



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 19

The New Wave: The emergence of low-power radio in Argentina

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Argentina used to be considered a rich country. However, as the end of the twentieth century approaches, it is undergoing one of the worst crises in its history. Many Argentines thought that when democracy returned in 1983, economic prosperity would also return. However, after nearly three years of Carlos Menem's Peronist government, its neoliberal economic policies have only worsened the situation.

Indiscriminate privatisation, declining production, lack of investment and a virtual end to the economic role of the State, have all served to deepen the crisis on both the social and economic level. There has been a dramatic increase in poverty and unemployment, wealth is becoming concentrated in fewer hands. Urban crime, apathy and hopelessness are on the rise. Traditional roles, both in the family and in society, are breaking down. The union movement has suffered enormous setbacks; increased unemployment coupled with the Menem government's anti-union policies have left workers demoralised and unprotected. There is disenchantment with traditional political parties and consequently participation in the political process is declining. Old political organisations are becoming fragmented. A new culture based on unemployment and the informal or underground economy is being created. Unlike a culture based on the dignity of labour, this culture tends to degrade, marginalise and destroy any hope for the future.

It is against this background of crisis and disintegration that we shall examine the emergence of low-power radio stations in Argentina, the legal framework in which they exist, and Radio FM Sur, one example of this new wave of broadcasters.

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SOMETHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Small FM radio stations began to crop up all over Argentina as early as 1986. Over 2,000 of them, broadcasting programmes dealing with neighbourhood problems and other matters of local interest sprang up. They were often started by small groups of people who wanted to democratize communications and give a voice to all of those who had been silenced by years of military dictatorship. Neither legal nor illegal, the stations operated in a regulatory vacuum that existed because of the lack of any broadcast legislation covering the FM band. This low-power radio movement quickly gained popularity within communities, and just as quickly discovered enemies in a mainstream communications industry which feared that the competition would result in declining profits.

In September 1986, the Asociación de Radiodifusoras Privadas (ARPA, the Association of Private Radio Stations) organised a national meeting of commercial broadcasters. One of the outcomes of this meeting was the so-called *Mar del Plata Declaration*. Among other things, this declaration ‘reaffirms the need for absolute respect for the Constitution and the Law, and thus the elimination of clandestine radio stations as well as the suppression of all activities which undermine the legal order.’ Later, ARPA gave COMFER (Comité Federal de Radiodifusión/Federal Broadcasting Committee, the government body charged with regulating broadcasting) a list of 60 “clandestine” radio stations they wanted closed down and their equipment seized. (ARPA and other institutions insisted on referring to the unlicensed stations as clandestine, despite the fact that they operated openly). COMFER response to this and other pressure was inconsistent. At times they would close stations, but at other times they seemed content with merely issuing general warnings against unlicensed broadcasts.

Meanwhile, ownership of the media, including television, the press, and radio, was becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations. In response to this, some provinces passed new broadcast laws, making use of an article in the Constitution which allows states to “promote activities of interest” in their territories. Several municipal radio stations, serving the needs of the local population, sprang up in Patagonia, near the Chilean border. These have been on the air ever since, despite several attempts by the border police to close them down.

Some people have welcomed the development of community radio, others are violently opposed. In August 1987, while visiting Puerto Madryn, Senator Hipólito Solari Yrigoyen welcomed “the presence of the new Radio Libre station because it ends the monopoly of LU 17.” In Córdoba, on the other hand, Pedro Sánchez, COMFER’s Standardization Officer, declared: “My principal wish is that Argentina will be rid of this plague of underground radio stations.”

As the number of underground radio stations increased, so did the pressure from certain economic and political sectors which wanted them closed down. The Alfonsín government proposed a draft Broadcasting Law which it hoped would put an end to all the contradictions. This proposed law would allow cooperatives, unions, nongovernmental organisations and social organisations to operate radio and television stations. The Christian Democrats presented their own draft Broadcasting Bills.

In 1987 the Asociación do Radios Comunitarias (ARCO) was founded in response to all the legal uncertainty. It represented various low-powered radio stations and provided them with information about legislative activity and possible closures. The legislation being proposed by the government required that radio stations broadcast with a minimum of 1,000 watts of power. The cost of such a station was beyond the reach of existing stations. In May 1988, another group of radio stations founded the Asociación de Radiofusas Libres Argentinas (Association of Free Argentinean Radio). The 250 radio stations that were members of this association sent a letter to members of parliament in which they said that “free or underground radios are an essential form of social expression and they make it possible to broadcast information relevant to the small communities where they exist.”

There was public support for the radio stations and at the *III Jornadas de Comunicación Social* (Third Gathering on Social Communication) in 1988 panellists debated the question of community access and participation in the new stations. One of the speakers focused the debate effectively:

Faced with the false contradiction between State owned media and privately owned media driven by the pure logic of profit, there is a need to legislate for a third type of media, which is socially owned and where the voices of unions, ethnic and religious minorities and other organizations can be heard.

While the parliamentary debates on the broadcasting issue dragged on, the opponents of community radio began to act. ARPA, the association representing private stations, broadcast prime time radio and television ads which accused the government of “judicial passivity and ineffective policy.” A few months later, ARPA started legal proceedings against the Secretary of State for National Communication, “for not acting against clandestine radio stations.” Pedro Sanches, COMFER’s Standardisation Officer, was another opponent of the proposed law. In May 1988 he said the existence of over 400 clandestine radio stations and television repeater stations constituted “acts of institutional subversion.” More pressure was brought to bear on the president, Alfonsín, by The International Broadcasting Association. Its Board of Directors sent a telegram to Alfonsín expressing concern about the situation in Argentina, accusing the government of exacerbating the situation by its behaviour, and criticising “legal and administrative passivity which has allowed the proliferation of clandestine radio and television stations.”

