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The radio's afterlife. Three spheres of communication and community

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Abstract:

The converged radio reaches out for new areas of both transmission and communication. The article mentions three different fields where radio programs, so far transitory, now become constantly present in the way that can be described as 'the radio afterlife'. The situation results in new way of perception which paradoxically often resembles the traditional role of radio as centre that gathered community around. The first of the spheres is constituted by the radio stations' web-pages, internet portals, or podcasts where radio archives (or part of them) can be accessed. Second sphere is the radio fans' internet activity. Third area is revealed by the migration of radio personalities from traditional to web-radio. The process can be enhanced by the fact that internet is a space free from pressure determined by political or commercial factors. The paper is based on examples from Polish radio, as well as from different types of web-sites. They indicate how radio messages are still alive (despite the fact that certain programs are not broadcasted anymore or legendary DJ's are dead), and how modern technology facilitates it. The important field of interest in this context is the presence of community circles that arise around some radio shows, stations or DJ's.

Keywords: radio, communication, community, interactivity

Introduction

The transformation of radio, or its convergence with other media, brought changes in many fields. Obvious statement is that traditional model of communication is now enhanced by the visual elements and non-verbal context (i.e. radio on TV or accessed through web-sites). Radio broadcast is accessible not only by air but also by mobile-phones, internet, and television. It is certainly big advantage of modern technologies, but some claim that multiplication of accessible sources devaluated one of the radio's main features – unrepeatability and uniqueness. Old radio fulfilled with unrecorded live shows, improvised and living only through the memory of listeners is passing by. On the other hand, the new radio and other media give some programs or people an opportunity of second life.

Below I would like to give a quick glance at what one might call "a radio's afterlife". I use this term to describe situations in which the radio content can exist for some prolonged time. The radio production resembles performing arts. They both happen in process: listening to the radio is like participating in concert or watching a theatre show. They both give the audience some impressions and amusement which fade away, as time passes by.

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But in modern radio what once was transitory may now be recorded and re-played, sometimes it even may be rebuilt. Below I give three examples of such "afterlife spheres" based on cases from Polish market.

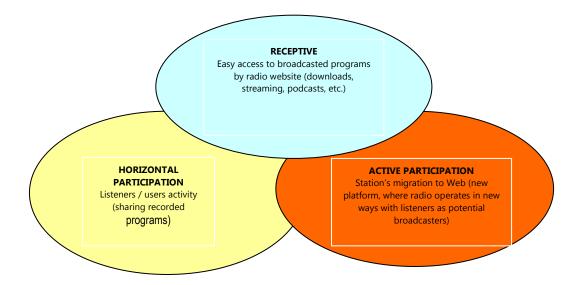
The first of the spheres is constituted by the radio stations' web-pages, internet portals, or podcasts where radio archives (or part of them) can be accessed. The radio output can be 'immortalized' through them, as many of live programs can be played at anytime in the future.

Second sphere is the radio fans' internet activity. People who like certain radio stations, specific programs or DJ's create small communities through internet blogs, forums or social networks. Their common fascination with the radio occurs in different forms: i.e. creation of web-pages, discussion groups exchanging recorded programs, meetings in 'real life', but also making music or other forms of art inspired by their favourite radio icons.

Third area is revealed by the migration of radio personalities from traditional to web-radio. The process can be enhanced by the fact that internet is a space free from pressure determined by political or commercial factors. Therefore making one's own program can be more uncompromising and staying in touch with listeners is easier. By the example of Radio Wnet I would like to show how the experiment of community radio that could not function within public or commercial sector is conducted in the internet.

Thus the concept of 'the radio afterlife' which consists of three spheres mentioned above. The listeners do not allow their favourites go away. They demand an access to old programs through radio archives, they want personalities on-line while not on air, because they feel important part of communication process. They expect a dialogue with broadcaster, if it is possible. If not, they may become broadcasters themselves, multiplying the radio work from the past, so that other members of their community might listen, comment and pass it further to others.

The paper is based on examples from Polish radio and different types of web-sites related to radio content. They indicate how radio messages are still alive (despite the fact that certain programs are not broadcasted anymore or legendary DJ's are dead), and how modern technology facilitates it. The important field of interest in this context is the presence of community circles that arise around some radio shows, stations or DJ's. The paper researches how they operate and what is the source of their strength and popularity.



