Welcome to pod-drama-cast and to a new listening experience:

The virtual community of *The Archers*

New technologies and, in particular, the podcast are leading to the revival of the most creative of all radio genres: the radio drama. Not being subject to the here-and-now, this genre is easily adapted to new production and reception methods on the Internet and via the podcast. Numerous experiences based on the radio drama have started to appear on the Internet, thus contributing to the revival of this genre. One such experience which exemplifies how conventional radio can be adapted to new technologies, and thus create a new virtual community of listeners, is *The Archers* soap opera (BBC), which has been broadcast regularly since 1951. The following pages examine the technological adaptation undergone by *The Archers* and include an analysis of the main resources employed in defining this new virtual community of listeners.

Benvindos ao pod-drama-cast e a uma nova experiência de escuta:

A comunidade virtual de *The Archers*

As novas tecnologias e especialmente o podcast favorecem a recuperação do género mais criativo do meio radiofónico: o radio-drama, que por não estar sujeito à actualidade, se adapta aos novos modos de produção e recepção de conteúdos na Internet e através do podcast. Surgem, assim, na Internet diversas experiências que, tendo o radio-drama como protagonista, estão a contribuir para recuperar o género. Uma experiência significativa, que exemplifica como a rádio convencional se adapta às novas tecnologias, criando uma nova comunidade virtual de ouvintes, é a soap opera *The Archers* (BBC), com emissão regular desde 1951. As páginas seguintes compreendem um estudo sobre a adaptação tecnológica realizada por *The Archers*, analisando os

principais recursos empregues, que permitem caracterizar esta nova comunidade virtual de ouvintes.

1. Radio drama, a new technological opportunity

The radio drama is one of the genres most suited to the medium of radio since its essence combines all the necessary qualities. It is precisely this genre which illustrates most clearly the radio's foremost characteristic: a story which is narrated solely through sound boosts the imagination. "It is sometimes argued that the stimulus to the imagination, especially the visual imagination, belongs to radio alone, and if we are thinking in terms of 'drama' this is unquestionably correct" (Lewis, 1981: 9). Indeed, the topic has been documented in several areas of research (Bolls, 2002; MacInnis & Price, 1987). Most of these studies compare the characteristics of the radio with other audiovisual media, particularly television (Greenfield *et al.*, 1986; Greenfield & Beagles-Roos, 1988; Valkenburg & Beentjes, 1997), but there are also studies applied to radio drama (Rodero, 2010; Rodero, 2010b). For this reason, the transmission of radio dramas has always worked very well with the audience because people wish that the radio narrates stories that stimulate their imagination.

For many years, the radio drama genre has occupied star position in radio station programming. With time, however, in many countries production of dramatic programmes has gradually declined. Nevertheless, new technologies may constitute a good opportunity for the radio to recover the radio drama. For this reason, authors such as Chignell (2009: 26) conclude that: "There is evidence in the recent developments in 'new media' (including both radio and audio) that there is a future for this genre". Internet, therefore, might provide this genre with an opportunity.

2. Internet and Podcast, allies of radio drama

Digital technology is submitting radio to such a transformation as is unprecedented in its history. Within this new context, radio needs to incorporate expressive components that renew the formal treatment currently applied. A good part of this renewal may be achieved through the recovery of the radio drama in the form of the podcast.

The podcast format is one of the most appropriate ways of broadcasting radio dramas because it enables direct and immediate access to recorded material intended for later, asynchronous listening. Since the radio drama is not anchored in the here-and-now, it may be stored.

> There is evidence, however, that various forms of audio-on-demand may come to the assistance of this beleaguered genre. Unlike a great deal of other radio output, drama does not necessarily benefit from being live. If the right kind of dramatic material could be produced to suit the internet or MP3 player then this may provide a way forward (Chignell, 2009: 30).

Moreover, the possibility to download and store material on an audio device guarantees one of radio's most inherent listening modes: 'on the move'. Thanks to this flexibility, the listener can make decisions not only regarding the content but also the way in which he listens to it – at any moment, at any time (time shifting). These characteristics configure a new type of active listener who can select content and also establish patterns of loyalty via subscription.

> Whilst the listener selects the content they want to subscribe to, the content arrives by a 'pushed' mechanism and the user ultimately decides when it is played ('pull'). Podcasts are therefore defined as content with the lazy benefits of push media but with all personalization features of pull media (Berry, 2006: 156).

