The use of digital resources in Brazilian community and associative radios

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Abstract

This article proposes an observation of the uses of digital resources in community and associative radios in Brazil, trying to point out their potential influence over the practices. The analysis is based on 23 reports of experience presented by popular media actors in a national event and on interviews made with leading actors from two radio stations in Brazil. The initiatives are observed under three dimensions, regarding technical aspects, networking dynamics and the perspective of social change.

Keywords: radio, digital resources, Brazil, citizenship, social change

Résumé


Mots-clés : radio, ressources numériques, Brésil, citoyenneté, changement social

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una observación de la utilización de recursos digitales en radios comunitarias y de grupos de la sociedad civil en Brasil, buscando realzar su influencia sobre las prácticas comunicativas. El análisis está basado en 23 relatos de experiencias presentadas por comunicadores populares en un congreso nacional y en entrevistas hechas con comunicadores líderes de dos radios del nordeste brasileño. Las iniciativas fueron analizadas desde tres perspectivas, orientadas cada una a aspectos técnicos, a dinámicas de trabajo en red y en relación a la búsqueda del cambio social.

Palabras clave: radio, recursos digitales, Brasil, ciudadanía, cambio social
Manuel Castells defends the idea of communication as a central power in modern societies and argues that the emergence of digital culture has made it greater than ever. It is supposed to introduce changes in contexts of asymmetries, considering that “the entry barriers in the Internet industry are much lower than in the traditional communication industry” (Castells, 2013). Taking Brazil as a stratified society (Fraser, 1992), this article proposes an observation of the uses of digital resources in community, church-related and associative radios in that country, trying to point out their potential influence over the practices.

The country reproduces its social and economical inequalities in the media sphere. According to social actors working on the equality of communication, no more than 11 families own most of the media in the country while thousands of applications for licenses for the establishment of community radio stations go for decades without a proper answer. On top of that, the reality of a great number of community and associative radios is marked by huge efforts to overtake the lack of resources of all types.

This analysis is based on 23 reports of experience presented by popular [1] media actors in a national event and on interviews made with actors leading two radio experiences in Brazil. The impacts observed will be presented in three analytical dimensions: the technical dimension, the collaborative dimension, and the dimension of social change.

In the field, the media actors consulted frequently talk about digital resources for describing their activities, for pointing to a perspective or for unfolding partnerships and shared initiatives. Our assumption is that they are already aware of the potential of digital resources on technical and collaborative dimensions as a means to improve their work or to make processes easier, but their role as a boost for societal changes seems to be still underestimated. They say frequently that they feel powerfully connected to people fighting for the same goals, but it is not clear how this concept is actually translated into action. There is evidence for assuming also that the use or the desire to use digital resources is related to a concern to be seen and recognized, which can be connected to the construction of identities, both individual and collective.

This article is organized in five sections. The first one describes briefly the approach applied and is followed by a presentation of the sample. Then, it proceeds to a description of the three dimensions of analysis. The fourth section discusses the findings observed in each of them, and the fifth one proposes a general conclusion.

The approach

This article is based on the analysis of 23 reports of experiences presented during the 8th Mutirão Brasileiro de Comunicação. The event is a biennial national congress organized by the Catholic Church in Brazil, which gathers communicators from all over the country, mostly related to grassroots catholic initiatives in the field of communication, but also other community and popular experiences. It was conceived as a place for sharing experiences among peers, stimulating debates around relevant issues and providing several workshops where participants exchange information with the audience. Considering the extensive hold of the Catholic Church in Brazil and its social engagement in many regions and sectors (Dornelles, 2007), the set of contributions appeared to be relevant for identifying trends.

The 8th Mutirão was realized in the city of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, in October 2013, and drew around one thousand participants. The program counted on 113 shared initiatives during three days of workshops and 96 of them counted on written abstracts of 2-4 pages that were the material used for the present analysis. In total, 23 contributions reported expe-
RadioMorphoses n° 2 / 2017

Experiences where the radio was the main medium. The analysis of reports was carried out with the support of NVivo software - version 10. The three dimensions proposed were transformed into coding labels and applied to the texts. The program identified the occurrence of certain characteristics and allowed associations between them to enrich the interpretation of the way actors described their practices.

