Chapter 18

Comedy shows: Humour, crisis and the resilience of radio

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Abstract

Being a part of many radio stations’ programming, comedy shows are also available on radio websites as audio on demand. Often topical, many of these shows are based on everyday news. With a strong aesthetic sense, comedy shows are often brash as well as funny, but they can also play an important role as a barometer of social, political, economic and cultural life.

The history of comedy shows on radio in Portugal began in the 1940s. Since that time, humour has been inspired mainly by news and current affairs, not only in terms of content but also in terms of format. Many comedy shows parodied news genres. Like news bulletins, these shows normally feature an anchor who presents the comedic news. The scripts for these programmes are written in a satirical way and present a caricature of society.

This chapter will identify some characteristics of comedy shows on the radio, consider the relationship between comedy shows and real news output and reflect on the role humorous narratives may play in contributing to the resilience of radio.

Keywords: radio comedy, humour, news parody, spectacle, Portugal
Introduction: the frequency of laughter

One of the most successful radio genres is probably comedy. Comic sketches on the radio are almost as old as radio itself. The first such programmes had begun in the United States by the end of the 1920s. Since then, radio comedy has been part of many stations’ programming. Considered by Henri Bergson (1983) as inseparable from the human being, laughter is today one of the most important ways of reflecting on daily life. According to Verena Alberti, ‘laughter and comedy are literally indispensable to know the world and to apprehend reality’ (2002: 13). Every society of every epoch had its own forms of humour and its own forms of satire, comedy demonstration and public exhibition. Many different comedy genres, from comic theatre to stand-up comedy, have appeared during the history of radio. Most use the same approach, making fun of situations, people, historic episodes and political strategies, while simultaneously provoking thought and stirring opinions. Taken as a version of the ordinary, worldly understanding of our social life (Meredith 2014), comedy performances are much more than entertainment formats. Almost sometimes using the unrealistic, their main goal is to portray real life. If in the past, comedy shows were, as with all other forms of art, intended for certain groups in society, such as more educated and wealthier people, today, humour formats are widely targeted at all social groups. To a large extent, due to the appropriation of this kind of discourse by the mass media, comedy plays and humourous sketches are nowadays among the most-consumed media productions. Generally defined as ‘laughter-provoking’, these narratives have a particular characteristic on radio. That is, their power is exclusively found in the audio, in both words and sound effects. Despite such an apparent disadvantage, they are very popular.

In Portugal, for example, humour is almost an obligatory genre on national radio stations. In some commercial radio programmes, even the language used by the entertainers is deeply influenced by humour styles, as a way of making audiences feel good while listening. Detailed studies of specific audiences of humour programmes on Portuguese radio are unknown. Marketed, the company that produces audience data for industry, does not publish information detailed enough to show genres. Instead, radio stations seem to intuitively feel that listeners like this kind of programme. In general terms, all the national stations have slots in their programming dedicated to humour, usually short sketches. These programmes are, in almost all cases, also available on the stations' own websites, or on other audio-on-demand platforms, where they can be downloaded to be listened to outside of the broadcast schedule. The popularity of these formats is evident, though, in their being widely shared on social networks, where links to this kind of audio content are exchanged between potential new listeners. Sometimes people linked in these networks comment on excerpts too, contributing to a wider distribution by triggering a viral effect across the country.

Compared to comedy programming on television, where programming also includes comedy narrative genres, humour on the radio is normally in shorter bursts and very often broadcast on a daily basis. More fleeting than the television programmes, the humour sketches on Portuguese radio have, however, a particular dynamic and seem to have the capacity to win over audiences. Aesthetically pleasing, with a vivid structure and direct references to current political, social, economic and cultural news, these sketches often correspond to the audiences of the stations. Quite intentionally, a form of social and political criticism, humour is in various ways one of the most produced genres on radio. The genre exploits to the full the creative power of the word and the significance of sound. This chapter will consider the frequency of laughter of two Portuguese national radio broadcasters and, taking two specific programmes, identify the main characteristics of humour shows. This approach has three main objectives. Firstly, to determine whether there is a narrative pattern to comedy sketches, secondly to understand what the framing of these programmes is within the stations’ programming and finally to ask what is the Portuguese sense of humour. Putting comedy narratives into perspective, both in general and in the specific context of radio, has a special relevance in the current creative industries. Today, much more concerned with spectacle and entertainment, creative industries represent, both in economic and social terms, the level of innovation societies are experiencing. The analysis is focused on the connection between comedy narratives and programming strategies. At the same time, the examination of two particular programmes aims to provide some insight into the interpretation of humour as an expression of a joyful culture, delivered to give pleasure and to cause laughter. As signs of the times, and emblems of what Guy Debord identified as the ‘spectacle society’ (1995), comedy sketches are content-oriented, for provoking thought and nurturing affective connections, but also representative of the parodic and satirical character of post-modern societies.

