

Chapter 3

Portuguese Internet Radio from 2006 to 2009: Technical Readiness
and Openness to Interaction

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The advent of the internet raised questions about the role of radio in a fast-changing media environment. Many voices forecast its end but in the summer of 2008 the Swedish Radio and TV Authority published a study named *The Future of Radio*, which clearly opposed the pessimism of recent analysis. While the study anticipates the exhaustion of the FM model, it clearly broadens perspectives for DAB and internet radio, highlighting digitalization as the key element for the future relevance of radio.

The Portuguese researcher and radio professional João Paulo Meneses states that 'the future of radio relies upon the internet', calling the broad service offerings of the net the pathway for the survival of radio from the threats to its two essential aspects: mobility and accumulation (Meneses 2008). Accumulation is radio's capability to be used in a non-exclusive manner, which means that a listener can use the radio while performing other activities, like cooking, sewing, reading, writing or jogging.

Even if we have the perception that internet users and computer users in general tend to 'accumulate' activities with a certain ease, in what concerns mobility there are some technical progresses that seem to confirm Meneses' conviction. If the transistor and the so-enabled miniaturization, mobile transmission and reception it allowed were radio's responses to the growth of television, it seems that the answer to the impact of the internet relies on the search for technical solutions that guarantee its relevance.

Two recent innovations are relevant here: firstly, internet-car-radio, which the Audi, BMW, Ford and Mercedes automobiles are equipped with, enable its users to access 30,000 internet radio stations (Moses 2009); secondly, the Olinda prototype, developed and already presented by BBC Audio & Music Interactive R&D, which consists of a DAB-based technology with interactive network-relationship capabilities (Ferne 2008).

These two devices may neutralize radio's loss of reach among itinerant users, who are seduced by iPod and MP3-capable car-radios, which also offer social networking – the hallmark of web 2.0 and contemporary internet use.

Mariano Cebrián Herreros (2007) reckons that radio has been able to mark its presence in all spaces of media consumption (at home, at work, in the car, on the move) and thus offers itself as an omnipresent option, while facing growing competition. This means that it must constantly re-position itself to sustain its relevance.

This focus on change is already propelling radio towards incorporating languages that are not part of its own tradition – such as video, image or written text – and pushing further its historical willingness to interaction, expressed by a tradition of 'inviting anonymous people to express themselves' (Becqueret 2006) either by phone or via vox-populi testimonials.

The Future of Radio shows that people are interested in interactivity and value-added services. While 36% showed interest in getting traffic information with text, maps and pictures, 33% were interested in accessing their favourite shows in a time-independent manner, 31% would like to have access to more radio channels and 23% expressed their willingness to programme the radio flow themselves (Swedish Radio and TV Authority 2008).

These types of services demand great efforts by radio stations, which need to adopt new ways to communicate and interact. According to Portela (2006):

'In these times, radio is asked a new hard-to-reach dynamic, because it needs to address the traditional listeners, maintaining their familiar expression through the airwaves – even though it has to be revised in order to compete with the numerous alternative options – but also it needs to renew its language and social role, as the progressive individualization of communication processes and internet interactivity request a capable answer.'

All these facts suggest that interactivity is at the core of the new demands on radio stations, not only as a historical component of its expression but also because it is at the centre of new digitally mediated social relationships.

Portuguese web-radio in 2006: a brief overview

We've observed how Portuguese radio stations were using digital interactive technologies in 2006 and how this reflected a willingness to seek new forms of relationships with its listeners/users. We also found that 30.8% of Portuguese radio stations did not have a website or a streaming system that could transmit their programmes to the whole world (Portela 2006). In that study it was also pointed out that 'the vast majority (73.4%) of radio stations with online presence don't reflect an interaction-stimulation behaviour'. In terms of technical readiness, only 8.4% of the stations with an online presence were using the available technical potential. Furthermore, despite being online, 62.9% of the stations didn't appeal to their listeners to interact or to establish contact using the internet. Finally, another interesting finding of this research was that 97.5% of online stations were not using web 2.0 (Portela 2006).

