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Formal or informal 'you'? 'Você' or 'Tu'? How the radio listener has been treated in the past decade in Portugal

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Abstract:

Until 1998, the formal 'you' ('você') was the consensual way of treatment in radio broadcasting. The first radiostation ever to treat its listeners in an informal 'you' ('tu') was Mega FM, which was founded in 1998. Mega FM's target, at that time, was young adults, mainly students, and treating them in an informal way was a strategy in order to improve proximity and intimacy with the radio listener. After that, competitors that arose

(Best Rock, Cidade FM) started using the same strategy, creating a new paradigm in the radio market: stations aiming at youngsters would be informal and use 'tu'; stations targeting adults would be formal and use 'você'. This phenomenon was the status quo during the whole first decade of the century.

However, nowadays there seems to be a growing tendency of informality in social patterns. Since the end of 2010, RFM – the leader in radio audience, which target is 25-45 years old – has changed its positioning in the way of treating radio listeners and it is now treating them with the informal you ('tu'). The way of treatment has changed but not the target; therefore, this might reveal a few social tendencies that can predict the future. Radio broadcasting seems to be following a tendency of informality, which is not happening in media competitors such as press or TV. This tendency might be explained by social patterns: life expectancy has been increasing so exponentially that people become older much later in time; also youth and beauty are extremely valued and have become a goal to the majority of people, thus making them appreciate the fact that the environment around them makes them feel young. However, there are also commercial reasons behind this tendency: day by day, companies have been communicating their brands in a much more innovative and fresher way, many times using an informal tone of voice in advertising. Therefore, the informal treatment in radio broadcasting also creates coherency between information and entertainment contents and advertising. In this communication, the main goal will be to understand this new paradigm that has been developed in the past years about the way radio stations treat their audience, try to explain its causes and how this tendency will evolve in the future. The two case studies mentioned (Mega FM and RFM) will be introduced more deeply and the social analysis of the radio listener will also take place.

Keywords: radio; listeners; audience

Introduction

Radio is a tribal drum, has McLuhan mentioned back in the 50's. Sixty years later, we could now say that radio is 'a tribal orchestra'. Therefore, when we reflect on radio evolution, we have to understand what sort of

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'instruments' have grouped with traditional radio transmission, in order to make it evolve the way it did in contemporary times.

Digital broadcasting, Internet, podcast and Facebook have changed post-modern ways of listening to radio. Radio is not an exclusive belonging of hertzian waves anymore. All these new ways of relating to the radio as a medium have also changed the way listeners perceive it and relate to it – thus, radio content.

The Portuguese language and culture is characterized by certain specificities that are naturally exported into the radio universe. Communication and radio language particularly, are social extensions of human relationships. Therefore, the way people relate between themselves is also reflected in the way radio players relate to their listeners.

In this paper, in order to understand how radio has evolved in terms of narrative formalization, I would consider important to go through ways of treatment towards radio listeners in the last decade. For this reason, I will start my analysis in 1998, an year of breakthrough due to the creation of Mega FM, the first radio station in Portugal to treat radio listeners by the informal 'you' ('tu'). Afterwards, I will focus on the evolution of marketing strategies, showing how brands have been demanding the change on the way radio stations direct to their listeners in the 00's. Afterwards, I will focus on the case-study RFM, which has in 2010 changed their way of treating listeners.

Moreover, the Spanish have long been informalizing their way of treating the radio listener. Spanish media have long been more informal than their Portuguese peer. Spanish cultural patterns are more colloquial, laidback and rooted to daily life. The Portuguese radio industry participants were perceived as opinion-leaders. This status has slowly been dissipating; therefore, radio stations have positioned themselves among listeners as 'peers' instead of the old 'leaders'.

For all the reasons mentioned above, I believe that this theme will be important to the understanding of radio evolution in the last decade. How, when and why listeners are treated nowadays in a less formal tone by radio stations are topics that I am willing to address in the next few pages. As it is a very recent tendency, I believe this is the first formal research on the theme of treatment in radio audience. This tendency might even anticipate a change in the radio paradigm, so I am willing to make some predictions on how radio will evolve in what concerns the future of ways of treatment.

