

The Sound Object of Radio – The Constitution of an Ethereal Community

LUÍS CLÁUDIO RIBEIRO

luis.claudio.ribeiro@ulusofona.pt

Lusófona University, Lisbon

JORGE BRUNO VENTURA

jorge.bruno@ulusofona.pt

Lusófona University, Lisbon

ABSTRACT: Our goal is to study the shaping of audiences formed by radio listening, and their behaviour vis-à-vis the notions of territory, identity, language, and private and public space. To this end, it becomes important to study listeners' relation with the radio sound object, the space where that relation fuses and how it comes about. Sound, when listened to as radio aesthetics (voice, music, effects and silence), sometimes fuses the private and public spheres. A negotiation is struck between the power of a mass medium and the interests that constitute the listeners' private spheres. Through broadcasting, in particular, what was of the private domain became collective. It is in this context, fed by the dubious relation of what is private or public, that the relation between listener and medium-broadcast sound object is solidified. One of the ways of understanding this relation, created through radio in the 1930s, involves understanding the relation between the listener and the voices/characters of radio.

KEYWORDS: Radio, sound, ethics, community.

In the first times of its history, radio provided a sensation of novelty and new experiences. It was in the 1920s that radio found the path of broadcast, due to three factors: technology, medium regulation, and society.

When it first appeared, radio displayed unique characteristics when compared to the other media. Its power open up to a new form of understanding of what was human, and to the creation of a community of listeners who united and formed a unity. Scattered over a territory, which was increasingly taken up by the medium radio, the inhabitants, in some cases from remote parts, began to be regarded as elements constituting an audience, since the technology of long-distance broadcasting allowed geographical barriers to be broken. It was a revolution of sorts: “life on the earth as it had always been lived was destined to never be quite the same again” (Cox, 2009: 03). Little by little, the broadcasting capacity reached planetary dimensions, and its large providers, such as, for instance, Americans, were creating broadcasting structures with head radio stations located in the larger cities and smaller radio stations scattered across the American territory, broadcasting programmes generated at the main radio station.¹

Around those times there was an atmosphere of novelty and projection of a medium which changed the community landscape of territories. Even those who lived far away, isolated in territories or wandering, could now belong to a community and have the same information as the others. When reflecting on this topic it is impossible not to think of the statement that opens the introduction to Armand Mattelart’s work *The globalization of communication*: “Real-time communication systems determine the structure of the planet’s organization” (1996:11, our translation).

With the creation of radio networks, contents are no longer exclusively received by those who have the chance to be in the territory covered by the radio originally broadcasting that contents, but they began being heard by a larger number of people, thus giving more people the possibility of listening to the same content: “On the ether, if multiple outlets could be linked together, they reasoned, a single show could be beamed to many more listeners than those confined to the geographical purview of a lone station’s transmitter” (Cox, 2009: 09).

The strength of a network lay in the number of relay stations, and this was proportional to the number of listeners. Broadcast contents were, thus, exported and gained the ability to reach farther, which made them more valuable for advertisers.

Radios working as a network on content production and/or broadcast originated in the 1920s, when two radio stations, WEAf and WNAC, which broadcast in the eastern United States, decided to share part of their programming. When other stations joined them, a

1. In the United States, two years after KDKA was created in 1920 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, there were already about 564 radio stations (Junqueira, 2002), a large majority of which would come to contribute to and form radio networks. What is considered to be the seminal broadcast of the idea of *network* took place on January 4, 1932, when the New York radio station WEAf dispatched, via telephone, to WNAC, in Boston, a saxophone solo lasting a few minutes.

group began which would come to be officially called *Broadcasting Corporation of America*, and unofficially *the telephone group*, because it was through the telephone lines that the stations shared their contents. It is here, in this movement, that the concept of network radio began.

In an association to the idea of community, radio networks (and especially those we address in this paper, namely the American ones, which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s) are connected to the creation and dissemination of their own specific culture. The audience seen as a set of united people received values capable of generating feelings and providing various inspirations. They came together in the reception of sound contents where, for instance, the great names of entertainment began to be known equally in the whole territory. The songs that were all the rage were not confined to the exclusive ear of a community in a city or a state – they played equally all over the country, familiarizing the ear with the same sound and with the creation of a united taste base, a new aesthetics. Everybody knew about and witnessed what was happening in real time. Culture was formed in the whole territory and access became widespread.²

In order to gain deeper insight into the constitution of *ethereal* communities, it is crucial to consider the characteristics adjacent to the listeners' relation with radio and its sound contents, the space where it is rooted and how this happens. In the America of the 1930s e 1940s, as well as in Europe, the relation between the listeners and radio was intense and, in many cases, it was in radio that the hopes of solving personal problems, pertaining to the realm of the family and the community, resided. One of the examples known, presented by Bruce Lenthall, in the book *Radio's América – The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture*, happened in the creation of a relationship triangle between sponsor, listener (who, in this case, was a child) and the programme. Janet, such was the child's name, was confined to a sanatorium. Her father had given up smoking to save money to be able to afford a Christmas visit to his sick child. Janet's wish to give her father a Christmas present was enormous and, in particular, to give him a tin of tobacco. For lack of other solutions, Janet resorted to radio, namely, to a quiz show sponsored by her father's favourite brand of tobacco, *Kentucky Club*. With a letter sent to the programme, Janet managed to get the attention, not only of the programme, but also of the sponsor, who sent her a large tin of tobacco for Janet to give her father.