All these data suggested that radio was not capable of meeting its 'obligation to resituate itself in the media panorama' (Rodero Antón & Sánchez Serrano 2007).

The continuous loss of advertising revenue might explain the lack of investment in new technologies by small stations and may constitute, in itself, a bigger threat to their subsistence than competition posed by the internet.

From our research it was also clear that big national stations, with accompanying bigger budgets, were far more likely to adapt to change than smaller local ones. It was also noted that

internet-only stations were, in their overwhelming majority, amateur initiatives (41.2% of cases were the work of a sole individual), exhibiting technical problems with their streaming systems, and did not have the essential resources to survive (Portela 2006).

Current research course

According to our 2006 study, Rádio Renascença, RDP-rádio and TSF, the three key players who define the future of radio in Portugal, have upgraded significantly their online presence and have embodied in their websites forms of expression that are not part of the radio traditional language, taking more noticeable advantages from digital interactivity.

Other positive signs come from a recent French monitoring study that underlines the comfortable lead radio has in credibility as a source of information, as perceived by media consumers, ahead of newspapers, television and the internet, respectively (Petit & Afota 2009).

Furthermore, available data reinforce our conviction that radio should find a powerful ally in the internet. The *Barómetro Media e Comunicação: tendências 2008/2009* research by Obercom that collected and analysed answers given by the directors of several Portuguese media companies predicted that the internet would be an important source of revenue for radio stations in the next five years, providing profit by means of online advertising and value-added digital services (Obercom 2009).

Evidently the onus is now on radio to search for new pathways for its own future, using creativity and addressing the main needs of the target of its actions: the listener.

Taking into account that 'media [...] are being shaped at the intersection of new technological potentials, cultural traditions, and institutional circumstances' (Jensen 2006), it is necessary for radio to find a renewed identity, capable of understanding and integrating the new forms of online relations, while avoiding the trap of media standardization that might originate from the ongoing dynamics of media-convergence. Bruhn Jensen suggests 'redifferentiation' – the divergence in convergence – as a path for media to follow to avoid unification and find its own place, despite some degree of technological convergence (Jensen 2006).

Thus, the listener should have a crucial role in this dialogue between the medium in need of transformation and the ultimate beneficiary of its message, so that change occurs in a meaningful manner. It is true that 'the study of audiences has been a constant concern since the inception of mass communication research' (Pinto 2000) but it makes more sense now when radio is at the crossroads and is unsure of the course to follow in future.

A perspective expressed by Schramm et al. (cited in Pinto 2000) is pertinent here when one also considers that the present technological development empowers radio with a large set of digital tools. These in turn have been the object of research in recent times, so it is fundamental to raise some questions about the actual use people make of interactive tools offered by radio stations and what their particular framework is in respect to how, when and where they use it.

We share Finnemann's view that 'internet enables users to act and interact, not just with each other and at a distance, but with the system of communication in ways that may significantly reshape the very system' (Jensen 2006). Thus a better knowledge of radio's audiences and the type of interaction they maintain or wish to maintain with the stations and, eventually, with the community established amongst all listeners will definitely contribute to radio's correct positioning.

The urgency of this subject is reinforced by the realization that the youth audience, the one that can guarantee radio's future, does not seem to be interested in this medium but shows a high percentage of internet use. In Portugal, 81% of the people aged 15–24 are internet users (Obercom 2008), but when asked about their online radio listening habits 61% of the children aged 8–18 answered that they never do it (Obercom 2009b).

Therefore, it is clear that radio should charter its own course in the dynamic confluence of the three main vectors: technical change and radio digitalization; interactivity and its own redefinition brought in by the internet; and the role of listeners (conscious or not) in these changes.

In this chapter we discuss Portuguese online radio stations' technical readiness and their interactive positioning, identifying the main changes that have occurred since 2006 and attempt to establish a basis to undertake a deeper and more focused research and analysis.

