



Sharing and retweeting sounds – The relationship between radio journalism and social networks

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Abstract:

This article aims to define the relationship between radio news stations and social networks. We will start with the notion that radio is going through changes that affect its expressiveness, programming, routines and values. Accordingly, we intend to characterize the uses that Portuguese radio news stations are making of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

The article will begin by reflecting on these changes in radio and the implications for radio journalism. The study looks at the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the three main Portuguese radio news stations: TSF, Antena 1 and Renascença and tries to identify what benefits were brought about through being in social networks.

One of the most important conclusions is that social networks are used as an excellent platform to promote user participation. This finding was especially verified in the case of Facebook, where listeners frequently post comments, criticize radio policies and suggest news topics.

Keywords: radio, journalism, social networks, Portugal

Introduction

News radio is still important, but not as it was before. Today, a consumer looking for news has access to a wide range of subjects, formats and channels whether they be television, printed media or the Internet (websites, social networks, and blogs). We access news in multiple formats and from multiple platforms.

Radio all over the world is adopting various forms of multimedia convergence in order to deal with this new multiplatform media environment. News radio news is present on the Internet, on cell phones and, in recent years, has started to make use of the social networks.

On the other hand, journalism is seeking new ways and formats to adapt to new technologies and thus continue to position itself as a window to the world, despite the emergence of other forms of journalism, such as citizen journalism.

In the digital age, news consumption has changed, and has become a social experience: people share the news, instead of just receiving them, as they did before.

The question is: What is the role of the news radio today?

In this paper we intend to analyze the relationship between the Portuguese news radio and the social networks, especially Facebook and Twitter.

Starting from the perspective that nowadays radio is a multiplatform medium, our aim is to understand and reflect how the Portuguese news radio is using social networks to disseminate its journalistic content.

We analyzed the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the three main Portuguese radio news stations: the public radio service, Antena 1; the Catholic radio, Renascença and the commercial radio specialized in news, TSF.

The study examines the use of multimedia tools, the presence of comments, the user generated content and the hypertextuality used in messages on Facebook and Twitter.

Radio news and the new media environment

The idea supported by Philip Elliot and Peter Golding in the 70's, that radio was the main media creating public agenda by pointing out the issues of the day to other media, doesn't have the same meaning today as before.

Nowadays, news radio is one part of the overpopulated media environment. Besides radio, a person looking for news has many other alternatives, especially on the Internet. Weblogs, websites and social networks are also in the field competing with mainstream media for the consumer's attention, as Ben Scott says: "(...) traditionally distinct segments of the news industry itself, print (dailies, weeklies, and magazines) and broadcast (networks, cable, and radio), found themselves competing head to head for users and advertisers". (Scott, 2005: 94)

Traditional media which, of course, includes radio, is facing competition from a broad range of other platforms that have started to disseminate information. Traditional news organizations exist in a scenario where other forms of producing news are operating simultaneously. This competition includes not only news production, but also business models. Indeed, alongside these models comes a huge volume of non-profit and non-commercial enterprises sharing the media landscape with traditional media.

In this context, the challenge for radio news stations is to adapt to a new environment, creating policies in order to maintain their credibility over and above their own legacy.

Since the beginning, radio has always demonstrated an ability to adapt successfully to other changes in communications technology, but the challenges have never been as huge as they are nowadays.

David Hendy makes the point that, traditionally, radio is a time-based medium since its programs emerge in a linear flow of time (2000: 178). In one way Hendy is right, because this model of radio still exists, but the challenges imposed by the digital era have created a scenario where it exists simultaneously alongside a new radio. More interactive, multi-faceted and whose programs do not only exist in the flow of time.

Never before has radio been forced to change its expressiveness, becoming a multimedia platform. Sound is no longer the only resource for radio. Also, radio has never been as interactive as it is today, and has never been so bombarded with requests to make the news available in so many platforms.

In the digital era, radio must find the balance between these new characteristics and the need to maintain the old ones so it continues to be a significant source for listeners in terms of breaking news and public issues. One of the keys for the future of radio journalism might be in the way that radio will take advantage of its knowledge regarding immediacy and credibility, which are two very significant attributes constantly sought by those who search for news on the Internet.

New platforms, and especially the Internet, provide radio with more space (not time) and this can be an opportunity for more creativeness and alternative ways of covering public issues. Also, radio has become more interactive, since the Internet offers more opportunity for debate and user participation about public affairs. Finally, radio on the Internet surpasses the limits of the traditional broadcast, reaching listeners all over the world which means a challenge for news reporters.

