behalf of the Church. The goal of the following study is not to analyze them from the perspective of the broadcasters or to determine whether or not this mission is being fulfilled and how, the broadcasters themselves certainly can watch out for that. We will try to take a look from another perspective. We will talk about the complaints that the public send to the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission (CBR) about these broadcasts. Let's try to analyze which parts of their broadcasts evoke negative responses, disapproval, and antagonism of the public. In our opinion, such negative light will also reflect their true nature, because the imprint of disapproval may serve as a mould for a bronze cast of their true appearance and their actual effect on the society. We will therefore subject these cases of

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complaints to scientific study to learn more about the Christian media from a different perspective.

2. Christian electronic media in Slovakia

In Slovakia, there are three electronic media outlets dedicated to Christian mission. These are Radio LUMEN, Radio 7, and TV LUX. Two of them are Catholic – Radio LUMEN and TV LUX, the third one is Lutheran. Their history is brief. The establishment of a dual TV and Radio system after 1989 caught Churches in Slovakia unprepared in this area. Initially, in the 1990s, there was a boom of commercial radios with entertainment and musical programming, and the Christian media started to emerge only later. The Christian institutions understood that “Christians, which are ontologically and spiritually reporting their life to Christ, must hope that the time of quantity domination, who deceitfully claims the quality, will diminish its offer of immoral consumables in order to make place to the responsibility, the respect” [1].

The first one to emerge was Radio LUMEN. In 1993 it was first known as Radio MARIA and a year later, in 1994, it was given its current name. Its impact was initially small, both in the number of transmitters as well as the broadcast output. Its headquarters were located in Banská Bystrica. It took several years to obtain frequencies in Bratislava so that people in the Capital City could tune in. For a long time, it was unavailable in Trnava, the seat of Archbishop. But in 2013, it is doing much better. Its East to West coverage ranks it among the multiregional radios. In addition to the terrestrial transmitters, Radio LUMEN also utilizes broadcasting via satellites Astra 3A and 3B. It is being offered by cable, satellite, and internet companies UPC, Skylink, and Magio TV. According to the opinion poll by Median SK-TGI, Radio LUMEN has a daily audience of approximately 130,000 listeners, which makes it number nine in popularity of radio stations in Slovakia. Half of its financing comes from Catholic dioceses, the other half comes from voluntary contributions of listeners, plus they have a small income from advertising.

The Lutheran Augsburg Confession Radio 7 dates back only to 2006. It is affiliated with the Czech branch of the Trans World Radio and broadcasts through weak terrestrial transmitters in Bratislava, Nové Mesto nad Váhom, and Banská Bystrica. In addition, it can be heard via the Astra 3 satellite thanks to satellite platform Skylink, as well as through the Czech web page Radio 7 TWR – after all, the Czech and Slovak programming is identical. Marginality and un-Slovak origin of Radio 7 coupled with poor coverage may explain its very small listenership in Slovakia. In February 2013 the web site reportedly registered only 7380 visitors [*TWR Media a Radio 7 správa za február*, online at http://www.radio7.sk/buxus/docs/Partnersk%C3%A9%20spr%C3%A1vy/Partnerska_sprava_TWR-Radia7_za_februar_2013.pdf]. According to the Median SK-TGI opinion poll, the number of listeners to the terrestrial broadcast of Radio 7 cannot be ascertained; it is too small to appear in the statistics. This radio station is financed by voluntary contributions, individuals, and church organizations in the

Czech and Slovak Republics. The Czech management is headquartered in Brno, the Slovak management is in Bratislava, which is also the technical broadcast centre.

The only Christian TV station in Slovakia is TV LUX, created in 2008 when the Slovak Catholic Church decided to abandon the original Czech and Slovak project TV NOE and establish their own Catholic-only television. It is financed mostly by the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia. As of today, the signal coverage is satisfactory. The terrestrial broadcast comes from Bratislava, Jaslovské Bohunice, Borský Mikuláš, Banská Bystrica, Piešťany, and Pezinok, and the signal is also being carried by two satellites, Astra 3B and THOR C. The station is included in the majority of cable company packages in Slovakia, offered by the UPC, SATRO, DIGI TV, Magio Set, and Skylink. It can be viewed on mobile devices such as iPhones and iPads. Altogether, it reaches 80% of households, and, of course, it can be watched online. The current viewership numbers are not available, but for comparison, the non-commercial and primarily non-entertainment broadcasts of public Dvojka (national TV – RTVS) and private TA3 have an approximately 2% share of the market. Based on this comparison it can be estimated that TV LUX may have a daily viewership of approximately 230,000 viewers. The population of Slovakia is about 5.5 million. All three of these organizations are non-profit broadcasters with a general philanthropic mission. From the economic perspective, as understood by Karol Jakubowicz, it is “the conversion of commercial media into companies whose main objectives are not high profits” [2].

