

## INTRODUCTION

I was very much overwhelmed by such strong sense of community, which connects these people, listeners of Radio Maryja or followers of Father Rydzyk, difficult to say...It is unusual that in modern times something like this is happening, there are indeed hundred of thousands people whom a man can unite around one idea and also against other (Subiektyw, Radio TOK. 2006).

As stated in the Introduction and Literature Review, it was the goal of the study to find out where precisely lays the truth about the people who listen to Radio Maryja. Can they be called 'followers' or is the term assuming too much about the nature of the listening experience. In addition, this section will provide the evaluation of the perception of Radio Maryja amongst Polish society, and more importantly the listeners' accounts drawing on the data from the focus group interviews.

This section is noteworthy for the true apprehension of the Radio Maryja listenership as it provides first-hand stories of people that engage with Radio Maryja. It will begin with the opinions from the public and their ideas on the station's appeal. Only then, the focus will shift towards the listeners whose remarks will give away knowledge about the listening experience at large and confront or expand what has been already said about Radio Maryja.

### NON-LISTENERS

#### *We Catholics know very little about our faith*

Focus group members admitted that even though radio was not their media choice, it fulfilled its educational role. Participants realised that the society's general knowledge of Catholic faith was very limited and, in the fragment below, indicated Radio Maryja to be the medium expanding understanding of the principal ideas connected to Catholicism.

Krystyna: You can't just discredit that radio, actually, there are some elements that are worth listening because I think that among all faiths, we Catholics, we know very little about our faith.

Piotr: absolutely,

Krystyna: we should seek certain programmes on air of this radio, at least in order to deepen our knowledge about our faith. Just meet with Jehovah's Witnesses or Baptists...we don't have much to say because we don't know much about the faith...we who consider ourselves to be very religious but in reality don't know

much about Catholic faith. And there [Radio Maryja], there is a chance to get deeper understanding (40-50, non-listeners).

In spite interviewees' rejection of Radio Maryja, they recognised station's role in wider the society as they felt a religious education provided by radio reflected general needs of the society.

### *The Church is the Community*

The downfall of Communism in Poland did not see the downfall of religion like it has been predicted (Gowin, J. 1999). Despite the Church's struggles to restore its status of pre-war period<sup>1</sup>, political and economical situation realised that the thought of continuation was a mere wishful thinking. Perhaps what the Church has maintained intact was the worshippers' respect and longing for the close relationship. Therefore, it was predicted that some group mention this issue. Though, non-listeners were least likely to discuss such topic. In the conversation, it is concluded that Church's role is predominantly social, as it is a moral pillar for the worshippers.

Czesia: Poles don't go out, like in the West. They don't go to pubs, they don't meet up like that. Such community here is Church, nothing else...If not in churches then people listen to the radio at homes and it is their, our only life.

Jasia: That is how it is for older generation...

Czesia: it is too hard in our Poland. It is too hard to live, all you have to overcome and thus you need support

Jasia: support in someone

Czesia: yes and here, why escape to God

Jasia: and indeed Radio Maryja fulfils this mission (50-60, non-listeners).

The participants depicted a distinct comparison between the West and the reality in Poland, which presents Church as a means of participation in social life opposed to i.e. pubs fulfilling such role in the West. Members understood that Radio Maryja became a medium to strengthen and expand already existing social but local connections to create network of a national reach. Nevertheless, they have stated that it may refer to certain, mainly older age

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<sup>1</sup> Before World War II Church hold strong position as a moral and spiritual leader of the nation. It had influence on the politics, education and culture in the country.

groups, as young people tend to identify with western culture through consumption of Western films, books, music or surfing the Internet.

*Being Polish means being Catholic*

A fragment below suggests in the view of Radio Maryja, Catholic faith is inseparable to Polish identity. More, participants contended that Radio Maryja broadcasting shaped the depiction of Catholicism as an equivalent to being Polish.

