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**RADIO AND TELEVISION IN KOREA**

**by Kim Kyu**

The history of Korean radio and television broadcasting can be divided into four stages of development and change. The first period is the advent of radio under the Japanese colonialism (1927—1945); the second, post-World War II radio (1945—1954); the third, free competition broadcasting system (1954—1960); and the fourth and present period, the early age of television, from 1960 onward.

First period (1927-1945): Advent of Radio Broadcasting. It was on February 16, 1927 that radio broadcasting in Korea was initiated. This was two years behind the first Japanese radio started in Tokyo, and seven years’ difference from the first American radio station, Pittsburgh’s KDKA, established in 1920.

The time was still full of stress and struggle under the Japanese colonial policy, and the aftermath of the 1919 March 1 Independence Movement vividly remained in the hearts of the Korean people. To calm and appease the hostile local sentiments and encourage cooperation with the Japanese rulers, they thought of setting up a radio station in Seoul as a part of the so-called “new cultural policy.” Since the illiteracy rate was relatively high due to the continuing policy of discouraging the use of the Korean alphabet during the Yi dynasty, the idea of starting a radio system in Korea seemed very clever.

But the importation of radio sets made the common people open their eyes to the new age of electric machines. It was a shocking and magical phenomenon when the people heard voices and sounds from the tiny machine, though it was not [page 98**]** so clear and full of variety as we hear today.

The Japanese Governor-General provided the initial installation budget for the JODK radio station in Chung-Dong, Seoul. It was a l-kw powered, medium-wave station equipped with two small studios. The operation budget was subsidized mostly by fees collected from the set owners. The air time was approximately ten hours a day, and the dual language system was adopted in the beginning. But when a direct program relay from the Japanese main station became possible gfrom 1929, approximately 70 per cent of the total program time was filled by programs in Japanese.

However, this preponderance of Japanese language pro-gramming invited complaint and dissatisfaction among the Korean listeners, and from March 1930 the major portion of the evening programs, including prime time, was allocated to programs using the Korean language. The pressure to increase the programs in Korean remained high, and in 1934, 610 KC frequency was newly allocated for programs in Korean language only. The purpose of setting up this separate channel was mainly for the farmers, women and country folk who could not understand Japanese.

But great significance is found in the promulgation of the standard Korean language among the common people, and the cultivation of Korean arts, especially folk music, folk songs and folklore. The number of sets in use at the time was approximately 25,000.

The monitoring of the programs by the Japanese authorities was so strict that it was said there was one monitor for each announcer. The national network was gradually expanded, and by 1945 14 local stations were completed, covering nearly 80 per cent of the peninsula, and set owners had access to any of the programs, either in Korean or Japanese. During [page 99**]** World War II, almost all the programs were heavily influenced and dominated by the wartime mood; military songs, marches and war news comprised a major portion of the content. By 1944, the number of receivers reached 280,000.

Though the analysis of program content of the time indicates the heavy influence and effects of Japanese colonialism and imperialism, we should not neglect to recognize the opening of the Korean people’s mind to the immensely wide new horizons of the outside world brought by this new medium called radio, and particularly the actual physical setup of the national network system represented noteworthy progress. Thus when we evaluate the impact of radio broadcasting in the early 20th century in this land, the political misuse of the medium under Japanese colonialism can be balanced with the socio-cultural significance, which can be considered highly successful in that, in the long run, the medium played a key role to bring the people to the threshold of modernization. However, unlike the newspaper medium, which was owned and operated mostly by Koreans, radio as a news and information medium naturally failed to promote the peoples’ resistance against the Japanese occupation. This fact is closely related with the ownership and control of the media.

Second period (1945-1954): Post-World War II Radio.

When the war was over, Koreans took over the control of the Chosun Bangsong Hyophoe, or Korean Broadcasting Corporation, from the Japanese management. But as the country was divided into two parts, south Korea could control only the eleven stations located south of the 38 th parallel. All the programs were aired in Korean, and from August 1948 the Office of Public Information undertook management of its operation. The government owned and operated Korean [page100**]** Broadcasting System was thus officially started. In October 1947, the International Telecommunications Union allocated HL to the Korean peninsula as the broadcasting call sign letters.

To look back on the program contents of the time, we can find a heavy emphasis on the need for education of a democratic people. Audience participation was actively encouraged for the mutual communication or feedback effect. Another program trend of the time was emphasis on children’s programs and quiz programs. In this period, the ever-popular radio dramas were started. Many programs adapted dramatization form, and various kinds of experimentation were undertaken. People paid keen attention to the radio.

Clearly it was the heyday of KBS radio, until the war broke out on June 25 th, 1950. The war shattered all the efforts and accomplishments to date. In the early phase of the combat a memorable event occurred when President Syngman Rhee made a special speech on the war in Taejon on the way to Pusan, three days after the war started, and it was relayed to the Seoul station. It was a time of confusion and chaos. To promote the war spirit and encourage the people in the communist-occupied territory, a Marine radio station operated along the east coast, and the Pusan station was a key station until the recapture of Seoul.

