

Chapter 18

Comedy shows: Humour, crisis and the resilience of radio

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Abstract

Being a part of many radio stations' programming, comedy shows are also available on radio websites as audio on demand. Often topical, many of these shows are based on everyday news. With a strong aesthetic sense, comedy shows are often brash as well as funny, but they can also play an important role as a barometer of social, political, economic and cultural life.

The history of comedy shows on radio in Portugal began in the 1940s. Since that time, humour has been inspired mainly by news and current affairs, not only in terms of content but also in terms of format. Many comedy shows parodied news genres. Like news bulletins, these shows normally feature an anchor who presents the comedic news. The scripts for these programmes are written in a satirical way and present a caricature of society.

This chapter will identify some characteristics of comedy shows on the radio, consider the relationship between comedy shows and real news output and reflect on the role humorous narratives may play in contributing to the resilience of radio.

Keywords: radio comedy, humour, news parody, spectacle, Portugal

Introduction: the frequency of laughter

One of the most successful radio genres is probably comedy. Comic sketches on the radio are almost as old as radio itself. The first such programmes had begun in the United States by the end of the 1920s. Since then, radio comedy has been part of many stations' programming. Considered by Henri Bergson (1983) as inseparable from the human being, laughter is today one of the most important ways of reflecting on daily life. According to Verena Alberti, 'laughter and comedy are literally indispensable to know the world and to apprehend reality' (2002: 13). Every society of every epoch had its own forms of humour and its own forms of satire, comedy demonstration and public exhibition. Many different comedy genres, from comic theatre to stand-up comedy, have appeared during the history of radio. Most use the same approach, making fun of situations, people, historic episodes and political strategies, while simultaneously provoking thought and stirring opinions. Taken as a version of the ordinary, worldly understanding of our social life (Meredith 2014), comedy performances are much more than entertainment formats. Although sometimes using the unrealistic, their main goal is to portray real life. If in the past, comedy shows were, as with all other forms of art, intended for certain groups in society, such as more educated and wealthier people, today, humour formats are widely targeted at all social groups. To a large extent, due to the appropriation of this kind of discourse by the mass media, comedy plays and humorous sketches are nowadays among the most-consumed media productions. Generally defined as 'laughter-provoking', these narratives have a particular characteristic on radio. That is, their power is exclusively found in the audio, in both words and sound effects. Despite such an apparent disadvantage, they are very popular.

In Portugal, for example, humour is almost an obligatory genre on national radio stations. In some commercial radio programmes, even the language used by the entertainers is deeply influenced by humour styles, as a way of making audiences feel good while listening. Detailed studies of specific audiences of humour programmes on Portuguese radio are unknown. Marktest, the company that produces audience data for industry, does not publish information detailed enough to show genres. Instead, radio stations seem to intuitively feel that listeners like this kind of programme. In general terms, all the national stations have slots in their programming dedicated to humour, usually short sketches. These programmes are, in almost all cases, also available on the stations' own websites, or on other audio-on-demand platforms, where they can be downloaded to be listened to outside of the broadcast schedule. The popularity of these formats is evident, though, in their being widely shared on social networks, where links to this kind of audio content are exchanged between potential new listeners. Sometimes people linked in these networks comment on excerpts too, contributing to a wider distribution by triggering a viral effect across the country.

Compared to comedy programming on television, where programming also includes comedy narrative genres, humour on the radio is normally in shorter bursts and very often broadcast on a daily basis. More fleeting than the television programmes, the humour sketches on Portuguese radio have, however, a particular dynamic and seem to have the capacity to win over audiences. Aesthetically pleasing, with a vivid structure and direct references to current political, social, economic and cultural news, these sketches can be considered to be an interesting barometer of communities that

correspond to the audiences of the stations. Quite intentionally a form of social and political criticism, humour is in various ways one of the most produced genres on radio. The genre exploits to the full the creative power of the word and the significance of sound. This chapter will consider the frequency of laughter of two Portuguese national radio broadcasters and, taking two specific programmes, identify the main characteristics of humour shows. This approach has three main objectives. Firstly, to determine whether there is a narrative pattern to comedy sketches, secondly to understand what the framing of these programmes is within the stations' programming and finally to ask what is the Portuguese sense of humour. Putting comedy narratives into perspective, both in general and in the specific context of radio, has a special relevance in the current creative industries. Today, much more concerned with spectacle and entertainment, creative industries represent, both in economic and cultural terms, the level of innovation societies are experiencing. The analysis is focused on the connection between comedy narratives and programming strategies. At the same time, the examination of two particular programmes aims to provide some insight into the interpretation of humour as an expression of a joyful culture, delivered to give pleasure and to cause laughter. As signs of the times, and emblems of what Guy Debord identified as the 'spectacle society' (1995), comedy sketches are content-oriented, for provoking thought and nurturing affective connections, but also representative of the parodic and satirical character of post-modern societies.

