



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 10

Zoom Black Magic Liberation Radio: The birth of the micro-radio movement in the USA

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In the United States, in response to the government carrot of licensing status and the stick of anti-piracy crackdowns, many once adventurous community radio broadcasters have toned down their oppositional elements and have consciously or unconsciously become engaged in a process of self-censorship. One sign pointing in a different direction is the micro-radio movement, originating not on a college campus or in a university-based community, but in the heart of the black ghetto. This is the story of one micro-radio station, WTRA/Zoom Black Magic Liberation Radio in Springfield, Illinois.

The story unfolds at the John Hay Homes, a sprawling, low income public housing project located in Springfield's east side. It is a housing project that is almost exclusively African-American. Located just a short distance from the enshrined home of Abraham Lincoln, it's a part of Springfield that isn't on the tourist map. During the mid-eighties, the John Hay Tenants Rights Association (TRA) was formed to do issue-based, neighbourhood organising.

Focusing first on expressway expansion and related school traffic safety issues, the TRA moved on to the issues of school bussing and the inadequate representation of the east side community under the archaic, commission form of government. Calling for more community control, they successfully challenged the local black bourgeoisie who claimed to represent them in a historic voting rights lawsuit, which resulted in the commission system being replaced with an aldermanic one.

The TRA then opposed an ordinance sponsored by their newly-elected black alderman which involved the purchase of scab coal from a Shell owned mine which violated the boycott on Shell in response to its South African holdings. They also politically skewered the alderman's plan for a weak-kneed civilian review board for the police, proposing instead a much stronger one modelled on that of Berkeley, California.

Angered and dismayed by biased media coverage of these actions and its organising campaigns, the TRA, in 1986, hit upon the idea of a community-based radio station to represent its point of view directly to its constituency and to communicate more effectively with a community which has an oral tradition and a high rate of functional illiteracy.

This idea was not unusual in itself. For example, ACORN (the Association of Community Organisations for Reform Now) had been using radio as an organising tool for some time. However, the ACORN vision was more centralised in focus, more closely tied to coordinating national ACORN organising goals among the local chapters, promoted relatively high wattage for maximum outreach, and was strictly legal.

In contrast, WTRA (as the station was originally named) was based on a decentralised model, had a symbiotic relationship with its community with no official membership base and no national ties. Disdaining professional trappings, it broadcast with low power and was not only illegal in the eyes of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC),¹ but defiantly so. Because of Springfield's apartheid housing patterns, it was clear that even a station of less than a watt with a radius of between one and two miles could cover 70% of the African-American community, the prime audience which the station desired to reach. Since it was not a clandestine station, it would, by its very openness, challenge the power of the federal government.

Given the TRA's non-compliance with FCC rules and regulations, though it continued to be involved in more mainstream community organising activities, its primary funding agent, the Campaign for Human Development, cancelled its grant. Fortunately, before cancellation, \$600 in grant money had already been spent to purchase the equipment necessary to set up the radio station. All that remained was to find an empty spot on the dial and start broadcasting.

The FCC model for radio broadcasters is based on scarcity. Asserting that the electromagnetic spectrum is finite, the FCC benignly agrees to act as the impartial gatekeeper for access to the airwaves in the name of the public interest. However, another explanation of federal radio communications policy might start with a question recently posed by M'banna Kantako, founder of the TRA and "deprogramming" director of the radio station since it has been on the air: "Why is it that in this country you can buy a fully assembled AK-47 easier than a radio transmitter?"

M'banna Kantako has been intrinsically linked to the evolution of the radio station from its inception as WTRA, into Zoom Black Magic Liberation Radio, and, most recently, into Black Liberation Radio. It is from his apartment at the John Hay Homes that the station transmits, and his living room is a gathering place for political activists,

¹ The Federal Communications Commission is the official body charged with regulating the airwaves in the USA.

neighbours and friends to discuss the issues of the day. It is a focal point for community animation in which grievances are aired and aspirations articulated around the radio transmitter.

His name wasn't always Kantako. Born DeWayne Readus he later discarded it as a slave name, choosing for himself the name M'banna Kantako, symbolising refusal, resistance, rebellion and a connection with Africa. According to Kantako:

We were on the air 3 years before the FCC bust. It was just a party thing, and we partied because we didn't know that we were being wiped out. Once we got hip to it and started to identify those things that are used to wipe us out, like the police, then we became a threat to the government, and then, of course, they used another apparatus, the FCC, to declare us illegal.

