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Sounds and Identity: The role of radio in community building

Abstract

The twentieth century is commonly recognized as the century of image. Many forms of visual communication emerged during the last hundred years, threatening the radio's triumph as a mass medium. However, maintaining a discreet presence in our lives, radio survived and is still a much-used medium. Although new technologies such as the Walkman and MP3 player "stole" music from radio, people have not given up on radio just yet.

Attractive, easy, and cheap, radio is in many communities the most important medium linking people to the global world. In the dense Brazilian Amazon, for instance, radio allows people to stay connected with the rest of the world. Supported by a very simple technology, radio is also based on a very simple language. Although experts and laypeople alike tend to announce the death of radio, they overlook the fact that radio has a more intrinsic place in everyday life than ever before. It is integrated into our mobile phones, our cars, and even some home appliances.

This article explores the role of radio in keeping communities linked together. It also aims to put into perspective the power that sound still has within a visual cultural environment.

Keywords: radio, sound, mental image, identity

Introduction: The power of sound in an image-focused civilization

When the Lumière brothers announced their first public screening of films, only a small number of people rushed to accept the invitation. However, the moving images – 10 short films of no more than 50 seconds each – had a tremendous impact on the public, which showed enormous interest for the new way of depicting reality. In terms of arts and entertainment, this first show constituted a promise of revolution. A few years were enough to make evident the effects cinema would have on popular culture. Aside from the changes

in the type of art consumption people sought most, the moving images meant a profound transformation in the visual representation of the world.

Regarding spectacle, the invention of motion pictures was something extremely challenging. Although only 33 people attended the first film session at Grand Café at Boulevard des Capucines, Paris, in 1895, cinema quickly became one of the most popular forms of entertainment at the beginning of the 20th century. Curious about this new image and fascinated by the fabulous miracle of cinematography, people were truly impressed by this mysterious medium registering human movement.

Though silent in its first phase, cinema required some type of sound since its infancy. Accompanied first by live musicians and sound effects, for 30 years cinema demanded the synchronized register of sound. Although attractive by nature, motion pictures would be incomplete without sound; more incomplete, actually, than sound would ever be without image.

During the entire history of radio, there were always voices pointing out the visual limitations of the medium. Those who believed that radio would not survive the advent of television have always believed the absence of image is the weakness of radio. Defined as a blind medium, radio nonetheless stayed alive without changing its original nature and resisting until the Internet era all visual innovations.

The 20th century is indeed the century of image. Ironically, it is also the century of radio. According to Laurent Gervereau, who wrote *Histoire du Visuel au XXème siècle*, our time should be defined as a time of accumulation of images in all forms and supports. Referring to this as the major phenomenon of the contemporary period, Gervereau points out "the exponential accumulation of all types of figurations, of all epochs, of all civilizations" (Gervereau 2010: 40). Gervereau divides the history of the 20th century into three different visual periods. The first is the period of image on paper, which concerns mainly the illustrated press, the invention of photography, and the golden age of picture postcards and posters; the second is the period of projection, which refers mainly to the period of cinema; and the third is the screen period that includes all kinds of screens (mainly televisions and computers).

The conversion of a culture of words into a culture of images is one of the most debated themes across the social sciences and humanities. Many contemporary authors, coming from diverse subject areas, have been discussing the effects of such a change of paradigm. From philosophy and semiotics to sociology and psychology, there is no research field that can ignore how current life is surrounded by images. Examining contemporary culture is to a certain extent synonymous of analysing our relationship with images. All spheres of social life

are today dominated in one way or another by the presence of images, which means that visual messages overlap verbal language.

Until the middle of the 19th century, images were almost exclusively limited to the realm of the arts, however. They were mainly confined to the art of painting, and therefore to the narrow group of people who had access to the artistic field. Even if we consider the scientific domain and the uses of some illustrations in books, we still could not think about images as productions available to everyone. The popularization of visual representations began only with the invention of photography and the wide diffusion of the illustrated press. At the beginning of the 1900s, pictures were starting to gain prominence throughout society. Furthermore, the miniaturization of cameras allowed the production of photos by amateurs. Additionally, the development of press techniques made possible the endless reproduction of graphic registers.