To refer to this new form of communication, BBC presenter Peter Day has coined the term 'Radio-Me' (Day, 2005). In addition, however, this new listener may avail

himself of a whole range of additional tools which provide interactivity in the sense in which Kiousis defines it:

> …as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency) (Kiousis, 2002: 370).

Although listener participation over the phone has always been fomented in radio, undoubtedly it is now when this possibility of interaction is at its greatest, both in form and in effectiveness. This is most evident in the case of the radio drama which, as a closed format, offers fewer possibilities for interaction in traditional radio, unless it occurs outside the broadcast itself. "For cross-media work between radio and the internet, drama seemed to offer a strong potential for enhanced interactivity and internet activity" (Neumark, 2006: 213).

Also significant is the strong sense of identification that listeners create with certain fictional stories. The interactivity provided by new technologies and the incorporation of multimedia language can reinforce the sense of belonging to a virtual community of listeners who share the same collective imagination regarding a particular radio drama story. Authors such as Neumark (2006: 216), therefore, refer to the podcast as a *gap medium* connecting the real and virtual worlds.

Perhaps for all these reasons it is through the podcast that there is currently evidence of the revival of the radio drama genre. This is borne out by the references appearing in the media to the subject, with such significant titles as that published by *The Guardian*: 'The podcast's the thing to revive radio drama'.

A clear case of adaptation to the requirements of new technologies whilst not losing its essence is the radio soap opera *The Archers*. This is a clear example of how

conventional radio has adapted to modern times, being complemented as it is by podcasts, thus creating a new community of listeners.

3. *The Archers* and the adaptation to news technologies

The Archers, broadcasted by BBC-Radio 4, is the oldest radio soap opera in the world still running. First broadcast in 1951 within the framework of post-war Britain, *The Archers* has just celebrated its 60th anniversary. *The Archers*' concerns a farming community in central England and it is developed in the fictional village of Ambridge. The radio drama was created with the aim of providing practical advice to farmers in a simple but attractive way.

One of the most notable aspects of the radio drama is the extent to which it has evolved over the years, adapting its plots to the problems of each different period, such as swine fever in the 1970s and Mad Cow Disease from the '80s to 2000. At the same time, however, like all radio dramas, *The Archers* has made use of its own dramatic resources in its format and so has incorporated large doses of such elements as accidents, deaths, romance and divorce. In this way, it intertwines in its plot both areas: personal and professional relationships, the domestic and the rural environments.

Together with its thematic renovation, *The Archers* made its first advances towards technological adaptation in 2002, when the programme was made available via the BBC Radio Player. Some years later, in 2007, the soap opera offered its first podcast, which included several additional services such as a synopsis of each episode (available on the website or by e-mail). This innovation was well received by listeners. *The Guardian* reported in October 2007 that *The Archers* had received one million such online listens a month, almost double the number of its closest rival, Chris Moyles show (Gibson, 2007). The new format led to a modification in the duration of the episodes,

which changed from 30 minutes to the current 15 minutes, thus catering better for the needs of increasingly busier listeners.

So, with the incorporation of new technologies, *The Archers* has adopted a system of co-option. That is to say, it combines traditional broadcasts with online emissions and the podcast format. In its traditional form it is broadcast daily from Sunday to Friday at 7 pm (repeated at 2 pm the next day, excluding Saturdays) and weekly as part of 'Omnibus' (edition of the whole week's episodes) on Sunday mornings at 10 am. The choice of these broadcasting times, as occurs with all Radio 4 programmes, is designed to suit the lifestyles of listeners and, in this case, coincides with English dinner-time preparations. It is, however, significant that on the Web, where programmes may be listened to at any time, the peak audience time is almost identical to that of the traditional broadcasting time: 7.15 pm, as shown in a study conducted by Thomas (2009) into the behaviour of the soap opera virtual community.

As would seem apparent, over its 60 years on the air, *The Archers* has built up a faithful community of followers which spans several generations; grandparents, parents and children have grown up with the adventures of this farming family.

> I for instance have listened to *The Archers* for more than 30 years. In that time a generation has died in Ambridge, a generation has grown up and married and had children. And in this time Ambridge has changed. It has changed silently, imperceptibly, day by day, through the years (Scanell, 2009).

