

Tuning with listeners: portrait of citizens' participation in the public opinion programmes Antena Aberta and Fórum TSF

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Introduction

Today's radio is profoundly connected with certain new technology devices. This is actually where some academic research has started from. Several approaches haven't granted a specific overlook to the mechanisms in which radio has been working so far. Some of those perceptions are shaped by a strong belief in the potential of radio's adaptability to the digital landscapes and by some fearful acknowledgement regarding the future of radio, arguably due to some nostalgic feeling related to the old times of radio. Taken into account these perspectives, we will draw upon several researches which have been conducted to analyse the actual state of radio, described generally in a twofold basis, although we might admit several others in this regard.

In the first perspective, we could underline some works which have pointed out the eventual crisis of radio or even its death. Raul Garcés (2007) emphasizes the 'trilogy of alarm' in the current living situation of radio: technological alarm (as a new paradigm which symbolizes the attraction to the most popular digital features); intellectual alarm (which dismisses the potential of advertisement in the radio as those investments go straight to television productions); and finally a scientific alarm, which has basically been trying to relegate radio into the shadows of the academic productions, where there is a concerning lack of studies related to radio, as well as low levels of students who are interested in following a professional career in radio journalism. Emma Rodero e Chelo Serrano (2007) also follow some sort of radio crisis perspective, alongside a set of plausible explanations, starting from the same choices

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for the programmes, in terms of formats and contents, as well as lack of visibility of those radios²⁴.

The last point clearly connects radio to the present standards, especially with online techniques. In this context, Ibarra considers that «the digital phenomenon is no Armageddon» (2007:1), which means that radio should not fear its future in the online domains. This researcher believes that digital possibilities provide new sounding landscapes (Jensen, 2008) and new audiences, through democratization in the access to technologies. Although it still remains blurred the borders of the digital divided, a popular expression put forward by Robert Putnam in several of his works (2000), radio should not be absent from these new features. Laurent Gago has also worked in this similar topic, arguing that radio is becoming a media which grants «new listening contracts», although in addition to his analysis we should include the economical constraints that prevent radios, especially smaller ones, from following the same demanding.

In this present state of radio, we might argue that the digital landscape is able to guarantee two sorts of interpretations, among those who foresee and expect several positive implications in this industry, creating new sounding contents, new audiences, eventually a young one, and those who feel quite negative about the constraints that a new digital era may bring to the industry of radio.

Participation as a radio genre

In the context of our present discussions towards radio at this current time, we may acknowledge one of its unique characteristics, which has also been one of its landmarks: its connection to the telephone and its listeners. Although we easily recognise that its format has been changing throughout the last decades, the telephone symbolises, almost in a nostalgic point of view, a particular relationship between radio and their audiences, in terms of what we could entitle as listeners'

²⁴ We may underline other perspectives. A 2008 Report from the Portuguese OBERCOM (Communication Observatory) points out that the radio has been the most effective media in terms of taking advantage of the online possibilities for its work. As the main research has admitted «radio has been the most successful media in investments online. There is a solid effort in captivating people through this platform. Radio is alive, more than ever» (http://jn.sapo.pt/Paginalnicial/Media/Interior.aspx?content_id=1527471).

participation. Given this paradigm, we will assume that 'participation' will be our key concept in this paper, as we will focus on the strategies drawn by radio institutions in Portugal to create real opportunities for people to interact in their formats.

In this context, Mariano Cébrian Herreros has been interested in summing up the radio genres in five types: fiction, realistic or informative, advertisement, musical and, finally, humorous and educational. For this author, «the most developed genre is, all doubts aside, the informative one, especially by its unique characteristic of expositive attitude or even for its persuasive broadcasting style, alongside appellative witnesses» (2001:123). In addition to this perspective, Merayo Pérez suggests participation as a radio genre: «it has modalities, structures and defined objectives, as it operates autonomously in relation to other genres and it is pretty established in the radio production in several countries» (2000:223). This researcher explains this idea better by proposing participation as a structure of radio discourse in order to engage the audience, making it the main force of certain programmes. After being able to underline the role of voice as key element of participation, Merayo Pérez states that as a specific genre, participation can act as symbol of one single radio, becoming part of the a marketing strategy in this sector.

