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Linear radio versus On-Demand

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The Golden Age is here

In the beginning of this century, ARTE Radio unknowingly invented podcast. Let me tell you why and how we did it, and where we are now. Because 17 years later, we are this rare mix of radio and podcast.

In 2002, I was asked by ARTE to create a radio on the Internet. ARTE, as you may know, is a European Cultural channel, a public TV run by the French and the Germans. Because there was very little budget allowed, I was asked to create a small radio « on demand » for ARTE France, the French side of ARTE.

If you remember this time, there was nothing : no Facebook, no YouTube, no Netflix online. Traditional radios were not accessible online. Downloading was a word only use for music pirates and illegal hackers.

Luckily I was not alone : we were two. Christophe Rault, 22, and me, 38 at the time, were big fans of France Culture. I started radio in France Culture in 1990, producing a number of programs about philosophy, rap music and Joy Division. Christophe was a young sound engineer who grew up listening to the masterpieces of Yann Parenthoën and ACR, those big, elaborate, creative pieces of radio which use sound as a language.

So, we like sound. Its power. Its flesh. Its impact. But at the time, in France, there is no broadband for people at home. They are surfing on 56k. So we talked, Christophe and I, for about 20 minutes, about what we wanted to do, and we decided this :

I want to assemble a team of young producers who will produce short pieces – 3, 4 minutes – either reportages or creations, about what's happening in the world and in our lives. Each program will be a capsule on the screen, to be enjoyed by itself like a short story, a short audio film with the author's name up front, a small description, and the program should be self-sufficient. No 24 hours broadcast, no schedule, no time rendez-vous.

Christophe says : yeah, cool, and with great sound quality, so that even if it is short, you'll want to listen to it twice or more. And we have to make these capsules downloadable , so that people can listen to them when and where they want.

So : non-linear radio, online, no formats, and you can listen to it whenever and wherever you want. And so, without thinking twice, ARTE Radio pioneered podcast.

The consequences were huge. We had and still have complete autonomy and creative freedom. We have a young team of producers, so our themes and languages are immediately modern. I remember one of our first « documentary », maybe 9 minutes long : « Parents who smoke pot ».

I encourage the authors to write or record with a strong, personal point of view. We do not deal with patrimonial works : we only produce original pieces, designed from scratch inside ARTE.

I want all my producers to become radio authors. So we buy the best digital equipment (Nagra recorders, Sennheiser and Schoeps microphones) and we train everyone on how to use it. I don't read résumés. I read projects and I read everyone of them (I get 3 to 5 daily). My motto is « beginners are a sure value ». Radio should be open to everyone with a good story.

Then I work a lot with the author about her piece : what do you want to say ? where will you record ? where do you go from here ? And then they enjoy autonomy to go outside and record by themselves, and then edit by themselves. And then I'm back to oversee their rough draft and eventually correct it. And then the sound director comes in, with fresh ears and ideas, and completes the piece, with the author always in the room.

So it's a mix between creative freedom and strong editing. And all of this takes the time it needs : the project is king. With a yearly budget of 400k euros, we produce now around 120 pieces per year.

They are radio pieces : docs, dramas, sound creations, regular shows, but they are produced for podcast distribution and consumption. A podcast is an intimate piece of radio. It addresses a person, not an audience. It is friendly, rhythmic and complicit.

A podcast is mainly about the address. It's like having people over for dinner. You open the door and welcome them. It's all about you, your tone, your spirit, your engagement.

Then, most podcasts now in France feed their guests with peanuts, appetizers, or junk food. Fast produced, fast consumed. Enjoyable while it lasts. We try to cook a good, elaborate dinner.

Podcasts now are all about addiction. You subscribe, and then you want the same show, same format, with regularity : every Thursday at 8. I guess we totally failed in getting rid of schedules.

But the audience has spoken and this is what they want. So, we do podcasts. Our biggest hit is a monthly, one-hour show about feminism, equality and gender issues, « Un podcast à soi » by Charlotte bienaimé. We now have 4 regular podcasts, and will produce more next year.

But we still do our radio things : docs, dramas, sound pieces. Some of them have been major hits, introducing a new generation to creative radio

(Crackopolis, Les Braqueurs : true crime pieces). Our audience has gone younger and bigger. We now enjoy 500k-700k listened pieces / month.

Mostly, we are a family - a nice little dysfunctionnal family. Our team of 5 (on 3,5 salaries) has been together for ten years now. We chose each other, we love each other, we work with fun and pride. We still enjoy complete autonomy and creative freedom.

Some authors have grown up with us and became professionnals. A new generation of listeners has become authors too. Our authors are mostly women, 66% of them, a record inside ARTE. I could tell you why women are best but we have little time.

The results are, our authors won 36 major radio awards since 2008. 5 prix Italia, 5 prix Europa, best drama or best documentary, one almost every year. I could also tell you how to do that but again, not enough time. But obviously ARTE Radio has re-defined radio creation for the last ten years.

When you are a small project of 5 to do these elaborate pieces, which themselves can be easy or demanding, short or long, distribution is obviously the key. Your podcasts have to be everywhere : your site, your app, Apple podcasts, SoundCloud (ARTE Radio is the N°1 French radio on SoundCloud), Deezer, YouTube... But you have little control other them and the way they might be advertised by those platforms. We try to keep total control, but it's a lot of work.

And obviously to advertise your programs you have to be on social medias : Tweeter, Facebook, Instagram... Basically you are now working for the GAFAS.

Sometimes, 3 of us plus the intern are in the office, and everyone is doing something Facebook-related : a video of the program, a video teaser for the program, a post about our regular public listening sessions, a funny picture of the team, stats for the direction of ARTE... 4 screens are logged on Facebook. As public broadcasters, we have a problem here.

But there is a plus side : social medias and platforms reach a younger, wider audience. My favorite now is YouTube : our YouTube channel is growing fast. We put up our strongest, award-winnng programs with carefully done subtitles. Some videos reach hundreds of thousands views. The comments are obviously written by young, poupopular audience. Some go « I liked this, but check their other stuff too ». And in the next weeks you will see some videos of our most popular or award-winning programs with English subs.

Thank you very much.

You may have some questions ?