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# When PSB is delivered by the ‘hand of God’: The case of Roman Catholic broadcast networks in Venezuela

## ABSTRACT

*This article explores the nature and extent of the delivery of public service broadcasting (PSB) by alternative models and actors in Latin America. The main hypothesis is that PSB is delivered in Venezuela not by the state but by the Roman Catholic Church. In looking at the case of the Instituto Radiofónico Fe y Alegría (IRFA) we argue that, contrary to what might be expected, this media outlet provides what by all standards can be described as PSB. The article is based on research sponsored by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and which included content analysis, semi-structured interviews and participatory observation for over three months in 2008. The article makes comparative reference to public service broadcasters in the United States and in Europe and aims to challenge traditional sources of knowledge regarding PSB.*

## KEYWORDS

Fe y Alegría  
faith  
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public service broadcasting  
radio  
religion  
Roman Catholic Church  
Venezuela

This article explores the nature and extent of public service broadcasting (PSB) by Third Sector actors in Latin America, specifically those broadcast networks owned by the Roman Catholic Church in Venezuela. Our aim is to provide an alternative framework on PSB to those offered in the developed world and in the context of the secular state and secular providers. Our view is that traditional understandings of PSB are dominated by the idea of a secular state and secular organization providers of this good. We believe, based on our own observation and data, that this is a persistent limitation of scholarly work. In looking at the PSB provisions from the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America, we argue for the need to develop a more comprehensive framework. We recognize that this is a provocative idea, especially when the Roman Catholic Church is presently subject to vehement criticism of its role in sexual scandals and its continued intolerance towards gays, lesbians and others. However, we also think that this is an unsatisfactory representation of the diversity of the Church in the international context, and an invisibilization of much of what really happens in practice on the ground.

Our investigation is of particular relevance at a time when values and reasoning that have justified PSB in the past can no longer be taken for granted in western Europe (Ofcom 2007a) and are being redefined in Europe and in the United States (Steemers 2003). We argue that the main problems with current debates and definitions occur because they remain within boundaries of what can be called the liberal-secular academic consensus. This consensus, not homogeneous or well articulated, nevertheless imposes the idea that values such as diversity and social inclusion can only be delivered by the 'neutral state', which, according to this notion, should aim to be 'scientifically objective' and mostly 'secular' in order to legitimize itself in the realm of what some authors have called the 'discourses of civility' (Fitzgerald 2007). It is also important for media studies because radio has been a much neglected area of study (Lacey 2009: 21).

To discuss the above thesis, this article provides a wider range of intellectual coordinates for policy-making while also enriching the wider debate about PSB by considering the role of the Catholic Church in delivering such a service, a topic that has so far failed to attract sufficient scholarly attention. We argue that, in Venezuela, the Church's radio services actually provide that which, by any standards, can be defined as PSB. We discuss the ways in which the radio network 'Fe y Alegría' ('Faith and Joy') delivers content that coincides with that which is commonly defined as the Reithian triad of 'education, information and entertainment' (Born 2003a: 64). Managed by a Jesuit-run non-governmental organization (NGO) that delivers education to poor areas all over Latin America (Aristotena 2006: 2), Fe y Alegría makes a particularly interesting case study. Having observed, analysed and assessed Fe y Alegría's radio network content, structure and delivery in the light of the core values associated with PSB, this article considers its wider implications for ongoing discussions about its value and its future.

It is important to begin by observing that, as with many other countries in Latin America, Venezuela has lacked state-funded provision for PSB. Contrary to the European Union, where there is a protocol on PSB, requiring each member state to have at least one public service provider (Sawers 2000: 34), no such protocol exists in Latin America. Its nation states have no obligation to either develop PSB provisions or set guarantees to ensure that government-owned broadcasters perform this function (Lugo and Cañizález 2007: 61). Instead, across the continent, the Third Sector has commonly assumed this role by

providing alternative modes of broadcasting. From universities to NGOs, there are multiple examples of non-governmental broadcasters delivering PSB. This coincides with a widespread practice whereby most private- and government-owned broadcasters operate within a commercial/profit-making remit, often becoming propaganda tools for the current ruling party (Andresson 2008: 55).

In Venezuela, some Catholic Church-owned media have assumed the role of PSB providers. The Church owns or operates a broadcast network with eleven FM and AM radio stations, plus another twenty that are affiliated to *Fe y Alegría*, together with three television stations (NCTV Zulia, NCTV Carabobo and TAM in Mérida). It is worth noting, however, that Venezuela is not a unique case. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church owns media outlets all over the world (Hibberd 2007: 52); a subject that lies outside the scope of this article and yet deserves further research. Instead, we concentrate on a comparative study of notional values of PSB – from a Weberian point of view – and actual broadcast delivery and content of Church-owned media. Informed by wider discussions about PSB, and yet necessarily stopping short of a literature review, this article fleshes out, and considers the relevance of, some core international concepts and values that have been associated with PSB.

