

NOTES FOR A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RADIO JOURNALISM¹

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to give an overview of radio journalism practiced today in the city of Rio de Janeiro, from the theoretical framework of the Political Economy of Communication and convergence studies, especially in its Latin American component. Two major radio stations dedicated to the All News segment are taken as reference: Central Brasileira de Notícias (CBN) – which operates AM and FM radio stations – and BandNews Fluminense FM, both members of large media groups operating in several other media. The study will focus on the reconfiguration of the routine production of radio content, particularly analyzing the scope of the professional process of media convergence.

Key words: Radio journalism. Political Economy of Communication (PEC). Convergence. All News.

INTRODUCTION

Radio Journalism in a convergence scenario

Media convergence has become, in the last decade, a successful discursive construction, achieving wide acceptance among businessmen in the communication, culture, telecommunications and computing sectors, through the action of consultants dedicated to capitalizing on the so-called “digital age” (KISCHINHEVSKY, 2009). At the turn of the 21st century, media conglomerates intensified studies and projects to integrate newsrooms, first isolated from newspapers, magazines, radio, TV and news websites, justifying this as a means to achieve synergies, increase productivity and reduce costs that resulted from overlapping workforces.

This phenomena occurs at a time marked by the “diversity of supply” (BRITTOS, 2002) of symbolic goods, in which the interlacing of media, telecommunications and computing sectors engenders a multitude of electronic devices for production, distribution and consumption of text, audio, video and photos.

The period, hailed by scholars from the so-called Information Society

is, however, the focus of concerns of Political Economy of Communication (PEC) researchers, who detect an growing corporate concentration in the cultural industries with the transition to the post-Fordian era as a historical background, which was intensified after the late 1970s.

The first decade of the 21st century is therefore characterized by the impossibility of separating radio from other media sources. Radio broadcasting operates in a complementary manner, referring increasingly to the content presented by newspapers, magazines, TV stations, and especially the Internet – be it in news, social networks, personal or corporate sites.

Radio is therefore understood as a plural environment, which incorporates permanently new services and languages, broadcasted both over radio waves as well as on digital platforms. Over the past ten years, this perspective has led, in our view, to overly optimistic approaches regarding the scenario of media convergence, even among respected academics in the field of radio studies.

La radio se encuentra en el nuevo escenario de los medios de comunicación en el que predomina la tendencia acelerada hacia la digitalización y convergencia y en el que cada uno busca su arraigo y diferencia alternativa. El cambio a la digitalización no es meramente técnico sino que repercute en el aspecto jurídico, económico, comunicativo, de los contenidos y tratamientos.

[...] Ante todo la radio adquiere nueva diversificación por el desarrollo de los sistemas de difusión: ondas digitales terrestres, satélites, cable e Internet. [...] Hay convergencias internas en cada sistema y además la convergencia de los tres sistemas con otras innovaciones como Internet en los móviles y en los multimedia.

[...] La convergencia expresiva aporta un enriquecimiento informativo al incorporar la capacidad expresiva escrita y visual paralelas a los sonidos: gráficos, tablas, fotografías, y otros componentes visuales sencillos y otras informaciones complementarias.

Con la digitalización y la ampliación del ancho de las redes llega también la capacidad interactiva y, en consecuencia, la posibilidad de un cambio en el modelo comunicativo de la radio (CEBRIÁN HERREROS, 2001, p. 27)

Interactivity and convergence have become magic words, made fetishes and presented as universal panaceas by communications industry consultants, and radio could not remain on the sidelines of the changes offered by the wonders of the digital world.

Convergence would be, thus, an inexorable although uneven process. The path left to newspapers, magazines, radio and TV seemed common: the migration to digital platforms. Each business group would be on a distinct step within a stratification gradient going from the lower levels of convergence – the mere repackaging of news for distribution on various platforms maintained by the same company – to the fully

integrated newsroom, with indistinct content production in text, audio and images produced by the same working team, to be presented to an audience in printed format or through radio, TV and Internet portals. Some authors have helped build this stratified view of the convergence process (DAILEY et al., 2005).

