

# For a political economy of music radio – links between the industries of music and of radio broadcasting<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This article propose a critical approach to FM radio, analyzing in particular those network stations with programming mainly constituted by pop music. The goal is to explore the Political Economy of Communication and Culture theoretical possibilities to investigate music and radio industry articulations, as phonographic market reconfigures itself.

**Keywords:** Radio, FM, music, Political Economy of Communication and Culture

## INTRODUCTION

In the small studio of a youth-oriented music broadcasting station, the student of Communication asks the broadcaster who is guiding the visitors about the process of choosing the set list of a program. The announcer starts with an evasive and tells the student that every suggestion from the listeners is sent to the department in charge to be considered, according to the target audience of that radio station. However, a more sincere, although disturbing, answer is given in addition: “sure, most of our setlist is *made* by the record labels, and they have this promotional budget just for these cases. We used to call it *payola*, but nowadays it is a legal deal, and we consider it in our budget”.

This conversation, witnessed by the author, reveals a lack of decorum in describing the established terms between the music radio station and the phonographic industry that has dictated what is listened from Frequency Modulation radios. Payola (as it is called in the United States, where the practice aroused during the 1950s) is now the main source of income to youth-

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oriented broadcasting stations. While these radio stations can help to put records in the sales top lists, they also can be crucial in determining the commercial failure of an artist.

The phonographic and broadcasting industries developed symbiotically during the Twentieth Century, mainly between the 1950s and the 1990s, period of Frequency Modulation commercial development (Kischinhevsky, 2007). The stereo sound of high fidelity brought by FMs has helped to diffuse pre-recorded music, establishing a new radio-language and reapproaching the media to the *radio music box*, predicted by David Sarnoff almost a hundred years ago<sup>2</sup>.

The live concerts that marked the first decades of Amplitude Modulation (AM) have given way, on FMs, to music produced by the rising phonographic industry, cheaper and easier to be consumed. Music generally produced according to an industrial logic, following well defined economical aims. According to Adorno, music to be homogenized and standardized through a mass production ready-packed for a mass culture, under the shelter of monopolist capitalism (Endler, 2008, pp. 179-190). Nevertheless, it must be said that this music can represent a key-factor to trigger mechanisms of identification (or rejection) among listeners and broadcasting stations, helping to establish some *taste communities* and to affirm (or to suppress) local and regional identities.

The prevalence of music programming on FM stations has consolidated a cycle of production, promotion and consumption of phonograms, including companies of different industrial branches as well as many professions that orbit this important section of cultural industry.

This essay aims at mapping the production chain of music and radio economy, analyzing the links between these industrial segments. To design this map of music radio in FM, a most recent bibliography will be applied, mainly from Brazil and USA, the world's largest broadcasting industrial pole, holding historical resemblance with the Brazilian experience when related to commercial exploitation of radio spectrum and to the also symbiotic relationship

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<sup>2</sup> Considered one of the pioneers in American music broadcasting, Sarnoff – Belarusian settled in the USA in 1900 – founded the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and commanded Radio Corporation of America (RCA) for decades.

Retrieved Dec 26, 2010, From: <http://www.radiohof.org/pioneer/davidsarnoff.html>

between broadcasting stations e record labels. These references will be checked against other indications associated to the phonographic industry, the culture economics and to the media convergence, thus helping to map the main issues about the social-cultural mediation exerted by FM broadcasting stations through music.

The processes of automation, digitizing, segmentation and programming decision making of radio stations will be analyzed, as well as their interfaces with record labels, which consider radio stations as a privileged area for their cast to be noted and profitable.

### **PRODUCTION CHAIN, CULTURAL CIRCUIT**

The music industry has been the subject of several essays in the field of cultural economy. Luiz Carlos Prestes Filho considers the

production chain of the music economy [...] a hybrid complex, composed by the networked set of industrial activities and skilled services, both complementary in a system of interdependence in order to achieve artistic, economical and business goals in common (Prestes Filho et al, 2004, p. 29).

