
UNIT 9 INTERACTIVE PROGRAMMES

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9.0 INTRODUCTION

A few decades ago, a well-known playwright, **Bertolt Brecht** observed that the one-way nature of a communication medium would condemn it to sterility. Over the years, every communication medium has introduced new features to take away the odium of being 'one-way' in nature and invest it with a two-way character to the extent possible. The newspapers regularly devote considerable space to letters to the editor from the readers to highlight peoples' reactions to events, happenings and the like. The periodicals have gone one step ahead by introducing schemes of prizes to encourage readers' feedback. In the case of the electronic media, the OB or outside broadcasting method helps the media persons to get out of their studio confines and interact with the audience. The radio medium offers large scope for interactivity with the common people. In this unit, we shall discuss the various aspects of interactive programming on radio.

9.1 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- appreciate the need for interactive programmes;
- describe the types of interactive programmes;
- explain the process involved in their production; and
- analyse their efficacy.

9.2 INTERACTIVITY IN RADIO BROADCASTS

To interact means, 'to facilitate a two-way flow of communication'. This could be between two persons in a face-to face situation or at a distance using tools of technology. Think of a situation in which you are listening to a talk by a specialist on a subject of your interest. At the end of the talk you may have some questions or thoughts in your mind that you would want to share with the talker. If you get an opportunity of asking or interacting, the subject or issue under discussion becomes more clear in your mind and you may like to apply that information or knowledge in your personal life. For example, you are listening to a programme on tree plantation and you are motivated by the programme to plant some tree saplings. You would like to know from where can you get the saplings. If you get the opportunity to ask the questions and get an appropriate reply, you will possibly go ahead and plant the desired saplings. However, if there was no such opportunity for interaction then the motivation may probably die down. The programme thus would have failed to get the desired result to inspire tree plantation and the objective of the programme would have remained unfulfilled. Therefore, interactivity is essential in any form of communication, especially when communication, radio communication in this case, is being used as a development tool. Interactivity has many facets and its scope is large. In the radio medium, it is useful not only in 'live' or pre-recorded broadcasts but also to:

- Know the audience
- Plan and design the programme
- Content formulation
- Ensure that the programmes are comprehensible, interesting and that message is clear;
- Know whether the desired objective is achieved and also to measure the impact of communication.

One of the important elements of broadcasting is planning. If broadcasts are to be effective, interactivity must begin at the stage of planning itself.

Interactivity in Planning

In Unit 17 of this Course, you will be familiarised with the concept of audience research. Both, formative and summative researches involve close interaction with the present and potential audience. Surveys and Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) are such interactive exercises of a researcher. The producer plans his/her programmes with reference to the communication needs gleaned from audience survey findings. This is an on-going exercise. The producer has to keep in constant touch with people of different strata of society to ascertain their needs and expectations. S/he looks forward to receiving their views and reactions to his/her programmes. At the conclusion of the broadcast of a series of programmes on a chosen subject, the producer can invite listeners' views or suggestions on the broadcast they had heard through an announcement. Very often, the suggestions serve as the basis for further programming.

This can be illustrated with an example. When a series of programmes on adolescents was about to conclude, the producer wanted to introduce a new serial retaining the same audience which was deeply involved in the serial. The listeners were asked what they would like to listen in the next serial. Announcements were made inviting suggestions from listeners and the response was overwhelming. A majority of the listeners wanted a serial on marriage problems as many of them were at the threshold of married life. This response made the decision of the producer easy. When the serial on marriage problems was introduced, it not only addressed the felt needs of the listeners, it also gave the impression that the radio station was sensitive to their needs.