The present work is, however, based upon the perspective of Spanish researchers who participated in the *Convergencia Digital en los Medios de Comunicación en España* project, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science. The study, conducted between the years of 2006 and 2009 with the participation of 12 universities, established useful analysis parameters that permit reflection upon the media convergence process in different dimensions – technological, business, professional, and content (SALAVERRÍA and GARCÍA AVILÉS, 2008).

According to the opinion of these authors, convergence is an essentially non-linear process, which focuses unevenly on the various aspects of the news production process – collection, editing and distribution of information (GARCÍA AVILÉS and CARVAJAL, 2008). In the first step, there would be increasing demand for multiple skills. In other words, professional journalists should be increasingly able to gather information in various media supports in order to formulate news in text, audio or video, according to the final editorial decision.

In this study under reference, García Avilés and Carvajal focused on business groups that have sought to integrate the newsrooms of newspapers, radio, television and websites. In interviews with journalists working in these media, there were numerous reports of layoffs and quality loss, especially among the video-related staff, with the growing use of photographs and unprofessional video footage produced by reporters lacking special training.

Concerns regarding the lack of information content quality also permeate other works that discuss media convergence. Huang et al. (2006) see in the convergence process a trigger for communication companies' fusions, acquisitions and collapses, endangering the diversity of society's voices.

Digitization has transformed the ways of creation, production/editing, distribution and consumption of symbolic forms (BUSTAMANTE, 2003), shaking up the mediation role played by traditional media groups and opening markets for new players. The Political Economy of Communication provides a critical analysis of this process, identifying the changes in broadcasting in both technical and professional businesses, and allowing one to foresee developments in radio content consumption.

In another study (FERRARETTO and KISCHINHEVSKY, 2010), an effort was made to map the development of radio relative to media convergence and the following conclusions were reached:

1) The digitalization processes occur asymmetrically in radio, narrowing business concentration, through the extension of network radio waves or satellite and microwave (MMDS), and the increasing inequality in public access to new technologies;

2) Radio content distribution increasingly calls for powerful channels with higher data and audio traffic speed on the Internet and with the dissemination of mobile phones²;

3) New value chains of symbolic goods production are formed, strengthening large business groups with greater capacity for investing in technology, while opening opportunities for new actors – such as service suppliers and voice portal solutions and applications for smartphones, radio-based social networks, podcasters and even companies with no tradition in broadcasting, establishing direct communication with the consumer through a type of radiofrequency leasing (Oi FM, Sulamérica Paradiso FM, Mitsubishi FM).

This article seeks to go more deeply into the analysis of the convergence process emphasizing the professional dimension. It has been detected elsewhere (KISCHINHEVSKY, 2008) that the integration of radio and other media newsrooms has increased working hours. Journalists and broadcasters have been subjected to abusive working conditions in large urban center commercial radio stations, with low salaries, accumulation of functions, long workdays and the cancelation of rest periods granted in the case of overtime work and work on legal holidays. Even where radio stations are not required to produce content in text and video, reporters are increasingly being urged to record and edit their own stories without technicians' professional support. With the increasing automation of FM programming, predominantly in musical broadcasts, operators, publishers, programmers and broadcasters have been losing their jobs.

Our aim, therefore, is to reach, in these times of convergence, an outline of a political economy of radio journalism, integrating interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological contributions, as required by our subject of study (SAAD CORRÊA; CORRÊA, 2008), and reviewing the literature on the All News segment in Brazil (for an overview on the subject, see LOPEZ, 2007, 2010). The study has particular interest in the pressures faced by journalists and the broadcasters' workforce in a scenario where the huge communication conglomerates on the

Internet impose their will on the recruitment of skilled flexible personnel – in what is often referred to as informal labor relations – that provide working skills in a multi-media environment.

In addition to the digitalization of newsrooms and production processes in written journalism, television and radio stations, the main vehicles of these media have incorporated the Internet as a monitoring space and even the visibility of their organizations and strategies, relying on their own websites, where they not only reproduce part of the materials already available in their traditional channels, but also offer differentiated content (...)