All three Christian outlets strive to preach the Gospel. Radio LUMEN self-describes its mission as follows: “Belief in Jesus Christ. Church as the life support for the man. Togetherness on the road. Symbol of Christ for the society” [*Profil*, online at <http://www.lumen.sk/profil.php>]. TV LUX writes about its mission: “TV LUX wants to offer high quality programming in Slovakia with a focus on the spiritual and deeply human values, bringing joy and hope to people. At the time when people are being bombarded with a flood of information and often disheartened by the shallowness and tabloid approach, we provide a family TV station to make the viewers feel good, and to be watched with joy by children, adults, and the elderly.” [*Vízia*, online at <http://www.tvlux.sk/content/view/vizia>] And Radio 7: “The purpose of the satellite Christian radio broadcast through Radio 7 is to serve the Church of believers in Jesus Christ as their personal saviour and to serve the general public by spreading the gift that Lord Jesus Christ gave to his Church” [*Rádio 7*, online at http://www.radio7.sk/buxus/generate_page.php?page_id=97]. In addition to the Christian content we need to remember that all three of these media outlets also form an integral part of the Slovak dual system, and while their primary mission is spiritual, their programming also includes other components, such as shows focusing on culture or current problems in the society. Understandably, their mission to spread the gospel does not prevent them from making errors or suffering from deficiencies, and occasionally they become the subject of their listeners’ complaints sent to the CBR. Looking back at the past years, we observed several instances of media

breaking the law and the CBR having to sanction them for such violations. It must be noted here that this was the case of the Catholic Radio LUMEN and TV LUX, and not the Lutheran Radio 7. For Lutherans, this could be good news and we do not mean to contest it, but we need to point out that Radio 7 has a very small audience, and a tight group of faithful listeners likely has no reason to complain about their radio. Having a relatively broader audience, it is more likely that not all of the Radio LUMEN listeners and TV LUX viewers would be willing to indiscriminately accept everything they hear/see in the broadcast, and therefore their rate of complaints is higher.

3. Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission

To regulate media and handle the complaints of the citizens Slovakia established the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission (*Rada pre vysielanie a retransmisiu*), which has an equivalent in every European country (in Romania CAN, *Consiliul Național al Audiovizualului*, in the United Kingdom OFCOM, in France CSA, *Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel*, etc.). The CBR is guided by the Slovak Republic Act No. 308/2000 on broadcasting and retransmission when reviewing the radio and TV broadcasts. It is an independent authority to protect communication freedom in Slovakia, since 2009 its Chairman is Miloš Mistrík.

The complaints focus primarily on those provisions of the law that task the electronic media with the obligation to maintain objectivity and balance in their programming, not to endanger the upbringing of minors, and not to infringe upon human dignity (Sections 16 and 19). In addition, the CBR keeps an eye on how the commercial communication broadcast media regulations (advertising, teleshopping, etc.) are being followed (Sections 31 to 39). It must be noted that complaints about violations of the sections above are generally rare for the Christian media, as these violations are being perpetrated mostly by the national commercial TV stations, which stems from the nature of their programming and their effort to achieve the greatest possible profit at any cost. For instance, in 2012 the CBR received a total of 1108 complaints about the programming content, of which only a minimal fraction was associated with the Christian media [3]. We will describe each case below. It also should be noted that no such strict regulations exist in the area of print media in Europe or in Slovakia, so the comparison of electronic media with print media – which could be very interesting – is impossible, as their governance cannot be compared from this perspective. No council oversees the print media, and they are regulated only by the ethics of their publishers and the market.

4. Case studies

4.1. Homosexuality

TV LUX has two talk shows – *At Nicodemus'*, focusing on the social and

religious issues, and At Paul's, which analyzes the political aspects of these topics.