## DEFINING AND RE-DEFINING PSB

A wide-ranging debate has challenged the concept of PSB and the institutions that embody it (Born 2003b; Hibberd et al. 2003; Jacka 2003; Scannell 1989; Tracey 1989). In the UK, for example, the BBC, which for a long time was considered a role model for PSB by many, has continuously faced waves of criticism, questioning its suitability for such a model at all (Lugo 2005: 20). These debates have involved sustained revision of the traditional values associated with PSB and its remit. Furthermore, it has led to a reassessment of the BBC's role together with that of its western European counterparts in their respective contexts.

There is broad consensus that PSB should aim to contribute towards specific forms of output or content which the market is considered as unable to provide (due to market failure). Considering its potential contribution towards the ideal of an informed citizenry, the media should not be left in its entirety to market forces (Chaparro Escudero 2009: 157); state intervention is therefore required. Since the early stages of its development, PSB was considered by European stakeholders as a powerful medium too valuable to be left unrestricted and unregulated by the state (Scannell 1990: 13). It was soon assigned a special role as 'an instrument of social integration, for enhancing democratic functioning and raising cultural and educational standards' (Born 2003a: 64). As opposed to its commercial competitors, PSB is strictly based on the mission triad of entertainment, information and education as defined by John Reith, the BBC's first director general. However, in addition to this mission, other values rapidly accrued to the concept of PSB. These included 'universality and quality', 'impartiality', 'accountability' and 'trust'. Within these debates, PSB is also meant to encourage diversity, social cohesion, community development and citizenship (Collins 2006; Collins et al. 2001). As these values and notions are still believed to be essential ingredients of PSB, it is worth considering each one briefly and comparatively according to our own observations.

Born and Prosser make distinctions between three aspects of the universality principle (2001: 676). Technical and geographical universality refers to the provision of infrastructure that allows every citizen to receive transmissions

regardless of their geographical and social location. Social and cultural universality requires that programmes are expected to cater for, and reflect, the diversity of the relevant publics whilst also creating a sense of community and 'common culture' (Born 2005: 426). In relation to the breadth of genres and programmes expected from a public service provider, quality was a prime maxim for John Reith in the 1920s (Scannell 1990: 13). Roughly 80 years later in 2007, the regulating institution Office of Communications (Ofcom) named this as the first characteristic of PSB in a report, alongside adjectives such as 'innovative' and 'original', 'high quality' and 'widely available'.

Furthermore, over the decades, impartiality, accountability and trust have developed as core values of the journalistic work of PSB institutions. Schlesinger (2004) points out that these values are enshrined within these institutions by their practices with regards to commissioning, scheduling and training. An additional set of values associated with PSB are diversity, social cohesion and community development. Public service broadcasters are committed to diversity in terms of the social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds they represent, and offer a voice to their publics.

The enhancement of citizenship by means of PSB is considered another important value. What distinguishes a PSB provider from its market competitors is the perception of audience. Viewers (listeners and users) are citizens first and consumers second, particularly in view of 'pre-existing inequalities based on factors such as age, education, geographical location, income and ethnic origin' (Graham 2000; Hoffmann-Riem 1996; Murdock 2000; Steemers 2003: 126). Therefore, to provide a service with the maxims outlined above, independence from advertising money has been viewed as essential. The liberty to take risks, to think outside the box and challenge an existing genre (and with it the audience) is only feasible if ratings alone are not a decisive factor at all times.

Until now, and despite ongoing criticism from several quarters, PSB – in its various manifestations across Europe – has stood the test of time, admittedly with mixed reviews (Pauwels and Bauwens 2007). This also holds true for PSB in the United States. After periods of existential threat in the early 1990s and a subsequent rebranding, PSB remains in place (Hoynes 2003). Similar to some of its western counterparts, the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation (Nippon Hoso Kyokai [NHK]) has been subject to question about its independence from governmental pressure together with its commitment to diversity across Japanese society (Hanada 2003; Krauss 2000). All over the world, the traditional and core elements that once characterized PSB have been subject to reassessment and debate.