Taking into account some considerations of Mariano Cébrian Herreros, in which we can perceive a strong support to the idea of a 'participated radio', this researcher reminds us the theoretical assumptions put forward by Bertold Brecht and his book *Theory of Radio* (1927-1932). In this framework, the author underlines a 'democratic radio', «a space filled with communicative processes to the citizens, through dialogue and debate, focused on its plural relationship with social, political, economic, ideological or cultural contexts, compromised to bring this service from main sectors to minorities, proposing relevant topics for the society» (Herreros, 2007:205).

Our research paper stands from the basic support of participation as a key element in democratic societies. Drawing our thoughts into the media landscape, we will try to evaluate how is participation perceived by Portuguese radio, and those strategies to include several sectors of our society in some public opinion programmes, aiming to frame what kind of dynamics are being held by one public service radio and a private one.

Comparative study of two public opinion programmes in the Portuguese radio

Taking advantage of some previously pointed out knowledge, we are going to present two spaces that will try to illustrate how participation is being treated in two public opinion programmes in Portuguese radios. The first audience discussion format is *Antena Aberta*, from the public radio broadcaster Antena 1, and the other one is *Fórum TSF*, from private radio TSF - Rádio Notícias. These two spaces represent the most popular formats within Portuguese radio productions towards public intervention, a particularly and relevant aspect which has been fundamental to put our theoretical assumptions in this empiric approach.

In a general overlook, we could distinguish these programmes in terms of property, as we have stressed out before. The public one was founded in 1977 and the private ten years later. After this basic acknowledgement, we shall present some criteria which contribute to our analysis. Thus, our observation has chosen a one-week regular set of programmes, from 11th April to 15th April 2011. Prior to the description of such levels of comparison, perhaps it may be relevant to recognize some important details which guarantee total independency and reserve to our research as a circumstantial point of view. The observation period is, though, very short in time to perceive clearly all the differences and common aspects between the two formats. Is it highly predictable that the subjects discussed and the way participants are selected by the production teams somehow constrain the data that we have been able to gather from those broadcastings. The current situation in Portugal, especially at political and economic levels, has been on permanent focus from the media coverage, right after the Prime-minister José Sócrates has resigned from his position, helping to draw the beginning of a serious economic crisis which would reach probably its higher point with the confirmation of the financial and economic support package for Portugal in the first semester of 2011. In this regard, our study has been conducted during this period, which could have created an important bias, even in terms of the commentators chosen by media productions to interfere in such programmes.

It seems pretty clear that these kind of spaces – and maybe this is the reason why they exist – totally depend on what is really happening in one community or society, and that is a perfectly legitimate working basis. However, these circumstances

must be acknowledged, in order to provide a concrete analysis as it is intended that this kind of studies could be the starting point and motivation to following ones.

Criteria to establish the comparison between the two programmes

Schedule

There are no significant differences towards the period reserved for broadcasting. Both programmes are transmitted in the morning period, although we might underline some deviations, in terms of their length, and in terms of the time at which they go on air. *Antena Aberta* starts right after the 11 am newscast, and ends almost at noon, giving place to another informative section. *Fórum TSF* starts to broadcast at 10:15 am finishes almost at noontime²⁵. Taking into account all the programmes analysed, the duration of *Antena Aberta* does not exceed 55 minutes, whereas *Fórum TSF* is longer, reaching almost one hour and a half of duration.

Checking out the programme when it is over: podcast?

Both radios offer the possibility to listen to all the past and ended programmes in a very fast and easy way. Bearing in mind that these spaces are broadcasted during the morning, it is likely to find them in the programmes' section online within the afternoon of that same day, either through their websites²⁶ or in the feeds²⁷ section, in mp3 formats.

