

Socio-semiotic considerations about playlists

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the notion of playlists as a socio-semiotic category in the context of the mediatization of contemporary popular music by studying its uses in virtual and non-virtual communities. We propose that the digital mediatization of playlists affects contemporary cultural forms, shaping social modes of conceiving music as they enable new forms of interaction in the present moment. Our investigation focuses on different ways digital mediatization of playlists contributes to creating virtual communities and transforming performative practices in non-virtual communities of musicians. In our analysis, we consider the playlist as a format, a category of action that encodes cultures in different social groups in a diachronic trajectory. It may involve the evolutionary development of musical genres or practices of production and recognition, in which the use of playlists and their interactive possibilities as repertoire affect how the digital memory of the semiosphere is encoded.

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1. Introduction

Mediatization affects the ways of conceiving culture, from its conditions and methods of production to habits and valuations arising from its recognition conditions. If mediatization is considered a long-term process, it is possible to observe how specific formats endure over time, even when the media and technologies that gave rise to them have disappeared. Some structures, therefore, acquire relative rigidity over the years.

Among them are enunciative formats with actantial capacity that encode and transmit the cultural memory of a semiosphere. These are axiologically differentiated from the notion of genre, although the margins between them may sometimes be fuzzy (Migliore and Colas-Blaise 2022; Martinelli 2020).

Playlists are a media format of mass consumption with heterogeneous cultural implications and a growing scholarly interest (Dias, Gonçalves, and Fonseca 2017; Eriksson and Johansson 2019). They integrate functional affordances to the experience offered by a platform, adapting their interactive features to the functioning of specific social groups. We consider two examples of group uses in physical and virtual environments to account for these processes. These belong to phenomena that we consider interstitial or lateral, that is, mediatizations that, due to features we will explain below, are not part of the media mainstream but instead of what is considered alternative media that can be framed within the studies on mediatizations below the radar (Martinelli 2020; Boccia Artieri, Brilli, and Zurovac 2021).

First, we study the case of Radiooooo, to account for the design of an interstitial platform based on an innovative interactive system of playlists. At the same time, its name alludes to an iconic signifier of pre-digital media culture. The second case focuses on the mediatization of playlists in Spotify, focusing on alternative uses, that is, uses for which their mediatization was not initially envisaged. To do so, we look at Spotify playlists in the context of a specific circuit of jam sessions belonging to Buenos Aires city.

2. From list and repertoire to playlists

Playlists have become a primary format for discovering, ordering, and sharing music in contemporary culture, occupying a central role in the strategy of platforms such as Spotify to attract advertisers (Eriksson and Johansson 2019). The concept of a playlist has been defined as a “sequence of songs meant to be listened to as a group” (Dias, Gonçalves, and Fonseca 2017: 5). However, different authors have dealt with playlists and their actantial capacity inside and outside musical life. Among others, as a means to communicate political opinions and self-presentation (Siles et al. 2019).

Playlisting, the practice of collecting music files inside the playlist format, is one of the main features of streaming platforms. It has multiple uses and has varying degrees of importance to playlist curators (Sesigür 2021). Regarding the morphological attributes of its evolution, the playlist inherits traits from both the list and the repertoire. These notions are related and extensively studied in the social sciences.

2.1. List

The study of the *list* as a semiotic phenomenon acquires importance insofar as it is a cultural practice that fulfills different functions, both in the ordering and systematization of textual corpus and the mutation of cultures in their points of explosion. Umberto Eco (2009) deals with the morphological multiplicity of the list as part of the modes of artistic and everyday representation. In this sense, the *list* is a semiotic device that gives order to a specific accumulation process. That is when one does not know precisely how many elements comprise a macrocosm or when it is complex to encompass. Also, when we are not “able to offer a definition based on essential features, one goes on to enumerate its properties in order to translate it into something intelligible” (Eco 2009: 15). Eco distinguishes between practical or ‘pragmatic’ lists and ‘poetic’ lists.

The practical list can be exemplified by the shopping list, the guest list for a party, the catalog of a library, the inventory of objects in any place (such as an office, an archive, or a museum), the list of goods in a will, the invoice for a commodity that requires payment, the menu of a restaurant or the list of places to see in a tourist guide. (Eco 2009: 113)

Following Eco, pragmatic lists have some specific properties. They have an exclusively referential function; that is, they refer to objects or concepts and have the practical purpose of nomination and enumeration; secondly, they are finite; and thirdly, they cannot be altered. From this perspective, practical lists confer unity to a set of objects that, however different they may be from each other, fulfill a contextual requirement, i.e., they are related by their immanent features, by being grouped in the same place or by constituting the objective of a specific project, as we will see below. Poetic lists, however, deal with any artistic purpose they are made for and any art form that employs that format to express it.