This longstanding loyalty to the programme means that the listeners of this soap opera possess expert knowledge about everything that goes on in Ambridge, as the study carried out by Reeve and Aggleton (1998) demonstrates. However, what is more important is that, with the incorporation of new technologies, the psychological affinity

which for so many years has united traditional listeners is now extended to a new virtual community of people who follow the episodes online.

Proof of the fruits that this technological convergence is yielding can be found in the surprising vitality that *The Archers* still displays in the year 2011. With a current audience of 5 million listeners, it is the most popular online BBC programme. The programme's degree of influence socially, in terms of diversity and frequency of mentions in the media, constitutes further proof of its excellent state of health. Indeed, it enhances this popularity by inviting celebrities and other prominent people to appear in certain episodes. For example, the Duchess of Cornwall visited to Ambridge in her role as president of the National Osteoporosis Society to celebrate the 60th anniversary.

For all these reasons, *The Archers* is a clear example of how this genre has been able to resurge using new technologies as its allies and so expanding its community of listeners. The following pages, therefore, analyse the main resources which have made this adaptation to new technologies possible.

4. *The Archers* online

The analysis of the BBC Archers website[1] reveals three main categories of resources: the services of an audio library, the documentary service and participation services.

Firstly, the audio service embraces all the sounds of the radio drama. It is the most significant part of the main web-page and it always starts by offering the opportunity to hear the most recent episode, either through the BBC iPlayer or by downloading the podcast. Online listening includes the possibilities of recommending the episode and adding it to favourites. Via the podcast, as well as being able to download the relevant episode, the user can take out a free subscription using several systems: iTunes, MyYahoo, Zune, Google Reader, ZENCast and RSS Feed. Additional information

provided includes a synopsis of the episode, which the listener can subscribe to by e-mail, and a list of the characters and locations which appear in it, with a complete biography of the character or a description of the place in question, including photographs in both cases. A tab at the top of the page allows the user to view the six most recent weekly episodes. Furthermore, from the main page the *Ambridge Extra* can be heard. This contains details of the latest stories to unfold in the community. Another tab provides access to *Catch up*, a page that contains all the episodes, their synopses and titles, classified by days. Here the *Omnibus* is also to be found; a summary of the whole week lasting 75 minutes.

Secondly, the documentary service consists of additional information which allows users to extend their knowledge of the series. One of the most noteworthy pages is *Timeline*, an interactive calendar where users can scan the years of the series and follow the evolution of events. Accompanying this is the *Who's who* page, which gives a complete description of the characters in alphabetical order, including family ties, likes and dislikes, relationships and location. It also lists the typical expressions used by each character and an audio fragment from an episode in which that character was of particular relevance. The fictitious places in which the series is set are available through the *Ambridge map*, which includes a detailed description of each place, complemented by the episodes related to that place. The *About* page acts as an introduction to the series in audio format and whose aim is to help the listener keep up to date with events. It includes the section *Frequently Asked Questions*. Finally, within this documentary service there are also interviews with scriptwriters and a somewhat original section: *Ambridge Ups and Downs,* which measures the behaviour of the characters of the radio drama, classifying them as 'up', represented by a sun, and 'down', represented by a rain-cloud.

Thirdly, listeners can exchange their experiences and knowledge about the radio drama by using the participation services. These are divided into two types: passive and active. The passive services are those in which listeners are able to participate but without real interaction. Here, the main page provides different types of questionnaires in game format which are also to be found on the *Fun* page. The *Quick Quiz* asks questions about events in the series with three possible answers. The *Vote* allows users to give their opinions about what should happen in the series or what a particular character should do regarding a problem they face. However, it is the *Fun* page that contains the most opportunities to participate. One such opportunity is the multimedia game *Hill Climb Quiz*, which is quite basic and involves choosing questions about or subjects from the series and which, if answered correctly, help "David to feed his hungry sheep". On the other hand, *The Archers Quiz* is much more elaborate, with images and sound, and consists in answering questions about the series which have three possible answers.

Nevertheless, it is in the active services where the listener finds a real opportunity to interact and make a contribution to the radio drama. These services appear in the *Blog* and *Discuss* pages. It is important to note that all this interactive part is supervised and the administrator may delete messages which do not adhere to the rules clearly set down in the *House Rules* section.