Moderation/Hosting

Concerning this subject, we have once again observed another coincidence, as a journalist is always chosen to host the debate. This could be explained by the journalistic framework for which both programmes stand, with this kind of neutral

²⁵ Please, do note that *Fórum TSF* is interrupted for the 11 am newscast and starts its 2nd part expectedly at 11:10 am.

²⁶ *Antena Aberta* - http://tv1.rtp.pt/programas-rtp/index.php?p_id=1040&e_id=&c_id=1&dif=radio
Fórum TSF -

http://www.tsf.pt/Paginalnicial/Interior.aspx?content_id=1827724&tag=F%F3rum%20TSF

²⁷ *Antena Aberta* - http://ww1.rtp.pt/web/podcast/gera_podcast.php?prog=1040
Fórum TSF - <http://feeds.tsf.pt/TSF-ForumTSF>

element. In *Fórum TSF*, Manuel Acácio is the host, as in *Antena Aberta*, there is a regular switch on the host between journalists Eduarda Maio and António Jorge.

Broadcasting

There are some particular aspects regarding the broadcasting of *Antena Aberta*, which actually bring interesting options to this context. This programme has been born in radio, nonetheless with the latest technological developments, in terms of communication, the public service of radio has decided to broadcast this format both on radio and television, in this case simultaneously on RTP-N, the cable television of the state television RTP, an exclusively dedicated to news and information channel. This complementary broadcasting shows other curious aspects in terms of the representation of the participants, which are more visible in the TV screen than through radio: in the television broadcasting, the audience is informed about the ways to participate (telephone numbers, emails, besides information related to the age of participants). If we just listen to the programme through the radio, we will be not able to be informed with these details, as the host/ess neglects those data as well. In TSF, the programme is broadcasted in the herztian space as well as online, as in Antena 1.

Rules to participate

In this point, we have been able to observe different choices. In *Antena Aberta*, throughout their website and even on air, there are absolutely no references to the rules which should guide people to interact and participate. This is actually a different option if compared with *Fórum TSF*. In this programme those rules are pretty clear, as they are posted online, although we might recognise that this strategy can, in fact, be limited. Nevertheless, this radio points out that, «due to the high number of participants in *Fórum TSF*, not every contribution will be broadcasted. The online *Fórum TSF* [a direct panel which occurs at the same time when the programme is being broadcasted live, on air] has a stricter comment policy than in other spaces in TSF online, broadly speaking. According to this idea, and in total harmony with the rules understood for the live broadcasting on radio, we remind that: the commentaries in the online *Fórum TSF* should always be identified by the first and last name;

anonymous commentaries will be not considered; commentaries filled with inappropriate, slang, obscene, insulting language will not be considered, as well as criminal charges towards individuals, companies, violations of privacy, appeals for hate or violence, or violations of human rights»²⁸.

Appealing to participate

This is another item where it is possible to examine different options as well. As a matter of fact, in this point we tried to evaluate how these two programmes are working in terms of captivating their audiences to participate in the programme. What kind of strategies are we considering, from the online tools and the live broadcast, from the radio?

Thus, another difference has been observed, as TSF insists more in those appeals, both online and on air by the hostess, while Antena 1 remains somehow in silence. However, in the online scope there are some differences: in the *Antena Aberta's* webpage, the production just reminds that «in Antena 1, the opinions from our listeners are very appreciable. Day by day, the programme *Antena Aberta* suggests an actual and relevant subject, analysed by specialists and listeners of the public service of radio. *Antena Aberta* is a plural platform, keen to register the opinions of listeners»; in TSF online, there are expressions such as «in *Fórum TSF* we want to listen to your opinion» or even «comment» here, in the comment section posted online.

Opening the gates: tools to participate

A critical point to understand the relevance and the dynamic of these two programmes is probably related with the set of interactive possibilities that each format gives to the audience in order to participate or at least, to intend to. Once again, the options diverge quite a bit.

