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Rádio Ás, a Community Web Project

Stanislaw Jedrzejewski and Madalena Oliveira

THE COMMUNITY NATURE OF RADIO

The idea of community is usually associated with radio today in the context of what Bart Cammaerts (2009, 635) classifies as a “third type of broadcast, namely participatory radio, complementary to both commercial and public media.” Following Ellie Rennie (2006, 3), community radio corresponds, as all other forms of community media, to non-profit media that provide “community members with an opportunity to participate in the production process.” For the International Association for Media and Communication Research, which supports a research group on Community Communication, this area includes media that originate from, circulate and resonate with the sphere of civil society.¹

Although in formal terms this taxonomy corresponds to how radio stations are seen from a political economic viewpoint, the relationship between radio and community in a wider approach is much more deeply rooted in this medium’s ‘temperament.’ Unlike the press, the focus of radio is not exclusively on the transmission of information. Radio is therefore much more a means of communication than it is a means of information, notwithstanding its favourable position towards the instantaneous dissemination of news. Information is part of the communication process because it is the formal content of a communicative situation. According to Shannon and Weaver’s theory (1949), information is what circulates in the flow of communication between the source and the receiver. But radio is no longer only the transmission channel invented by Marconi. Radio is communication in the sense that communication is contact, relationship and interaction, sharing not only ideas and information but also emotion, feelings, and sensations. Comprising all these actions, radio has no other spirit but to build communities, here defined according to Martin-Barbero’s (1993, 29) understanding, as close and concrete human ties and by a collective identity.

At the beginning of radio broadcasting, in the 1920s and 1930s, families and neighbours used to get together around a radio set to listen to shows, music and theatre. There was a capacity of radio to aggregate people and
give them motives to extend their conversations. In other words, in its golden years, radio favoured the conditions for preliminary forms of current media communities.

With the diversification of commercial radio stations and their technological advancement—which created ever smaller radio sets—listening to radio individually became increasingly frequent. Perhaps some working contexts provide an exception to private listening. But the concept of community was not erased from these changing habits. Though in a different way from the past, when someone tunes in to a radio station, a community of listeners becomes widened. The audience of a radio station can indeed be described in terms of a community, given that it implies sharing the same music preferences, sometimes the same religion and the same humour sensibility. Classical reception and audience studies are usually particularly concerned with the sociodemographic characterisation of the listeners. Indeed, some of these features may constitute a portrait of those groups that to a certain extent create specific communities. The history of radio is full of examples of radio programmes whose listeners are part of fan groups; currently, the latter have blogs or pages on Facebook and interact outside the broadcast, normally in social networks, creating platforms to share additional information on a specific kind of music or sportive group or any other common interest. The natural community profile of all radio stations encourages these forms of community dynamics.

Carpentier, Lie and Servaes (2003, 54) remember that community can “refer predominantly to geography and ethnicity as structuring notions of collective identity or group relations.” According to the authors, “a community is actively constructed by its members and those members derive an identity from this construction” (Carpentier et al. 2003, 54). A radio community is nothing different. It usually develops on a geographical and/or ethnic basis. Moreover, its listeners have always contributed to the construction of a shared social identity.

Some local radio station programmes still work today as a kind of café where people meet together to chat. Talking to the host by telephone, listeners actually talk to each other, feeding into a sense of community that exists in the majority of radio projects. Moreover, the intimate relationship that can be built between radio producers and listeners also contributes to the feeling of belonging to a group. Incomparable to any other medium, radio is the space for more than a relationship with a mass of anonymous listeners. It consists indeed in “almost an interpersonal relationship that is established between radio professionals and the listeners” (Oliveira 2013, 186). Aggregation is hence a characteristic that should be added to the depiction of radio as a medium, justifying Ellie Rennie’s (2006, 4) position that “radio is the dominant medium for community expression in most parts of the world.” Besides being universal, simultaneous and instantaneous (Portela 2011), radio also works as an aggregator.
THE WEB CHALLENGE

