



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

Chapter 1

Introduction

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*Radio could be the most wonderful public communication system imaginable...
if it were capable, not only of transmitting, but of receiving, of making the
listener not only hear but also speak.*

– Bertolt Brecht, 1932

A PASSION FOR RADIO

In a world where information was the preserve of the literate urban minority with access to newspapers and books, the first regular radio broadcasts of the 1920's made it possible to imagine that the medium might really become the “wonderful public communication system” envisioned by Brecht. Radio did in fact bring about a radical transformation in the nature of social communication. Often this transformation was democratic, but it had its dark side as well. Little more than a decade after the first radio stations went on the air, Adolf Hitler made effective use of radio to propel himself to power.

Radio developed in very different ways in different parts of the world. In the United States, competition and commercialism were the rule. In Europe and its colonies, radio operated under centralised State control. In Canada, a combination of the two gave birth to a system with a strong centralised State network on the national level and competition and commercialism on the local level. And Latin America developed a radiophonic salad of State, private, church, university, special interest and indigenous peoples radio stations.

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As time went on, the models blended and changed. Commercial radio appeared first in western and later eastern Europe. Public radio became a part of the media environment in the United States. In Africa, many of the national networks are in the process of decentralising, adopting new objectives such as development, education and community participation.

However, as we near the end of the century, radio appears to be in decline. Eclipsed by other media, radio is overlooked in public policy debates and often neglected in the plans and budgets of both State broadcasting networks and media corporations. And rather than engaging its audience as Brecht had hoped, it has become predominantly concerned with its search for larger audiences. In much of the world, the majority of radio stations either choose to make their programming as bland as possible in the hope that they will attract listeners by not offending anyone, or they adopt sensationalist programming, hoping to attract listeners by offending everyone.

So, why a “passion for radio”? The answer to that question is found in a third type of radio – an alternative to commercial and State radio. Often referred to as *community radio*, its most distinguishing characteristic is its commitment to community participation at all levels. While listeners of commercial radio are able to participate in the programming in limited ways – via open line telephone shows or by requesting a favourite song, for example – community radio listeners are the producers, Managers, directors, evaluators and even the owners of the stations.

This alternative form of radio is becoming increasingly important for those at the margins of society, those who seek political and cultural change. From the native-owned *Wawatay Radio Network* in northern Canada, to *Radio Venceremos*, operated by Salvadorean revolutionaries, to the rural station in the Kayes region of Mali, alternative and community radio stations fulfil an essential role for the outcasts of commercial and large-scale State media. Women, indigenous peoples, ethnic and linguistic minorities, youth, the political left, peasants, national liberation movements, and others are discovering the potential of radio as a means of political and cultural intervention and development. They are transforming radio into a medium that serves their needs – a medium that allows them to speak as well as hear.

This radio is not filled with pop music and “easy listening” newscasts, nor with official communiqués or government-sanctioned cultural content. It is not so important that the programming be “slick,” but that it be based on a concept of participatory communication. The role of the radio is to respond to the priorities set by the community, to facilitate their discussion, to reinforce them, and to challenge them. Juggling all the interests of a community is difficult, and community radio does not always succeed. However, when it does, its broadcasts are marked with a passion rarely seen in commercial or large-scale State media. This passion arises out of a desire to empower listeners by encouraging and enabling their participation, not only in the radio but in the social, cultural and political processes that affect the community.

A WIDE RANGE OF COMMUNITY RADIO PROJECTS

The primary objective of this book is to present a wide range of community radio projects, not so that the “ideal” model can be identified, but in the hope that the book will serve as a useful tool for community broadcasters and potential community broadcasters looking to create or adapt models of community radio that are suited to the specific conditions they face. This objective of facilitating an international exchange of experiences and ideas has been AMARC’s primary motivator since the first World Conference of Community Radio Broadcasters took place in 1983.

The use of radio as a tool for cultural and political change, while a growing phenomena, is not new. Indeed, the first participatory community radio stations surfaced almost simultaneously in Colombia and the United States over forty years ago. Since that time, innumerable participatory radio projects have attempted to promote community-led change in a variety of ways.