Two more experiences were included in the study, the Rádio Casa Grande, in Nova Olinda/CE, and the Rádio Ibiapina, in Florânia/RN. This approach consisted of a one week field visit to each radio station, including observation of practices in studio and interviews with staff members, such as the content coordinator of each radio, and broadcasters responsible for specific programs.

The sample

Half of the initiatives (12) are situated in the Northeast region and the other regions were represented as follows: four reports from the Southeast, three from the South, two from the North and one from the Central West; one report did not identify its geographical position. It is important to consider, then, that the findings are influenced by this distribution. But, taking into account the concern about asymmetries, they still present an interesting framework. Even if life conditions have improved in the Northeast in the last years, it is still a region marked by poverty and huge inequalities.

The distribution of age is relatively balanced. Half of the initiatives (12) have existed for less than five years while eight have existed for more than ten years. The range of diffusion is also well distributed: nine community experiences, six regional, five municipal, three global and two national. It is important to say that some reports identified the initiative as local and global simultaneously, already pointing to an impact of digital culture. This classification considers the audiences beyond the original community, because of the wide access allowed by web platforms.

Finally, even if the event focuses predominantly in communication practices of the Catholic Church, 14 reports declared an attachment of the radio station to this institution while nine of them indicated property or management of NGOs and other local associations. Believers are the target public of nine of the initiatives analyzed, while 12 of them are directed towards a general audience and four towards a scholarly one.

Rádio Casa Grande and the Rádio Ibiapina were chosen because of their geographical situation, both in the Northeast region of the country like the majority of reports. The first case is attached to a local NGO focused in culture and children development; the latter is attached to the Catholic Church.

Dimensions of analysis

The observation was originally guided by the results of the reference research work of Cicilia Peruzzo about the use of communication by popular movements (Peruzzo, 1998). The initial objective was to observe if and how weakness and strengths pointed out by this author in the 1990’s (Table 1) were still present in the initiatives selected for the present study, as well as to identify other relevant characteristics that could point to new trends, specially regarding the role of digital resources. For the purposes of this study, digital resources were understood as electronic technologies, such as the internet, social networks and the world wide web,
among others, that are used by media actors as a main or complementary resource for producing and diffusing information.

Table 1: Weaknesses and strengths of popular communication initiatives, according to Peruzzo (1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reduced range, improper means, limited use of media, regardless of</td>
<td>diversification of tools, ownership of resources and techniques,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>variety, lack of technical skills, content untappped, manipulation, lack</td>
<td>conquest of space, critical content, institutional autonomy, articulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of financial resources, use in emergency situations, political influence,</td>
<td>with culture, reworking of values, identity formation, predisposition to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unequal participation</td>
<td>service, preservation of memory, media democratization, conquest of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>citizenship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Searching for the evolution of these findings, we organized them according to three dimensions of analysis, as follows:

**The technical dimension**

This dimension encompasses predominantly aspects related to how information is produced and disseminated, what resources are available to create and maintain the medium, how the medium reaches society, among others. The analysis of reports and the field observations focused in the following aspects: institutional autonomy, availability of resources, adequacy of media, kind of “staff”, range of diffusion, variety of content.

**The collaborative dimension**

This dimension aims to reveal the use of networking practices to enhance and/or enlarge the media practice effects, that is, what are the connections established with other media or with other social groups in order to improve the production and/or the diffusion of contents.

**The dimension of social change**

This dimension is associated with the use of a medium to make an action or idea stronger and then transform a given situation. It is related to descriptions made by the actors, where they justified the existence of the media with arguments concerning rights, representativeness or the intention of contributing to create a new social order. The analysis focused on aspects such as: participation of the community, appropriation of media, resources and techniques, approach, management.
General findings

The presence of digital resources was observed in most of the reports of experiences analyzed and in both radio stations visited. Only seven out of the 23 reports did not mention any digital practice, but it is important to observe that five out of these seven were initiatives where the radio was used in educational projects, frequently in schools. For instance, two of them actually mentioned the internet in cooperation with radio and/or education.

