

A Pioneering History of Philippine Radio

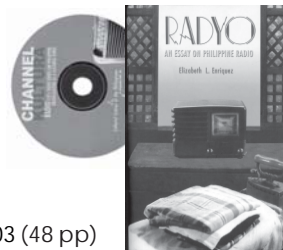
by Ma. Bernadette G.L. Abbrera

Radyo: An Essay on Philippine Radio

by Elizabeth L. Enriquez

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Being a seminal work, the monograph gives a comprehensive overview of the rise of radio in the Philippines and thus partly fills the need for a more extensive documentation of the history of the medium in the country. The essay chronicles the development of Philippine radio, beginning as a colonial and commercial tool in the Americanization of the islands and growing into the widest subscribed mass medium that has played a crucial role in our political history, notably the 1986 EDSA revolt and the coverage of coup attempts during the early years of President Corazon Aquino's term.

But it is not so much the political side of radio that the monograph wants to develop as the cultural influence of this medium. It is quite a daunting task that it sets out to do: to see how radio "has come to occupy a central role in the forging of a national consciousness and, perhaps, the crafting of a national identity." Ironically, however, radio may even be seen in its inception as having been an obstacle to the building of a Filipino nation. For example, in the 1920s, nationhood as symbolized by Inang Bayan had already been molded in the furnace of Revolution and War. But radio was utilized from the onset to sell American culture, thus dampening the love for country and independence that continued to simmer. Moreover, although radio ownership and programming have since passed on to Filipino hands, elite interests continue to dominate the airwaves to the disadvantage of those below. Perhaps, these "limitations" should be considered in the discussion of radio's "central role in the crafting of a national identity."

In addition, even as radio is recognized in our day as the most widely used medium of communication, its role in the “forging of the national consciousness”, in the mold of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” model, is still quite literally beset with static, especially where the ethnolinguistic groups at the periphery are concerned. For example, our fieldwork in Tawi-Tawi in 1998 revealed that the radio programs popular in the Sulu archipelago were those from Sandakan, which played Malay music. Sama and Tausug listeners wrote Sandakan radio stations to request songs for their friends in Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Even the TV news in Sibutu Island was broadcast from Malaysia every night. In short, the very people who needed cultural integration into the rest of the country were precisely the ones that radio stations from the Philippines could not reach well enough.

Further, it should be pointed out that while statistics prove that radio has the widest reach of all the media, that reach is limited by the areas it actually touches. In 1994 the Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey found that 81% of the population were exposed to radio (compared to TV’s 56.7%). While this is an impressive coverage, it is not evenly distributed, since 81.6% of the listeners are in the urban areas. Thus in the rural areas, radio continues to be mostly a dead signal. The role of radio in the crafting of a national identity is fraught with problems.

The section on the cultural content of radio and its social influence is likely an offshoot of the author’s concern for media education. In her M.A. thesis on media education, Enriquez stated her concern that media “audiences...are also actively directed towards particular ways of seeing and understanding...” It would indeed be interesting to see how this happens but this can probably be shown when the author focuses specifically on the content of radio programs.

In addition, there are points that could be elaborated on in succeeding publications: the language of radio, the social significance of radio/transistor ownership, the programs and the time slots, the class status in frequency modulation (AM vs FM), and the target audiences. In terms of economic interests, the ownership of radio stations by big media networks needs to be discussed in order for the public to understand the content of radio programs. Also, the power and persuasion of media upon its consumers has taken a greater political significance. The essay notes the radio personalities who crossed over not only to another medium, TV, but to another field as well, i.e., government, banking

on their popularity as media people. Because of this apparently growing fascination among media practitioners to enter government, media owners will have powerful friends in the public sector to protect and advance their interests. How will this development, which began in the radio industry, affect the national interest?

Radio's shining moments in recent history were the live coverage it afforded during the protest years of the 80s leading to EDSA and the coup attempts after EDSA. But the protest commentaries against the Marcos dictatorship after the 1983 assassination of Ninoy Aquino were not radio's triumph alone, but the achievement of the combined efforts of all media. It should be remembered that radio was just as muzzled as most of the other media during the Martial Law years and that the alternative media in print was more aggressive in expressing protest before the EDSA revolt. But radio's portability and accessibility became an advantage during the People Power Revolution, when it provided the crucial link between military rebels and civilian supporters in the streets and in the provinces through clandestine radio broadcasts, with only the voice of June Keithley ensuring credibility. TV then was mostly off the air, providing only government-approved images of Marcos during EDSA, and even alternative newspapers were being outrun by events that magnified by the hour. In February 1986, the power of radio was immediately evident when the people poured into the streets. In the case of EDSA 2, however, the same feat could no longer be solely claimed by radio, considering the big contributions of the cellular phone and text messaging. Today, television too is just as prompt as radio in its live coverage, especially of political events. But while it has the advantage of being a visual medium, it is still limited by the cost and non-portability of the TV set.

The monograph does not look into the challenges that confront radio today. But we cannot help wondering about these. The coming of new technology and the return of free media are important developments of which radio was a part, but these could also make radio a thing of the past. As technology improves, the near future may yet see the radio being overtaken by television, which now has the biggest expansion rate (56.7% in 1994) among the eight forms of mass media. What does the future hold for radio? It will probably have to develop its unique characteristics as a medium if it hopes to survive: inexpensive, portable and capable of running on batteries.

This monograph comes with a VCD, a 30-minute documentary entitled *Tunog Pinoy. A History of Philippine Radio*. Perhaps it is more apt to give it a more general title, like “Development of Philippine Radio.” It provides a leaner version of the essay with valuable photographs of early radio personalities. Unfortunately, the audio of actual news broadcasts from various periods in history is not clear, such as Cardinal Sin’s call to the people to come to EDSA and the Radyo Bandido broadcasts. In future videos, more could be added perhaps from earlier periods, such as the commentaries of fiery radiomen who were respected as political critics, and not as politicians. The footage of a radio drama program taping, showing how sound effects were created, provides an interesting look behind the voices in the box.

To date, this monograph is the very first history of radio that has been made available to contemporary readers. It clearly shows the development of radio and its importance, indispensability even, at certain crucial moments in Philippine history, such as the Japanese Occupation and EDSA I. As a scholar, Enriquez’s advantage is that she worked 17 years in the newsrooms of DZRP, DZFX and Channel 4 before, during and after Martial Law and thus directly experienced media control, construction and manipulation. As it stands, the monograph has paved the way for future monographs and videos focusing on specific periods and aspects of the development of Philippine Radio.

Ma. Bernadette G.L. Abrera is an associate professor of History at the University of the Philippines in Diliman. She obtained her M.A. in History (1992) and Ph.D. in Philippine Studies (2002) also from UP. Her interest lies in Philippine cultural and social history. She was president of the ADHIKA ng Pilipinas, a national historical association that is actively engaged in research and training in history that seeks to interpret it from the point of view of Philippine culture and indigenous traditions.