One of the episodes of At Nicodemus' discussions was broadcasted under the name *Christian Perspective on Homosexuality*. It premiered on May 3, 2010. After a long delay of almost a year, two complaints – most likely coordinated – were received about this show. They stated that the show only presented damnatory opinions of Christian churches on homosexuality, “*whereas various Churches have different opinions, and gay Christian exist. Moreover, the panelists repeatedly referred to Science – Psychology, Sociology – but the presented information was erroneous and even misleading – the studies that they were allegedly based on were not quoted. The presented opinions were offensive, derogatory to homosexuality, and not mitigated in any way, i.e. there was no opportunity for them to be refuted.*” [CBR's Monitoring Report, August 30, 2011] Even though these complaints were clearly written by qualified people and the arguments were on target, they were received long after the legal deadline of 45 days, which is the duration of time for which the broadcasters are mandated to keep the recordings of all their shows. The CBR was therefore unable to obtain the original recording of the discussion from the broadcaster, and had to file these complaints away as impossible to investigate.

The topic of homosexuality is closely related to the issue of registered partnerships. TV LUX held a discussion forum At Paul's under the name *Law on Registered Partnerships*. It premiered on October 29, 2012. At that time there was an ongoing national discussion caused by one of the liberal political parties (Freedom and Solidarity, SaS) submitting a draft law to the National Council of the Slovak Republic for discussion. The complainant objected to the following: “*I believe that the choice of guests and the behaviour of the host in this talk show failed to provide objectivity and balance. There were no guests that would represent the political party (SaS) that submitted the draft law or the community that this law affects. The host was unable to offer an opposing opinion, which turned the potentially well-balanced social political discussion into a group-wide homophobic masturbation justifying why oppression of the minorities is correct and why we, the panellists here, are better people than our absent, uninvited opponents with different opinions. That was too much, even for me.*” [CBR's Monitoring Report, January 29, 2013]

The CBR investigated the complaint. It found that the host Martina Ruttkayová-Tvardzíková lead the discussion with a conservative member of the National Council Branislav Škripek, a Christian Democratic Movement attorney Martin Dilong, and a Catholic priest Vladimír Thurzo. No representative of the liberal party SaS, which submitted the draft law to the Parliament, attended. The Social Democratic Party SMER-SD also did not participate, although this happened just about at the time when the government created the controversial Council for the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Intersexual (LGBTI) Persons.

Everyone in the TV studio condemned not only the draft law, but also homosexuality as such. They expressed their opinion that the law is not needed

because the affected groups in Slovakia are not at risk. Priest Vladimír Thurzo stated that registered partnerships would violate the basic principles of faith. Parliament Member Branislav Škripek proclaimed that *“our society is being ruled by attacks on the solidity of marital bond and views on marital fidelity, the society is becoming widely sexualized, demoralized by images in print, electronic media broadcasts and on the Internet.”* The panellists unanimously rejected the possibility of expanding the gay partnership registration to include the option to rear children. They thought it would be threatening if the problem was resolved liberally by the ruling government party SMER-SD, who *“already founded the LGBTI Council”* – and, if that was the case, would certainly win thanks to their majority in the Parliament. In the absence of any opponents, the invited guests presented a unanimous opinion in the discussion; the show’s host did not even attempt to provide any opposing views. The shared results were affirmed by the viewers’ opinions, received by email and text messages. In the end, the host openly admitted: *“Our goal was to provide the believers with direction how to stand up to these people and deal with this topic”*.

The CBR found that the complaint was justified. The discussion was truly one-sided. The fact that there was not a single opponent caused that both the legal initiative and homosexuality as such were condemned, because as one of the participants stated, *“to compare marriage of a man and a woman with registered partnership would be like comparing gold with lead”*. Since Section 16, Paragraph 3, Letter b states that political journalistic programs must be objective and impartial, the CBR decided to impose a penalty – the TV LUX broadcaster received a written notice of violation of the law.

4.2. Gender equality

On April 22, 2013 the TV LUX’s broadcasted a talk show *At Nicodemus’* called *Gender equality – equality in what?* The host, Jozef Kováčik, moderated a panel with Marek Iskra, Director of the Diocese’s Family Centre, Daniela Ostatníková, Chief of the Physiology Centre, School of Medicine, Komenius University, Martin Dilong, Christian Democratic Movement attorney, and Anton Ziolkovský, Executive Secretary of the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia. The complainant objected that *“the discussion included only one-sided opinions discrediting this principle, without the presence of representatives of gender equality, and the topic was presented in a manipulative way without realistic explanation of the issue as it is being perceived in a modern society and in the EU”* [CBR’s Monitoring Report, July 2, 2013].