Picture postcards became very popular during the first decades of the 20th century. In a book in which he narrates the history of postcards in the last hundred years, Tom Phillips (2000) states that in the early 1900s postcards had a function similar to that of the phone call. Circulating massively, picture postcards contributed, as a very simple medium, to increasing the flow of images – that is to say they projected the visual imaginary of distant and unknown places and of people separated by distance, often for military service.

When radio appeared, some emergent forms of visual communication were already used for diverse purposes – interpersonal communication (cards), promotion of events (posters on theatre stars and spectacles), information (illustrated press), and entertainment (cinema). Unlike what some commonsense approaches may suggest, radio did not appear before image. Radio had a place in society alongside image since the very beginning. Thus, it would not be correct to say that image or visual media in general took radio's place in the media landscape. Rather, what we call the civilization of image did not emerge after radio's golden age. Some literature tends to report the history as if the current visual culture started only with television. However, we cannot ignore what came before television, which included many forms of visual communication that should be recognized as relevant precursors of current visual media.

Taking into account this synchronous emergence of audio and visual media, it becomes obvious that rather than competing with each other, radio and visual mass communication followed parallel trajectories through the media's recent history. The power of sound cannot consequently be construed as preceding the power of the image. While different by nature, the power of sound and the power of image evoke different senses and different sensitive relationships with the world. That is why radio has been coexisting with other media for almost one hundred years, maintaining a discreet although relevant presence

in everyday life. This chapter, which examines media history during the last century from this point of view, is founded on the supposition that the current dominance of images did not kill society's radio enchantment or even radio's potential to communicate.

1. Sound and imagination: The design of mental images

Despite these assumptions of the allegedly antagonist roles that radio and other media play toward one another, the truth is that they all used different strategies to achieve the same purpose: creating images of reality. As mentioned earlier, radio is usually defined as a blind medium, in the sense that it does not require any visual faculty to be consumed. However, as part of a media system whose main concern is to make subject matter visible¹, radio could not exist if its role was not or should not be to produce a way of looking at reality too. It is in fact a fallacy that radio is the opposite of image.

Based on sound alone, radio discourse has always searched for images or visual representations, similar to the ones provoked by painting, photography, cinema, or even other digital systems. Existing alongside the omnipresence and accumulation of images, and supported by limited resources, radio is mainly engaged with the power of the mind to create imaginative, although potentially real, images. Whether in journalistic or entertainment terms, radio narrative aims at activating imagination. Its central objective is using its particular language to generate images, whether imaginary or concrete. While describing reality, the speaker on radio wants his or her audience to imagine birds chirping and flying or water bubbling.

Sound is the source of image on radio. Defined by Armand Balsebre, in his classical book on radio language, as an "ordered, continuous and meaningful sequence of sounds made by people, musical instruments or nature and classified according to repertoires/codes of radio language" (Balsebre 2007, 20), a sound message imitates the expression of reality and creates a mental image. In an article focused on advertising on radio, Darryl Miller and Lawrence Marks assert that "sounds evoke mental imagery" and "the inclusion of sound effects can increase imagery activity" (Miller, Marks 1992: 339).

In semiotic terms, the same could be said of the word. As a matter of fact, verbal language has a visual nature, since its primary function is bringing to

¹ To make visible is here understood as being more than a window to the world. In tune with Bourdieu's thesis on the structuring character of discourse, we also understand that media discourse shapes a way of looking at reality. More than representing what happens, media promote a *mise-en-forme* of the world in the very French sense of the expression.

mind the memory, or the image, of the represented object. Replacing reality with signs, verbal language is based on the necessity of evoking a kind of mental visualization of something that is absent. When Saussure defined the linguistic sign, he considered it divided into two parts: an acoustic image, later classified as a signifier, and a concept, or the signified. Considering that the signifier evokes the signified, Saussure's sign theory suggested in a way precisely the capacity of verbal language to signify *in absentia* what can be seen and felt.