Some of these projects have attempted to foster this change by providing formal education in areas such as literacy and mathematics, or by promoting agricultural techniques suited to a particular vision of development defined by the central government. This type of project has been common in the Third World, especially in Africa and Asia. Sri Lanka’s *Mahaweli Community Radio* (chapter 13) is one example of such a project. Other projects have been more political and have attempted to support the organisational and cultural initiatives of marginalised communities. These are the projects that tend to involve listeners in a participatory process. Haiti’s *Radio Soleil* (chapter 9) and *Zoom Black Magic Liberation Radio* in the United States (chapter 10) are two examples.

Following the tradition of participatory communication, most of the chapters in this book are not written by impartial observers but by people with first-hand knowledge of community radio and with direct experience in the projects they write about.

The chapters are grouped into five sections, each concerned with one of the book’s major themes: community, conflict, development, culture and beginnings. A brief passage at the beginning of each section introduces the theme.

COMMUNITY RADIO IN THE WORLD

Africa

Radio is undoubtedly the most important medium in Africa. Illiteracy and distribution problems mean that newspapers are unavailable to the vast majority of the population. Similarly, television is beyond the financial means of most people and national television service often does not extend to rural areas where much of the population lives.

Radio, on the other hand, is available almost everywhere. Receivers are relatively inexpensive and programming is inexpensive to produce and distribute. In virtually all African countries national radio services broadcasting from the capital and other major centres are the most important source of information.

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While autonomous and participatory community radio does not exist in most African countries, rural radio does. Many countries have set up networks of rural radio stations that broadcast a mix of nationally and locally produced programmes.

Although rural radio stations share certain characteristics with community radio, they are usually managed from the capital by their national broadcasting systems through a department or production centre specifically concerned with rural radio. This lack of autonomy often results in programming that ultimately reflects the perspective of the central government rather than the local population. A second problem is that the rural stations often inherit the administrative and financial problems of the institutions that direct them.

Traditionally, rural radio in Africa tends not to involve the population in either decision-making or production. Programme content is usually determined by the government or by professionals in the stations, and almost never by the expressed concerns of the audience.

In the past two years a number of African countries have seen some remarkable political changes. These changes have been accompanied by a certain opening up of communication policies and as a result, a number of community radio experiments are taking form. In chapter 14, *Pluralist Responses for Africa*, Eugénie Aw discusses the significance of these changes and demonstrates how some communities have already been able to take advantage of the new openings. Pascal Berqué takes a closer look at one of these new experiments in chapter 12, *The Hard Lesson of Autonomy*, about a rural station in Mali.

The dramatic political changes taking place in South Africa are also being accompanied by fundamental changes in radio. For fifteen years the only challenge to the monopoly of the State-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation was the African National Congress' *Radio Freedom*, broadcasting on shortwave from neighbouring countries. Now, a large and dynamic community radio movement is preparing to go on the air before the end of 1992. In chapter 22, *When there is no Radio*, Edric Gorfinkel outlines the development of an organisation that started with a "talking newspaper" project and will end with nothing less than a community radio station.

Asia

As with Africa, the broadcasting system in Asia was greatly influenced by the centralised, State-controlled traditions left behind by foreign colonisers. Designed as a means of propagating government thought, Asian broadcasting has never developed mechanisms to accept feedback or to provide the population with a means of articulating their aspirations and frustrations.

A second characteristic that Africa and Asia have in common is the importance of radio. Indeed, the central position of radio is a factor throughout the Third World. A worldwide survey conducted by UNESCO in 1986 indicated that there was an average of 160 radio receivers per thousand inhabitants in the developing countries. In contrast, there were only 39 television receivers per thousand inhabitants. These figures compare

with 472 television receivers and 988 radio receivers per thousand inhabitants in the so-called developed countries.¹

For the most part, Asia's broadcasting systems have been slower to shed their colonial past than have Africa's. However, some tentative steps have been taken and participants at a regional seminar on community radio held in Malaysia in 1990 described radio as being "in a state of ferment."