At the height of the debate, representatives of the government and of the community radio association, ARCO, met for the first time. The meeting did not clarify the legal situation of the over 2,000 stations and they remained neither legal nor illegal.

In 1990 a presidential decree required all unlicensed stations to register with the government. Since then, intimidation, closures, and equipment confiscations have taken place in every province in the country. In May 1991, Fernando Enrique Paz, the president of the Communications Commission of the Argentinean parliament and a member of the government party, criticised his own government’s actions, saying they “have the effect of ordering the closure of all the functioning FM radio stations.”

During the campaign for the 1991 elections, threats to close down radio stations and seize their equipment suddenly ceased as aspiring politicians found them invaluable for reaching the electorate. It remains to be seen if this sensitivity to the population’s

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needs will continue now that the elections are over. Today, stations of all shapes and sizes, representing every shade of ideology and opinion can be found on the Argentinean FM band.

FM SUR IN THE STREETS

FM Sur (South FM) is one of those stations. Born December 10, 1988, it owes its existence to the confused legal situation and to the efforts of the various groups who came together to set it up, including professional broadcasters who wanted to use their skills to help the community and CEOPAL (Centro de Comunicación Popular y Asesoramiento Legal/Popular Communication and Legal Counselling Centre), a nongovernmental organisation.

FM Sur's home is in Villa el Libertador, a poor neighbourhood of more than 50,000 in Córdoba, Argentina's second largest city. The community is typical of many shanty towns in Argentina. Until a few years ago, only two stations were heard in the neighbourhood: LV2 and LV3, the most successful commercial radios in the province. Today, these stations still have the most listeners, but many people have switched to local FM stations not covered by current legislation. In Villa el Libertador people listen to FM Sur.

What they hear is community radio, radio that answers their needs. Listeners can send messages of all kinds to each other. Small store owners take out ads. There are programmes giving health information and neighbourhood leaders go on air to discuss problems, berate local government and announce upcoming meetings. Music of many genres livens the airwaves. Radio has become a constant companion.

Radio is the only medium which can enter into everyday life... A medium that its listeners will basically define as company; a medium that far from calling for any effort or interrupting their life, adapts itself to its listeners.¹

We do not know exactly how many people listen to FM Sun The station gets over 500 messages per day and many more than that must listen. We do know that FM Sur has created a close emotional link with its listeners and that it gives them a sense of belonging. This observation is based on the letters and messages sent to the station: *Don't ever change; In my book, you get a rating of ten; You are the best radio station; I consider you my best friends; I like you very much.. Thanks for making housework more bearable.*

Attendance at the party we held on our third birthday also showed how popular we have become. We invited people "to celebrate three years of being together with you and your family, three years of sharing experiences in Córdoba's neighbourhoods." There was no well-known musical group, just local musicians, but more than 1,500 people came. Considering the current political and cultural mood in Argentina, that is a lot of people.

A poem written by one of our listeners expressed the way people feel about FM Sur:

¹ Mata, Marita."Todas las voces." Cuadernos Barriales No.8.

Words from my Neighbourhood - Carlos Garcia

Like a distant murmur
shy, emotional
a voice crossed space
and came to my radio...
It was crazy
turned the whole neighbourhood upside down
90.1 FM Sur
began to beam.
Now I can listen
to the voice of the people
of the poor
of friends and acquaintances.
December 10, 1988
is the unforgettable date
that with heartfelt solidarity
our radio began
The voice of the voiceless
because it belongs to the community
90.1 F M SUR
you are...
the voice of my neighbourhood

TRAINING AT FM SUR

What were we trying to do with FM Sur? We wanted to create a radio station listened to by the residents of this neighbourhood: one that becomes part of their daily lives; that has the potential to develop a political educational strategy; that answers to popular tastes while offering alternatives; that lets people express themselves on local as well as national issues and gives them a reference point from which to create a popular understanding of the world; that creates a place where those trying to create a popular urban movement in Córdoba can speak; that creates a space in which the popular sectors can talk to, negotiate with, agree with or confront authorities; and, finally, we wanted it to be participatory radio. This latter required us to have a thorough training programme, giving volunteer community members the skills and confidence they needed in order to produce their own programmes.

Our strategy is based in the practices of popular education, tailored to the interests, problems and wishes of each person. It includes theatre workshops that provide the skills necessary for production of radio sociodramas, communication workshops in schools, and training for correspondents from community organizations or from other neighbourhoods. We also spread the word and get feedback from the *Friends of FM Sur Club*, where the most active listeners meet, discuss, take part in auditions, organise dances, concerts and sporting events, and support campaigns for neighbourhood demands.

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Throughout our three year history we have attempted to find a suitable training model. The models we have tried were usually influenced by what we thought about popular communications at the time.

At first we talked about participation. All we meant by this was opening up the mikes to the popular sectors. Later we decided that this was not enough. If we wanted more listeners, we had to produce *good* programmes. So we emphasised content and radio skills so we could produce high quality radio programmes. This was not enough either. We had not understood that often those who listen to radio are looking not so much for technical perfection or for good content but rather for something they can identify with, something that relates to their daily lives.

Now we try to think about those we are communicating with, their culture, their way of expressing themselves and their desire to listen to us. We believe that it is not the class origins of those behind the mike, nor the ideological correctness, nor the technical quality of the programmes that defines popular communication.

We believe that popular communication is more adequately defined as “a series of practices in which new communications actors – workers, peasants, the unemployed, women in all kinds of occupations, indigenous people, jacks of all trades, illiterate people, all the residents of the shanty towns – become visible to themselves and to society in a way which, although precarious and contradictory, is as distinct and significant as their own lives and cultures and the social movements that they create and which represent them.”

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