Portuguese internet radio in 2009: focussing on change

Firstly, let us consider how the big stations were reacting to technological change, and whether the internet-born stations were still active. Our 2006 study showed these to be two main indicators of the process of change, and by observing them three years later, we are able to identify the main changes taking place.

By doing this, we were left with a sample of 26 stations, 17 of which were web-only and the remaining 9 national¹ in terms of frequency coverage. We have analysed their websites between 31 August and 2 September 2009.

Amongst internet-only stations, we were not able to identify a single one that did not exist in 2006, and while back then 70.6% were undoubtedly active, now only 23.5% are transmitting. This means that in 2009 only four web-only radio stations were operative. Of these, one station belongs to a political party (that transmits only an hour per week), one university station and the remaining two are commercial stations. In other words, web-only stations in Portugal closed probably because they were unable to come up with a proper business model.

This further narrows down the number of stations analysed in this study to thirteen.

The situation is totally different when we look at national stations, since not only are all of them working but there is an extra radio bitcaster (Rádio Sim). While in 2006 only three of the stations mentioned above were broadcasting more than one streaming channel (two music-only streams and one all-speech stream), now this number is as high as seven,

offering a total of nineteen extra streaming channels, thirteen of which include some speech and the remaining six work in the 'jukebox' mode. A clear increase in the use of the potential of the internet can be seen here.

Other positive signs include an increased use of podcasting, there are eight stations offering podcasts (one web-only and seven national), which means that there is one station more than there were in 2006 there. There are 279 channels now as against 168 which were there earlier, which is a growth of 66%.

The number of programmes available for streaming is also much bigger now. From 98 programmes in 2006, available from seven different stations, the number has now risen to 316 shows from eight stations that one can tune into in a time-independent manner.

The use of video and small flash interactive animations in radio-stations' websites has also increased as of 2009. Eight stations use video and seven exhibit interactive animations, whereas back in 2006 these figures were, respectively, one and four stations.

Listeners were more interested to interact with the station than in 2006, since there is now just one station more that invites the listeners/users to establish electronic contact. All stations provide e-mail addresses so that one can contact presenters, journalists and directors.

E-mail newsletters are increasingly being employed to contact listeners; whereas only one station used them in 2006, the number has risen to four in 2009.

In terms of comments on news stories, the approach remains practically the same; the dominant attitude is of reluctance to indulge the opinion of the users/listeners, since only three stations are inclined to publish people's written opinions on their websites (back in 2006 there was only one station). This attitude opposes Berthold Brecht's (2005) branding of the radio as a democratic media. Only one station offers online discussion forums. The year 2009 saw a rise in radio's use of blogs for communication, when there were eight stations as compared to four stations in 2006.

The last relevant issue observed is that more than half of these stations – seven out of thirteen – do not use (or at least do not reveal the use at their website) social-web tools such as MySpace, Facebook or Twitter. Though there is more scope now than in 2006, when only one station used such tools, most of the radio stations are yet to be popular among the youth.

Chart 3.1 below shows that Twitter is the most used social-web tool, since there are six stations using it. One may consider that this is probably in line with short and simple messages that are constitutive of radio's linguistic essence, but no conclusion should be arrived at without further research.