The idea is that despite the many and ongoing changes in the ways that people access information, radio is still an important window to the world. In the most competitive media environment ever, radio must adopt policies to enable itself to be an important source of news for people. In this context, the presence among the new media platforms is seen as a logical strategy.

The fact is that in a multiplatform media environment, people's relationship to news is becoming portable, personalized, and participatory (Pew Internet, 2010). Accordingly, radio is requested to adopt strategies in order to facilitate portable consumption and audience participation in its news content. Thus, social networks are, nowadays, advantageous platforms for the radio news stations.

Social networks and journalism

Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis wrote in their book *We Media - How audiences are shaping the future of news and information* that the profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history. The reason, they explain, is because for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by new technology and competitors but also, potentially, by the audience it serves (Bowman & Willis, 2003: 8).

Indeed, journalism in the digital era has changed, and one of the most important changes stems from the opportunity that is provided by the new platforms which allow consumers the possibility of participating in the news content. This can be done in several ways, by creating weblogs, websites or, most recently, by using the social networks.

Thus, when we are talking about the relationship between journalism and social networks, participatory journalism is frequently highlighted as a benefit.

News consumers can comment on the topics, suggest new approaches or add facts about an event reported by journalists. The presence of journalism in social networks increases, at least in theory, the possibility of more diversity and pluralism in news production once people inside and outside the newsroom are engaged in the communicating process. Nowadays, journalism is a blend of producing and consuming information.

Social networks contribute to what Dan Gillmor (2006) defines as a conversation, which means that people and journalists share comments and discuss public affairs.

Another characteristic frequently mentioned when we are talking about journalism and social networks is the speed with which it is possible to distribute information. Twitter is often mentioned as a useful platform for disseminating news in a short period of time, and this is seen by journalists as a good way to reach the consumer.

The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism's study (2010) reveals how Twitter can be an important platform for breaking news:

"And the breaking news that trumped all else across Twitter in 2009 focused on the protests following the Iranian election. It led as the top news story on Twitter for seven weeks in a row – a feat not reached by any other news story on any of the platforms studied."

Among the advantages that social networks can bring to journalism, it is suggested that a new consumer's behavior is a consequence of the fact that the information can be shared and recommended to "friends" or "followers". Consuming news is, at present time, a social experience.

"Half of Americans say they rely on the people around them to find out at least some of the news they need to know. Some 44% of online news users get news at least a few times a week through emails, automatic updates or posts from social networking sites. In 2009, Twitter's monthly audience increased by 200%".

According to the Pew Internet (2010) report, 37% of internet users in the United States contributed to create, comment on and share news through social networks like Facebook and Twitter.

Another study revealed that the presence of journalism in social networks leads to a new journalistic discourse. The study looked at the Spanish reality and aimed to understand the relationship between journalism and Facebook.

"This new reality has created a new way of reporting events that are similar to microblogging, but also draws on the blogosphere, image, video, hypertext and interactivity. A new form of information to which the media are not used to" (Garcia Alvarez et. al.: 2010)

Finally, social networks can also change the impact of news on the public. Traditional journalism is still the main source of news stories but, as they are on social networks, users stress the importance of a news topic by highlighting it to other users. As the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2010) reports “technology makes it increasingly possible for the actions of citizens to influence a story’s total impact”.

Portuguese radio news and Internet

In Portugal, the last two decades have shown a decrease of investment in news radio.

The Portuguese scene is characterized by hundreds of local radio stations, most of them music radio stations, and by other national radio stations which are, in the majority, also music radio stations.

With respect to news radio stations, the Portuguese scene is very small. Apart from a few local radio stations with small newsrooms, the main radio news stations are TSF, which is an all-news radio station, Antena 1, the Portuguese Public Radio Service and Renascença, a radio station owned by the Catholic Church.

Antena 1 is the main radio channel of the Portuguese Public Service which also includes six other radio stations. Antena 1, at the time called Emissora Nacional, was the voice of the government during the Portuguese dictatorial regime, which ended in 1974. Today, Antena 1 has the biggest radio newsroom in Portugal and its programming includes much journalistic content.

Renascença is owned by the Portuguese Catholic Church which has three more radio stations, all of them music radio stations. Throughout its history, Renascença has played an important role in Portuguese radio journalism as it continues to do nowadays.

TSF is the youngest radio station among the three analyzed in this study. Created within the movement of the Portuguese local radio in the 80’s, it soon emerged as an innovative project not only for radio, but in general for Portuguese journalism. TSF is an all-news radio and introduced a new style into the Portuguese radio journalism scene, based on live reporting and breaking news.

