



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
www.comunica.org/passion/

Chapter 17

Radio Gazelle: Multi-cultural radio in Marseille

by members of the Radio Gazelle team

Marseille is a cosmopolitan city located in the south of France. It is a Mediterranean port which has seen its share of immigrants and travellers. In the last two decades this city the second largest in France, has experienced much economic hardship. Predictably, this economic slump provoked social and political tensions in the city, torn between a rich and tourist area in the south, and an industrial and working class district in the north. Despite a declining population, the unemployment levels reached record highs, 15% for the general population and 40% for those under the age of 25. The increasing poverty and the rise of the right on the political scene have caused a resurgence of racial conflict throughout the 1980s.

In the midst of this socio-economic scenario, Marseille experienced the birth of numerous stations that were part of the “free” radio movement. This movement began circa 1979, when “pirate” radio stations sprang up around the country. The enthusiasm for this type of radio grew in 1981 when the Socialists came to power and deregulated the airwaves, ending the State’s monopoly. The free radio stations fulfilled an urgent need to give a voice to people who had been under-represented by the State broadcasters. A few months before the 1981 legalisation, Radio Gazelle was born.

2 / A Passion for Radio

THE MAGHREB COMMUNITY RADIO¹

Radio Gazelle was the initiative of a group of young people from the Maghreb, living in Marseille's northern district. Their initiative was based in a political desire to make their voices heard, to inform their community, and to ensure respect for its rights. Their actions enabled them to counter the cultural vacuum which had impeded the integration of this minority community with the rest of the population. With the aid of educators and activists, these youths began by broadcasting unbridled debates on weekends and at night. The broadcasts were accompanied by music from the Maghreb. They used a 100 watt transmitter and broadcast illegally.

One of the consequences of the Socialist Party's deregulation of the airwaves was that foreigners now had the right to form associations and own radio stations. Thus, Radio Gazelle was formally incorporated and became the principal activity of the Association Rencontrer Amitié. Today, Radio Gazelle is located at street level in the heart of the working class district, in its own building. The area is primarily inhabited by immigrant workers.

The name Radio Gazelle came by chance during one of the many meetings of the team. Nobody remembers exactly who came up with the name. One theory is that it was chosen because it has the same pronunciation in French and in Arabic.

TOWARD PLURALISM

Today, after over ten years, Radio Gazelle is firmly established. Initially, the station was known for its roots in the Maghreb community, then it gradually opened its doors to the various communities making up the Marseille cultural mosaic. This change did not occur without some heated debates. These discussions concluded with a decision to avoid conditions which ghettoise a community, and to open the station to other cultural communities. The decision to go forward with this project of de-compartmentalising the airwaves was a result of regular contact between various ethnic groups in the same neighbourhood, as well an involvement in various debates on issues of common concern. It would have been hypocritical to fight for equality and for a pluralist France while maintaining an isolationist attitude towards our own radiophonic space. After much discussion, the term "multiculturalism" was added to the mandate of Radio Gazelle.

The redefined mandate was initially quite polemical, for each person understood multiculturalism in a way that is most convenient for them! Endless debates raged about the smallest details. Certain militants of European origin left, claiming there was not enough Arabic music on the air. In another case, some atheists adamantly opposed special programming for Ramadan.² The diverse ideologies represented within the teams running Radio Gazelle erupted during these conflicts and created an explosive environment.

¹ Maghreb is a region in north Africa composed of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

² Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim year, a period of daily fasting from sunrise to sunset.

RAMADAN

While Radio Gazelle is not a religious station, it has always provided its listeners with the opportunity to express and live out their Muslim traditions in Marseille. One way this service takes form is through special programming during Ramadan. Every year, for over ten years, Radio Gazelle sets up a temporary schedule during Ramadan. Each day, starting at 6:00 p.m., volunteer announcers call for the breaking of the fast. Special programming continues until two or three in the morning. This programming consists of religious music, radio plays, games, debates and interviews with spokespeople from the Muslim community of Marseille. There is also programming done in cooperation with radio stations in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

Ramadan is an important component of the activities at Radio Gazelle and our listenership increases five fold during this period – after all, in terms of number of adherents, Islam is France’s second religion.

Religious programming did not appear at Radio Gazelle without ruffling some feathers. During the first Ramadan, the Maghreb team wanted to rearrange the schedule in order to satisfy the demands of their Muslim listeners during the celebration. This required substantial changes in the regular programming. Many of the regular programmers were vehemently opposed to allowing what they saw as temporary disruptions to affect their programmes. The issue affected the station and the relations between programmers for years, until in 1986, a vote by a General Assembly of the association made a definitive ruling on the issue.

RESOURCES

Radio Gazelle has 143 volunteer members, of which 42 are on-air announcers. These volunteers give not only their time but also contribute financially to the station and its programming. Indeed, Radio Gazelle has survived and grown thanks to the dedication of these volunteers, and their contribution is unmatched in real value by other, larger, financial contributions.

Notwithstanding the trials and tribulations they have had to face, the volunteer teams which have managed the station have succeeded in achieving the two principal goals the station had set: multi-ethnic representation and the preservation of the political independence of the station.

Radio Gazelle also receives some support from the French government, which assures it a certain basic stability. It does not receive any money from foreign governments. Of its total budget of 800,000 francs³, one third comes from a fund operated by the Ministry of Communication. Another French government programme, the Fonds d’action sociale pour les travailleurs immigrés et leurs familles (Fund for social action for immigrant workers and their families) also provides a third. The remaining third comes from a grant from the city of Marseille, membership dues, advertising, and various other minor sources. With these funds Radio Gazelle operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

³ Approximately US\$200,000.

4 / A Passion for Radio

The station broadcasts in 13 languages, although Maghreb and oriental Arabic still account for 30% of the programming. The rest of the time is shared by European languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek and Italian), African languages (Comoran, Malagash, Kabyle and Wolof), Creole and Armenian. Radio Gazelle is indeed a multicultural forum which represents up to twenty cultural communities.

The wide spectrum of Radio Gazelle's programming takes various forms. The news and information magazine programmes provide analysis of issues concerning immigrants. The various cultural programmes broadcast news and developments of the life of the community and encourage communication amongst various communities. In order to further facilitate the expression of its listeners, Radio Gazelle dedicates a portion of its programming to open-line shows. To complement its information and educational programmes, the station also offers various kinds of entertainment programmes that can be enjoyed by all of its listeners. In this category are: comedy shows, cultural and sports magazines, and serials. Finally, in addition to all this, we feature music from all corners of the world.

Radio Gazelle has won its place amongst the various communities of Marseille. It has become a permanent part of the community's life, so much so that during the events in Algeria in 1988, during the Gulf War, and during the troubles in Madagascar, Radio Gazelle gave a voice to various militants from associations defending human rights and representing various liberation movements.

It is not always easy to maintain a progressive political stance when one is of foreign origin and living in France, where the Muslim communities tend to be regarded either as a potential "Fifth Column" or as scapegoats. If Radio Gazelle accomplishes this difficult task it is, in part, thanks to innumerable French sympathisers – friends who aid and defend immigrants. It is also thanks to members of the station who after many arduous years have not relented and still energetically defend human rights and equality, and tenaciously support the causes of the Third World and of liberation movements. All this while having to fight against the increasing harassment of the French extreme right. This speaks volumes for the integrity of Radio Gazelle and its role as a tool of social change.

* * *