Sri Lanka's *Mahaweli Community Radio* project, discussed in chapter 13, has contributed to this "state of ferment" and to a growing understanding of the possibilities for local and national radio. *Mahaweli Community Radio* is operated as a branch of the national broadcasting system rather than as an autonomous community radio project, but it is an important step forward and the model has been adapted for use in a number of Asian countries.

In 1991 Vietnam undertook an important initiative with the establishment of a number of local community radio stations. The stations are operated by community representatives and enjoy a fairly high degree of local autonomy.

The Philippines stands out as an exception among Asian countries because its broadcasting system was heavily influenced by the commercial tradition of the United States. In addition to the private sector and a State radio network, there have been a number of rural radio projects established by universities and other institutions.

The lack of autonomous community radio stations in the Philippines has been partially compensated for by the ability of production groups to get airtime on commercial or public stations. *Radyo Womanwatch* (chapter 21) tells the story of one of these programmes.

Broadcasting remains a State monopoly in most Asian countries and the next few years will show us whether national broadcast organisations will be willing to share the airwaves with community groups and whether local stations will enjoy real autonomy in their organisation and their programming.

Australia

While Australia is not represented in the book, it does have an active community radio movement with over one hundred stations on-air and more than fifty groups waiting for licenses to be granted. The stations broadcast in virtually all parts of the country, from large cities to tiny isolated "outback" communities.

Some of these stations (mainly in large cities) are licensed to provide a special broadcasting service, such as ethnic or Aboriginal programmes, or classical music, or educational programmes. The majority of them, however, are licensed to provide a broad-based community service and have a particular requirement to serve those groups in their community not served by national or commercial radio services; indigenous and ethnic minorities, women, the aged and unemployed youth are among the groups that have access to community radio. .

¹ World Communication Report, UNESCO, 1989, pp 149,156.

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Australia's community broadcasters derive their funding from three main sources: direct community support in the form of membership, subscriptions and donations (40%); "sponsorship," a highly restricted form of advertising (30%) and a variety of grants from federal, state and local government programmes.

Europe

The model of a centralised State-owned broadcast system that Europe exported to the detriment of its former colonies did not serve Europeans any better than it did Africans or Asians. The State monopolies lasted until the 1970s when the free *radio* movement swept through western Europe. At the height of this movement there were thousands of unlicensed pirate stations rebelling against the State's domination of the airwaves.

Only a handful of free radio stations survived into the mid-1980s. The ironic victim of its own success, the free radio movement withered when government monopolies broke apart and high-powered commercial radio networks pushed the free radios aside. Those that did survive were almost always in countries in which the State steadfastly refused to give up its monopoly. Amsterdam's *Radio 100* (chapter 2) is an exception and the station continues to broadcast as a pirate, even though Holland has a strong community radio movement.

Along with the decline of the free pirate stations came a demand for community radio, and almost all western European countries now have some form of legal community broadcasting. However, there are dramatic differences in form from one country to the next, and indeed, from one station to the next. Radio Gazelle (chapter 17) in France is one example.

In the eastern part of the continent, the situation varies dramatically from country to country and the broadcast environment seems to change on an almost daily basis. The clandestine Radio Solidarnosc had a brief moment of glory when Solidarity was still a banned trade union in Poland, but once walls and governments started falling the most visible trend was towards large-scale commercial radio, often fully or partially-owned by the giant media corporations of western Europe.

Despite the traditions of State monopoly and the strong presence of foreign capital – or perhaps because of them – there is a strong interest in alternative models of radio. Two examples are presented in this book, Radio One in Czechoslovakia (chapter 20) offers a cultural alternative for Prague's youth and Echo of Moscow (chapter 8) offers a political alternative in Russia.

Latin America

It was arguably in Latin America that the first community radio experiences were initiated almost fifty years ago. For years, State, private commercial, church, university, trade union and indigenous peoples' radio stations have combined to make the region's radio the most dynamic and diverse in the world.

In the past decade there has been an increase in the use of radio by popular groups. Some of these groups, such as Peru's Feminist Radio Collective (chapter 11), produce programmes and

have them broadcast on the airwaves of commercial stations. Others use “bocinas,” simple loudspeakers installed in shanty-towns, over which the community is able to have the voice the other media deny them. Thousands of tiny radio stations have sprung up in Argentina, so small they fall through the cracks of telecommunications legislation (chapter 19).