When the armistice agreement was signed on July 27, 1953, the main transmitters of KBS in Seoul resumed operation.

Third period (1954—1960): Free Competition

The granting of a license to HLKY Christian Broadcasting Station on December 15, 1954 brought a new era in Korean broadcasting history. It was the first non-governmental commercial radio, bringing an end to the government owned and operated monopolistic system of broadcasting in this country. Though CBS is a religious radio, it completed a network [page 101**]** system consisting of four local stations in major cities, and the key station in Seoul boosted its transmitting power from 5 kw to 10 kw in the same year. This was about the same time KBS emphasized its anti-communist broadcasts to the north, and overseas programs, with a particular emphasis on Japan. Japanese-Korean relations became a major concern of the people at the time.

In May 1956, the first television in Korea was tested. HLKZ-TV, financially affiliated with Radio Corporation of America, telecast two hours of daily programs for the estimated 1,000 television receiving sets in the Seoul area. This continued until February 1959, when the station burned clown by accident. The initial effort of television broadcasting, though on a small scale, heralded a new era of mass media in Korea, and helped in accelerating the coming of the television age.

In 1959, a sort of laissez-faire mood was created in the field of Korean radio broadcasting when Moonwha Broadcasting Company, Korea’s first purely privately-owned commercial radio, and The Evangelical Alliance Mission radio station in Inchon started regular broadcasting. MBC pioneered commercial messages and formed listeners’ habits to dial to commercial radio from this period. It used open and unhidden hardsell methods when it first started, and people felt shock when they first heard the radio medium used to sell goods. Until then, radio was an altruistic medium owned by the government for the purpose of news service, enlightenment and official public relations. MBC has expanded its outlying network stations as the sole commercial radio in Korea, and enjoyed a powerful monopoly until other commercial stations, Donga and Tongyang, came out.

Fourth Period(1960— ): Early Age of Television

As in other fields after the May 16 Revolution of 1961, [page 102**]** the new revolutionary government launched a vigorous modernized program of public relations activities in the broadcasting field. Setting up the new medium, television, seemed a most effective way to modernization in mass-communication, as studies and statistics suggested. It was late in 1961 when KBS-TV started its telecasting from Namsan Hill- Gradually it has increased air time as the number of receiving sets increased. To boost the television boom, the government imported a large number of television sets free of tax in its initial stage and distributed them on a monthly installment payment system. This policy helped temporarily speed up distribution of the sets, though it brought a slowing down of domestic manufacturing efforts. By 1962, approximately 30,000 TV sets were in use in Seoul and vicinity.

KBS-TV adopted a unique method in its operation. As it found an enormous need for financing its budget after one year of operational experience, the government granted KBS permission to carry commercial messages for advertising revenue, while also collecting subscription fees from the set owners. This created vast dissatisfaction and complaints on the part of the audience, especially when the strictly commercial TV, based on advertisement revenues only, Tongyang TV, started three years later. This situation continued until MBC Radio opened its own television station.

As in other countries, the trend was for newspaper publishing companies to own electronic media. This was true in Korea in the case of the newspapers Dong-A Ilbo and Joong-ang Ilbo. The former owned Dong-A Radio in 1963, and the latter merged Tongyang radio with its publishing company. The two complexes have proved themselves as the most powerful integrated mass-media, both in electronics and publishing.

It was late 1964 when KBS-TV encountered a full-fledged [page 103**]** competitor: The Joong-ang Mass-Communication Center with its daily paper, AM and FM radio stations, and television network. Consequently the audience could choose between two stations, and this brought severe competition between the two, insuring faster progress both in management and programming. Though there were many shortcomings in technique and in production of programs, Korean television has kept up steady growth from the beginning. Some receiving sets are now produced domestically, though the bulk still depend on importation.

Advent of another TV network, MBC-TV, in August 1969 has brought over-saturation and over-competition in major cities. Since MBC has its network affiliate stations in provincial cities, it has to present something different from the existing KBS-TV and TBC-TV to attract the audience. But MBC-TV, owned and operated by the May 16 Scholarship Foundation Group, was a quasi-government type organization, and little difference was found in their programming.

There are approximately 250,000 TV sets in use in Korea today. Of them, one third are outside the Seoul area. Considering the advertising budget and set saturation, the three TV networks are too many to be self-sufficient Besides, the four commercial radio stations have to face keen competition among themselves. This may bring down-grading of programming, lack of sound management, and an unhealthy atmosphere in the broadcasting industry as a whole.

What the Korean broadcasters lack most today is well- intentioned pressure groups. The government and the political parties may be pressure groups, but the general audience simply accepts passively what it is given by the stations. It becomes worse when the stations do not put any sincere effort into finding out what the audience needs and wants. There is not [page 104**]** a single publicly organized survey group in this field in Korea. Some schools carry on surveys or studies on programs or audience on an irregular basis, but it is doubtful how professional and practical these may be.

