

The Role of Radio in Everyday Brazilian Society (1923—1960)

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As the lights dim on the twentieth century, we can conclude that this has been the revolutionary era in forms of long-distance communication. Many will say that it is a time of acceleration of technical discoveries in all sectors of human knowledge. They are, without a doubt, correct. However, without rapid means of communication, only small groups of people would have access to these discoveries. The immediacy of events is directly proportional to their distribution throughout the world.

The story of rapid communication originated with the emergence of radio broadcasting. In Brazil, the first radio station began activity in 1923. Over the course of its more than seventy-year history, Brazilian radio has played many roles, responded to various interests, and adapted to changing times. Today, Brazilian radio reaches more than 115 million listeners, in comparison with 85 million television spectators and no more than 8 million readers of newspapers and magazines. Regardless of its broad participation in the construction of a modern mass society in Brazil, radio has not been viewed as a promising field of study and its importance has largely been eclipsed by a more powerful competitor: television.

Television transmission in Brazil began in 1950, only reaching a significant number of televisions during the 1960s. In other words, between the 1920s and the 1960s radio was the principal vehicle of mass communication in Brazil. This article will analyze some of the primary aspects of Brazilian radio and its role during this period. Similar to the dynamic which established itself in the majority of Western countries, these years reflected profound changes in social, cultural, economic and political

structures in Brazilian society. Radio at times played secondary and often fundamental roles in these transformations.

Radio made its first public and official appearance in Brazil in 1922 at the National Exposition prepared for the celebration of the Centennial of Brazilian Independence.¹ The President of the Republic, Epitácio Pessoa, gave a speech in one of the Fair's pavilions as part of the solemnity of the inauguration. After the presidential address, Carlos Gomes' opera, *The Guarany*, was broadcast directly from the Municipal Theater. The following year, the success of the first radio transmissions in the contemporary press resulted in the establishment of the first Brazilian radio broadcasting station, the "Radio Society of Rio de Janeiro."

Radio's growth during its first decade of existence in Brazil was slow. Brazilian law did not permit the transmission of commercials, which made the financial survival of the Radio Societies difficult. However, although the broadcasters were not producing commercial segments, their programs were sponsored by specific advertisers whose products were recommended to the audience throughout the program. During the early years, radio's reach was small, since the price of radio receivers was high, making them inaccessible to a large portion of the population.

By the beginning of the 1930s, the situation had changed and radio had become a more popular vehicle of communication. In São Paulo (which offered the country's highest salaries), a radio cost approximately one sixth of the average working family's monthly salary.² In March of 1932, in Decree #21,111, the government legalized and regulated the broadcasting of commercial advertising over radio, reiterating that it considered radio broadcasting to be a sector of national interest with educational purposes.³

In May of 1932, radio began to show signs of its potential for political mobilization. A movement to oust the current president, Getúlio Vargas, was initiated in São Paulo. São Paulo's radio stations, particularly "Record Radio," were transformed into powerful arms against the president. The armed rebellion known as the Constitutional Revolution, which demanded not only the removal of the president, but also the call for elections to form a Constitutional Assembly, began in July. The country was in need of a new constitution. Citizens of São Paulo were called to participate in the movement over the radio. When federal forces surrounded the city of São Paulo, only the radio stations could communicate events to other parts of the country. In October, the revolutionaries were defeated, but radio emerged

reinvigorated. During the course of the conflict, radio stations were used as advanced combat posts. Some radio announcers, such as César Ladeira, became nationally known through their roles at the microphone during the revolt.

Over the course of the 1930s, radio became a promising advertising medium. The 1932 law offered solutions to the problem of radio station survival, and simultaneously guaranteed the State one hour per day of programming throughout the entire country for the transmission of the government's official program. The *Programa Nacional*, which was foreseen in the 1932 legislation, only reached its objectives in 1939 with the creation of the *Hora do Brasil*. Through this program, the government attempted to personalize the political relationship with each citizen⁴ without being required to establish its own system of radio stations. To attract the listening audience, the Department of Press and Propaganda (*DIP*—Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda) invited famous celebrities to appear on the program, which was composed of news stories of a general nature, entertainment and political news.

In 1936 the "National Radio of Rio de Janeiro" was founded, and this event was considered a historic development in the history of Brazilian radio. After its first four years, the National Radio grew enough to compete for first place in audience share.⁵ In 1940, the group of companies to which the National Radio belonged was incorporated into the government patrimony and control of the station was assumed by the State. Unlike the treatment given to other state stations, the National Radio continued to be run like a private company, receiving financial support from resources accumulated through the sale of advertising time. Between 1940 and 1946 the National Radio became an audience champion as well as a collector of huge advertising investments. Similar to the case of the entrance of Coca-Cola into the Brazilian market, the company invested an amount significant enough to place *A Million Melodies*, a program created exclusively for launching a product, on the air.

During the 1940s, multinational companies gained an ally in their bid to enter the Brazilian market, similar to developments in other countries in the Americas. In 1941 the first radio soap opera, *Em Busca da Felicidade* (*In Search of Happiness*), premiered on National Radio. According to Brazilian sociologist Renato Ortiz, radio soap operas were used in some Latin American countries and in the United States as a strategy to increase sales of cleaning and personal hygiene products.⁶ *Em Busca da Felicidade* was originally created by the Cuban Leandro Blanco, then adapted by Gilberto

Martins of “Standart Advertising Company.” “Standart Advertising” not only sponsored the show, but also chose the morning time-slot for its premiere. The project seemed risky since the time chosen was one of low audience listening. However, the sponsor created a strategy to evaluate receptiveness to the new genre by offering a free gift to each listener who mailed in a Colgate toothpaste label. Over 48,000 labels were returned in the first month of the offer alone, demonstrating the commercial effectiveness of the new programming. As a result of the success of the genre, many more radio soap operas emerged throughout the entire day. The National Radio became a veritable fantasy factory; its soaps marked eras, forged habits and attitudes, raised debates, and were highly successful with the listening public.⁷

In 1942, the National Radio inaugurated the first short-wave station in the country, transmitting its programs throughout the entire country and making the station yet more attractive to sponsors. Technical quality and the hiring of highly qualified professionals guaranteed high audience rates and transformed the National Radio into a model to be emulated. Two sectors clinched the station’s success throughout the country: the soap operas and music programs.