A history of Portuguese comedy on radio

The history of comedy on radio in Portugal begins in the late 1940s. In 1912 a weekly satirical newspaper of significant national impact, A Bomba (The Bomb), was published for about three months. With explosive and audacious headlines, this publication was provocative and brave, not only in its textual content but also in the illustrations, (very often caricatures,) published on its pages. Many years after the last edition, this newspaper inspired the creation of the group Parodiante de Lisboa, or Parodists of Lisboa, a group for comedians that produced some iconic programmes for Portuguese radio. Parada da Paródia (Parody Parade) and Graça com Todos (Joke with All) were probably the most significant productions broadcast by the group. According to their website, Parodiante de Lisboa first aired in March 1947. At first, the group was on air once a week, starting with Parada da Paródia, which was broadcast by Rádio Peninsular on Tuesdays at 20:00. Later, with the programme Graça com Todos, the Parodiante de Lisboa extended their activity to new audiences in Porto, Madeira, Angola and Mozambique, as well as various foreign radio stations dedicated to expatriates. The group was populated by some of the most popular comedians, who later became very well-known television stars. The Parodiante de Lisboa distinguished themselves because they produced different kinds of comedy programmes, including soap operas, especially for radio, although they also produced shows for television. In August 2005, the Portuguese daily newspaper Diário de Notícias published a special feature on the parodists, saying they had captured the imagination of Portuguese people over 30. In the publicity for the programme, the newspaper revealed that the group had always used the same approach to writing comedy: they would open the newspapers and news magazines to get ideas from each day’s news and current affairs.
At around the same time, there was also a programme called A voz dos ridículos (The Voice of Ridiculous), which was broadcast for the first time in April 1945. This show came out of a proposal aimed at "transposing" to radio a humorous column someone from Porto used to publish in the newspaper Os ridículos (The Ridiculous) entitled Piadas à moda do Porto (Jokes Oporto’s Way).” Some historical notes gathered from the press of that era state that, in the first episodes, the programme was composed of funny songs and words, which were biting, sometimes caustic, and had above all a function of social criticism. Today, A voz dos ridículos is still on the air and is broadcast by a regional radio station in northern Portugal. The programme retains almost the same structure of the first broadcasts, with jokes, satire and local comments on daily life. Running for about seventy years, the programme is not only a reference point for comedy programmes in Portugal but probably the oldest regular programme on Portuguese radio that is still on the air. This chapter will not pretend to present a detailed genealogy of radio comedy in Portugal. The history of such productions is extraordinarily rich, made of abundant examples of sketches that, commenting on daily life, used the language of laughter to create characters that became symbols of certain generations. Some of these characters were born in the newspapers, in the caricature press where the burlesque caricatures of some public personalities were drawn. They were later transformed into oral language, and in some cases, they were also taken further to the small screen in television shows. Classics of the Portuguese media scene, many of these programmes contributed to the consolidation of a Portuguese style of comedy programming. With a strong affective connection with the audiences, mainly to the period preceding the spread of television in Portugal. This kind of production was then resurrected in the last few years, sometimes appearing in advertisements. Icons of the creative industries, they were used for marketing campaigns, having a further impact that is not picked up by audience statistics. According to Jorge Guimarães Silve, who publishes the blog A Rádio em Portugal (Radio in Portugal), “comedy programmes are the last blast of the golden age of radio in Portugal.” The Parodians de Lisboa were on the air for many decades. The public imagination of the second half of the twentieth century is strongly associated with this memory because they became national icons through the national radio stations Rádio Clube Português and Rádio Renascença. During their history, this group of comedians produced some radio dramas, in addition to the brief comedy sketches. Their wide experience, the group can today be taken as an inspiration for much modern comedy, such as that of Produções Fictícias, a Portuguese company appearing on radio and television as well as theatre, cinema and the press.

Satirical news or reflections of real life?

Although today there are more programmes, and therefore more diversity, than in the past, one great difference between the early forms of radio comedy and those of today is that, unlike then, today comedy is more often produced as monologues. Productions de Lisboa was a group effort, with dialogues between the parodists, who used to play different characters. Today, however, daily comedy sketches on radio are more focused on one single comedian or on a dialogue between two of them, and very often they are celebrities who are already well known from television and advertisements. Angel Nieto agreed, adding that: "Comedy programmes on the radio used to exist in very different formats, although almost all in tune with the drama genre. Comedians usually played one or more characters. Monologue was not used like it is used today" (2008, 106). So, performances of comedians, whether broadcast shows or individual comedians, some distributed through networks. For this research, the programming of two national radio stations was examined: the public Radio Nacional de Portugal (RTP) or TSF. According to audiences in Portugal, with a weekly reach of 48.8 per cent and a 36.4 per cent share of listening. Over the same period, audiences were lower for the two stations analysed for this research: TSF registered a weekly reach of 9.4 per cent and 4.4 per cent share of listening, while RTP 1 had a weekly reach of 11.3 per cent and a 7.1 per cent share. Nevertheless, stations of the TSF group focus more on music with presenter links and entertainment. Their comedy output seldom consists of individual, built programmes. By contrast, choosing to analyse RTP 1 and TSF for this study reflects a decision to analyse stations which are based on news content rather than entertainment.