This situation, which is surely similar to other cases, illustrates the relationship with listeners that the first years of radio brought about, as well as the construction of ethereal communities around the sound produced by radio. America, as embryo and as privileged space of some events pertaining to radio history, is, in this radio/listener relationship, an

2. This is still the case today with a greater emphasis to be provided by television and, in the past few years, by the internet.

important place for the study of the notion of audience formation, as it is the space of a social setting associated with the rise of this medium.

Janet's story clearly illustrates the relationship that developed between a public sphere created by the medium radio, optimised by the fact that is based on a broadcasting model, and the private sphere. A relationship of mutual influence and with various aspects capable of offering solidity to that relation, "listening to the radio was an act of negotiating between the power of the mass medium and one's own interests" (Lenthall, 2007: 64). In other words, the use of a sphere to the influence, or benefit, of another: [on Janet's story] "When she could not manage on her own, when her local and personal community proved inadequate, she reached for an ethereal connection. Through radio she found ways to personalize a vast, anonymous world. She heard a human voice attached to a large commercial company – and believed it might hear her. The broadcaster who spoke to millions felt like an intimate friend, someone she might trust – perhaps like someone who might help her find a measure of control in her own life" (Lenthall, 2007: 54). The final part of this quote is intriguing because, through the story told there, there is the possibility of entering what we might call an intimacy created in the vastness of broadcast. Although traditional radio broadcast is from one to many, and therefore gives rise to a vast audience, the listener feels the message as being exclusive to him/herself. In this context, it is fed by the relation between a public side and a private side which strengthens a relationship between the listener and the medium. This is one more way of understanding the relationship between the public sphere created by radio and the private sphere of each listener.

The historic fact that was the entry of a stranger's voice, through radio, in the space of privacy and intimacy (the house, the room, the business premise, and later the car) implies the immersion of sound in the public space. Radio was the first medium to make spaces and times hybrid, uniting public and private, as well as present and past. It was on this relation that the constitution of an audience in the 1920s and 1930s was based. A considerably rich relationship, where new relations were formed which were similar to the regular relations we build and rebuild every day.

Through the radio networks that were formed in the United States, Americans were able to understand and interact within a new mass culture, bringing into their private sphere the benefits found there. When they could not find answers, it was to the radio they turned as if that mass culture which emerged through broadcast might be an inspiring beacon of life in the private sphere. The radio brought the world to those who listened to it.

We all know that the model created for the radio and other media is centralising. The economist William Orton, together with other intellectuals, even questioned whether there was still space for the individual: "...Right that radio was a crucial source of that culture" (Lenthall, 2007: 55). This and other critical visions went as far as laying their thoughts around culture as mass phenomenon. Indeed, radio, it is true, carries a message which is

heard by many and which, therefore, is located in a space of centrality, capable of giving rise to a standardisation of culture, a standardisation of thinking, in a sort of globalization of times. Yet, even so, there is a space where the message is the target of a negotiation or of mediation. It is the space where the listener has the chance to participate and shape a kind of deal between collectivism and centrality with the private side. This was strongly felt in the 1930s, with the listeners' active participation in a relation with the radio of true activity. Listeners displayed an ability to draw to their benefit what they listened to. There is, in fact, a centralising and collective space that is associated with the radio's broadcasting nature, but also through interaction listeners attempted to take from that collective side something that would benefit their private sphere: "Popular listeners did not dictate the shape of radio or its programs, but within the bounds of the centrally controlled form, those listeners discovered some room to use radio in ways that helped them to count in modern society" (Lenthall, 2007: 55). It is thus that in the 1930s each listener pinned in the radio their hopes that it might reflect a general model.

One of the ways of understanding this relationship between listeners and radio involves understanding the relation created with the voices and characters of radio.³ This relation is fed by the listener's ability to create a specific personality for that voice. It is based on the qualities of sound and on the voice where a physiognomy, a spectre or a phantasmatic image always arises.

In these created relations, one tries to consolidate the characteristics of relations held in the private sphere. Even where there is no physical knowledge, the listener felt this relationship as true *friendship*. When we stated above that it was to radio one turned to obtain information, it is clear that we were talking of radio voices. It was these figures, in some cases characters playing a role, that listeners felt as friends and relatives, and in whom they placed complete trust. Something which still happens today.

Listeners' involvement with radio in this early stage must also make us reflect on a quite intriguing content phenomenon known as the *Radio Soap*.⁴ As would later happen on television with soap operas, there was a strong involvement with the characters of these programmes who, to a certain extent, justified the high level of loyalty that listeners placed in their relation with these shows. It was with these characters that listeners lived daily, it was these characters that entered their homes and, in the development of their roles, exposed themselves to the audience. Indeed, listeners felt the relationship with these characters very closely, in a truly intimate way.