Piotr: It is a radio creating an image according to which the Polish people must and are Catholic. They believe [Radio Maryja – M.P.] that they are patriots...Poland used to be country of tolerance, Jews used to live here and Waleria: Germans

Piotr: Germans, Protestants...it used to all function. But creation of image that Pole is also Catholic, ultra-Catholic is wrong (40-50, non-listeners).

All realised that Radio Maryja's ideology proposed an uncompromising worldview, also summarised by a saying 'who is not with us, is against us' and its programmes furthered the opinion that being Polish meant being Catholic.

LISTENERS AND RADIO MARYJA

All focus group interviews commenced from broad-spectrum questions investigating participants' discovery of Radio Maryja and their history of listenership. This proved to trigger many worthy of note stories on how people got accustomed to the radio as well as how they became committed listeners. Like mentioned in the Methodology, the majority resembled accounts of tribal initiations or religion conversion. There were numerous reasons why people turned to Radio Maryja but the manner of storytelling was similar if not the same. Every account told in an uplifting and exalted style, stressing the extent to which participants 'have found the Truth and became alive again' (50-60 group). Some relations pointed out to God's will or odd events, like in the fragment below one listener turned the radio on and by chance found Radio Maryja:

Danusia: it's all started from terrorist attacks in New York, as I came back from church, where they asked us to light a candle in the window. And that's how it's

all started. I didn't look for it [Radio Maryja – M.P.]...as I said, I have never listened to it before this 11<sup>th</sup> September [11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 – M .P.]...I have lit the candle, and as usual, I turned the radio on and heard Radio Maryja. I listen to it ever since (50-60, listeners).

It is questionable if the listener actually was in this situation or whether it is on the human part to cover the other motives that may stand behind the media choice. Establishing the truth here is not of highest priority as the statement in itself demonstrates the way listeners relate to the radio. It is not ordinary radio station but a medium with a mission to expand one's faith. Hence the listeners aspired to give appropriate accounts to what seemed to be the prelude to story of their salvation.

*We learn great deal of Truth*

Second group of questions was designed to establish appeal of the station without going into detailed explanations. Participants were asked to state in brief what they liked and disliked about the radio, and indicate any specific programmes to justify their statements. Drawing on the age difference that shaped focus group interviews, it was noted that younger groups were more specific in identifying radio's appeal. Firstly, groups 20-30 and 50-60 found Radio Maryja to be offering certain worldviews that corresponding with their own opinions, as quoted in 50-60 group:

Zofia: it is right wing and I like it, I agree with it. They uncover sink of corruption that happens around us and they are not afraid to tell.

The listeners considered themselves as members of mainstream Catholicism, engaging with other Catholic media like Radio Jozef or Radio Niepokalanow<sup>2</sup> (20-30 group) and thus consumption of Radio Maryja stood for the efforts to expand their knowledge about Catholic faith, rites and liturgy. Majority opposed to politicised content and sought programmes about Church or Polish history.

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<sup>2</sup> Other Catholic media in Poland.

These groups have been able to point out clearly features of attraction, whereas groups 60-70 and 70-80 tended to generalise about the station rather than answer questions directly. A member of 60-70 focus group stressed the fact that Radio Maryja provided the him with the Truth – as if the medium was God’s messenger. He contents:

Piotr: it gives you food for thought

Moderator: Perhaps it is because you are religious?

Piotr: this is one thing, second thing is that I will find the truth here, detailed, authentic truth, nothing else, this is why I listen.

In addition, Danuta from 50-60 group thinks it is radio’s community broadcaster status that enables service’s neutrality:

I think that whatever I hear here is true, that whatever is on Radio Maryja is true. And there [commercial media] it is all about competition and money, they are looking for sensations and scandals (50-60).

The above statements serve the example of devotion to the medium, resembling existing relationship between lay people and the Church which main feature is the unquestionable authority that Church is believed to hold.

On the other hand, few participants admitted their resentment towards impartiality in media and acknowledged a need of questioning media content. As Krystyna holds:

With this ‘truth’ is different, sometimes when you listen, read, and watch TV news or something it is biased. Our papers are biased towards certain direction, so you need to centre all these messages and make your own conclusions (60-70, listeners).

