

*Kailangan Pa Bang I-Memorize Yan?!:
Media Freedom, The Ratings Game,
and “Masa” Programming on FM
Interview by Marinela M. Aseron*



Manila Broadcasting Company (MBC) is said to be the oldest existing nationwide network of radio stations, having been established in 1939. Its AM station DZRH is the oldest radio station in the Philippines, and has made history as the “Voice of Freedom” during World War I, as well as in 1986 when it covered the snap elections which would eventually signal the downfall of the Marcos regime.

MBC has set the trend in Philippine radio broadcasting through the years. In 1994, it launched its Satellite Radio Network, bringing its vision “One Station, One Nation” into fruition. For the first time in local radio history, a single station truly covered the entire Philippines, reaching 97 percent of its communities.

It also started what may well be considered a phenomenon in FM radio programming in the country: “Masa” or mass-based programming. It was indeed a phenomenon because the FM band during the 1980s and until the early 1990s was primarily regarded as a medium for the high-end market due to its crisp and clear signal which radio station owners saw as a potential medium for music.

In 1995, MBC launched DWST “Showbiz Tsismis” on 101.1 FM in Manila. It was the first nationwide satellite FM station, dedicated to “an innovative mix of showbiz news and the latest music hits.” It was also the very first “masa” radio station on FM, using both Filipino and English as medium of communication. It was eventually relaunched in December 1988, under a new name: Yes! FM.

It was also during this time that MBC’s erstwhile top-rating easy-listening English-language station 90.7 Love Radio FM suffered a slump in the ratings game, dropping to as low as No. 4 in the overall listeners’

survey. This compelled its management to change Love Radios format into that of Yes! FM.

Towards the 1990s and into the new millennium, Metro Manila's FM radio stations increased in number, posing stiffer competition in the airwaves, as well as in getting a lion's share of the advertising pie. This led radio stations to think "out-of-the-box" in order to come up with innovative ways to get their message across, as well as that of the advertisers. As in the case of "masa" stations, it meant attracting their target market not only through the songs they play but also through the language their personalities speak and the kind of humor that their market could very well relate to. Oftentimes, it is the language and humor that render these stations at odds with regulatory bodies like the *Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas* (KBP), due to the use of double-meaning statements or playing novelty songs with suggestive lyrics.

The following interview with MBC President Ruperto Nicdao, Jr. and Station Manager Willie Espinosa reveals how freedom in the media is put to a test through various factors, particularly ratings.

It must be noted that the questions asked during the interview were meant to tackle the issue of media freedom and responsibility vis-à-vis the ratings game as seen from two different perspectives, that of the network management and the station's programming department.

At the time of the release of this article, the MBC management has already redirected its overall programming to one that is more entertaining and less offensive.

Question: What led MBC management to initiate major changes in Love Radio's format? For years, it had enjoyed top spot in the overall ratings. Why "fix something that isn't broken"?

Willie Espinosa: Love Radio suffered a slump in the ratings from 1995 to 2000, dropping to as low as No. 4. An Adult Contemporary station needs to be in the top three for it to optimize its sales as some advertisers are limiting their choice of stations to a maximum of three per format. The thought of improving and overhauling Love Radio then wasn't just a consideration but a primary and urgent concern.

Q : What led to the switch to masa or mass-based radio programming? In the past, FM was more of a high-end medium.

W.E. : Love Radio now subscribes to the New Myx Music Format, which can be considered either an upgrade or an evolution from the old Adult Contemporary Music Format. Either way, it is a mass-based music format. The old Love Radio may have sounded "high-endish" because the ad lib presentation of DJs was "old school"-oriented and so it sounded like it is niche. Love Radio's music mix has always been broad. It wasn't an issue of switching from one target audience to another. We simply improved and fortified our *masa* image to be more consistent with our brand.

Q : So what's the story behind "Kailangan Pa Bang I-Memorize 'Yan?!'?"

W.E. : This catch phrase started in Love Radio Zamboanga and was popularly and instantly accepted by the listeners. In its first few days of airing, it instantly became part of their vocabulary, a manifestation of its great potential. The reception was the same when it found its way in Metro Manila.