All participants in the discussion on the TV screen agreed that there is no such thing as gender equality in the sense that man and woman could be absolutely equal and identical beings, or even that it would be possible to have the so-called social gender, i.e. that a person has the right to willingly choose their sex regardless of their biological gender. As Anton Ziolkovský said, gender is not a cultural construct, it is not a life role, and spreading such opinions is dangerous because they violate the basic human principle. *“One may try to*

identify with the other sex, but it is completely against nature,” said Daniela Ostatníková, and added: *“if we wanted to implement it, it would have far-reaching implications for the whole society in a few years, perhaps decades. And we cannot even begin to guess how far-reaching, because from the beginning of the world we have been men and women”*. The panellists also asserted that if, on the other hand, any kind of discrimination against women in the society exists, it definitely should be eliminated, but not by means of false gender equality.

Again, the viewers were able to participate in the talk show by email and text messages. Their opinions reflected what was already said in the studio. In the end, Martin Dilong demanded more of these discussions on TV, because *“these negative trends must be stopped”*.

The CBR investigated whether TV LUX analyzed this topic from a different perspective before, but could not find anything similar. Since this was not a political show but a philosophical journalistic program, the CBR considered whether the broadcaster satisfied its obligation to provide well-rounded information and plurality of opinions on the topic as part of the overall TV LUX programming. However, no similar program was found, therefore the CBR initiated a legal action in this matter. At the time of writing this report the CBR has not made the final decision.

4.3. Ethics vs. politics

Radio LUMEN receives very few complaints. The CBR deals with Radio LUMEN only rarely. Shortly before the parliamentary elections in 2012, it broadcasted an irregular talk show on the topic of *Decency in politics* (February 17, 2012). The show seemingly focused on ethics, but in reality it was a political discussion. The show featured the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman of the Christian Democratic Movement Ján Figel’ and Pavol Hrušovský, respectively, and the Associate Professor Inocent Maria Staniszlo of the Catholic University in Ružomberok. The complainant wrote: *“Radio LUMEN did not allow members of any other political parties to discuss the topic of Decency in politics. Why wasn’t the opportunity to speak on this topic given to e.g. Ján Slota, Anna Belousovová, Róbert Fico, Mr. Hrdlička, Marián Kotleba and others? I request that Radio LUMEN prepare a show on the topic of Decency in politics with different politicians. I request that the show on the topic of Decency in politics be broadcasted before the parliamentary elections.”* [CBR’s Monitoring Report, May 15, 2012]

The misconduct of the Christian Radio LUMEN was apparent from the beginning of the discussion. Under the pretext of ethics the participants gradually discussed current issues of political struggle, the election platform of the Christian Democratic Movement, and criticized other political parties. When the issues of decency or ethics happened to come up, usually they were addressed with clichés or accolades about Christian faith. For example: *“Christianity offered such an amazing concept of public life, not only personal, but also public, social, that we still have a long way to go and room for its study*

and application” (Ján Figel’), or: “*The citizens want to be decent, but they also want their politicians to be decent. That is what the current situation is about a little bit. And not only decent, but also responsible.*” (Pavol Hrušovský) The politicians transitioned from the ethics directly and openly straight to the election issues. The host never pointed out that the scheduled topic was being sidelined and that their approach was clearly pragmatic and propagandistic. One can assume that the show was supposed to serve the participating politicians as a platform to stand out in the ‘avalanche of information’ [4] which attacks the voters before every election, and the significant one-sidedness also presented the way how to escape it.

The crux of the matter for the CBR was to figure out whether this talk show should be viewed as philosophical and contemplative, i.e. whether it was really primarily about ethics and decency in politics, or if it was a political journalistic show, current, aimed at the elections. According to point 243 of the Explanatory Report on the Directive Television without Frontiers (89/552 EEC), “*the term ‘current affairs’ refers to strictly news-related programs such as commentaries on news, analysis of news developments and political positions on events in news*” [5]. Based on this definition, the CBR could classify this as a pre-election show and apply the legal criteria of mandatory objectivity and fairness, which Radio LUMEN failed to fulfil. In this case, the CBR also sent the broadcaster a written notice of violation of the law.

5. Discussion

As the described cases demonstrate, the complaints focused primarily on one topic. They were received after the Christian broadcasts emphasized that the basic units of humankind are Adam and Eve, biological man and woman. The complainants, on the other hand, demanded that the broadcasts admit the existence of other options.