A history of Portuguese comedy on radio

The history of comedy on radio in Portugal begins in the late 1940s. In 1912 a weekly satirical newspaper of significant national impact, *A Bomba* (The Bomb), was published for about three months. With explosive and audacious headlines, this publication was provocative and brave, not only in its textual content but also in the illustrations, (very often caricatures,) published on its pages. Many years after the last edition, this newspaper inspired the creation of the group *Parodiantes de Lisboa*, or Parodists of Lisbon, a group for comedians that produced some iconic programmes for Portuguese radio. *Parada da Paródia* (Parody Parade) and *Graça com Todos* (Joke with All) were probably the most significant productions broadcast by the group. According to their website, *Parodiantes de Lisboa* first aired in March 1947. At first, the group was on air once a week, starting with *Parada da Paródia*, which was broadcast by Rádio Peninsular on Tuesdays at 20:00. Later, with the programme *Graça com Todos*, the Parodiantes de Lisboa extended their activity to new audiences in Porto, Madeira, Angola and Mozambique, as well as various foreign radio stations dedicated to expatriates. The group was populated by some of the most popular comedians, who later became very well-known television stars. The Parodiantes de Lisboa distinguished themselves because they produced different kinds of comedy programmes, including soap operas, especially for radio, although they also produced shows for television. In August 2005, the Portuguese daily newspaper *Diário de Notícias* published a special feature on the parodists, saying they had captured the imagination of Portuguese people over 30. In the publicity for the programme, the newspaper revealed that the group had always used the same approach to writing comedy: they would open the newspapers and news magazines to get ideas from each day's news and current affairs.

At around the same time, there was also a programme called *A voz dos ridículos* (The Voice of Ridiculous), which was broadcast for the first time in April 1945. This show came out of a proposal aimed at 'transposing' to radio a humorous column someone from Porto used to publish in the newspaper *Os ridículos* (The Ridiculous) entitled *Piadas à moda do Porto* ('Jokes Oporto's Way'). Some historical notes gathered from the press of that era state that, in the first episodes, the programme was composed of funny songs and words, which were biting, sometimes caustic, and had above all a function of social criticism. Today, *A voz dos ridículos* is still on the air and is broadcast by a regional radio station in northern Portugal. The programme retains almost the same structure of the first broadcasts, with jokes, satire and jocular comments on daily life. Running for about seventy years, the programme is not only a reference point for comedy programmes in Portugal but probably the oldest regular programme of Portuguese radio that is still on the air.

This chapter will not pretend to present a detailed genealogy of radio comedy in Portugal. The history of such productions is extraordinarily rich, made of abundant examples of sketches that, commenting on daily life, used the language of laughter to create characters that became symbols of certain generations. Some of these characters were born in the newspapers, in the caricature press where the burlesque caricatures of some public personalities were drawn. They were later transformed into aural language, and in some cases, they were also taken further to the small screen in television shows. Classics of the Portuguese media scene, many of these programmes contributed to the consolidation of a Portuguese style of comedy programming. With a strong affective connection with the audiences, mainly in the period preceding the spread of television in Portuguese homes, this kind of production was then resurgent in the last few years, sometimes appearing in advertisements. Icons of the creative industries, they were used for marketing campaigns, having a further impact that is not picked up by audience statistics. According to Jorge Guimarães Silva, who publishes the blog *A Rádio em Portugal* (Radio in Portugal), 'comedy programmes are the last blast of the golden age of radio in Portugal'. The Parodiantes de Lisboa were on the air for many decades. The public imagination of the second half of the twentieth century is strongly associated with this memory because they became national icons through the national radio stations Rádio Clube Português and Rádio Renascença. During their history, this group of comedians produced some radio drama, in addition to the brief comedy sketches. Because of their wide experience, the group can today be taken as the inspiration for much modern comedy, such as that of Produções Fictícias, a Portuguese company appearing on radio and television as well as theatre, cinema and the press.

Satirical news or reflections of real life?

