

Women Podcasters: Between feminist narratives and Virtual communities

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Abstract

This article examines the relevance of the podcast medium for recording the memories of the community of Brazilian women podcast producers, highlighting their feminist trajectories. The research analyzes how the narratives produced by these women contribute to the construction of spaces for action and political reflection within the digital environment known as the Podcast Sphere. The methodology of digital ethnography was employed, including observations in three instant messaging groups and recordings in a field notebook, to understand the dynamics and impact of these narratives. Ultimately, the conclusion is that podcasts can serve as instruments for documenting history and marking a political digital territory through narratives.

Keywords

Communication; Podcast; Women Podcasters; Feminist Narratives; Digital Ethnography.

1 Introduction

This research began in the master's degree in human rights, which investigated the presence of women in the podcast media, their profile, and organization in the #MulheresPodcasters group. Continuing the research in my Ph. D in Communications, which now intends to investigate the feminist identities of these producers with a deepening in gender issues, I start from the idea that narratives are fundamental for constructions of individual and collective political actions, in ways of seeing and perceiving the world.

These women are part of the "Women Podcasters" community. They have faced challenges like mine since I joined as a producer in 2017. For the constitution of the *corpus* of this research, three groups of instant messengers were analyzed:



"#MulheresPodcasters" and "Clube da Luluzinha Podcastal" on WhatsApp (157 participants) and Telegram (140 participants), exclusive for women (cis and trans), and a mixed group of podcast editors with 753 participants at the time.

Other national survey have already revealed that the group of women producers, although a minority in the media (23%) (ABPOD, 2021), is composed of 91% of women who call themselves feminists (Hack; Lima, 2022), whose profile is mostly cisgender (96%), white (71%), concentrated in southeastern Brazil (57%), with a high degree of education and variable income (Hack, 2024).

However, it was from digital ethnography (Hine, 2000; 2015), carried out between 2019 and 2020, that I captured how women podcasters show the importance of the collective in building a struggle based on self-constructed identities, with an impact on the entire system around them. Using a field notebook, we observed the producers, their interactions, and achievements, recording political and feminist practices that guide the reflections in this article.

This analysis is structured in two parts. The first part examines how the podcast serves as an important instrument for recording feminist narratives and stimulating political action. The second part characterizes the Podcast Sphere¹ as a digital collection of memory and territory of podcast media with political and social contours.

Finally, considering that cultural markers, influenced by the ethnic-racial and territorial context, directly impact the narratives produced in podcasts and the formation of identities, in addition to the conduct of feminist narratives that value the struggles of women, we can affirm that this is a fertile field of discussion in an interdisciplinary perspective. The significant increase in female presence in both podcast content production and participation in existing programs reinforces this claim.

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¹ The first appearance of this term takes place in an issue from Radio Doc Review (Editorial: How Women are Reclaiming their Power in the Podcast Sphere. Vol. 3, Issue 2, Article 9), searching and mapping geographically women that use the space of podcast media in the #metoo era – ref. https://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol3/iss2/9/. Access: November 20, 2023.



2 Podcast: a narrative record of the feminist experience and a call to action

The podcast, as a form of spoken communication, acquires its own characteristics from the digital interaction between producers, content, and listeners, as well as the concepts of signifiers and meanings established by Roland Barthes (2012). The digital practices of podcast content production reflect analog social issues of language in digital environments, similar to offline practices (Castells, 2006).

Barthes (2012) highlights that linguistic elements are essential for media analysis. Although the podcast was not a reality in his time, his work allows us to interpret this predominantly oral media, since oral resources are vital for communication, requiring submission to autonomous social rules, comparable to a game that can only be played once it has been learned. In the processes of signification of feminist narratives within podcast production, the use of Barthes' theory reveals that in the way of interpreting, as well as in the substance of expression of the content, it is possible to understand objects of oppression and social arrangements of the interlocutors.

From a feminist perspective, Rayza Sarmento (2019) defines interpretive frameworks that relate signs to social dimensions. Based on these frameworks, she discusses the mobilization of consensus in the media and questions how the construction of political identities can be supported through discourse and narrative.