Thus, this chain would include several actors in different levels of institutional terms, all engaged in music business distributed by links: pre-production (manufacturing of musical instruments, sound and recording equipments), production (creation/composition, studios, recording techniques, mixing, mastering etc.); distribution (logistics, publicity/promotion on radio, TV and internet, shows); marketing (stores and outlets such as supermarkets, bookstores, newsstands and internet paid app downloads); and consumption (radio, TV, internet, shows, sound equipments, movies, theaters, festivals, bars, nightclubs, shops).

Cultural studies authors have also worked with a useful concept for our aims: the *cultural circuit*, including *production*, *consumption* and *regulation* and immaterial aspects of the process, as *identity* and *representation* (Du Gay, 1997). That proves that not only the analysis of the founding conditions for the production chain of music radio is necessary, but also the investigation of what is diffused by these broadcastings, the sort of subject matter is brought to their audience and which identity devices these stations inspire on the audiences they mobilize.

Music is seen as an economic segment of industrial features since Adorno and Horkheimer's seminal works which denounced the increasing standardization of popular music

since the 1930s and 1940s. From then on, many critical studies have been developed considering the phonographic industry: since Paul Hirsch, who believed that the artist provides the *raw material* (presumed to be *authentic* or *pure*) which is later submitted to record labels *filters*; up to the notion of *manufacturing*, used by John Ryan and Richard Peterson to understand the hit-making of country singers; through Joli Jensen, for whom culture is not just a commodity, something technically produced by companies that follow financial criteria, but also a way for people to give new meanings to the world they live in (an inventory of such theoretical approach can be found in Negus, 1997, pp. 99-101).

Although the segmentation of radio programming in Brazil has occurred through the importation of the North-American radio stations format (Kischinhevsky, 2007), it was intensified with the première, in 1977, of *Rádio Cidade FM*. A radio station aimed at a young audience and with a set list mainly composed by foreigner pop and rock singers, *Cidade* copied the *Pop Contemporary Hit Radio – Top 40* segment, on the rise in the USA then and just formatted for the broadcasting of mass popular music.

*Cidade* has given a new design to Brazilian FM's set lists. The masters of ceremony of AM programs in mid-twentieth century were gradually replaced by disc-jockeys, communicators who talk to their listeners no longer appealing to ceremonious terms, like *dear sir* or *ladies and gentlemen*<sup>3</sup>. The specialization of music programming allows a much more effective marketing exploitation of the audience, helping to establish cross-borders communities of similar tastes (though keeping local peculiarities), moved by musical genres (and sub-genres) in continuous rearrangement, such as rock (and all its derived designations, as hard rock, heavy metal, industrial, rockabilly), pop music, rap etc.

One must consider the impossibility of taking the production process of music by focusing only on the music industry. One must list the mutual relation between record labels and broadcasting stations – in charge of making some stipulated songs become hits, managing the public interest – as conclusive factors for the construction of an artist's commercial success. It is often considered the idea that there is a production chain of music radio, integrated by

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<sup>3</sup> The most revered Brazilian radio DJ was Big Boy, prematurely dead, who introduced the rock music of the 1970s to his young listeners as if he were “a brother or a friend guiding tastes and behaviors” (Ferraretto, 2008, p. 152).

cultural circuits formed on the interface between the local artistic scenes and the cultural and communication related companies (record labels, radio, TV networks, specialized press), added to producers, entrepreneurs and professionals linked to music business.

The key idea in this universe is the notion of *success*, mainly in the commercial sense. But how to make a song a hit? Is it just a matter of following the industry standards, producing predictable 3 to 4 minutes long work songs? “This attitude reinforces the concept of a link between two cultural industries – the record labels and the broadcasting stations – that are complementary and, since they are close in interests, sometimes they can also be engaged in accusations of payola” (Ferraretto, 2008: 152)<sup>4</sup>.