In *Antena Aberta* there are just two ways of participating: using the telephone to proceed to inscription (800 220 101 / 223 399 912) or e-mail (antena.aberta@rtp.pt). *Antena Aberta* seems to still dedicate their main attention to

²⁸ http://www.tsf.pt/PaginalInicial/Interior.aspx?content_id=1835313&tag=F%F3rum%20TSF

the telephone, as they promote email as a tool to interact, but this kind of participation is almost absent, because the host/ess neither calls the audience attention to that platform, nor reads any received messages. Comparatively to *Fórum TSF*, we can find several options here: the telephone (808 202 173), TSF's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/tsfradio>) and the online forum²⁹ in the web page of *Fórum TSF*. It looks clear that TSF exposes participants to a wider plethora of interactive means. This radio, especially in these formats, understands cyberspace as a way of gathering people together in one participative aura, although we may acknowledge that the high number of participants that want to be a part of it contrast with those who actually intervene live in the programme.

Subjects discussed and commentators invited to the debate

Bearing in mind the current context of our country, we should recognise that those conditions may interfere in the discussion of public affairs during the week we focused our observation on. The Portuguese economic crisis of 2011 was fostered by a political one, as José Sócrates resigned on March, thus leading the actual President of the Portuguese Republic, Aníbal Cavaco Silva, to the dissolution of the government and parliament. This has been the political landscape that has anticipated the financial supporting programme, established between Portugal and the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the European Commission. Hence, this political and social framework has inflected in how media coverage has understood reality during this one-week observation study.

Even so, it was possible to confirm this scenario throughout that week, because all the subjects have focused mainly on the political and economic scopes. In *Antena Aberta*, from Monday to Thursday, these were the topics, established in terms of general questions: 'what do you expect from the political parties [about an eventual financial support]?'; 'what kind of measures are keen to be held in exchange of this financial support?'; 'what sort of negotiation can Portugal handle with while establishing the parameters of the external financial support?'; and 'Voices against the external financial support to Portugal are expected to grow as Germany, Netherlands

²⁹ <http://www.tsf.pt/PaginalInicial/tag.aspx?tag=F%F3rum%20TSF>

and Finland seem interested in jeopardizing this solution for the Portuguese economy. Is Portugal another victim of the market fundamentalism?. On Friday's programme, after some Portuguese football teams have been through to the semi-finals of the European competition Europa League, the programme has focused in this sports event with the subject entitled 'Portugal in majority in the Europa League's semi-finals'. In this regard, it is very difficult to clearly separate all the topics within static areas, with the only exception to be made in the last programme's issue. Nevertheless, we could assume that during this week there were three subjects dedicated to financial and economic themes, one related to the Portuguese policy, especially within political parties, and the last one which debated football.

It is curious to observe that *Fórum TSF* has followed an identical philosophy in terms of choosing its subjects. We do not claim that both programmes follow each other's options mimetically. Nonetheless, we have registered in the subjects' list: two oriented to a political framework ('Is it possible to be a citizen besides one's own political idiosyncrasy?' – on Monday; 'The need for an political agreement' – on Wednesday); two more towards finance and economy ('The future and its solutions to avoid a new crisis' – on Tuesday; 'The consequences of the crisis' – on Thursday); and, finally, as it happened with *Antena Aberta*, the last day of the week's programme, football has dominated the subject on Friday's show, discussing 'The success of the Portuguese football teams in Europe'.

We shall focus in another fundamental topic in this scope, which is the commentators that were invited to participate in these formats. Their presence may arise different questions from a theoretical point of view, either about their importance, pertinence or even about how people actually perceive their presence. Nonetheless, we may observe other formal questions as we have noticed in several distinctive options regarding this item. After collecting the data from 10 programmes, we have concluded that *Antena Aberta* invites more commentators (13), that is two more than *Fórum TSF*. It remains somehow obvious that in the first programme, there is more time to talk, although we may underline that we have not conducted any experimental research to acknowledge that in a scientific or rigorous way.

In *Antena Aberta*, the colleague teachers have been the most invited group (4) both in economic and financial areas, plus three journalists (*Diário Económico* -

economy, Record e A Bola – both sports) and other three home political commentators. The same criteria is likely to happen in *Fórum TSF*: five colleague teachers (from economy to finance), two home commentators (politics and sports), one journalist (the TSF sports editor), a sociologist, an economist and a politician³⁰.