The Archers Blog, which can be subscribed to through RSS and ATOM, comprises discussion topics generated by listeners' messages from the *Discuss* page and from Facebook and Twitter. The *Discuss* page is quite complete and carefully put together. The right side of the page contains users' comments posted on Twitter, the links corresponding to four different Facebook pages about *The Archers* and, lastly, links to websites devoted to the soap opera.

The main section of *Discuss*, together with the *Blog*, is *On the messageboard*, where listeners give their opinions on the series on a peer to peer basis.

> The messageboards provide a space in which the imaginative work required by radio can be developed, shared and compared. In this sense, the messageboards add a new, shared dimension to the pleasures of the imagination which a radio programme can provide (Thomas, 2009: 57).

This section, which can be subscribed to, is sub-divided into several parts with the facility for both synchronic and asynchronic interaction. All of these options have been available since October 2005.

The synchronic interaction takes place in *The bull*, the space designated for the chatroom about questions relating to the series. It is the most popular section with about 68,000 topics being discussed. The asynchronic interaction takes place in various sections of either a general or specific nature. *Discuss The Archers* is the section where listeners exchange opinions about the series. It receives around 60,000 proposals for topics. As regards the sections of a specific nature, these comprise particular topics which may or may not be related to the series. Among those which do refer to the series, the one which stands out is *Notes and Queries,* in which listeners resolve their queries about the series or about the messageboard and registers around 3,500 queries. *The village hall* is the section where special interest groups can exchange views and opinions. Activity is low, with only 1,300 topics proposed. *The Archers Omnibus* is the space specifically devoted to the programme's listeners' comments and discussions. Activity is quite low in this section, only 500 topics, which suggests little listener interest in this specific audio service. *Archers Spoilers* is the site devoted to spoilers' comments and opinions and its activity is limited, around 200 topics. Finally, there are two sections of a specific nature which are not related to the series. One of these is

Fantasy Archers, a site where listeners make up their own stories or parodies and which offers the chance to interact with other users. This page registers about 2,000 invented stories. The other section is *The Bull Upstairs*, which has very little activity, with around 1,800 proposals, and contains word games with a variety of topics.

Apart from the official website itself, mention should also be made of another website for addicts to *The Archers*, one which is important since the BBC acknowledges it as the official *Archers* fan club[2]. Its start page contains news and comments relating to the series. The documentation section is completed with the *Catch up* page, which contains extensive synopses of the events of the different episodes. The participation section has a blog and a forum which are classified by topic. However, two things differentiate this website from the official one. Firstly, no audio material is available. Secondly, the *Shop* page which contains all kinds of items relating to the series available for sale, such as calendars, kitchen utensils, mugs and audio materials for the blind. Finally, the sense of community is strengthened through the *Gallery* page, where fans post their photographs, arrange meet-ups and competitions about the series are held.

These two websites are complemented by the social networks Facebook and Twitter. The official Facebook page devoted to *The Archers* (BBC The Archers[3]) has around 1,200 members. But there is a duplicity with other official page (The Archers[4]) with more members, about 3,725. The topics proposed normally concern information or news about the series. Very little user interaction occurs here and most of the activity involves requests for information regarding the broadcasts. The Facebook page for fans of the series (Archers Addicts[5]) is less popular, about 330 friends, and registers a fewer degree of participation. User activity on this page centres on expressing opinions about the series at a more informal level than is the case with the official page. On Twitter, the

official page[6] has too more followers, 4,000, than the fan page[7], 1,500. This may be due to the fact that the BBC Archers website views interactive communication more through Twitter, followed in real time, than Facebook.

Thanks, therefore, to this combination of audio, documental and interactive possibilities, added to by the fan sites and social networks, *The Archers* manages to create an authentic virtual community or virtual public sphere, in the words of Klein (2009), whose findings are analysed below.

5. The virtual audio sphere community of *The Archers*

One of the main benefits accruing from the convergence of *The Archers* with new technologies is the possibility to add a new virtual audio sphere community to the traditional community of listeners. For Rheingold (2000), "virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". Therefore, we may consider the whole collective of *The Archers* listeners as a virtual community in an audio sphere.