Although, 60-70 group was characterised by deep religiosity, and of unquestioning approach towards Radio Maryja, Krystyna brought the attention to agenda setting and news bias in mass media due to the need of representation diverse points of view. She then accented the importance of consumption of various sources in order to form independent opinion. Which is why, she questions or chooses Radio Maryja’s texts she considers believable. Her opinions challenge the view, which perceives older generations as more vulnerable to media manipulation, as well as, less media literate. The only noticeable difference between

following groups arises from the use of language and accuracy of their answers. Groups 20-30 and 50-60 proved to be precise and provided several examples of what they meant, while groups 60-70 and 70-80 gave answers of more general nature, often juxtaposing Radio Maryja and God. As a result, this shows listeners' conception about the radio, which plays a role of mediator between humans and God. The radio itself entered a profane space but remained its sacrum status for some listeners, especially of the older age.

#### *A Catholic medium*

On the whole, listeners showed interest and consumed other media both public as well as commercial. The frequency of consumption other media depended on the age group, and gradually decreased as the age progressed. Majority could discuss similarities and differences existing between Radio Maryja and other media. What is more, listeners demonstrated Radio Maryja's role on media market to 'be Catholic and tell good things for the Church (60-70 group)'. It was believed its programme outline maintained Catholic profile by contributing airtime to prayers, Catechesis, Catholic music and chants of psalms and hymns.

Considering the fact that of all listeners interviewed predominant proportion identified themselves as Catholic, it was no surprise that the medium first and for most was seen as a resource to meet religious needs. It was generally felt that Radio Maryja assisted with everyday religious duties like prayers as it made listeners aware of each other, enabled communal participation and mobilised to join in prayer.

Maria: when there was no radio, I somehow managed, I had to, but now if radio broke down, I wouldn't be able to pray, not even a rosary.

Moderator: Maybe because you are aware that you pray together

Maria: together, especially because I am alone...I often ask Lord Jesus if my prayers are good enough. I am always alone...without the radio I couldn't do it, I wouldn't be capable of preying, I'm very happy because of it and always listen till midnight (70-80 group).

Listeners emphasised the ability to connect with others whilst preying, as if the significance of the prayer grew powerful in relation to number of people. The intimate sphere of religion

such as prayer became a collective activity that brought people together. Besides, it proved radio could overcome geographical or physical limitations people were facing. Like one listener said:

I prefer to pray with Radio Maryja because I can connect with others, because they [Radio Maryja] build the community, and I can connect with Jasna Gora<sup>3</sup> through Radio Maryja (50-60, listeners).

Radio also validates the role of spiritual guide. Agata (20-30 group) appreciated the Divine Office and Christian meditation for the transcendent values:

I usually listen to chanting of the 'Liturgy of the Hours' in the morning, and sometimes meditation. It helps me to hear my inner self, and what God wants to tell me on that day (ibid).

If it comes to dealing with certain religious content like Holy Mass, majority perceived it as part of institutional religiosity, thus refusing to take part unless prepared or being able to honour it.

Moderator: Do you participate in prayers or mass broadcasted by Radio Maryja?  
Krzysztof: Prayers help me but I don't listen to the mass, coz it is wrongdoing, if someone does it like without, with no proper bearing during the transmission (20-30 group).

Such opinions were common amongst the interviewed regardless the age differences. A significant section did not take part in the broadcasted mass due to its scared meaning for listeners. However, participants allowed the thought such services could be suitable for the elderly, or the ill confined to bed, which otherwise would not have the opportunity to participate in the ceremony.

*A patriotic medium: 'real patriotism' versus 'twisted patriotism'*

Most listeners did not approve radio's political involvement for its accepted role of religious broadcaster. Few saw these programmes as another point of view in comparison to mainstream broadcasting, not deploring but taking it with a pinch of salt, being aware of the station's standpoint.

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<sup>3</sup> Another name for Czestochowa.