Concerning the presence of journalists in public opinion programmes, we shall remind that are several studies which have claimed that this group has been a fundamental part in this scope, as it seems that media productions are not keen to let the media discourse outside journalistic borders. The research project 'TV journalism and citizenship: the struggle for a new digital public sphere' has followed some of these perceptions³¹.

Listeners and participants³²

In a social and demographic level, it is also possible to describe our sample, in terms of gender, residence or employment. By participants we mean the group of listeners who have, in fact, interfered live during the programmes, via telephone or online platforms. The host/ess is crucial on this issue, as we will just consider those who have been called for the discussion, for an empirical point of view.

The number of participants observed on these two formats is quite different. As we have not seen any repetition, in *Antena Aberta* we have counted up to 38 participants, whilst *Fórum TSF* registered the exact triple, with 114 listeners and participants. Gender distribution is the same in both cases, men are the most participant ones: *Antena Aberta* (28 men, 10 women) and *Fórum TSF* (106 men and just 8 women)³³.

³⁰ In Monday and Wednesday programmes, there were two commentators who have participated in both formats.

³¹ http://www.jn.pt/PaginalNicial/Media/Interior.aspx?content_id=1759341

³² A small note: as we have noted earlier, *Antena Aberta* is broadcasted both in radio and television and this may have lead to a methodological dilemma. In this case, the observation has registered from the radio broadcasting, although we should question whether the participants were listeners or television viewers. However, we assume that this does not compromise the characterization of the participants in this programme.

³³ These data justify and give importance to other studies which have focused in the same topic. 'Radio and listeners, a formula of a bipolar relationship' has proved also that men are the most representative gender in this media discourse (Ribeiro, 2008).

Towards the residence of the participants, it is interesting to analyse some differences, as suggested in Map 1³⁴. In a general overlook, there is a clear predominance of participants from coastal areas (28 out of 36 in *Antena Aberta*; 55 in 67, in *Fórum TSF*), as there are almost no interventions from the Azores or Madeira islands (just one listener from Madeira, in *Antena Aberta*). The south districts of Portugal (Faro and Beja) are among the most absent ones, in terms of representation of participants, in both media spaces (see Map 1).

This data may actually convey to a misleading analysis, as we conclude that the subject determines, in fact, the mobility of the audiences. In this sense, the success of the two football teams, both from the north of Portugal, has conducted to a significant growth in the number of participants from that part of the country, especially in the last day of both programmes. After checking this situation, one may think that, in the absence of this subject, a more atomized distribution of participants around Porto and Lisbon (where the great majority of participants studied live³⁵) could have occurred.

In the employment section, we have been able to find more similarities. In Antena 1's programme, we have organized them in terms of 11 categories, among business man (5), teacher (4), student and engineer (3) as the most representative ones. In *Fórum TSF*, the three most observed employments were again business man (10), salesman (5), engineer and public worker (4), in a 34 employment selection row. Although this item does not clearly show how the sample is in terms of instruction, we could argue that the typical participant has an academic degree, once taken into account the limited description of such analysis.

Listeners' participation during the programme

After the characterization of our sample in terms of gender, residence and employment, we shall focus on some trends that have conducted the participation

³⁴ It is important to note that online participants in *Fórum TSF* are not considered in this statistic because they did not need to answer to this item to participate. In Map 1 the red numbers indicate how many participants have been part of the programme in that specific area or district.

³⁵ If we join the two maps, we could argue that 57 of 103 participants is from these two regions. In *Antena Aberta*, Lisbon takes the lead, in *Fórum TSF*, Porto is on top of the participants' residence.

flows during this week of observation. Comparing the two formats, we are able to establish differences and resemblances on both.

As it is suggested by Chart 1, we monitored the daily progress on the number of participants on each day of observation. It looks like in *Antena Aberta* the number of participants does not diverge that much, from five to twelve interventions. In *Fórum TSF*, this flow is a little unusual, since we have observed a minimum of 11 participants up to a maximum of 35. In addition, the possibility of multiple choices posed to the online participation in *Fórum TSF* has brought interesting approaches to this analysis, on the contrary of what is conceived by the *Antena Aberta* production.