Usually, virtual communities emerge to satisfy three types of needs: functional, social and psychological (Wang *et al.,* 2002). The virtual community of *The Archers* owes its vitality precisely to the accomplishment of these three needs, which are described below using a content analysis of the messages posted on the interactive services of the official website, the fans website and the social networks since October 2005.

5.1. Functional needs through the public sphere

Functional needs are met through the web's own public sphere and are manifested through the different interactive services. The resources that contribute to creating community through this sphere are the audio and participation services, the passive services (where users can obtain information about the series via games) and also the active services designed for this purpose such as *Notes and Queries*. The members of *The Archers* community use the resources provided in this space fundamentally to expand their knowledge about the series by meeting three basic needs of a referential nature: obtain information, resolve doubts and formulate requests and complaints.

a. Obtaining information. Users tend to use interactive services to request information, either of a documentary type or related to the audios of the series.

> *I live in America and have been following the Omnibus podcast since April 18th 2010. My Itunes feed didn't update properly for a time and I'm missing the weeks after October 17th ("Kate has thoughts of home." to November 28th ("Will's on the warpath"). I have the episodes after that. Can anyone give me a summary during that missing time period?*

They also obtain or expand information about the series whilst satisfying a need for leisure or entertainment through the games and quizzes.

b. Resolving doubts. A considerable number of users' comments are aimed at resolving different doubts, either relating to the soap opera's plot or of a technical nature. In this area, messages relating to possible deficiencies or technical problems are frequent.

> *Yes, and I know why it`s empty because it`s blooming difficult to get in - I have had to log in 3 times to get on the board, in spite of having posted already in the Bull earlier - I`m going to complain.*

Furthermore, messages referring to subscription problems, especially with the synopses of the episodes, are a regular occurrence. This indicates that many listeners choose the episodes to listen to based on the synopses they receive via e-mail.

c. Formulating requests and complaints. Users also avail themselves of the opportunity to interact in order to formulate their requests and obtain a reply. For example, they ask for emoticons to be included in messages so as to personalise them, a function which is not currently available. They also request audios in podcast form when these are not made available in time or they cannot find them.

> *Thank you for putting these on a Podcast! That way your friends across the pond get to enjoy!! And how I enjoy The Archers.*

In fact, flexibility in the listening modes is one of the characteristics which is most highly valued by users. In addition, they use their messages to complain about the story's plot; they even send complaints directly to *The Archers' editor*, Vanessa Whitburn.

> *I say Vannessa Whitburn needs pushing off the roof of broadcasting house! The 60th anniversary episode could have been celebrated with the birth of Helen's baby - why another death?*

5.2. *Social needs through the social sphere*

Through the social sphere, *The Archers* users satisfy their need for inter-relationships. The resources designed for this purpose enable the members of the virtual community to establish a social relationship which links their imaginary experience (that which is conformed by the events in the series) and their actual experience (that which is conformed by reality). This social projection occurs thanks to the documentary services and is manifested in the interactive services. The members of the community use the resources provided in this space mainly with four objectives: to reflect their social identity; to generate a referential illusion; to control plausibility; and to elude reality.

a. Reflecting social identity. Relatively often users include among their comments interpretations of the events in the series which reflect their own social identity. "The assimilation or mirroring of textual features in their own online identities by listeners functions within and in interaction with the middle-class habitus which the programme, its producers and its audience share" (Thomas, 2009: 65). Therefore, they are comments that interpret the fictitious events of the series and reflect them in users' own social experience.

> *Keep out of it, Fallon! It's none of your business! Your mum is an adult, and what does it matter if all she has is a brief fling with Kenton----or otherwise! I wouldn't want my daughter interfering with my middle aged love life--yuk!*

b. Generating a referential illusion. In the words of the French semiologist, Roland Barthes (1982), this referential illusion produces the effect of conferring a sense of reality on fiction. In this sense, users frequently make comments about the series referring to the events or characters as if they were real. No doubt this phenomenon is contributed to by the fact that, in the documentary services, the information about each place and character, complemented by a photograph, seems real.

> *Helen needs to learn some compassion. Her whole pregnancy was ridiculous...she thinks she knows it all....her poor baby!*

Some listeners even seek to justify the plausibility of the radio drama in the fact that the events it describes could actually happen in real life.

