

UZBEKISTAN RIDES ON THE NEW FM RADIO WAVES

By Rustam Sadykov, reporter, Uzbekistan

Commercial non-governmental FM radio stations are popular now in Uzbekistan. One of the factors for their success is the absence of overt editorial censorship. However, no radio editor will let any ‘political error’ be broadcast on a show.

Four years ago, Uzbekistan saw the beginning of the first FM radio station ‘Grand’, which immediately won audience appeal by presenting a mixture of news and music programs, games, quizzes, and by offering listeners direct telephone links with the studio. This led to an influx of other stations. Today, the number of FM broadcasters has grown to seven, including the above-mentioned Grand, Sesame, Oriyat Dono, Ekho Doliny (Echo of the Valley), Uzbegim Taronasi, and Khamrokh. Almost all of them transmit their programs to the city of Tashkent and Tashkent province. The sole exception is Echo of the Valley, which broadcasts to the entire Ferghana Valley and Tashkent. The FM radio stations were founded by a number of organizations and agencies with various patterns of ownership, including some private ownership.

FREEWHEELIN’

The majority of the audience of all commercial non-government broadcasting are young people, school children, college and university students as well as young workers - a fact in no way accidental as FM news and music programming is tailored to young peo-

ple’s interests and tastes. Radio time is mainly devoted to music (predominantly popular), and interview and listener call-in programs.

Editor-in-Chief of Oriyat Dono Alexander Kudryabtsev, describing the way they are normally presenting news, said, “We offer news 12 times daily both in Uzbek and Russian. Every update is 80 percent fresh news.” The newscasts he said include two Uzbekistan-related economic news offerings, two world and home news transmissions, and two newscasts regarding culture. In addition, sports news programs are broadcast hourly. The team consists of skilled reporters. Not only do they draw information from the Internet but also make on-the-spot news reports aired via cell telephones.

The method of immediate and on the spot news presentation is what all commercial channels use – a feature making them stand out from state-owned radio. The only state structure working in a similar mode is the studio “Yoshlar” of Uzbekistan’s Broadcasting Company. Among their most popular programs, Kudryabtsev named live broadcasts of numerous games, one-time or serial, express lotteries and quizzes. A jazz quiz has recently been broadcast together

with the American embassy. There are a multitude of radio games offered in both Russian and Uzbek. Other radio stations produce similar programs too.

IT’S ONLY ROCK N’ ROLL

Polls show that commercial channels are extremely popular with young people. Some are fans prefer one station while others prefer to ‘surf on the waves’. “Personally”, says Timur Usmanov, 22, a Tashkent resident, “I like radio ‘Grand’, ‘Uzbegim Taronasi’, and ‘Sesame’”. He remarks that one can find a lot of thought-provoking material on FM channels. ‘Grand’, he said, offers news on technology. It would be nice if they transmit similar programs concerned with other fields of learning and art. For one, they could present information about cultural values in a form appealing to young people. There was a station transmitting a program called ‘Music of the Outgoing Century’. “I’ll never forget their serials featuring Elvis Presley, Freddie Mercury or the Beatles,” said Timur.

“I like Echo of the Valley,” said Nodira, a student of the Tashkent Oriental Studies Institute, and added, “There you will always find fresh news, nice music and no reruns. A great variety of music: folk, modern or classical. Everyone has a niche of one’s own – popular Uzbek singers Yulduz Usmanova or Kumush Razzakova; Elton John or ABBA and many others. You need not even buy audio cassettes

or CDs once you can freely hear your favorites on the radio.” However, the FM life is not as cloudless as it may seem on the face of it.

CROSS ROAD BLUES

To begin with, FM stations depend on their profits that hinges on their close work with advertisers and sponsors. Some do it better, some worse, but every commercial channel has partners it maintains cooperation with, constant or temporary. The absence of government financing seems to give FM radio freedom in planning information and music programs. Is it really so?

A former employee of ‘Sesame’, who asked to remain anonymous, said, “By and large, news editors or reporters would be responsible for newscasts they make. The material was also reviewed by the editor-in-chief. He was the person who said what could be aired and what could not. Whether you like it or not, you have to admit there was preemptive censorship, anyway.” According to the employee, there were instances of excising critical comments from interviews given by political scientists, cultural workers or educationalists. Only texts with antiseptic phrases would be allowed to go on the air. The journalist insists that no ‘political error’ could slip in also for reasons of self-censorship. Every time they were doubtful they would call the presidential or ministerial press service, where they got instructions as to what material they could broadcast or were to shelve. Those were mostly the cases of local news. World news programs

by and large would go through more smoothly.

Employees of the ‘Grand’ and ‘Echo of the Valley’ radio stations also shared this opinion. They noted they had an intuitive awareness of information the editor-in-chief would approve. They could also tell in advance what kind of items was not even worth presenting for approval.

A situation like this has a markedly negative effect on the quality and content of programming. That’s what many listeners say – mainly middle-aged and old people. They point to the dearth of political and economic items. “Along with news and entertainment programs, a more detailed information about home and international developments should be offered to young people,” says Muradkhoja, 49, a Tashkent resident, and adds, “I think news reports should be supplemented by short commentaries. Also, locally produced news standards are not up to the mark. Important local and world news comes to us from foreign, primarily Russian, television networks.”

STATION TO STATION

Yulia, 50, a listener from Tashkent, shares this opinion. She says, “In fact, there are no programs featuring interesting items dealing with vital political or other developments in Uzbekistan. Commercial channels should invite scientists, political analysts, specialists in other fields to present comments, at least brief ones, that would be interesting to young people.” As for the younger listeners, they are mostly keen on music rather than seriously concerned

about the news programming on state or commercial radio. Though senior citizens also listen to music on FM channels, there is no consensus with the younger listeners on quality.

Shoira, 50, said that “Commercial radio stations are indiscriminate in programming. All they broadcast is rap, techno, etc. - just transitory trends while professional singers, such as Yulduz Usmanova, Kumush Razzakova, Ziyod, the Yallah group will be popular for many years to come. Unfortunately, young people are not great lovers of classical music since their tastes are already spoilt.”

Be that as it may, a former employee of Grand said her professional background makes her feel optimistic about the future of FM channels. “First and foremost, we get feedback from our listeners. There are people who write letters to me personally, make calls to the editorial office and can even recognise us by our voice in the street.

“Even though the freedom the FM channels enjoy is curtailed, there is still room for creative endeavor. No matter who you are, a newscaster or a show host, you will still be able to translate your ideas into reality.

“And the number of commercial channels will surely increase in the near future. Nobody is afraid of competition since it stimulates your professional growth and development; it stirs up your imagination.

“As for the listeners, they’ve got at last a choice of tuning into any station they like best with a single turn of the dial.”