
EDITORIAL

Radio, Communities and Social Change

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Radio from its beginning has been a revolutionary technology adaptable both to violent overthrow of corrupt regimes and gradual almost unheeded social change. This issue of *WPCC* invited submission of papers on the subject of radio and revolution. We suggested that revolution be intended in its broadest sense, encompassing not only the violent overthrow of governments and their counter measures but also revolution in the sense of radical social change. Radio's long set of histories and traditions of activism and community-building are foremost in this issue's material. This editorial reflects on key themes of the journal issue: motivations of free radio practitioners, key phases in development of community broadcasting, radio's potential for social liberation of several kinds and its claims to be a form of mass self-communication in which users also take charge of the media platform itself and lastly radio's presence alongside social media like Twitter in contemporary activism and protests.

Keywords: radio; revolution; community broadcasting; alternative media; social change; protest

Arguably the first news transmission ever broadcast was at 5.30 pm on Tuesday 25th April 1916, from a shop opposite the General Post Office in Dublin. It went out via a 1 1/2 kilowatt ship's transmitter, which had been 'liberated' from the nearby school of wireless telegraphy and announced to the world that the Irish revolution had begun; the intention being to alert passing US ships to the fact in the hope that once the news reached America, help would be forthcoming. Other revolutionaries were not slow to realize the potential of this new medium of radio; to Lenin it was 'the newspaper without paper' (and mindful of his country's vast size) 'without distances.' Trotsky thought it could be used to encourage urban revolutionary fervour in Russia's vast rural interior. Nasser's *Sawt al-Arab* (Voice of the Arabs) electrified audiences in the Middle East in the 1950s. In the 1960s, anti imperialist and anti apartheid radicals broadcast from friendly countries like Tanzania and the ANC's *Radio Freedom* broadcast secretly inside South Africa from 1963. Throughout the Cold War prohibition of foreign radio stations was countered not only by CIA-sponsored radio but local community initiatives all in the name of social change. Today, *Radio Rebelde*, founded by Che Guevara is still supporting the Cuban revolution he helped launch. In Venezuela there are over 300 communitarian socialist radio stations. The FARC has its own station. Argentina boasts a thriving alternative communitarian radio network *La Tribu* whereas in Africa radio has been credited

with the role of developing listening communities that have radically transformed the form of the public sphere from colonial times to the present. Radio from its beginning has been a revolutionary technology adaptable both to violent overthrow of corrupt regimes and gradual almost unheeded social change. And it is now, as Gretchen King's article in this issue demonstrates, a global medium, locally situated.

This issue of *WPCC* invited submission of papers on the subject of radio and revolution. We suggested that revolution be intended in its broadest sense, encompassing not only the violent overthrow of governments and their counter measures but also revolution in the sense of radical social change. With such a topic it was gratifying to see the interest and range of material proffered initially (not all of it we were able to publish) with radio's long set of histories and traditions of activism and community-building foremost in the published material. Not all the emphasis was on political struggle. Lola Costa Gálvez echoes Stefania Milan's earlier research (2008) as she explores the motivations of radio practitioners amongst the free radio stations of Barcelona. She discovered that the people who work there consider those stations there as a 'free space' and associated with happiness and other positive feelings. Unregulated to an extent that is rare in Western Europe, free radio in Spain (with music especially important for it) also becomes, 'a vehicle for "alternative" content which can not be found in other media, precisely because they implement different (non-commercial) working rules' as (Milan 2008) had also noted. Costa Gálvez also confirms that for her interviewee participants community radio's progressive or even revolutionary significance can often abide somewhat below the radar and as the title of Foxwell et al. (2008) indicated, it 'Sounds like a Whisper', alluding aptly to Tracy Chapman's song 'Talkin' bout a Revolution'. This is not surprising since radio is so often unheralded by big media of various kinds which does not undertake, covet or necessarily even understand its vital and appreciated community functions. The workers at Barcelona's free radio stations Costa Gálvez talked to (whilst displaying no absolute uniformity) share a comparable ethos and proximate values which underpin their work of providing a set of diverse platforms for music tastes 'where personal views and beliefs are vindicated and progressive ideas (not often seen or heard on television that slowly and quietly) may take root'.

It would be a mistake though to think that community radio has stood still as Gretchen King's systematic mapping of four stages of community broadcasting practices highlights. Taking a de-Westernizing and internationalizing approach she highlights four stages of its development and a history of disparate activities flourishing often despite the dominance of both state and/or commercial stations. These stages she has labelled: experimental, wildfire, solidarity and resurgence. As technological advances accumulated King shows that the 'increasing simplicity and affordability of the production and broadcast technology' has ensured this 'old medium' she notes 'remained a preferred platform' in many parts of the world, nurtured at a local level. The proliferation of community broadcasting across the world, in the Global South and amongst native communities in 'Western' countries such as Canada and elsewhere are testament to a vitality and positivity that is reflected in all this issue's contributions. Such perspectives from radio's media margins are shared all too infrequently although the institutions, organizations and networks she describes in the resurgence stage indicate a vibrant movement that is decentralized but now nurturing its own community ethos and set of mutual concerns that cut across national borders. This important overview urgently asks us to internationalize our analytical outlook and wake up to the diversity of community broadcasting worldwide and radio's significance as a medium within so many communities. Readers are recommended to listen Dr King's accompanying audio presentation of her research available in *WPCC* as an accompaniment and supplement to the written account.