> *I am an Archers fan and proud of it. Whilst it is very sad when any of the characters are killed off for whatever reason, it is the type of tragic event that happens in real life and is brave of the writers/producer to risk losing a popular character.*

This referential illusion which is generated within the community may even lead some users to feel the need to remind themselves that the story is not real "making it clear that the speaker is only 'playing' (Thomas, 2009: 60).

I have never felt the need to post anything before, but I am really disappointed with the storyline of Nigels death. Before anyone gets excited - I KNOW ITS NOT REAL- but it doesn't mean I can't have an opinion on something I've followed for over 30 years.

c. Controlling the plausibility. This referential illusion, in which the listeners of the radio drama are immersed, contrasts sharply with manifestations of a contrary nature, such as claims of potential incongruencies in the story. Users tend to be alert to any element which might indicate a lack of plausibility. Indeed, elements of the plausibility of the story itself may be called into question:

I'll never nag him in the kitchen again ...Kenton was eating a sausage as he spoke but who was helping in the kitchen?

Or elements that distort their own perception of reality:

Am I right in thinking that Jenny got the news of Kate's visit on a postcard? A postcard? The family's in touch by email and phone all the time; why on earth would Kate be moved to write such important news on a postcard. They take forever to deliver and hardly give much room to write more than having fab time.

Or comments concerning formal aspects of the language employed:

Particularly if small cups, 3 mugs would be better. Not unusual in "the professions". Off for some (more) now!

d. Eluding reality. One of the most obvious functions of radio dramas is to provide an opportunity for evasion from reality where listeners can relax and forget their day to day problems.

This has implications for radio soaps because they have the potential not only in their subject matter to echo the everyday domestic concerns of listeners but also in their reassuringly fixed place in the schedule and in the creation of a fictional world in which time passes in exact parallel with the real world (Hendy, 2000: 184).

As a result, when the events of the radio drama are not to their liking, users complain bitterly, as occurs in this comment:

> *How is it a celebration of such a long living programme to kill off a character in the new year. Makes us [listeners] feel great doesn't it! Not! Surely to celebrate something is to enjoy and have fun and feel good about it. I am sorry, but to try and balance it with the stupid birth story doesn't give it balance.*

5.3. Psychological needs through the personal sphere

Through the personal sphere, and in symbolic form, users of *The Archers* satisfy both their need of belonging and their strong sense of identification with their community. The resources designed for this purpose enable members of the virtual community to establish a personal relationship with the imaginary world conformed by the events in the series.

> In this way, the messageboard extends the openness and polysemy of radio, by providing a space where new meanings and stories can be generated by listeners, and where the imaginative work of listening can in some measure, be shared and captured (Thomas, 2009: 57).

This psychological projection is produced and manifested through the interactive services, by the purchase of products related to the series, by attending live broadcasts or through physical meetings arranged via the community of fans (Guinalíu, 2003). The members of this virtual community use the resources provided in this space with basically four objectives: to become psychologically involved, to reveal a dependency, to show loyalty and to obtain emotional relief.

a. Psychological involvement. Frequently, users' comments reveal a high degree of personal involvement which is clearly reflected in the form of expression they employ.

> *Listening to The Archers this afternoon... Nigel, NOOOOOO!*

This psychological involvement is also manifested through expressions of disconformity with the events in the series. In fact, the broadcast commemorating the series' 60 years on the air generated considerable controversy among listeners when it ended with the death of one of the most loved characters. The outcome was an avalanche of protests in the different interactive services.

As an Archers fan for 30 years I was looking forward to this. I listened to the first few minutes but hated it and couldn't listen to anymore!

Personal involvement is also evident in the continual proposals from users regarding possible future outcomes of the story:

I think the next reality show should be a visit from the Hotel Inspector with her dirt detector. Then that posh woman who helps people with their stately homes could visit Lower Loxley.

Or, alternatively, regarding possible solutions to the problems which the characters experience:

David definitely needs some help, either from the vicar, a good friend (does he have any?) or a therapist... I think we all get the point now, that he feels Lizzie needs him for the rest of his life.

b. Revealing a dependency. Users' comments reveal a high degree of dependence in the following of the radio drama. Significant in this sense is the following response given by a listener to his son:

Do you listen to The Archers as a penance? My son has just asked me this question. I am at a loss to explain quite why I did listen to it this evening. It was excruciating. The so called comedy element was dire. Off now to boil my head as it will be more enjoyable.

