



an emancipatory cultural practice

Marc Raboy

“Radio must be changed from a means of distribution to a means of communication”, Bertolt Brecht wrote in 1932, when the medium was barely a dozen years old. By that time, its form was already established as a one-way transmitter of messages to mass audiences whose only power lay in their control of the switch. Whether commercial or state monopoly, radio was indeed a reflection of political and cultural power relations, and a tool for maintaining them, everywhere in the world.

Brecht’s own countryfolk were among the first to try to invent an emancipatory form of radio practice by taking radio-phonics into their own hands. During the revolution of 1918 German workers occupied radio studios, and illegal radio broadcasts by worker groups persisted throughout the Weimar Republic.

From the *Arbeterradiobund* of Weimar to the *radios libres* of France, Belgium, West Germany and Italy in the 1970s, radio has been used as a means of social and political intervention in western Europe. At the same time, from Algeria to Latin America, from Viet Nam to Afghanistan, radio has been an important weapon in revolutionary struggles against colonial powers. In North and South America, meanwhile, “community” radio occupies a critical, although marginal, space at the edge of the cultural colossus.

More than 500 contemporary practitioners of these different types of oppositional radios met at a remarkable conference in Montreal last August (1983), to discover they had one great unifying quality: use of the medium as a means of opposing domination, albeit of various forms and degrees. The conference was organized under the sign of “community”—a particularly North American designation, which everyone recognized was not necessarily appropriate to all the experiences represented at Montreal. In fact, if anything, there was a tacit recognition of a kind of solidarity that transcends socio-cultural context but

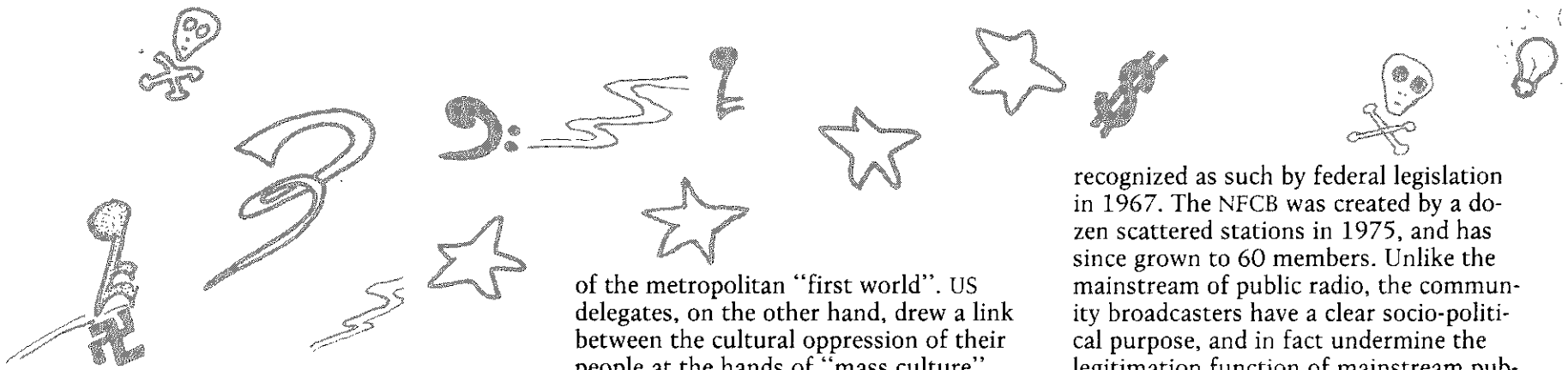
which can not yet be named. What ties these experiences together is the way each of them uses radio as part of a process of human emancipation.

Where did these radios come from and where are they headed in 1984?

Revolutionary Radio

The use of radio as a means of propaganda and ideological support for armed struggle is the oldest, clearest and least ambiguous kind of ‘alternative’ radio. During the Second World War, radio was an important propaganda and counter-propaganda tool of both sides, and also a tool of resistance. After the war, when the CIA began regular monitoring of “clandestine stations” throughout the world, virtually every imaginable revolutionary guerilla group, of left and right, had its radio. Some of the examples to turn up on the CIA monitors in the 1940s and ‘50s: the Irgun, the IRA, Slovakian anti-communist nationalists, Spanish Republicans in exile, Basque separatists, Kurdish rebels.

illustration by Peter Dako



Frantz Fanon detailed the important psychological role of radio in the Algerian war of liberation: Up until the start of fighting in 1954, radio was considered a tool of colonialism, to the point where lack of ownership of a radio was a mark of resistance among upper-class native Algerians. Then, one day in 1956, leaflets appeared in Algiers announcing the launching of "la Voix de l'Algerie", the Voice of Algeria. Suddenly the situation was reversed, and soon the colonial authorities had to outlaw the sale and purchase of radio stations.

Radio enjoyed a special place in the Cuban Revolution. No less than nine clandestine radio broadcasts to Cuba between six anti-Castro and three revolutionary, including the famous *Radio Rebelde*, set up by Che Guevara in the Sierra Maestra in February, 1958. Guerilla radio has since been a regular fact of Latin American struggles. In Nicaragua, *Radio Sandino* used mobile transmitters to communicate with guerilla forces and throw the Somoza guard off balance.

