How social media has affected audience’s direct participation in Spanish radio stations. The case of the National Radio of Spain

Manuel Martínez Martín
Radio Nacional de España :: Universidad Carlos III de Madrid | Spain | manuel.martinez.martin@rtve.es

Abstract

The audience’s participation has been a part of the so called “radio language” since the beginning of its history. However, there are not as many studies on this field as there are on other topics such as message analysis or radio formats. Using the main theoretical approaches of radio in Spain as a starting point, and referencing the most recent contributions of researchers in the field, this proposal focuses on the changes experienced since social media came in to the picture.

The immediacy provided by the Internet, the elimination of all time-space barriers thanks to the new “radio on demand” and the radio’s vocation to come closer to the audience have sketched out a scenario in which the direct participation of the audience is constantly reflected on the antenna. However, a higher participation does not necessarily imply greater quality of it.

This paper aims to show the key findings of a doctoral thesis focused on the evolution of the audience’s participation at RNE Radio 1 between 2004 and 2014, coinciding with the birth and consolidation of social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. The paper is based on content analysis, more specifically, the detailed analysis of eleven weeks of complete emission during that decade.

Keywords
radio; Internet; participation; audience
Introduction

Audience participation, as an element of speech, has been present in radio from the beginning of this media. This resource is closer to music, words and silence, of which programs are composed and, therefore, they deserve to be specifically analysed. Even though communication theoreticians, like Merayo (2000), Martí (1999) or Cebrián Herreros (1992) have included participation as a radio genre, little has been said about its evolution and about the motivations and themes that make people want to be part of radio broadcasting.

Without studying thoroughly the different terminological concepts that, throughout history of sciences have been associated to participation in the media, such as philosophical matters by Habermas (1986) or more recently matters related with politics and social movements like Fraser (2012), the goal of this dissertation is to analyse if the arrival of new ways of communication, like social media, have changed or have maintained direct participation of audience on radio.

In order to achieve this it has been essential to take into account contributions by the experts of this field of investigation as Cebrián Herreros (1995), López Vigil (1997) or Prado (1981) about the phenomenon of participation but also more recent contributions interpreting the Internet as a communication phenomenon and a mean to participation (Herrera, 2011; Legorburu, 2008).

The actual approaches to the concept of participation describe it as a key element in the relation between media and society (Carpentier, 2011), and show that there is a constant dispute over whether participation is limited to representation within institutionalised systems or whether it is part of a convergence of the political and social. In that balancing game the role of social networks has turned essential in the process of interactivity. If Carpentier (2011, p. 130) distinguishes between three strata like access, interaction and participation, (AIP-model), and maintains that access and interaction are crucial components that enable acts of participation but are differentiated due to the power relationship within a variety of decision making processes, the web tools and the social networks could be the major difference between these two scenarios.

Social network platforms like Facebook or Twitter have broken the time and space barriers in the moment of the participation and have democratised the fact of expressing an opinion about every theme. According to Bonini (2014) the radio is, among the traditional mass media, the one that benefited the most from the integration with social media, because it doesn’t need the

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image support like television and it’s faster than press. The author defines four ages in the history of radio in terms of the possibilities that the audience have to take part in the radio message. The first stage, between 1920 and 1945, was a time with an invisible medium for an invisible audience. In this era, the radio is a new phenomenon and the people don’t yet know the enormous power of the transmissions and the only way that people have to stay in contact with the radio were the letters and the mail. The second age, between 1945 and 1994, is defined by an invisible medium for an audible public with the introduction of the telephone into radio’s productive practices. The third age, since 1994 to 2004, adds the visual component to the radio because the media turns readable by the receptors, thanks to the World Wide Web. And the last step in this evolution is nowadays when a visible medium is ready for a networked society in a new scenario where the receptor could be at the same time a contents creator (Arvidsson, 2011).

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As Bonini says (2015, p. 19), the new communication model deriving from the mix of radio and social media “is a hybrid model partly still broadcast, partly already networked”. This is a new era for radio, where the listener is networked and productive.

This essay shows the first conclusions and results of a broader thesis paper that focuses on the analysis of the intentions, themes, means and ways of participation during one decade (2004-2014) of broadcasts on Radio 1, a general radio station of National Radio of Spain (RNE).

Methodology

This essay is based on a mixed research methodology, combining the content analysis with several in-depth interviews made with professionals of The National Radio of Spain who were directly related and responsible for some radio programmes during that time. All these professionals have a deep knowledge of the value of audience participation in radio.

The chosen period of analysis goes from 2004 to 2014. These 11 years represent a wide enough context to determine if a certain evolution can be noticed in some of the fields proposed. We have chosen 2004 as our starting year because that is when Facebook was officially born.

Facebook has been the most popular social media in the last years and, although radio is one the media that has taken more time to adopt it as a resource for audience participation, it is a very useful reference as starting point.