Interactions with the potential audience are of great help in planning the content of the programme. A study of the available research literature can throw insight on contemporary issues which deserve extensive treatment in radio programmes. Focus group discussions also provide free and frank articulation of views and opinions of a representative segment of people. Such feedback is of immense value in designing programmes. To illustrate, before preparing the conceptual design of the serial on adolescents (referred to earlier) critical issues confronting them were identified. A series of group discussions and in-depth individual interviews with the target audiences in schools, homes, counselling clinics, and in drug de-addiction centres were arranged to record their impressions, grievances and views. During these interactions, it was felt that parents' viewpoint was vital to present a balanced view since many among the youth blamed their parents for not understanding their feelings, pressures and stresses. Problems posed by the youth and their parents were analysed by subject specialists and suggestions were offered.

Check Your Progress: 1

- Note:**
- 1) Use the space below for your answers.
 - 2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) What do you understand by the term 'interaction'?

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2) How is interaction with audience useful in planning radio programmes?

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9.3 TYPES OF INTERACTIVE PROGRAMMES

From the early days of radio broadcasting, producers have endeavored to involve the listeners and associate them in programmes. The development of technology and availability of miniaturised equipment have expanded the scope for producing different types of interactive programmes involving the listeners. Some of these methods are:

- Listeners' letters
- OB-based programmes
- Forum programmes
- Phone-in programmes
- Voice mail and E-mail based programmes
- Audio Conferencing and Radio Bridges

Let us discuss these in some detail.

9.3.1 Listeners' Letters

For a long time, interaction between the broadcasters and the audience was mainly through the medium of letters. There are two types of listeners' letters – solicited and unsolicited. When a radio station invites comments of listeners on specific programmes, and a response is received from them, these are known as solicited letters. In the case of unsolicited letters, listeners write on their own to the radio station to express their views and comments. Both types of letters are important for a radio station as they provide the station with valuable feedback of the listeners. Radio stations usually make a provision for broadcast of weekly/biweekly programmes of replies to listener's letters. The general pattern followed by radio stations is that one announcer reads excerpts from listener's letters and another announcer answers the points raised. However, some more innovative approaches are also been undertaken.

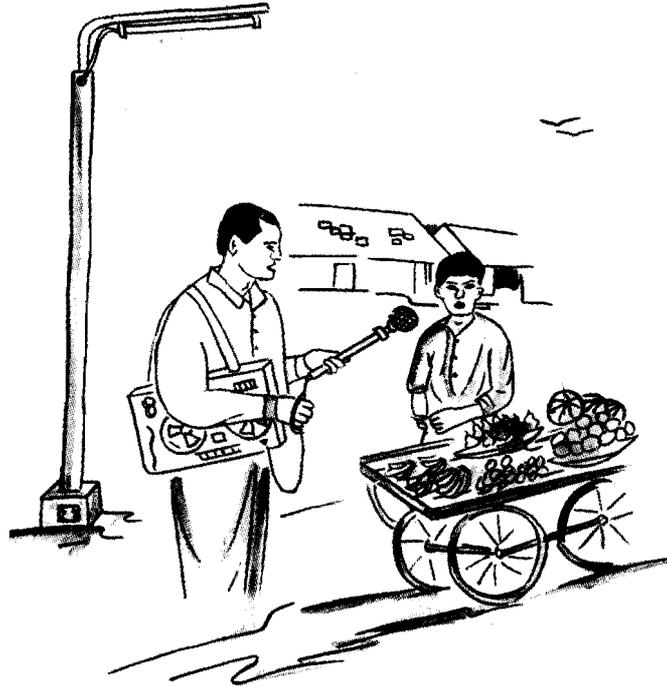
Generally, there is a considerable time-gap in listeners sending their letters and the radio station replying on the air. This gap is being bridged by e-mail facility which is being increasingly used by listeners to convey their requests, queries or feedback to the radio station. When the facility of voice mail was introduced, the listeners were asked to telephone their comments, suggestions or assessment of the programmes. The replies to listeners' programmes included comments of the listeners in their own voice.

The format of receiving communication from listeners was expanded to serve the interests of public service broadcasting. Listeners are now encouraged to send their queries on the day-to-day problems relating to family, health, law, inheritance and so on. The producer would approach experts in these areas to provide clarifications and advise the listeners. These are put together in an integrated broadcast programme.