2.2. Repertoire

Far from the cumulative nature of Eco’s view of lists, the notion of repertoire is associated with the idea of collection. Namely, it has a more active meaning than the practice of accumulation. The notion of repertoire refers to the use of language for operational purposes, specifically communication, and is generally associated with collaborative interaction practices (Rymes 2022). Unlike the list, the repertoire serves the constant creation of performative competencies. This is described by Diana Tylor, who also recalls that the notion of repertoire is intrinsically linked to the idea of the archive (2015).

Tylor attributes unalterable features to the archive, be they documents, maps, books, extension books, written texts, objects, or any type of instrument supposedly

resistant to transformation. Instead, the repertoire requires the presence of actants who participate in situ in a specific type of production. In other words, “contrary to the supposedly stable objects of the archive, the actions that make up the repertoire do not remain unalterable” (Tylor 2015: 16).

The notion of playlists brings together in its etymology aspects immanent to both definitions -list and repertoire-. While the prefix *play* reminds us of the actantial weight of its meaning, the suffix *list* synthesizes the subjectivized form in which a playlist is cognitively presented. In general, playlists comprise an extensive range of interactive modalities and, thus, ways of generating transference and enunciation.

3. Cultural media co-evolution

The mediatization of everyday life forms (Fontanille 2015), particularly in music, encompasses practices that exemplify its subtle but penetrating influences on global culture, as well as its variable assimilation across the planet. In the digital age, the relationship between arts and media has been co-determined more intensely than ever before. Analyzing some of the features of this co-evolutionary process enables us to order and classify the novelties, permanences, or mutations that occur in current, technology-related social practices and uses through the socio-semiotic and, therefore, cultural processes taking place in the textual, metatextual and transpositional discursive levels.

One of the interesting aspects of the semiotic study of formats is that, perceived from a meta-level, they operate as affordances in different spheres of everyday life. Thus, playlists integrate specifically media affordances aimed at shaping the conditions of music listening and enjoyment, but also musical affordances, affecting the interaction between musicians and shaping aspects of the performative. This double-edged character of playlists is echoed in our epistemological framework, i.e., understanding mediatization from a socio-semiotic perspective that comprises both *mediatic affordances* (explored in studies on mediatization and media ecology) and *musical affordances* (explored in popular music studies, semiotics, and musicology). The socio-semiotics of mediatization uses the concept of affordances to explain how the material aspects of media can influence and co-structure symbolic representation and social interaction (Scolari, Fernández, and Rodríguez-Amát 2021; Boccia Artieri, Brilli and Zurovac 2021). On the other hand, the fields of musicology and popular music studies employ the notion of musical affordances to mean sound production actions and their effects (Prieto 1976; Lopez Cano 2006; Reybrouck 2012).¹

¹ James Gibson's (1979) concept of affordances originated in the field of perceptual psychology, while Norman (1988) and Hutchby (2001) later introduced it into technology and media studies. Subsequently, the concept was incorporated into mediatization theory, musicology, ethnomusicology and semiotics.

In other words, our epistemological framework allows us to conceive affordances as an operational tool that encompasses the full range of potential uses facilitating, limiting, and structuring mediated communication and interaction in specific contexts. As cultural configurations, they possess a diachronic character, with each stage in their evolution crystallizing in particular discursive systems. Regarding the present conjuncture, for example, we may think of the semiosphere of black music and contemporary formations of the macrostructure, such as trap, reggaeton, hip hop, or neo-soul.

One of the fundamental concerns of mediatization studies, whatever their geographical perspective, is their concern to understand contemporary and future culture, i.e., mediatization studies produce knowledge by constructing qualitative, quantitative, or quali-quantitative descriptions of the particularities that characterize the synchronic stage of cultural-media processes. This involves building metatextualities that explain or can establish dialogues with similar processes in other areas of the semiosphere on a micro, meso, or macro scale (Hartley, Ibrus, and Ojamaa 2020). An innovative viewpoint in mediatization theories is to examine daily media life not only from the listener's perspective but also from the perspective of the actors who produce transpositions in the musical universe.

3.1. List and repertoire through mass media

During the second half of the twentieth century, the role of the list and repertoire formats became evident in radio or television formats structured on the basis of song lists or video clips. For example, television programs such as MTV's *The 10 most requested* or *El mundial del video* broadcast by Much Music Argentina. The role of the ranking program's format in music mediatization and configuring a discursive genre must be acknowledged. The same is true for television and radio station programming schedules or record labels and distribution companies' catalogs, which played a central role in the second half of the twentieth century. Considering such precedents, we can perceive playlists as the evolutionary result of other intangible media formats long present in the mass media.