Just before the cease and desist order was issued, Kantako, who was himself blinded as a young man in a beating at the hands of the police, had broadcast a series of shows which involved community people calling in and giving personal testimony about police brutality or as Kantako calls it, "official government-sponsored terrorism." Springfield Police Chief Mike Walton quickly complained about the illegality of the station to the FCC, and in April of 1989, the officials knocked on Kantako's door demanding that he stop broadcasting or face a fine of \$750 (\$150 more than the cost of the station's equipment), pursuant to Section 301 of the Communications Act of 1934, for being an unlicensed station. Shutting down the station for a little less than 2 weeks to reflect on the situation, Kantako recalled from history that during slavery there had been laws against the slaves communicating with one another.

Bringing that history up to date, as Kantako told Rich Sherekis of the Illinois Times back in January of 1990, "We weren't around when they made those laws about licensing... We were sitting in the back of the bus somewhere. So why should we be responsible to obey laws that oppress us?" Furthermore, as he pointed out later that month at a conference on radio censorship held in Chicago, those laws are selectively enforced.

If you are saying, "Don't give a damn about nobody. Get you a house. Get you a dog. Get you a swimming pool, and the hell with everybody else," then they will not only leave you on the air, they'll give you a bigger transmitter! But if you start talking about people coming together to fight against the system that's oppressing all of humanity, all across the planet, then they will find you. There is nowhere you can hide.

So, he decided to go back on the air as an open act of civil disobedience, risking confiscation of his equipment, FCC-imposed fines that could go as high as \$10,000, and criminal penalties of as much as \$100,000 and one year in prison. WTRA was not simply resuming operations, but consciously challenging the exclusion of low income people, particularly African-Americans, from the airwaves and offering an affordable alternative. In 1978 the FCC adopted a policy to give licenses only to stations broadcasting with 100 watts or more, replacing the old minimum standard of 10 watts. Start up costs for such a station run around \$50,000 (including equipment costs, engineering surveys, legal fees and proving to the FCC that you're solvent.) The cost of meeting FCC requirements effectively silences many potential radio voices. As Kantako put it, "It's kind of like those black tie dinners at \$25,000 a plate. You can come, if you've got \$25,000.

Anything you need to survive, they put a price tag on, and if you don't have it, you don't survive. They call our broadcasting controversial. We call it survival material.”

Such survival material includes broadcasting local police communications live from the police scanner he has set up in his apartment. In a more humorous vein, the station once recorded the oinking and squealing of pigs in a central Illinois barnyard and broadcast it later, for a full 90 minutes, as a “secretly-recorded meeting at the Springfield police station.” While he likes a joke at the expense of the police, when he flipped the switch to go back on the air, Kantako was very serious about his historical mission. “Somebody tell the children how WTRA served as an advocate for the people when the police wouldn't police themselves... Somebody tell the people how we fought police brutality by broadcasting the personal testimonies of African-American victims.” While he was not arrested, the FCC made clear to him that he was in violation of the code.

The only exemption to the FCC's licensing requirement is for extremely low power transmissions that can be heard no more than 25 yards away. So, unless it increased its wattage 100 fold, the station would not qualify for an FCC license. However, as Kantako has noted in expressing his contempt for the FCC licensing process, ‘ Anything the government gives you, they can take away.’ He calls the FCC the “thought patrol As he explains, “It's not legal in this country for people to do anything to empower themselves, and in particular the black community. Don't no government give you freedom of speech. Don't no government own the air.”

Ironically, the Objectives of the FCC Commissioners, as listed in the 1990 budget, call for the Commission “to eliminate government actions that infringe upon the freedom of speech and the press.” Kantako is calling their bluff by demanding that the government pay more than just lip service to the constitutional guarantees of free speech and equal protection under the law. In terms of the latter, while blacks compose 12% of the nation's population, they only own 2% of its radio stations for an exclusion rate of 600%, dramatically higher if class and gender are brought into the picture. Providing equal protection, by waiving license requirements or by setting up a separate category for low power community broadcasting licenses, is a political choice the FCC seems unwilling to offer, despite the Federal Communications Act's call for “fair, efficient and equitable” distribution of radio services.

