

## Radio in Transition: Current Perspectives and Challenges

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### *Editorial*

Radio is experiencing the paradox that accompanies all long-lived media: the more people talk about its demise, the more evident it becomes that it is not disappearing, but changing. More than a century after the first regular broadcast, the audio signal remains one of the most trusted and widespread ways in which the public accesses information, music and social debate (Hendy, 2000; Lacey, 2018). At the same time, however, the radio that today's listener uses differs from its analogue predecessor just as significantly as the postal service differs from instant messaging. Traditional linear broadcasting coexists with podcasts, smart speakers, voice assistants, streaming services and synthetic voices generated by artificial intelligence; radio professionals are shifting from the role of 'guardians of the broadcast structure' to that of curators, data analysts and educators of the audience within an audio environment that is becoming fragmented, personalised and algorithmically recommended (Newman, 2024; Sellas & Bonet, 2023). This monographic issue of the journal *Textual & Visual Media* therefore asks the most fundamental question: what does 'being radio' actually mean today, and which of its transformations remain technological, which economic, and which – perhaps most importantly – social.

From a theoretical perspective, radio has seen a remarkable renaissance in research interest over the last two decades. After a long period during which radio was perceived as the ‘invisible brother’ of television and the internet, a distinct field of radio studies has emerged in Anglo-American, Latin American and continental European academia, analysing radio not only as the technical transmission of sound, but also as a cultural practice, a set of professional routines and a distinct genre of public communication (Crisell, 1994; Lacey, 2018). The current understanding of this field is necessarily intermedial: radio has expanded to include so-called post-broadcast formats, including podcasting, which has brought its own conventions of production, distribution and listening (Berry, 2016). In line with this trend, Slovak academic literature has long been systematising radio production and practice as a distinct professional discipline (Brník, Bôtošová & Kapec, 2020), thereby providing a pedagogical and methodological framework upon which today’s discussion of radio’s transformation can build. This is precisely why we see a need to provide a space for studies that reflect the transformation of radio in its full breadth – from the careful preservation of the public service mandate to experimentation with formats that were unimaginable a decade ago, such as the one produced by the unstoppable global rise of so-called video-podcasts, which deepen the trend towards blurring between genres and media that characterizes communication in these 2.0 times (Alonso-López et al., 2025; Pedrero-Esteban et al, 2023).

The first thematic focus of the monograph is artificial intelligence in radio production and synthetic voices. Generative models now influence every stage of radio production: from automatic transcription and editing, through algorithmic playlist generation and personalised news briefings, to a fully synthetic ‘presenter’ capable of reading out current information in multiple languages (Singh, 2024). Some stations are already publicly experimenting with AI voices in utilitarian formats where listeners expect accuracy and brevity (weather, traffic reports, short news items), which raises questions about editorial responsibility, transparency and quality. A review of domestic and international practice suggests that Central European radio stations are following a similar trajectory to larger Western European markets in their adoption of AI tools, albeit with their own linguistic and editorial specificities (Furtáková & Janáčková, 2023). Empirical studies document that audiences can distinguish an AI voice, but their evaluation depends on the genre context and on whether the technological nature of the voice is signalled openly (Brník & Paučin, 2025). Other studies analyze the use of synthetic voices in the recreation of historical figures such as the legendary Spanish republican leader Dolores Ibárruri, known as “Pasionaria” (López-Olano et al., 2025). This monographic issue opens up this discussion not only from the perspective of technological fascination, but also from the perspective of radio ethics and the professional identity of radio presenters, who face the challenge of a new division of labour between the human voice and machine synthesis.

The second thematic axis is the digital transformation of radio and the changing relationship with the audience. The Reuters Digital News Report has long documented a decline in the reach of linear media among younger cohorts and a parallel rise in on-demand and personalised audio consumption (Newman, 2024). Within the radio ecosystem, this is changing the very concept of the ‘listener’: instead of a collective audience synchronised with live broadcasts, we now speak of pluralistic user pathways in which live broadcasts, podcasts, music services and voice assistants intertwine within a single day. For radio, this presents a challenge to maintain its social function – to be a medium of closeness, locality and mediated dialogue – within a technical environment that does not automatically support these qualities. We therefore view studies devoted to format, genre, podcast dramaturgy and the relationship between public service and commercial radio in individual countries as one of the pillars of this issue: it is here that it becomes clear that radio is not dying, but is reworking its grammar.