However, one of the main challenges has come from the introduction of digital technology, which has allowed the proliferation of commercial TV and radio channels, subsequently fragmenting audiences and making PSB potentially excludable (hence changing the traditional notion of broadcasting as a public good). This situation has raised questions about the purpose of a public service broadcaster and what exactly defines PSB service (Collins et al. 2001). Some critics, for example, have come to doubt the need for PSB and whether related institutions are truly providing a service that the market would not (Peacock 2000; Sawers 2000), even though research suggests that public service broadcasters continue to offer a wider range of programmes than commercial broadcasters. However, as Steemers argues, 'the perception of blurring boundaries, promoted by the commercial sector is eroding in the case of PSB' (Steemers 2003: 128).

In the last 40 years, Latin America has also seen sustained debate concerning the nature of – and need for – PSB (Fuenzalida 2000, 2005; Pasquali 1995; RATELVE 1976). However, given the limited funds for PSB provision, these debates have explored alternative models within existing realities and resources (Capriles 1979; Pasquali 1990; RATELVE 1976). Although the general consensus seems to be that PSB can only be delivered by means of exclusive and appropriate state provision (yet which is not governmentally controlled), the debate has encompassed 'other possibilities' (Pasquali 1995: 85). Indeed, among researchers and broadcast practitioners in Latin America, there is broad agreement that the private commercial sector has traditionally been unable to provide PSB. Most of the analysis and research undertaken in Latin America (Fuenzalida 2002; Orozco 2003; RATELVE 1976) suggests that the region's marketplace appears to be incompatible with the traditional model of PSB. At the same time, this analysis also indicates that PSB cannot be delivered by means of commercially driven *or* government-run broadcasters (Bisbal 1991: 20). Since the 1970s, these researchers have pointed towards alternative means of PSB provision from universities, NGOs, independent trusts and other third-party sectors.

## METHODOLOGY

Using Radio Fe y Alegría as a case study, our research examined the nature of Catholic Church-owned broadcasting media provision in Venezuela. We adopted a multidisciplinary approach, drawing concepts from the fields of media studies and political communication. Our fieldwork used empirical data by observing the existing practices of broadcast media and comparing this with other PSB models to evaluate the extent to which they coincide. The aim was to extend and redefine existing conceptualizations of PSB by considering the experience of the Catholic Church-owned media in Venezuela.

In order to do this, we made use of qualitative research strategies, revising existing literature and documentation and conducting semi-structured interviews with senior managers and staff at a number of different radio stations across the Fe y Alegría organization. We also made use of ethnographic methods, which included participant observation conducted in 2008 in Maracaibo and Caracas. Fe y Alegría permitted us to spend three months working in their radio networks, allowing close observation of journalists and news editors at work. The research was carried out during January and September of 2008 thanks to a grant from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and the logistical support of the Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación of the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello in Venezuela.

## BROADCAST PROVISION

As mentioned before, PSB is not a new aspiration in Latin America. In both theoretical and empirical terms, Latin America has made significant contributions to PSB debates. In many countries such as Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela, television and radio were set up originally following the European model of PSB, only to be later privatized and redesigned as commercial services (Lugo 1998: 16). This was the case with Venezuela, where broadcast-ing provision was mainly delivered by the private sector (Cañizales 1990: 10). Indeed, in terms of property, most of the media in Venezuela are owned by national entrepreneurs and international media conglomerates. However, the

private media coexists with large media systems owned either by the state or by Third Sector organizations such as Roman Catholic and Evangelical churches and a variety of community-based radio stations. Until recently, no commercial broadcaster or government-owned radio station had any formal or legal commitment to PSB. However, the broadcasting law approved in 2005 ('Ley de Responsabilidad Social de Radio y Televisión') makes important provision for all broadcasters to comply with the requirement to deliver certain types of educational and informative content. This is not the case, though, in practice. TVES (Channel 2), for example, has made explicit claims to deliver this type of content but close monitoring of its actual content indicates that it has not done so (Andresson 2008: 51).

Furthermore, the full spectrum of radio stations in Venezuela is currently undergoing profound change in its normative and ownership structure. Traditionally dominated by large private commercial networks, its ownership and audiences have become increasingly fragmented. Meanwhile, there is a significant growth in government-owned network provision. Recently the Venezuelan government has allocated new radio licences and provided resources and equipment to community groups in order to break what has been called the 'monopoly of the commercial media'. Managed by local groups, these new community-based radio stations are sometimes only broadcast at irregular hours and within the immediate vicinity, being heard solely by the particular community they serve. In our own media monitoring, we were able to hear two – and sometimes even three – different community stations broadcasting on the same frequency at different times of the day, some of them disappearing after a few weeks. Since 2002, the government has approved dozens of new radio licences on both AM and FM frequencies as well as cancelling existing licences and assuming direct control of others that were in the hands of private/commercial broadcasters. However, these changes have meant very little in terms of delivering PSB content and, as in the past (Cañizales 1990: 8), most radio programmes are still characterized by music, light entertainment and talk shows, which occupy most of the airtime.