The technological transformation of radio broadcasting is a permanent process which, despite occurring from its invention, has nevertheless become accentuated since the 1990s. Digitisation systems were absolutely revolutionary, and sound editing with specific software radically changed the manipulation of sound elements and the possibilities for radio narrative. Improving the quality of the broadcast and of the message at the receiver end, the digitisation process made a particular impact, however, on the production side. It was the production context that was extraordinarily affected by the conversion from an analogue to a digital environment. The new editing paradigm, introduced by the digitisation of sound, represented and facilitated new creative conditions and contributed extensively to the development of the artistic dimension of radio production. Digitisation brought advantages to journalistic audio productions, making it easier to select and edit excerpts of interviews, include them in news features and collect them in easily accessible archives.

The most important change in radio history, however, was introduced by the Internet. In a certain sense, radio was born again after the Internet. The blind medium was given a kind of clean slate due to the extension of the transformations affecting radio as it was known before.

Reconfiguring the notions of time and space, the Internet accelerated the evolution of radio by promoting the integration “in multimedia systems and the interactivity, the hypermediality and the possibility of creating web radios” (Cebrián Herreros 2008, 11). The worldwide Net brought in podcasts and channels for participation, in combination with images, written text and online archives. Over the previous eighty years, radio had not faced such a metamorphosis. Some authors still argue that, though transforming radio, digitisation and the immersion in the Internet will not separate radio from its traditional functions, and it will go on being a predominantly sound vehicle (Almeida and Magnoni 2010). The preliminary results of research carried out within the scope of the NET Station project demonstrate, however, that websites of traditional radio stations are much more similar to other websites (created by other media) than their ‘sound’ nature would suggest. The research team (Communication and Society Research Centre), to which the authors of this chapter belong, realised that sound is hidden in the websites of mainstream radio stations. It is indeed the last content that users find while surfing on radio websites. The first contact is with images and text. Sound keeps its invisible essence and appears as an additional element, rather than being the predominant component of such websites, as radio’s origin would seem to recommend.

The Internet is still a challenge insufficiently explored by radio. If in traditional broadcasts there was a geographic limitation concerning the physical range of Hertzian waves, the Web radio is no longer limited to a local, regional or national spectrum. Without depending on the power of transmission towers, radio broadcasting through the Internet gains a global dimension unparalleled
by any of the largest international corporations. Benefiting from the almost
costless fluxes of information, radio on the Internet has an unimaginable
opportunity for expansion, not only in territorial terms but also as concerns
the storage of content that used to be ephemeral. Beyond linear broadcast
limitations, radio could also find the Internet to be an opportunity to make
available information and other sound formats that would not fit conventional
programming (longer programmes or interviews, for example).

Many authors have insisted that the major advantage of the Internet for
radio is the emergence of an interactive type of communication. Cebrián Herreross
(2008, 207) recognises that “the radio’s model of traditional diffusion has
been converted into an interactive model,” which means that the ‘traditional’
listener becomes an interactive user with a stronger capacity to participate in
the narrative or, at least, of choosing what he/she wants to listen to. In many
cases, radio live streaming is available in fragments (podcasts), that is to say,
radio programming is now available in audio-on-demand mode. Thus, there
is “a combination between the sequence of 24 hours broadcast and the non-
sequential or juxtaposed programming” (Cebrián Herreros 2008, 51).

Besides these opportunities offered by the Internet, which are not the
focus of this chapter, radio of the Web generation may also be seen as a
fresh opportunity in terms of community media. For its technological
simplicity, radio is probably the most democratic and generous medium.
The Internet and the generalisation of editing software put a special accent
on this characteristic. Traditional radio broadcasts were already cheap
when compared with other media, and much more accessible than television
or even newspapers. Defined by simple language, radio production does
not require very complex skills and is therefore particularly well suited to
initiatives coming from nonprofessional groups.

Although not well regulated, the Web works currently as a kind of lab
where new experiences sprout up like mushrooms. New economic models,
new formats and increasingly specialised content for more specialised
audiences have been appearing, in part sponsored by individuals having
no professional background. Expressions of newly empowered groups’
interests, these exploratory projects contain some indications of radio’s
future or, in Guy Starkey’s (2006) terms, suggest a revision of erroneous
predictions usually associated with this medium. The Internet provides
confirmation of the relevance of radio in the media landscape, stressing the
democratic, inventive, ingenious and involving role it can still play.