In particular, we have created a listening record of one whole week per year between 2004 and 2014, 24 hours a day from Monday to Sunday. A total
of 1.848 hours of radio have been analysed. The one-week-a-year limitation has been applied since in broadcast programming the structures are repeated week after week. This is what Legorburu (2005, p. 51) defines as “cycles of broadcast programming”. The first week of February was chosen in order to avoid periods of special broadcast programming, such as summer or Christmas holidays, when the personal necessities of the radio force to broadcast a greater number of recorded or repeated programs, making this medium less personal. Another aspect that must be avoided is what Dayan and Katz (1992) define as “media events”, which might as well influence dayparting.

Listening of the programmes has been carried out by dividing the broadcast programming in 24 sections of one hour, making it possible to compare the results obtained in relation with the remaining hours of a day and the same hour in different days. Hereafter, the creation of a codebook consisting of 14 categories, each of them divided in variables, constitutes a deep analysis of the global participation on radio during the period that has been analysed.

The categories established are divided in two groups. The first group includes each of the participations, per time and programme. For example: “year of emission”, “day of the week”, “hour of the day” or “name of the programme”. The second group analyses in depth the content, forms and intentions of the participant: “theme of participation”, “format used”, “aim pursued”, “obtainment of answers”, etc.

The evolution of the participation at Spanish National Radio

A total of 7,127 interventions have been analysed throughout the listening process and the material obtained is being used to work on several conclusions, some of which can already be made. The first goal is to determine whether audience participation in radio has increased throughout the

Graph 4: Total number of participations in radio during one week of complete broadcast programming by RNE between 2004 and 2014. (Compiled by own sources)

1 Such as political elections, special social ceremonies, awards ceremonies or broadcasts of big sport events.
decade that has been analysed.

A growing evolution on the level of participation is observed, especially from years 2010 and 2011. During this time, radio started including social media as a participation format. It must be emphasised that Facebook appeared in 2004 and Twitter in 2006, thus, it took longer for public radio to adopt these new formats as platforms that make access to radio easy for the audience.

Participation reaches its maximum level during the week corresponding to year 2012 and experiences a sharp decrease one year later, reaching a similar level to the one registered five years before. This decrease, which breaks the increasing projection, is due to the change of broadcast programming experienced on National Radio during that season. These changes match in time with the arrival of a new approach of the station, which chooses to include more recorded programs (to the detriment of previous programs that were live transmissions) and reduce the allocated time for audience opinions, such as political or news talk shows.

The tendency changes again the next season with a light increase of participation, although it does not reach the levels of the previous years. The first conclusion offered by this research is that, numerically speaking, the appearance of new formats benefits audience participation. The new formats allow the audience to make use of more rapid ways to contact media, even though at the end, radio has the power to decide whether or not to include these comments, which can be obtained by any type of format.

The distribution of participation based on time of the day and day of the week reveals that the behaviour of the audience has been very similar all the way through, being Monday, in a systematic manner, the day with less audience presence on radio. This is attributed to the fact that, unlike the other days of the week, a substantial part of the Monday programmes from the early morning slot correspond to live transmissions.

In 2005 and 2007, almost 40% of the weekly participation happened on weekends (Saturdays and Sundays). However, this percentage has been slowly reduced. Weekends have been losing predominance and participation is more distributed throughout the whole week. There is no doubt that this has been definitely achieved through the contribution of social media and new technologies because whereas during many years telephone has been the most direct way of taking part in radio, nowadays participation is also possible through social media or e-mail, for example, which allows audiences to participate from the working place without having to leave the office at all. In this sense, participation in radio has become more accessible than it was before.

Regarding the times with a higher level of participation, this research reveals that programmes with greatest audience are precisely the ones that get more participation. They can be divided in three time slots. The first one represents the so called “audience time” of morning shows. The second time
slot refers to the afternoon main hours. Finally, the last time slot covers the early morning hours, normally a very favourable time for audiences to participate in radio, as a way to have someone who can accompany them while they are studying, working or just sleeping.

According to the genres purposed, the programs that obtain higher participation levels are the great radio magazines:

![Graph 5: Distribution (in percentages) of the total number of participations according to types of programme. Total data between 2004 and 2014 on Radio 1 RNE. (Compiled by own sources)](image)

Magazine programmes occupy the greatest number of broadcasting hours per week and also receive a greater number of participation from the audience. These magazines offer a wide variety of sections. Most of them favour direct communication, for example, by asking questions to experts in all kinds of subjects (doctors, psychologists, nutritionists, decorators, veterinaries...), but also by using contests as a mean to encourage participation in exchange of prizes or even by offering talk shows or opinion sections about relevant issues in which audience like to take part.

The programmes that have achieved greater participation on live transmissions during the period analysed are the following:

- “It’s not an ordinary day” (“No es un día cualquiera”): weekend magazine broadcasted during the 11 years of analysis.
- “It sounds familiar” (“Esto me suena”): it became the afternoon magazine programme in 2014 but during the previous years it was a
program essentially based on calls from listeners who would deliver their message to an answering machine. Its time slot has changed frequently.