As a tribal orchestra itself, radio is most of all a human system that aims at connecting to people in an engaging and fruitful way, almost as a love relationship: if you love me you should be faithful to me, and if I love you I should do my best to deserve your love. So stations do need the faithfulness of their listeners and definitely do listeners demand more and more quality from stations, so that they are not seduced by other competitors in the market.

And is the seduction game not a market itself too?

The radio panorama in the 90's

In the 90's, the radio panorama suffered many changes that helped it to develop in the post-modernist frame of mass communication. The crescent digitalization in technical structures of broadcasting and the raise of internet as a source of information (and also itself as a radio player) have changed the way presenters communicate with their listeners.

In the 90's in Portugal, the radio market spread and developed. New radio stations were created, directing themselves to an even more specific target, segmenting the radio market more and more. The growing importance of marketing strategies in the contents of radio stations also marked a deep change in the tone of voice used to communicate.

Moreover, in 1998 a new radio station was founded, which revolutionised the way presenters communicated with their listeners: Mega FM. The first radio station that treated listeners by an informal 'you' ('tu') was about to reinvent communication in radio in Portugal.

Mega FM, the third radio station belonging to the historic Renascença Radio group, targeted youngsters in the age range 18-29 years old. This radio group, which included Renascença (market leader by that time; very popular among mature adults and seniors, due to its connection to the Catholic church) and RFM (second most popular station in the country; very good acceptability among the 30-45 years old), lacked the young adults fringe, which was somehow directing audience to competitor stations (such as Energia, XFM, Rádio Cidade and others). In addition, in terms of marketing strategy, the young adults segment was growing in terms of commercial attractiveness.

When Mega FM was created, it struck the market as the first radio station to treat its listeners in an unusual colloquial tone of voice. The informal 'you' ('tu') was a breakthrough in the history of radio evolution in Portugal, as it opened the door to other stations to informalize and communicate in a more youthful tone. Mega FM can be classified as belonging to the Specialist Music/Youth Oriented format, classification made by Ofcom (2005)². Its naming refers to colloquial language used by youngsters; 'mega' means 'great', 'huge', which is a positive connotation, creating empathy and identification links with the target.

Rádio Cidade, back in the beginning of the decade, already treated its listeners in a much colloquial tone of voice, however, as the presenters used to speak Brazilian Portuguese, they used 'você', the pronoun that represents the informal 'you' in Brazil but the formal one in Portugal. Therefore, Rádio Cidade was already innovating in the area of contents and style back in the beginning of the 90's but was not yet using the informal 'you'. This step ahead was made by Mega FM and this could explain part of its huge success among the target right after its launch in the radio market.

In the years that followed Mega FM's creation, a few competitors entered the hertzian spectrum following this vanguard movement, reacting to its quick approach to the young target. All these competitors took part in the same radio format as Mega FM, that is, Specialist Music/Youth Oriented format.

Best Rock FM first and later Cidade FM (taking the brand name of old Rádio Cidade) were launched by competitor Media Capital in order to break the crescent and broadened audience fringes that Grupo Renascença was aiming at. These two radio stations acted mimetically, also treating their audience by the informal 'you' and bringing new songs and fresh contents to their programming.

In terms of radio audience, Mega FM soon became the leader in radio audience among students in Lisbon, city where its first mast was grounded. Antena 3, the public service radio station aimed at youngsters, kept its leadership in the target nationwide, thanks to its almost 30 masts. Antena 3 treats its listeners as a group, meaning that it used the 2nd person plural ('vocês'), and this was one of the weaknesses that mostly allowed Mega FM to make the difference in this market segment – as we will verify later on in the next chapters of this paper.

From mass-media, radio stepped on to become a 'self-media', due to the increasing interactivity. This mutation reinforced its status of companionship in people's daily life. Since the 90's, radio contents depend much more on the dichotomy radio players – radio listeners/consumers/users.

The radio panorama in the 00's

The 90's ended with the growing audience of Mega FM, bringing a breakthrough in the radio market with the laid-back attitude of its presenters and the freshness of its play-list Antena 3 started to lose the race and then Best Rock was created in 2003 by Media Capital, the second greatest player in the radio market.

² In <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/communications-market-reports/cm05>, last consulted on 12/09/2011.

In the 90's, radio professionals were confronted with the slowdown of a phenomenon that dominated the radio market in the 80's: 'pirate radios'. In the 90's, the radio market became more commercial and profit searching itself. The spreading of digital information technologies changed the way radio professionals relate to the media and, consequently, the listener.