In this sense, we shall study *Fórum TSF* as it provides plenty of possibilities for a more interesting analysis. Gender distribution between the two ways of participation (telephone and internet) tells us that men call more often to the programme than women, who prefer online platforms to interact with this media³⁶ (see Chart 2). How is the production working in terms of combining the radio broadcast with the online one? Minutes before the programme is transmitted live, the production team posts in Facebook a short information about the subject to be discussed, not only to promote the day topic, but also to call for people's attention so that they feel motivated to participate.

As presented in Chart 3, we have described how gender is distributed by the two ways of online participation. According to this analysis, we have seen that people do prefer the online *Fórum TSF* to try and participate. In Facebook, it is possible to see once more the predominance of male participation (9), whereas just 2 women have actually been involved in the discussions. In *Fórum TSF*³⁷ we have also checked the daily evolution on the online platforms, as it is described in Chart 4. It is possible to see that in Thursday's programme the number of participants has shrunk, as it was interrupted for a special news event about the political crisis that was taking place in

³⁶ We shall underline that the editorial options of the programme are the responsible for this distribution, therefore it must be acknowledged that this is one fundamental step to understand critically what kind of data are we dealing with.

³⁷ One of the reasons to explain the predominance of telephone as main tool to participate could be explained by the general editorial option of the production which gives it almost full role of protagonist. As we might be able to pose, it can be understood as a faithful feeling to the origins of radio and with listeners.

Portugal. These kinds of programmes are dependent on unpredictable situations that might happen during these formats. In this period of instability in Portugal, it was likely to observe that press conferences and other events could harm the normal functioning routine of the programme, which concurs with the fact that we have observed a decrease on participation in this particular day.

Participants' selection is a decisive step to understand part of the dynamic of the programme, as well as to comprehend that there are a lot of people who wishes to interact with media. As it is described above, our analysis could not access to the global number of people who have signed up for participation through the telephone. However it is possible to see the total comments posted in the online platforms and then compare with the actual comments brought on to the live broadcasting, as it is explained on Table 1. There is a tendency which leads people to participate more in the online Fórum TSF than in the Facebook's page of the radio: we have seen that 11,3 % of the total comments in the first online tool are broadcasted in the live transmission, slightly more than those from Facebook (11,1%).

Final remarks

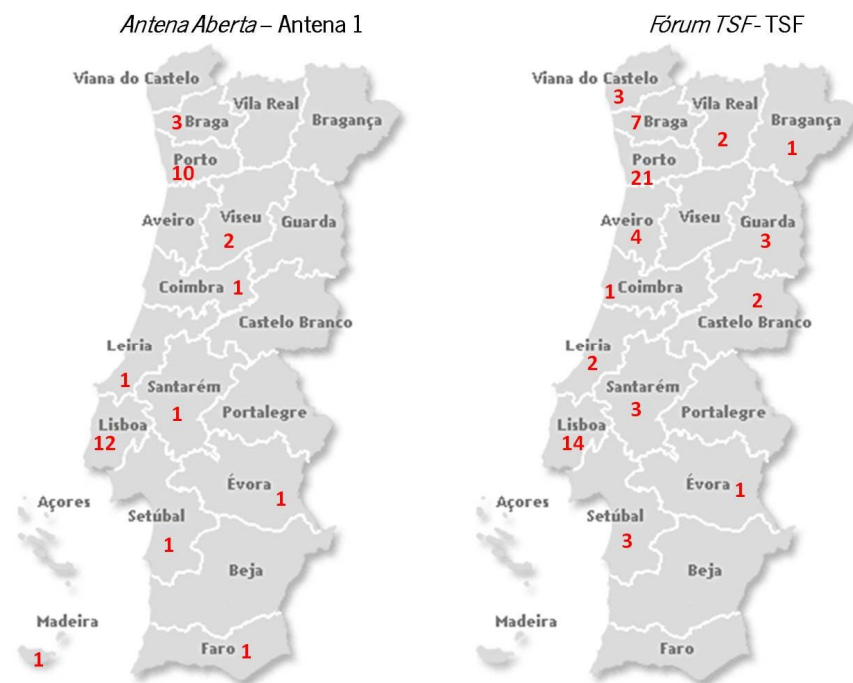
It seems somehow logic that the present state of radio must not be absent of new communicative and sounding landscapes. If crisis means necessarily opportunity, this paper urges radio production to rethink in another business model, alongside public opinion programmes and eventually other formats designed for people's intervention. In other media sections, the digital era has proved to be a refreshing window, although it remains unclear the way the web can be a powerful tool for generating money and profit for the media.