In the content production system, content producers transform their experiences into understandable narratives, functioning as testimonies of action (Barthes, 2012). These narratives are consumed by users, who interpret them according to their realities and create meanings of political needs within a cultural contract that can allow changes.

Such ways of "seeing and classifying the world" (Miguel; Biroli, 2011, p. 25) the women confront "universal" and reductionist accounts outside the media power, presenting new aesthetic perspectives in collective constructions (Martín-Barbero, 2004). Their narrative positions in history, based on their situated knowledge, build collective memories (Halbwachs, 1990).



Jesús Martín-Barbero (2008) highlights the importance of researching the roles of subjects in the preservation of popular memories, where they maintain orality as a form of cultural resistance. Halbwachs (1990) and Martín-Barbero (2008) emphasize the need to revisit memories with attention to lived realities, allowing them to reconstruct memories individually or collectively.

When it comes to podcasting, the audio-phonic format shapes old and new feelings, functioning as a cultural mediator. These facts allow reverberating speeches and experiences of women inclusively, from the recognition of themselves as social and political beings, making the revealed narratives attribute new meanings to life stories, promoting militancy and welcoming new generations.

When fixated on feminist experiences, podcast producers resist, confronting gender inequalities and guiding listeners and future generations to confront these inequalities. Their narratives in podcasts are consolidated as a source of knowledge for current and future struggles, claiming spaces and contextualizing the history of these women in digital practices, following Freire's praxis of "acting and reflecting on the world to modify it" (hooks, 2017, p. 26).

The life stories of these women organize in time and space the issues they seek to communicate. Their voices connect on themes of individual production, identifying and negotiating social brands, and articulating their perceptions that there is no universal sense of feminism. Therefore, the rhetoric of the digital revolution in the media from *broadly democratic* spaces may seem fallacious, as these fields of political discussion are still hierarchized in a system of gender and market oppression, based on algorithms.

However, the recordings and disclosures of women's speeches have repercussions on the constant processes of exchange and freedom: talking, exposing, and denouncing hegemonies over their bodies, ideas, machismo, and patriarchy. Reflecting on the memory created from audio-phonic content, disseminated in podcast format, helps to understand the difficulty women have in organizing collectively, due to the gender roles they must reconcile, making it easier for them to organize themselves in private and digital spaces, where they can make their exchanges safely.



Within Aristotelian *mimesis*, women inspire new women from the digital presence and programs that become known, propagating in these spaces their own arrangements, with guidelines, social brands, memory, and inspiration for future struggles, influencing everyone around them. There are the leaders who direct the pace of these struggles, who indicate the path and the destination of this result. That is, each woman represents a protagonism, color, meaning, rhythm, goals, and strategy.

The repetition, the periodicity of episodes and the act of telling stories add a ritualization in knowledge and transfer social narratives from social representation. This representation embodies values, ideas, and plots of the material and social world. The reports, loaded with symbolic elements, offer different values and guidelines to the public, in addition to responsibility for the narratives.

Although the narratives of diverse women can be opposed in this context, they are not immune to gender stereotypes and the oppressions inherent in an entire social system. The stories create diversified identities, senses about these experiences, and limits for the group itself, organizing the memory with the narrative construction of the *podcasters* themselves.

In this digital environment, the place of speech finds the place of listening, where problems are perceived as real, and indicators of gender and race are contextualized, while political practices take on their own forms. The digital environment offers a space for the proposed cultural criticism and related themes based on the phenomena of reception (Martín-Barbero, 2008), allowing feminist discourses to move and constantly reconfigure themselves.

These processes of perception of power in gender contexts are stages of awareness that lead to analysis, creation, social contextualization, knowledge, organization, theorization, and political mobilization, as discussed by Stuart Hall (2006) and bell hooks (2019).

Since the podcast media is a discursive practice that is a product of language and its production is a contextualization of historical processes, the symbolic composition becomes as fluid as the narratives that bring materiality to women's social struggles. Podcasts circulate statements, determine the position of subjects, and assign contexts to what is understood as a feminist struggle, locating women in the time,



history, and culture of a people in a field of symbolic representations (Gregolin, 2007). In this sense, it is evident that women use podcasts to preserve the memory and protagonism of other women in the media, in a realm of sound and presence.