Not only outcomes, but also the patterns of cultural production are affected by the new dynamics of news production, requiring the same professional skills to handle different formats in dealing with different stories. For journalism, the online transition also implies changes, representing the convergence of several digital formats (video, audio, text) into a technological solution for the distribution of a single product, which requires increased capacity for processing all these materials.

Flexibility is the key word in world business today. (BOLAÑO and BRITTOS, 2006)

We investigate here the experiences of CBN FM and AM (92.5 MHz and 860 KHz) and BandNews FM (94.9 MHz) in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the main radio broadcasting stations in the country. The data presented below were collected in several interviews with team members from both stations occupying different functions and hierarchical levels in the newsroom. The study is part of an ongoing research project, conducted by the Audio Laboratory at *Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro State University - UERJ), with support from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) – to which the author expresses his gratitude.

New Production Routines

CBN and BandNews present distinct proposals in the All News segment. While the former focuses on analysis and interpretation, as evidenced by the choice of anchors, favoring journalists who originally worked in the press as political (Lucia Hippólito) or economic (Carlos Alberto Sardenberg) commentators, the latter invests in dynamic news headlines, composed mainly of short notes, strong local news and live interviews (LOPEZ, 2007).

Central Brasileira de Notícias (CBN³), an affiliate of the Globo Radio System (SGR), was established in 1991 and claims to be a pioneer (precursor) in the All News segment in Brazil. Rio's CBN shares with São Paulo's CBN the leadership of the network's role in the entire country, generating content for affiliates in different regions from midnight to 6 a.m. and major local news programs broadcasted

in the morning and afternoon periods.

The station operates in a building located in the Glória district, in the south zone of Rio de Janeiro, sharing studios with other radio stations belonging to the SGR, such as the popular Rádio Globo (AM, now replicated with FM signal), Beat 98 FM and various web radio stations such as Globo (former FM adult contemporary segment, which gave way on the dial to CBN in 2005), Multishow, GNT and Zona de Impacto⁴.

The news team from CBN brings together some 35 professionals, six of whom are devoted to feeding information to the station's website and keeping it updated from Rio de Janeiro. Thus, under certain guidelines, reporters have been instructed to take cameras to the street, allowing the publication of supporting images on the radio's webpage.

SGR has given central importance to the Internet, offering listeners the ability to download podcasts from commentators and newsletters, and to access, on demand, special reports and programs. The distribution of content on digital platforms also includes summaries in text messages to mobile phones updated via Twitter and YouTube videos (including some in Brazilian Sign Language), a channel called Listener-Reporter (off the air, at the time of the closing of this article), plus live footages from the studio, financial indicators, useful phone number information, blogs and links that allow audiences to listen to other CBN-generated programs from other regions of the country (São Paulo, Belo Horizonte and Brasília, among others).

The comments are an example of the success of the initiatives of CBN on digital platforms: one of the most-downloaded podcasts of filmmaker and polemicist Arnaldo Jabor has over 70,000 subscribers, a significant number considering the average audience of 25,000 listeners per minute on both AM and FM radio frequencies. This information is an indication that the distinction between mass communications – tied to the so-called “traditional media” such as radio and TV – and niche-related communications – identified with the Internet – made by many researchers, perhaps is no longer a key subject for study.

Although SGR belongs to Globo Organizations, the leading media group in Brazil, there is little integration between their radio stations and other businesses, notably Globo and GloboNews TVs and the newspapers *O Globo*, *Extra* and *Express*. Rarely is CBN news supplied by the other vehicles in the group and the same goes for the presence of radio content in other affiliates of Globo Organizations.

On August 20, 2008, for example, audio from F 1 commentator, Livio Oricchio, who witnessed the plane crash at Barajas airport in

Madrid, went live on CBN minutes after the tragedy and was replicated on the Globo Online site. The radio flash was highlighted on the newspaper's homepage, although with considerable delay – hours after being published on CBN's website. This exchange of content, however, is far from usual.