In the context of what we can describe as a regular use of radio – generally speaking, producing and diffusing information and/or entertainment – the impact of digital culture revealed several perspectives. On the one hand, there was evidence of its contribution for improving the production process, in ways such as access to sources of information or possibilities of exchanging contents. However, it was not clear if there was a concrete impact on the level of participation of the communities and audiences in these processes. On the other hand, it was also possible to observe an enlargement of audiences, meaning that the production of these media becomes available to people other than their original public. In this sense, a question arises around the potential enrollment and the visibility of more voices in the constant fight for domination and influence in the public sphere (François & Neveu, 1999). This double sided configuration is described by the managers of the Portuguese and Spanish web radio channels Migrantes:

“For migrants both channels are a tool of articulation and visibility. Articulation among migrant communities in various regions, through the web devices that create contacts in real time and network. Visibility to the extent that the migratory phenomenon in question shall be placed on the media, which discusses the circumstances in which migrants live and their claims.” (Lara & Gheller, 2013)

Observing the practices, 11 out of 23 reports pointed out to the use of social networks, with facebook leading the preferences. Actually, there is a trend of applying the term “network” associated to the presence in social networks and meaning “being connected”. The possible implications of this understanding will be better developed in the following sections. Another frequent use of digital resources is related to the availability of productions online; 12 out of 23 reports described this kind of practice.

From the account of the actors, the introduction of digital resources produces impacts in the definition of territory and public – some actors classify their media as communitarian, for example, but still mention an international audience because of the enlarged access provided by the internet –, in their capacity of performing as alternative sources of information, as well as in their ability of making issues visible. In general, digital resources are seen as a solution already in place and/or as a hope to solve problems and to improve radio production and diffusion.

In the following, the findings will be discussed according to the three analytical dimensions proposed before.

Technical dimension

As already mentioned, this dimension looks to the conditions for establishing and maintaining a radio station and the means for reaching audiences. According to the reports analyzed, digital resources represent the possibility of reducing costs of production, meaning better opportunities for the continuity and expansion of the projects as well as for institutional autonomy. This advantage was particularly highlighted by those working with web radios,
as stated by Cláudio Viana Gonçalves, from the web radio São Francisco, in Itapipoca (CE), Northeast region:

“The radio via internet offers the opportunity of expanding the variety of programs. The cost of going online is reduced and it is possible to reach “small communities” of audience interested in more specific music genres.” (Gonçalves, 2013)

Even if internet connection is still low or unstable in many places in Brazil, it makes it possible to share and even produce collective programs with participation of outlying communities. The Rede de Notícias da Amazônia, in the North region, for example, produces a daily news program with information coming from 13 community radios all over the region. The low bandwidth avoided the installation of a system where all members could upload and download productions from a common server or website, but it is still enough to send and receive pieces. (Santos & Sena, 2013)

The use of digital resources is also related to the improvement of content production. Both in the reports and in the field visits, media actors revealed how they are able to reach sources of information like never before. It includes the use of search engines and the access and reproduction of contents produced by partners or peers wherever they are. Actors also recall more mobility for reporting from different places and more possibilities for making contents available in different formats like podcasts, for example.

When it comes to the aspect of reaching society, there was frequently a blog or a facebook page related to many of the initiatives. This presence on the internet may be read under several perspectives. First, there is the idea of expanding audience, which is challenged by inequalities in the infrastructure. For example, in the case of Rádio Casa Grande, in Nova Olinda (CE), Northeast region, the general connectivity in the city is around 300K and the number of homes with a computer is small. Anyway, the project has many digital interfaces to diffuse information and activities. Besides the institutional web pages, the coordinators of the project motivate the children participating in the activities to have their own blogs and tell the world their news.