Tab. 1 - Three spheres of 'radio afterlife' in the internet

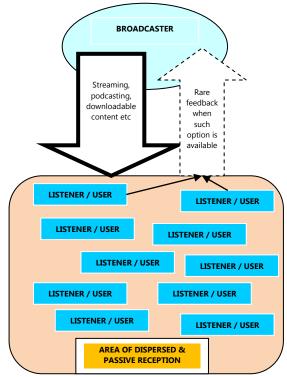
Radio as the area of access. 'Receptive activity'

First space of radio's prolonged life seems obvious, so I will not dwell on it in detailed way. Generally it may be described as an area of access to radio archives and programs that already have been broadcasted on air.

They may be divided into many categories such as: downloadable content, listenable but not downloadable content, podcasts, live-streaming and many others. Such options are available through official radio Web-sites, but also through fan-pages. The first case relates to all three sectors: public, commercial and social. In Poland the leaders in terms of quantity and quality of material are public broadcasters. The communicational role of such radio content available through official web-site is strengthening the broadcaster position and expanding its brand in the internet. It does not change relation with the audience. Listeners just have an easier access to some programs, unlimited by time of broadcast. They remain passive consumers, who occasionally post opinion about downloaded program, but on many times they do not have even such option.

The diagram below describes the situation. 'Strong' communication is directed downwards, from the broadcaster (via web-pages), while the audience is predominantly 'passive receiver'. The rare cases of activity (i.e. posts under downloadable programs) are not replied by the broadcaster and do not seem to influence him. The listeners are also dispersed – they do not communicate with each other and exist separately. Of course they may run such actions, but they happen outside the 'official' channel.

It may be said that the radio offers opportunities for the community to come into being, but does not give too many incentives. Many broadcasters in Poland still do not fully take advantage of such potential commercial possibilities. Strengthening relations with the internet audience could be certainly very profitable. Especially, when the traditions of 'radio family' already exists in many forms².



Tab. 2 - Communication in the sphere of 'passive reception'

² I.e.: 'The family of Radio Maryja' consists of many local groups of listeners of Polish biggest community stadion – the religious 'Radio Maryja'; but also Polish Radio used to have a very strong response to the radio-drama serie called 'The Matysiak Family' – the listeners treated them as their own family and tried to help them by sending letters with god advises or even givig presents

Intereresting fact is that sometimes official web-site direct users into unofficial fan-sites³. Sometimes 'the official' material is incomplete: some programs from the past might be deleted or were not recorded at all. But some of them were tape-recorded by the fans, who later share them with others. This will lead us to the second sphere of radio afterlife.

Radio personality

Traditional radio was a medium of contact between human beings. Even if it was fulfilled mainly by the music, the presenters used to communicate something through it. In the era of format radio the concept started to fade out, but still the presenter may become something more than a plain DJ or journalist: a personality (a respected authority, a friend, even a role-model). Radio changes though, personalities are rare, they tend to go away, sometimes forever. Can modern radio provide them with a kind of 'immortality'? Sometimes their voices remain hidden in the archives and can be broadcasted or uploaded for the web-site. But the dialogue is not possible any more. Yet the phenomenon of 'converged radio' (or 'web 2.0 radio') can prove otherwise.

Let's have a look at the second of given questions: How the radio fans can extend the existence of radio personalities that went away? I will analyze the case of late Polish music journalist Tomasz Beksiński. This son of famous painter Zdzisław Beskiński begun his work as a radio DJ in 1983. It lasted until 1998, when he committed suicide on Christmas Eve. His professional career was devoted to Polish Radio – Channel One, then Two and finally Channel Three. His activities also included writing and translations of movies: his interpretations of "Monty Python", James Bond and Dirty Harry series are considered to be classics. But what made him a radio icon was the music that he presented.

Let me write a couple of words that would make a figure of Tomasz Beksiński a bit more familiar, as it seems necessary to understand how big impact he had on his audience. To describe Beksiński's DJ'ing style, following McLeish we can use the mix of two terms: personality and expert.McLesih describes "personality" as someone who builds the program around himself while "expert" is concentrated more on the main subject, in this case – music (McLeish 2007: 189). Beksiński was certainly both, although he was neither a strictly expert, who gives opinion only about music, nor a "personality" concentrated solely on himself or on the entertainment he's supposed to deliver.