The phenomenon of community-based, university-managed and NGO-run radio stations is nothing new in Venezuela. For the past three decades the radio spectrum has incorporated community-based radio stations and stations managed by universities and NGOs. There are now ten universities that own or directly manage radio stations in the country. Some university-owned radio stations operate with state subsidies but most of them run commercial adverts. They do not officially have a public service broadcast role but in some cases they do perform part of this function. On the other hand, many radio stations are run by local communities and NGOs while also being subsidized by the state. An emerging sector is that of corporate-run radio stations such as those owned and operated by Pequiven (the state-owned petrochemical company) and Carbozulia (the state-owned coal company).

Equally important in radio is the presence of religious groups such as the Protestant churches. Other religious groups have also been a significant feature of Venezuela's radio landscape, especially the evangelical sector, which owns over a dozen radio stations in the country, mostly operating on AM. The evangelical churches also buy airtime from commercial broadcasters, mostly off-peak slots. They also operate stations linked to international evangelical networks such as the PTL Club and other international networks. Initial scrutiny of the programming of some of these stations (La Voz de Dios 104.3 FM and La Voz que Clama 99.5 FM) indicates that, distinct from the Catholic

Church network, the evangelical and Protestant radio stations devote most of their content to matters of faith and evangelization and do not have news bulletins or space for political discussions. The participation of other faiths or groups in these networks and stations is also very limited.

Of all these faith groups, however, it is the Catholic Church that owns the most extensive radio network. This network includes our case study, *Fe y Alegría*, which operates on AM and FM. It is managed by a Jesuit-run NGO that delivers education to poor areas all over Latin America (Aristotena 2006: 2). Besides daily news and talk shows, it offers literacy and numeracy classes, health advice and programmes for rural workers. The network has a news department comprising journalists, news editors, stringers and correspondents. It is affiliated to the Latin American radio networks and receives news services from international news networks.

The network operates under the official name of Instituto Radiofónico Fe y Alegría (IRFA). It has been running since 1975 and today incorporates twenty radio stations all over the country, although only twelve were fully operational by 2008. *Fe y Alegría*, as an NGO, receives most of its budget from the state through the Minister of Education, although part of it comes from private donors and commercial sponsorship, which includes adverts. In recent years, the network has dropped some of its formal education and distance learning programmes, but, as Gerardo Lombardi, deputy national director of the NGO *Fe y Alegría* explains:

Education is still at the core of what we do. The fact that we no longer broadcast classes in prime time does not mean that we are less committed to education. That was a stage that we have now moved on from. We are now offering a framework that allows individuals to overcome functional illiteracy, we offer a space in which communities interact and grow. On Saturday we still do what we have always pretty much done; we deliver formal education. But the rest of the week we dedicate our programmes to informal education. (interview with the authors 23 June 2008)

*Fe y Alegría* is one of the most important educational NGOs in Latin America. Its main aim is to provide education to children and adults in poor areas (Pérez-Esclarín and Rodríguez 1992: 36). It is also important to pinpoint that embracing radio was not originally an aim, as Alexander Hernandez, educational coordinator of *Fe y Alegría* explains:

At the start of its activities we concentrated on educating the children; however it soon became clear that many of the parents did not know how to read or write either. To make matters worse, at the time most of our programmes ran in rural areas or outside the perimeters of the city. The only way to get to them, we thought, was using the radio. It was just a medium for us to reach more people. (interview in Maracaibo on June 28, 2008)

The organization has some twenty stations in Venezuela, thereby fulfilling the goal of universality in terms of geographical reach. The monitoring of the stations occurred in the state of Zulia. In the city of Maracaibo, the organization has two stations: one FM (88.1) and another AM (850). In addition to this, it has a station in the rural area of Machiques (105.5 FM), where there is a strong presence of Native American people, including Bari and Yukpa. It also has another

one in Paraguaipoa (92.3 FM), where the majority of inhabitants are Native American, from the Wayuu and Paraujanos populations. The average structure of radio programmes delivered by Fe y Alegría FM and AM is characterized by a prominent display of news and current affairs, followed by entertainment, and then almost a tenth of daily airtime is dedicated to children or child-related programmes.

Significantly, in some cases, this is above the average dedicated to similar programmes by public service broadcasters in industrialized countries. The content itself reflects similar characteristics between networks. News output is characterized by quality in the process of gathering and dissemination as well as impartiality in the way news is treated. Moreover, the whole process is governed by the principle of accountability. Journalists are instructed on a daily basis to provide different, valid and complementary (contrasting or not) views on each event covered, while community and news actors are allocated space to air views or criticize the news.