Although today there are more programmes, and therefore more diversity, than in the past, one great difference between the early forms of radio comedy and those of today is that, unlike then, today, comedy is more often produced as monologues. Parodiantes de Lisboa was a group effort, with dialogues between the parodists, who used to play different characters. Today, however, daily comedy sketches on radio are more focused on one single comedian or on a dialogue between two of them, and very often they are celebrities who are already well known from television and advertisements. Ángel Nieto agreed, adding that: 'Comedy programmes on the radio used to exist in very distinct

formats, although almost all in tune with the drama genre. Comedians usually played one or more characters. Monologue was not used like it is used today' (2008: 106). Although relatively small, Portugal has almost three hundred radio stations, many of them with their own comedy shows, while others broadcast shows produced by production houses or individual comedians, some distributed through networks. For this research the programming of two national radio stations was examined: the public service broadcaster Antena 1 and the commercial news station TSF. According to December 2013 data from the Bareme Rádio of Marktest, r/com has the highest audiences in Portugal, with a weekly reach of 48.8 per cent and a 36.4 per cent share of listening. Over the same period, audiences were lower for the two stations analysed for this research. TSF registered a weekly reach of 9.4 per cent and a 4.4 per cent share of listening, while Antena 1 had a weekly reach of 11.4 per cent and a 7.1 per cent share. Nevertheless, stations of the r/com group focus more on music with presenter links and entertainment. Their comedy output seldom consists of individual, built programmes. By contrast, choosing to analyse Antena 1 and TSF for this study reflects a decision to analyse stations which are based on news content rather than entertainment.

Antena 1 is one of the three main national broadcasters. It is part of the public service broadcast group and is the station most expected to follow principles established in the public service contract, which states that the group should include a plurithematic broadcaster, with diversified options and a strong informative component, as well as some entertainment, targeted to serve the majority of the population. It should be aware of the regional realities and engaged with the broadcasting of Portuguese music, Portuguese singers and composers, as well as popular culture and sport. With very diversified programming, which encompasses news programmes, cultural shows, the showcasing of Portuguese music, literature and such specialised musical genres as jazz, in 2013 this broadcaster had only one comedy programme. *Portugalex* is presented as 'a comedy magazine, which combines the main news stories with other diverse items'. Amusingly, the text introducing the programme announces that: 'what they [the presenters] say is all invented, with rigour and journalistic exemption'. Produced by Produções Fictícias, this programme sets out to satirise the news itself and genres of mediated news. The script includes traffic information, in a bulletin entitled *Já bateu* (It Crashed), and a public opinion slot called *Gosto muito do seu programa* (I Love Your Programme). There is also futurology, within a segment called *Previsão do estado da atualidade* (The Current Forecast). *Portugalex* is a three-minute programme - the producers say it can also be four minutes 'if many things happen' - broadcast every weekday in the morning and at lunchtime, which is of course prime time for radio in Portugal because it is also drive time, at least in the main towns and cities.

Being at the forefront of Antena 1's programming, *Portugalex* features two comedians whose purpose is 'to sum up Portugal in three minutes'. Adopting the register of a news bulletin and presented by two different voices, this programme is a funny take on the day's news. It picks up some real events in a satirical way, and sometimes even an unrealistic way. The format is pseudo-informative since the programme presents a kind of sound caricature of some public figures as well as of other media programmes. In this sense, *Portugalex* produces a discourse that might be labelled as meta-discourse. Specially inclined to treat everyday news in a mocking way, the programme is consistent with the profile of the station. If news constitutes a strong component of the

programming, in *Portugalex* the comedians scoff at current affairs but also, in a more indirect way, at the journalism itself through reinterpretations of some of the news values which determine the production of real news bulletins. The style is not original in terms of the international media landscape, and it rephrases some formulas already tried and tested in television. However, it seems to be extremely successful, as it is followed by more than 12 thousand people on Facebook.