This aligns with the reality that media do not only represent. The idea of representation involves an assumption that something (or someone) is in the place of something (or someone) else. The way media in general and radio in particular are considered here invokes the idea of framing. Radio, more than any other medium, cannot reproduce a pre-existing image of the world. On the contrary, radio must suggest an image of the world that the imagination has the capacity to visualize.

The word is the fundamental expressive tool on radio; radio is by nature linked to the expressive power of the word (Oliveira 2011). Combined with all other acoustic signs, the word is the medium; the word is the message; the word is shape and substance, affection and intimacy. The word is therefore our identity. In regard to the seduction of the words, Alex Grijelmo (2002) says that words have a special perfume. He repeats Nietzsche's idea that each word has its own aroma. In speaking about the colour of the word, and its melody, Armand Balsebre (2007) also recognizes a magic dimension to radio narrative that is supported by the complex sensorial experience that words evoke.

A Portuguese radio journalist quoted by Meneses in the TSF² Style Book (2003: 45) says that "if the word loses its brightness, we will be killing what drove us to radio". Stating that the radio language should be creative, no matter its informative purpose, Fernando Alves identifies in the word the secret of radio. The poetry of audio media is, according to him, behind the voice of the speaker and is printed in the words chosen to "touch" the listener. The word is indeed the dominant plastic element in radio language. The word is what stimulates all senses in the listener. To see, to smell, to feel – all these senses are put together in the verbal language. That's why we can say that the word is inventive, and at the same time informative, persuasive, seductive, appellative, and even manipulative of feelings (Oliveira, 2011: 125).

Physical images are still missing from radio. Notwithstanding the strength often found in the verbal radio language, the power of the word does not design tangible images. Those provoked in listeners' minds engage their imaginations,

² TSF is a Portuguese news radio station, the only one that broadcasts news every half hour. In 2003, the first style book of the station was published, being until now the only one in the country ever written for radio.

fostering a creative spin on the interpretation of reality. Mental images conjured by listeners attach word and sound effects to imagination. According to Adam Clayton Powell III, "what can be imaged is almost more scaring, more intense, more vivid than the explicit images of a video or a film". Guy Starkey and Andrew Crisell, when talking about *Radio Journalism*, state that "what cannot be seen should be imagined, and to imagine is much more energetic than to see" (Starkey, Crisell 2009: 103). Earlier, in 1979, when he wrote *Radio als Hörkunst*, Rudolf Arnheim affirmed that the listener is more easily seduced by radio precisely because he or she can mentally complete what is missing in a radio broadcast (Arnheim 1980: 86).

Even though it is almost impossible today to separate radio from other media, the truth is that, by nature, radio in traditional terms has only one language: sound. However, due to its increased combination with other media in the cyberspace, radio is becoming a hybrid medium. There is still no consensual classification for the renascence of radio on the Internet. Cébrian Herreros points out that there are already some labels with which to refer to this phenomenon, but none seems to clearly define radio on the web. "Webradio", "cyberradio," and "radio on the Internet" tend to refer to different models of radio broadcast through the World Wide Web. When we opt for one of these radio formats, we know that we are listening to radio that has been mixed with other languages (i.e., pictures or film). Sound is, in most cases, relegated to second place. Ironically, although the web has the advantage of taking radio broadcast all over the world without any boundaries, the web is probably killing the intimate relationship that radio has always had with imagination by offering a kind of "visual translation" of what radio used to broadcast from the "dark room."

