

Rethinking social life of radio news: Slovenian public radio journalists' perceptions of audience interactivity

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In his essay *The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication* Bertold Brecht (1932/1994: 15), explains that the radio is “one-sided when it should be two”, suggesting the need for change from the apparatus of “distribution” to technology of “communication”. For most of the eight decades of the evolution of audience interactivity, radio institutions have only partly overcome its occasional phone-in programme and practices, to let listeners use their phones and become contributors (Hendy, 2000: 195). In the last few years, traditional ways of transmitting radio content are being woven with interactive online environments, particularly news websites and social media. Members of the audience engage in the prolonged life of radio news and invited to communicate not only to, but also with radio journalists, as well as among each other (Scannell, 2010: 23). These changes have been followed by the *Second Programme* of the Slovenian public radio, which has recently set up its news website *Val202.si*. They implemented their activities on Twitter and Facebook in their daily production, in order to develop a cross-media platform, to strengthen the relationship with the listeners and to reach out to new audiences (RTV Slovenia, 2012). How is journalists' relationship with the audience being reshaped? How do these alterations in radio production and delivery, change the concept of radio news and its implications for political life? How has social life of radio news transformed in this context? These questions are in primary focus of this essay which is based on in-depth interviews with four radio journalists of *Val 202*, *Second Programme* of public *Radio Slovenia*, conducted in September 2012. Central issues of these conversations are radio audience interactivity and social media; as well as social life of news in the contemporary radio environment and its implications for the societal role of journalists.

The interconnection of radio stations and their audiences has somewhat changed, by

the facilitation of online interactive modes in the daily accounts of radio news that's making and delivery (Gazi et al., 2011). It appears that it is? more than technology that shapes the social, political and cultural dynamics, of what Deuze (2012: 230) calls "self mass-communication", in that they have reshaped contemporary relationships between radio journalists and the "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen 2012: 13). This is by being embedded in the management of (belonging to) large social groups, as well as of combined properties of "seeing" and "being seen". The *second Programme of Radio Slovenia* entered this interactive world of social media two years ago, and through institutional and *Val 202* journalists started sharing links from their personal *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts, to website versions of radio content. They included short tweets with audio clips, blurbs, shout-outs, calls for information and snippets of news (Val 202 Journalist A). Interviewed radio journalists more or less agree that contemporary public radio needs its online presence, for the sake of its public and/or commercial goals. "Contemporary radio cannot function anymore in conventional terms, but needs to adapt to new audiences that do not live with the radio in a way that people used to. Radio needs to reach for their hand and address them over different channels." (Val 202 Journalist C) According to the Val 202 journalists, the Slovenian public radio uses social media in their daily activities for three main reasons: first, to generate "concrete responses" (Val 202 Journalist B) and "useful critique" (Val 202 Journalist C) from members of the audience in addition to phone-ins; second, to "receive alternative information" that would help the newsroom to follow-up the story (Val 202 Journalist A); third, to archive or "not to lose" radio content and make it reachable for those who miss the programme on air (Val 202 Journalist D). Interviewees also stress that the notion of audience interactivity has changed dramatically, for instance, "If we did not have social media we would be limited to phone-ins on the air or phone calls to the newsroom after the programme. Interactions with the listeners are important, because you at least know that somebody is paying attention to your work." (Val 202 Journalist B)

Such changes in radio news production and delivery, call for reconsideration of "the social life of information" as defined by Seely Brown and Duguid (2002). They argue that technology can transform only to a certain degree and other factors exert great influence in the utilisation and eventual success or failure, of new concepts and technology. Despite the fact that the internet does not simply move in and change journalism by itself (Dahlgren 2009), social life of radio news appears to be in the process of reshaping. That is by responding to the "individualised and peer-based nature of contemporary sociality" which is being built into, as Deuze (2012: 157) writes, "the material infrastructure of networked media". Namely, interviewed Val 202 journalists indicate "new life dynamics" (Val 202 Journalist C) and stress that the definition of radio as a medium needs reconsideration. For instance, Val 202 Journalist B argues that radio content has "longer life" due to the multiplying character of social media sharing, "Radio news used to disappear after being on air; it needed to have immediate impact. [...] Now, radio news have longer lives and journalists follow them online. It even happens that stories made by Val 202 spurred a debate on Twitter, and other media used it as a basis of their own stories." Additionally,

some interviewees say that radio is overcoming its role as a “background medium” (Val 202 Journalist D) or “secondary medium.” Crisell (1986, 220) states that, “Radio is often only a background sound scenery, but I do not understand it in this fashion. Radio is becoming interactive thus, I like to use the web when I work. It enables me to archive radio content and I enjoy following my stories when they are being spread online.” (Val 200 Journalist D)

The debates on radio-internet articulations bring the potentials of people’s interconnection in contemporary public life and questions the traditional notion of journalism, which sees citizens “as reactive rather than proactive” and implies the “competitive model of democracy” (Strömbäck 2005). Online forms of communicative engagement have in this fashion facilitated the ideas of collaboration and collectivity in contemporary journalism of traditional media organisations; generating participatory possibilities for the reshaping of prevailing societal roles of journalists (Singer et al. 2011). Interviewees from the Slovenian public radio are highly critical of prevailing realisations of journalism at Radio Slovenia. Some say that public radio journalists should depart from the norm of objectivity in journalism and take a more analytical approach to societal life; identifying problems and providing solutions to those problems. For instance, “The worst thing we can do is adhere to these good old rules of objectivity and balance. [...] If you strive for balance, it often happens that you end up promoting something bad.” (Val 202 Journalist C) Additionally, Val 202 Journalist A stresses that people “need also alternative sources” other than “mainstream” in order to be able to participate; social media however has this “function”.

Despite some indications that social life of radio news (in terms of the radio-audience relationship and societal roles of journalism) needs rethinking, on the basis of one case one cannot synthesise that social media is revolutionising radio. Additional studies of this case, but also other cases, are needed to profoundly explore principles and practices of interactive modes of journalism, previously identified as both inclusivist and also exclusivist (Singer et al. 2011). There are examples where different modes of audience participation in journalism have done away with some traditional ideals in journalism, such as objectivity, and have replaced them with alternatives, such as multiperspectivity; yet, at the same time traditional media organisations has a tendency to develop models of audience engagement that do not involve non-professionals on equal footing, as they enable professional journalists to retain control in news making. In any case, rethinking the social life of radio news in the context of social media proliferation in audience interactivity on the path toward the “apparatus of communication”, should be understood as “utopian.” As Brecht (1932/1994: 17) would put it, “This is innovation, a suggestion that seems utopian and that I myself admit to be utopian. When I say that the radio or the theatre ‘could’ do so-and-so, I am aware that these vast institutions cannot do all they ‘could’, and not even all they want.”

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