On the contrary to widely known (also outside Great Britain) legendary BBC Radio One DJ John Peel, who had been for the decades in the avant-garde of new musical styles, Beksiński's musical taste was inalterable. John Peel easily switched from prog-rock to punk-rock, saying once about Yes record that it was their last album he would ever present and in fact he went into the bands like the Clash or the Fall. Beksiński' fascination for early King Crimson or Barclays's James Harvest lasted from the beginning to the end of his career. Thus, the title of his favourite song by the band called Camel – "Stationary Traveler" may be his accurate description.

The audience then knew what they might expect: Ultravox or Bauhaus, Peter Hamill, Legendary Pink Dots, Genesis etc., but certainly no soul music (as he hated horns), pop, dance or punk (unless it was Siouxie and the Banshees. But she got(h) the right look). His musical taste oscillated around such genres as new romantic, art- and progressive rock and gothic. His programs were full of references to vampyres or black cats, but also humorous, wit remarks often relating to his personal feelings. It may seem that the entourage was quite childish and we may have association with the "emo" subculture, but then this term was not in use. Term "gothic" might be more appropriate.

Pretty soon his programs started to gather a dedicated audience – both because of the music (which wasn't very frequently played in other antennas) and his personality. Certainly that mixture was exceptional,

³ It was the case of Polish Radio Channel 3, which official site dedicated to the 50th Anniversary of their legendary DJ Tomasz Beksiński re-directed users to the fan-site http://www.tbmp3.republika.pl/strona/strona.shtml that contained some of his shows recorded by his fans

especially in the late eighties and early nineties, when public radio didn't offer much in that sense and when private stations only started to operate (in 1991). Beksiński was one of the first radio DJs who used his own musical taste and personal features to create an exclusive atmosphere of confession-based community. What was interesting – his programs did not have the "phone-in" formula, and his personal reluctance made him avoid an e-mail communication. So the community was based on his own "confessions", and fans' letters sent by mail were the main form of communication:

Andy Latimer played for the beginning and it was "Stationary Traveller" again, the song that returns on special occasions... (...) Dear listeners, I was listening to that record about a week and a half ago, when it was finally released. My mum baked a plum cake which reminded me how I had listened to that record for the first time – it was through Channel Three in the summertime of 1972. My mom's plum cake was then a regular thing but it won't be anymore and this is why I would like to dedicate our today's meeting to her.⁴

This is an example of confession typical for his programs. Such personal comments were rare at the time, so the listeners may have felt privileged to be part of the exclusive circle. Of course the music was the main element of attraction, but an air of mystery and exceptionality were inseparable. Listeners also awaited for lyrics translations (which was one of his trademarks), vampire stories, short reviews of horror movies or some loose opinions about the way of the world is going (and it was certainly the wrong way). No other person could fully replace him – Polish Radio Channel Three in the late nineties had a couple of other DJs who played similar music, but the program although of the same title "Trójka pod księżycem" ('Channel Three Under the Moon") was lacking the specific atmosphere provided by Beksiński.

His program on the 11th December 1999 was meant to be the last one in the year of 1999, but it happened to be not only his farewell to the Twentieth Century, but also a personal farewell to life. Let me give you a sample of that:

The hands of clock are ticking inexorably, just about three weeks left until the end of the century and millennium. Next week's program will be led by Piotr Kosiński... In two weeks we'll have Christmas, in three: year 2000. Do you realize that today we are meeting for the last time... in the nineties of the XXth century? And it may be our last meeting at all; who knows what will happen...

What happened was his suicidal death, committed on Christmas Eve 1999. In fact it was his third attempt of taking his life's away, this time successful. This death also became the beginning of the legend that lasts until this day. If an average radio listener of age 30-40 was asked what have in common Monty Python, King Crimson and vampires the answer would be Tomasz Beksiński.

Now we come to the question of Tomasz Beksiński's legacy. As I mentioned before: public radio has relatively big sphere of accessible archives, but not in this case. Except a few occasional events (like on the 10th Anniversary of death), Polish Radio abandoned his heritage. So the afterlife went to the Internet and other places.

