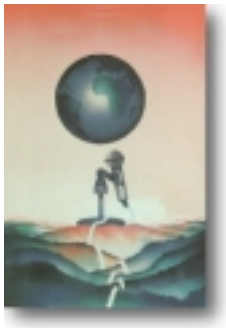

A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
www.comunica.org/passion/

Chapter 2

Radioproeflokaal Marconi

François Laureys

In Amsterdam, one can find more than 5,000 bars and cafés, from dark-brown to high-light, from cosy neighbourhood pubs to high-brow society clubs, from no-future dumps to futuristic techno-spaces, and from gay-bars to dreary night-clubs. But there is no place quite like Radioproeflokaal Marconi: the Marconi Radio Tasters Café. As its name suggests, Marconi is more than a café, it's the heart of free radio in the Dutch capital.

Radioproeflokaal Marconi is located in an old school on a small canal just a little outside the city-centre and just down the street from Radio 100**,** an unlicensed community radio station founded in 1980. In the earlier days, I used to come here almost daily to have a chat with some of the other people from Radio 100 or with the listeners who would gather there. But since I stepped over to the 'settled' media, and started to earn a living two years ago as a journalist for the provincial radio, my visits to Marconi have become less frequent. I hadn't been there for a long time, when on May 15, 1991, I heard news of a police raid. When I arrived at the place everything was already over. "We knew this had to happen sometime. It's been seven years since the authorities last raided us," says an old radio acquaintance. "But look at the mess they made. We didn't expect them to come down on us that hard."

The place looks a mess indeed: glass is scattered all over the floor; the walls that used to separate the café and the studio have been demolished. Someone hands me a flyer, Radio 100's first official reaction to the raid. It reads:

> It is six in the evening. The strong arm is itching to hack out the rotten places in society. The troops advance on the Bilderdijkstraat (the street where the broadcast studio of Radio 100 is housed) and environs. As is

> usual at this time on Wednesday evenings, Amsterdam's theatrical life is being discussed on Radio 100. The program Playrol is coming to a close when the doorbell rings... must be the blues show! The unsuspecting theatre woman who opens the door is trampled by a horde of defenders of the public order – in full regalia. The security dogfaces storm the illegal radio den. Soldiers' boots echo through the hall of the building, in search of suspicious conspirators. Meanwhile, the Marconi Radio Tasters Café is taken in hand by vermin with ears only for the orders of their superiors... The protesting café customers are hustled outside and the blue brotherhood begins to rearrange the building, in a search for criminal networks. Appointment books, shopping lists, computer files and phonographs are welcome booty. The roundup begins. Elsewhere in the city six people are hauled from their dinner tables, accused of being leaders of the radio-conspiracy, and thrown into the clink. Everything capable of producing sound disappears into mouldy sheds. Under the fedoras of the Secret Service, sardonic grins appear.

The studio equipment, the transmitter and the antenna have been confiscated**,** several people arrested, the radio café thoroughly demolished. Strangely enough, nobody seems defeated or depressed. A feeling of anger predominates. Rob, a volunteer programmer at the station, comments:

> We'll get over it. Just wait and see – with the help of our listeners and a few benefit events we'll be back within three weeks. What really bothers me is the fact that they arrested so many people. We don't have leaders. We're a grassroots organisation which means that everybody who works with us has an equal voice in every decision concerning the radio. It looks like they want to have some scapegoats... or maybe they want to intimidate the 97 other programme-makers. I don't know. We'll have to see what their next step will be.

Two days later, Rob is arrested. His presentiment was right. This time, the authorities seem determined to finish this pirate radio business.

Radio 100 has been broadcasting on the FM band illegally at least since 1980, and hasn't had too much trouble with the authorities. Once in a while, the police would show up and confiscate the transmitter. But that's part of the game... With a little extra effort, a new transmitter would be obtained within a few days, and broadcasting would start again. This time the warning seems clear enough: as far as "they" are concerned, the game is over.

During the first weeks after the raid it becomes evident that the authorities did indeed spend a lot of time planning how to deal effectively with Radio 100 this time. During a six month period prior to the raid, a large team of undercover agents have been busy following programmers, tapping their phones, and listening to their broadcasts. Radioproeflokaal Marconi has been watched constantly. The postbox of Radio 100 has been emptied and the mail read. The bank accounts of both Marconi and Radio 100 have been studied and a list of regular contributors has been made up. In other words, an investigation that would make any member of the Mob flush with jealousy. The raid itself involved a police force of 150 men and four officers with another 150 guardians of the peace held back, just in case.

A criminal investigation it was, so a criminal organisation it must be. The radio programmers who were arrested during and after the raid were charged with "membership in an organisation whose intention it is to commit crimes." But where's the crime? Dutch law states that illegal broadcasting is a misdemeanour. In most cases a fine will settle the case The police argued that "this bunch of anarchists grew to be a highly developed organisation." Anarchists? Organisation?

After ten days the charges are dropped. The jailed programmers are released.