In general terms, listeners thought Radio Maryja stood for patriotic values. However, as the sessions developed, two contrasting points have dominated discussions. First one, also more recurrent, presented opinion according to which Radio Maryja maintained the traditional values and served the patriotic ideology. Patriotism was understood by protection and defence of the heritage, as Urszula said:

Radio Maryja is most of all oriented towards patriotism, towards the fact that we are Polish, and what is ours, Polish, it should be taken care of, and Radio Maryja fights for this, fights for this, but many don't like it, coz they'd easily sell Poland. And Radio Maryja fights for these roots ours, Polish, for Polish should be Polish (50-60, listeners).

The statement indicates the listeners adopted a conservative position, which calls for preservation of traditional values and adherence to social conventions since the tradition grows on the nation's past. Furthermore, Radio Maryja was seen as an ally on the mission to continue the traditional ways, to remember roots that have shaped the modern nation. One listener argued that radio encourages positive connotations of patriotism and enables people to voice their pride about the country. As she says:

people often misunderstand notion of patriotism and nationalism, and often see one as the other, they call us [Radio Maryja's listeners – M.P.] nationalists, chauvinists...in the end, you are too scared to admit of being patriot... they even bully you, that you love your country, that you are patriot, as if it was something embarrassing...They [Radio Maryja] teach patriotism, remind Polish history, past, white stains<sup>4</sup> which we couldn't talk about on history lesson...we forgot many things about patriotism, as maybe there isn't enough of it in the schools, and radio is patriotic indeed (60-70).

Radio Maryja is also an educational tool that provides teaching about history, especially events that Soviets desired to wipe out of the Polish history cards. Moreover, radio shows the meaning of patriotism by honouring historical events of national significance like January Uprising<sup>5</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup> Literate translation from Polish, an idiom standing for communist way of history teaching that purposely omitted certain for Polish nation events so as not to undermine Soviet regime and now these events are called white stains. White stains include mass killings of Polish army officers in Katyn or history of Polish Resistance Army etc.

<sup>5</sup> The January Uprising (22<sup>nd</sup> January 1863-1865) was the longest Polish and Lithuanian uprising against the Russian Empire. It started as a spontaneous protest by young Poles against conscription into the Russian Army. Various politicians and high-

Alicja: it is a radio of real patriotism, which we rate highly, programmes or days of remembrance for example January Uprising, on Radio Maryja we hear that today is an anniversary of January Uprising, but not anywhere else, and there they [Radio Maryja] remember (60-70).

Lastly, listeners agree on opinion that patriotism is linked with faith, and two cannot exist alone:

In this radio it is connected, like the motto God, Honour and Motherland<sup>6</sup> and this radio, you can see, that it is connected, the faith with patriotism, and for Poles it was always joined (60-70).

Majority agreed that the connection came to be a result of history and should not be rejected in contemporary times.

Second view contrarily, pointed to the bias in ideological line of thought and called the patriotism promoted on air as follows:

Certainly you could call it patriotic radio but it is twisted patriotism (20-30).

Aleksandra: in some sense I think it [Radio Maryja] has the patriotic attitude warped, in some ways...I realise that it's lighting it by the reflector from one side more than from the other (50-60).

The criticism related to lack of objectivity in the programmes as well as crafting the atmosphere of threat, in which people should unite against the evil forces, such as a liberal enemy in government. According to the listener some programmes were to provoke certain behaviour or feeling of insecurity,

Seweryn: there used to be a programme, which actually changed after right wing parties came to power in parliament, which used to analyse press coverage but its main aim was to induce sense of threat, threat to the existence of country, and that danger came from the liberals (20-30).

To sum up, all agreed that radio was a patriotic medium through maintenance the traditional values, teachings of history and honouring the martyrs in Polish history. However, some recognised impartiality coming from the fact that the station appealed to listeners' emotions and delivered the certain view in which the existence of Catholic country was

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ranking Polish officers from the tsarist army soon joined the uprising. In the aftermath, there were severe reprisals against the Poles, such as public executions or deportations to Siberia.