Prestes Filho sees the radio as a promoting apparatus, though radio stations pay copyrights for the reproduction of phonograms passed by record labels.

Once radio stations are considered by the record labels as the main vehicle to publicize music, the record industry being sure that “what plays on radio becomes a sales success”, radio stations have great bargaining power and demand high payments to play specific songs for a certain period of time (usually three months). In addition, almost every promotion, token, T-shirt or CD to be distributed by these stations are paid by the record labels. Usually, the investment on radio represents 60% of the budget applied on promoting the songs.

Of course it is extremely profitable for the record labels to determine the set list of a radio station; on the other hand, radio stations, aware of their power, require increasing benefits, burdening the expenses with marketing and, therefore, the costs of the final output – the CD. (Prestes Filho et al, 2005, pp. 41-43).

The playing of work songs paid by the record labels to be diffused is tracked by independent automated services, reaching the main cities nowadays, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

This amoral business restricts cultural diversity in radio programming, imposing to millions of listeners records that main labels are committed to sell, be it as CDs, DVDs or as live concerts, on which these companies have their share, thanks to new forms of contracts they have signed with artists within the last years (Kischinhevsky e Herschmann, 2010).

The last 15 years have been difficult for the record industry, however. They lose income exasperatedly, pressed by the advance of internet and mostly by the sharewares of digital audio

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<sup>4</sup> Ferraretto quotes a report from the newspaper *Folha de S.Paulo* in which it is estimated that 20% of total income of broadcasting stations come from payola. This projection, however, may be conservative, given the overlapping of these two cultural industries (Mattos, 2003 apud Ferraretto, 2008, p.152).

files (peer-to-peer or P2P apps). The decline in record sales risks the strategy of massive investments in marketing, putting indirectly in threat the radio stations, now dependent of the marketing budget and also facing the increasing competition of online web stations, which can be globally reached and have a highly segmented set list.

A consequence of this crisis is the steadiness in broadcasting industry, feeding a radio frequency lease market, although the practice of resale on public franchise is considered to be illegal. Large networks of youth-oriented broadcasting stations have been created, generally located in São Paulo, in search of economies of scale and of better conditions to deal with record labels.

It is meaningful that an analysis of the programs of the four major youth-oriented broadcasting radios in São Paulo, made by the author, reveals an almost absolute coincidence amongst the most played songs during the first semester of 2010 – a predictable cocktail of pop, rap and rock artists like Lady Gaga, Black Eyed Peas, Justin Bieber, Rihanna, Charlie Brown Jr., NXZero, Chris Brown, Beyoncé, Jay Z, 50 Cent and Mariah Carey, represented by the very same tracks, entitled by their record labels<sup>5</sup>.

During the first semester of 2010, music FMs control the top 15 positions in the Ibope ranking of São Paulo's Capital City (Bufarah et al., 2011). One can only find an all news radio station, CBN, in the 16<sup>th</sup> position of the ranking. The set list of those FM stations bet on different genres of commercial appeal, such as *sertanejo* (derived from country music), *pagode* (a commercial samba subgenre), pop, rap and rock. Rio de Janeiro presents the same scenario, prevailing the music broadcasting, despite the advancement of the religious proselytism and the uprising of popular AM stations being replicated in Frequency Modulation radio (Ribeiro et al., 2011).

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<sup>5</sup> The sample involves Mix FM, Jovem Pan FM, Metropolitana FM and 89 FM, all competitors for the same public segment, in São Paulo city. The survey was made by crossing information from the websites of the stations cited and can be found in another paper (Kischinhevsky, 2011a). It should be noted, however, that discrepancies in listings were on time, highlighting the repetition of tracks and artists.