One of the most popular formats of radio broadcasts is the 'listeners' choice'. Even at a time when the market is flooded with music cassettes and CDs, listeners write to radio stations on their choice of songs which they would like to listen. Of late, listeners at some centres have the facility to dial the radio stations, get connected to the producer or disc jockey and get the song of his/her choice broadcast immediately.

9.3.2 OB-based Programmes

Radio stations organise programmes outside the studios where the producers come into direct contact with their audience. These programmes are known as Outside Broadcasts or OB programmes. These are of different types: public functions, seminars or colloquia, etc. Some are in the form of features where a producer records views/opinions of the people connected with the topic of the feature. They are Vox pop type programmes. **Vox pop** is derived from Latin word Vox populi which means, 'voice of the people'. In such programmes the common people get access to the microphone to articulate their views and interact with the producers.



Common man being interviewed

Some radio stations arrange programmes in interior villages for dissemination of information on a given issue. The producer accompanied by two or three experts goes to a village where an interactive session with the local people is organized. During the course of one such programme, a chief engineer of electricity board was participating and explaining to the villagers the use of electricity to energise their irrigation pump sets.

While he was explaining to the villagers, there was a sudden drop in the voltage in power supply. The villagers pointed out that this was a regular feature which handicapped their drawing power for irrigation. The chief engineer did the investigation on the spot, located the fault and took prompt action to remedy the situation. It was the case of a radio programme solving a long-standing problem of the people.

“Students’ forums” are OB programmes which are organised in colleges and universities. These bring subject experts face-to-face with students and their interactions on subjects of interest to students are recorded. The subject chosen varies from academic and subjects of vital interest to the youth. The recording of the interaction is suitably edited for broadcast.

9.3.3 Forum Programmes

Radio stations provide a forum for voicing the grievances of the people. “People’s forum” is an OB-based grievance programme format. The producer identifies a subject agitating the minds of the people. S/he records the complaints/grievances of a cross-section of people in their own homes or workplaces. For example, if there is shortage of water supply in a particular town or city, the producer takes this up as a subject of grievances programmes. S/he contacts cross-section of the people and records their grievances. The recording is played back to the Mayor/the administrative head/concerned authority. Their reaction to the complaints and plan of the action is obtained. The people’s complaint and the administrator’s response is put out as a composite programme presenting both the sides of the issue.

Generally, morning information programmes broadcast from various radio stations in the country include a segment devoted to OB recordings of people’s grievances and the authorities’ response to these. ‘Zoon Dub’ was a popular programme of yesteryears broadcast from Radio Kashmir, Srinagar. The programme brought the people’s grievances to the notice of the government agencies. The Chief Ministers of some states also use the radio for ascertaining the difficulties being faced by people and take prompt action in resolving them.

“Phone-in” is a technique adopted by radio stations abroad for receiving listener’s requests for pop music items which are played immediately. In India the concept is catching up. ‘Phone-ins’ have been popular in our country not only for listening music but also for counselling services. The ‘phone-ins’ on health related subjects are more popular due to the benefit the listeners derive from counselling services offered. These are designed to provide immediate advice and guidance to listeners in the areas of immediate concern to them. A large number of listeners interact with the experts and get the counselling directly. If the subject of a ‘phone-in’ programme is ‘arthritis’, specialists in orthopedics and physiotherapy are brought to the studios. The subject is announced beforehand and the listeners are asked to telephone at the time of live broadcast and pose their problems to the specialists. A large number of listeners interact with experts and get the needed counselling directly. Based on the success and popularity of this format, radio programmers have expanded the scope of the programme to cover various areas including law, education, employment opportunities, etc. If listeners ask questions about matrimonial disputes, the dowry act, the divorce laws, the provision for alimony, etc, the legal experts provide them the answers immediately. Supplementary questions can also be asked to get further clarifications.