These three radio stations are, indeed, the most relevant in the context of Portuguese radio news, since they dedicate a high percentage of their programming to journalistic content. Also, they represent the biggest newsrooms among the Portuguese radio news stations.

Regarding the migration to digital platforms, Renascença, Antena 1 and TSF are not much different. All of them initiated their presence on the Internet in the second half of the 90’s, by creating websites.

Despite the center of news production in these three stations still being the traditional radio, the efforts to improve their presence in various platforms are evident. In the last decade, Antena 1, Renascença and TSF have adopted strategies in order to craft a multi-platform radio by creating websites, being in the social networks and improving their multimedia expressiveness.

In some cases, TSF, Antena 1 and Renascença have created significant milestones in the context of Portuguese web journalism, as is shown in the following examples.

TSF was the first of the Portuguese media companies, including newspapers and TV, to offer podcasts on its website. Also, it made an interesting move in 2005, creating a radio for the deaf population, by translating each day’s programming to sign language. The strategy of TSF on the Internet aims to maintain the same image acquired through its traditional version. Therefore, the website contains news contents, programs and many other journalistic formats. TSF highlights user participation by providing tools that allow for commenting on the news content.

Renascença has a clear strategy for its presence on the Internet. The website has been inundated in recent years, especially since 2006, by several videos. There’s no doubt that Renascença is the Portuguese radio station which has led the way in video content.

The Portuguese Public radio service adopted a different policy for its presence on the Internet. Since Antena 1 is part of the Portuguese Public media service, which also includes the TV station, the website unites

these two mediums. The result is not as positive for the radio section because the most important news contents available on the website are produced by public TV. Despite being a public service, the website does not promote user participation. Even today it is impossible to comment on the news on Antena 1's website.

Radio news and social networks

Antony Mayfield (2008) in his e-book *What is social media?* identifies five characteristics of the social networks: *Participation*, as they encourage contribution and feedback from everyone who is interested; *Openness* as they are open to feedback and participation; *Conversation* because social networks are seen as two-way platforms; *Community* as they allow communities to form quickly and communicate effectively and *Connectedness* since social networks use links to other sites, resources and people.

The Portuguese scholar, Gustavo Cardoso (2009: 37), advocates that radio is the medium that competes more easily with social networks. The author says that radio, like social networks, contributes to the discovery of new talent in music. To do that, suggests Cardoso, radio stations should increase their strategies on proximity to the listeners by creating, for example, communities.

2009 was the year in which TSF, Renascença and Antena 1 discovered the social networks. Since then, Facebook and Twitter have become a part of the Portuguese radio news stations. Thus, Portuguese radio news stations are present on social networks in two distinct ways: "institutional" and "formal".

By "institutional" we mean that radio news stations use their own brand and image on social networks to promote their contents. In this case, the objective is to suggest the programming of the traditional radio, for example, by making available the on-air programming schedule.

One of the most common uses in the "institutional" type is to launch the topic of the phone-in programs on Facebook. This has a very curious effect, as the users start to comment on the topic, anticipating the debate even before it goes on the air.

However, the main use that is given to Facebook and Twitter is to link news topics that take the user to the website. In the "institutional" type, we also identified two others uses.

Firstly, as a way to promote the debate and criticize the radio station.

One example occurred when, on TSF's Facebook profile, users posted various comments criticizing the radio after a phone-in program in which the Prime-Minister was interviewed. TSF was accused by the listeners of having promoted the Prime-Minister since those who called in to the program only did compliments. The listeners considered that TSF had not done its job well and started to criticize the radio station on Facebook. The pressure was so extreme that the Director of the radio felt he should write a note on Facebook giving the radio's version of events. This example shows that social networks can be a useful way for users to participate in radio stations' policies.

Secondly, as a way to gather news sources by posting messages in which reporters request information about a news story they are working on.

By "formal" presence, we intend to say that radio journalists use social networks to promote radio programs. Here, we aren't talking about the presence of the radio station, but of the journalist who uses his own name to speak on behalf of the radio.

In this case, journalists are clearly identified with the radio and take advantage of the social networks to disseminate the programs and the news stories they made or took part in to their "friends" or "followers". In this case, the profile of the radio journalists turns out to be part of the radio station.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between radio journalism and the social networks Facebook and Twitter. We made an exploratory study by analyzing the news topics available on the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the three main Portuguese radio news stations: TSF, Renascença and Antena1.

The study addresses the following research questions:

Q1: What uses are being made of the social networks by the Portuguese radio news stations?

Q2: Do social networks contribute to the increase of multimedia expressiveness on radio?

