

● Last month we were discussing the need for, and problems in getting, initiative in the publishing field. This month brought to my attention a similar set of questions, in radio, a field closer to many readers of **db**. During the last year or so, a number of NBC affiliates across the country have been operating with a format they call the "news-only" station. In this format, the network provides updated newscasts for alternate quarter-hour periods, and the local station fills in the rest, from local happenings. For whatever reason, the network decided to discontinue this service, so now those stations are looking for something else to do to fill in the time formerly occupied with network program material.

## PROGRAM ALTERNATIVES

All across the country, stations fill time, mainly with recorded music that appeals to the local listeners. Right now, that is country and western, most places within miles of where I live. But when dozens of stations are transmitting the same type of program, and listeners are limited mostly to people driving to and from work, most of the stations eke out a meagre subsistence.

To really get ahead, a station must show some initiative. Where there is a larger population within a station's service area, one station can adopt a more unique format, such as a talk show where anyone "out there" can call in and talk about whatever interests him. Or they can run interview shows where interesting personalities of all kinds are interviewed at regular times.

## SPONSORSHIP DEPENDS ON LISTENER APPEAL

But whatever format is adopted, whether the station does essentially the same as everyone else but tries to do it better, or whether it does something different from its neighbors, what pays the bills is sponsorship. What interests every potential sponsor is how many people he can reach by means of whatever advertising medium he uses, and usually radio is only one of them.

An argument for the news-only format, as well as for anything other than what may be termed background music—something to drive by—is that they are something to which people

consciously listen. So, in an attentive mood, they will also listen to the sponsor's message rather than letting it go by as part of the background. It would seem to be a natural for a program that grabs listeners' attention to be something that sponsors would want to buy.

What a radio station expects will grab the listeners' attention does not always do it. When drivers put on the radio with the idea of providing background to relieve the boredom of driving, they do not necessarily want to have their attention grabbed. However, if something does grab it, it may provide a talking point, when they get to work, or home, or wherever they are going. And of course, it may also give them a resolve to listen again, to hear more of the same, if they like what they hear.

## GETTING INTO EDUCATION

Statistics from other fields, such as book publishing, t.v., and even theater, suggest that people want to be more than just entertained. Non-fiction has been outselling fiction for some time. Documentaries are more popular than they have ever been. So couldn't radio get into the business of education, somehow?

Whatever a station does, it must find a way to stay in business doing it. When we mention education, in almost any context, we soon hear someone talk about "funding," with perhaps a reference to "Classroom of the Air." In most people's minds, education means something that is tax-supported, and thus gets away from the "finding sponsors" hassle. But really, in making that switch, you merely substitute one hassle for another, both money. Now you are looking for funding.

## FUNDING PROBLEMS

I do not really want to get into this, beyond showing what is wrong with it. As I said, sponsorship depends on listener appeal. Funding doesn't, at least not in the same way. So long as what you broadcast appeals to the agency that funds it, everybody is happy, for a while, at least. You do not have to please the listeners anymore.

And that is what really paves the way for the downfall of whatever educational program you happen to be

## theory & practice (cont.)

engaged in. So long as the person who benefits from the funding can keep the funding source happy, the money keeps coming. But, sooner or later, something changes, and someone discovers that really nobody is listening to that junk. End of junket.

So let us ask ourselves whether educational programs really have to be funded, or whether we cannot find a way to base their continuance on the establishment of listener interest, like any other format, along with a way to get them paid for on that basis.

Well, one way, perhaps, would be to find sponsors who share your interest in education, and use a commercial format, with whatever educational content you agree upon. One advantage of this is that you can mix it in, part of the time, with some other format instead of changing your whole operation over.

There is another possibility, selling materials to subscribing students, that needs more development, which we will come to later.

### **RADIO IN A/V INSTRUCTION**

What part will your radio program play in the learning process, apart from the obvious one, that to pay by listener acceptance, it must interest them, rather than boring them?