Listeners listening to an interactive programme

The phone-in technique can be used for innovative programming. To take an example, a radio producer was keen that truck drivers must get the benefit of the public service messages a particular radio station was putting out. A reporter was sent to a roadside restaurant where the truck drivers halted at night during their driving assignments. The reporter engaged them in conversation and asked them to mention the song they would like to listen to on the radio. When they indicated their choice of songs, he got in touch with the radio station on his mobile phone and conveyed what the drivers wanted to listen. Within a few minutes, the announcer played the first song to the delight of the drivers. The next song of their choice followed and along with it a message on AIDS which they listened along with the songs. The subsequent discussions revealed that the drivers got information on AIDS for the first time and understood the content of the message.

Once the confidence of the drivers was gained, the reporter then started collecting details of their lifestyles, habits, including sexual behaviour. While this was an extremely sensitive matter a small percentage among them did part with the required information. The drivers also reported that they often suffered from fatigue, backache, stomach upsets, cough, allergy, etc. Appropriate counselling was provided to them with the help of medical experts.

The phone-in technique has been used with considerable success by IGNOU in its radio counselling programmes through All India Radio. During the counselling, presentations are made by subject experts followed by a question-answer session. Students' queries regarding admissions, tests, assignments, results, fees, etc. are also taken up during the sessions. Those students who do not have a telephone connection are asked to send their questions by post to the respective Regional Centres. These are taken up in the subsequent programmes. However, it has been found that students often prefer to telephone from a public phone booth rather than write letters. This could be because they get instant replies and also hear their own voice over radio.



Questions raised by listeners, being answered by an expert at studio

The phone-in sessions are monitored by a researcher who notes down the telephone numbers of the callers. They are subsequently contacted to find out whether the caller was satisfied with the answer given or not. According to a feedback study, the phone-in counselling has been especially found useful by specific sections of the student's population, e.g., in-service personnel such as, nurses, primary school teachers, the visually challenged, women and poor students.

9.3.5 Voice Mail and E-mail based Programmes

While phone-ins can be used for interaction in 'live' programmes, voice mail and e-mail can be used for counselling. Voice Mail is akin to Post Box service available at post offices wherein a telephone number gets allotted as Voice Mail Box number. Listeners can dial the voice mail box number of the radio station and convey his/her message which is recorded. The radio producer retrieves the message and transfers it to an audio tape.

E-mail, as you may be aware is electronic mail sent through computers using the Internet. The radio stations have email address on which listeners can send emails. For this one need not own a computer. Email messages can be sent through the cyber cafes available in various towns and cities by paying nominal charges.

Voice mail or e-mail can be sent to the producer wherein the listener can state the questions for which s/he needs clarification from the experts. The listeners can e-mail his/her question to the producer even during the course of a 'live' programme and get the response from the expert in the same programme.

Every segment of listeners including women, industrial workers, farmers, youth and others for whom radio broadcast special programmes has the benefit of counselling through phone-in programmes. Apart from adults, children also seek radio counselling. In an interesting case, children participating in a radio programme asked the UNICEF expert how to behave when their parents quarreled in their presence. They also sought guidance how to manage their life when both the parents were employed and they were left alone at home.

9.3.6 Audio Conferencing and Radio Bridges

Audio conferencing is an extension of the phone-in facility. It involves the linkage of two or more radio stations through satellite or telephone lines. Experts in the studios of several cities are able to discuss a subject and the listener has the benefit of interactions with the experts from different places. The facility of audio-conferencing could be enlarged in the form of Radio Bridges in which apart from experts' participation, listeners could also telephone the radio station which is transmitting the programme from their residence and interact with the experts. To illustrate, a listener from Mumbai can telephone the radio producer at Delhi and seek clarifications from the experts in Kolkatta and all this happens in the same 'live' programme.