In the meantime, several huge benefit parties have been organised all over Amsterdam. More than 2,000 people show up. Left wing parties on the local, national and European levels protest the raid. Hundreds of listeners support the station with financial donations. A Radio 100 flyer puts it this way:

> This deafening silence begs for a new sound. The call for social liberation of the airwaves echoes through the local cosmos. They can't do this! The listeners, too, keep dazedly twisting the frequency dials, in the throes of cold turkey. But the people and children of Radio 100 are feverishly resuming their public obsession. Waves of energy ripple through the city. Bicycle wagons full of discarded CD players arrive. The bank account of the radio climbs further into the black by the minute. Everyone joins in. The programmers are back at work.

And indeed, four weeks after the raid Radio 100 starts broadcasting again. As if nothing had ever happened.

THE VOICE OF THE SQUATTERS' MOVEMENT

Radio 100 is a bit of an anachronism. Between 1979 and 1985 there were dozens of FM pirates operating in Amsterdam. Most of them were commercially motivated: easy music and a lot of advertising. After 1983 the authorities started to pay attention to these illegal stations and most of them were closed down within a year. By 1985 Radio 100 was the only one left. Some former pirates were able to obtain licences to broadcast under conditions set by the government, but Radio 100 turned down offers of a licence. Claiming the right to freedom of expression they refused to submit themselves to the rules that would accompany legalisation. Nowadays, Radio 100 is the only pirate station in Amsterdam with regular daily broadcasts.

The station's roots lay in the roaring year of 1980, when the squatters' movement in Amsterdam started to organise and rebel against evictions from squatted houses. Housing shortages (a product of speculation) and unemployment drove thousands of young people to squat in order to provide themselves with a home. This resulted in numerous violent clashes between the police and the squatters. In those days the radio station operated as an 'action-medium'. It was the voice of the squatters' movement, attacking the housing policies of the local government and mobilising the militant segments of the city's population. During riots it would provide information about police movements and tell demonstrators how to avoid roadblocks and arrests.

In the following years, when the situation calmed down, partly due to the city's efforts to legalise squatted houses, the tone of the radio mellowed too. It started to focus more on musical and cultural developments. Also, within the station, a re-interpretation of the medium's possibilities took place. Why should a small group of people have the power to operate this radio? How could we involve listeners in the programmes, or even in the actual production of programmes? How could we let listeners participate more than simply via the phone? This is where the concept of the radio café came in.

Ingrid, who worked with Radio 100 from 1982 until 1987 recalls:

> At the end of 1984 we came to a point where we asked ourselves what was the point of going on like we were used to? On the one hand, we didn't want to be legalised. On the other hand, we were the last pirate radio left and we knew that in order to survive we had to gain the sympathy and the support of a broad audience. You know, the classic dilemma: because we were illegal we had to operate more or less 'underground', which made it difficult to make 'real' contacts with listeners or social and cultural organisations outside the squatters' movement. So we came up with this idea of a radio café – a place in the neighbourhood of our broadcasting studio. Here, people would be able to meet us without the stigma of illegality. The radio café would be what You might call 'the open door to our (illegal) radio'. We were determined to make our radio 'visual', to get out of the harness of having to be anonymous. 'Open radio' was our credo at that time. Getting other people, listeners, to participate in the radio. We were fed up with hiding ourselves. We wanted the radio to become a part of daily life for as many people as possible!

So eventually we found this old school near our studio. The squatters there agreed with our proposal to turn two huge classrooms on the ground floor into a radio café, so we started building! We didn't have any money, but we got most of the things we needed from listeners and supporters. What we did was build a kind of big glass wall between the two rooms, dividing it into a bar side and a studio side. The idea was that people actually would be able to 'see' radio being broadcast. After two months of blood, sweat and tears we officially opened 'our Marconi' with a kind of press conference during which we also 'revealed' the location of our broadcasting antenna to the press.

I remember that. Searching my archives I find the press statement dated June 9,1985:

> As far as we are concerned, we are fed up with this illegality that is imposed on us, as well as the anonymity that is connected with it. We demand the right to free communication! For our part, we will start to act as an open radio from now on. Everybody can and should know what we stand for. What does open radio mean to us?

- the possibility of active participation by every listener.
- a public room, accessible to anyone, with studio facilities: the radio café.
- the possibility for people, groups and organisations to express and profile themselves on the air.

- no hierarchical structures within the station. Every member has an equal say on all the matters which concern the radio. General meetings are public.

> ...We demand a frequency on which we can broadcast unhindered. If this demand is not complied with, we'll start broadcasting anyway.

A pretty heavy statement coming from just another pirate radio station...

Ingrid:

> Not an ordinary pirate radio. We were a free radio: non-commercial, democratic, progressive... You know, we really felt like we had right on our side. All we asked for was a frequency! We didn't want to become a professional or a commercial station! just a station for and with its listeners. We wanted to gain a large audience from different communities in town. We wanted to create this kind of creative melting pot, with the radio as the gentle fire under it. But we didn't want to beg for permission. If it couldn't be done legally, well sorry, we would just carry on illegally.