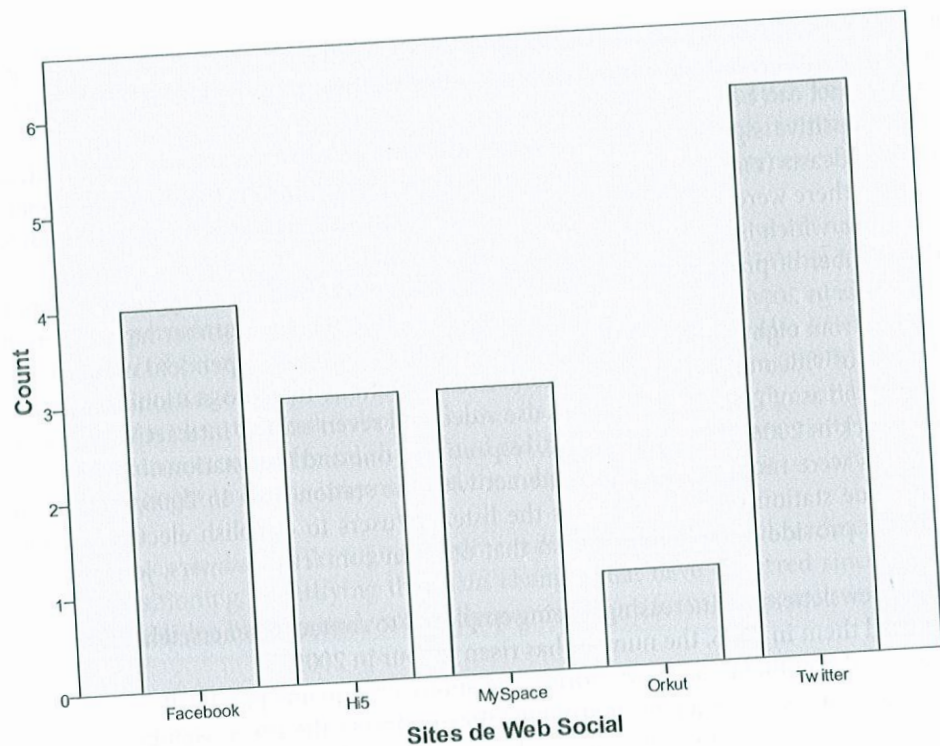


Chart 3.1: Radio's social web.

Conclusion

If we group the data gathered using the same criteria as in the 2006 study (Portela 2006), we come to the conclusion that stations have been technically upgraded. The two national broadcasters classified as 'medium' users in 2006 have now been classified as 'advanced' users.

Chart 3.2 demonstrates that nationwide stations are using technical resources to a higher degree. The unique national station classified as a 'medium' user is Rádio Sim, which started its activities recently and did not exist at the time when the 2006 study was undertaken.

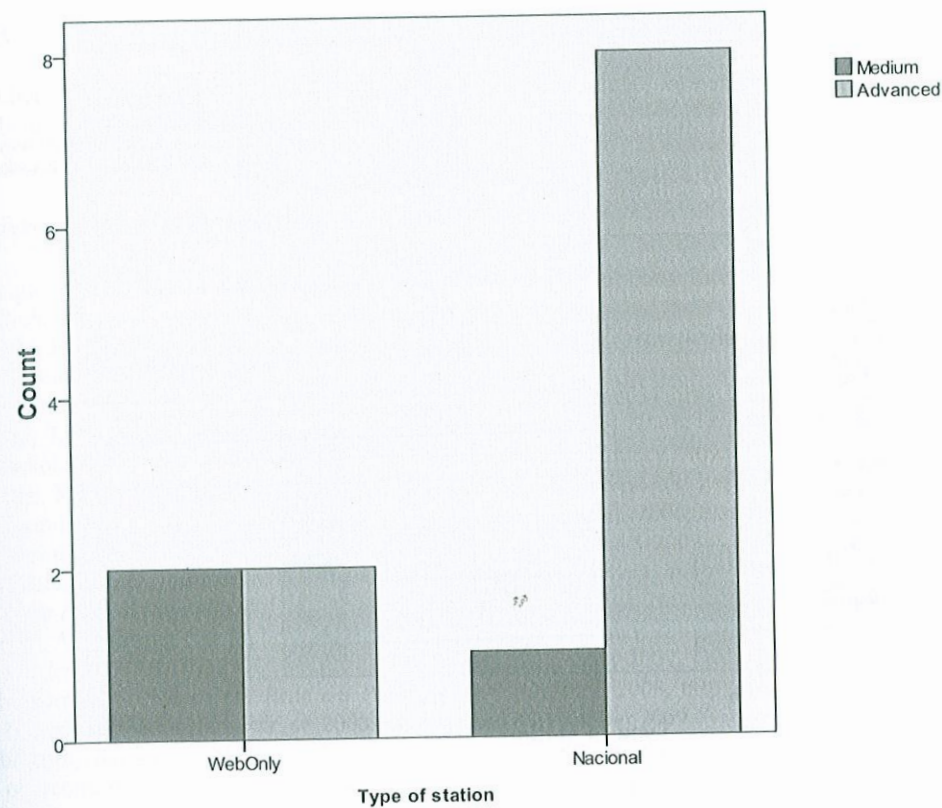


Chart 3.2: Online radio station's technical promptness.