RTP 1 is one of the three main national broadcasters. It is part of the public service broadcast group and is the station most expected to follow principles established in the public service contract, which states that the group should include a pluri-ethnic broadcaster, with diversified options and a strong informative component, as well as some entertainment, targeted to serve the majority of the population. It should be aware of the regional realities and engaged with the broadcasting of Portuguese music, Portuguese singers and composers, as well as popular culture and sport. With very diversified programming, which encompasses news programmes, cultural shows, the showcase of Portuguese music, literature and such specialised musical genres as jazz, in 2013 this broadcaster had only one comedy programme. Portugalis is presented as a comedy magazine, which combines the main news stories with other different forms. Amusingly, the text introducing the programme announces that: "what they [the presenter] say is all invented, with vigour and jocularly exemption." Produced by Parodias de Lisboa, the programme sets out to satirise the news itself and genres ofmediated news. The script includes traffic information, in a bulletin entitled as bate (It Crashed), and a public opinion slot called Gesto muito do teu programa (I Love Your Programme). There is also futurology, within a segment called Previsões (Current Forecasts). Portugalí is a three-minute programme - the producers say it can also be four minutes: "if many things happen" - broadcast every weekday in the morning and at lunchtime, which is of course prime time for radio in Portugal because it is also drive time, at least in the main towns and cities. Being at the forefront of RTP 1’s programming, Portugalis features two comedians whose purpose is to sum up Portugal in three minutes. Adopting the register of a news bulletin and presented by two different voices, this programme is a funny take on the day’s news. It picks up some real events in a satirical way, and sometimes even in an unrealistic way. The format is pseudo-informative since the programme presents a kind of satirical caricature of some public figures as well as other media programmes. In this sense, Portugalis produces a discourse that might be labelled as meta-discourse. Specially inclined to treat everyday news in a mocking way, the programme is consistent with the profile of the station. If news constitutes a strong component of the
programme, at least seven features might define some trends in this genre: 1) the source material being news and current affairs, 2) the emoluation of journalistic media genres, 3) the reinterpretation and caricature of political and social agents, 4) the leg-pulling over current events, 5) the biting critical nature of the humour, 6) the objective of provoking a critical stance concerning social and political news stories and 7) the creative capacity to make people laugh at their own lives. Today, adapted to new lifestyles and to a more complex society, contemporary radio comedy programmes in Portugal follow some traditions that have shaped several comedic narratives since the 'Parodiões de Lisboa'. The focus on episodes of everyday life and on the public social and political agenda is probably a tendency of all forms of humour. Today, as in the past, these programmes show how risible some news is and how reality is often experienced as a spectacle.

Conclusion

According to Alison Ross, comedy is always something related to '...an ambiguity, or double meaning, which deliberately misleads the audience' (2005: 7). In Simon Critchley's opinion, '...comedy is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality' (2002: 1). This is what radio comedy shows still have in common with stage comedy. Besides, not just as in the past, there is in comedy something that comes mainly out of the way words are articulated. This may be why comedy is so suited to aural media and why '...radio became a widely popular vehicle for humour' (Hovig, 1990: 5). Comedy is related to crisis by nature. Crises of moral values, political crises or economic crises are very inspiring for comedians. Every era has its own crisis. Thus, comedy is intrinsic to history. It represents the capacity a certain society has to laugh at itself, and it consists of a kind of criticism that is above the capacity of producing a joke. Bergson considered that comedy signifies a 'diversion of things'. He explained that: 'Comicality can be defined as a diversion of things, like the individual comicality is also due to a certain diversion of the person' (1983: 50). Which does not mean comedy is outside reality. Diversion is otherwise a way of interpreting it. Sometimes more destructive than constructive, comedy is meant to work as a way of dismantling and disconcerting, being in all these forms an expression of excess.

Contemporary societies have been described as excited but depressive. Comedy is one of the most significant expressions of such a contradiction. By mixing carefully chosen words, sound effects and the use of the human voice, comedy on radio completes, in some ways, the companion function this medium performs for many people. It reinforces the power and the resilience of radio. Besides engaging listeners in mainstream broadcast radio, comedy programmes have been very successful in attracting audiences on the internet who comment on and share extracts. If comedy can provoke laughter, stimulate thought and build audiences, then radio comedy might well deserve to be recognised as a language that entertains but remains essentially radio.
Chapter 19

Noise, soundplay, extended radio: *Bugs & Beats & Beasts* as an example of resilience in the German *Hörspiel*

**Ania Mauruschat**

**Abstract**

This chapter highlights *Bugs & Beats & Beasts* (1999) by Andreas Ammer and Console to explore the development of the special German radio art *Hörspiel* through soundplay and even beyond towards the concept of ‘extended radio’. It argues that the unique openness of the *Hörspiel* as a special kind of radio art makes it possible to respond almost instantaneously to cultural and technological transformations and contributes to the evolution of the medium of radio in doing so. Consequently this soundplay was able to dramatically articulate the rise of the network society, its swarm logic, and the evolution of the medium at a time long before these significant changes were understood by a wider public. It did so by using ‘noises’ in different meanings and pushed the resilience of the medium of radio forward on three levels, aesthetic, technological and spatial.

**Keywords:** noise, *Hörspiel*, extended radio, network society, Germany