Boring science challenge for educational radio

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Polskie Radio BIS is a nation-wide educational and cultural station run by Polskie Radio S.A., a public broadcasting corporation in Poland. There are 4 national public radio stations broadcast by Polskie Radio: general Programme 1, Programme 2 - classical music, arts and literature, Programme 3 - information, music and entertainment, so called AC format and Polskie Radio BIS. It was established in 1994 and replaced old-fashioned educational Programme 4.

Guiding notion of Polskie Radio BIS is „education which entertains, entertainment which educates“. Educational programmes broadcast by PR BIS are cofinanced by Ministry of National Education. Scientists, high ranking officials of MEN and professional science communicators from Polskie Radio are the members of the Council for Educational Radio Programmes, created by both institutions. The Educational Council express it’s opinion about the educational programmes and is able exercise it’s influence on the programme.

How to attract young audience?

As I have already mentioned, Polskie Radio BIS was established in 1994. The very first problem, we faced, was how to attract interest of young audience, dealing with such a traditional matter as classical music, literature and science. We didn’t want to restrict our influence to what one may call „intellectual ghetto“, to well educated, open-minded and rather elder listeners, living mostly in large towns and cities, employed at the budget sector and purely paid. We definitely needed young people.

However, You have to bear in mind, that polish radio market has been extremely competitive with two nation-wide commercial radio stations and dozens of regional and local broadcasters. They all offer what young listeners love: aggressive music, live concerts and a lot of gifts.

The answer is - research

As I already mentioned, Polskie Radio BIS closely collaborates with the Ministry of National Education. Both institutions decided to ask the actual and potential listeners - students and teachers - about educational radio. Two independent market agencies - OBOP and BSM - conducted three series of quantitative and qualitative researches. This is, what they found out:

At the time of research the weekly reach of programme was at the level of about 4-5 %, half of the listeners was 30 or younger.

The quantitative research, 1996 - 1997, conducted by OBOP:

- educational programmes were not used in the classes in most cases; the only exemption were kindergartens
- educational programmes are listened by both students and teachers after classes much more often than in the classes
- educational radio programmes were highly appreciated by both students and teachers
- according to opinion of both students and teachers, educational radio programmes are to broaden rather than fulfil school programmes

Much more intriguing were results of qualitative researches, conducted in 1996 and 1997 by BSM agency (more than twenty focus groups in large towns and villages in different parts of Poland):

- the traditional radio, broadcasting drama and feature and classical music, is generally unknown to younger generation (until 1990 there was only traditional public radio in Poland)!
- the most promising formula of education by radio is interaction
- students expect educational radio to provide them with interesting scientific information and ask general questions concerning different aspects of knowledge (however, science is regarded to be boring!)
- students expect educational radio to raise problems of emotional and social nature
What was wrong with the old way of radio teaching?

As I have mentioned Polskie Radio BIS replaced old-fashioned Programme 4. In Programme 4 educational programmes were broadcast for schools during the classes, they were strictly related to the teaching programmes, they were recorded and rarely contained any young voices. They represented one - lets call it „adult” - point of view, which was not subject of discussion. They aim was „to teach”.

The first changes started in 1994, but the real revolution came after the researches. The simple conclusion was: if we are going broadcast As you can imagine Polskie Radio BIS stopped producing „teaching programmes” and started to broadcast educational programmes, which are exactly opposite to what used to be done earlier. So the programmes are:
- live
- sound young
- represent different opinions
- as interesting as possible
- fast in scientific information and commentary
- in-depth, particularly when researching the popular subject
- include sounds and dispatches
- close to the life
- broadcast after classes

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Is the science boring?

Our young listeners, mostly students regarded science to be boring! It was a huge challenge for the radio station, which popularise science, history and humanities four hours a day! It was quite obvious - we have to try to change the image of science. Our answer was Science Picnic.

The answer is Science Picnic

The man, who came up with the idea of Science Picnic is Prof. Łukasz Turski, of the Centre for Theoretical Physics of the Polish Academy of Science, and - from the very beginning -chairman of the Science Committee of Science Picnic.

The main goal of Science Picnic is better understanding of science among general public, and particularly - young public. The event takes place in the Old Town of Warsaw, this part is actually called New Town, and the adjacent greens along the Vistula River. It is organised by radio journalists and PR people in close co-operation with researchers, who help to understand the real meaning of conducted experiments and its possible use in daily life.

Science Picnic - think big

- 60 research institutions
Four years ago, when organising first Science Picnic, we decided to think big and create the biggest science show in Poland. As far as I know, the Science Picnic is actually the biggest open air science show in Central Europe. Four years ago there were 17 scientific institutions participating in the Picnic and some 10,000 visitors. This year, on the 10. of June, some 30,000 visitors stream through the Old Town to join this fair-like operation. Some 60 research institutions and almost 300 researchers, not only from Warsaw, had joint the show.

In the Old Town just for this one day a small city of approximately 100 tents is build. At those stands for the whole day all sort of scientific experiments are performed and explained. The important thing is: almost every particular show at the stand is interactive. Public is advised to participate in the experiments and in fact public is part of the show.

Science Picnic - what is this?

At the stand of low temperature physics show public can see everything from levitating superconductors to frozen in liquid nitrogen roses, which crumble when grasped. Everyone was able to change their voices using helium. As a matter of fact the idea of Picnic came from the physicists. And the physics displays attracted the most interest from our younger public.

Interesting exhibitions shows also Space Research Centre of Polish Science Academy. At their stand one could see device – penetrator, part of the lander, which will take part in the Rosetta mission.

At the Institute of Experimental Biology of Polish Science Academy stand visitor can undergo an optical illusion experiment, find out how and why we test DNA and get to know the workings of the brain.

Every year there is a main topic of the Science Picnic. Last year was it Science and Sports. Visitors to Science Picnic could join many sport events like bow competition and rowing speed test. Scientists were explaining how various sport activities use physical laws and the relationship between sport and medicine.

In several stands visitors could pass the medical tests, have the eating habits analysed, and get doctors opinions about the actual daily diet, calculated by a computer set – up. Here you can see the Food and Nutrition Institute.

Secrets of archeological discoveries as well as marvels of fossils excavation were explained on stands, where kids could search a huge sand box in order to find a real leftovers from the past. The polish school of archeology became famous for its discoveries in Nubia, Syria, Cyprus.

Who organises Science Picnic?

- Polskie Radio BIS
- participating institutions

Who finances Science Picnic?

- sponsors
- municipal authorities
- Polskie Radio

What about media?

- live broadcast in Polskie Radio BIS
- 12 reporters, non-stop broadcast which involved the most sophisticated technical means, including two OB-vans with satellite up-link.
- live dispatches in Polish Television – Programme 2, about 50’ and coverage by six other tv stations in the news programmes
- coverage by all leading dailies and weeklies
- live broadcast in internet – real video and real audio

„Wprost” weekly

„Physics, mathematics and even biology belong to the most hatred classes at the school. They are usually boring, badly conducted and - what particularly important - out of touch with reality. The public of Science Picnic found out, that learning physic may be a fascinating adventure. There were long queues to the low temperature physics stand and only the most patient visitors were able to take part in the experiments. We haven’t seen such a queues in Poland for years”. 