At the time of the presentation of the annual budget of the Union Government, radio stations arrange a Radio Bridge programme and announce the telephone numbers which the listeners can dial for participation. Any listener from any part of the country can participate in the interactive programme which usually includes the government functionaries connected with the central budget and economists at different centres. A large number of listeners including income tax practitioners, business men, exporters and students seek and secure additional information they want. Innovative radio producers have been trying to make use of technology for interactive programmes in different ways. Two examples of the use of technology for such programming are explained in the words of a producer:

You might be using mobile phones or pagers, but think of the times when there were no cell phones or pagers. How did people interact while on the move? They could not unless they decided to stop on the way and use telephones. Taking up the challenge, we decided to link people on the move in different modes of travel such as aircraft, train, ship and bus into a radio programme in the year 1983. The closed circuit communication facilities were already available on these sectors. In this programme, we chose an Indian Airlines flight moving from Madurai to Bangalore, a ship that was just leaving the harbour, a train which was departing from Madras Egmore and a state transport bus. The press was allowed to monitor the programme from the bus. We thought that if these people were able to interact in real time which can be broadcast, it will be 'Interactive Radio'.

Prof Alladi Ramakrishna, a mathematical scientist was invited as the moderator. In the bus, the press people saw the ship leaving Chennai harbour, then they went to the railway station. We had commissioned TV anchors to add glamour and credibility to the event. Suddenly on the day of the rehearsal everyone backed out thinking that using wireless frequencies for broadcast purposes will land them in trouble. The Inspector General of Police was requested to give three wireless sets and one antenna. We placed the antenna in All India Radio, one wireless set in the bus, the second on the train and the third on the ship to link the people. Except for a small hitch, wherein one electrical wire had a loose contact leading to minor disturbance in the conversation from the plane, the broadcast went smoothly. The 19th century technology was used in the 20th century to prove that interaction can take place even if people are on the move in different locations.

In another experiment, we wanted to use satellite technology for an interactive radio programme. In the year 1984 INSAT 1B was launched. There was criticism in the country that despite satellites being launched and SITE conducted as early as 1975, the ground segment was not ready to receive the signals. Keeping this in view, we planned to use satellite technology for a programme to be broadcast on 17th May, i.e. World Telecommunication Day.

In those days STD was difficult to get through. We gathered some students at the Telecom earth station in Leh, Shillong, Andaman Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep. Some students were also invited in Madras, Trivandrum, Bangalore and Goa. We tried to teach the students located at these distant places to sing Mahakavi Subramaniya Bharathi's song, 'Odi Vilayadu Papa'. Mr. M.B.Srinivasan, well known choral group leader sang the first line from Madras which was picked up by INSAT 1B. The lines of the song were then repeated by students of Leh who did not know a word of Tamil! The second line was taught to the students in Port Blair in Malayalam, the third line was taught in Hindi to students in other places and in English to students in Shillong. Thus four lines of Odi Vilayadu Papa were taught in different languages to students separated by thousand of miles, mountains and ocean. They all sang the song in unison which was picked up by satellite and relayed on the radio set, making the listener feel as if they were all singing together in one room!

Check Your Progress: 2

- Note:** 1). Use the space below for your answers.
2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) List the various types of interactive programmes.

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- 2) What do you understand by the term 'phone-in'?

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- 3) What is a 'radio bridge'?

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9.4 INTERACTIVITY IN PROGRAMME EVALUATION

In section 2.2 of this unit, we have stated that for effective broadcasting, interactivity must begin at the planning stage itself. However, sometimes programmes designed after a lot of discussion and consultation with experts may not find acceptance with listeners. This could be due to a variety of reasons. A pre-test survey can reveal the reasons for this. This methodology of pre-testing the programmes in the field before they are actually broadcast has been applied to a number of science communication initiatives to assess the utility, acceptability and appeal to the target audience. In pre-testing, prototypes of the programmes are played to a group of potential listeners and their reactions are recorded.