Dependence is also observed in the way that users integrate listening to the radio drama in their daily lives, associating it with certain activities and with certain times of the day.

Coffee, catching up on The Archers and pottering around getting things done. Lovely!

This phenomenon shows how a soap opera "could mark time with the listeners' lives and reflect their intimate concerns" (Chignell, 2009: 51). Through interactive services, listeners manifest their dependence on being able to listen to a programme that forms part of their lives, even when they are away from home or travelling.

I'm stuck here in Sri Lanka listening to it on internet - never saw this coming -is he just clinging to the gutter - is David going to save him - why couldn't it be Helen that died - life is so unfair - she really irritates me and deserved to die in childbirth smelling of yoghurt and home made cheese grrrrrrrrrrr...

Some users even go to such lengths as to express this dependence in the form of poems:

I have a little problem, with which I am afflicted. There is a Sunday omnibus, to which I am addicted. I should be outside digging, or weeding in the garden, If I'm to rival Monty Don In my wife's heart's affection. But rather than be useful, I'll make a bacon sandwich and brew a pot of morning tea, whilst tuning into Ambridge. Then on my favorite armchair I'll settle nice and comfy, and find myself sinking a pint with my mate Eddie Grundy.

c. Showing loyalty. There is no aspect in which the feeling of identification is clearer than through manifestations of loyalty. Many listeners include among their comments references to the number of years that they have been following the radio drama.

The Archers has been part of my life from childhood to senior years.

This loyalty, established over many years of listening, is also frequently used to confer a greater sense of authority on a particular comment.

Love 'The Archers', not missed a show in years and although Sad to see Nigel go it was well written and well performed.

A curious form of loyalty is also observed in the betting that takes place among users regarding the events which occur in the series.

£2.00 from me says the DNA test will show Em's not the real mother.

d. Obtaining emotional relief. Many users of interactive messages use this resource to express the emotions they experience in the face of certain events portrayed in the series.

The last 3 weeks of story has been so depressing I have not enjoyed listening at all. I may have to switch off for a while if this carries on!

Thus, the messages act as a kind of escape valve which alleviates their emotional state. "Radio is used to maintain or alter mood – it is emotionally evocative and reassuring" (Tachhi, 2000: 291). A very significant case of such behaviour is this user who made a video in order to relieve the pain he suffered at the death of a character in the 60th anniversary episode.

Please see my elegy for Nigel in music and film on You tube or facebook called "Nigel Pargetter RIP" It tries to explain the anguish we are all feeling ...I was so angry and betrayed by the storyline that I had to make the film and music to help alleviate the negative feelings I had[8].

In conclusion, Graphic 1 shows the virtual community of The Archers and the accomplishment of these three needs:

Graphic 1. *The virtual community of The Archers*
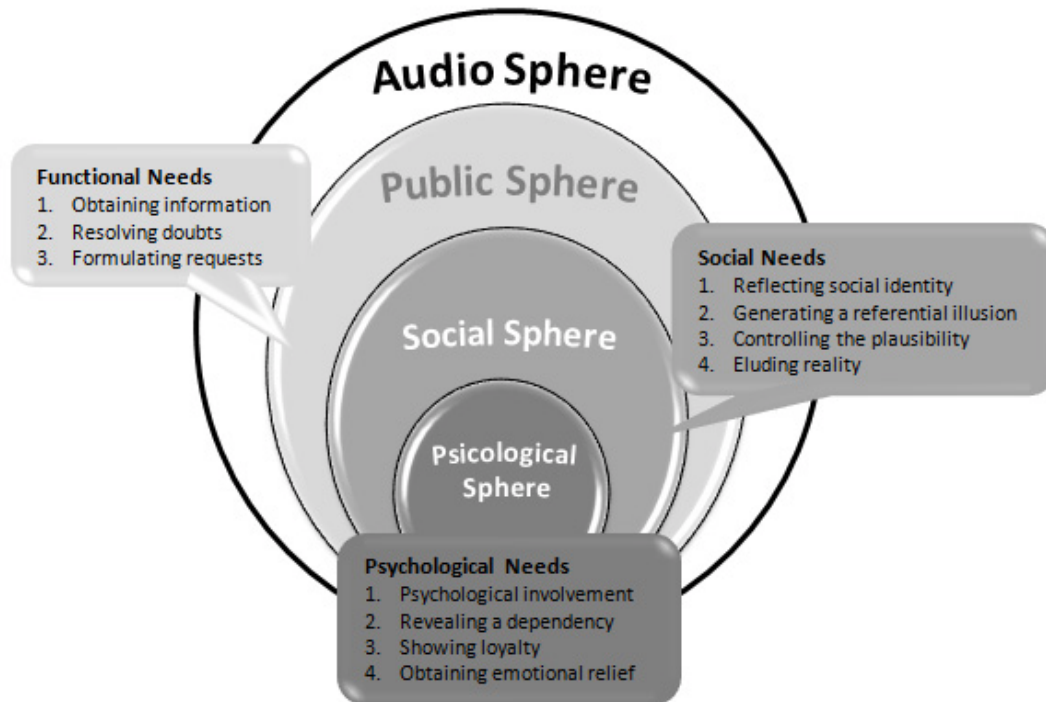
6. Conclusions