Impartiality is a core value of the news agenda of Fe y Alegría. This translates into a process of allowing facts to predominate over opinion (or at least making it clear to the audience when there is interpretation of the events by the journalists), facilitating contrasting voices to challenge mainstream versions and offering airtime to those who believe themselves to have been misrepresented by the network. This was, during the two months of participatory observation, a daily practice that was also evidenced on a weekly basis in meetings and during the editorial processes.

The claim to impartiality is key for any public service broadcaster. However, in any context, impartiality is an inherently problematic concept, closely linked to notions of objectivity and neutrality, which have been widely brought into question by academics and practitioners alike (Fisk 2001; McNair 2000; Starkey 2006). Nevertheless, it must be said that the perception of impartiality – the ability of the media and journalists to show all sides of the story without assuming open bias – seems to be crucial in generating trust, which is an overall goal of PSB (Biltereyst 2004: 342). Fe y Alegría's officials do not entirely subscribe to the notion of impartiality in the way it is articulated in Europe or the United States. They prefer the term 'openness', as Rogelio Suárez, Director of IRFA Falcon-Zulia, explains here:

We are not here to make judgements, but nevertheless we do; as everyone who is human does. To pretend that we do not get upset when what we consider to be an injustice is committed is hypocritical. However, we try to listen to all sides and air their views without taking a position or at least clarifying to the audience when we do, while guaranteeing that regardless of their position all sides have their share of air time. We do not editorialise but we allow our audience to know what we are thinking both as an organisation and as individuals. We are honest with them, and I guess also with ourselves. I suspect that many of our listeners do not agree with our views, but I am also sure that most of them trust us because they know we would not deliberately lie to them and we will apologise and rectify when we make errors [...] and trust me, as most broadcasters in the world who deal with 24 hour news, we make a lot of them.

For the officials, this approach has paid off, providing IRFA with listeners' trust. It is one of the most trusted broadcasters in the country (Consultores 21 2003).

According to the assistant director of radio Fe y Alegría in Falcon-Zulia, Monica Marchesi, generating trust is a key objective of the network's remit:

For us it is more important to verify our stories than to broadcast them first. It is a general principal that we follow. We instruct our journalists to make sure that not only they have all angles of the stories, but that people can trust us to deliver trustworthy news.

(interview with the authors 24 June 2008).

This is in line with the ethos of PSB in other parts of the world. For example, a report produced by Ofcom in the United Kingdom says that despite technological and regulatory changes, trust remains a key element associated with news delivered by PSB (Ofcom 2007b: 59). For Gerardo Lombardi, there is little doubt about the need to generate trust:

The main asset of Fe y Alegría is our ability to be believed and trusted. There is no question about it. We are not the biggest network, nor are we often the first to broadcast a news item of the mainstream news agenda, but when we do it we make sure that we have the most accurate story to tell our listeners. Moreover, we keep broadcasting the news that others don't want or are unable to air.

For Fe y Alegría, generating trust depends not only on impartiality but also on the need to incorporate diversity to the number and nature of those voices being heard. This, according to Rogelio Suarez, has the dual benefit of 'managing to promote diversity and social cohesion'. As an example he referred us to the station set up in Paraguaipoa (92.3 FM). The station broadcasts both in Spanish and Wayuu 24 hours, 7 days a week. It incorporates news content and educational material alongside its entertainment schedules (for example, music programmes) that refer directly to the ethnic diversity of the counties of Mara and Paéz in which the station operates. Similarly to what the BBC radio services deliver for Asian, Gaelic and Welsh communities, Fe y Alegría Paraguaipoa (92.3 FM) offers a comprehensive and integrated programme schedule that balances national programmes with local interests. In his interview, Suarez states:

We thought very well what type of programmes we should have for a community so diverse and heterogeneous. It then became clear that we had to enhance and reassure local traditions, strengthen the use of Wayunaiki by the people of all ethnicities and promote local histories and narratives. However, it was also clear that we needed to do this in the context of universal citizenship and social cohesion. This is how we came to develop the current programme structure.

The value of diversity is not limited to stations aimed at specific ethnic groups. As Gerardo Lombardi points out:

The network is committed to provide space and voice to the social excluded, those in the margin of society. Our motto was from the beginning, 'we start where the road finishes'. However, now the situation of the excluded is not as clear-cut as to say urban and rural areas. Today, we are very active in shanty towns in the middle of big cities such as Caracas, Maracaibo and Puerto Ordaz. It is in these same geographical areas

where we have most of our audiences. So for us the issue of diversity is not only about ethnicity, but also about social exclusion and class issues.

