



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 9

A New Dawn for Freedom of Speech: Radio Soleil

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In 1978, Haiti was still suffering under the dictatorship of Jean Claude Duvalier. Repression was rampant and any opposition to the regime was immediately squashed. Duvalier, who had replaced his father as president a few years earlier, was later to declare himself President-for-life. International pressure had forced the government to permit a certain opening and a few radio stations and newspapers were attempting to report on the repression.

At the same time, the Catholic Church was re-examining its role in Latin America. At a conference in Medellin, Colombia, Catholic Bishops spoke of the need for the Church to become involved in the struggles of the people of Latin American and the Caribbean and of the importance of the media in combating political repression.

It was in this context that the Episcopalian Conference of Haiti created Radio Soleil (Sun Radio) to work alongside the people against repression and for the promotion of human rights.

RADIO SOLEIL AND THE DICTATORSHIP

Radio Soleil's first confrontation with the dictatorship came in 1980 when the government arrested journalists from Radio Haiti Inter, a commercial station that often took progressive political positions. These journalists had begun broadcasting news in

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*Creole*¹ that was critical of the Duvalier regime, and the station director, Jean Dominique, and some staff were forced into exile. Expressing our solidarity with the journalists, Radio Soleil protested the events as yet another abuse of human rights and another reason to keep working for an end to the dictatorship. At a time when people were feeling that they had suffered another defeat, Radio Soleil encouraged them not to despair.

Radio Soleil was again at the forefront of the resistance with its role in the release of Gérard Duclerville, a Catholic activist who was detained by the government in 1982. The authorities denied they were holding Duclerville. However, Radio Soleil persisted with daily reports about the detention, saying each time: Today, November 17, Gérard Duclerville, arrested on such-and-such a day was not released. Today, November 18, Gérard Duclerville, arrested on such-and-such a day was not released. We kept this up until his release in February, 1983. The campaign to release Duclerville was the catalyst for the creation of a nation-wide solidarity network, the first time that students, teachers, priests, and representatives of neighbourhood and peasant organisations worked together. By the end of the campaign the Episcopalian Council had made Duclerville's release a precondition for Pope John Paul's planned visit in March.

The papal visit provided us with yet another opportunity to speak out against the dictatorship. "Something must change in Haiti." pronounced Pope John Paul II at the Port au Prince Cathedral. For the next five years this statement became a theme for Radio Soleil, as we tried to identify the "something" that had to change. Our programmes addressed issues of justice, and the lack of it. We talked about the enormous privileges of the land-owning class, such as the right to go to school. We spoke of the lack of decent health services and of the Tontons Macoutes.² Each time a government official claimed the regime was democratic, we pointed to the facts that contradicted the claim.

GARANTI LA LOI

These early experiences revealed the power of radio to those of us at Radio Soleil, and to the rest of the Haitian people. However, it was not until 1985, when President Duvalier announced that there would be a referendum in which people would be able to choose between one form of dictatorship or another, that we began to use this power to its full potential. We responded to the referendum with a series of skits – one of our most effective and popular campaigns ever. The airing of the first skit caused an uproar across the country and got everyone tuning in. Listeners asked to have it rebroadcast, which we did, three times a day. The programme was called *Garanti la loi* (Uphold the Law). The regular cast included two peasants (a man and a woman), a few peasant youths, and a *griot* (an experienced elder). These people met each morning under a tree and discussed their problems. The peasant man always started out by saying he was hungry and couldn't find anything to eat; that he had been to the hospital and there was no medicine; and that the dispensary was far away and it took him a long time to get there. One day he told

¹ Although Creole is the daily language of Haitians, most radio stations chose to broadcast in French, a language mastered by only a small elite. This policy had the effect of excluding the voices of most Haitians from radio.

² The Tontons Macoutes were a private militia established by Duvalier.

about how he had met another peasant on the road who told him something was about to happen in the country. The first man asked:

- “But what is going to happen?,” and the second replied:
- ‘ Aren’t you aware of the referendum?’

The first man did not understand what this was about,

- “What are they referring too? And who is dumb?” he said.

We did a lot of scenes that made fun of the terminology of the referendum. In the end, the peasant never understood what it meant. An opportunity to choose between one form of President-for-life and another didn’t make much sense.

The peasant women asked questions about democracy:

“Will it come in a plane?,” she asked. She looked in sky and didn’t see anything. Then she looked on the ground and didn’t see anything, either. Democracy was nowhere to be found in Haiti. We ridiculed the government’s entire political philosophy. One day, the *griot* talked about the constitution and everyone was stunned.