According to two different approaches on how online is being received by two Portuguese radios, one might suggest that the digital universe is definitely a whole new world of possibilities, simply because it means a different chance to call for people's attention, some of them probably who are absent of the radio broadcasting. In this regard, *Antena Aberta* is roughly more conservative than *Fórum TSF*, as this last one proves clearly that radio needs to surpass its traditional barriers in order to gather people around debates. Thus, there is no surprise to see that the programme of the

radio public service is three times less popular than TSF's. Nonetheless, it is vital to understand that telephone remains as the main tool to get people involved, and this is a perfect example on how radio can indeed be a symbol and a paradigm of new and traditional features towards reaching media. If some authors are not far from being wrong as they frequently point out the same choices in some radio formats, it is possible to see this feature once again, as we observe the same options in terms of the commentators which are invited.

Working in radio means necessarily doing business, in the same perspective as other media landscapes, especially in such a fragile context as nowadays is. Thus, this paper urges the need to understand that there is no point in neglecting the digital environments that radio is surrounded by. In these platforms, it is also possible to gather people, making them faithful towards the media, as well as promoting clear and responsible ways of people to get involved in.

Illustrations, charts



Map 1 – Participants' distribution according to the Portuguese districts.

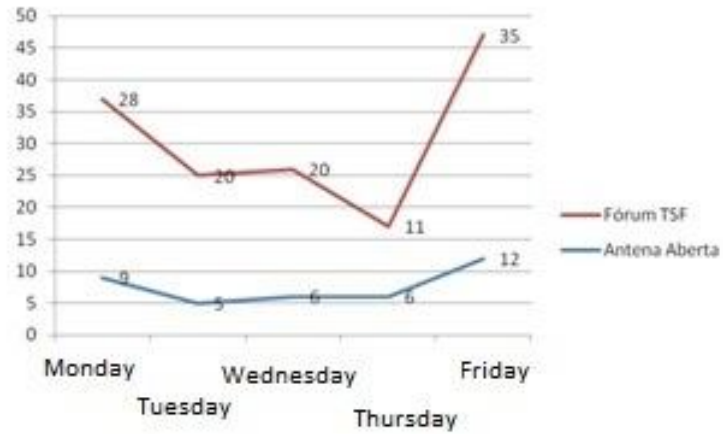


Chart 1 - Daily evolution on the participants of both programmes.

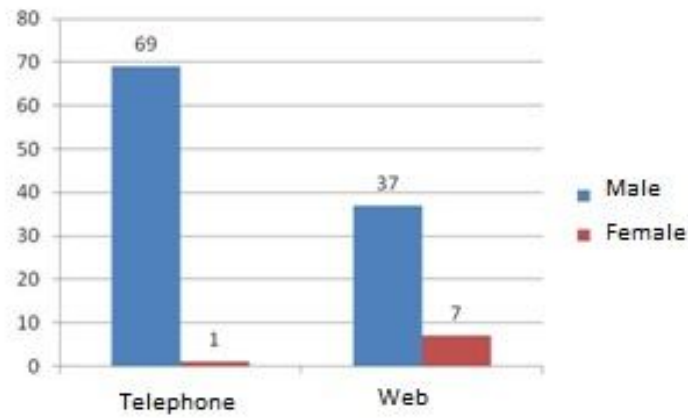


Chart 2 - Gender distribution in the two ways of participation in Fórum TSF.