For the last three or four years, I have been active in producing new kinds of mediated material. The best, from the results viewpoint, is often not the most costly. In fact it is often the least costly. Individualized instruction that uses workbooks and exercise books for the visual and student involvement part, with audio cassettes that provide the instruction, have been increasingly successful.

Before we leave mention of that, funded programs using the same media are invariably less successful. When the program designer gets paid for turning something out rather than for producing material that helps people to learn, this difference is really to be expected. If, as some people want us to believe, the profit motive is bad, all I can say is that the non-profit motive is worse!

Back to individualized instruction: the good feature about an audio cassette, with printed workbook and exercise materials, is that each student can take the audio at his own rate. If he comes to something he knows, he can press the "fast forward" button and save himself some time. If he comes to something that gives him difficulties, he can use the rewind button as many times as he needs to.

## theory & practice (cont.)

The audio is best when designed to be repetitive, except with variation, to provide alternative ways of understanding, relying on the student to replay anything he wants to hear twice. We mention this, precisely because that procedure is *not* adaptable to audio by radio. What should we do then? Redesign the audio for radio?

The more you think about it in those terms, the more difficult it seems. You could be repetitive where the home-use individualized cassette relies on the student replaying material if he needs it. But then you repeat, whether the individual listener needs it or not. You just cannot suit all of the people all of the time.

### EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS

If you think about it, these are precisely the same reasons that more orthodox forms of education are in trouble. Lecturing is not the best way to teach. Yet education insists on gearing material on a fixed program basis, so the only variable is the speed at which it is administered.

Schools have been struggling to get results this way, in a losing battle. The four-year colleges have shared the elementary and secondary schools' problems; the only bright spot on the edu-

cational horizon in recent years has been so-called vocational education. The junior colleges that offer it have been expanding where the other institutions have been in difficulties.

But at last we are hearing moans from even the vocational ed shops. Why? Because, while they were fresh, they did offer a new approach, different from the boring methods of conventional school. But now they are becoming "establishment" in this sense too.

Come to think of it, most correspondence schools have fallen into the same trap. All of these sources of education work in separate phases: first they try to sell you a course. On that they do a good selling job, to convince you that you need one of the courses they are offering. Once they get you signed up, their pay is sure.

Public institutions are assured of payment by funding; private, such as correspondence schools, are assured of payment because you sign a contract. So you'll pay, whether or not you take all the lessons. Once they have you signed up, they really do not care whether you learn, whatever their promotion may say.

### HOLDING INTEREST

Do you remember the old serial-type story that magazines and periodi-

cals used to publish back in the days before most of their readership was by subscription? That was a circulation-building gimmick. You read this week's, or month's installment. Then it left you hanging at a spot where you just couldn't wait to get the next installment.

Believe it or not, the same thing can be done in education. I know, because I've been on both ends of the situation, taught that way, and teaching that way. And believe me, a teacher who does that does not lose students. So how can we apply that technique to radio or to some other medium that may offer educational programs?

There are many tricks that can be incorporated. Perhaps tricks is not the word. Really they are techniques. But they work. The cassette audio can probably be used, either as is, or with little modification from the present, good individualized instruction material. The best study, for learning, is what each student does on his own. That is why that method is so successful.

But part of its need for success is competing against all the other things that clamor for the student's interest. This is where radio can provide, both the first incentive to get started, and the continuing incentive to see "what comes next."

The effort should not be to sell the listener a whole course all in one package, either in the learning materials, cassettes and printed work materials, or in a commitment to listen regularly. Get him interested, first, in something that other people are enjoying. Use the radio both to introduce something the listener can "find out" about, for a modest cost, and to provide an aid to continuity in learning. Continuity should not depend on the radio, but the radio should provide information of vital interest when the listener can tune in.

Space is gone, for this month. In later columns, I will discuss in more detail the role that radio can play in supplying this kind of initiative, so that, in return, it can give radio a new lease on life. ■