TSF, on the other hand, is the sole broadcaster of *Controlinveste* and the only broadcaster with a profile close to a national news radio station. Its programming includes mainly news content, with breaking news every thirty minutes. It produces different kinds of news bulletins, mainly on sports and economics, and also has programmes aimed at listener participation. In terms of humour, TSF has invested significantly in these formats in the last two decades, with, in the second half of 2013, at least two specific comedy shows, one broadcast daily and another weekly. Although different in many respects, these two programmes had in common the purpose of satirising social behaviour and presenting topical news in a humorous way. Both programmes were inspired by real news formats and commented satirically on stories. *Tubo de Ensaio* (Test Tube) is a sketch show presented by Bruno Nogueira, one of the top comedians of the current generation of humourists. The programme, with its online archive on the TSF website, was created by *Produções Fictícias* and it is presented as a space for 'stand-up news, fictional interviews, "hot" topics, things that may irritate, projects for the future, public figures who present some abilities on the radio, solutions for the main problems of humanity and many other experiences'. It is a three-minute programme, broadcast every day at three different times, 09:20, 18:25 and 20:25. *Tubo de Ensaio* is a monologue, during which the presenter makes personal comments on recent events and news stories, caricaturing some public figures, making some funny remarks about incidents of the day or the week and joking about media reporting.

Governo Sombra (Shadow Cabinet) is also broadcast by TSF, but it is a very different programme, being fictional content produced in a comedic style. This project brings together three men, all closely involved in the media either as columnists or a comedian. The programme flows as if a talk show or a debate, led by a real journalist. Each week, each comedian assumes the character of a minister of the real cabinet and participates in a dialogue with the group, commenting on the political agenda in a satirical way. As with the previous programmes, *Governo Sombra* is also inspired by the news, although mainly politics. Once again, this programme fits the genre of programmes that attempt to make humour using a typically journalistic style. The programme is much longer than the others, lasting 45 minutes, and broadcast on Fridays at 19:15, when a significant part of the working audience is driving home or going out. *Governo Sombra* was originally created for radio. The programme is available on the TSF website, and more recently, a version is made for a TV channel. Both *Tubo de Ensaio* and *Governo Sombra* are available as podcasts and the latter also has a blog, although little used since 2011.

A detailed comparison of the three comedy shows described in this chapter would, of course, be constrained by the very different structures of the programmes. There are, in fact, big differences, mainly between the daily and the weekly formats. However, some similarities can be noted and the extent to which they might depict any pattern in comedic radio content considered. Notwithstanding the specific characteristics of each

programme, at least seven features might define some trends in this genre: 1) the source material being news and current affairs, 2) the emulation of journalistic media genres, 3) the reinterpretation and caricature of political and social agents, 4) the leg-pulling over current events, 5) the bitingly critical nature of the humour, 6) the objective of provoking a critical stance concerning social and political news stories and 7) the creative capacity to make people laugh at their own lives. Today, adapted to new lifestyles and to a more complex society, contemporary radio comedy programmes in Portugal follow some traditions that have shaped several comedic narratives since the 'Parodiantes de Lisboa'. The focus on episodes of everyday life and on the public social and political agenda is probably a tendency of all forms of humour. Today, as in the past, these programmes show how risible some news is and how reality is often experienced as a spectacle.

Conclusion

According to Alison Ross, comedy is always something related to '...an ambiguity, or double meaning, which deliberately misleads the audience' (2005: 7). In Simon Critchley's opinion, '...comedy is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality' (2002: 1). This is what radio comedy shows still have in common with stage comedy. Besides, now just as in the past, there is in comedy something that comes mainly out of the way words are articulated. This may be why comedy is so suited to aural media and why '...radio became a widely popular vehicle for humour' (Havig, 1990: 5). Comedy is related to crisis by nature. Crises of moral values, political crises or economic crises are very inspiring for comedians. Every era has its own crisis. Thus, comedy is intrinsic to history. It represents the capacity a certain society has to laugh at itself, and it consists of a kind of criticism that is above the capacity of producing a joke. Bergson considered that comedy signifies a 'diversion of things'. He explained that: 'Comicality can be defined as a diversion of things, like the individual comicality is also due to a certain diversion of the person' (1983: 50). Which does not mean comedy is outside reality. Diversion is otherwise a way of interpreting it. Sometimes more destructive than constructive, comedy is meant to work as a way of dismantling and disconcerting, being in all these forms an expression of excess.

Contemporary societies have been described as excited but depressive. Comedy is one of the most significant expressions of such a contradiction. By mixing carefully chosen words, sound effects and the use of the human voice, comedy on radio completes, in some ways, the companion function this medium performs for many people. It reinforces the power and the resilience of radio. Besides engaging listeners in mainstream broadcast radio, comedy programmes have been very successful in attracting audiences on the internet who comment on and share extracts. If comedy can provoke laughter, stimulate thought and build audiences, then radio comedy might well deserve to be recognised as a language that entertains but remains essentially radio.

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