3. A relationship studied by the psychologists Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport.

4. This format é characterized by being a radio soap opera in several episodes and with listeners, mainly female, following the events in the lives of a set of characters. To consider the issues related to this type of programmes in more detail, see: Jim Cox, *Historical Dictionary of American Radio Soap Operas* (Scarecrow Press, 2005); *The Great Radio Soap Opera* (McFarland & Company, 1999) and John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopaedia of Old-Time Radio* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

The characters of the radio soaps were more than characters in a fictional space. They were close to the listeners and the listeners lived and shared their joys, frustrations, annoyances and suffering with them. In a letter written to the leading character in one of these shows, at one point the listener declares that Mary Marlin is “so real to me” (Lenthall, 2007: 66). Once again, we can speak of that collective or public that belongs to all and is the product of the experience of listening to the same contents, albeit in a relation with the private side, since these characters worked as models brought from the public into the private arena.

This audience process was not passive. Quite the opposite, since it displayed a strong level of interaction. Besides, only with this interaction is it possible to understand the relation between the public and the private. The listener was required to have the ability to become part of the process: “Integrating radio into their lives meant interacting with the broadcasts they heard” (Lenthall, 2007: 62). An interaction was required which in the 1930s involved a series of activities capable of showing the practical side of this action, for instance, sending mail to the programmes⁵, participating in contests, placing various requests, and in some rather unusual cases to the producers, making various information requests, purchasing sponsors’ products, creating feelings of friendship with show hosts or programme characters.

It was also with the large radio chains that emerged in the first decades of the 20th century and created large audiences that radio began to be considered a medium capable of contributing to the construction of a national culture. Something in common, capable of creating an identity and influencing a collective personality. However, this creation is not linear since there are variables that are not always easy to control: common personality differences within a population, geographic issues, regional unity features, urban vs. rural, etc. The idea of community gradually forms by the relation created between the listener and the medium, and by the ability of large networks to supply the same contents to large audiences.

The feelings lived through radio and all we have mentioned as support of a relation between listener and medium, with special emphasis in a relational balance between the public and the private spheres, lead us to the notion of new community formation. The idea of a sharing, of a similarity of ties, results in the constitution of a community which is created and evolves through the relation established with radio.

These relations are the product of ether. They are *ethereal* relations, just like the communities that emerge around the medium radio. A great deal of what happens in the community, in the radio collective, is introduced in the relations belonging to the private sphere.

5. Writing letters to show hosts was very much in fashion. On this topic, see Bruce Lenthall in the work *Radio's América – The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture*, p.62.

For example, the possibility of listened contents becoming the topic of conversation in the private sphere: "...communities of listeners grew up in private settings" (Lenthall, 2007: 77). News, contests and other programmes foster conversation within personal relationships.

Another aspect of the formation of the notion of community lies in the fact that the experience of listening to radio in the 1930s took place in a group, for instance in the family or at the club.⁶ The radio was even conceived as an element capable of providing pleasure and unity to the family. The popular quiz shows were a source of entertainment and family togetherness. We emphasise the idea that the ever-present relation with the collective shaped and influenced the private sphere, in this case as catalyst of face-to-face relationships.

It is clear that this sense of community and the relations created within the listener-medium scope could not achieve the same depth that relations consummated within a space, which for lack of a better word we shall call «traditional»: "But equally certainly, the imagined interactions of listening and occasional letter writing could not provide the same level of personal exchange and potential support that face-to-face relationships might: radio permitted only a moderate degree of social participation" (Lenthall, 2007: 79).

Felt in the 1930s was the ability possessed by radio, as later became apparent with other media, of creating a space for sharing ideas. A collective *arena* which opens new horizons for those who listen to it, and which has the ability to exert a strong influence in each listener's private sphere.

Much of the influencing capacity of radio can be detected here, as well as the way how a true relationship is forged between the medium and those who listen to it. It can also be partly detected what nobody can really explain well and which is the magic of radio. The ability to penetrate in the core of the private sphere, which is the basis of all sounds.

In this game of influence between the public and the private, there were/there are those who assert the possibility of instilling the private side into the public: "By using radio to personalize the public world that touched their lives they felt they could claim a measure of importance and control" (Lenthall, 2007: 80). This last quote is an example of that, by highlighting such terms as 'importance' as 'control'.⁷

The medium radio and its dissemination throughout the globe, be it the device or the contents, have fostered a notion of network distinct from the traditional one, and the emergence, before the new technologies did that, of a community where alteration through listening led to substantial changes in the very notion of subject and public. The space was being shaped by a culture of sharing, but also of the imaginary realm which lies in the phantasmatic spectre introduced by sound.

6. This is an experience which was gradually lost throughout the history of radio. Nowadays, listening to the radio is much more a lonely act than a group act.

7. A possibility opens up here of reflecting on the notion of radio propaganda and the way this medium was used to spread political ideas and ideals, and how it became a medium at the service of dictatorships and other interests.

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