This observation was also echoed by Yasmeen Ebada and Kim Fox (2023), who defined autobiographical narrative as a tool of empowerment. The networked activity of memories and actions of women who practice discourses of materiality in various contexts reinforces this empowerment, highlighting the importance of podcasts as tools for the preservation and amplification of female voices.

Therefore, the vocalization of feminist demands in the Podcast Sphere can politically decentralize the podcast media itself. Emerging narratives bring new definitions of meaning to the feminist agenda, closely related to democracy. If the media is not representative and the speeches fail to add symbolic capital to the demands, they will not have significant public effects.

3 The Podcast Sphere Digital Territory for recording the memory of the community of producers

The collective of women *podcasters* is formed in a system of affinities – a community, as defined by Manoel Castells (2001), as a group of subjects who approach each other around a common goal. As in social movements, this community has as its vector the female gender identity and the objective, even if implicit, of fighting against machismo and patriarchy as feminist producers, promoting the construction and permanence of a community in a symbolic space called the Podcast Sphere.

Julieta Paredes (2014) understands that women's communities function as a body, and, from the perspective of Anne-Marie Paveau (2021), the group of women podcasters would therefore be a native digital *corpus*. This definition provides the observation of data, their collection, languages, political struggles, and discourses, as this body defines both the feminist and epistemological choices that permeate the programs produced individually and the political choices of the community, in their collective aspects.



In a similar context, Manoel Castells (2001, p. 43) defines that the community, among other factors, directly interferes in the so-called internet culture, contributing with ideologies and identities spread by the digital space. He adds that "virtual community culture adds a social dimension to technological sharing, making the Internet a means of selective social interaction and symbolic integration."

When we think of bodies and communities, we naturally reflect on the territory these bodies occupy, vocalize, and where they create cultures and memories. Geographically, territory is any space of land divided or delimited by borders. Politically, territories involve the concentration of memories, cultures, and ethnic identification.

There are also other names for the concept *territory* as places of speech (Gonzalez, 2020; Ribeiro, 2017), situated knowledge (Miguel; Biroli, 2011), places of oppression (Carneiro, 2011; Martín-Barbero, 2004), and digital territories delimited by algorithms (Silva, 2020). The discussion I present on territory mainly permeates political contexts.

I consider that the interpretation of territory builds and preserves stories because no society exists without printing a territorial logic to the space that occupies and disseminates its stories. To reduce territory to land space is to limit the debate to property alone. Territorialization also involves the process called by Martín-Barbero (2004) "de-territorialization", which consists of identifying social markers of the speeches of groups and their ideologies, to recognize life and meanings from the places where their demands are contextualized.

He also highlights the need to change paradigms in the ways of acting and communicating in Latin America, allowing the creation of new aesthetic experiences, the collective construction of knowledge, and the emergence of a new consciousness. Although he analyzed the media in the '80s and '90s, we find in the podcast media similarities and concerns that the author describes as "fetishization of the media". This process hides the production system, the elaboration of messages, and the consequent "thing-fication" and control by the more favored classes", causing a "re-silencing" by the economic monopoly of the media (Martín-Barbero, 2004).



I also emphasize that there is an important point in the delimitation of the media space called the Podcast Sphere, considered territory. This territory, essentially digital, has characteristics like those of non-digital public spaces, with its regulations and dynamics. Despite this, women manage to position their voices through alternative communication channels to disseminate marginal debates (Freitas, 2019) and build their own history based on the memory of territorialized women, in their subaltern knowledge and contexts (Halbwachs, 1990; Spivak, 2014).

And, in this sense, contextualizing the environment of the Podcast Sphere as a political territory, where guidelines are worked on and the people who must be heard are selected, is related to the media standardization process already existing in other media, such as journalism media, for example. This is even more relevant in a context where podcast consumption is concentrated mainly in the Southeast region (ABPOD, 2021; ABPOD; CBN, 2019).

Territories are discursive articulators and translate displacements, thus being called discursive fields of action (Alvarez, 2014). When considering a country where the concentration of power is directly related to economic concentration, it is possible to draw a territorial parallel to define where there are interests, barriers to free communication, media deserts, and agenda development. Women seek spaces in this territory called the *Podcast Sphere* not only through their productions but also through the recognition of a whole protagonism of women.