- “Days like today” (“En días como hoy”): Morning magazine programme directed and hosted by Juan Ramón Lucas. It was broadcasted on RNE from 2008 to 2012.
- “Own business” (“Asuntos propios”): the afternoon magazine program directed and hosted by Toni Garrido. Also broadcasted on RNE between 2008 and 2012.
- “Sports” (“Tablero Deportivo”): live sports broadcast focused on soccer. It has been on air for more than 30 years. Lately, due to the proliferation of sport competitions and the tendency of radios to offer live sports broadcasting, the number of broadcast programming hours has increased in relation with previous years.

Early morning shows such as “Morning Affection” (“Afectos matinales”) and “The least expected night” (“La noche menos pensada”) have also earned a great level of participation on live transmissions. According to these results, magazine programmes get the greater volume of participants, followed by sports programmes.

So, how have the new formats influenced these tendencies? Has the Internet made audience participation easier? In terms of the radio medium, the need of sound as a main element makes telephone prevail over other kinds of communication, such as social media or email. Advantages of these formats are proximity and ability to break spatial borders, since an email or Facebook message can be sent from anywhere.

From the total of participations analysed, 38% were made by telephone. These calls were broadcasted live, allowing the audiences to listen to the interlocutor’s voice. Thirteen percent of participation corresponds to messages left by the audience on an answering machine. This number should in fact be added to the previous 38%, since it was also channelled through telephone. This method offers more advantages for this medium since the content the duration of the message (very important when arranging times) are controlled. Another 7% belongs to telephone calls received where a member of the radio station acts as an audience representative, reproducing the content of the interventions in a reliable way. In total, 58% of audience participation uses telephone as the main format.

Following the platforms mentioned above are the ones where Internet participation is needed. Email, for example, is a quick and direct way of contacting the radio with no need of interrupting any other tasks. One out of 10 people that took part in this research used email. Besides being a very young platform, which also did not exist at the very beginning of this research, social media also makes their space. Facebook, with 8% of participation, and
Twitter, with more than 2%, beat other kind of formats (like blogs or website surveys), which seemed to be destined to be opinion forums for social media.

![Graph 6: Formats of participation on live transmissions during the broadcast programing of Radio 1 RNE. (Compiled by own sources)](image)

Even though the total numbers are important and notable, it is interesting to analyse the behaviour of each kind of format throughout those years. This is how we discovered that, whereas telephone keeps its position as a reference format all along these years, social media have experienced a very significant growth since 2012. As radio increases its presence on social media by creating profiles and official accounts, the level of participation on live transmissions multiplied exponentially.

Social media participations possess characteristics that attract the language of radio:

- **Immediacy**: In a matter of seconds, hundreds of answers to questions made to experts can be received.
- **Short duration**: Twitter for example has a limit of 140 characters, which implies a high level of conciseness.
- **Participation**: Participation can also be arranged in a way that the most interesting or less problematic messages are broadcasted live, by choosing the ones that will be read. (For this research, we have only analysed radiocasted participations, but not the ones expressed on Facebook walls or Twitter).

Finally, the intention of audience to speak or appear on radio has been analysed. Interesting conclusions have been made and must be pointed out.
From all the variables considered in this category, one of them is especially significant: 50% of the people who participated on a radio show wanted to express their opinion about a topic. Eighteen percent wanted to share their own or other people’s experiences. And from here, there are other options for which the percentages are more distributed. For example, taking part in competitions (7%), asking experts for information (6%) or providing information by themselves (6%).

Conclusions

The analysis of the data obtained during the listening period is still in process, so we are still unable to provide all the conclusions to this matter, neither can we provide qualitative value of the interviews with radio professionals, because these interviews were still in the course during the conclusion of this research. In any case, we can already state some observations that we consider interesting and that will be extended when this thesis paper is completely finished:

- After social media appearance, the participation of audience on RNE broadcast has not experienced a considerable evolution. Even though it is true that the level of participation increases in number of interlocutors who can take part in the message, the topics and intentions remain the same.
- Media have the ultimate power of allowing audience to take part in live broadcasts because, although this format creates positioning in media (social media for example), if it does not have an effect on live broadcasts, it will be less effective for a medium where sound is fundamental.
- Generalist broadcast programming is slowly getting closer to new means of participation precisely because of its general character, targeting a wider range of audience. There are other kinds of models, such as music radio stations or radio stations broadcasting specific contents that can create greater links of connection, since they aim at a more reduced audience.
- As it progresses, technology will be slowly adopted by radio as a way to stay in touch with the audience. For example, nowadays the use of Whatsapp voice messages to contact radio stations is very frequent (although this option was not available during the time analysed) and that perfectly matches the necessities of this medium: speed, short duration and presence of sound.
References