THE COMMUNITY CHALLENGE AND
THE PORTUGUESE LEGAL VACUUM

Unlike the well-known experiences across many countries (such as Brazil,
United Kingdom, France, Spain and Ireland), where community radio is very
common, the Portuguese radio landscape almost ignores the existence of this
kind of project. There is no tradition of community media in the country,
an exclusive focus on the political economy and regulation of the media and communication 'industry' and/or on public service broadcasting systems tends to exclude alternative or community media, often very local, embedded in civil society and thus situated in-between or relatively independent from state and market.

According to the Portuguese Law on Radio, which was revised and republished in 2010 (Law no. 54/2010, December 24), “the activity of radio consisting of the organisation of general or informative thematic programming services in the local scope can only be practiced by collective people who have the exercise of social communication activities as the principal object” (§15, 2). The initiative of creating a radio station is, however, also allowed for “associations or foundations with humanitarian, educative, cultural, scientific or academic purposes, if their programming services contribute significantly to value these activities” (§15, 3). In addition to these provisions, §16 states that “the activity of radio cannot be practiced or funded, directly or indirectly, by political parties or political associations, trade unions or public professional associations, unless this activity is exclusively practiced on the Internet, and consists in the organisation of programming services of a doctrinal, institutional or scientific nature” (§16, 1).

Although not absolutely clear, the process of creating a non-commercial or non-public radio station does not seem to be specifically stated in the law. The word ‘community’ appears in the Portuguese Law on Radio only three times, always concerning the specific obligations of the public service broadcast to immigrant communities in Portugal and Portuguese communities in other countries. Unlike what happens in Brazil, for instance, where community radio is regulated by a specific law that created the Community Radio Broadcast Service (Law no. 9.612/1998), community radio in Portugal does not represent a specific category of radio and is not a principle of the law.

In terms of categorisation, the Portuguese Law on Radio refers to two main typologies. On the one hand, it concerns the coverage area (§7), stipulating that programming services can be (a) international if they cover the territory of other countries, (b) national when they cover the national territory in general, (c) regional if the area concerns a small group of counties or a metropolitan area, and (d) local when the radio station covers only a municipality or a small group of municipalities. On the other hand, two categories define the type of programming service, according to broadcast content and editorial policy. In this context, the law distinguishes between general-interest radio and thematic stations. While the former should present diversified programming and include an informational component that
targets the general public, the latter should present programmes focusing on specific matters, such as music or specialised information (§8).

Although community radio is usually local and more or less thematic, given that it is targeted at a more specialised audience, these categories neither properly admit nor adequately define the idea of community media. Community radio is indeed more than local and thematic. The Brazilian law, for example, defines that it is supposed to represent “an opportunity for the diffusion of ideas, cultural elements, traditions and social habits of the community” (§3). There is also an expectation of education promotion, given that community radio in Brazil should “offer mechanisms for the community’s training and integration, stimulating leisure, culture and social intercourse” (§3). The Brazilian law also clearly defines that community radio should “allow for the empowerment of citizens in terms of expression rights” (§3). Nothing similar is determined by the Portuguese law, except in relation to the public broadcasting service.

In geographic terms, communities are very often local. Cammaerts (2009) is inspired by the perspective of Howley (2005), who wrote Community Media: People, Places and Communication Technologies, to remind us that localism is one of the defining characteristics of community media and radio. However, the Portuguese concept of local radio is not equivalent to what community radio is supposed to be. Deconstructing seven equivocal theses on community communication, Marcos Palácios (1990, 106) suggests that it is inaccurate to consider that “the community is a socially small-sized unit, characterised fundamentally by the physical proximity of its members.” According to the author, the concept of community has to be taken outside the ties of local communities, because “community is not only a place on a map” and “people can have diversified experiences of community no matter whether they are living close to each other or not” (Palácios 1990, 107).