The catch phrase is the product of numerous considerations to better serve the station. In this ratings game, you need to have that "unique something" lingering in the consciousness of the listeners, otherwise your station will not even rise above the clutter of so many stations in the band. Therefore, its primary purpose is to remind the listeners that

Love Radio is one option whenever listeners feel like listening to FM. The more you hear the line, the more you use the line, the better your memory of the station's existence. As you experience it yourself, the liner's applicability is universal. It may be in casual or serious conversation, in presentations, text, etc.

(According to MBC President Ruperto Nicdao, Jr., the phrase "Kailangan pa bang i-memorize 'yan?!" was a creation of Love Radio's Station Manager Willie Espinosa while he was still running the Zamboanga station. The top management was initially apprehensive about using the line because they felt it was too long for people to remember. However, after integrating it with the station's programming, it eventually caught on and soon became a hit with the mass audience. While stating that creativity is sometimes beyond explanation, Nicdao said that Espinosa who was willing to try unconventional approaches simply wanted to push Love Radio's product branding to the edge, even going as far as inserting controversial jokes in order to make the people remember the station. "Kailangan pa bang i-memorize 'yan?!" simply meant that remembering the station was an elementary task, considering its strong following.)

Q : *It looks like your management is really on to something there, since a lot of FM stations have finally followed suit: i-FM, DWRR, Energy-FM and even your sister station Yes! FM. Aren't you worried about the competition? Incidentally, why adopt the same format on Yes! FM? Doesn't the idea of pitting two of your stations against each other pose any problem?*

Ruperto S. Nicdao, Jr.: We always watch what our competitors are doing and they do the same. The fact that our competitors are copying what we are doing shows the success of our strategy. We don't worry about this much because we expect that any successful program, format or strategy is bound to be replicated by our competitors. What needs to be done is to be always a step ahead. We continue to innovate and introduce new elements and program segments that our target audience will enjoy listening to and perhaps participate in.

Why adopt the same format for Yes! FM? We actually considered formatting our second FM stations in all areas using another program format like high-end pop. However, we decided against that because: (1) our expertise is in catering to the needs of a broad-based audience, whether in AM or FM

(stick to the knitting); (2) broad-based programming guarantees better ratings because the target audience accounts for 80% of the population; (3) our strategy is to go for the ratings to have a better chance in maximizing our sales; and (4) outside of big cities such as Metro Manila, Cebu and Davao, niche programming has not gained much ground.

(According to Nicdao, the population size in areas outside Metro Manila, Cebu and Davao is relatively smaller, giving very little or no room for "niching". This means that the smaller the area is, the more similar its people's cultural backgrounds are to one another and, consequently, the more similarities there are in listeners' preferences. This makes popular songs, for instance, more of the norm. On the other hand, Metro Manila has a wider variety of cultural backgrounds. By just considering the sheer number of its residents, less than 1% of the population, from the advertiser's standpoint, already represents the volume of a radio station's listeners. This consequently made it easier for Love Radio to establish its niche in a competitive industry.)

Q : *Let's get down to the real issue here. The media in our country enjoy tremendous freedom. How would you relate this freedom to responsible media?*

R.S.N.: We certainly enjoy tremendous freedom, in fact, maybe too much. We know that we have the power to influence social behavior by what we put out in our media. We in the broadcast media realize that we need to exercise such power responsibly. Broadcast companies are guided by a code of ethics in broadcast. For members of the KBP, such code is embodied in the Broadcast Code and members are mandated to strictly abide by this or face sanctions. Non-members have their own company code of ethics.

Q : *This freedom has allowed you to adopt a unique programming approach which I understand draws mixed reactions from the listening public. What kind of feedback have you been getting from radio listeners regarding your programming, specifically the announcing style and choice of music? Why do you think this is so?*

R.S.N.: We have been getting mostly favorable feedback from our listeners. They are entertained by our style. The fact that we communicate to them in a language that is most familiar

(something that they themselves use) makes them comfortable. When making requests, via telephone or text, they know that they don't have to use straight English. As far as the music is concerned, we have learned from years of experience what appeals to our target audience and therefore is much appreciated as well. The ratings will bear these out.