The radio drama has always been the most genuine of all radio genres, but it has for many years been a forgotten genre. Now this tendency is being reversed thanks to new technologies, especially the Internet and the podcast, which provide a good opportunity for the revival of the radio drama genre. Due to its characteristics, the podcast is one of the most appropriate formats for the transmission of radio dramas, since it is based on recorded materials designed for later asynchronous listening. Moreover, it brings to the genre an added value in the form of the option to subscribe (which stimulates listener loyalty). Further added value comes through the incorporation of other multimedia languages (which reaffirm the feeling of identification with the radio drama) and

through the interactivity available (which creates a virtual community of listeners with a collective imagination based on the fictitious story).

In this sense, *The Archers* radio soap opera is a significant example of adaptation to the conditions imposed by new technologies. The analysis of the website shows that this is a site offering a very complete service, with regard not only to audio facilities but also with respect to documentation and participation services. In the audio context, it provides the listener with all possible modes of listening. However, a possible shortcoming lies in the fact that it only offers the episodes corresponding to the last seven days. The documentation services stand out for their degree of creativity and the use of different multimedia options. Listeners who seek to resolve their doubts about events in the story over the years or to bring themselves up to date with current developments have several resources at their disposal. These resources are not only very complete but are also characterised by a high degree of realism which contributes to reinforcing the listeners' collective imagination. The participation services, through the surveys presented in game format and via messageboards, also offer users a whole range of possibilities for interaction, including synchronic and asynchronous communication. Both topics and the audience are classified in categories and integration with other social networks is facilitated. The only element which might be found wanting, due to the fictional nature of the soap opera, is a MUD-type resource (*Multiple User Dimension*) and to unify the Facebook pages. The series' official fan website is an important complement to the main website. It reinforces users' sense of community by incorporating such resources as the sale of items related to the series, by encouraging physical meetings among followers and by organising competitions about the series.

Together, all these elements have allowed a new virtual audio sphere community to develop. A community which owes its virtuality precisely to the way in which users'

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functional, social and psychological needs are satisfied; the satisfaction being manifested through the messages posted on the interactive services. Therefore, the functional needs of a referential nature, developed through the public sphere, which are identified in *The Archers* are: obtaining information (audio or documental) about the series, resolving technical doubts and queries about the plot, and making requests and complaints. Secondly, the needs for social interaction through the social sphere which users of the community of *The Archers* display are: to reflect their social identity with comments that interpret the fictitious events in the series through their own social experiences, to generate a referential illusion (conferring sense of reality on fiction), to control the degree of plausibility (reporting on incongruencies between fiction and reality) and eluding reality (using fiction to forget their day to day problems). Finally, the psychological needs of users of *The Archers* virtual community, created in the personal sphere and symbolic in nature, are: psychological involvement (making proposals regarding future events and offering solutions to the characters' problems), revealing a dependence on the series which is reflected in listening habits, showing loyalty to the series through strong identification and expressing feelings as an escape valve to alleviate emotional states.

In conclusion, the characteristics that define this new virtual community of *The Archers* constitute a clear example of how a lost genre, the radio drama, can be successfully revived, thanks to the comprehensive incorporation of new technologies. Welcome, therefore, to pod-drama-cast and to a new listening experience.

7. References

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Notes

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