Only a small number of community radio projects are well known in Portugal, all of which are on the Internet. Despite the silence of the law on this matter, community radio in Portugal cannot be described as illegal. Perhaps the right term would be alegal, considering that it neither exists against the law nor appears within any specific legal framework. Community radio in Portugal today represents more or less what pirate radio did in the 1980s, although such a comparison might be exaggerated due to the former still not having the same impact as the latter. In general, they flourish from private initiative, are very often started by amateurs, are not intended to be profitable and represent a certain emancipation of the audience.

RÁDIO ÁS, LINKING PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES

The Rádio Ás project was launched in Portugal, promoted by the local government of Aveiro municipality (located in the centre-north coastside of the country). With a global policy oriented towards investing in the production
of content for the Internet, the municipal executive led by the major centre-right Social-Democratic Party (PSD), during the 2009–2012 mandate executed the Aveiro 21 Programme aiming to foster digital citizenship, civic participation and social interaction. A set of sixteen actions, such as the creation of a newsletter, a TV and a community of photographers called Image 21, were planned to achieve the objectives of this programme, whose main purpose was to endorse proximity among citizens. Constituting part of this plan, Rádio Ás was hence created in 2011 as a community and inter-municipal Web radio station (http://www.cm-aveiro.pt/radioas).

Although integrated in a strategy of improving the visibility of Aveiro’s local culture, this radio station was meant to enlarge the municipality’s net of interconnections with other communities. Consistent with this purpose, the project brought together three municipalities of three Portuguese-speaking countries, Aveiro (Portugal), Santa Cruz (Cape Verde) and São Bernardo do Campo (Brazil), with three main goals, according to the mission statement of the station:

(a) to motivate the civic participation in public space and to open the programming to associative organizations of citizens; (b) to reinforce the communities’ cohesion and to sponsor programming related to community life; and (c) to deepen the approach to urban culture and local identity and to promote the diffusion of tradition trends and local modernity through this medium.7

This project is exclusively online, as contemplated by §16 of the Law on Radio, according to which radio broadcasts are not allowed for political parties or political associations (including any form of government) unless transmitted over only the Internet. Promoted by three town councils, one from each partner country, Rádio Ás could be defined as a project on Lusophone culture and identity. Focusing on the idea of intercultural cooperation through sound, Rádio Ás appeared in the Portuguese context as a unique media project. To our knowledge, this was the first community radio station in the country promoted by a municipality but aiming at a Lusophone audience wider than the borders of that very municipality. The notion of community implicit in this profile is in fact not confined to the borders of a local municipality. In this sense, the shape of Rádio Ás coincides with Cammaerts’ (2009, 639) thought, according to which “reducing a community to a local context or setting is deemed to be too limiting.” Quoting Peter Lewis (1993), the author explains that “a community of interest can extend ‘across conurbations, nations and continents’ and thus bypass or transcend the geographically and spatially confined definition” (2009, 639).

Owned by the Aveiro city council, whose website it was embedded in, Rádio Ás was organised under two boards or committees. The management board was integrated by the three partners. The editorial board, however, included individuals from Aveiro only. This particular board was responsible
for the selection of the programmes and counted on the collaboration of
two local schools and two higher education institutions (the Communi-
cation and Arts Department of the University of Aveiro and the Institute
of Information Sciences and Administration). Created to ensure the editorial
independence of the radio station, this board was ultimately responsible for
the ‘design’ of the programming.

According to its editorial mission statement, Rádio Ás aimed at:
(a) “consolidating the mutual knowledge, the cooperation and the close
relation between populations from the three partners”; (b) “fostering the
value of the multicultural experience”; (c) “supporting the diffusion of
the Portuguese language by intending to be a vehicle of ‘Lusophony’; and
(d) encouraging “innovation and creativity.” With the general objective of
reinforcing the spirit of community and cooperation among the countries
involved, Rádio Ás was meant to be a collaborative project.