“What does the constitution mean? Does such a thing exist? I didn’t realise that there was a constitution and that the president’s name was in it as president-for-life!”

The peasant man asked if it was normal for the president’s name to appear in the constitution. The *griot* said that it was not. There was also a stranger among them, a *mon blanc* (a friendly term for a white foreigner) who described and explained experiences in other countries, pointing out to people that Haiti’s political situation wasn’t normal.

THE STATE’S REACTION

One day the Ministers of the Interior, External Affairs, and Information called the station director in. The Minister of External Affairs said to him, “Director, I listen to your skits every morning, they’re really fantastic, and very interesting. I’d like to participate. Could I possibly give you a cassette?”

The Minister gave us a cassette, and asked that it be included in our show. Later we met to discuss what to do with it. We decided to start the skit, as usual, with the peasant man. He stated that in his region there were no cars or ambulances, while in Port-au-Prince he had seen several cars in the Ministries’ courtyards. The cars were equipped with loudspeakers that made noise and spread propaganda. This was just the sort of naive but insightful criticism a peasant would make. At this point one of the youths in the skit turned on his radio and invited the others to listen to what appeared to be a government announcement. Everyone listened, and we then played the government’s cassette. The characters in the skit criticised what they heard on the radio, pointing out the contradictions. A few days after we aired the show, the authorities cut the electricity and telephone, and jammed the station’s signal.

Fortunately, our technician succeeded in thwarting the jamming and we managed to get electricity from a neighbour so we were able to continue our work and keep

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broadcasting *Garanti la loi* three times a day. We received hundreds of letters from the provinces, with people's opinions on the referendum. They were all against it.

On referendum day, we broadcast reports from clandestine correspondents. They were located at various polling sites and by identifying license plates, they were able to follow buses that left working-class neighbourhoods, packed with voters paid by the government. These buses went from polling station to polling station, and people voted several times. We secretly recorded their accounts:

- “I voted twenty times. I voted one-hundred times.”
- “Why did you vote ‘yes’?”
- “I didn’t choose. I was given a ballot already marked ‘yes’.”

In other areas people came down from the mountains to vote and discovered the ballot boxes already full. Through our correspondents, we were able to record their accounts, too. All over the country those who went to vote were paid to do so, and we had recordings to prove it:

- “Dérélus give me my dollar, I already voted!”

When the government realised that everyone knew the referendum was a fraud, and that we were broadcasting the news, they shut down the station. We were linked by phone to two other stations in the provinces and so for a while our programmes were still heard outside Port-au-Prince, but they soon found this out and cut the phone lines. Undefeated, we sent the cassettes to the other stations by bus every day.

On the day of the referendum we were told by supporters in the neighbourhood that the station director had been arrested and hit by soldiers and that he was to be deported the same day.³ We immediately took steps to get the embassies and the Church to intervene and prevent the expulsion. The director was released later that day and we produced a special edition of *Garanti la loi*. In it the peasant hit the *mon blanc* (who was played by the director) in the same way as the soldiers had. The *mon blanc* cried out and told the story of what had happened to him that day, but in a comical fashion. Then the peasant boasted that, for the first time in his life he had been able to ride in an air-conditioned bus, that he had voted 100 times, and that he had even been paid for it. Two days later the director was deported.

THE PRESSURE INCREASES

From November 1985 to December 1985, fifteen upper level government officials, including four ministers of state, paid us visits. On their final visit, they told us, “We now own Radio Soleil. You will follow our orders. In this battle you will lose because we have the weapons and the Church has none.”

Each time we received this type of visit we informed our listeners on air. This irritated the ministers. The day of their final visit we once again broadcast the news. This time however, we received calls from Church officials asking us to stop because they had received threats from the authorities. We no longer had the right to broadcast news, but

³ At the time, the station director was a Belgian priest.

we continued to play political music. This angered the authorities just as much, and they threatened to issue a decree banning music containing protest messages. On December 4, the army showed up and broke equipment at the transmitter site and at the station, forcing us off the air.

On the same day I returned to the station from a trip abroad. When I arrived the soldiers told me that the army now owned the station and that I could not stay. They searched my suitcase and found some Catholic newspapers. I told them that the information was harmless, but they replied that it came from Canada and Yugoslavia. "Jean-Claude doesn't have relations with those countries. They're communist countries! You are under arrest!"

Later, after eating, the soldiers said I seemed like an okay type and could return to the station if I wanted to. We were able to go back to work, even though the station was off the air. For the next while we fed the soldiers three times a day and they watched TV and didn't bother keeping watch on the station.