“We motivate each kid to have his/her blog, because it is a way of showing themselves off virtually to the world. How the Casa Grande is doing today, there will be people out there in São Paulo, in Japan, that will know the reality of Fundação Casa Grande.” (Diniz & Marope, 2013)

This situation reveals the development of a double-pronged strategy. While the local community still depend on the traditional radio services, new publics can be reached. The group leading the web radio São Francisco, for instance, think about young audiences with their smart phones. Through the internet, the public of web radio Migrantes can follow the programs all over the world and keep connections with their original backgrounds. However, some reports assign to digital resources advantages that were already attributed to the radio itself, such as the possibility of reaching people who could not go to the Church through programs available in the internet.

Another observation that must be made is that, even if media actors praise the potential of digital resources for enlarging audiences, frequently they are used just as another mean of communication, along with or in place of the telephone. The report from Willamy Renan de Jesus, from a community radio in Lucena (PB), Northeast region, illustrates this situation:

“Through social networks and the telephone, the audience could establish direct contact with the radio presenter, who interacted alive, improving the character of entertainment of the program.” (Jesus, 2013)
Finally, the use of social networks is providing a mean for measuring the audience and the quality of productions, according to the reports analyzed. ‘Likes’, sharing and comments are recalled by media actors as symbols of the success of the programs, as reported by the team leading the web TV and the web radio of a parish in Natal (RN), Northeast region:

“Since the beginning till currently, the results achieved by the web TV and the web radio in the parish of Nossa Senhora da Candelária are very expressive and positive. The first evidence is the constantly growing number of page hits to the parish’s website (...) Another important point that confirms the good results are the testimonials of internet users following the productions.” (Fonseca, Santos, & Medeiros Jr, 2013)

**Collaborative dimension**

In this dimension, the analysis focused on practices of networking, in the sense of gathering efforts among media or other actors for improving the potential of producing and diffusing information. The most frequent practice identified was what could be called a distribution partnership, i.e, digital resources have been used for making ready content available among partners. Media actors talk about broadcasting productions done by peers and about exchanging material.

It must be said that the best experiences observed in this dimension came from groups that were already working together before, independently from the use of digital resources. It can be seen, for instance, in the cases of Rede de Notícias da Amazônia and Rede Católica de Rádio. The radio stations that form these networks already existed and the digital resources made possible for them to share contents on behalf of a common goal, which is making Amazon known by Amazon people in the first experience and making local experiences of catholic communities visible for the whole country in the second one.

In the case of Rede de Notícias da Amazônia, the project includes the whole work of training and building up common concepts among professionals taking part in the initiative. It includes an important effort of giving voice to local actors and presenting the region from a local perspective, in opposition to what the founders of the project consider as a biased view coming from mainstream media. The digital resources, even though limited, support the dynamic of collective production that is constructed within other regular activities.

In the case of Rede Católica de Rádio, digital resources are used for strengthening the networking dynamics already in place for decades. Based on a digital news platform which combines a website and applications specially developed for answering to their needs, the members of this network are able to diversify their contents through a permanent exchange of productions from all over the country. It improves the quality of services and it also works as a financial solution. Small radio stations can engage in large projects, offering their presence in remote places as an original source of information for the partners and providing national and deep covering for their local audiences.

“The new technologies came to sum up with radio, allowing more integration (...) This proposal [of having a news digital platform within the Rede Católica de Rádio] aims to integrate, through the internet, catholic radio stations with low financial resources, offering news articles in written and audiovisual formats, as a way for qualifying the network with information produced in local news rooms, based on an intranet and an extranet platform that makes possible the exchange of contents from local perspectives, that improve the working conditions in a collaborative environment and that, also, improve the quality of production with exclusive news.” (Romanini, 2013)
Dimension of social change

The analysis in this dimension looked for practices focused on objectives such as getting an issue or idea publicly stronger and/or improving life conditions for certain groups. Two aspects may be highlighted. The first relates to patterns of participation and the second concerns the appropriation of channels. They were considered as elements of social change because they may contribute to the democratization of communication through the diversification of voices in the public sphere.