2. Sound and emotion: From live broadcast to the intimacy of the voice

Although communication studies have an almost one-hundred-year history, which means they are more or less contemporary to the radio age, audio media have always been neglected by academics. There is already a long tradition of research on the impact of the press on audiences, and after the 1960s, many studies were initiated on the impact of television on viewers. Radio, in comparison, seems to have always attained less attention from researchers. Eduard Pease and Everette Dennis have mentioned radio as the forgotten medium in a book with this title (1995). As discreet in the research field as in our lives, radio has not been sufficiently considered and valued in terms of its contribution to the current media landscape and contemporary society. Many authors agree on this point. Denis McQuail explained in his *Theory of Mass Communication*

that television put radio out of sight. As a matter of fact, television appeared precisely when communication studies were being widely introduced in many universities, meaning that young researchers directed the spotlight to the most recent medium. In spite of its social and cultural relevance, radio remained in the shadows.

However, numerous factors justify a scientific interest on radio. On one hand, many sociologists' and philosophers' theories on the concept of time, and the way people experience time in postmodern culture, have roots in the technology of radio. On the other hand, contemporary debates on the turning point from an ideological to a sensological society might be recognized as being to a certain extent based on the radio's nature related to the idea of intimacy. Finally, there was already in radio, before any other modern media, a direct relation with identity and a feeling of community.

Paul Virilio is commonly known as the philosopher of velocity. He inspired many authors of media studies to reflect on the impact of new technologies on the way people perceive and feel time running. Although greater effects might be recognized for television and the World Wide Web, the truth is that the transformation of the understanding of time started with the hertzian medium. Radio was indeed the first wireless medium, which gave it a tremendous technical power. It was also the first medium capable of allowing live reporting, which at the beginning constituted an advantage over television. Furthermore, early on, radio opened channels of direct interaction with the public by inviting audiences to participate in the broadcast, which put it in the front line of the debates on participatory communication. Radio was also the first medium to diffuse last-minute news, which made it the mentor of the paradigm of urgency that administrates our societies.

With permanent technological innovations incorporated into its framework, radio preceded most recent media in a kind of revolution in the concept of time. The simultaneity of production and reception increased the pressure of knowing what was happening. Thus, the expression "radio is the first one to give the last news" took root. This perspective emerges also in radio style books, which say that even when radio journalists do not have complete information on a topic, their priority should be to inform and then, when possible, to confirm and complete the information with details. This is a strategy copied later by television and more recently by cyberjournalism.

Aside from this relationship with time, radio is singular in relation to how it connects people with audio media in general. In the past, people used to sit together around a radio receiver to listen to a program. Today, radio is not that big of a device. It actually comes integrated into our cars and some home ap-

pliances. From this point of view, radio is a privileged medium in terms of intimacy with listeners³. A Portuguese media critic, José Pacheco Pereira, noted several years ago that devices are becoming *biologized* in the sense that they are more and more "integrated" into our bodies (headphones fit almost inside our ears, for example). This means that media have acquired a profound intimacy with us, which in a certain way radio potentiated since its very beginning.

A hot medium, in McLuhan's words, radio is also generally referred to by practitioners as a passionate medium. Those who work for a radio station tend to speak about their work as something more than a job. Journalists of any medium tend to have at least some passion for their profession. However, radio journalists or entertainers have more than an attraction for reporting news. They also have a singular appeal for radio as a medium. There is a certain passion for the microphone, for the mystery of a faceless voice, for the warm contact established with the audience. Associated with the technical characteristics of radio, this feeling lends radio language a greater sense of emotion.

Although it would be an exaggeration to include radio language in the sphere of other artistic languages such as paint or sculpture, Rudolf Arnheim dared to consider it the eighth art, which justifies his book's title on the aesthetics of radio (*Rundfunk als Hörkunst*, 1980). Conceiving radio as the art of listening, Arnheim shed light on the idea that radio language must be considered as a set of artifices, which is to say that radio language involves as much natural expression as it does careful production. Apparently spontaneous, radio discourse is often the result of the hard work of selecting and combining words and sounds. It is this appearance of artlessness that makes radio so attractive on one hand, and so effortless on the other.