Q3: How can we define the presence of the Portuguese radio news stations on the social networks?

To answer these questions, the study looked at the following aspects analyzing the news topics available on the Facebook and Twitter accounts: multimediality (presence of videos, photos, sounds), interactivity (which tools are used to promote interactivity), the circuit of news contents (where do the links take us) and user-generated content (do the users participate with comments and the journalists take part in this conversation).

Q1: What uses are being made of the social networks by the Portuguese radio news stations?

Portuguese radio news stations, TSF, Renascença and Antena 1, are using social networks to promote user participation.

Social networks are useful tools to encourage users to comment and share information. Facebook and Twitter help to promote the spontaneity of the user and to break down barriers to access. Users do not need a password or a registration to participate. This helps to explain the reason why topics that are available on Facebook receive so many comments, compared with the news available on the websites.

Portuguese radio news stations receive many comments from users on news topics posted on Facebook which means a renewal of interactivity on the radio. Indeed, radio has always been interactive, but never has it been so easy for listeners to participate in the news content.

However, contrary to what Gillmor advocates (2006), we are not yet talking about a conversation, as journalists don't take part in the discussion. Users do comment and do suggest, but the only conversation is among the users.

Facebook represents an important platform for spreading user participation in the public sphere. However, it is interesting to note that not all the comments posted by users are contributing to a positive discussion about public affairs. Indeed, in some cases, users use Facebook to criticize and offend without any argumentative position.

Facebook is also used to contact radio and give information, as in the follow example:

User – Does TSF know about the death of a 16 year old Benfica fan who died due to a beating in Braga when he was celebrating Benfica's 32nd football championship? Is this true?

TSF Radio – Yes, we know. It was reported by Benfica TV and we are checking the facts to report that too. (Facebook, TSF, May, 10th, 2010)

Users also use Facebook to denounce situations:

User – I'm calling to the attention of the company responsible for the road works on the highway A8. I live about 100 meters from the works and it is now 01h30 in the morning and right now, as in the past two days, a jackhammer is working. (Facebook, TSF, November, 4th, 2010)

In this particularly case the user felt he could talk about a situation he was going through. People see Facebook as a platform to get in touch with the radio station and to turn personal problems into public affairs.

Radio news stations use Facebook to stimulate user participation by asking its "friends" to send videos and photos about public affairs, and so in this way they are adding new elements to news topics. For example, when Pope Benedict XVI visited Portugal in May 2010, users were asked to send videos and photos.

Allowing user participation is, in fact, one of the most important benefits that social networks offer journalism.

Commenting on the news on Facebook has started to be common practice among users, and because of that radio news stations have created rules about participation.

For example, TSF explain that comments containing insults or obscene and defamatory language are removed and Antena 1 wrote on Facebook that users who make offensive comments, appealing to verbal or physical violence or provoke discussions are removed from the page.

Social networks, especially Facebook, are seen as an important window to opening radio to interactivity and participation by promoting the discussion of public affairs. In some cases, social networks appear to be the only way to do that. For example, the Portuguese public radio service still does not provide any other access points on digital platforms for user participation.

Q2: Do social networks contribute to the increase in multimedia expressiveness on radio?

Radio has become a multimedia medium and because of this one of the most important questions about the future of radio is to understand what the role of sound will be in a multiplatform radio.

On social network sites, sound takes second place. On Twitter and Facebook it is possible to post sounds, but this is a rare practice among the Portuguese radio news stations as the norm is to post sounds linked to the affiliated website instead of posting the sound on the profile. By doing this, radio news stations “invite” friends and followers to go to the radio’s website and not to listen to the sound directly from the Facebook page.

Our observations also revealed that social networks are used by the Portuguese radio news stations to post photos about the stories reported by the journalists. Indeed, we found that posting photos is one of the most intensive practices done by radio news stations on Facebook. Often, the photos posted aren’t the same as those that are available on the website. On Facebook, photo galleries are frequently posted which are not on the affiliated website.

Posting videos is not very common practice. Rarely do news topics posted on Facebook contain videos.

Regarding multimedia expressiveness, our observations revealed that the most common practice is the posting of text and photos. Sounds and videos are very rare.

Q3: How can we define the presence of the Portuguese radio news stations on the social networks?

According to our study, social networks are a complement to the on-air radio. The center of production remains the traditional radio. Journalists think first about broadcasting news. Only after this task is completed, news are first posted on the affiliated website and finally on Facebook and Twitter. This means that the newsroom is still organized according to the traditional routines and values of radio journalism.