The ethos of diversity is very important in *Fe y Alegría*, but not necessarily because of its orientation as a PSB. Christian values seem instead to play here a more important role, as explained by Alexander Hernández:

From the beginning, *Fe y Alegría* was committed to social inclusion. The radio project was born from the educational project and this last was in itself a project of social inclusion. Back in the 1970s the Jesuits decided to move their operations to the poor areas. They moved the famous school Gonzaga in Maracaibo, which was a private school for rich children to a poor area. They stopped charging and started to recruit poor children. At the same time they started *Fe y Alegría*. All this was part of a deliberate effort to push social inclusion into the centre of their agenda. This has remained our main objective since then. This is why it is so important for us to promote alternative voices in radio and offer space to the voiceless. (interview with the authors 24 June 2008).

With a broad Christian-Jesuit ethos at its roots, social inclusion became a key value in the radio network *Fe y Alegría*, thus complying with the expectations of any PSB provider worldwide. The idea of inclusion was pivotal in the developing of the project from the beginning, as Gerardo Lombardi explains:

*Radio Fe y Alegría* derived from a project of social inclusion. Therefore from the start it was a network conceived to incorporate the voiceless, the ones that were left behind, those who do not seem to resonate with mainstream society because they're poor. In the case of Venezuela, this meant incorporating not only working class people, but also those from ethnic and national backgrounds who for one or another reason were excluded. This meant not only offering broadcast space to other languages and cultures, but also to other ways of seeing the world [...] I would call this pretty much a commitment to diversity.

The question of social inclusion is a key component of a new paradigm for communication at the base level (Urribarrí 2007: 53). Any future PSB model will need to incorporate social inclusion, whether as an independent aim or as part of its commitment towards diversity. According to Lombardi, offering a diverse world-view in news editorial terms is 'as important as providing space for the voiceless':

Our own experience shows that the rationale of those who go through the whole of the formal educational system can be sometimes different from that of those who could not access the scholar system. However their [i.e. the latter] rationale is not less valid because of that, or legitimate as a paradigm to read and interpret the world. We put every effort into making our programmes accessible, but also representative of the diversity of views. That effort means that not only we report the two traditional contrasting views of white and black, but we also try to give as much space as we can to the infinite degrees of greys that are often present in the news but that are seldom reported.

Diversity is also incorporated into Fe y Alegría's style book guidelines, which all journalists are obliged to follow. The style book states the commitment of the network towards the excluded and poor (IRFA 2004: 7). The contribution of Fe y Alegría however goes beyond the traditional paradigm of diversity, which departs from multicultural but nevertheless nation-based assumptions:

Our public is not only comprised of those who are here legally or permanently, we also have a commitment towards those who are here circumstantially, including the people who are neither here nor there [illegal immigrants]. As a Christian organisation our ideal of citizenship is a universal one, not a parochial one defined by national borders. We provide space and editorial resources to make sure that the invisible appear in our society's radar.

This idea is manifest in the permanent coverage of the problems affecting illegal immigrants living in shanty towns, the Colombian and Brazilian temporary workers who come and go across the border and often are unable to exercise any rights. It also refers to the Native Americans who live in transnational spaces – because they culturally do not recognize national borders – as well as to those displaced by violence, natural tragedies or economic deprivation. Perhaps the best example of this type of programming is the award-winning soap opera series 'Cruzar la raya para vivir' (which roughly translates as 'Crossing the border to survive'), which was broadcast by Fe y Alegría in 2007. Each one of the three plays was sponsored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and was broadcast on prime-time radio by the network in Spanish, Wayuu and Yukpa (Lares Martiz 2007). As Monica Marchesi explains, 'these *radionovelas* allowed us to inform and educate about diversity':

Many people have been displaced, uprooted from their homes because of war, natural tragedies or economic struggle. These people come here, without anything, having lost it all. There are hundreds, thousands, sometimes even hundreds of thousands at a time. The victims then are not only the displaced, but also those living near the border. They have to be accommodated, sometimes with little or no support from governments. These *radionovelas* were important because they allowed us to build bridges between communities using creative resources. The main goal was to raise awareness about the humanity of others, regardless of their status. I think we were pretty good at doing that.