<sup>6</sup> God, Honour and Motherland is unofficial devise of Polish Army, also summarises the Patriotism for Polish nation.

endangered by liberal forces. This ‘twisted patriotism’ saw Poland as Catholic country in need of protection as it faced liberal enemy that did not represent the values of Radio Maryja.

#### *Community Broadcaster*

Having portrayed two most conspicuous factors of an appeal to the listeners, it is time to move to the last point, which brings notions of Catholicism and love for the country together. Radio Maryja’s progression from local to the station of national reach has been affirmed by obtaining the status of community broadcaster as the radio came to represent Polish Catholic community.

Uppermost quality that interviewed saw in Radio Maryja was the station’s different point of view, as noted previously not truly impartial but showing people a different perspective, other side of the problem, giving listener a choice and a place to form independent opinion. All agreed that radio was a forum enabling people to voice opinions, like Alicja described:

and you can call there, no problem. Everybody can take part in the discussion, you need just the phone, I heard many times, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Atheists (60-70).

The connection between the listener and the station commences though a phone line and as the listener argued it was available to whoever wished so. Therefore, in the eyes of listeners radio was a community environment that maintains and encourages the dialogue amongst Catholics and people of other beliefs. It is worth noting though, the forum Alicja identified is predominantly Catholic, for she uses religious belief as the main denominator in relation to other people and classifies the discussion participants with regard to their religion or lack of it.

Moreover, discussions have revealed that the majority found radio to be useful source of information. However, their conception on what was important or valuable depended on emotional or religious qualities. In the fragments below, session members saw other’s

suffering as a reason to recognise the value of their own lives and bring to an end feeling of self-pity or ungratefulness.

Aleksandra: we learn a lot, don't we? Because usually we are busy with our lives, we don't know many things

Moderator: what kind of things?

Aleksandra: about life, most definitely. For example when the priest talked about the children, how sick they are, the serious and difficult situations

Moderator: and what that gives you?

Aleksandra: reflection

Krystyna: you look in a different way on suffering

Aleksandra: you have different way of thinking, looking at the surrounding world

Krystyna: you start to appreciate you own life...

Aleksandra: it is difficult to say that...because we have problems too but it is nothing in comparison to, to that someone has much more serious issues in the life (60-70)

Danuta: sometimes when you listen it you think God why am I worried, when this other person is in worse situation (50-60).

The phone-ins thus contribute to the collective awareness of suffering and difficulty. Even though majority cannot relate to the problems others face, it helps them to deal with their own lives. The stories of illness or hardship illustrate here psychosocial reality, in which people seek such things as means of contrast to see their reality as more attractive or bearable. Furthermore, like in the section below some acknowledge radio's problem oriented programmes for its down-to-earth approach reminding that life for many is not easy at all.

Aleksandra M: every Sunday there are programmes about schizophrenia...and they not that, well maybe in some respect provide content-related knowledge, but that is too a form of consolation coz they are phoning-in, people phone-in, talk, tell their authentic stories from life, it creates such aura, that despite the smile people carry on the outside, you know that the world is not so beautiful, and the people are not so happy as they look on the street, so happy-shiny

Zofia: and you are in not so bad situation

Aleksandra: yes, yes and the reality is pretty rough...and it's sometimes a way of consolation, it might sound bad

Zofia: you compare how others are...

Aleksandra: I switch to listen to these problems and not to listen to the middle of the road music that is played on other stations, especially on Sundays music is easy and happy. Then you feel remote from life, and through these problems you are close (50-60).

Other's problems become public on the radio's forum and help listeners to come to grounds with their own life. Aleksandra also points out her preference to know that the life is not as easy as it is portrayed in the media, and she thinks Radio Maryja provides her with the true story. This form of consolation then confirms a human behaviour that drives individuals to find and acknowledge their position in the wider society through contrast and context assessment.