The types of voices heard on WTRA when it started and those heard on Black Liberation Radio today have changed somewhat over the years. The local authorities are one of the causes of this change. In the early days, most of the station's programmers were youth, learning radio skills and doing live hip hop mixes on the air, laying down the black liberation sound track of the Nineties. But there has been a constant barrage of police harassment directed at anyone involved with the station and more than a dozen of the young people on the air at the beginning have been expelled from school for, as Kantako puts it “anything from reading books on Malcolm X to not wanting to eat the red meat.” In spite of the harassment, there are still youth involved with the station, but they come and go. Moreover, in addition to radio, many youth continue to be involved in the TRA's Marcus Garvey Freedom Summer School and the Malcolm X Library.

One of the things that has helped the station continue in the face of threats from local authorities and the FCC is the degree of national and international support it has

gained. It has a high national profile with favourable articles appearing in a range of publications from the progressive press to the underground “zines,” news stories on NPR and MTV, a potential constitutional court case (“Black Liberation Radio vs. the FCC”) presently being researched by the National Lawyers Guild, and international support from the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), along with articles appearing in the Italian and German press.

Yet all this publicity could not protect the station were it not for the strength of its grassroots community support. Kantako is not some outside agitator, but a lifelong resident of the community in which the station is situated. “I love to brag about the community I live in” he says. “This is a group of people that society has no need for and instead of laying down and dying, they’ve said, ‘let’s arm ourselves with the necessary knowledge and we’ll make a place for ourselves.’ If those in charge of the money won’t include us, then we’ll include ourselves.” Going full circle, it is this kind of spirited resistance that, in turn, generated the national and international support in the first place, and that continues to do so. One of the results of this local, national and international alliance was a successful letter writing campaign that beat back a 1990 attempt to have the station evicted from its base in the John Hay Homes.

By 1991 the station had changed its name from WTRA to Black Liberation Radio, a change that was motivated by the desire to dissociate itself from official labelling devices and proclaim its right to exist without government sanction.

In addition to the immediate concerns of the local community, Black Liberation Radio’s programming also deals with world issues in the same openly-oppositional way. During the recent war in the Middle East, Black Liberation Radio was the only station in Springfield that offered a position vigorously critical of the U.S. government, with both the commercial stations and the local university-based NPR² station busily involved in collaborating with the process of manufacturing consent. As Kantako has said:

If anything, what people should have got out of the Persian Gulf massacre is how tightly the media is controlled by the military industrial complex... Your station will get community support if you start telling the people the truth because all over the planet folks are dying to hear the truth and one way this multinational conglomerate has stayed in charge is by purposely making the people ignorant.

In addition to news and commentary, Black Liberation Radio has a music policy that offers a “yard-to-yard” mix of hip hop, reggae and African music with a political flavour that consciously eschews racist, sexist or materialistic music. As Kantako says, “Our music format is designed to resurrect the mind, not keep the mind asleep.” He also plays “talking books” on black history, culture and liberation struggles that he receives from the audio service for the blind.

Another way that the micro-radio movement intrinsically challenges cultural hegemony is on the networking level. It is a model of organisation concerned more with spreading information than with hierarchical control. In this regard, Kantako has even produced a 20 minute video on how to set up your own micro radio station, which he has

² National Public Radio is a network of not-for-profit radio stations supported with a mix of corporate and government sponsorship.

6 / A Passion for Radio

distributed widely around the country to those wanting to get started. I recently asked Kantako what his vision was for the micro-radio movement, since it is a term he coined himself.

I would like to see lots of little stations come on the air all over the country so you could drive out of one signal right into another. If you had a gap, you could run a tape until the next one came into range. I'm not interested in big megawatt stations. When you get too big, you get what you got now in America which is basically a homogenised mix of nothing, a bunch of mindless garbage which keeps the people operating in a mindless state. We think that the more community-based these things become, the more the community can put demands on the operators of these stations to serve the needs of that community.

So, I envision myself behind the wheel of my van, cruising the USA of the future with a map of micro-radio stations lighting my way from coast to coast, reflecting the wide array of cultural diversity that exists beneath the surface gloss – a vision that is the antithesis of the lockstep national unity of the new world order.

I smile broadly as I recall a recent radio interview with a community station in which Kantako was asked what he would do if the FCC came and took his equipment. ‘We’re prepared,’ he said, “to be a mobile station until we get some equipment again. We can run our station off of a 10 speed bike if necessary.” Then, when asked, “How can our listeners support you in your struggle? Should we write the FCC?,” his reply was immediate. “Go on the air! Just go on the air!”

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