1. That there may be gay couples Adam – Adam or Eve – Eve.
2. That this option should be legislated and that such couples should be able to rear children.
3. That gender equality of Adam and Eve should be acknowledged, as well as the right of every person to choose their sex and decide whether they choose to be Adam or Eve regardless of their biological nature.

These three areas may be individual topics, but they are closely related. Yet they represent only a very small part of the content of Christian media broadcasting. Their programs include religious, philosophical, Church topics, as well as medical, cultural and political subject matters. Not even the timely topics such as the election of the Pope, Church property, abortion, or even miracles and revelations ever evoked any complaints. Some of these topics, when discussed by other commercial or public broadcasters, evoked complaints sent to the CBR.

If the topic we identified here caused the greatest controversy, it must be for a reason. It could be explained by a strong and perhaps sizeable lobby with lifestyle different from Christian teachings, willing to fight for its right by filing

complaints. We can also mention that the topics above are very politically and socially sensitive, because the legislative framework for the LGBTI group is being constantly expanded and refined. It is being politicized, as thanks to the media, this topic is considered synonymous with tolerance of the majority towards minorities and the so-called otherness. Many other topics have significant political and social aspects, yet they did not evoke complaints. Therefore we should not settle for partial explanations. Another reason should be added to explain this hot topic. It can be found directly in human sexuality, in this case in sexuality of a minority group. The power of sexuality, libido and lust of those who identify with LGBTI, to create room for the sexual behaviour they need can also be a strong drive for them to carefully and sensitively pay attention to everything that could potentially interfere with and threaten their intimate lives. Therefore we identified two main sources of disapproval of the Christian media broadcasts – 1) political and social and 2) psychosexual, which are present in reality and the Christian media should realize that they need extra editorial preparation for these topics, as they can expect resistance and complaints to the CBR.

However, our studies show that the Christian media are unprepared. The complaints reveal deficiencies in how these media deal with such delicate topics. All cases demonstrated that the mentioned shows were truly one-sided and did not present any opposing views. Multiple occurrences of the same error by the Christian media indicate that this was not a common mistake but a systemic defect. Christian media are sometimes clearly incapable of debate, or we could say that the Church that backs them up is incapable of debate. It is the result of centuries of thinking in dogmas. The Church does not discuss, the Church recruits, converts to faith, and embraces lost souls in its arms.

However, the current conflicting world that is so well reflected in the media is often the meeting place for contradictory, incompatible views. At times, the commercial media shows reflect this much better. They intentionally invite to their recording studios selected antagonistic guests and let them fight each other, almost like new age gladiators. This utterly commercial way, paradoxically, allows them to adhere to the letter of the law about balanced programming. The Christian media is characteristic for their preference to spread serenity and peace, focus on spiritual values, unity, cultural communication – and thus sometimes not let the opponents inside the studio – and therefore they violate the law. They often have a tendency to lead their flock and assume to be taken on faith. Perhaps they even underestimate their audiences by not offering different alternatives to choose from. Or are they afraid that people will make a bad choice?

If the Christian programs focus on certainty and dogmas of faith, if they emphasize Christian principles of life, family and morality, this approach could be understood by sober reasoning that the broadcasters strive for common good, even if the law does not allow such imbalance. But if the same principle is used directly in a political fight right before the parliamentary elections, which is what happened with Radio LUMEN, it cannot be accepted under any

circumstances because it is dishonest and demonstrates bad intention. Television and radio today are the so-called old media [14], the Internet being the new medium, but their exceptionally strong influence on the behaviour of the public, such as during the elections, still cannot be refuted.

6. Conclusions

Yet the commercial media often circumvent the law too. However, they use a more sophisticated, hidden manipulation. A seemingly objective show may be prepared in such editorial way as to ensure that few people notice the true objective of its creators. We do not want these words to be misconstrued as encouraging Christian media to play dishonest games, but in truth, without a sophisticated preparation they will remain naïve, focused on dogmas, with no convincing victories over their opponents in open discussions.

From this perspective, it would be interesting to apply the duality of Conflict Media vs. Consensus Media, as described by Karol Jakubowicz [2, p. 36-40], and especially the latest findings that while the audiences in the U.S. prefer media that provide transparent discussions, at the same time they appreciate when hosts are not amorphous in their opinions, but when they openly and convincingly take a side. To apply these words to our case studies, this would be the way to make Christian programs more interesting for their viewers and more open to the current world.

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