In terms of resources, the radio was entirely funded by the Aveiro city
council and by the partners themselves, since the authors of the webcast
programmes worked on a volunteer basis. The project was extremely cheap,
according to one of the station’s representatives, Virgílio Nogueira, who
holds a degree in Communication Studies and works in the city council. Rádio Ás expenses were as low as around 500 euros per year. The equip-
ment was bought with the support of patrons and no relevant duties were
required, except for the regular fees of the Portuguese Association of Authors
for music copyright.

In November 2012, Rádio Ás celebrated its first anniversary. On the occa-
sion, the local daily newspaper of Aveiro, Diário de Aveiro, proclaimed that
“the first year of Rádio Ás was a success.” According to a city councilman,
Pedro Ferreira, referred to by the newspaper, the project had concretised its
objective of involving the community. By that time, according to paper,
Rádio Ás would have registered more than 60 programmes and could count
on around 100 collaborators.

However, it did not perform an education-oriented function in a strict
sense, as some Brazilian radio stations do, because it aimed at creating a
community-like public sphere oriented towards a more general associative
civic movement. Nevertheless, there were schools, libraries and students
collaborating with Rádio Ás, which contributed to the pedagogical role that
this station also played.

PROGRAMMING: DISCONTINUOUS BUT PLURAL

Although broadcasting daily, Rádio Ás programming was not based on a
24-hour system. Due to the editorial strategy, privileging content produced
almost exclusively by civic institutions and individual citizens, program-
m ing was irregular, fragmented and made of diverse contributions. The
Web radio station worked as a kind of sound-hub where productions
coming from various origins combined to devise a singular composition of resonances in different Portuguese accents. People were therefore invited to participate by creating programmes and voicing ideas. Those who wanted to collaborate were asked to submit a proposal with the description of the programme (objectives, thematic, topics related to community life, approach to local cultures and identities, multicultural thematic, expression of Lusophony), information on the author or on the team, periodicity of the programme, schedule, duration and the public to whom the programme would be targeted.

Depending on the proposals received from the audience, programming was discontinuous. The broadcasting schedule concentrated on the evenings, between 8 p.m. and midnight. In the last version of the scheduling, Rádio Ás had no programming in the morning. There were only two programmes on Saturday before 2 p.m. The rest of the week, the radio station worked mainly during the afternoon and at night. Taking into account daily routines, it could be said that this webcasting schedule was more or less adapted to leisure time. Without specific apps for smartphones or iPhones, Rádio Ás was listened to mainly on its website. Some programmes, however, had pages on Facebook (like A Idade (com)Vida\textsuperscript{13}) and specific pages where authors usually made available programming produced for the station (like 80 à Hora\textsuperscript{14}). Although rigorous studies on Rádio Ás audiences are not available, it was estimated that the station was accessed by listeners from more than 80 countries.\textsuperscript{15}

Without pretending to examine the programming in depth, a simple and almost informal analysis of the programmes' technical data demonstrates that these were prepared almost exclusively in Portugal, by Portuguese listeners individually or by Portuguese institutions. Only one programme, called In the Mix Brazil, was produced outside Portugal, namely in Brazil, being broadcast by many Web radios in the latter country and supported each week by a DJ invited to animate this one-hour programme. Besides individual producers, there were also some programmes promoted by civil society organisations. Environmental Education and Citizenship was a one-hour programme promoted by the Portuguese Association for Environmental Education with the aim of fostering environmental citizenship and education through the implementation of the Lusophone Network for Environmental Education, deepening the knowledge of cultural and environmental diversity in Lusophone countries and exploring relations among culture, art and the environment. Due to including interviews with both experts and citizens, this programme was presented by volunteers from the association.

A programme on reading and literature also had a weekly edition, prepared by a group of school libraries. Focusing on Lusophone literature, Ler + na Rádio (Reading + on the Radio) had the following goals: to promote reading by teenagers, explore children's feelings on reading, develop relationships with the local community and other schools and disseminate literature for children and teenagers.
Another example of a more institutional programme was Assembly Channel. Promoted by the assembly of Aveiro’s local government, the programme was designed to give a space of visibility to the activities of this assembly. Concentrating on the Aveiro county region, the programme aimed to promote engagement among citizens and improve civic participation; analyse the reality of the region in political, social and economic terms; and boost local cultural identity (e.g., gastronomy).