Internally, the staffs of CBN and Rádio Globo are articulated particularly in sports coverage, consisting of four frequencies (two AM and two FM frequencies) and was unified after Globo's main competitor's launching in FM, in 2009: Super Rádio Tupi AM, a station of Associated Newspapers and Broadcasters (*Diários e Emissoras Associados*), in a condo founded by media tycoon Assis Chateaubriand in the 1950's that includes the newspaper *Jornal do Commercio* of Rio de Janeiro, among other communication vehicles.

It is remarkable how modest are the investments in exclusive stories. News programs are based on newspaper headlines – which can be interpreted as a cross-media feedback strategy, as *O Globo* and *Extra* are the largest daily newspapers in Rio de Janeiro, in terms of circulation. Broad news coverage is given to the various governmental spheres (executive, judiciary, legislature, the presidency, the State Government, the Municipal Government, public bodies such as the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics and the National Bank for Economic and Social Development, both based in Rio) and to a lesser degree, the business sector (*Petrobras*, *Vale do Rio Doce*, *Firjan*, *Fecomércio-RJ*, *Fundação Getúlio Vargas*). Traffic information – SGR has Genilson Araujo, the most experienced traffic reporter in the whole country – and daily routine information, such as closed streets and tunnels, weather forecasts, among others, are highlighted throughout the programming.

Reporters, in addition to assuming the task of illustrating the site, bringing photos or graphics, also record and edit their own stories. Technicians are still available, but in decreasing numbers. Like in other broadcasting companies, ability in editing softwares has been increasingly valued in the recruitment processes. The most frequent complaints among the reporters are the workload and the routine shifts on weekends and holidays, exacerbated by the small staff.

BandNews Fluminense FM⁵ has a team of approximately 20 persons, composed mostly of journalism graduates or trainees. Daily in the morning it shares audience-leadership with São Paulo, channeling programs for seven other affiliates (Salvador, Belo Horizonte, Curitiba, Porto Alegre, Brasília, Campinas and Ribeirão Preto) and from 6 p.m. to 6:40 p.m., offers Rio de Janeiro listeners a local newscast marked by

police coverage and traffic news.

The station operates on the ground floor of a building in the Botafogo district, in the south zone of Rio, occupied by the TV Band. *Grupo Bandeirantes de Comunicação*, created in 1937, includes public open channel and private cable/satellite TV stations (Band, BandNews, BandNews Sports, Network 21, Network TerraViva), six radio networks (Band FM, Native, Rádio Bandeirantes, BandNews FM, Sulamérica Trânsito FM, and Mitsubishi FM), newspapers (*Primeira Mão*, a classified ads newspaper, and *Publimetro*, a free newspaper published in partnership with a Swedish group), among other businesses. In 2009, it launched *eBand*, a portal that integrates the contents of the group, but gives little visibility to the radios.

BandNews FM website is simple and does not offer podcasts of the station's commentators or specific programs. The news content can be heard in streaming (live), on demand or read, but the files cannot be downloaded. The page provides institutional information, links for hearing other regions' BandNews' programming and an area consisting of an interactive blog and polls, updated occasionally⁶.

BandNews' differential is the use of new technologies, as well as its active presence on Twitter. It constantly announces its electronic address to which listeners can send opinions, information and, frequently, striking footage and images. The station uses the audience to multiply its ability to gather information, offsetting part of the negative impact of an insufficient number of reporters on the streets. The result is a flexible coverage, which feeds the digital platforms with information shared by listeners and occasionally turns them into sources, conducting audio interviews by phone. The return in terms of audience is undeniable: an average 18,000 listeners per minute, with only five years on the air.

Following Globo Organization's example, BandNews FM gives broad coverage to scoop data by reporters from the group's own television stations. The integration advances by means of contractual arrangements and allows the use of well-paid professionals to work for the various conglomerate's vehicles – as in the case of the anchors Ricardo Boechat, Boris Casoy and Mariana Rosadas, among others, who present news programs on radio and TV during the same working day..

Local news prioritizes coverage of police, traffic, state government services, municipal services and public health. The news broadcasts, however, often close with items from the written press and online news agencies. Short notes prevail, with strong pressure in terms of writing, editing and broadcasting deadlines. The most frequent

complaints among the reporters are the heavy workload, the routine shifts on weekends and holidays, and especially the low salaries.