The so-called “golden age of Brazilian radio” spans the period between 1945 through the end of the 1950s. It is important to stress that the expression “golden” is related to a series of characteristics of the era and does not mean that radio during this period attracted more listeners than it does today. This would be statistically impossible because the current Brazilian population is numerically much larger and the number of radios produced continues to multiply rapidly (primarily through the phenomenon of portable personal-use radios). During the 1940s and 1950s, radio possessed a certain glamour and was considered a type of Brazilian Hollywood. Being an actor or singer on a large Rio or São Paulo station was enough for an artist to attain success throughout the entire country, to obtain prominence in the written press, and to frequent political circles (as an invited guest or even as a candidate for a political office). These artists’ national tours were usually highly popular; their admirers in all parts of the country wanted to see and, perhaps, even touch their stars. This almost magical aura that surrounded the National Radio artists prompted many young people to dream of becoming a radio celebrity.⁸

With the end of the Second World War, consumer goods industries renewed their growth and some of the products already available in the United States and Europe since the beginning of the century began to arrive

in Brazil. Between 1945 and 1950, a process of accelerated growth in the radio sector occurred. New stations emerged, equipment was perfected (sometimes by legal mandate), and the number of short-wave stations multiplied.

This new panorama, which took shape at the beginning of the 1950s, created a situation of favoritism to sponsors who already possessed a range of domestic activities. For a better conceptualization of the process, see the growth statistics of the Brazilian stations:

Founding Year	Number
1923 to 1930	013
1931 to 1940	056
1941 to 1950	223
1951 to 1956	180
Unspecified	009
Total	481

IBGE (Brazilian Geographical and Statistical Institute)—*Annual Statistical Publication*, 1958

The table indicates that radio stations multiplied rapidly between 1940 and 1950. For a better understanding of radio's reach throughout the Brazilian population, it is important to remember that at the end of the 1950s the country had a 53.16% illiteracy rate, and 61.98% of those who couldn't read were inhabitants of rural areas. In other words, radio was the source of information, modernization, and contact with the rest of society for more than half of the population.

The 1960 census provides more data regarding the primary characteristics of private households, revealing information on the supply of electricity and the ownership of home appliances such as radios, refrigerators and televisions.

	Total households		Urban households		Rural households	
	number	%	number	%	number	%
Totals	13,497,823		6,350,126		7,147,697	
Electricity	5,201,521	38.54	4,604,057	72.50	597,464	8.36
Radio	4,776,300	35.38	3,912,238	61.61	864,062	12.09
Refrigerator	1,570,924	11.09	1,479,299	15.82	91,625	1.29
Television	621,919	4.3	601,552	9.47	20,367	0.28

IBGE—Seventh General Census, 1960

The table points to a link between rates of electric service and the existence of radios in the households visited—38.54% of the total population with electricity and 35.38% of the population with radios. Only a small portion of the population had access to television sets—4.6% of the total—and of the rural households, virtually none had televisions. The correspondence between electrical rates and radios demonstrates that a process of popularization of radio had occurred, turning it into an almost obligatory presence in Brazilian homes, or a type of indispensable utensil. Radios of the 1940s and the 1950s were relatively large, especially if compared to current sizes, and needed electricity or generators in order to operate. Transistor radios only invaded the consumer market toward the end of the 1960s. The mere physical characteristics of radios meant that they were primarily for collective listening, permitting an exchange of impressions among those united around them. Attention should be called to the fact that Brazilian families had the habit of congregating for meals, listening to the radio, and discussing daily news.

Another indication of the popularization, and even the trivialization of the presence of radios in large urban centers, is a 1960 IBOPE (Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion) study on the effective potential of the Rio and São Paulo markets for household goods.⁹ The study examined the presence of televisions, mattresses, washing machines, refrigerators, blenders, and floor polishers, but did not seek information on whether households possessed radios. In other words, radio had become so popular that it no longer served as an indication of income. Still in 1960, the IBOPE conducted a study of the ways that residents of Belo Horizonte became familiar with the store *Ducal*, and 73% of those interviewed had learned of it through radio, 18% through newspapers, and 12% through television.

By the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, Brazilian radio had consolidated its position as a medium of mass communication and as a fundamental component in the formation of Brazilian society's habits. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, radio was the medium through which technological innovations, cultural trends, political changes, news and entertainment simultaneously reached the most distant parts of the country, promoting the encounter between tradition and modernity. Radio helped to create new cultural and consumer practices throughout all of Brazilian society.

Notes

¹ On the Centennial, see Motta.

² Tota 87.

³ On the State/radio relationship, see Calabre, "O Estado na Onda".

⁴ Lenharo, *Sacralização* 42.

⁵ On National Radio, see Saroldi and Moreira, *Rádio Nacional*.

⁶ Ortiz 44-45.

⁷ On National Radio soap operas, see Calabre, "Na Sintonia do Tempo".

⁸ On radio singers, see Lenharo *Cantores do Rádio*; and Miriam Goldfeder, *Por trás das Ondas da Rádio Nacional*.

⁹ IBOPE, Pesquisas Especiais 1-31, 1960.

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