3.2. Meta musical affordances

Let's take jazz as an example of the popular music of the twentieth century. We find that its repertoire has been canonized, at least partly, thanks to fake books and Real Books. This repertoire of archives in scriptural format, crystallized from scores, played a crucial role in the canonization of jazz and the consolidation and evolution of the semiosphere of black music during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Jazz became popular between 1900 and 1950 due to the enormous amount of music published at the

time by the American industry. Toby Wren (2022) asserts that the distinctive features of jazz, as a musical genre, are intrinsic to the repertoire of standards, and even the very practice of musical improvisation in the genre is structured by that repertoire.

The specialized literature considers it essential to analyze the diachronic adaptive capacity of global jazz practices and how racial, ethnic, and cultural differences are expressed through music to recognize how different cultures assimilate the same cultural code (Floyd, Zeck, and Ramsey 2017; Johnson and Havas 2022). Hence, Wren concludes that a jazz standard has no precise definition. “Debates over which pieces can be considered standards are contentious, in part because the criteria for a jazz standard change over time and geographies” (Wren 2022: 1). Wren refers to those melodies and harmonic structures that are considered common knowledge among jazz musicians and appear in the pages of the various Real Books and Fake Books. This is the raw material, the Saussurean langue, from which musicians engage in parole on any given stage.

In 1975, students at Berklee College of Music in Boston compiled the best versions of the standards being played at the time. They added new compositions, listed and published in a single edition, resulting in *The New Real Book*. This book failed to be legalized due to the difficulty of obtaining copyrights for all the pieces. Also noteworthy is the case of the *Great American Songbook*, comprising popular songs written for Broadway and Hollywood musicals and Tin Pan Alley. Another relevant precedent is when the Hal Leonard Corporation publishing house was in charge of compiling the copyrights of almost all the songs that appear in the original *The Real Book* of 1975, surprising the jazz guild with the release of the first legal version in September 2004, with similar features to the original version in terms of typography and organization (Faulkner and Becker 2011).

Real Books were consolidated in the semiosphere as a series of handwritten scores, alphabetically ordered, in which the melody of each standard is found in different keys, accompanied by its harmonic nomenclature. Their fame is partly due to the many versions of standards transposed to different instruments. This aspect facilitated their performance since it allowed musicians to have a repertoire to read in ubiquitous mode.

The specialized literature defines these musical forms as pieces of distinctive songs of American culture, combining African-American influences (including blues, ragtime, and other vernacular song influences) and European conventions. What is interesting about the jazz standard, and thus Real Books, is that they were usually situated and defined in both the academy and the musical realm as repertoire for improvisation.

Samuel Floyd asserts that jazz is more about improvising new ‘texts’; it is a communal and cooperative process (Floyd, Zeck, and Ramsey 2017). As a cultural format, the standards were also referred to as a symbolic resource by Damond Phillips (2011),

as they function as the glue that connects the different styles within jazz. Individually, standard tunes have distinctive characters that performers try to highlight in their interpretations, including their improvisations. Paul Berliner, for example, describes in detail how musicians have varied chord progressions and improvised on standard repertoire.

Although Berliner's book expresses multiple viewpoints, the general characterization of the repertoire conforms to European notions of working in music: the standard is pre-existing, and the musicians offer an interpretation and use it as a basis for improvisations. At present, both popular music and semiotic studies point out that, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the score is no longer used as a language for archiving musical texts. This began with analogical mediation and deepened with digital technology (Marino 2020; Valle 2021).

4. Playlists in Radiooooo

Radiooooo is a French platform born in 2014, based on collaborative playlisting. It is a project in which each user can contribute files with sound text and a visual cover. Each 'contribution' or 'discovery' implies an act of selection and inclusion in at least one of the playlists offered by the platform.

Depending on the decade to which each song belongs, the number of contributions of each user, and the level of acceptance of each contribution – counted in likes – each community member accumulates points that position in a general ranking.