As mentioned before, it was not possible to identify whether the use of digital resources is producing a relevant impact in the participation of communities in the production process. Frequently, media actors talk about benefits of digital resources in the participation associating with more opportunities of reaction and of using contributions from the public as a content, that is, people have more channels to express their opinions and share their perspectives in the framework of radio productions and, in return, these contributions are easily used to nourish the programs.

It is important to recognize that the analysis of a set of 2-4 page reports is not enough to identify such a complex process as participation. The field visits did not yield much information either. Radio Ibiapina does not use digital resources for public purposes. Its programs are not available on the internet and the radio is not present on social networks. As mentioned before, Rádio Casa Grande has a diversified presence on the internet, but it is situated in a city where the access to internet is very low. The field observation registered dynamics of participation but they were not related to digital resources. The contribution of this analysis is, then, to point out some evidence that confirm that the term participation must be carefully used, according to precise criteria.

Concerning the appropriation of channels, the contributions of digital resources seems to be more easily observable. The first evidence, present both in the reports and the in the field visits, is the disagreement of media actors in relation to the Brazilian laws regarding the distribution of radio licenses. There were several narratives of difficulties for obtaining a permission for broadcasting. In this context, digital resources may take over legal and bureaucratic barriers, especially in the case of web radios. After waiting for 15 years for receive permission for a regular community radio station, the coordinators of Rádio Cantareira FM, in the city of São Paulo (SP), Southeast region, defend their advantages:

«Communication via web radio extends the voice of the community since the community radio legislation limits coverage to a radius of 3 km, antenna up to 30 feet tall and 25 watts of power. Another complicating of the law is the limitation of only one frequency channel for community radio stations by county. In this context the web radio breaks certain barriers of community broadcasting legislation and reaches other cities, states and countries.” (Rosenbach & Zottis, 2013)

Another benefit coming from the reduction of barriers for developing a radio project in a digital environment is the possibility of getting some or more space for “invisible” social groups or issues. The activities promoted by Instituto Comradio, in Piauí, in the Northeast region, have been integrating, among others, blind people and their claims in the public debate. After being trained and getting appropriate equipment, they started to use radio, occupying a place in a professional market and delivering messages that discuss the inclusion of handicap people in society.

The report of the web radio Migrantes goes in the same direction, with a confirmation of the potential of digital radio productions for building recognition to social groups and highligh-
ting issues concerning their life conditions. In this case, there was also a reference to the possibility of agenda setting that comes with the fast and wide diffusion of information on the web. Issues debated on digital platforms can be easily multiplied and introduce alternative topics in mainstream media.

Conclusions

Departing from the findings of Cicilia Peruzzo in the 1990s, it is possible to identify important evidences of evolution influenced by the use of digital resources. Some weaknesses are still very present, such as the lack of financial resources, the limited use of media or the lack of technical skills, even if digital resources may contribute to build solutions – for instance, web radios are presented as much cheaper than traditional radios. In turn, the answer to the situation of unequal participation, that sounds as a promise in the context of internet practices, is not solved yet.

On the other hand, the cases allowed us to observe opportunities of improving production processes and enlarging audiences – and consequently increasing visibility for social groups and public issues, which confirm many of the strengths already observed by Peruzzo. In this sense, digital resources represent a chance for diversification of tools and contents, and an occasion for media democratization while granting more visibility for the perspective of citizens.

It is important to highlight that this study identifies trends. The sample can be considered representative, but its geographical and institutional orientation must be recalled; as well as that, except for the two radio stations actually visited, all the analysis was made upon reports of experience; that is, the description of practices made by the actors themselves. As mentioned before, this article aimed to raise some questions and aspects related to the use of digital resources by community and associative radios in Brazil. Each of these questions and aspects may be taken mostly as a point of departure for future and deeper research.

Bibliography


Notes

[1] The term popular is applied according to its Latin-American approach, referring to the culture of the so-called popular classes such as indigenous people, those living in peripheries and suburbs, “campesinos” and all groups that are excluded from the dominant elite culture. It also refers to practices searching for the emancipation and the improvement of life conditions of these groups.
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