Records in podcast format have been used, as in the past by women in the black and feminist press, to create "privileged spaces for the recording of memories of experiences of black individuals and groups, built on their perspectives" (Freitas, 2019, p. 117). This digital territory offers a powerful platform for the construction and dissemination of feminist identities and struggles, shaping a space where marginalized voices can be heard and recognized.

I find in Chandra Mohanty (2020) an epistemological reference that also appears in the pedagogical perspective of bell hooks (2017) and the decolonial pedagogy of Catherine Walsh (2013) for the fixation of women's memory, even in a territorial context. Together, the authors consider memory essential for reaffirmation, resistance, and organization, something hooks and Walsh also define as pedagogy.



Resistance lies in conscious interaction with dominant discourses and the creation of analytical and cultural spaces of opposition, a process that was also pointed out by Ebada and Fox (2023) as a recreation of the stories themselves.

Discovering and appropriating subjugated knowledge is crucial to recovering alternative histories and fixing impressions of the internal and external world since ideas are organized through memory and imagination. Thus, the memory of women rescues ancestral practices from stories not only lived by them but also by those that preceded them. In a podcast context, the shows of women producers who joined the media between 2015 and 2018 – years in which there were few representatives – can still be accessed by women who enter today, organizing presence strategies for new producers.

The audio practice, which records this memory, keeps the link between generations of podcasters alive, bringing difficulties and inspiring new producers, just as mothers and grandmothers told their daughters and granddaughters stories of their people. From the observations, I realized that many of these women, when they encounter feminism, revisit content they had previously recorded, in a process of feminist self-criticism, according to the WhatsApp and Telegram group conversations observed.

When it comes to the feminist experience, when they narrate their experiences – whether in WhatsApp or Telegram groups or in the programs they produce – the producers report that they were not clarified, perceived, or understood concerning the aspects of machismo they suffered. Today, when revisiting them, they understand that it was a lack of experience, attention and political maturity²; something that, despite not mentioning feminism, Halbwachs (1990, p. 52) calls "simulated memory".

Conversely, there is no absolute void in memory; in other words, there are no regions of our past that have been completely erased, so that every image that we project onto it cannot cling to any element of memory, revealing a pure and simple imagination or a historical representation that remains external to us. We forget

² In time, I note that there was no transcription of the speeches of the group participants because there was no explicit authorization for this, even anonymously. Respecting the ethical commitment of the research and the characteristics of ethnography, which consist of observing, reporting and analyzing, I consider that the methodological criteria for the investigation presented here are met.



nothing; however, this proposition can be understood in different ways and interpreted over time (Halbwachs, 1990).

The technodiscursive memory described by Marie-Anne Paveau (2021) allows us to understand how the perspective of cognition is formed to contribute externally to discourses. This podcast memory I present here is built from digital archives, amplifying voices, and struggles in past, present, and future entries. The importance of collectively and constructively transforming life stories within podcasts is not reduced to the mere production of content but incorporates the translation of the relevance of a culturally diverse digital environment, reflecting the inequalities suffered by each podcaster and evidencing a line of oppression suffered.

Analyzing the field notes and my experience in actions such as the International Podcast Day, during which meetings were held with Latin podcasters, who call themselves *Podcasteras*, a small political action was initiated based on tweets on September 30, 2020, integrating the *hashtags #mulherespodcasters*, #*PodcasterasLatinas* and #*NosotrasHacemosPodcast*³ to symbolize the presence of women producers in Latin America.

Likewise, in actions such as the Brazilian National Podcast Day, on October 21, 2021, the Women Podcasters channel on YouTube digitally broadcasted, for more than three uninterrupted hours, the event called "The Podcast Sphere we want". This together members hashtags #mulherespodcasters, event brought of the #podcastersnegros (Black Podcasters), #podcastersPCDs (Podcasters Disabilities), #LBGBTPodcasters (Queer Podcasters) and #PodcastersPeriféricos (Perifery Podcasters) for the celebration of the Brazilian National Podcast Day, where the forms of women's presence in the media, their experiences, projects and the future of podcasters were discussed. Between one panel and another, the movements of the hashtags were presented by women members of the same.