Today, the tradition is continued in the Morazan mountains of El Salvador, where the Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) broadcasts *Radio Venceremos*. *Radio Venceremos* began regular broadcasts from FMLN-controlled territory January 10, 1981, after a year of sporadic "people's revolutionary radio" broadcasting in the capital. It has been on and off the air since then, depending on the fortunes of war, and is a prime target of government repression. During the 1982 elections, when the army was unable to contain its activities, United States vessels offshore began jamming *Radio Venceremos*' broadcasts.

Radio Venceremos is a classical "revolutionary" radio. As the voice of an armed rebel movement, it conveys vital information and does political education, with a view towards the communicational needs of the revolution. The problem with this type of radio is that the revolutionary context severely limits the possibility of democratic participation, and lends itself too easily to institutionalisation as "party radio" after the revolution . . .



At first glance, you couldn't get much farther from the revolutionary radios of third world national liberation struggles than the "community" radios of North America. While the revolutionary radios are seen as support systems for political struggles, community radios are attempts at cultural struggle. The distinction was made sharply at the Montreal conference. Latin American delegates insisted on the "abyss" separating the voiceless peasants of their countries and the urban populace

of the metropolitan "first world". US delegates, on the other hand, drew a link between the cultural oppression of their people at the hands of "mass culture" and the military repression which is current in many third-world countries. A lot of time was spent concerned with guilt: trying to inflict it or trying to deal with it, until it was pointed out that suffering and struggle could not be quantified. One intervener insisted that four deaths in Poland could be as important in the struggle for democracy as 100,000 starving in the sub-sahara, while another added that the same arms profiteers are exploiting and was threatening people everywhere . . .

"Community" radio is practiced in many parts of Latin America, for example in Bolivia, which in spite of its desperate poverty has a well-developed, structured community radio system existing alongside state and commercial systems. Since the 1950s, radio has been used by Bolivian miners in the course of their struggles and many mining towns have for varying periods sustained decentralised, autonomous, self-managed radios in the face of military dictatorship.

A clearly different type of community radio is practiced in North America. In Canada, community radio takes the form of minority cultural development. Community radio is a (provincially) state-sanctioned alternative in Quebec, where in some parts of the territory it constitutes the main local station. Under the sign of community, autonomous radio has found its way into over a dozen Inuit and dozens of Indian settlements of the Quebec and Canadian north. It is also present on several college campuses and in two cities of the English Canadian south (Vancouver and Kitchener).

The American situation is different once again. Almost all radio in the US is of course private/commercial. Since the 1950s, when the Federal Communications Commission decided to open some FM channels for non-profit, educational radio, "public" radio has taken a significant spot in the spectrum. US "public" radio is unlike any other; it has no direct connection to the state, as the term implies in the general western context. One out of every eight radio stations in the US is "public", or non-profit (1,000/8,000), but nearly 3/4 of these (700) are found on college campuses. The others are grouped in two organisations, the National Public Radio (240 stations) and the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (60). It is the latter and tiniest group, representing less than 1% of all radio stations in the US, that presents a most instructive example of "community" radio.

Unlike the other public stations, community radio stations in the US have no institutional affiliation. They are independent and see themselves as social animation tools of community development, serving media-poor publics—various minorities, poor people, women, etc. The community radio stations are not only an alternative to commercial broadcasting but also to public radio, the official alternative to the commercial system that was

recognized as such by federal legislation in 1967. The NFCB was created by a dozen scattered stations in 1975, and has since grown to 60 members. Unlike the mainstream of public radio, the community broadcasters have a clear socio-political purpose, and in fact undermine the legitimation and function of mainstream public radio. This is indeed, in the US context, radical radio. These radios are financed by listeners, foundations and government subsidies for which they are eligible under funding programs for public radio.

US community radio dates from the founding in 1949 of KPFA in Berkeley, on the basis of anarchist/pacifist principles. This listener-sponsored station is today one of the mainstays of the 5-station Pacifica Foundation, which has been under sharp attack from the right since the election of Ronald Reagan. After a right-wing organization, Accuracy In Media, accused Pacifica of broadcasting "filth, racism and communism" in 1981, a *National Enquirer* expose screamed "Your Tax Dollars Support Red Broadcasters". A right-wing lobby, the American Legal Foundation, has been seeking to get the FCC to refuse renewal of Pacifica's Washington station's license. The media have become public battleground in Reagan's America, pitting groups like the right-wing Coalition for Better Television against the left-leaning National Citizens' Committee on Broadcasting. The government is trying to break down the 60-year-old idea that broadcasting is a "public trust" (even though it has always been entrusted to private interests!), through measures like deregulation. In this context, community radio is an involved political player.

