



**A Passion for Radio**  
*Radio Waves and Community*  
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## Chapter 6

### Inventing and Experimenting: Radio Centre-Ville

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*This text is a collage put together from writings of the following friends of Radio Centre-Ville: Evelyne Foy, Eric L'oiseau, Richard Barette and Louise Boivin.*

We would like to take you on a tour through the complicated maze of Radio Centre-Ville, a radio station with a past as rich and eventful as its present. The route will begin with some anecdotes about how it all began, followed by a more theoretical dealing of the principles surrounding the station's participatory structure. Finally, we will end with a look at the role of women in the station.

#### THE RADIO STATION

Radio Centre-Ville, Montréal is a multilingual community radio station. It has been broadcasting in seven languages for more than 15 years. Seven ethnic groups meet every day to produce a wide variety of radio broadcasts. Organised into teams, they work at creating a collective intercultural community project, reflecting a society which is becoming steadily more mixed. The Greek, Portuguese, Chinese, Haitian, Spanish, English and French-speaking communities are brought together every day. Other cultural communities, such as the South-East Asian, Filipino, African, Irish and Arabic communities, also use the airwaves. Radio Centre-Ville contributes, in its own way, to the coexistence of individuals and different cultures within Québec society. More than three hundred volunteers produce all of the station's programming.

## THE CITY

Montréal, with a population of one million inhabitants (three million including the greater Montréal region) is a large cosmopolitan city with inhabitants from almost everywhere in the world. The largest city in Québec and the second largest in Canada, Montréal has been one of the most important cities in north-eastern America since the beginning of European colonisation.

Francophones form the majority, with anglophones and other ethnic communities representing respectively 15% of the population, although the latter group is steadily increasing in number. Francophones constitute 80% of the total Québec population of six and a half million. It is important to note, however, that Québec is a tiny island in the anglophone ocean of North America. For this reason it has always had to struggle to protect and promote its distinct language and culture.

## WHERE DID RADIO CENTRE-VILLE BEGIN?

A huge movement for social change was built in Québec during the 1960s and 1970s. This movement gave birth to a multitude of organisations, ranging from community-based daycare centres, women's centres, youth centres, citizen's action committees, to several groups fighting for the independence of Québec from Canada. The movement also gave rise to many new communication media: neighbourhood newspapers, alternative press networks on a Québec-wide scale, community television and video production groups. Community radio was part of this new network of popular information. It was in this context that Radio Centre-Ville appeared in 1972, the first station in a movement that was to spread all over Québec.

Daniel Lavoie was one of the francophone pioneers of community radio in Québec.

There weren't very many of us. The social struggle was very important at that time in Montréal: demands for a better quality of life, urban renewal, battles against the demolition of low cost housing. I was working with people fighting against the construction of a highway which was to link the east and west ends of the city; a huge project which would have brought about the demolition of many neighbourhoods in the city centre. There were also the draft-dodgers, American conscientious objectors against the war in Vietnam, who came seeking refuge in Canada. Kevin Cohalen, one of the founders of Radio Centre-Ville was one of these draft-dodgers; he probably brought the idea of alternative radio from the United States, where that kind of radio had existed since 1946, I believe, in California, and which we were unfamiliar with. Hyman Glustein, the other founder of Radio Centre-Ville, was a student at Sir George Williams, which is now Concordia University.

From the beginning, it was a multi-ethnic radio station. That was one of our principles. We played a lot of jazz too, which was a type of music that everyone could relate to. Our ideology was fairly left-wing, of course. We didn't want to copy the straight radio scene. However, it wasn't community radio in the real sense of the term, meaning a station managed by a board of directors elected by a certain community. It was more an "alternative" or

“counter-culture” radio, defending citizens rights. A radio station which wasn’t out to make money or do business, but to broadcast popular information, unlike the whole mainstream information machine. Democratic structures weren’t a priority a small group of unelected people could run it and do whatever they felt was best. Later on, this brought about some friendly and less friendly free-for-all... up to the point of threatening the very survival of the radio station.

At first, we broadcast through the cable network with used equipment; army surplus stuff which couldn’t have cost very much, an old console like you see in war movies, turntables and old heavy metal microphones... and it worked! It was a heroic era; we broadcast hours and hours, we were always there, but it was tremendously fun. The majority of our programming was in French – that was a principle, established in proportion with the population.

After a hard battle to get a licence, Radio Centre-Ville came on the FM band February 27, 1975, broadcasting with 7.2 watts of power.

The radio found its niche and grew slowly but surely! But we all know that growing isn’t a painless experience, and the first growing pains came in 1977. A group of activists demanded that the radio station become participatory, that it conform to the norms of the CRTC,<sup>1</sup> and that it operate with a board of directors elected by a general assembly. The fact that the people making the demands were supported by “orthodox” Marxist activists did not go over well with the people running the radio station, who feared that it would become a kind of propaganda centre. The radio station, which at the time closed its doors for a two week vacation period every summer, was silent for two months that year in order to solve the problem. Finally, the principle of a general assembly was accepted, especially since it was a legal requirement.

