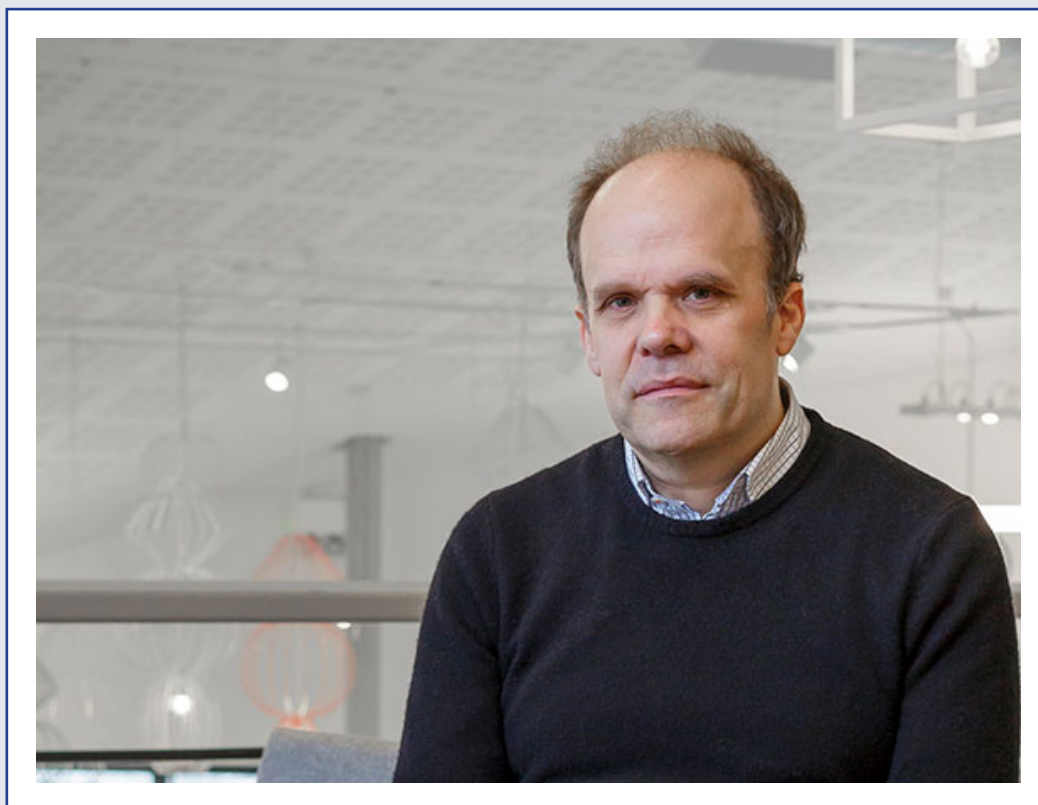


INTERVIEW

RICHARD BERRY



Radio is learning a lot from podcasting

Marcelo Kischinhevsky

One of the most respected radio and podcasting researchers in the world, Richard Berry goes against a trend in Brazilian radio studies, which have adopted, in recent years, a broader perspective on the nature of radio, covering podcasts, *streaming* and other types of audio content. Professor and researcher at the University of Sunderland, in the United Kingdom, Berry thinks of podcasting as a new medium, al-

though there are several points of convergence with radio. Berry distinguishes listening habits and languages of radio programs and podcasts, but admits they are increasingly blurred. In an email interview with **Radiofonias**, in early June, he talks about the challenges brought by the pandemic of the new coronavirus and speculations about a possible “bubble” of investments in podcasting.

RADIOFONIAS – In a recent paper, “Podcasting: Considering the evolution of the medium and its association with the word ‘radio’”, published by *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media*, you discuss the boundaries between radio and podcasting. You argue that podcasting is something different, even though it has “radiogenic” characteristics. Why should we treat them as two different, aural-based media?

There are lots of reasons. It's true that both radio and podcasts are mediums made up of sound; but so are audiobooks and we don't think of them as radio. Some podcasts do use radio genres (like documentary or drama) but many podcasts do not. I think calling podcasts radio is reductive and closes down discussions around what we are really hearing. Radio is a distracted medium, we listen to it whilst doing other things, but research shows that people like to focus on podcasts; especially those like RadioLab that really demand close listening. The modalities are different. Podcasting is much more active. Listeners make lots of choices, from subscribing to or following a show, to selecting when (and where) to listen to it. Podcasts are a “lean-in” medium not just because of this decision making, but because of the niche nature of content. I think this means that listeners are closer and more connected to the podcasts they listen to. They pay more attention and I think this opens up opportunities for producers to do different things.