The growing importance of the digital happened to individualize communication in a deeper way. With online media streaming, each listener related to the station in its own PC, therefore, in a more individual experience. The radio starts to move towards the listener, and not the opposite as it used to be. The listener acquires a double role: listener-user.

RFM, the radio station leader of audience in Portugal, is a paradigmatic example of how radio has evolved in the last decade in Portugal. It belongs to the Chart Led Mainstream category, which means that its format aims at pleasing an audience that is fond of contemporary music hits, thus a broad target, from young adults onwards.

RFM has made a strategic decision in 2010 that changed radically its way of communicating with listeners. It started to treat listeners by the informal 'you' ('tu'), becoming the first adult radio station in Portugal to radicalise the tone-of-voice. Music appears to match this informal way of treatment, because nowadays mainstream music successes are mostly included in the pop/rock/dance styles, and the majority of them do sound light and youthful.

This strategy of informalization follows a social tendency that has been growing in the past years. Listeners need to feel identified with the radio station (and consequently the brand) to develop loyalty, therefore, they will obviously feel more into a station that represents their relationships with the world (family, friends, workmates, people that normally treat them using the 'tu').

Altogether, in this decade radio performs a metamorphosis, becoming a 'self-media' alongside the status of 'mass-media'. This tendency grew along the following decade. In the beginning of 21st century, internet audience started to be measured as well, becoming another socio-economical indicator of the radio market panorama.

Nowadays, interactivity with the listener is growing day-by-day, especially thanks to social networks. The reinforcement of the presence of the listener in one of the radio station's platform (Facebook and Twitter mostly) increases pressure of response from the radio's side to meet listeners' wishes and wills. The listener enters the private sphere and this one becomes more imposing than the public sphere itself. Therefore, we might conclude that radio is suffering at the end of the 00's and beginning of the 10's another metamorphosis: from 'self-media' to 'own-media'. Just as we own a Facebook profile page, we believe that we can also own rights to participate in radio programming.

But what are the main reasons for this growing proximity, and therefore, informality in radio communication?

The reasons are mainly three: economical, socio-cultural and strategic. In the socio-cultural perspective, we can argue that radio communication has gone informal due to the growth of life expectancy and the latter age of certain traditional practices, such as getting married, having children or buying a flat (what we used to do by mid-20's, we are now leaving it for the 30's).

Socially and culturally, the rejuvenation of cultural practices make individuals feel younger until a later age. It is popular now to claim that the 30's are the new 20's, therefore, making young adults believe that they can still live according to younger patterns than the ones that ruled the previous generation.

Finally, in a more marketing strategy point of view, the commercial positioning of brands these days is fresher, cooler and thus younger. Youth is a goal itself (in a sort of Peter Pan complex), therefore, also for brands it is important to perform in a younger tone-of-voice. Radio has been adapting to these commercial standards; so, informality is more consistent with today's marketing and advertising practices.

'The advertiser is a resource for survival but the listener is the reason why the station exists', said Herreros (1995). For this reason, radio should not follow blindly the advertising tendencies, however, it can adapt to the consumption society that advertising reflects.

According to Cordeiro (2010), 'the undeniable transformations that result from digital, multimedia and interactivity reinforce the distinctive character of radio: interactivity with the audience, indirect access to events, constantly up to date information and individual companionship on people's daily life.'

Actually, due to the multiple platforms that radio is using for broadcasting, individuals can listen to radio in different stages of their daily life: during their personal hygiene, through a waterproof shower radio; going to work on the car's radio player; online at work, using a media player and watching the whole thing with a webcam; at lunch break via an application on their smart-phones; at the afternoon coffee break on YouTube or Facebook; before falling asleep, using the 'timer' mode of their Hi-Fi systems.

However, the step further is to stop listening to radio and starting to experience radio, as it is now spread as an octopus through different platforms that promote alternative experiences. Can emotivity lead the future of radio?

The emotion in formal and informal "you"

As mentioned before in this paper, radio is nowadays a complex media network, connecting itself to other forms of communication, trying to search for the components that it lacks in other platforms (such as internet and social networks).