Technical books on radio production specify that the success of audio transmissions depends on the rhythm of the sound wave, the fluency of the discourse, the simplicity of the words, and the spiral technique in what concerns meaningful narratives production of the narrative. Aware of the natural distraction of the public while listening to radio – as audiences usually listen to this medium while performing simultaneous activities, giving this medium a lack of exclusivity – practitioners know that radio needs to be simple and well-paced to effectively create bonds between radio practitioners and the audience.

³ Radio appears integrated in shower devices and seems to come from the walls, from circuits of sounds that are seamlessly incorporated into the basic structures of life. Radio was actually the first medium selected to be part of personal objects such as the mobile phone. Today this tendency is generalized to at least the television, but radio pioneered the concept of a medium being integrated into spaces of intimacy. A potentially permanent companion, radio is a kind of background sound of the entire daily life: from the bedroom to the car, radio is everywhere in a very discreet way.

Football reports provide one of the best examples of the strong relationship that can be formed between radio practitioners and their audience. In all information sectors, radio journalists are concerned with "giving to see", but no such effort matches that of a football match. That is the reason why some people prefer to watch the match on TV while listening to the report on the radio simultaneously. As Alcudia Borreguero says, "in particular during sport transmissions, radio narrative converts these moments in spectacle" using extremely vivid and expressive language (Alcudia Borreguero, 2008, 72). Trying to "put people in the place of the event", radio journalists and animators tend to recreate, as suggested by Armand Balsebre, "situations, ambiances, sensations, that is to say, to design audio images" (Balsebre 1994).

Adopting a specific grammar and syntax, radio language aims at, as stated before, generating pictorial representations. For this reason, its codes of expression aim at a double function, that is to say a communicative function and an aesthetic function. As a consequence, radio language results from the signifier elements that try to create sensations of the world by articulating words and music as well as sound effects and even silence. Likewise, as discussed, these sensations are not only audio sensations; they are also potentially visual.

From Rudolf Arnheim to contemporary researchers, a general belief prevails that asserts radio message should not only be objective, but also admit some warmth, while adding semiotic value to the audiosphere. Pragmatic handbooks on radio language explain that radio demands objective and direct words. This political economy of words fosters an unpretentious tone that ensures the listener's consent to some emotion in the tone of the program, which in turn strongly affects the listener's engagement.

Radio is also intimately related with music, serving as the medium that most intensively expresses the connection between music and communication. In promoting musicians and singers by repeatedly airing productions of the music industry, radio engages in the artistic stimulation of the sense of hearing in a way that no other media does. Thus encompassing the boundary between objective language and the aesthetics of sound production, radio invites the listener to partake in a unique experience of intimacy.

3. Sound and identity: Radio and the sense of community

When a radio practitioner talks with his or her audience, calling each audience member "dear listener", as is typical in Portugal, a medium of proximity is being produced. There is more than a relationship with a mass of listeners; it

is almost an interpersonal relationship that is established between radio professionals and listeners⁴. This kind of relationship is the beginning of a community.

As stated before, the usage of emotion as a discursive strategy in radio also has the function of stimulating imagination; that is to say, of configuring reality, shaping it, and creating social relationships. Silvia Jiménez Martín suggests that "the more the information is passionate and invokes feelings, the more the audience's sensibility is stimulated to establish affective relationship with the protagonists" (Martín 2008: 94). This is why Armand Balsebre asserts that an audio message has a certain magical dimension. Eduardo Meditsh makes a similar point when he states that "radio communication has many components that refer to a universe exceeding rationality" (Meditsh 1999: 17).

By mediating the relationship between the public and a kind of audio reality, radio forms part of the contemporary audio environment that makes up part of people's daily lives, helping to define their lifestyle. A great range of sounds configures our everyday atmosphere: the sounds of the computer, the mobile phone ring, the lift arriving at our floor, the train. Besides the sounds of nature, this set of mechanic jingles defines our daily actions and builds a kind of audio memory. Radio creates these daily sounds while also celebrating both the ability of sound to stir people and the expression of the musical soul of the people. Radio is, therefore, the register of a kind of an acoustic identity of the listeners. To choose a radio station to listen to is, in this sense, to select the convergence of community and individual identity.