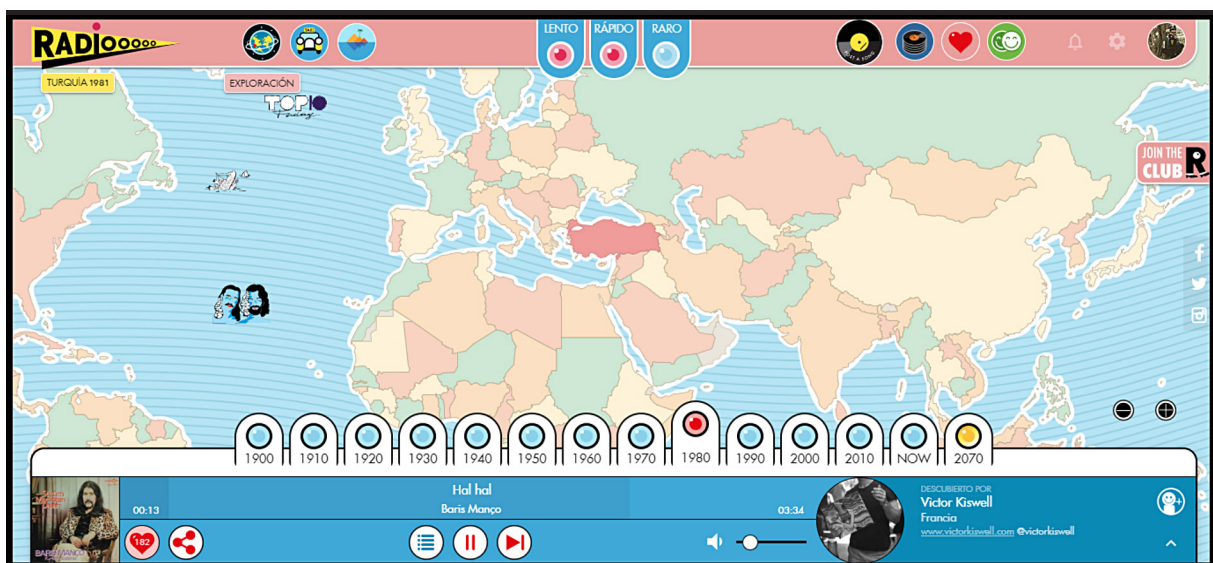


Figure 1. Radiooooo user interface in the year 2023. Retrieved from <https://radiooooo.com/>

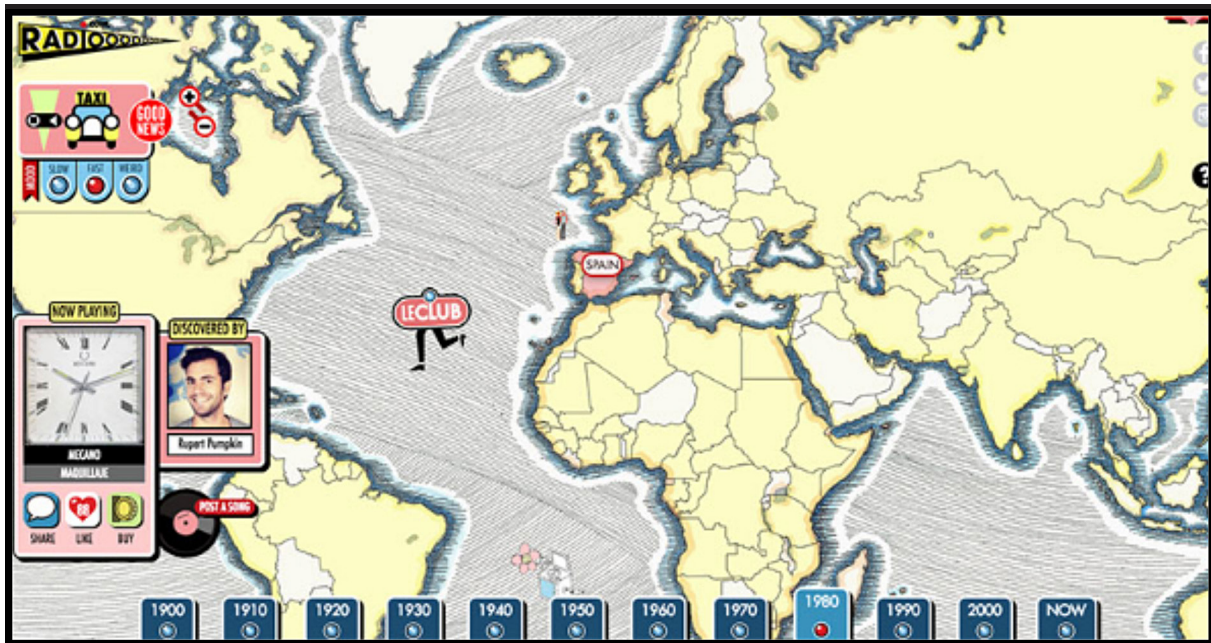


Figure 2. Radiooooo user interface year 2018.

Radiooooo allows a previously non-existent experience of musical fruition, in which the user can choose any country from the world map that occupies the central place of the interface, then select a decade within a timeline that goes from the early twentieth century to the present, and even making future representations from current songs. Once we choose geography and a decade, the platform plays a list of songs automatically generated from the collaborative contributions of the users. In other words, mediatization is based on a wiki-type of interaction, where the files are organized in playlists according to the geographical and temporal characteristics of each piece and their stylistic attributes.

In addition to spatio-temporal coordinates, other technical devices function as vectors that individualize the user experience. The 'shuffle mode,' for example, offers a more unrestricted experience in terms of space-time, as the option dispenses with user interaction by choosing geographic and temporal locations for music listening. Next, it allows the choice of a stylistic range of the music among three main vectors: slow, fast, or weird. In semiotic terms, these vectors are inadequate to define the criteria underlying list-making. In contrast, the first two effectively allude to the musical pieces' *tempo* or BPMs. On the other hand, given the temporo-spatial variety, the concept of 'rarity' does not seem to offer more than opacity.