The two web-only stations classified as 'medium' and also the ones classified as 'advanced' show exactly the same level of technical readiness when compared to those of 2006. This means that the thirteen stations of this type that ceased activities were the ones that then showed less technical development.²

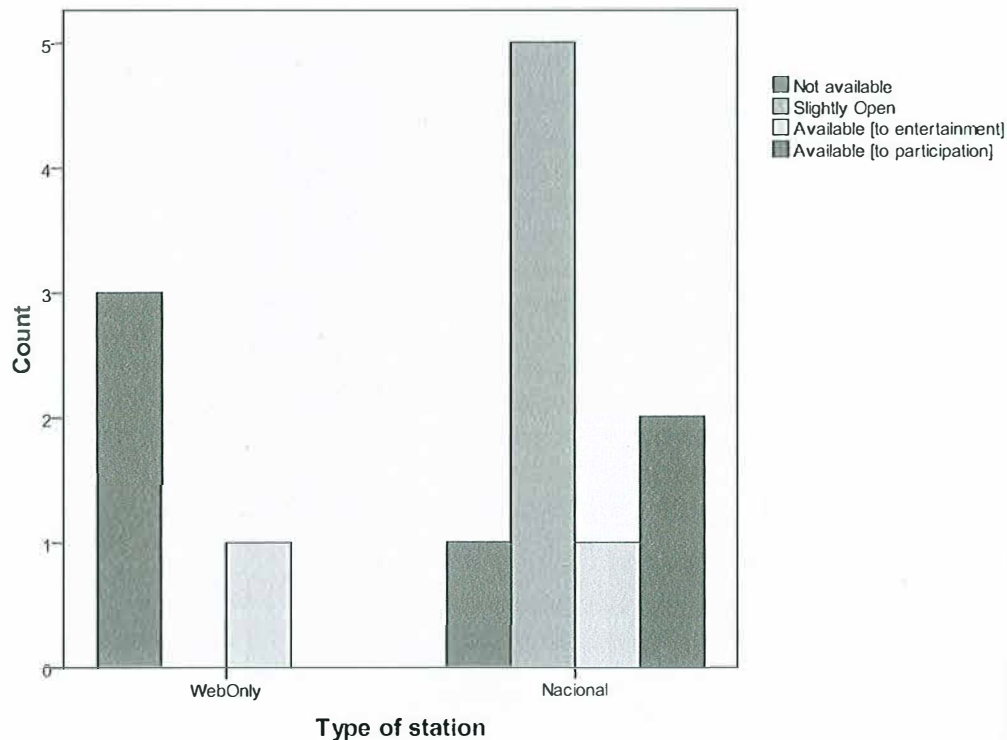


Chart 3.3: Openness to interaction.

Four stations are not available for interactivity with their listeners/users on the internet and five seem to distrust the power of interaction. The remaining four stations are already seeking interaction, although they seem to pursue different objectives. Two stations use interaction for entertainment, while the remaining two are willing to empower citizen participation in the public sphere.

In sum, these findings contribute to a better understanding of the internet's interactive potential for radio, indicating that the transformation of this medium is looking up to the net as the tool for change.

The slow pace of these transformations shows that radio is on the verge of carving out its niche in a fast-changing media environment and forecasting the right course is nearly impossible. It seems that there is still a long way for radio to go to *redifferentiate* itself and reinforce its appeal to future generations.

Note

1. Given the changes in RCP (Rádio Clube Português) since 2006, we now consider this station as being countrywide in coverage.

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