In the final days of December 1985, popular and international pressure called for Radio Soleil to be reopened. At one point John Littleton, a religious singer, was in Haiti on a concert tour. At every concert the announcer thanked the various radio stations for their help in promoting the concert. Each time he got to Radio Soleil, which he thanked even though we were not on the air, there was a standing ovation. The last performance on Littleton's tour was a benefit for a youth organisation. When the show was over the people spilled into the streets in a spontaneous demonstration, demanding that Radio Soleil be reopened.

After that, things changed quickly. The situation was so tense that the government actually started putting pressure on us to reopen the station. Finally, on December 24, in the middle of the night, we found ourselves at the transmitter site supervising government technicians while they repaired the damage they had caused. We went on the air again on December 31, with the same content, assuring our listeners that we had not changed and that we would not.

THE DAYS LEADING UP TO FEBRUARY 7, 1986

Our first programme when we went back on the air was a live broadcast of an open-air mass. We wanted to take some time before starting to broadcast news programmes again, but public pressure soon got them back on the air. As soon as we started, the government started harassing us again. It was very tense. On the one hand, we were receiving phone calls threatening to throw grenades at us, and on the other, calls from people telling us they were going to form security brigades to protect us.

The situation was heating up and by early January the repression was very intense and people were becoming discouraged. We launched a show called *Seven Diocese in Seven Days*. The show's host travelled to each community and talked with the locals about the situation in Haiti. They discussed how it was unjust and unacceptable and how it was against the teachings of Jesus Christ. The programme went into people's homes with reassurance and encouragement. The essential message was, "Hello, how are you?"

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We know you have lost parents, brothers, sisters or children and that these are hard times. But we have come to tell you not to despair, that there are still ways to fight.”

Our plan was to close the show with simultaneous ecumenical services across the country. Protestants would visit Catholic communities, and vice versa. The services were supposed to end in demonstrations against the regime. However, the government felt so threatened that it called a meeting with the bishops to tell them to stop the programme. We refused to stop, despite the bishops’ interference. On the seventh day, the demonstrations took place as we had planned. On January 31, the station was, once again, closed by the government. But this time, the closure was too late.

ONÈ! RÈSPÈ!

The demonstrations continued after January 31 and one week later, on February 7, President-for-life Jean Claude Duvalier left the country for good, creating new potential for democracy in Haiti.

Some people maintained that the struggle was over and that Radio Soleil’s programming should become purely religious. The station staff didn’t agree. On the contrary, we felt that this was precisely the moment to be with the people in drawing up a new blueprint for our society. Part of our contribution to this was the launching of a new programme, *Onè! Rèspè!* (Honour! Respect!), as a sequel to *Garanti la Loi*.

The programme was produced by the same team and had the same cross section of Haitian characters, all with different experiences and different levels of education. One day we discussed health, another repression, and so on for the whole week. The programme started with a traditional peasant greeting, “*Onè! Rèspè*” to address the families participating in the project.

Members of the community sent letters which we read at the beginning of the programme. These letters included thoughts on problems encountered by families in the various regions. They also asked that we come and visit them. So we took the show to the regions. We were always very warmly received and there was remarkable contact and familiarity between the people and ourselves. At times people worked as journalists themselves, putting their own reports on cassettes and sending them to us for broadcast. They also sent poems, songs and political pieces. They were preparing themselves for times of conflict. They even sent us practical information, like how to preserve mangoes. The programme was part of a conscious effort to show the worth of peasants’ work, both social and cultural.

Although Duvalier was gone, there was still a lot of repression. One of the things we did to encourage people was organise a song contest in which we invited people to sing about their problems. The group that won had written a song against increasing contraband that was destroying rice production in Artibonite (an irrigated rice-producing region in the centre of the country). They also sang songs about a massacre of 600 peasants in Jean Rabel (a town in the northwest region of the country). These songs were performed with traditional instruments.

One of our principal themes, adopted as well by several peasant organisations, was “Organisation or Death!” We provided techniques for organising that were not simply based on experts’ know-how, but on the basis of successful experiences throughout the country. The show was considered enemy number one for several successive governments – Namphy, Manigat, Avril and the others. It continued until 1989, when the pressure from conservative elements in the Church forced the firing of the production team.