Another essential feature of Radiooooo is that, unlike platforms like Spotify, there is no manual generation of playlists. The process is automatic or assisted and based on the intrinsic characteristics of the texts each user contributes. Figure 2 is a screenshot of the user interface of Radiooooo in 2018 and aims to show some visual and vector

features that have remained or disappeared in its evolution. At the time, for example, there was an option called Taxi, which metaphorically alluded to the experience of moving through different landscapes while tuned to a city radio; in effect, taking a ride in the sound landscape of some other country and decade. The platform also has a 'shuffle mode' (Figure 3), moving randomly between countries and decades, making the sound experience even more unpredictable.

Following Eco, the generation of playlists by the application occurs pragmatically. A priori is about users scattered around the globe who, motivated by their love for music and perhaps for the pleasure of appearing in the site's ranking, collaborate with sound fragments collected in a digital space. If one considers the aesthetic dimension of the playlists, especially the most recent ones, it is possible to recognize the enunciative role of the platform through the playlists insofar as there are certain stylistic attributes shared among the selected files. A clear example is the representation of future sound landscapes from a selection of past or current texts to risk an aesthetic conception of the year 2070 in different parts of the globe, as shown in the picture below.

This actantial feature of playlists endows the platform with an enunciative identity. Given its interactive properties, the platform's identity is always shaped by its community of users, which generates narrative processes and aesthetic identification. We need to underline that the Radiooooo experience offers a type of musical fruition based on interactions resulting from the practice of playlisting. Interactional attributes are unthinkable outside the spatial-temporal malleability provided by digital technology. In sum, Radiooooo's description highlights some aspects that show how a virtual community establishes its ties based on the encoding and decoding processes of global music, where the playlist format is the platform's practical and enunciative proposal.

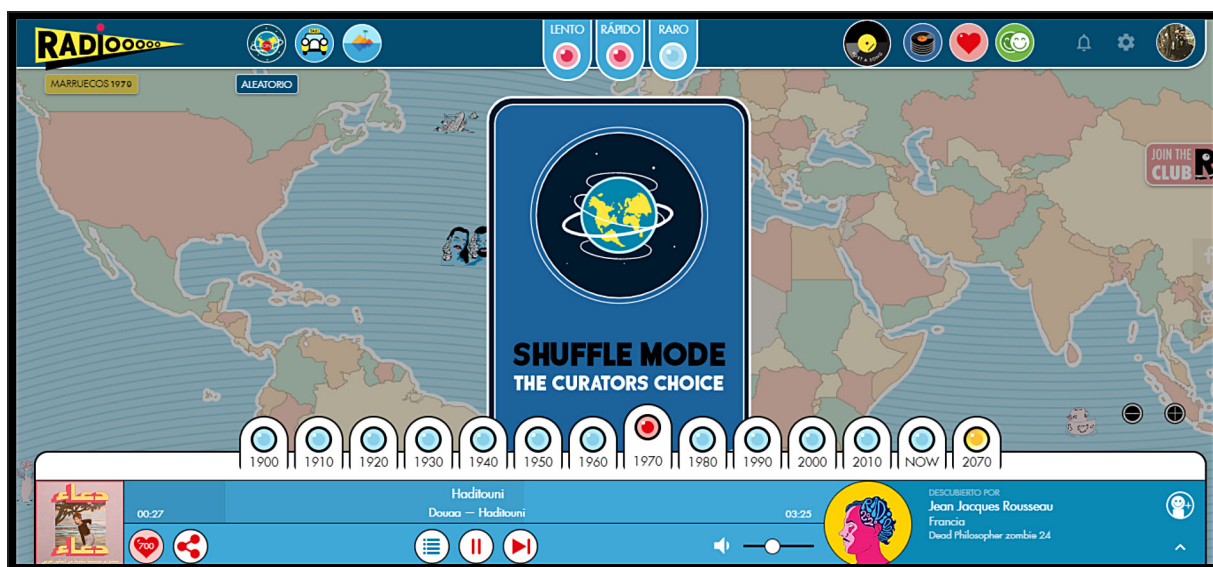


Figure 3. Radiooooo interface in Shuffle mode, 2023.

5. Spotify playlists as repertoire in Black music jam sessions

Our research framework includes ethnographic work and, more specifically, participant observation in contemporary circuits of jam sessions across different geographical latitudes. These circuits are characterized by exceeding the jazz sphere in the interpretative field, embracing a broad spectrum of the black music semiosphere. Given these peculiarities, we have called this type of jam sessions JBM (Jams Sessions of Black Music). Jam sessions are forms of cultural life that originate in the field of jazz. Given the practices that characterize them – with musical improvisation as one of their distinctive aspects – we can say that they represent instances where the *langue* becomes *parole*; where the repertoire is placed at the service of the improvisational and transformative action of a text initially archived in a repertoire, the Real Books.