Other projects have emerged that define themselves as “educational” but that are not concerned with formal education. They have abandoned the classical methods of radio schools in favour of the tremendous educational possibilities of popular participation. Haiti’s *Radio Soleil* followed this path for many years (chapter 9) and *Radio Asé Pléré An Nou Lité* in Martinique also continues to do so.

Native people have their own radio stations throughout the region. These stations broadcast in indigenous languages and are important place for cultural and political intervention. Chapter 15, *New Voices*, offers a look at how the structures of these stations in Mexico take into account the wide variety of local traditions and conditions that exist among native peoples.

Clandestine guerrilla stations have been instrumental in national liberation movements in many countries. *Radio Venceremos*, in El Salvador, broadcast the struggle of the Salvadorean people for eleven years before becoming legalised with the signing of a peace accord between the Farabundo Mart! National Liberation Front and the government in February 1992 (chapter 7).

Hundreds of other examples exist: trade union-owned stations in Bolivia, stations run by peasant organisations in Ecuador, a women’s station in Chile, over three hundred popular radio stations run by the Catholic Church and a handful of stations in Nicaragua courageously trying to survive in the hostile environment of that country.

North America

Community radio began quietly enough in North America when, in 1949, a California pacifist obtained a license for an FM station at a time when most people did not have FM receivers. Known as KPFA, the station is now listened to by hundreds of thousands of people in the San Francisco area and has an operating budget of US\$1 million (chapter 5).

KPFA is not typical of the North American community radio experience. North America has almost as many different types of community radio as Latin America and it is hard to imagine that any of the 300 stations in Canada and the United States could be considered “typical.” There are, however, a few generalisations that can be made. For example, *urban* community radio stations in North America tend to be more culturally and/or politically engaged and serve communities that are outside the “mainstream” because of their language, race, cultural interests, or politics. Vancouver’s Co-op Radio is an example of this (chapter 18). In contrast, *rural* stations tend to be more in tune with the majority of their community, although the majority of a remote community often has little in common with the “mainstream” images and debates presented by urban-based radio networks.

In the remote regions of Canada’s north, more than one hundred Native communities, some with only a handful of residents, have stations that fill the role of telephone, post office, meeting hall, and teacher. Broadcasting in their own languages, the volunteer programmers provide entertainment and essential information to people who may be cut off from the rest of the world for weeks at a time during winter storms. Given the important service these stations provide to Native people, they are drastically under-

funded with annual budgets of around US\$10,000. The stations of the *Wawatay Radio Network* described in chapter 3 are typical of these stations.

In the province of Quebec, site of AMARC's head office and of the first AMARC conference in 1983, there are 45 Native and 23 non-Native community radio stations. The non-Native stations tend to be further south than the native stations and serve larger populations, but even here we cannot find a "typical" station. Examples range from Montreal's *Radio Centre-Ville*, (chapter 6) which broadcasts in seven languages to an inner-city mostly immigrant population, to *CFIM*, which broadcasts in French to a small population spread across the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Pirate radio, a small but persistent phenomenon in North American broadcasting, is experiencing a resurgence as Black and anti-poverty groups challenge the system and set up low-powered neighbourhood stations (chapter 10).

As a result of deregulation in both Canada and the United States, commercial broadcasters are free to operate with fewer restrictions. They are carrying less news and information programming, engaging in fewer local productions and concentrating on the bland music formats that seem guaranteed to attract advertisers. In Canada, the State-owned CBC, traditionally the main source of quality programming, is suffering from budget cuts. For community radio in North America, the challenge continues to be to provide a service to those sectors of the population with cultural and political interests that are ignored by commercial or public radio.

Community radio broadcasters are working to make the airwaves accessible and open, and to transform radio into a medium in the service of their communities. With radio activists from around the world as your guides, this book offers a voyage to the heart of the alternative airwaves, and an understanding of why these activists have a passion for radio.

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