The following list introduces the major FM networks working mostly with musical programming and having a nationwide broadcast, except for the ones with religious features<sup>6</sup>:

*Jovem Pan* – Held by Augusto Amaral de Carvalho Filho, a.k.a. Tutinha, the group is over 60 years old, working on AM (news radio) and on FM (pop music) since 1976. From 1994, after creating the *Jovem Pan Sat*, the company has set up a nationwide network, currently with 53 affiliates distributed over cities like São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Brasília, Porto Alegre, Florianópolis, Curitiba, Recife, Fortaleza, São Luís, Belém, Manaus, Aracaju, Maceió, Teresina, Goiânia, Cuiabá and Vitória – besides three stations working abroad in Tokyo, Miami and New York.

*Mix FM* – The broadcasting network belongs to Di Gênio family, controller of Grupo Objetivo de Ensino, and can be found in 23 centers like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Brasília, Curitiba, Recife, Fortaleza, Manaus, Vitória, João Pessoa, Maceió and Natal. The network grows rapidly through its association with local groups such as *Dial Brasil Empresa Interativa de Rádio Ltda.*, belonging to entrepreneurs Alexandre Accioly, Luis Calainho and Luciano Huck, partners in *Mix Rio* and in *Sulamérica Paradiso FM*, both in Rio de Janeiro's Capital City.

*Rede Antena 1* – Off the air in Rio de Janeiro, the network established in São Paulo holds 17 affiliates in different regions of Brazil.

*Oi FM* – 16 broadcasting stations *sponsored* by the homonymous telephonic company, with headquarters in Belo Horizonte<sup>7</sup>.

The major networks hold great bargain power in dealing with recording industry, though they seldom reach audience leadership locally. Even in major urban centers, musical FM leaders are usually controlled by medium-size companies. That is the case of the leader and the second radio networks in Rio de Janeiro: FM station *O Dia*, belonging to the publisher of same name which still holds *O Dia* and *Meia Hora* newspapers, and *Nativa FM – O Amor do Rio*, member of *Emissoras e Diários Associados*. It also applies to *Tupi FM*, formerly belonging to *Emissoras e Diários Associados* and nowadays held by entrepreneur Paulo Masci de Abreu, and São Paulo based *Nativa FM*, controlled since 2000 by Grupo Bandeirantes and not related to the homonymous radio station in Rio de Janeiro<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> There are religious programming broadcasting networks with expressive musical participation, but the tracks broadcasted form a stand-alone circuit, often fed by record labels linked to the owners of radio and TV networks.

<sup>7</sup> Data presented are given by the broadcasting stations and by the project of monitoring Donos da Mídia. Retrieved Dec 27, 2010, From: <http://www.donosdamidia.com.br>

<sup>8</sup> For a landscape of radio in Brazilian capital cities, see: Prata (2011).

There is a lack of studies in Brazil about the decision-making processes leading to the set list programming of a music radio. Some researchers have been devoted to the subject abroad, but on a limited scope. Analyzing the connections among artists, audience and executives of record labels and of an AOR (*Adult Oriented Rock*) radio station located in the American Midwest, Rothenbuhler (1985) realized that imitation of previous hits aesthetics plays an important role in assembling the playlists and reassures the fact that radio programmers allegedly serve the audience taste, but shape it instead.

Along the way, the programming department is led by specialized publications, music charts and mainly by the record labels representatives (the so-called promoters) indication of specific tracks. Their greatest fear is *to make a fool of themselves* by not following this indication, while other radio stations play the tracks *suggested* by the major record labels. The author concludes that the broadcasting station does not work as a local actor, serving the city audience, but as a publisher and allocator of outputs supplied by a nationwide industrial system that defines what should or should not be a musical hit.

After studying the case of three American college radio stations, Wall (2007) verified that the alternative to the hit factory of record labels is the segment known in the USA as *free format*, with a set list purposively made of different musical genres blended, prioritizing the artists not often accepted by the business-oriented radio stations. These radio stations, though in high number and spread throughout the country, present a modest audience and an unprofessional structure, ultimately reinforcing the leadership of commercial FM stations.