However, the final test of diversity and openness to other voices comes from other churches and faith groups. Fe y Alegría in fact has among its staff and journalists members of other Christian groups while offering space to Protestant and evangelical voices:

We are very proud of the fact that other faith groups and religions find space on our stations. Of course we have limits, but no more than any other broadcaster would have. We do not broadcast what we would consider a promotion of satanic groups, but saying that, the promotion of this type of group in broadcast media is currently banned by law too, so even in this case it is not even about our own guidelines but about complying

with Venezuelan law. If there are members of other religions who want to discuss any issues, regarding faith or not, they are welcome to do so in this network. (style book guidelines)

Given the evidence so far, it is difficult not to assign the label of PSB to IRFA. There is plentiful evidence to suggest that the network fulfils each and every notional value associated with PSB. Furthermore, despite its association with the Roman Catholic Church, there is scant evidence for questioning its independence. During the *coup d'état* on 11 April 2002, Fe y Alegría was the only mainstream outlet to broadcast what was happening at the time (Barrios and Urdaneta Jayaro 2002: 29) and to say openly that a military coup against a democratically elected government had occurred. As Gerardo Lombardi points out:

Despite having in our board of directors some of the most influential people opposing Chavez's government, we did not receive before, during or after those 48 hours, a single phone call from them or the Jesuits to limit, question or criticise anything about our coverage of the events. We reported what was happening from the ground, what we saw and heard: that a coup had taken place and that the President had not resigned but was overthrown. We were the only mainstream media to assume the risk of being truly independent.

Lombardi's claims are supported by further research into the issue together with the fact that the government itself awarded the network the National Journalism Prize. In his book *Golpe de Radio*, José I. López Vigil (2006) provides additional evidence that the radio stations of the network Fe y Alegría were among the few mainstream media outlets that kept informing people of what was really happening during the 2002 coup against President Hugo Chávez:

Through the internal speakers, we could hear the signal of *Fe y Alegría* News Network from Caracas and Maracaibo, which alternately kept us informed of what was happening in the country. It was through that network signal that we knew about the coup against President Chávez in Venezuela. It was through that same signal that we discovered the misrepresentation of what had happened by the US networks CNN and Telemundo. (López 2006: 14)

However, this is only one of the many examples in which the network has defied its own stakeholders to pursue a news agenda that is independent enough to challenge the status quo. After the coup, the network maintained its criticism of the government, highlighting cases of corruption, inefficiencies and authoritarian tendencies in the regime.

## WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

Fe y Alegría is a distinctive example of PSB provision; we were unable to find evidence of a similar PSB commitment in other Roman Catholic-owned media outlets. Indeed, the monitoring of other broadcasters such as NCTV in Zulia – also carried out as part of the research project during this period – does not show compliance with notional values of PSB to the extent that IRFA does. Furthermore, programme records from other main Catholic broadcasters indicate

that, in most cases, these broadcasters either dedicate space to faith-based programmes or rent airtime to commercial producers. As a result, other Catholic stations' content consists mainly of music and talk shows with little or no programming that reflects the core values associated with PSB.

According to Javier Barrios, national coordinator of the offices of IRFA, this is a major problem for the Roman Catholic Church's remaining broadcast services in Venezuela. With the exception of Raudal Estereo in the state of Amazon and Radio Occident in the state of Mérida, which 'work closely with *Fe y Alegría*', there seems to be 'little coordination or synergy' among the television stations and the eleven radio stations not affiliated to IRFA. Barrios recalls that

Years ago, we were called by the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela to advise on the development of a strategy for the Roman Catholic media in Venezuela. We provided that advice and even got to write a project that went to the Episcopal Conference of the United States [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, USCCB], which was keen to support financially this media revamping financially, however everything fell apart at the end. Not because of us, but because every radio station is managed by a different bishop or archbishop, who each have a different idea, many times wrong, of what radio and television in the hands of the church is for. (interview with the authors 10 July 2008).

## **DELIVERING PSB VALUES: TOWARDS A CONCLUSION**

IRFA receives most of its income from the Venezuelan state. Furthermore, its journalists work in the radio network but are nominally classified as 'teachers' in the organization and their salaries are paid from government-allocated resources, given to *Fe y Alegría* by the Ministry of Education. However, similarly to other PSB organizations, IRFA operates as an independent trust and acts as an independent broadcaster. This type of independent structure was set up by *Fe y Alegría* so as to allow the radio network to effectively resist external pressures and provide a service that is somehow complementary to commercial broadcasters and independent from government intervention.

The findings of our study suggest that the IRFA network has shown consistent commitment towards PSB both in theoretical and in practical terms. Moreover, the people conducting IRFA see themselves as PSB providers, as Gerardo Lombardi puts it:

IRFA followed the model of Radio Sutatenza in Colombia. However, because this was a church project to engage with the poor and the excluded, which in Venezuela is the majority of the people, we had from the start a strong commitment to public service, even if that was not articulated explicitly in our initial documents. In time it did become articulated, although perhaps not in the same language and terminology that PSB uses in Europe. Nonetheless, those same universal principles are present in our guidelines and day to day activities.