As a matter of fact, Radio 100 did succeed in becoming this strange melting pot of different groups and cultures. Listening to its programmes, you might find an Indian programme followed by an hour of punk music, a two hour African music show and a theatre programme. And they've stuck to this idea. A flyer issued after the 1991 raid reads:

> We exist now more than ever. We are not criminals but the criminal organisation of dissatisfaction. The infiltrators of the eardrums, the foam on the airwaves. We rule nothing out and broadcast it all. We never dial the right number but always get through. We continue fighting the air war, the other offensive has begun. We have joined in conspiracy with palace revolutionaries, Blackfoot Indians, kiosk runners, barkeepers, tax-evaders, crown prince Willem Alexander, black riders, cyberpunks, house-wives, narcotraffickers, superheroes, computer pioneers, jugglers, deserters, political tourists and other brilliant dilettantes. If they're looking for trouble, keep listening. Radio 100 is far beyond 1992 in ideas and technique. The terrible echoes of our silence will ring out everywhere.

That is Radio 100 indeed. I don't think the term "community radio" really covers this kind of radio. The kind of people it attracts would probably better fit under something like "a movement": sometimes very tangible (like the squatters' movement used to be), and other times more diffuse, less perceptible, but still there somewhere under the surface of city life. "Free radio" fits quite well – the station drifts on the input of its programmers and listeners, independent of commercial or political powers, free from pressures on programming, altogether free of mind and choice. As such, Radio 100 is one of the pivots on which subcultural Amsterdam hinges.

But when the radio café was opened, Ingrid had in mind that the radio had to break out of this subculture and open itself to a broader audience:

> Me and some other people felt the atmosphere within this 'scene' was suffocating, we reflected too little on things that happened outside our 'subcultural' perception. I felt that to really achieve some changes within the radio, we had to broaden our view. This is what I thought a radio café could bring about. But I think we never really managed to break out. In the beginning, we tried to create an 'objective' atmosphere in Marconi, to

> attract ‘ordinary people’, and not only activists, squatters and punks. But it soon appeared that Marconi especially attracted marginals; maybe this was due to the fact that our prices were very low... Sometimes it really looked like a kind of human zoo. You would have some alcoholic bums, spaced-out weirdoes, a couple of tourists and a few programmers hanging around. Not always a very stimulating crowd, though it could be fun sometimes. Later it became clear to me that a lot of people didn’t want it to be different. They felt Marconi should be a place for our kind of people. Well, to achieve that is not too difficult, you know. You just play loud punk-music all the time, and you can be sure of a select company! In my eyes, the experiment failed, though it might still provide a good function for a select group of people...

Somewhat disappointed, Ingrid left the radio in 1987 and started working as a journalist for (legal) local and regional radio.

Rob started to work with Radio 100 at approximately the same time as Ingrid left. He disagrees with her view on the development of the radio café

> I think Marconi grew to be one of the meeting-places of alternative Amsterdam. Look around at who’s sitting here: those guys over there are Moroccan. They come and drink tea here almost every day. That group over there is from Radio Scorpio in Belgium, paying us a visit. You know the people at the bar, programme-makers. There are some people who live here. Sitting outside in the sun the usual bunch of acrobats and clowns who train in the old gym-room of the school. Quite an international public, eh? Apart from that, I think Marconi is important for the radio because it is the only place where programmers can meet. Our broadcasting studio is in another building, where we don’t have extra space. Happily, it’s just around the corner, so most programme-makers come here before or after their programme, to chat a while or have a laugh. Marconi is also the place where we have our general meetings – every Tuesday evening. Everybody from the radio can come, but it’s not obligatory. Most of the time approximately twenty out of the one hundred collaborators show up. In extraordinary situations, like after the police raid, everybody comes to the meetings. That can be quite a spectacle! But at ‘normal’ meetings we discuss the current affairs of the radio, the technical problems, the financial situation, the programming, and so on. We also make plans for the near future. That can vary from organising a benefit party to preparing a live broadcast from somewhere else in town or making plans for cooperation with video and computer groups. We get pretty wild ideas sometimes! During that meeting people can also come by if they have new programme ideas and want to get some air time on the radio. Generally, if the ideas or concepts are original, they’ll be granted one month of probation-time and can more or less start right away!
>
> Last but not least Marconi is a source of income for the radio. It doesn’t make a huge profit, but that is due to the fact that the prices are very low and that it is run by volunteers... Some of them forget to charge their customers, others make mistakes when counting the change or serve too large portions, and sometimes money just ‘vanishes’. But we still manage to save some money for the radio! You know, when I heard about the raid at the radio and at Marconi, I first thought this would be the end of it. Now, I think the raid has given us a new impulse. We tended to work too

much on automatic pilot lately. Now that we have seen, once more, how many people are willing to back us in hard times, how much energy we can develop in a short time and how many people we were able to mobilise, I think we're in for the next decade!

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