There are at least few web-sites dedicated to Beksiński and they are entirely fan-pages. What is interesting, some of them offer possibility of posting tape-recorded materials with his programs in MP3 format. The most important of them are: www.nosferatu.art.pl, www.krypta.whad.pl, www.tbmp3.prv.pl. They offer many options i.e.: large collection of mp3 files with auditions, posted through the guest-book, links to many small Internet stations and on-air radio stations (like Polish community station in Dublin NEAR 90,3 FM) etc.

Some other events to commemorate him were the music festival "Love Never Dies" in his hometown Sanok in 2009, two television documentaries ("Dr. Jimmy" and "The Diary of Preannounced Death") and many local music and film events (like movie show, with his voiceover). The voice of the community can be found not only on the dedicated web-sites, but also on YouTube (where fragments of his programs are posted too):

I rememeber it as if it was yesterday /GrandelPL/

⁴ Polish Radio Channel Three, "Trójka pod księżycem" ("Channel Three Under The Moon) show, 27.09.1998

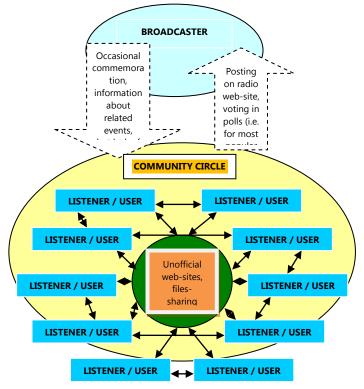
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It was the lyrics of the Sisters of Mercy song called "I Was Wrong". These were cult programs also because of Tomek's translations. You can find a lot of them (programs) in the net profiles of Chomik (which is popular files-sharing portal) so listen recalling the old times. /Smurf1111/ $^{\delta}$

The music that created generation one may truly say, quoting Mark Fisher (Fischer 2007: XVII-XVII). It was the man and the music that contributed to creation of today's thirty-something-year old generation. Some of them still feel the sense of belonging to a greater circle, despite the fact that the radio does not offer any insight into the heritage of Beksiński. What happened in the fifties and the sixties in the USA and later in Great Britain, in Poland happened three decades later. There was a generation formed both through the historical events of the Solidarity movement, John Paul II pontification, martial law of 1981 and regaining freedom in 1989, as well as through the musical experience provided by people like Tomasz Beksiński and few others (like Piotr Kaczkowski or Wojciech Mann). The traces of that phenomenon now are being described in Polish literature (novels by Krzysztof Varga or Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz) and the cinema ("Beats of Freedom"). The sad point is that the radio which was the only source of music then (Western records were practically unavailable at that time), abandoned the community into creation of which it had played important part.

The case of Beksiński afterlife legacy shows that his former audience started to integrate outside the radio channel. The Web created a space where it is possible. What's more, official web-site of Polish Radio sometimes directs users searching for the sound archives with Beksiński's voice to fan-pages.

What is "the communicational balance" then? The audience loosens its ties with the broadcaster, but tightens ties with each other. The "afterlife" communication in this case looks can be described like this:



Tab. 3 – Communication in the sphere of 'horizontal communication'

⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxDXf8IMzco

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The communication is based on the basis of exclusivity and loyalty. Being part of a circle means also to dialogue with other members. It is more important than to contact with a broadcaster, especially when the radio seems not to be very interested in sustaining the listeners' fascination with a late DJ.

Radio Wnet and its 'active community'

Finally we come to the third case of radio afterlife: Radio Wnet. In fact it is as much a radio as a social network. The origins of Radio Wnet date back to 2009, where Krzysztof Skowroński, the head of Polish Radio Channel Three was fired from his post due to political reasons⁶. As a sign of protest, couple of other journalists left the station. Skowroński says:

Radio Wnet was born in a tea-house on Francuska street. The group of people who left Chanel Three wondered what to do, and all we knew was that it must be the radio – so we created Radio Wnet – a multi-media social network⁷

Skowroński was an experienced journalist, who was part of original Radio Zet team in the 1990's. This commercial station soon became the leader on Polish market and Skowroński was a founding father of some most popular programs including political talk-show "Breakfast with Radio Zet". In 2000 he and some other co-founders quit (in protest against station's policy of 'dumbing down') and soon joined Polish Radio Channel Three, where he became a Chief Head in 2006. He also collaborated with television – both of public and private sector. In 2009 despite the success he made at Channel Three, he was fired.