NOVEMBER, 1987

With Duvalier gone, the country could work toward its first democratic elections. An election was called for November, 1987 but in the end there was too much violence and it had to be postponed. It soon became clear the transition would not be an easy one. The repression continued. In one instance a teacher from a literacy project was detained by the army. (To this day we do not know if he was killed). We did a programme in solidarity with the teacher which included a skit in which his new-born baby asked where her father was. On November 7, there was a national demonstration and almost 300,000 people gathered in the capital to say no to the Macoutes, their endless killing and their muzzling of Radio Soleil. There was supposed to be a march, starting at the station and ending at a small church. The army started a rumour that the people at the station had assassinated someone. When the procession prepared to leave, the army started shooting at the crowd and the station. We spent three hours lying on the ground to avoid the gunshots, light bulbs exploding over our heads. Each time people reported to police that we were being shot at, they would deny it, saying that in fact we were the ones shooting at the army.

On November 28, foreign journalists and correspondents held a press conference at Radio Soleil denouncing the fact the army would not allow them travel to the countryside to report on the elections. We broadcast it live. At 9:00 that evening we received two anonymous calls warning us to leave the station because we were going to be bombed. We took our time and finished our work. We had just left the station when the shooting started. The transmitter had already been set on fire by the time the station was attacked by three trucks, machine guns and grenades. Eighteen people were wounded and one was killed in the fire.

We took stock of the damage the next day: the technician and guard’s houses and several cars had been burned. The ten kilowatt transmitter was damaged but luckily only the outside had burned. Using a 1 kilowatt backup transmitter, we were back at work within two days, reassuring the public with the same energy as before. We received an impressive showing of solidarity and within one month we had raised \$90,000 to buy another 10 kilowatt transmitter. The money came from both national and international sources and it came in so quickly that we actually had to tell people to stop sending money. People walked kilometres to bring us two gourds (the local currency), others \$20. In Port-au-Prince alone we raised \$20,000. That year we received the Letellier-Moffit award, in recognition of our work in popular and alternative communication and for our work in promoting respect for human rights with, among others, our show *Onè! Rèspè!*

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Even this caused us problems because the award came from a so-called socialist organisation.

CONCLUSION

If the “Sun” succeeded in bringing a few rays of freedom, it is due to a particular vision of struggle, which can be summarised in the simple strategy we employed, especially in difficult moments: Protect yourself and attack. This strategy required that a philosophy of struggle pervade all aspects of the station’s programming: news, educational, religious and music shows. As such, everything we broadcast was grounded in our commitment to political and social change. Listener participation was our other essential tool, because it was not only the station staff that was committed to change, but also and especially the listeners. It was their participation that drove Radio Soleil and enabled it to make a difference. An example: Elifet is in Port-au-Prince and has been attacked by the Tontons Macoutes. Fidelia is from Carrefour and her mother is in prison. In these two towns fear has gripped the people. But Elifet turns on his radio and hears Ekzius denouncing the repression of the people in his area, Bochan, in the north-west. In Petit-Goave, Adelaide demands the release of her father. Elifet and Fidelia, having been completely discouraged, hear these two messages and find new courage. They head off to the station to make their denunciations as well.

The staff’s militancy played an instrumental role in helping the people overcome their fear. The people’s own analysis of the state of affairs helped the station’s work. People came up with their own ideas about how their living conditions could be changed. This constant will to overcome fear encouraged us to take on nation-wide initiatives, that on several occasions succeeded in changing attitudes among the people and within the government.

Our best shows were produced spontaneously and creatively. They were used to circumvent the repression, to protect ourselves and to protect the people. The names of those who gave testimonies were never revealed. The characters in the socio-dramas were often invented. At Radio Soleil, it was the listeners who had the real radio power. Many came to sleep at the station, to protect what they saw as their own radio. They brought food for the staff, searched for news, even the most confidential, to give to the journalists. Our programmes, in turn, protected the listeners, discreetly or directly.

POSTSCRIPT A CHANGE OF COURSE

We continued to do our work, trying to contribute to the building of a new society in Haiti, until 1989 when conservative and orthodox elements within the Church managed to gain sway in the Episcopalian Conference and ordered the radio station to change course. Most of the programming staff was fired.

Since the coup d’état on September 29, 1991, which overthrew the first democratically elected government in Haiti, Radio Soleil has become a propaganda tool for the dictators. This affected the former staff because, siding as we did with the listeners, we no longer could depend on the station’s support, or on its previously

unquestionable concern for the truth. In contrast to the courage which it had shown in the past, the station no longer gave a voice to the suffering and fear of a threatened people. Radio Soleil did not denounce the aggression, intimidation and elimination of journalists and correspondents, or the gagging of the press. It did not denounce the systematic repression of peasant and popular organisations. Instead it kept silent, handing over the microphone to the assassins who mocked the people's faith in truth and justice.

Among ourselves, the members of the old team, we shared our pain and waited in vain for changes in programming. Finally we understood both what it meant to be a listener, and what listeners of a liberation radio hoped for.

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