An association of immigrant support was responsible for a weekly programme on Cultural Diversity. More concerned with immigrants from eastern Europe than from the Portuguese-speaking countries, the main objective of this programme was to promote interaction between different cultures, to encourage the integration of Russian and Ukrainian immigrants into Lusophone culture and to invest in intercultural dialogue by inciting the listeners to learn about eastern European traditions and cultural practices.

Although produced in Portugal, the programme Firkidja was proposed by the Portuguese Association of Guiné-Bissau Friends. Focusing on the culture of this Portuguese-speaking African country, this programme aimed to discuss the social inclusion in Portugal of people coming from Guiné-Bissau, as well as contribute to the dissemination of the culture and dialects from this country. In addition to this set of more institutional programmes, Rádio Ás included various projects on music. Produced by single authors, in general, these programmes proposed to briefly span diverse kinds of music, such as jazz, hard rock, punk and avant-garde, amongst others. Music and literature were the main themes broached, more in terms of individual productions than of associations or more formal groups.

There were neither daily programmes nor news bulletins. Programmes had a weekly, biweekly or monthly periodicity, but many had an informational purpose. The daily newspaper Diário de Aveiro produced a series of biweekly programmes. A Uma Só Voz was a space dedicated to interviews mainly with politicians invited to comment on issues affecting the population of Aveiro. Besides, although promoted by the press office of the city council, the programme Aveiro em Revista aimed at the diffusion of information on activities carried out by the council. Revolving around the ageing theme, the programme A Idade (com)Vida was an informative rubric. It was meant to be a programme on the present demographic panorama, inspired by the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations.

Producers could be individuals interested in music, but a significant part of the authors were actually people working for organisations, schools and associations. No specific competencies were required. With no pretension to be a professional medium, Rádio Ás was created to mobilise people around a common interest for the empowerment of groups, no matter how qualified the productions. At least in theory, the project is in synchrony with Janey Gordon’s (2012, 2) idea of such a station being able to “provide social capital, social worth and ultimately social gain to that community.”
Rádio Ás was online for 49 months. In January 2014, the project was suddenly suspended. The new mayor, who was a candidate from the same centre-right party, the PSD, was elected September 2013 and autonomously decided to put an end to this Web station, not recognising the communitarian identity of the project. According to the Diário de Aveiro, the council cancelled payment to the website hosting the service. Producers were informed by email, at January 3rd. The unilateral decision of the mayor was founded on two reasons: (a) the council had no funds to support the station and (b) the activity of Rádio Ás was not considered of relevant public interest by the new municipal executive, which would reformulate the municipal policy of communication.

Collaborators and a few bloggers expressed surprise at the city council’s decision. For instance, in reaction to the suspension, the spokesman of the Portuguese Association on Environmental Education declared that “this was a project of citizenship with lots of people involved, an activity of social interest.”

Rádio Ás had been announced as the first online radio station promoted by a municipality. And it was—in terms of its underlying rationale—a virtuous idea. Three main reasons contributed to the originality of this pioneering project: (a) the intersection of three partners from different countries; (b) the collaborative structure based on contributions from individual authors, associations and other social groups; and (c) the investment in audio content exclusively (besides the institutional information, the only other possibility offered by the website was that of listening to the streaming). The population seemed to welcome the initiative, as more than a half a hundred programme proposals were submitted for validation. Despite consisting in city council property, this project was able to gather the participation of many groups; nevertheless, the project seemed already doomed to fail due to governance having no space for bottom-up input, with too much power being held by the municipality.

In accordance with Nico Carpentier’s (2011, 27) approach, participation is more than access and interaction. In his own words, “access and interaction do matter for participatory processes in the media—they are actually its conditions of possibility—but they are also very distinct from participation because of their less explicit emphasis on power dynamics and decision-making.” From this point of view, Rádio Ás was not a clear example of participation. More than access and space for interaction, it provided listeners with the power to produce but not to take part in the decision-making processes. Programming was indeed essentially ensured by external independent entities and by citizens. Fuelled by the work of volunteer collaborators, Rádio Ás constituted a kind of spiral of communities: the community of producers, the community of those directly or not involved with the producers, the community of Aveiro inhabitants and, more widely, the community
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of Portuguese citizens living in foreign countries as well as the community of listeners in the partner countries.