Other crises were to come, as is the case with any popular and democratic organisation, but the radio station always managed to pull through. Jean-Louis Legault recalls:

It’s not easy to make an organisation like that work. We didn’t have the experience, it was something new and we didn’t have any precedents. On the other hand, there are good sides; the pleasure of success, solidarity, etc.... Among my favourite memories, these ones come to mind: the big fifth birthday party on the FM band in November of 1980, where, for three days, a huge multi-ethnic party brought 1200 people together for shows of every kind, film presentations, dances... and the programme that Benoit Fauteux hosted, *Au coeur du samedi soir* (In the heart of Saturday night) broadcast live from different bars, presenting jazz, improvisational theatre and other entertainment.

## AN INTERCULTURAL RADIO

Programming at Radio Centre-Ville reflects the cultural mosaic of the city where it has its roots. It is made up of broadcasts produced and hosted by members of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission is the federal government body responsible for regulating broadcasting. CRTC regulations require that community radio stations be owned, managed and programmed by members of the community at large.

cultural communities using their own languages. They participate in the social life of Québec by communicating their own culture, and at the same time, help their compatriots become more aware of Québec and Canadian current events and culture. Listeners benefit from information in their own languages about the new social environment to which they must adapt, and they conserve their cultural origins.

Communication between newly arrived ethnic groups and long established cultural groups promotes, in many ways, a mutual understanding of habits, moral values, and social or philosophical currents of thought. And it clearly allows a more harmonious coexistence of individuals, despite their differences.

Radio Centre-Ville enjoys a special connection with listeners from very different backgrounds, who are often not very well served by the other media. The station acts as a catalyst between communities and the entire cultural and social fabric, which, in turn, has been enriched by the presence of the communities.

First and foremost a centre for radio broadcasting, Radio Centre-Ville is also a centre for meeting and exchanging ideas and social and cultural experiences. Radio Centre-Ville promotes new cultural currents, such as world-beat music. It welcomes and offers radio production training to anyone who wants to take part and offers a forum to community groups and cultural organisations.

Also contributing to the richness of Radio Centre-Ville are the special events that it broadcasts or that it organises itself. Because of its contact with the countries of origin of its members, historic events are covered in a special manner on the Radio Centre-Ville airwaves. The station's coverage of events in Haiti is filled with the insight of volunteer journalists from that country. On some occasions, such as elections in Chile or El Salvador, the station might send a correspondent to prepare live reports in both Spanish and French. At other times, we arrange simultaneous broadcasts with sister stations in other countries. Among our solidarity programmes are: specials on the Palestinian question, broadcasts produced weekly behind the walls of a penitentiary with the participation of the prisoners, solidarity programmes with Radio Venceremos and Radio Farabundo Marti in El Salvador, and others for fundraising after natural disasters in Chile and Colombia. All of these examples reflect the human and cultural variety at Radio Centre-Ville.

## PARTICIPATORY RADIO

How does participation work at Radio Centre-Ville? Richard Barette, ex-director of francophone programming at the station and a long-time participant gives us his ideas about these questions.<sup>2</sup>

Inventing and experimenting with new methods of managing activities, different than that of pyramidal organisation are, of course, arduous tasks, because they require learning new ways of operating. The best intentions fail most often because of difficulties in putting into practice a genuine and durable collective operation, supported by real participation in decision-making, the

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<sup>2</sup> Extracts from a text by Richard Barette in the Guide de la Radio communautaire au Québec (Guide to community radio in Québec), Association des radiodiffuseurs communautaires du Québec, ARCQ, 1984.

sharing of responsibilities and the effective carrying out of projects. Do we want a society that uses communication techniques to reinforce rigidity and authority, which is the model of the dominant culture or, on the contrary, do we want to see freedom, responsibility and fellowship grow?

Radio Centre-Ville is, by definition, a communication tool at the service of individuals and groups to promote fellowship, quality of life, creativity, local democracy and cultural identity. It is a response to the difficulty of finding identity communicating, and participating in decision making. It also wishes to respond to the specific needs of its target audience: the working class, newcomers to the country and organisations defending citizens interests. To reach its objectives, Centre-Ville must therefore count on the cooperation of its listeners in order to avoid isolating itself from the real needs of its milieu. To do this, it has developed an operating structure which puts into practice a participatory type of management.

Participation at Radio Centre-Ville has its own particularities due to the nature of the station itself: community-based but also and especially multilingual and multi-ethnic. Accordingly, participation at Radio Centre-Ville depends on membership in one of seven production teams. The participatory system of management is built around these autonomous production teams.

Participating in the management of Radio Centre-Ville means giving up the possibility of staying on the sidelines and comfortably criticising those who run the station, those who are up front. Participation means expressing personal opinions, complying with group constraints, and supporting decisions.