The JBMs are usually open to languages with a higher degree of minimalism and economy of technical means than the language of jazz. This makes them attractive to many musicians, but it is also relevant to understanding the proliferation of JBMs in different countries despite the nuances they acquire in each case. One of the JBM circuits studied is located in the city of Buenos Aires and presents noteworthy mediatic issues in the shaping of its repertoire. Unlike in jazz jam sessions, where, as we have seen, the repertoire is dictated by the Real Books, the JBMs studied interact with repertoires through the use of playlists within the Spotify platform.² But, what are the implications of such a media substitution?

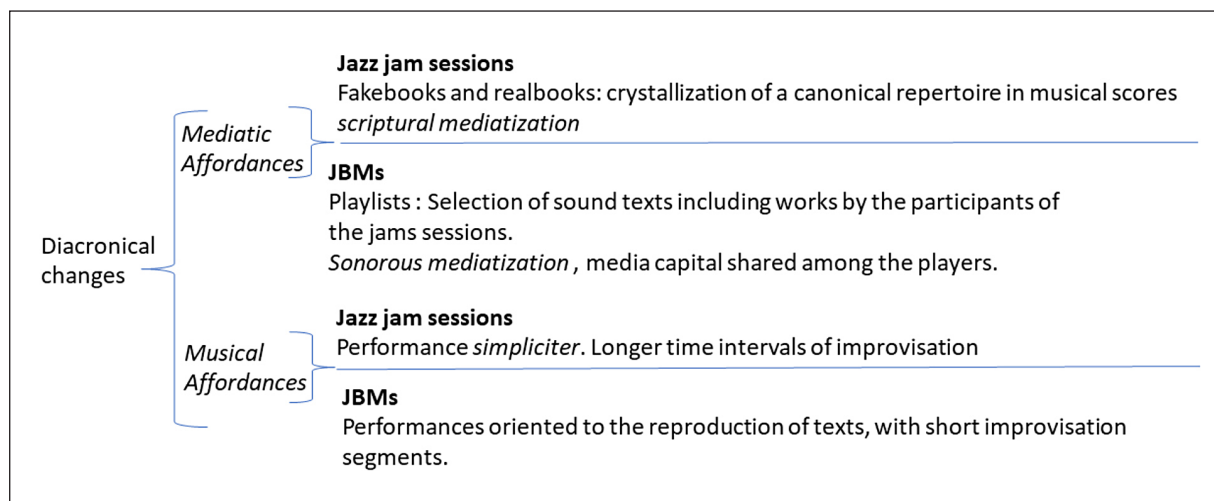


Figure 4. Diachronic changes and format substitution.

² SWe refer specifically to circuits circumscribed to Buenos Aires, Argentina, which have also begun to be mapped and studied in Europe as part of the broader research that includes this work.

A priori, the replacement of the book format by Spotify playlists allows an individualized creation of repertoires composed of sound files, selected and ordered through their user profiles, which can be official or belonging to the profiles of actants in the role of curatorship of the JBMs. The replacement of formats has wide-ranging implications. JBMs encompass a spectrum of musical genres beyond jazz, reaching all genres and styles contained in the semiosphere of black music. They encode both the type of performance and the interactions between the participants from the affordances that each media moment imprints from the use of Spotify Playlists, influencing both the configuration of the repertoires and the performative practices that characterize the type of performance in each historical period. The substitution of one format for another has also implied the disappearance of *solfege*³ as a recurrent practice to use the repertoire, encouraging the learning and interpretation of the pieces through listening. In other words, there are cognitive implications resulting from the media substitution that regulate the ways of learning and interaction among the players.

The following images (Figures 5 & 6) belong to the playlists of two JBMS with different degrees of development. The image on the right belongs to the playlists of a JBM called Skill Session, which is generated from the personal profile of one of its curators. Its content prioritizes local artists, some regular musicians within the circuit, over black music from international and consecrated worldwide artists. The image on the left shows a segment of the Afromama⁴ playlist, a Spotify jam session that interacts with musicians and followers through its verified artist profile. Its official profile curates a playlist that integrates Black Music classics with pieces by local artists and regular participants in their live performances.

The comparative relationship between both playlists allows us to describe how the individual styles of the repertoires are built according to particular features in each case. For example, the difference in the degree of presence of established black music artists in each repertoire, or the nature of the profile from which the playlists are created and mediatized, as well as how each repertoire includes texts by the musicians who participate in the circuit. While in the first case, the sound files are selected and ordered from individual user profiles, the second case takes advantage of the virtues of a verified artist account to focus on the production, edition, and circulation of sound texts belonging to musicians of the circuit.