The third axis is ethics, regulation and the question of trust. In long-term trust surveys, radio maintains a leading position among the media, yet it is precisely this social capital that becomes vulnerable as soon as automated systems enter the process. Recent recommendations for scientific publishing, ethical frameworks such as COPE, and regulatory initiatives in the European Union, including the adopted AI Act (European Union, 2024), all state that artificial intelligence can be a tool, but cannot be an author – neither of editorial content nor of scientific argumentation. For the radio environment, this means adopting explicit rules for labelling synthetic content, resolving the issue of copyright in voice recordings, and clarifying responsibility for algorithmic decisions in programming. This issue therefore also opens the floor to authors who offer legal, ethical and deontological perspectives on these issues, so that the discussion does not remain confined to technological optimism.

Running across these themes is a sub-theme that deserves separate attention: the voice as a cultural and social marker. Regardless of whether we are talking about a human or a synthetic voice, radio remains a medium in which legitimacy, competence and authority are assessed by listeners precisely through sound. Empirical research suggests that historically conditioned gender norms in the evaluation of the voice persist even among the generation of digital natives, albeit in a milder and more context-sensitive form (Kay, 2020; Brník & Paučin, 2025). We therefore do not view vocal diversity as a cosmetic issue, but as an integral part of the quality of public communication and pluralistic journalism. In this issue, we explore it primarily through an introductory reflection and regard it as both an indicator of a healthy radio ecosystem and a stimulus for further research, to which we intend to devote space in subsequent issues as well.

From a methodological perspective, this monographic issue deliberately presents a pluralistic range of approaches: quantitative analyses of audience and perception data, qualitative interviews with editorial professionals, case studies of specific stations and formats, legal and ethical analyses, as well as comparative international perspectives. It is precisely this plurality that allows us to view radio as an object of study that cannot be grasped by a single tool – its transformation is simultaneously textual, visual (in the context of social media and video podcasts), auditory, technological and institutional. During the editorial process, we therefore placed emphasis on methodological transparency, the ethical treatment of respondents, and the open declaration of the use of artificial intelligence tools where these were applied in the analysis or transcription, in accordance with the journal's editorial policy.

The articles published in this issue are divided into thematic sections that follow the axes outlined above. The first section is devoted to artificial intelligence and synthetic voices in radio practice and includes pioneering case studies of cloned and reconstructed voices on Spanish radio, as well as field research into the use of AI tools in the creation and verification of news content in radio newsrooms in the Middle East. The second section focuses on digital transformation, podcasting and the changing audience structure – from the relationship between community radio stations and listeners in the podcast era, through the architecture and editorial curatorial practices of autonomous public service radio platforms and the use of the video-podcast format in disseminating scientific knowledge, to the media behaviour and perception of podcast advertising by Generation Z. The third section presents deontological and regulatory studies comparing the Slovak and European frameworks for the ethical self-regulation of radio and online audio production, with an emphasis on transparency, human oversight and disinformation in the digital information environment. Across these sections, we also view the issue of gender, voice and communicative justice as an important cross-cutting theme; this issue introduces it in the opening reflection and sees it as a stimulus for further research and future issues of the journal.

This issue of *Textual & Visual Media* does not pretend to offer definitive answers to the open questions of radio's transformation. Our aim is something more modest and, in an academic spirit, more fruitful: to bring together high-quality, methodologically rigorous and theoretically grounded studies that will help to articulate what is currently happening in the soundscape, and to make them accessible to radio professionals, regulators, educators and colleagues in the research community. We believe that it is precisely the dialogue between these perspectives – Southern and Central Europe, Anglo-Saxon and Romance academic styles, the male and female voices in this monograph – that will present radio not as a medium of the past, but as one of the most open laboratories of digital public communication. In this sense, we hope that readers will view this issue as an invitation to an ongoing conversation, to which we look forward to welcoming further voices in future editions.

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