Let us take Flemming's (2002) statement as a starting point: 'identity reflects on all the sound environment of the station, whose elements must relate in a coherent way to create the station's sound distinction or style'. Upgrading McLuhan's theory *radio is a tribal drum*; we could claim that radio is in 2011 'a tribal orchestra'. Each instrument, in its own simple complexity, contributes to the whole in a homogenised miscellaneous blend. Each instrument, connected to the others, brings more to the symphony than it would if it acted alone – a holistic result that makes the orchestra more than the addition of its instruments. In the same way, radio becomes more than the sum of its components.

In a tribal orchestra, we would probably be presented with instruments such as the guitar, djembe, rattles, rainstick, kashaka, kora, xylophone, flute, trumpet and so on. Each of these instruments can be symbolically associated to the main individual elements that take part in the broadcasting process, like voice, music, jingles, news, ads and competitions.

The element music (and the play-list that is nowadays associated to it in major radio stations) could be represented by the guitar, as it is one of the basic instruments to compose a song; in addition, the quality of a guitar sample much depends on who is playing, and it can vary from a simple sample to great creative riffs. Rattles could be a metaphor for jingles, as they are constantly setting the rhythm of the song; also, they happen to be there all the time and many listeners do not even mind they are there. News could be associated to trumpet, which sound is shrill, thus creating impact and a breakthrough in the flow of the moment. Advertising might be identified with the typical tribal instrument 'djembe' (the skin-covered drum, played with bare hands), as it can be annoying and tiring when it happens to be too long, taking the melody over control. Competitions could be a xylophone: catchy, harmonious and sweet. Finally, the voice – the element that mostly brings meaning and soul to radio – may be disguised as a 'rainstick' (a long, hollow tube partially filled with small pebbles or beans which sound resembles the rain).

This tribal orchestra can symbolically resemble radio elements and how they relate one with another.

Naturally, in this orchestra such as in radio, the element voice-'rainstick' is the one that excels, meaning that it is the element that can create emotion among listeners and make them feel intimately related to the station and its brand.

Following the metaphor of the tribal orchestra, we can assume that emotion in radio mainly comes across the voice element. The presenter's personality is highly relevant in the listeners' development of loyalty process. Their feeling of identification towards the station is mostly related to the way DJ's present themselves to listeners, the contents (relevant or not to the target) that they wonder about on air and the attitude that the station passes along. Naturally, the element 'music' is extremely essential on the way the station as a brand is recognized but the role of the presenter concerns three different elements: tone-of-voice, content and way of treatment. And the attitude also comes across through (in)formality.

Tone-of-voice is the first contact one has with the person who is speaking. An agreeable tone-of-voice is half way to a pleasant approach towards listeners. However, it is the content that will make the listener decide whether to keep up listening that radio station or to move on.

Therefore, content is mainly what defines the perception of the presenter and its engagement to the audience.

Moreover, the way of treatment defines what the target's frontier is. In English speaking countries, this element is not taken into account, as the target's frontier might well be defined by content and tone-of-voice only. However, in Latin languages such as Portuguese, there are two ways of treatment: the informal 'you' ('tu') and the formal 'you' (você). Generally, the first is more related to proximity and intimacy, while the second adds more elegance and uniqueness to the speech.

Every moment of radio should be relevant to the listener, argued Flemming and emotion on music, words or news will certainly make one unforgettable.

Tendencies in radio treatment

Future is always unpredictable, especially to media, which are closely dependent from the unstable social interactions and the constantly evolving technologies.

The future of radio is possibly based on customization. By customization in radio I mean the adaptation of radio contents to the listeners' requests and tastes, through the establishment of a direct and interactive relationship with them. Knowing exactly and intimately what are the listeners' wishes is actually a conquer from the digital (internet, e-mail, social networks, online market studies) and consequently from the 00's.

From intense interactivity to total domain of radio contents by the ones who are consuming is perhaps a likely step. Individual control of the mass-media, in order to meet the listeners' preferences, leads to the dissolution of the frontier of intimacy, which has been crossed before by social networks. The target's control of the media will deeply transform its identity, turning the mass-media of the 20th century into the private media of the new millennium.

The social networks' phenomenon will probably stabilize in the next few years but it will surely maintain its function of instrumentation in the bi-nominal radio/listener. The reinforcement of interactivity will help the ontological transformation of radio from the 'self-media' that it has become in the last decade into the 'ownmedia' that it is transforming itself into nowadays.