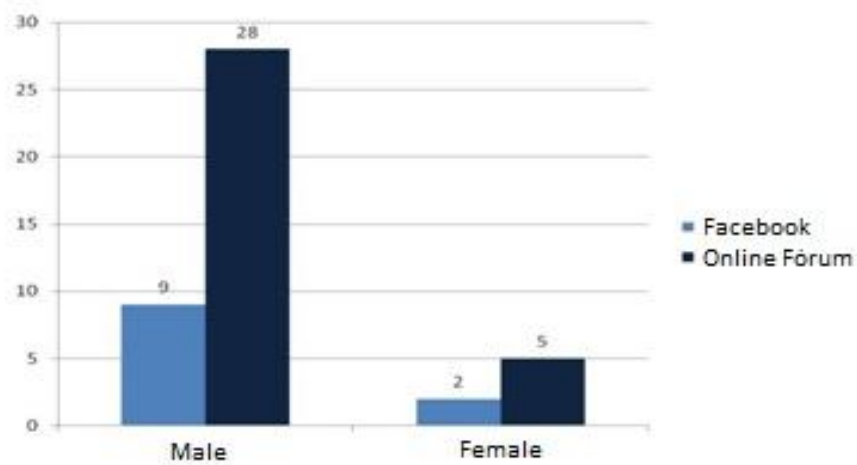


Chart 3 - Gender distribution in the two online platforms in Fórum TSF.

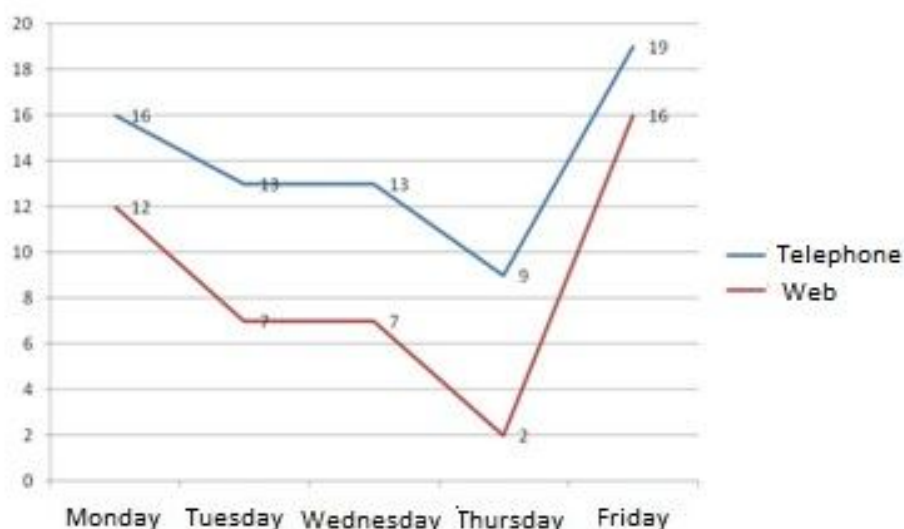


Chart 4 - Daily evolution on the telephone and Web participation in Fórum TSF.

	Facebook comments (total day)	Facebook comments (live)	Online Fórum TSF comments (total day)	Online Fórum TSF comments (live)
Monday	21	3	94	9
Tuesday	22	3	54	4
Wednesday	28	3	49	4
Thursday	20	1	62	1
Friday	6	1	33	15
Total	99	11	292	33

Table 15 - Global commentaries in the online tools and percentage of those broadcasted live in Fórum TSF.

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http://www.tsf.pt/PaginalInicial/Interior.aspx?content_id=1827724&tag=F%F3rum%20TSF

http://ww1.rtp.pt/web/podcast/gera_podcast.php?prog=1040

<http://feeds.tsf.pt/TSF-ForumTSF>

<http://www.comunicacao.uminho.pt/cecs/content.asp?startAt=2&categoryID=672&newsID=2060>

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