Previous research in the case of Colombia's Radio Sutatenza (Ferreira and Straubhar 1998: 289), one of the first initiatives of this type of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America, has indicated a strong historical commitment towards public service principles, although this is not always explicitly articulated in these terms. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church in

Venezuela today recognizes that its media outlets should have a PSB commitment as part of the religious context in which they operate, defining this as 'evangelist public service broadcasting'. As Baltazar Porras, Archbishop of Mérida and President of the Department of Media and Social Communication of the Venezuelan Episcopalian Conference, puts it:

There is no distinction between faith and public service, [true] moreover when it comes to the media. For church-operated media, public service is the *raison d'être*, the key of its existence. Based on this idea, we have church media which perform an evangelisation function that fulfils public service aspirations. Yes there is an evangelisation function that is direct and explicit, broadcasting and covering Eucharistic, catechesis, missions [questions] among other church matters. But there is another one, an indirect evangelisation function that is more wide and comprehensive. That one promotes and defends human rights that deliver education and that make people aware of their rights and responsibilities towards the rest of society. (interview with the authors 15 July 2008).

Finally, however, we are aware of the need to acknowledge the elephant in the room. How can a media outlet, owned and operated by an institution of the official state religion, even begin to claim independence? Yet, in reality, this is a non-issue. In the context of Venezuela, the claim that only the secular state has the sole means to guarantee independence, quality, accountability, diversity and inclusion for its citizens is baseless. Indeed, the recent decline in trust formerly enjoyed by PSB institutions in Europe, such as the BBC, RAI and TVE, indicates that for audiences, the actual output (as opposed to the institutional structure and interlinking with other state institutions) is decisive. If a PSB institution is perceived to be too close to, or controlled by, any other player in the political system or the world of business, the trust placed in that institution is likely to decline, as it has happened with some PSB providers (Aitken 2007: xxxvii). In the case of Venezuela, the Catholic Church – in particular the Jesuits that run IRFA – have recognized independence as a key issue that guarantees listeners' trust.

Moreover, the notion of secular state as guarantor of independent broadcasting comes under further strain in the light of a sustained interrogation both of the secular/religious distinction (Fitzgerald 2007; Taylor 2007) and of the widely accepted notion that Venezuelans somehow have a secular state (Tausig 1997: 12). European and US observers will perhaps find it difficult to accept that a broadcaster managed by a church, let alone the Roman Catholic Church, with all its historical baggage in Europe and the United States, can somehow deliver independent PSB content. Nevertheless, this assumption is premised on the distinction between a rational, secular 'us' and an uncivilized, religious 'other'. The religious issue is a potent one and 'present struggles about its place are but the last episode in a continuing drama' (Schlesinger and Foret 2006: 76). This drama, we may assert, is built on false premises that are unable to recognize a legacy of colonialism that valorizes its own world-view by attributing rationality to itself, allocating ideas about PSB from within a sort of secular bubble.

The evidence analysed here instead suggests that, far from being an obstacle to deliver impartiality, faith is a framework that not only can guarantee values such as universality and impartiality but can also offer a richer framework to understand what PSB can mean in the twenty-first century. Even on

issues such as homosexuality, the network seems to have a better track record than its commercial and government-owned competitors. (We developed initial content analysis using QSR NVivo software, looking at three specific programmes on current affairs that dealt with homosexuality. Initial findings indicated a high relationship between codings relating to tolerance and codings relating to homosexuality. Indeed, the analysis suggests that the treatment and level of discussion is significantly more 'liberal' than those found in other radio and television stations. However, our evidence is only indicative and this is an area for future research.)

Overall, it would be fair to say that in the case of Venezuela we have seen how values traditionally associated with the Catholic Church have allowed it to provide the people with a type of public service content that is not currently delivered by the state. This can seem, for many, surprising, given views and historical preconceptions in Europe and the United States regarding Catholic faith values, exclusion and intolerance. It can even be baffling to some given the predominant notion that only a secular state – or secular organizations – are neutral and objective enough to deliver PSB in accordance with 'western' paradigms. However, as we have seen in this comparative analysis, these paradigms are a construction reminiscent of other discourses that somehow assume a superior 'civility' in the secular realm and that are implicitly over-reliant on historical distinctions between Church and State that stem from the European Enlightenment.

The issue is therefore not so much about questioning the role of the Church in PSB (despite the most recent scandals on sexual abuse and paedophilia in Europe and the United States) as much as accepting that there can be as many types of the PSB model as there are different manifestations of the Roman Catholic Church worldwide. But, more importantly, the real lesson that we can extract from this case study is that in our own quest for new types of PSB model, we should perhaps start to look for answers in non-traditional fields of knowledge, even if that challenges the faith in our own secular academic preconceptions.

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