This scenario is the key to understanding how radio news stations are using social networks. In short, Facebook and Twitter are used by the Portuguese radio news stations to promote topics that have usually already been broadcast on the traditional radio’s newscasts.

Facebook and Twitter are mostly used by Portuguese radio news stations as a way to suggest and promote news available on their affiliated website. The circuit of the news posted on the social networks is as shown in the following diagram:

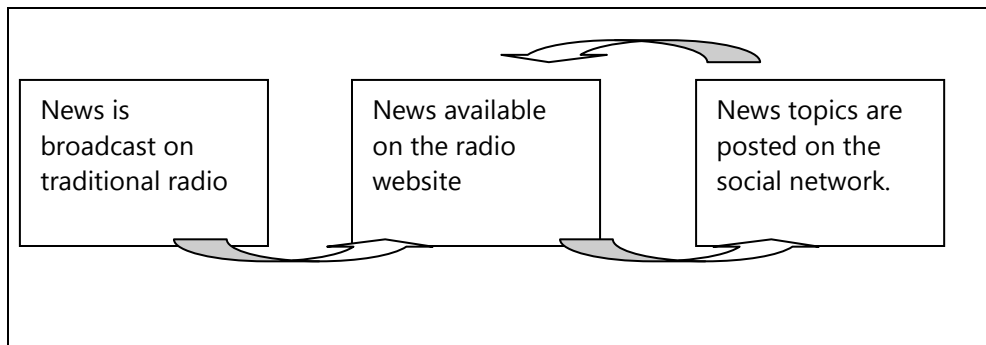


Figure 1 – Circuit of news

Our observations revealed that the news go on the air, then go to the website and finally are posted on the social networks. Finally, the link on Facebook or Twitter takes the user back to the website.

Twitter is only used to promote the news available on the websites. In short, the breaking news pointed out by some authors as an advantage for journalism is not a common practice among the Portuguese radio news stations. Twitter is only used as a platform to promote the radio, following the basic idea that if people are on Twitter, the radio should be there too.

Also, through the social networks, listeners can participate in the phone-in programs. The examples are taken from the Facebook accounts of Antena 1 and TSF. Both give the listener the opportunity to leave a comment about an issue which will be read by the journalist on the air.

Good morning. This morning, TSF Forum talks about corruption. Bureaucracy is seen as a fertile ground for corruption and this is one of ten themes of the challenge that TSF has released to the leaders of major parties. We wanted to know what actions they propose to reduce bureaucracy and make the fight against corruption more effective. The Forum also wants to hear your opinion. What can be done to stop the phenomenon of corruption? Do you believe that existing laws are sufficient? (Facebook, TSF, 3rd June, 2011)

In this way, despite the comment being available on the Facebook profile, the host of the phone-in program can choose the ones he considers more relevant to the discussion and read them on the air. Facebook, in this case, acts as an extension of the on-air programming and also contributes to increasing interactivity with the listeners.

Conclusion

Social networks did not invent interactivity on the radio, but they have transformed it. In fact, social networks represent a strategy to open the radio to its listeners. This is the most important conclusion we have reached in this study.

Facebook is a very useful platform for user participation. Taking advantage of its spontaneity, users can easily get in contact with the radio station and with the journalists and participate in the discussion of public affairs.

Thus, Facebook contributes to increase the values of democracy in the sense that the presence of more voices, at least in theory, represents more diversity and pluralism. Traditional radio, with its temporal constraints, is prevented from opening its programming to constant participation. The exceptions are the phone-in programs.

With the Internet, and particularly with social networks, radio opens itself to discussion and criticism. Listeners can, as we saw, participate in the news content, but they also can also criticize the radio and suggest new strategies.

Despite this openness, we have observed that the discussion still remains incomplete, as journalists are still reluctant to get involved in the conversation. The fact that the Portuguese newsrooms are becoming increasingly small can also be an argument in understanding why journalists do not take part in this discussion.

Journalists are constantly occupied with the tasks of news production. Journalists, especially those who work on radio, don't have much time to be on social networks interacting with users.

Our study also revealed a reduced use of some of the potential of social networks. That is to say, Portuguese radio news stations rarely use Facebook and Twitter as a breaking news platform or to improve the multimedia expressiveness of this "new radio".

Social networks are part of the global radio news station policy, but in these early years, despite being an excellent platform to increase interactivity, Facebook and Twitter are just used to promote the traditional radio. Indeed, we have observed that although the three main Portuguese radio news stations are in the social networks, much of the content available in their Facebook and Twitter pages is simply repurposed material from offline programming.

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