Afromama's verified artist profile shows in its playlist phonograms belonging to musicians who are part of its staff and regularly participate in live performances. In addition, each phonogram produced and edited by Afromama has a cover image that

³ Technique of reading and giving the appropriate value to musical signs of a score.

⁴ Afromama is one of the JBMs with the highest level of development in the urban circuit of the city of Buenos Aires. The following link corresponds to their profile on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/afromamajams/?hl=es>

contains the same identification logo with minimal variations between each file, distinguishing them from those files that the user profile did not produce but have only been selected for the repertoire.

The background colors on each cover change from dark burgundy to purple. The inscription below the logo allows reading the name of the phonogram and, below it, the name of the JBM, together with the name of the work's author. The uniformity of aesthetic features in the covers, together with the visualization of the works in list format offered by the playlist, generate an effect of homogenization among the phonograms, giving them a sense of identification with the profile of the user that contains them.

Playlists in the context of JBMs have a triple function: (i) the fruition of listening in a ubiquitous context; (ii) they function as the repertoire for the musicians participating in the performance; (iii) the edition and circulation of new phonographic texts produced by the artists participating in the live performances, thanks to the facilities offered by the platform and the digital technology of music production.

Creating repertoires in jam sessions through playlists implies a more dynamic interaction flow than the Real Books in the jazz sphere. The playlists offer the possibility of putting into play a type of media capital not available to the participants in previous media moments. That is to say, the possibility that the jam sessions put into circulation

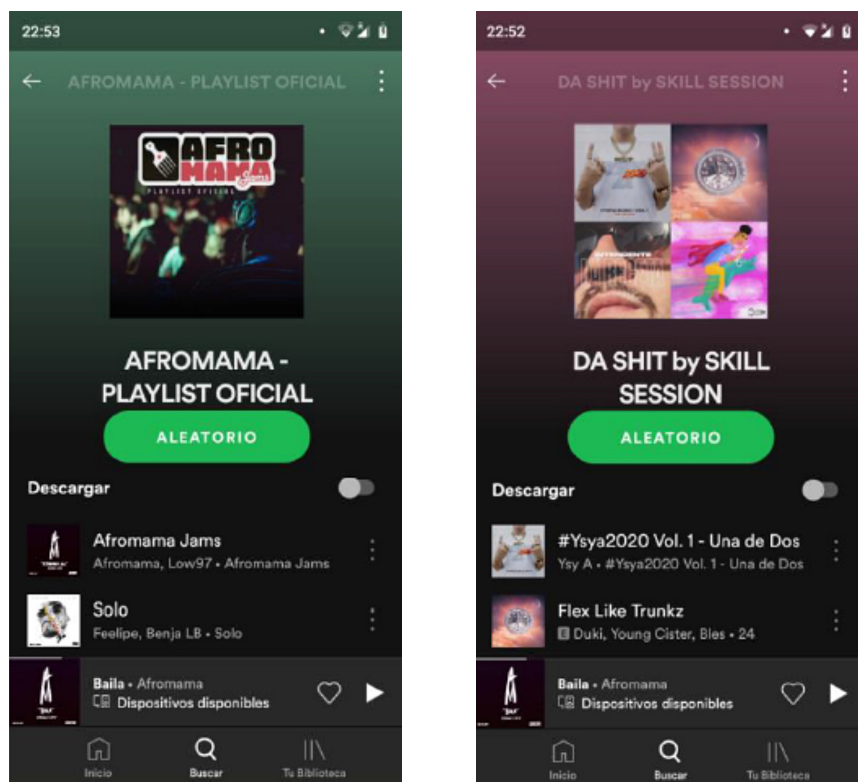


Figure 5-6. Visualization of studied playlists.
 Retrieved from the Spotify platform.

discographic material of the participating musicians, when in jazz jam, the actantial potential of the musician passes through the capacity to modify a canonized work at the moment of the performance, but the archives are not modified and remain crystallized as part of a canon. This means that the change in media format is also related to the type of performances each type of jam session offers. In the case of jazz, it is a type of performance where each execution of a sound piece has an aesthetic value, regardless of the work's identity in the repertoire. In musicology, this type of performance is called *simpliciter* (López Cano 2018: 64).

On the other hand, in the JBMs, the interpretations tend to reproduce the texts in their original form or with previously rehearsed variations, restricting the moments of improvisation to minor lapses, and where the artists seek to make their repertoire known and stimulate the circulation of its contents in platforms. In the JBMs, the enunciative character of the repertoires does not depend on the type of interpretation made of the sonorous texts. Instead, the enunciative and actantial value resides in the fact that the jam session participants can include their songs within a repertoire that includes established artists in the semiosphere. The possibilities of editing and circulating sonorous files offered by the JBMs are practices that, in other media, belonged exclusively to production companies and record labels.

