Restricted Opportunities for Community Broadcasting in Belgium

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Introduction: Understanding the Belgian Media Situation

Apart from being an image of developments in Europe, the broadcasting history of Belgium also reflects the country’s specifically local social relations and political evolution (Antoine, d’Haenens, and Saeys, 2001). It provides a clear indication of Belgium’s political and ideological divides as well as of those of language and region, and portrays the evolution from a unitary to a federal state.

Belgium consists of three cultural-linguistic communities, each with its own legislative and executive institutions. The largest is the Dutch-speaking community (55 percent of the population, about 10 million people) in the north, better known as Flanders. The south (Wallonia) and most of the capital region is French-speaking (45 percent). Close to the border is a small German-speaking community (about 70,000 people). Since 1977, these three communities have been responsible for their own media systems, which have developed along different lines. We focus on the two larger cultural communities, using the term “regional” to define anything at the level of these two communities and “local” to define smaller entities within them. The Belgian level is referred to as “federal.”

Broadcasting in Belgium is highly influenced by the British public service broadcasting model, like most West European countries, although it has certain distinctive features. The aforementioned regionalization of broadcasting is one distinct feature, and the development of broadcasting according to political and ideological divisions in Belgian society is another (Herroelen, 1982); in fact, most of the early radio stations in the
1920s were directly linked to a political party. Both in Flanders and Wallonia, the four main political tendencies (Catholic, Socialist, Liberal and Nationalist) had their own private radio stations. In 1930, a national, bilingual public corporation body, the INR-NIR (Institut National de Radiodiffusion—Nationaal Instituut voor Radio-omroep), was set up, fully funded and controlled by the government. After World War II, it was granted a monopoly, and private, ideological radio stations were incorporated within the structure of the national broadcasting corporation. Under the guise of “guest” programs, major political parties, management and trade unions, and religious factions were allocated airtime (d’Haenens and Saëys, 1998).

In 1960, the unified INR-NIR was split into two sections: the Dutch-speaking BRT (Belgische Radio en Televisie) and the French-speaking RTB (Radiodiffusion-Télévision Belge). The influence exerted by the political powers remained high. The Law of February 2, 1977 completed the separation of the two broadcasting institutions, which subsequently developed differently in Flanders and Wallonia, depending on the community’s own legislative framework. The regionalization of cultural competences was taking place when the first community radios emerged, therefore the evolution of the local community media in Belgium is largely a regional affair.

Since the 1980s, the audiovisual landscape has undergone some major changes. In Flanders, the public broadcasting corporation BRT, later renamed VRT (Vlaamse Radio en Televisie) lost its television monopoly in 1989 when the first commercial station, VTM, went on air. Public radio, however, profited from a national monopoly to remain dominant until 2000; today, the two public television channels have a stable and even slightly growing audience share even though they now face competition from three Flemish commercial channels in addition to an ever-growing number of international operators on cable and satellite (VRT, Annual Reports; T. Coppens, 2005). Ten commercial local television stations and a few commercial radio networks complete the picture. The situation in Wallonia is not very different (Antoine, 2000a). Two public channels (RTBF, La Une and La Deux), two private broadcasters (RTL-Tvi and AB), and about a dozen local stations compete, in addition to a number of foreign, mainly French, channels. Radio in French-speaking Belgium is dominated by private networks, many affiliates of French networks, and a rather weak public broadcaster (Antoine, 2000b).

The fact that community broadcasting was most successful in the French community is no coincidence, as traditionally the print media have had a strong local base (Antoine, 1998a). Powerful regional trends have led to the decentralization of the public broadcaster RTBF (Nobre-Correia and Collard, 1999, p. 55). In contrast, the Flemish public broadcaster has remained highly centralized over the years. There are five local radio centers that provide local information for one of the VRT radio networks, the rest of production being centralized in Brussels.