Just as paper circulation data is not accurately known, so the share of audience between broadcasting stations is not made public in Korea. This is a backward tendency in the development of mass media, and has to be improved. There must be active groups that exercise positive pressure upon the broadcasters, for what the people need, and what the community requires. Otherwise the broadcasters will seek profit only, and broadcasting will end up pure commercialism.

As we all know, broadcasting media, with their powerful impact and influence, particularly on uneducated people and children, have to be reminded of public service responsibility. This was why the TV channels and radio frequencies belong to the people, and why the qualifications of the broadcasters are carefully examined and constantly re-evaluated.

Lack of professionalism is also an important fault to be improved. Few broadcasters are qualified as to managerial staff, producers, directors, engineers, etc. Almost none of them has received formal basic training in schools, because there were no schools offering this kind of education when the first commercial TV and radio stations started in Korea. It was through apprenticeships or on-the-spot, irregular training experience that staffs aquired professional skills or technique. This may affect also their belief or basic philosophy about the media, which needs strong reinforcement. But fortunately, the general tendency shows that the intellectual and professional levels of the new recruits from colleges are rising every year, as the importance of the mass electronic media is recognized gradually.

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Newton Minow’s “vast wasteland” speech and Senator John Pastore’s complaint about violence can be applied to many Korean TV programs. Radio programs here adopt a commercial expensive all-comprehensive type programming system. This emphasizes in reality violence-ridden action dramas, sexy and meaningless situation comedies, and low-class home dramas, which are still the highest-rated programs; and simple, monotonous popular songs which are heard all day long whenever you tune in.

The powerful Broadcasters’ Ethics Committee is a self- regulatory group without having any enforcing rights. Foreign- made TV films are imported without considering the end result, purely for the sake of earning ratings. The school programs or childrens’ programs are becoming less helpful, since they are inadequately produced and slotted in unpopular time segments. There is much room to improve program quality, both in TV and radio, and it should be done by the combined concern and efforts of both the broadcasters and the audiences.

As a news purveyor, the electronic media in Korea lack commentary or editorial outlook. Radio or TV editorials are hard to find, and the commentaries are unskilfully carried out and sometimes vague. This is partially due to the political or social atmosphere, but we must remember the fact that radio or TV is basically a community service medium, which can cultivate untouched areas in order to bring more active public attention. Still, the majority of broadcasters think radio and TV are primarily entertainment media; but this is a misconception or misunderstanding. They are an Aladdin’s lamp that can create good or evil according to how they are used:

Like the newspaper, the Korean radio and TV find it [page 106**]** difficult to discard the habit of opposition or resistance inherited from the time of Japanese colonialism. Therefore they oppose or resist first, before they think or study in most cases. This attitude must be changed fundamentally.

Since the world has shrunk to a village-like community, as mentioned by Marshall Macluhan, people are constantly exposed to the happenings and events of the outside world. The full use of the television medium in our daily life has changed, in some aspects, the pattern of our everyday life, and the concepts we have cherished for a long time. The simultaneous carrying out of many space projects and the landing of human beings on the surface of the moon have brought to the people many incredible things, changing their way of thinking and acting. “Seeing is beleving” can be rightly justified in the television medium.

Though both media, radio and television, may have many unwanted adverse effects on the audience if not used properly, the fundamental merit and potentialities of the media working for public interests, convenience and necessity are undeniable. The blame is not in the media themselves, but in the people who use them. The broadcasters have to remember the basic concept of the media, which is public service-oriented. The channels and frequencies belong to the public.

There are still many cases of misunderstanding or misuse of the media by Korean broadcasters, who exercise ultimate power of control in this business. This, in my opinion, is overt one-way communication, not reflecting the views of recipients through sheer lack of study and research.

The broadcasters have to find out ways and means of feeding back the audience’s response, and must constantly pay attention to the various social groups that may exercise pressure or influence over the station for better service.

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Experimentation with new and fresh programs should be allowed the staff by the managerial group of the station, and sincere efforts for enhancing program quality should be properly rewarded.

When we look back on some local trends of programming, we find too many generalizations and popularizations. Too many domestic drama type programs are constantly on the air. This is also true in the case of cheap comedies, action dramas, and popular music programs. Good broadcasters should be courageous and audacious to find their own path and keep going on it.

As for the advertising field, over-commercialism, exagger-ation, hard-selling, loud and abusive tactics against competing products, and misplacement of commercial messages (such as placing of two competing products in consecutive sequence) are easy to find.

Graver professional conscience and more rigid self-regulatory activities will eliminate these kinds of malpractice, which bring more harm than good to the public, considering the powerful impact ana influence of electronic mass media, which no other form of human communication ever devised can match.