Also evident is the absence of sound technicians, including in the studio where live programming is generated. Even anchors have to operate sound equipment, commanding the alternate inclusion of pre-recorded stories, vignettes and commercials, sometimes coming in and out of the national broadcast abruptly.

Final Comments

The media convergence integrates, increasingly, radio journalism with digital platforms, and links it to business decisions that can hinder its sustainable development. The broadcast language, however, is far from losing its specificity. Images (static or moving) and texts play a merely incidental role on broadcasters' websites and are far from causing radio media to lose its characteristics.

From a business standpoint, there is growing competition in the All News segment in the city of Rio de Janeiro, but in contrast, the market has never been so concentrated, forming a virtual duopoly.

In the technological dimension, as demonstrated by previous studies (DEL BIANCO, 2004, BUFARAH JUNIOR, 2009), radio stations have sparsely used New Technologies of Information and Communication (NTIC), which prevents the full development of new forms of interaction with listeners – voice portals, collaborative content, exclusive online programs, etc.

As part of the professional dimension of convergence, concerns regarding the accumulation of functions are confirmed and are mostly caused by digital technologies for online content publishing and distribution rather than by synergy with other media. The integration of newsrooms in the same business group remains in its infancy, due to a combination of factors: radio managers are reluctant to develop partnership with (and subordinate their teams to) other vehicles of the same group, which could lead to work overload; specificity in terms of language and production routines, which forces radio stations to focus on immediate information aired on radio waves instead of distributing it on websites; and lack of investment in training reporters to produce content in text and video, among other problems.

Considering content consumption and production, radio journalism is oriented toward broadcasting transmission strategies, although (in contrast) innovative ways to interact with listeners have gained strength among the audience, where podcasts and on-demand

content reception on the websites of broadcasters play an important role, as well as alerts received through social networks and text messaging originating from mobile phones.

A political economy of radio journalism should further examine these areas of convergence, trying to identify more clearly the links in the radio broadcasting chain of production, from the formation of professional teams to the labor relations and the technological changes in the newsroom, to the corporate structure of companies holding concessions for radio frequencies, by framing the market in terms of audience and profits and to the discourses broadcasted regarding the programming. What is, for example, the percentage of information from official sources? What is the proportion on radio news programs of news produced by the station's own task force? How are the ethnic, religious and social minorities represented in the news?

These are just some of the areas to be explored based on the theoretical-methodological contributions of the Political Economy of Communication, in future studies devoted to radio journalism. The All News segment is an expensive corporate endeavor and involves intensive workload and manpower needs. Considering that it has information as its raw material, it plays, therefore, a strategic role in the communication industry. Mapping the production methods and understanding the logic that governs the organization of this radio format are key factors in ensuring diversity in the content provided to the public and more representative voices of social actors in this news business that has been so dynamic, and so ephemeral.

NOTES

- 1 Paper presented at the 8th Annual Meeting of the Brazilian Society of Journalism Researchers (SBPJor). In São Luís, Maranhão, Nov. 2010.
- 2 In Brazil, June 2010, there were 185 million mobile phone users, representing a teledensity of 95.9 per 100 inhabitants, according to the National Telecommunications Agency (Anatel). See <http://www.anatel.gov.br/Portal/exibirPortalInternet.do>. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), by the end of 2009 there were 4.6 billion mobile phone subscriptions worldwide, equivalent to 67% of the global population. See <http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/backgrounders/general/pdf/3.pdf> Access on in oct., 7, 2010.

- 3 See <<http://cbn.globoradio.globo.com/home/HOME.htm>>.
- 4 The site has 31 SGR web stations from many different genres, but most could perhaps be better classified as “audio channels”, because of the absence of speech and the automation of music programming. The group also offers services for corporate deployment of radios.
- 5 See <<http://bandnewsfm.band.com.br>>.
- 6 On July 21, 2010, ten days after the decision of the World Soccer Cup in South Africa, one of the survey questions was: “Who wins the grand final of the 2010 World Cup?” - a sign of a lack of care in relation to site updating that is not seen as a priority by the broadcaster.

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