About the interviewee

Richard Berry is a senior lecturer in radio and podcasting at the University of Sunderland, where he teaches across undergraduate and postgraduate courses in audio production, radio broadcasting and podcasting. His articles on podcasting are amongst the earliest in the field and he is one of the co-editors of the book *Podcasting. New Aural Cultures & Digital Media* published in 2018. His work has also explored developments of visualization and the use of the Internet by the radio industry. He is also the station manager of the University's award-winning radio station, Spark.

Some of his most important papers are:

BERRY, Richard (2016) *Podcasting: Considering the evolution of the medium and its association with the word 'radio'*. *The Radio Journal International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media*, 14 (1). pp. 7-22. ISSN 1476-4504.

BERRY, Richard (2016) *Part of the establishment: Reflecting on 10 years of Podcasting as an Audio Medium*. *Convergence*. ISSN 1748-7382

BERRY, Richard (2015) *A Golden Age of Podcasting? Evaluating Serial in the Context of Podcast Histories*. *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, 22 (2). pp. 170-178. ISSN 1937-6529

BERRY, Richard (2014) *The Future of radio is the internet, not on the internet*. In: OLIVEIRA, Madalena, STACHYRA, Grazyna, e STARKEY, Guy. *Radio: the Resilient Medium: Papers from the Third Conference of the ECREA Radio Research Station*. Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies, Sunderland, pp. 3-16. ISBN 099298050X

BERRY, Richard (2013) *Radio with pictures: Radio visualization in BBC national radio*. *The Radio Journal*, 11 (2). pp. 169-184. ISSN 1476-4504

BERRY, Richard (2006) *Will the iPod Kill the Radio Star? Profiling Podcasting as Radio*. *Convergence*, 12 (2). pp. 143-162. ISSN 1748-7382.

It is a true Long Tail medium in a way that radio can rarely be due to limited spectrum, licenses etc. The big reason why we should treat them differently is people. By calling podcasts radio, we are suggesting that those who make podcasts are, in fact, just making radio. The very medium they see their works as being an alternative to. If podcasters see the medium as being different, that commands respect. Just as film is different TV, and YouTube is different to TV, podcasts are different to radio. They are related but different, and increasingly more so. I think we know when we are listening to podcast. By talking about the differences, we can start to think what's really going. This is as much about cultural status of podcasting as it is about how they sound. We need to look at who is making the work and their status.

RADIOFONIAS – In Brazil, there was an intense debate in the past decade whether podcasting should be considered radio or not. At last, prevailed a more inclusive perspective, which considers podcasting to be a radio modality, although it seems to be more easily used in media activism and in micromedia or niche communication practices. Today, however, there is an increasing number of traditional media groups investing in podcasting. Aren't these boundaries between radio and podcasting increasingly blurred?

They are. A question to ask is who is calling podcasts "radio"? In some cases, those who do so are from the radio indus-

tries, looking to show how their medium is adapting and growing, when in fact young people are listening to less radio and more podcasts. It is a modality in so much as it is often an economic product of a radio station. For example, the BBC here in the UK now have platform called "BBC Sounds" an umbrella name for their online streams and on-demand listening. But it also commissions podcasts; shows that will never be on the radio. It's treated as a different form, where producers can explore niche or controversial topics aimed at a younger audience. There is a definite 'grammar' to podcast that rests in things like informality, authenticity, language and sound. In recent weeks, we've grown used to hearing radio shows made outside the studio as presenters work from home. This has been a podcast quality until now. As podcasts become successful, radio will steal ideas and shape a new informality or make music stations notice that people will listen to long interviews or even drama! If there is money here, commercial groups who make radio will want to be in the space. But we should not take this to mean that radio and podcasts are the same.

The challenge about podcasting is it so broad. There are educational podcasts that few of us would listen to fun. Some podcasts are made to help people develop their brands or freelance careers (in things financial advice, personal training etc.), or charities might use them to communicate with the public.