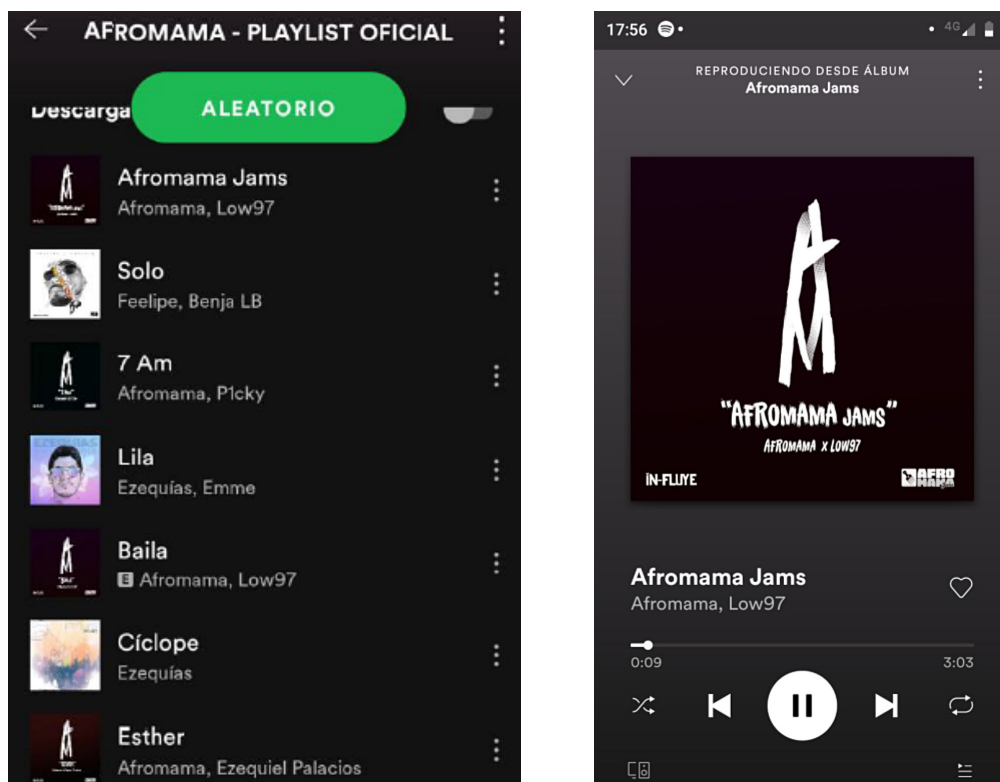


Figure 7-8. Visualization of studied playlists.
Retrieved from the Spotify platform.

6. Final considerations

This paper has described aspects inherent to the formation and maintenance of virtual and non-virtual communities based on the use of different types of playlists, which, in a temporal trajectory, crystallize in discursive styles belonging to the contemporary synchronic plane of the semiosphere.

The description of the Radiooooo platform allows us to account for the formation of a virtual community based on an interactional flow guaranteed by the platform's playlists. Radiooooo bases its media proposal on collaborative playlisting. In this way, it is possible to distinguish a musical experience aimed at showing exotic artists and songs from the desire to explore music in different geographies and periods. It is a non-algorithmic way of getting to know new artists and musical styles based on user collaboration. The platform organizes the operation of various playlist types, with files automatically ordered by default but generated by each user's contribution, opening playlists in countries and eras previously blocked on the platform due to lack of files. Radiooooo also shows the enunciative capacity of the playlist as it guarantees (thanks to the users' taste) stylistic attributes that generate a collective identity. In this context, the playlist's actantial potential is seen both in the collecting impetus of its users and in the search for unknown moments and strange places for the listener.

As for the alternative uses of playlists in Spotify, we refer to implementing the playlist to guarantee the repertoire and its individual enunciative features in a circuit of black music jam sessions. The playlists work by codifying the aesthetics of black music in individual styles offered by each jam session, that is, by attending to individual enunciative modalities adopted by each space. The playlists as a repertoire of the JBMs influence cognitive aspects linked to the learning of the musical pieces and the interaction between the musicians for their interpretation. An example of this is the elimination of *solfège* as a necessary practice to access the repertoire. This aspect modifies the musical competencies put into play among the circuit musicians.

All these highlight the emergence of a mediatic capital previously non-existent in these contexts. The possibility of including sonorous texts and putting them into circulation within a broad user community through the playlists of the JBMs prioritizes exposure and reproduction over the *extempore* modification of the archive at the moment of the performance. It is noteworthy, finally, that the mediatization of the playlist format in the cases analyzed reinforces the song format as a type of textual organization as opposed to other ways of conceiving musical pieces.

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