In many organisations of this kind, one often hears questions such as: Who decides? Who is in control? Who should I support? Who is right? Who will be responsible for failures? A participatory type of management cannot be imposed, without preparation, on people who have not been trained: it requires a certain apprenticeship of all individuals involved.

Good intentions are not enough to ensure that the target population and groups participate in the production of radio broadcasts. These groups must take control of the means of communication by participating in the management and decision making process. In this way, they manage the complete production process of the station.

## PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

This theoretical vision of participation inevitably becomes reality through its successes and failures. How can a radio station, which is really seven radio stations with seven production teams, become more accessible? How can genuine communication be established between groups with such different cultures and ways of doing things in a manner that keeps each production team from becoming “ghettoised?” How can the concerns of newcomers be included in the socio-political debates of the Québécois, and how can they participate in these debates? How can broadcasts based exclusively in folklore and the nostalgia for countries of origin be avoided? How can the concerns of recently arrived cultural communities be reflected and a real intercultural project developed? How can the interest of youth be raised? How can women be assured a genuine role in these debates?

One project, *Ondes de Femmes* Women's Waves), has recently gone on the air. It is an attempt to open up the airwaves to women of diverse cultural origin and may provide some answers to the above questions.

### *ONDES DE FEMMES*

Louise Boivin is the former director of Centre-Ville's news room. She is now coordinator of the *Ondes de femmes* project. This is how she described her work:

The *Ondes de femmes* project was begun because we noticed a low representation of women and groups of women in the production teams at Radio Centre-Ville. Sometimes what appears to be equal representation of women hides the fact that there is a reproduction of traditional roles inside the teams. Women are limited to jobs such as answering the telephone, cleaning up the premises and taking minutes of meetings. Few women are hosts, producers or technicians. Immigrant women are doubly exposed to these difficult conditions.

A radio which wishes to be alternative and community has to prioritise the representation and equal participation of women and their organisations in its programming and its structures. Our declaration of principles clearly affirms that we support collective action to transform society in favour of the marginalised sectors, of which women, unfortunately, all too often form a part.

Woman from approximately one hundred women's groups and community and ethnic organisations were invited to participate in the *Ondes de femmes* project. The reaction was so positive that two months later, about fifty women shared in the production of twenty broadcasts in French, Spanish, Creole and Chinese. Intensive training sessions have been organised and a support structure has been set up for the first broadcasts. Links between the women are maintained through monthly meetings, and a weekly information bulletin circulates among them. Participating organisations represent women from all over the world. Many communities which were not already represented at Radio Centre-Ville, or which did not already have women producers, participated in the project. The themes discussed in the programmes are freely chosen by the participants and deal with women's rights generally, as well as with specific problems such as conjugal violence, employment, culture shock and integration.

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The economic crisis, the evolution towards an increasingly intercultural society and the State's disengagement from social programmes means that, more than ever, solidarity is a necessary aspect of our communities. Community radio still has its "raison d'être." As a Radio Centre Ville document puts it: "We must return to the community, radio has to go to the people. Communities have fewer resources and there is an enormous amount of work to be done. Radio must help them communicate. We have to encourage cultural exchange." Radio Centre-Ville, twenty years strong, still has many challenges to meet.

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## **RADIO CENTRE-VILLE ORGANISATION CHART**

- 1) The General Assembly is made up of members of each of the production teams, who are members in good standing of the station.
- 2) Individual members are those who accept the principles of Radio Centre-Ville and who have participated for a period of three months during the six months preceding the date of the request for membership status. They must belong to one of the seven production teams of Radio Centre-Ville and demonstrate their capacity for teamwork.
- 3) Organisational members, as well as having the same obligations as individual members, must produce at least 30 minutes of air time per month during the month preceding the request for membership.
- 4) The Membership Committee, formed of four station members, regularly organises sessions for inter-team initiation of new volunteers. It grants membership status and may withdraw it on recommendation of the production team.
- 5) The Board of Directors is made up of 15 members of the station: eight are elected by the general assembly. Each of the seven production teams nominates one candidate for the remaining seven seats. The nominations are ratified by the General Assembly.
- 6) The Hiring Committee is made up of three representatives of the Board of Directors and makes recommendations to the Board in matters concerning the hiring of paid workers at the station. It is also responsible for all employment relations at Radio Centre-Ville.
- 7) The Production Teams are the basic units responsible for a certain number of hours of broadcasting per week, as defined by the station. Production Teams are responsible for:
  - job organisation
  - broadcast content
  - reception of proposals for programmes within their broadcast time
  - election of their candidate to the Board of Directors
  - advertising sales during their broadcast time
- 8) The Inter-team Production Committee is made up of a representative named by each production team. Its tasks include:
  - production, promotion and/or broadcast
  - inter-team special interest projects or programmes
  - important projects for one or more production teams, with the approval and collaboration of those in charge of programming and with the promotion of the team or teams