Podcasts are very democratic, but if we focus a lot on the most famous shows and engage in a discourse obsessed with monetization, we miss out what might be more interesting. Big media will always look to find ways to make money, sometimes this means get new ideas and sometimes it doesn't. I think in English speaking podcasts at least, we are seeing more and more podcasts that understand the medium. Some of them are from radio stations.

RADIOFONIAS – Brazil and the United Kingdom are among the countries hardest hit by the new coronavirus pandemic, a tragedy that has only been preceded by Spanish Flu a century ago. In some countries, there was a drop in the podcast audience, due to the suspension of urban transportation. In others, there was an increase in the number of listeners, precisely because of the situation of confinement. What role did podcasting play in the UK in face of Covid-19 crisis?

It's hard to know just yet. I have seen some industry data that suggests that listening went down when countries went into lockdown but is now coming back up; probably as people return to work or find a new routine. I am now taking daily walks to listen. Podcasting is responding well to the pandemic, especially for news. Podcasting is perfect for this as listeners can listen when they choose and to as many (or as few) as they want. I think producers are also looking to how they reflect the shared experiences of lockdown and

what it means. It is perhaps telling that it has become very hard to buy podcasting equipment like USB microphones, which suggests that podcasters and creatives are making more audio and music during confinement and not less. A comedy show in Australia even produced a sketch urging people NOT to make a podcast.

RADIOFONIAS – You've been saying that podcasting tends to sound different, because it is often produced at home, and not in radio studios. But when most of journalists are producing content and going on air from their homes, isn't the game getting more even?

Possibly. I think radio is learning a lot from podcasting, not least as some of the biggest hits are genres and formats that radio thought were outdated and no longer interesting. But each medium plays to different audiences and needs. The key thing about radio is that even though hosts are home, in most cases they are still live and interacting with listeners in real time. I heard a radio presenter recently saying to his audience that the builders in the flat above him had returned and we could expect hear them later. This was a live moment that connects us to his location. Podcasters do talk about their home space, but it's not live, and, although not all podcasters edit, most do. The acoustic might be the same, but the manner in which audiences use the mediums can be quite different.

RADIOFONIAS – Some analysts, especially in the US, see a growing bubble in the podcasting market. Do you consider that there is an exaggeration in the offer of new content? Have we reached a point of sustainability or is there a risk of several projects' discontinuity, as occurred at the end of the first wave of podcasting, in the late 2000s?

I think we are in different times. In some ways, podcasting was ahead of its time. It predated mass broadband use, cheaper mobile internet and the smartphone. The iPhone made a big difference, as did adding podcasts to iTunes and now Spotify and Google. This should add sustainability. The threat comes from platforms like Spotify making more content exclusive, like they just have done with Joe Rogan, as this detracts from some of the open principles of podcasting – even if Apple control a lot of the space. I think more people will make more podcasts and, to be honest, most will fail. But what we will also see is people taking control of their own media presence and talking directly to audiences, rather than going via TV or radio. Money is a problem here, especially with a slowdown post Covid19; but then not everyone in the podcast space is there to make money and this is where we might see growth as businesses use content to deliver sales messages. Agencies like Pacific Content already do this brilliantly. Listening is still growing and, whilst I don't think it will reach the same point as radio, it still has some room to grow. ■

About the interviewer

Marcelo Kischinhevsky

marcelok@forum.ufrj.br

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4838-2162>

Director of the Radio and TV Center at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), where he teaches across Radio and TV, Journalism graduation courses, he is also professor at the Postgraduate Program in Communication at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). PhD and master in Communication and Culture at UFRJ and bachelor in Journalism at the same institution. He coordinates the Research Group Rádio e Mídia Sonora (Radio and Sound Media) at the Brazilian Society for Interdisciplinary Communication Studies (Intercom) and published several books, such as *Radio y medios sociales - Mediaciones e interacciones radiofónicas digitales* (Barcelona: UOC Ed., 2017).

>> How to cite:

KISCHINHEVSKY, M. "Radio is learning a lot from podcasting". Interview: Richard Berry. **Radiofonias** – *Journal of Sound Media Studies*, Mariana-MG, v. 11, n. 01, p. 205-209, jan./abr. 2020.