Though there was initial enthusiasm, the project lasted only two years. Apparently it failed due to insufficient resources to support it and the weak involvement of the partners. The first reason, the most significant one for the mayor who ordered its closure, was that the project was funded entirely by the council, in the context that an effort was being implemented to reduce expenses as a part of the general budget.

Rádio Ás was a very modest project, certainly not the height of innovation on the Internet. Some weaknesses may have determined its end. The equipment for radio broadcast (or webcast) in general is relatively simple and inexpensive. Rádio Ás had the basic resources but suffered from technological limitations if it was indeed to be more ambitiously expanded. Moreover, as previously mentioned, there was weak involvement of the other partners. Based in Aveiro, the project did not count on much collaboration from other municipalities, although some programmes were clearly concerned with cultural production within the so-called Lusophone space.

Cammaerts (2009, 648) warns that “community radio movements had limited lobbying power and were usually positioned as rogue or unprofessional amateurs within the broadcasting community.” In this light and in line with his thought, it should be recognised that Rádio Ás was generally composed of amateurs. Furthermore there was neither a clear editorial structure nor a hard core of collaborators who could assume part of the programming and ensure its coherence. As we said before, Portuguese legislation is vague regarding what community radio should be and how it should work. There is insufficient regulatory information on how these kinds of stations should be organised and funded. The lack of inspiring models in Portugal could also have justified some of the difficulties felt by Rádio Ás promoters.

However, as far as we can understand, Rádio Ás ended more because of a political decision than because of its undeniable weaknesses. The project was working. There were people committed to the ideals of the project. Funding was not very demanding. It would have been possible to keep Rádio Ás on the air if the municipal executive had wished to do so. A project depending on a political institution is nevertheless subject to changes in policy. Indeed, Janey Gordon (2012, 1) alerts us to the fact that “governmental and non-governmental authorities have found ‘community’ a convenient tag to give respectability to their favourite projects.” The true defense of community, however, is not always practised.

Rádio Ás constitutes a convenient experience to discuss what is still missing in Portugal to allow for the flourishing of a new mediascape. To summarise, three lessons can be learned from this particular case:

Firstly, bottom-up processes cannot emerge without the participation of the community in the management of a media project: if nothing protects the project of community radio promoted by political associations from
discretionary policies, there are no conditions to ensure a long-term project; the community should indeed be able to play a role in the decision-making processes so as to ward off excessive dependence on political power, which has its risks.

Secondly, a permanent staff with a clear management and editorial structure, independently or not of the former being composed of volunteer collaborators, is fundamental to promote balanced and continuous programming.

Thirdly, a clear regulatory framework with a greater degree of legal precision, would promote quality in terms of organisation and functioning, despite the non-professional and community-based nature of community radio apparently not requiring rigid normativity.

COMMUNITY RADIO AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF COMMUNITIES

Community media were understood as alternative media based on participatory and collaborative communication. Emerging as a kind of reaction to the communicative deficits of mainstream media in the local context, this communication model pins all its hopes on citizens and communities. In a context of historical uncertainty, economic insecurity and the failure of traditional media systems, participatory communication has been defended as a pivotal foundation for human communities of belonging.

Despite this general understanding—commonly subscribed to by researchers on media studies—community media in Portugal and community radio in particular are not developed or supported enough in regulatory terms. In countries like Portugal, where there is “a strong public service broadcasting tradition, community radio is only a fairly recently recognized distinct media space” (Cammaerts 2009, 649). Unlike Brazil (and several countries such as the UK, Ireland, Canada and Australia), where community communication has been strongly developed for many years, in Portugal the marks of a long dictatorship, extended by the principle of the public service broadcasting system, did not favour the emancipation of such projects. But a movement towards this direction seems to be happening.