Besides the fact listeners saw radio as an opportunity of participation in the public forum, way of recognition other people and their problems, radio also builds a community both within and outside the airwaves. Listeners note that all of the programmes are created for the listener basing on that anyone can phone-in and take part in the discussion, prayer or send greetings. Many listeners have indicated certain programmes like rosary or morning prayers as a way of reinforcement the community ties but they also mentioned on a numerous occasions programmes of more practical approach that create airwave exchange, like in the following piece:

there is a programme where people simply call that they have things they want to give away, it's called 'Unconditional Offering'...And they call...and they leave their number so you can call (50-60).

Consequently, Radio Maryja provides practical help for the participants who face problems with the awareness that they can count on help of the others listeners.

Summarising, community comes to life on air by collective prayers, discussions and general help, the community also grows outside of the radio and as Urszula says:

is something very important...people who are in Radio Maryja's Family are very committed and if there's need, they will help, it's a real family (50-60).

The imaginary community of the airwaves turns into an outside organisation that expands social networks and reinforces Radio Maryja admiration. Even if some of the interviewed did not belong to the official structures of the 'Family', they to certain extent concluded that

station was a centre for community life. It gives them ‘strength’ (70-80), ‘energy’ (20-30), ‘hope’ (50-60) and helps realise other people around themselves (60-70).

Radio Maryja gathers people together through religion and the programme angle that contributes much of its airtime for phone-in participation that promotes new image of media, which people can freely shape. It seemed that listeners spoke of Radio Maryja as of their own property, consequently justifying their financial donations for the station.

### *Mohair Berets*

Questions regarding target audience served a speculative aim as there already existed data on the structure of the Radio Maryja audiences outlined by sociological researches mentioned in the Introduction. The real purpose of these questions was to uncover participants’ ideas on Radio Maryja’s the community and who is welcome to it. Further to what they said, radio was open to anyone regardless their religion or beliefs but at the core of the structure were the listeners self titled ‘Mohair Berets’, term at first bore pejorative connotations with bigotry and narrow-mindedness but it has evolved into the status of sociological description of movement. Alicja notes that:

they describe listeners as Mohair Berets and I at the time when, when Donald Tusk<sup>7</sup> used that phrase, described the listeners of Radio Maryja, I straightaway went shopping to Pila and bought a mohair beret (60-70).

Therefore until recently negative term became unofficially a description for the movement, which they identify with and will support by act like the above. Although Alicja did not take part in any events or pilgrimages, she realised her place within the social context and felt Radio Maryja helped her to understand and live in Poland.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Moderator: Do you trust Radio Maryja?

Urszula: yes of course. It has never let me down and I know it won’t disappoint me. Because as I say, what it comes from God, that will obviously stay, it will be.

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<sup>7</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> November 2005 the leader of Civic Platform party Donald Tusk used term ‘mohair coalition’ in his speech in front of Polish parliament. It was the first time the term was used in the public debate (Lis, Tomasz. 2006).

And here yes, we had not numerous experiences that indicated that it God's gift (50-60).

Nothing could not reflect unconditional trust that majority of listeners hold towards the station, better than the above fragment. Urszula concludes that the radio is God's gift and in the wider perspective illustrates the mentality of interviewed people.

Radio Maryja, unlike commercial or public media, is a station that provides spiritual services and teachings of Catholic faith. The discussions concluded on the fact that the station did not come to represent victims of system transition but people who primarily sought religious wisdom and interpretation to the life. And what is more, Radio Maryja was to many a God's gift, part of prophecy and new life.

Second came in love for the country and right-wing political views. Most of the focus group participants saw Radio Maryja as patriotic broadcaster that not only educated about country's past but also influenced the patriotic role models and encouraged traditional ideas that saw religion as intrinsic part of national identity and therefore suggesting Poland's Catholic religion as the only rightful in the light of history.

Lastly, the juxtaposition of values such as religion and patriotism consolidated emergence of the community that was crucial to programme content but it also became an important factor to the ordinary lives of the listeners who through others' experiences started to learn more about their lives and how to deal with mundane problems.

