

Introduction

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Abstract:

This special issue explores the transformation of radio and sound ecosystems in the platform age, presenting seven contributions from the 7th ECREA Radio and Sound Section Conference 2023. The articles examine various aspects of this evolving landscape, including the integration of video in podcasting, the expressive potential of narrative nonfiction podcasts, the use of binaural sound in journalism, the dynamic podcasting industry in Brazil, strategies for engaging young audiences in public radio, the impact of virtual reality and AI on podcasting, and the use of ethnographic methods in audio documentaries. These studies collectively offer insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by traditional and emerging players in the digital audio field.

Radio and Sound Ecosystems in the Platform Age

The rise of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed the media landscape, with radio and sound ecosystems experiencing significant changes. The production, distribution, consumption and monetisation of audio content through digital platforms have become a key element in this new digital scenario that affects the cultural and creative industries today. Traditional media such as radio or sound recordings on physical media, as well as streaming music services, audiobook catalogues or podcasts, are immersed in these new disruptive logics that are transforming the way sound content is produced in this platform-dominated era.

This special issue of *Radio Journal* presents a selection of contributions from the 7th ECREA Radio and Sound Section Conference, held at the Catalan Radio Observatory (GRISS-UAB) and the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain, on 6-8 September 2023. The conference theme, "Radio and Sound Ecosystems in the Platform Age," brought together scholars exploring the complex entanglement between radio, audio, podcasting, platformisation, culture, and society from interdisciplinary perspectives.

The transformation of radio and sound consumption habits has been a crucial aspect of this media ecosystem's evolution over the past decade. The smartphone has evolved from a mere communication tool to a personal device managing users' digital lives and entertainment choices. In addition, the smartphone has combined the mobility and intimate listening of the old radio transistor with the endless choice found on Internet platforms. This has also facilitated the emergence of audio content exploiting binaural listening characteristics to create immersive sound experiences and even experiment with interactivity.

In the search for user loyalty, platforms have proliferated, offering music, audio and sound through applications that facilitate access to these contents. The pursue of dominating this market by the major players in this area has led to the expansion of business lines such as, for example, the incorporation of podcasts into their catalogues.

If music platforms and peer-to-peer file sharing technologies generated uncertainty for music radio stations and record companies by facilitating the sharing and consumption of online music among users outside traditional channels, the rise of sound platforms has put the radio industry in check. While it is true that synergies have been created between the static analogue programming and the online offer, nourished in large part by content from the airwaves, radio broadcasters now produce native podcasts as a strategy to increase the value of their brand in the new digital environment. Radio stations are developing content as part of a broader vision to keep or increase their presence in the digital audio perimeter, with increasing set of content, services and forms of contact that radio producers have at their disposal to bring sound content closer to their audiences.

In these new scenarios brought about by the emergence of digital platforms, the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms play a major role not only in the opportunities and challenges they present to the traditional models of radio and sound production, distribution and consumption, but also to the new audio experiences that are generated. For radio and sound producers, AI allows them to analyse audience behaviour, preferences, habits and curate content that is tailored to their needs, offering a more personalised listening experience while automating and optimising radio production, scheduling and advertising. It also allows them to generate new and original content.

However, the adoption of digital platforms and AI in radio and sound ecosystems has also raised important questions such as the future of traditional radio formats, the role of public broadcasting and the impact on diversity and plurality of voices, among others.

This special issue brings together seven contributions that address these critical questions and analyse the challenges and opportunities of the digital audio industry in the Platform Age:

Richard Berry examines the growing trend of incorporating video into podcasting and its implications for defining the medium. Berry argues that the increasing prevalence of video podcasts and social media clips necessitates a re-evaluation of podcasting's definition. The study concludes that podcasting should be considered a dynamic and adaptable form that will continue to evolve in response to technological advancements and audience preferences.

Alfredo Areñese-Gómez, María de la Peña Mónica Pérez Alaejos, Raúl Terol-Bolinches, and Luis Miguel Pedrero Esteban investigate the expressive potential of narrative nonfiction podcasts. Their content analysis reveals that these podcasts often focus on past events or people, incorporate diverse voices, and expand the possibilities of audio journalism by harnessing the medium's immersive qualities to provide context, reflection, and in-depth analysis.

Ana Sofia Paiva presents a systematic literature review examining the use of binaural sound in audio and radio journalism. The study finds that while research in this area is limited, binaural sound holds potential for enhancing listener engagement and immersion. Paiva advocates for further research into its applications in journalism and the development of standardized best practices.

Marcelo Kischinhevsky and Katia Fraga explore the dynamic podcasting landscape in Brazil, focusing on its rapid growth, professionalization, and evolving relationship with traditional radio broadcasting. Their study reveals a complex interplay between independent producers, traditional media companies, and international platforms, highlighting the need for continuous research to understand the evolving dynamics of the podcasting industry in Brazil.

Tania Fernández Lombao and Paula Martínez Graña investigate strategies employed by Spanish regional public radio stations to attract and engage young audiences. Their findings show that these stations are actively adapting to the digital age through a multi-faceted approach, combining linear radio with digital native content, prioritizing in-house production, and focusing on topics relevant to young audiences.

Evi Karathanasopoulou explores how emerging technologies, particularly virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), could reshape podcasting. Using the concept of "hauntology," the author suggests that VR could reintroduce a sense of intimacy and technological wonder to podcasting. The study also raises questions about the potential ethical concerns related to AI-generated voices and interactive content in podcasting.

Paloma López Villafranca and Emilia Smolak Lozano examine the use of ethnographic methods in creating a documentary podcast series about rural women in Málaga, Spain. Their study demonstrates how ethnography can lead to more insightful and impactful storytelling, particularly when representing marginalized communities.

These contributions collectively offer valuable insights into the evolving landscape of radio and sound ecosystems in the platform age, addressing key challenges and opportunities faced by both traditional and emerging players in the field.