However, another study reveals that record labels perform a central role in decision making of the set lists even among college radios (Desztich e McClung, 2007). A survey among 102 set list programmers of this type of radio reveals that – along with items such as *quality of music* and *fit with station* – *familiarity with artist, well reviewed or charted* and *promotion or label assistance* are also reasons to include tracks in the set list. It means that the actions taken by the record labels promoters are considered as relevant to decision making as the artist's level of fame and his capacity to mobilize the traditional media (positive reviews in specialized newspapers and magazines, song playing on radio stations of same profile etc.).

The musical programming in American FM radios is, therefore, a millionaire business moving major promotional budgets of record labels and broadcasting stations, even within the



so-called underground circuit. The result, more and more, is the consolidation of nationwide strategic segments. A possible unfolding of these predatory business practices, from a cultural point of view, is the formation of oligopolies in key sectors of the American market (Wirth, 2007), reducing competition and, therefore, the diversity on radio, inciting the broadcasting of standardized schedules generated from networks to tens or hundreds of affiliates all over the country. This situation was aggravated by a deregulation occurred in 1996, allowing a corporate concentration without precedent in American radio broadcasting (Polinsky, 2007).

In Brazil, the progression of networks framing is slower, and independent broadcasting stations still play a key role in mobilizing audiences. However, the participation of major business groups increases as their presence grows in the main capital and small cities and their fire power to deal better promotional conditions with record labels improves, thanks to a strategic asset: audiences up to tens of millions of listeners.

#### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Although radio stations are increasingly integrated to new digital platforms, in a stage characterized by the multiplicity of offer (Brittos, 2002), radio stations face the challenge of the growing homogenization in musical FMs.

Regarding its commercial aspects, radio broadcasting keeps part of its local character, thanks to a huge universe of small and medium communication companies. The stagnation of publicity amounts and the market concentration, however, lead broadcasting companies to cut costs and to seek economies of scale. Independent stations increasingly automate their set lists, even giving up announcers. In some cases, human voice remains just in jingles and spots, interposed with tracks extracted from a set list, digitally and randomly played, updated just once a month – many times by an outsourced staff (Kischinhevsky, 2009).

This search for cutting costs feeds the increasing of broadcasting networks, hence the Adornian nightmare of homogenization. Integration represents economies of scale, leading to sharp spending cuts since the local programming schedules seldom exceed 5% of total amount and are filled mostly with affiliates advertising (Kischinhevsky, 2009). Playing lists come ready-made straight from the network head-office, hugely affecting the presence of local content on radio.

Perspectives for radio in a media convergence scenario (Cebrián Herreros, 2001 e 2007; Ferraretto, 2007; Ferraretto e Kischinhevsky, 2010) are plenty, regarding the development of new broadcasting modalities on demand, such as *podcasting* (Castro, 2005; Herschmann e Kischinhevsky, 2008), the uprising of radio-based social media – which we may just call *social radio* services – and the improvement of listening supports such as mobile phones (Kischinhevsky, 2011b; Kischinhevsky e Herschmann, 2010).

In comparison, record labels try to replace themselves in order to become music companies to explore new possibilities of invoice on digital platforms and to invest in new trades, including associations with new intermediary agents (Herschmann e Kischinhevsky, 2006; Herschmann, 2007; De Marchi; Albornoz; Herschmann, 2010).

In this scenario where economics of music production chain is being reconfigured, radio runs the risk of losing its central role in the process of promotion and in the forming of a record consuming *spot*, but there is no evidence of such phenomenon to happen yet. The constitution of a Musical Radio Political Economy, under a more detailed analysis of commercial structures linking broadcasting and music companies, as well as their shareholding structure and the development of far-reaching networks, is crucial for the survey of cultural diversity in FMs and for the elaboration of public policies that will be able to keep the presence of local artistic demonstrations on the radio.

Other studies should deepen the analysis on the subject throughout an exploratory survey gathering listeners and broadcasting playlists programmers, especially those belonging to the youth-oriented segment, who may seem to be more sensitive to symbiotic (and damaging) relationships nourished by broadcasting radio and record labels networks.

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