Although in a global media system other media tend to threaten the place of radio, radio still holds substantial power in community building within some geographic and sociological contexts. In many countries, radio is still the most widely consumed medium. According to the director of Radio Mozambique, for example, radio broadcast reaches almost 60 percent of the country's population while television reaches just over 20% of the people⁵. In some communities where there are still many illiterate people, radio is the single medium capable of getting people informed. This means it would not be mistaken to consider radio as the most generous medium: It does not require formal education to be understood, it does not demand electric power to be received (small receivers working with batteries are enough), people do not have to pay to listen to it, and it is ecological. Radio is at once the medium that most stimulates imagination, and

⁴ Some radio programs have historically become particularly famous in many countries because of the kind of relationship created between the practitioner and the listeners who would call in to the station to be part of the broadcast.

⁵ The main problem in some countries like Mozambique is that electric power net still does not cover the entire country. So besides the poor levels of life of the people there are basic structures still missing which makes radio more accessible than other traditional media as the press or the TV.

the one that least discriminates – it does not distinguish between listeners by their economic condition or their educational level.

Because it is technically the most accessible medium, in some poor regions of the world, radio is a fundamental instrument for increasing the promotion of public health, the diffusion of essential information, and the cultural stimulation of the local community. Likewise, radio is also a strategic means of promoting the exercise of a more engaged citizenship.

However, the role radio plays in community building is not only obvious in less developed countries. Experiences with so-called community radios developed in countries such as Spain and Brazil provide evidence for how radio is useful in creating spaces of socialization. Some studies, especially in Brazil, have been demonstrating the significant role that radio plays in contexts like *favelas*, the poor districts that surround big cities in Latin America. Andrea Medrado, who studied a particular case of community radio in a Brazilian *favela*, concluded, in her Ph.D. research (2010), that radio plays an important role for these local communities. Once in her case study, “radio represented the pace to which it beat to”. According to her, “radio was what kept the people, the ideas, and the social dynamics, which were often communicated through sounds and music, circulating” (Medrado 2010: 264).

Furthermore, new forms of community are emerging with the technical complicity of radio. ‘Rádio ás’, for example⁶, was created in 2011 as a community and inter-municipal web radio. Three cities from three Portuguese speaking countries (Portugal, Cape Verde, and Brazil) participate in this online project, which has a mission to reinforce the spirit of community and cooperation between these countries. Offering shared programming for these countries, the radio producers invite people to contribute to the broadcast by voicing ideas for enriching the project. By taking advantage of the web’s potential, radio maintains its original role of building community through its listeners. It fulfils this purpose within this project, for instance, by linking different places in the world through the sonority of the Portuguese language.

Researchers in general recognize that, more than it poses a threat, the Internet provides an opportunity for traditional radio to reinvent the way it has always aided in community building. It might be said that the history of radio on the Internet is still recent, and no one knows exactly which model will become a permanent part of this evolving medium. However, there seem to be reasons to continue looking at, or listening to, radio as a promising medium in terms of fostering a sound neighbourhood configuration.

⁶ <http://www.cm-aveiro.pt/radioas/>

Final remarks: The aesthetics of listening

Unlike what has already been said about other media, radio is traditionally mentioned as a modest and inoffensive medium. At the end of the 19th century, some intellectuals criticised the press, considering it a kind of minor literature devoid of quality. During the 1990s, there was a strong public debate on the violence broadcasted by television. Then some studies insisted that television is responsible for child obesity and for cultural sedentariness in general. Today there is a general awareness of the danger the Internet may represent. No such negative discourses are known about radio. Accepted as a simple and delicate medium, radio is still the background sound of many workplaces as well as many public places like shopping centres.

Related to the aesthetic pleasure of listening, radio's position in the media landscape can probably still be defined in the intersection of art and communication. From information to music, from the sound of everyday objects to the tone of a voice, radio is still the most adequate medium for re-establishing the culture of listening, which has been almost lost in the current visual culture.

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