Pre-testing in the field is one way of evaluating the programmes for their content, clarity of message, and production values, etc. Another way of evaluating the programmes is to judge them during broadcast. You can do this by inviting listeners' response to provide you with the information you are seeking about your programmes, and also to help the listener understand the concepts. For example, you can design a quiz at the end of each programme and tell them in the beginning of the programme that you will announce questions in the end of each episode. They have to send the answer and the best respondents will be rewarded. Thus you can motivate the listeners to listen to the entire episode. You may involve them further by asking them to send in the possible questions: "What are the possible questions you could frame on this episode?" You can announce rewards for those whose questions matched yours.

In this process, you can make them reflect on what they gained from the episode. After a fortnight, when the responses are received, you can announce the names of the best respondent/s. Through this process, your target audience has started thinking and talking about the issues you have dealt with. In other words, you have sensitised them to certain issues you have presented in the programmes. This approach can be especially useful in programmes on developmental issues and education.

Check Your Progress: 3

- Note:** 1) Use the space below for your answers.
2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) How is pre-testing useful as a tool for both planning and evaluation?

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- 2) Describe one method of obtaining audience response?

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9.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have studied the concept of interactivity in programming. We have examined in detail the advantages of interactivity, the different types of interactive programmes and the characteristics of each type. Let us now recapitulate the important aspects. Interactivity is

important in planning as well as evaluation of programmes. Radio programming has come a long way from the early days of preparing programmes based on listener's letters to the stage of audio-conferencing and radio bridges connecting cities and even continents. Strides in technology have helped diversification and expansion of interactive programmes.

OB or outside broadcast facilitates the reach of the radio microphone to the common person whose views could be heard in a radio broadcast. The programme on public grievances provide administrators a feedback of their policies and help them to understand the problems of the general public and work out solutions. 'Phone-in' technique is useful for programmes which involve counselling. Educational institutions use the technique for helping students in the distance education mode to clarify their doubts.

Audio-conferencing and radio bridges are interactive programmes using advanced technology. They are able to connect persons in different locations and enable them to exchange views. The element of interaction in programmes has contributed to the revival of radio as a potent medium of mass communication in an era of convergence of technology.

9.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress: 1

- 1) Interaction means, facilitating a two-way flow of communication. This could be between two persons in face-to-face situation or through the use of technology. In radio programmes, interaction refers to the exchange of views between the broadcaster and the listener for mutual benefit.
- 2) A radio producer always looks for new ideas in programming. S/he interacts with a large number of people including specialists, intellectuals, artistes, writers and listeners to gather ideas for planning programmes. Interactivity also helps in understanding the listeners' needs.

Check Your Progress: 2

- 1) The different types of interactive programmes on radio include, replies to listeners' letters, OB-based programmes, audio-conferencing and radio bridges. OB-based programmes comprise features, documentaries, science gatherings, students forums and grievances programmes.
- 2) Phone-in provides an opportunity to the listener to get in touch directly with the producer and other participants in a programmes through telephone. It can be used by a listener for getting a particular song of his/her choice for inclusion in a broadcast or for getting clarification from an expert participating in a programme.
- 3) A 'Radio Bridge' connects listeners with those in the studios of two or more radio stations where specialists have been invited. In same programme, the listeners get the benefit of the views of experts located in different places with different perspectives and get a clarification from any expert located at any centre immediately.

Check Your Progress: 3

- 1) Pre-testing is done to get listener's feedback about the strength and weakness of a programme. The listeners evaluate the pilot programmes and after getting their comments, the producer ascertains whether his/her production is on the right track or whether it needs modification or improvement. Accordingly, suitable changes in the planning of the programme are made.
- 2) One of the methods of getting listener's feedback for an ongoing serial is to invite the comments of the listeners on the programmes broadcast by putting specific questions. The producer can design one or two questions and tell the listeners at the beginning of the programme that questions at the end of the programme would be announced. The listeners should send their replies and the best response can be awarded a prize.