Radio Wnet is, as he and other journalists claim, an attempt to build "a truly public & truly social medium" – free form political influences, but deeply interested in public matters. It may be called a second life of a project, that did not have a chance to exist in neither commercial nor public radio formula – therefore I put it in a category of "radio afterlife".

The radio mission is "to increase the level of freedom in Polish media". The internet platform on which it is built (by the way, name "wnet" is a word-play – it means "soon" or "suddenly", but also "into a net!" or more precisely "into a Web!") enables adding various materials – not only by the journalists but also listeners / users. Materials presented on web-site apart from audio may be of video, graphic or text character. They are not removed (unless their authors decide otherwise), so users have non-stop access to whole content since the beginnings of the station. Current live streaming is provided by web-site, but the radio exist also on-air: by the courtesy of Radio Warszawa and Radio Nadzieja some of Radio Wnet programs are broadcasted live from a provisional studio in Hotel Europejski in Warsaw through their channels.

Radio has no specific format (this is not just an observation, but also a statement from the official web-site) and is open to every truth. Streaming transmission is accessible 24/7, but the part from midnight is fulfilled with replays, and the music is broadcasted for 6-10 hours per day. Other programs occupy morning and evening hours. How does it work? There are three groups of "content creators" and three respective levels of participation:

- unregister listeners
- the Republic
- the Academy
- Free Antenna

Except them, there are professional journalists who work or collaborate with Radio Wnet and who act as tutors for the members of Academy.

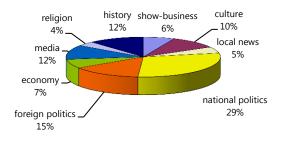
• 1) First group consists of passive receivers. They have full access to published material, but cannot post any comments. But as soon, as they register and create profile they become "the republicans".

⁶ www.radiownet.pl

⁷ Poranek Radia Wnet, 11.01.2010

• 2) The so called Republic gives the register users an opportunity of making their own internet radio channels, called @R (pronounced "ether"). The number of channels is unlimited, they may be of different subjects and may be joined with others. But it is more than just a plain audio channel; the Republicans are entitled to publish all types of material: also video or text.

• Currently there are 1329 registered members: the Republicans. Among them there are professional journalists, social workers and activists, Members of Parliaments (both National and European), active and retired politicians, but mostly ordinary people. They all act on equal basis. The republicans' content is accessible through the main page of Radio Wnet web-site. Thematically it is very diverse: there are posts about local events, international affairs, art, economy, election, show-business, religion, history etc.



Tab.4 'The Republic of Radio Wnet' content analyse (week 2-9 september 2011)

• 3) Radio Wnet Academy is meant to help people become journalists. It is a university without semesters, marks or payments, where professionals share their knowledge with adepts. To become an adept a Republican needs to present materials through his own @R and they must reach certain number of visits. Then one can expect an invitation to Academy. Other way of being introduced to Academy is recommendation from Radio Wnet journalist, based on the quality of published material.

• The benefits from being a member of Academy are of different character. Firstly, it is a chance to being taught individually by professional tutor. They are in direct contact, not only by phone or e-mail, but also by personal meetings, discussions and assisting at tutor's work. Secondly, once the adept is ready to "graduate" he gets diploma, radio Wnet ID card and is promoted to "Free Antenna".

• 3) Free Antenna is program led and created by those who graduated the Academy. They get their own air-time, this time on regular basis, as the professionals.

- Such structure is based on two major factors:
- free participation
- free education

It is worth mentioning that the tutors work voluntarily and without payment, which is another indicator of truly non-profit social medium. The effects of learning process are visible. The audio materials of Free Antenna are of much higher quality than those of the beginners. European Podcast Award in Non-profit category for Borys Kozielski, the author of podcast titled "Positive Haven" proves that the Academy has already brought effects. But the awards are not the aim. There are more reasons behind active participation and will to learn. Kozielski says:

I always dreamed about small, local radio which operates in the neighborhood and is listened to by the people you meet around you block, in local shop, at the bus stop or in the school your kid goes to. We see each other so much,

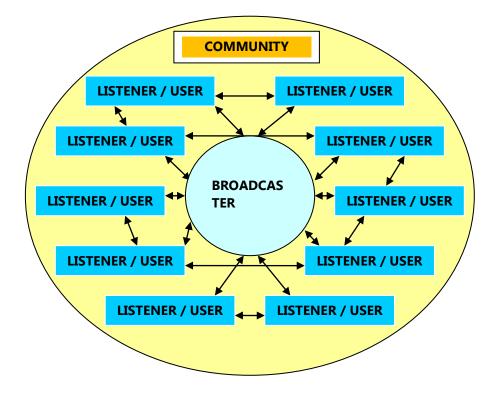
but know so little. What is 512 bus driver's hobby? Where to find good place to eat in nice company? What do they play in local cinema and theater during the weekend? What is going on in our community centre "Zacisze"? It would be good to better know each other, we don't have to be anonymous. We can meet through our radio. Everyone may come and help to build up.