Finally, in 2022, the profile of the former Twitter (today X)³ @MulheresPod, organized and created the campaign "Mulher, tua voz é tua luta" to celebrate

³ Available at: https://twitter.com/MulheresPod/status/1501165677524267012. Accessed on 12 Oct, 2022.

⁴ These and other issues were raised at the "The *Podcast Sphere* we want" event held by Brazilian Women Podcasters. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvKNCbMiYcY. Accessed on 10 Oct, 2022.

⁵ The campaign means "Women, your voice is your fight".



International Women's Day by the administration of the WhatsApp group Mulheres Podcasters to highlight the importance of the female presence in the Podcast Sphere, not only on microphones but throughout the media production chain. In this campaign, the administrators developed an art with the photography of several producers and the phrase of the campaign, also published on Instagram on profile @mulherespod and personal profiles of other producers, always using the hashtag #mulherespodcasters.

Although they may seem to be one-off actions, the chronology reveals that the mobilizations that took place in March 2020, known as "Women's Month", reflect an incipient political movement and a demarcation of territories based on the history of the protagonists in the media, which germinates in the epistemic matrix of recognition as something collective. Likewise, within this pedagogical and feminist proposal, the feeling of solidarity between podcast producers arises through critical exchanges that confront realities, lines of oppression, and needs.

Therefore, to build a theory of feminist memory of podcasters as a territorial and historical phenomenon, based on their protagonists, culture, and social and political practices as mediators of the world, it is necessary not only to attribute to the Podcast Sphere a territorialized space but also to establish a narrative timeline that registers places of speech for the producers and places of listening for the users (listeners), allowing a more comprehensive perception of these contexts.

4 Final considerations

Podcast media today face challenges like other forms of media, dealing with inequalities and questions about which voices are heard and considered legitimate. As in other media, podcasts face problems of political representation, legitimacy, and gender hierarchies, as discussed by Gayatri Spivak (2014) in various contexts.

The expression of symbolic power is deeply rooted in individuals and capitalism itself, and the notion of territories extends beyond the physical realms to include not only language and culture, especially in the context of feminist experiences but also algorithms. In the context of recording narratives and stories from technological products such as podcasts, women are inserted in a process of self-perception about



their social, dialectical self and part of history. This process of recognition, pointed out by the authors bell hooks (2017; 2019), Catherine Walsh (2013), and Yasmeen Ebada and Kim Fox (2023), is essential for the political exercise of the feminist movement, being part of this political action.

However, for women from underrepresented communities, connection through oral traditions offers an intimacy that can challenge preconceived notions (Ebada and Fox, 2023; Spivak, 2014). These processes are essential for the presence of women and marginalized groups in podcast media, contributing to counter-hegemonic narratives and the normalization of legitimate voices, whose meanings vary in different contexts.

In this sense, podcasts have become a crucial tool for accessing and preserving women's memories, reflecting their voices and stories meaningfully. However, they face difficulties continuing to resist historically due to the cost of virtual storage and access, amid so much available data. Although it is considered a democratic platform, due to technological limitations and prejudices, not all voices are equally heard in podcast media.

In the context of political ideas, a dialectical tendency emerges in podcasts through narrations told and silenced, in which women articulate their interpretations and navigate their perspectives through self-perception. The relevance of support networks between producers and the sense of community are crucial, as the convergence of these elements facilitates the dissemination of content on various platforms and the cultivation of new and enriched movements. As Manoel Castells observes, "the culture of the virtual community adds a social dimension to technological sharing, making the Internet a means of selective social interaction and symbolic integration" (Castells, 2001, p. 43).

Storytelling is a deeply ingrained aspect of human culture, and sharing narratives serves as a fundamental way for us to connect with people's stories. This innate inclination to share stories transcends technological advances; while the advent of new technologies has undeniably facilitated and expanded how stories are disseminated and consumed, it remains to be seen how these narratives will be preserved for future generations.



The creation of these territorialized digital spaces, based on the stories of experience, either by the spatial marking aligned with accents, cultural aspects, and contexts where the producers live or by the formation of a community with history and protagonism, is essential to create, maintain and value what is called the Podcast Sphere, where these subjects are inserted. I add that audio practice, which records memories and narratives, keeps alive the link of generations of podcasters connecting challenges and inspiring new generations of producers.

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