Meeting people's wishes has become radio's greatest goal. If in the past, listeners would listen to what radio was playing, today radio plays the music that their target desires to listen. Pleasing the audience is a task that nowadays takes market studies, online surveys, sms requests and Facebook questionnaires. As interactivity has become easier, quicker and cheaper, radio is becoming more and more malleable to consumer preferences. Achieving listeners' development of loyalty is a DJ's, presenter's, producer's and director's duty.

As Cordeiro (2011) mentioned, 'Radio will use all its diffusion channels that support sound or adapt to radio communication. Ultimately, we will assist to the definite change of the concept of audience.' Radio as a mass-media will become more passive and flexible, and the audience will take radio production over control.

Thus, we will attend a radio e-evolution: again, an exchange of paradigm where the digital is the channel through which radio will become more instrumentalized and less independent from strategic consumer command.

In addition, the decade of the 10's will be apparently absorbed by the worldwide economical crash of the end of the 00's, obsessed by recovering from it and regaining commercial attractiveness. Competitiveness will be tougher than ever and stations will fight over commercial opportunities and the attention of listeners.

Only the future can tell but one thing is certain: the attractiveness of entering the private sphere will overcome the duty of protecting the public sphere. The private sphere is naturally related to the

informalization of language and communication, as the action on the web and social networks are clearly less strict, as they float in the virtual sphere too. Cyberspace has been implementing modifications in the way people relate to each other, so the dichotomy radio/listener is also included in this tendency of informalization.

Conclusion

By analysing radio language in the past decade in Portugal, we recognize that there was an evolution in the way professionals are treating radio listeners, and it has evolved towards a more informal way of treatment.

This tendency of informalization was partially influenced by internet and its proximity values and practices; therefore, in the past decade a 'radio language e-evolution' occurred.

Until 1998, the formal 'you' ('você') was the consensual way of treatment in radio broadcasting. The first radio station ever to treat its listeners in an informal 'you' ('tu') was Mega FM, which was founded in 1998. Mega FM's target, at that time, was young adults, mainly students, and treating them in an informal way was a strategy in order to improve proximity and intimacy with the radio listener. After that, competitors that arose (Best Rock, Cidade FM) started using the same strategy, creating a new paradigm in the radio market: stations aiming at youngsters would be informal and use 'tu' and stations targeting adults would be formal and use 'você'. This phenomenon was the *status quo* during the whole first decade of the century.

However, nowadays there seems to be a growing tendency of informality in the social patterns. Since the end of last year, RFM – leader in radio audiences, which target is 25-45 years old – has changed its positioning in the way of treating radio listeners and is now treating them by the informal you ('tu'). The treatment has been changed but not the target, therefore, this might reveal a few social tendencies that can guess the future. Radio broadcasting seems to be following a tendency of informality, which is not happening in media competitors such as press or TV.

This tendency might be explained by social patterns: life expectancy has been increasing so exponentially that people become older much later in time; also youth and beauty are extremely valued, and have become a goal to the majority of people, thus making them appreciate a surrounding environment that makes them feel young.

However, there are also commercial reasons behind this tendency: day by day, companies have been communicating their brands in a much more innovative and fresher way, many times using an informal tone of voice in advertising. Therefore, the informal treatment in radio broadcasting also creates coherency between information and entertainment contents and advertising.

The new platforms where a 'radio experience' can be obtained have naturally transformed the perception of the radio listener in the past decade. A new paradigm has been developing in the past years about the way radio stations treat their audience and also the way brands treat their consumers. This tendency is to follow a Spanish cultural habit, which is informality in communication (both mass-media and other media).

As Cordeiro (2010) mentioned, in the future 'the mass diffusion will tend to restrict itself, from broadcasting to narrowcasting'. Nuclear audience, target segmentation, content individualization and intimacy relationships are concepts that tend to prevail in the way radio is communicating with people nowadays.

The adaptation of radio to the new patterns of technological communication in media consumption has obliged it to become more flexible to tendencies. If in the past, radio was the one responsible for changes in the way communication was performed, today radio follows tendencies created by individuals exchanging experiences in social networks, where socio-cultural connections are less strict and formal.

The 'own-media' paradigm will probably grow throughout the new millennium, thus replacing the 'self-media' which had already made 'mass-media' collapse.

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