On the one hand, Kate Coye (2006, 129) asserts that community radio “is a means of social organizing and representation coalesced around ‘communities of interest’ and/or small-scale geographic locales.” Besides revitalising local and small communities of interest, there are many reasons for community radio to constitute an exciting idea for countries like Portugal. The emergence of such projects, FM or online, contributes to the recognition of radio as a resilient, flexible and still-passionate medium. In a hyper-visual society, a growing concern over sound culture seems to be gaining relevance. David Hendy’s (2013) book on the history of sound, as well as the sound mapping projects of many global cities, are significant examples of this new sensibility for sound. On the other hand, the creation of community
radio has represented the emancipation of audiences, who are increasingly empowered to create and share compared with the past. The effects of media education programmes and of the emergence of more friendly and intuitive technologies, as well as the general liberalisation of thought that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, are the factors that probably accelerated the impulse towards more creative and engaged communities. According to the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), “community radio is not about doing something for the community but about the community doing something for itself” (Mtumbe et al. 1998, 34). Moreover, within community stations lie good chances to preserve the sound memory of a community and to promote intercultural dialogue. Used as the voice of the voiceless, community radio is associated not only with non-formal education but also with the expression of minority cultural groups. Cicilia Peruzzo (2006, 118) explains that “community radio’s specificities are expressed in identity building, both at cultural level and at social values necessities field of each place.”

Bottom-up media and community projects are not supposed to suppress traditional, commercial and professional media. However, as shown by Rádio Ás programming, alternative media also constitute a symbolic space of power. Owned and promoted by non-profit organisations, these media, radio included, do not have to follow strict economic principles. There is a new kind of editorial freedom in these projects, which probably dictates political resistance to their consolidation. From the political point of view, it can be risky to empower citizens to express their own feelings and ideas. But if getting listeners increasingly involved in the soundscape can be considered a cultural gain, this cannot be anything else than enriching.

NOTES

2. There was a public debate during the spring of 2013, in Portugal, on the role that local radio stations play in some Portuguese villages. This discussion was generated by the announcement of the end of a specific programme on a local radio station located in Northeast Portugal. The Bom Dia Tio João (Good Morning Uncle John) programme was on the air for twenty years early every morning, and the presenter became a kind of uncle figure around whom a large family gathered to listen to the programme, in the words of a Portuguese daily newspaper. In an interview in 2013, the person responsible for the programme commented that when he started speaking into the microphone in 1989, his first words were: “Good morning, I am Tio João and I would like to create the largest family in the world.” Despite its tremendous success, this programme was temporarily cancelled when the local radio station was bought by a big radio broadcasting company. Popular protest led to the programme being on air again. The importance of the public debate that this case sparked and that was globally reported by newspapers resides in its having shown how listeners form a real community who listen to the radio with the same expectation of conversation that they would have in going to a café to meet friends.
3. NET Station: shaping radio for Web environment project, funded by the Portuguese Foundation of Science and Technology and developed by the Communication and Society Research Centre/University of Minho. The project applied for funding in 2010 and started in April 2012.

4. This legal statement identifies the general objectives of community broadcasters, the principles of their programming, as well as the legitimate owners of community radio. According to this law, only legally created and registered non-profit foundations and community associations, led by Brazilian citizens (or citizens who have been naturalised for at least ten years), are allowed to be owners.

5. This classification is decided by the Regulatory Board for Social Communication [Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social] when the licence is assigned.

6. Once again, this classification is decided by the Regulatory Board for Social Communication.


8. The notion of ‘Lusophony’ is usually associated with expression in Portuguese, embracing individuals who are culturally, historically, and linguistically linked to this Latin idiom.


10. Some information on the functioning of Rádio Às was obtained during an interview with Virgílio Nogueira, who worked directly with the team that promoted this Web radio station. The interview, conducted by telephone on April 2014, focused on three main topics: the origin of the project, the way the project was organised and managed and the reasons for the demise of the station.


13. See https://www.facebook.com/pages/A-Idade-comVida-Rdio-%C3%A7%C3%BAs/148816708587468.


18. In Poland, the situation is similar. There is no fully recognised non-commercial sector that could be a real supplement to commercial local broadcasting.

REFERENCES