The spoken word was central to *WPCC*'s last issue with its unique opportunity to hear the presentations of seventeen globally-renowned scholars on the topic of 'Reframing Media and Cultural Studies in the Age of Global Crisis'. This issue included Paddy Scannell's caution against scholarly amnesia (Scannell, 2017). Radio, Scannell might say we think, was once 'new media' and as digital radio to a certain extent *is* so once again, a circumstance which we should not forget (see Jauert, 2017) notwithstanding the prevalence of DIY streaming, sharing and YouTube. The power of voice to effect change is poignantly registered in Everette Ndlovu's commentary (Ndlovu, 2017) which recounts the impressions of listeners tuning into Voice of the Revolution Radio (VOR) broadcasting from Lusaka whether they were nourished by the mesmerising voice of Cde Joshua Nkomo or fired up by influential female 'trouble-makers' like Jane Ngwenya. Ndlovu illustrates using first hand witnesses how radio truly was a recruiting medium in the struggle for liberation in a country then named after its colonial founder that was shortly to become Zimbabwe. Clandestine listening proved very important for morale for liberation fighters and the population as a whole with radio the 'only way [the revolution's leaders] could counter the propaganda communicated by the settlers in occupied land'. Schools and detentions camps were often sites for listening with some gatherings preorganized to present the outward face of a funeral wake in the event of police raids. Radio was a means to break the 'isolation' of Zimbabwe's people from each other and a means to share their concerns as well as serving overtly revolutionary ends.

Such social functions form a direct link to the themes of Tiziano Bonini's research on the relative importance of Twitter and radio to the Gezi Park Protests in Istanbul in 2013. Rather than rehearse jaded debates over whether social media caused revolutionary or protest activity or actually changed anything for the better, Bonini demonstrates how radio has not, 'lost the value that it gained as a tool for political and social change during the twentieth century, but ... only repositioned itself' in relation to the twenty-first century's digital media. Radio played its 'part' at Gezi alongside other media he argues. The specifics are important. Social media like Twitter he suggests may not root and branch replace other channels for political engagement but most probably lead to adjustments, accommodations and new roles for older media such as radio. Here radio, perhaps television too may provide raw materials, sometimes amplify messages and sometimes fill in the gaps in the transmission of political messages viralized by social media. Recalling Jauert (2017) quoting Paddy Scannell, 'Technologies, are, in the first instance, technical, but in the last instance they are not' and we can reflect on Bonini's conclusion concerning radio's future role in activism as it takes us back to the specifics of the Gezi Park Protests:

All these media – analogue and digital, 'old' and 'new' – once interconnected, represent what we could call a 'communicative capital', a network of communicative weapons in the hands of the global social movements of the twenty-first century.

The account of free radio's impact in the Southern Basque country sketched by Jason Diaux, Ion Andoni del Amo and Arkaitz Letamendia underlines this attention to context that Bonini's research via its ethnographic investigation and participant observation demonstrates. In terms of this rich history of social communication in the Southern Basque country they observe one strong point of difference between dispersed, 'mass self-communication through ICTs' and the free radio stations they analyze – 'the media is (self-)constructed collectively by those involved'. Such a clear distinction is arguable (and probably will be) but a persuasive case for a much longer history of mass media self-communication through free radio in the Southern Basque country is made. Free radio according to this narrative was and is self-evidently 'Do it Yourself' without the tight embrace and 'determined political economy' of the

big social media companies' existing platforms. Whilst the citizen-consumer is reminded that they have unprecedented creative 'power' and are in total 'control' of their digital devices and software – why are such big advertising budgets required to constantly reiterate this? – the example of free radio stations in the Southern Basque country suggest an alternative perspective where such platforms built by communities and sustained in adverse circumstances may at least historically have had more value to community members, as a community than many ephemeral social media pop-ups can have today. Such radio stations operated at a local level and continued over a long history, they the authors argue may be 'freer' in many senses, more liberated as they are from 'orchestrated ... mercantilist logic' than their individualistically-orientated corporate counterparts.

It is perhaps unlikely radio will regain the centrality to revolutionary social change outlined at the beginning of this editorial. This issue we hope illustrates that radio studies despite being something of a Cinderella amongst media disciplines can offer fresh perspectives, is for many parts of the world vitally important in contemporary contexts and has a serious and still under-appreciated historical role as an agent of revolutionary change. Furthermore to take a leaf from Kate Lacey's reflection on ten years of the UK's radio studies network these contributions illustrate that, 'by bringing it back in from the margins ... radio can amplify the 'blind spots' of visual cultural histories' (Lacey 2009) – (one now could add social media studies *too*) – and 'help to sound out the connections and inter-relationships between the full range of communicative practices available in any particular time and place'. Such a time and place might be decades past or could be Istanbul, Barcelona, Zimbabwe, the Southern Basque Country or where any of the radio stations listed by King (this issue) are broadcasting to today's audiences.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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