Q : *I've heard of feedback regarding some listeners' sensibilities being hurt after hearing some novelty songs played over your station, simply due to their double-meaning lyrics. How do you feel about this?*

W.E.: The emergence of double-meaning songs is primarily to be blamed. The competition had them in their playlists and was popularly received by the radio listeners. And to do away with them then meant dropping out of the competition. But please take note that we were the first station to abandon the trend at first sign of waning popularity.

(Nicdao stated that with regard to the station's use of double-meaning songs and ad libs, it was only a matter of time before the MBC top management directed the Love Radio station management to gradually veer away from the "trash talk" due to complaints filed by certain listeners' groups. For example, the Peoples' Alliance Against Pornography (PAAP) filed a complaint with the KBP against Love Radio's use of double-meaning ad libs on-air and the playing of novelty songs with suggestive lyrics. One example was a song titled "Felix Bakat" which was said to refer to male genitalia bulging through the crotch of a man's trousers. Constant warnings from Nicdao, who is also a KBP board member, compelled Espinosa to tweak the station's overall programming to something more entertaining and less offensive.)

Q : *This particular issue currently applies to quite a number of FM radio stations other than yours. There has also been some degree of concern regarding some announcers' ad libs with supposed double meaning. Whether or not you have also received any feedback on this, I would like to know your thoughts on this.*

W.E.: The idea is to speak and think exactly like how the *masa* speaks and thinks. It is a strategy to get instant positive reception and acceptance. Street words completely differ from radio

terminologies and to replace the latter with these street slang will most likely satisfy the image we are trying to project. We also ad lib relatable topics to establish connection otherwise our listeners will remain passive and uninterested.

Q : Do ratings have anything to do with such a strategy?

W.E.: Yes.

Q : They say that such ad libs and song lyrics are received differently by people. Could you please comment on this?

R.S.N.: We realize that whatever kind of programming we do or whatever style or manner of announcing we implement will be appreciated by some but not by others. We have, however, set a strategy that caters to a specific audience and therefore we have to adjust all the elements of such broadcast consistent to this strategy. We feel that the broad-based market, for the most part, appreciates this style.

Q : Your network is a long-time member of the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas (KBP), an organization whose mandate is to enforce self-regulation in the industry. The KBP Standards Authority, citing some provisions in the Program Standards portion of the Broadcast Code has, at one point, called your attention regarding this, in answer to a complaint forwarded to them. Have you made any steps to address this?

W.E.: Our president has called our attention every time we are cited by the KBP. We have responded by minimizing language that may be offensive to some listeners, even if majority of them are entertained by it.

Q : Broadcast media's role in educating the listening and viewing public is a given. How do you think these particular songs and announcing styles help in educating the masses.

W.E.: We recognize that "educating" is one of the DJs' responsibilities but we have leaned more on our role as entertainers by confining the ad libs solely to entertainment (jokes, humor, etc.). Please

don't get us wrong, we have not totally abandoned that particular responsibility because we still have our news and features which are for education.

Q : Broadcast media are extremely powerful in the sense that they can also affect society's value systems. How do you think these songs and announcing styles affect your listeners' moral values?

R.S.N.: We are sensitive to this issue and we realize that what goes on air may affect society's moral behavior. We emphasize that our objective is to provide entertainment, a kind of escape from the everyday problems our listeners face. We don't think our style encourages any dysfunctional behavior among our listeners.

Q : Taking all of these into account, is there too much freedom in the media?

R.S.N.: While we enjoy media freedom, this freedom is bound by certain rules that we have to comply with, e.g., KBP Code, NTC, and MTRCB rules. In this sense our freedom is limited by these rules. If the rules are not consistently and properly implemented, there could be a perception of too much freedom.

*Marinela M. Aseron is an instructor at the Department of Broadcast Communication of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication, where she is also currently completing her MA in Media Studies. She has 18 years of experience in FM radio broadcasting, having started as a newscaster/news writer for pop station 99.5 RT. She spent most of her radio years as station manager and disc jockey for smooth jazz station City Lite 88.3. She currently co-anchors **Tinig ng Bayan** on NBN Channel 4, a news and public affairs talk show. She is also a familiar voice on radio and television commercials, and is a member of the Kapisanan ng mga Brodtkaster ng Pilipinas (KBP) Standards Authority, the rule-enforcing body of the organization.*