It can be said that Radio Wnet acts as an incubator for new, Internet-based local radios, where radio fans can find tools and knowledge to become radio producers.

Since I can remember radio as a medium and an institution was in the first place, as far as I'm concerned. Being still kids me and my brother used to make our own radio dramas. Then came local radio in small town where I had my own show. The road towards is winding, but I have a vision of certain radio with certain programs; that's why I got to Radio Wnet, where I can pursue my dreams. You can find two of my stations here. /Krzysztof Szczepanik/

Sometimes decision of joining the Republic is more spontaneous and sudden. The activity of users may be more or less frequent and may have different forms: i.e. presenting favorite music, political commentary, drama etc. The discourse is therefore multidimensional. The internet form of Radio Wnet allows its listeners to compose program by travelling from one channel to another. They are often receivers and broadcasters in one, and participate simultaneously in many dialogues. Intertextuality and hypertextuality become main features of communications process. The engagement of users can create certain topic and make it dominant in Radio Wnet discourse. It is the recent case of discussion about law introducing GMO (Genetically Modified Organisms) to Polish agriculture. Mainstream media avoided the subject, so it was social media and Non-Government Organizations which led campaign against GMO. Radio Wnet, both through their Republicans and the main channel, actively took part in campaign and for several days it was their main focus of attention. Finally the new law was vetoed by the President, so the citizens' protest were successful.

Communicational relations in the sphere represented by Radio Wnet can be shown in the diagram below:



Tab. 5 - Communication in the sphere of 'active participation'

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The whole communication is a complex network of relations, where listeners (or users) can communicate within the circle either with each other or / and with a radio (the main broadcaster). Some of them (the Republicans) are also the creators of the radio content. Thus the names as 'prosumer' (Toffler 1980), 'pro-am' (Leadbetter, Miller 2004) or 'conducer' (Garlick 2004) can be applied. Radio Wnet seems to be an extremely interesting experiment of independent community radio. Time will show if it will develop further and gather more attention. So far it functions outside the mainstream. Unlike commercial or public media it does not have commercial breaks. Start-up money came from European Union Operational Programme Innovative Economy, but the question is if that's enough to make this "afterlife" project live forever. The recent news is that Radio Wnet transformed its legal status into a cooperative⁸, where all the members have the same rights of voting, regardless the number of shares they hold. It is the practical implementation of project's republican nature. Krzysztof Skowroński himself was elected as a new President of SDP (Polish Journalists Association) – the most important journalists' association in Poland. It is a first case in history when someone from outside the mainstream occupies such prestigious position.

Summary

'The radio afterlife', though possible due to the modern technology, is based mainly on the listeners / users activity. Downloadable content, radio archives, discussion forums, blog – they all live thanks to their users. Without them all the facilities are "empty options". Internet, Web 2.0 where radio dwells offer a chance of instant feedback from the audience. More precisely it is a series of feedbacks, as comments or opinions expressed under presented content may lead to another kind of activity: a new program, discussion topic or activity in real life. Sometimes the radio immortality manifests in taking the new roles by the listeners. They may become guardians of radio personalities' heritage (as in case of late Tomasz Beksiński) or try to walk the road drawn by their idol-authorities, following their footprints and trying themselves as a web-radio journalists or social activists. Thanks to the modern technology the number of such individual fascinations creates a network. It is a new community, which brings back the memories of golden age of radio, where the radio-set was able to gather people around, giving them not only knowledge, humour and entertainment but also own mythology and sense of belonging to a greater circle. The communities are of different types (as shown above) and their functions may be different – hence the types of communication process may appear in variable ways. This article attempts to sketch some of them – in the spheres which seem to be quite distinctive, though certainly do not fulfill the whole spectrum of possibilities.

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