The Pacifica group and other NFCB members say they are seeking to move people and change their consciousness. This purpose is an equalizer between radios otherwise as different as Pacifica's Berkeley KPFA, El Salvador's *Radio Venceremos* and the urban guerrilla radios of western Europe. It represents the "political" stream of the radio movement worldwide, alongside the "cultural" stream whose purpose it is to create a space for alternative forms of cultural expression, forms too unorthodox or unprofitable to find room on mainstream airwaves. Both streams contain emancipatory aspects. Only in very rare cases, usually at specific exemplary moments, do they merge.



Radio developed as a state monopoly in most of the western world*. As a result of the monopoly situation, radio became either a high culture medium, as in the United Kingdom, or a political extension of the state, as in France. By the mid-

* The US is the notable exception. Canada was on its way to adopting the US model when our federal fathers panicked and created the Canadian Broadcasting Compromise in 1932.



1960s, dissatisfaction with both types of "public" monopolies led to illegal "private" initiatives to create alternatives.

The first break in the European radio monopolies came with the setting up of the English offshore pirate station Radio Caroline in 1964. Its target was innocent enough: the stuffiness of the BBC. Soon there were a dozen stations broadcasting from floating offshore bases. They were never "political" as such. The BBC eventually took this action-critique seriously enough to completely change its program style, but only after legislation had crushed the pirate station movement in 1967.

The commercial broadcasting lobby in Great Britain was more successful, and in 1972 the BBC monopoly was broken with the creation of "private" broadcasting and the Independent Broadcasting Authority. Today, there is a raging debate in Britain over the shape and form of a new entity: "local" broadcasting. A blue-ribbon committee charged with reviewing the British broadcasting system recommended in 1977 the creation of a Local Broadcasting Authority, under which local radio would be independent of both BBC and IBA. The recommendation has not been realized, and a popular movement has since developed in support of the demand for non-commercial, non-governmental local community radio, politically independent of both capital and state.

The primary struggle in this case is over the political control structure of the radio, and the assumption is that this will lead to a certain kind of presumably different content. It inevitably does, but the content is widely variable, as the French and Italian situations, for example, show.

On the European continent, commercial radio developed with "peripheral" stations based in small principalities like Luxembourg and Monaco, beaming their signals to large, lucrative markets like France. This satisfied a certain consumer need for an alternative to the highly politicized French state broadcasting system . . . until a certain May '68.

In the wake of the May upheavals, an entire new set of alternative needs were identified: social, political, cultural and ideological. These needs had nothing to do with commercial interests and could in no way be accommodated within the official system. By the mid-1970s, a vast trans-rational movement of illegal, clandestine radios had developed, most strongly in France, Belgium, Italy and the German Federal Republic.

In Italy, radio began to be used as a political tool in 1975 by organized extreme-left and alternative movement groups (gays, women, ecologists) determined to build something different and autonomous of the official ideological apparatus and the Italian state. The illegal radios were severely repressed at first, but nevertheless, some 300 were broadcasting by the time of the 1976 legislative elections, no doubt influencing (or reflecting?? it's never quite clear . . .) the gains of the left in those elections. In a climate of political

crisis, Italy authorised the free radios, so long as they remained "local" and did not interfere directly with the state monopoly, RAI. This first European "deregulation" as it were, was to become the prototype of a new problem: the opening of the airwaves invited private entrepreneurs to invade a space hitherto restricted to the state and the outlaws. Soon Italy's alternative radios—and the "public service"—were marginalised as 3,000 commercial stations filled the air.

The French free radios of the mid-to-late 1970s saw themselves as media of social and political intervention. The first to transmit regularly was the Paris-based ecologists' Radio Verte, which went on the air in 1977, and was soon followed up by stations like Radio Lorraine-coeur-d'acier, set up by steelworkers in Longwy, and Radio Verte Fessenheim, set up by activists opposing nuclear installations in Alsace. By September 1977, there was a first free radio federation, l'Association pour la liberation des ondes.

Throughout the Giscard regime, police and guerrilla broadcasters played cat and mouse, and strong repressive legislation was brought in in 1978. Soon after, the Socialist Party identified the media issue as a key source of political dissension in France and set up Radio Riposte. When Francois Mitterrand was elected President in May 1981, one of his first gestures was to amnesty several dozen people facing charges of violating the state broadcasting monopoly—one of whom was himself, arrested in a raid on Radio Riposte studios while he was on the air. In the first year of Mitterrand's regime, the radio issue was never far from the forefront, as free radio initiatives mushroomed and a government reform of the broadcasting system moved to co-opt it.

In Belgium, clandestine radios appeared in 1978, then began to emerge from hiding and flout the state monopoly openly. When police tried to raid the first permanent "animation radio", Radio Louvain-La-Neuve, hundreds of students spontaneously turned out and physically prevented them from carrying out the action.

In Belgium too, the government moved in 1981 to regularise the radio situation, wary, as were the French, to avoid an "Italian" situation. The tremendous paradox that has since emerged in most of western Europe, has the state playing the role of guarantor of non-commercial "difference" and defender against the tendency of an uncontrolled marketplace to favour commercial offerings. (From where we sit, it is tempting to refer to this situation as "canadianisation" of the air . . .)

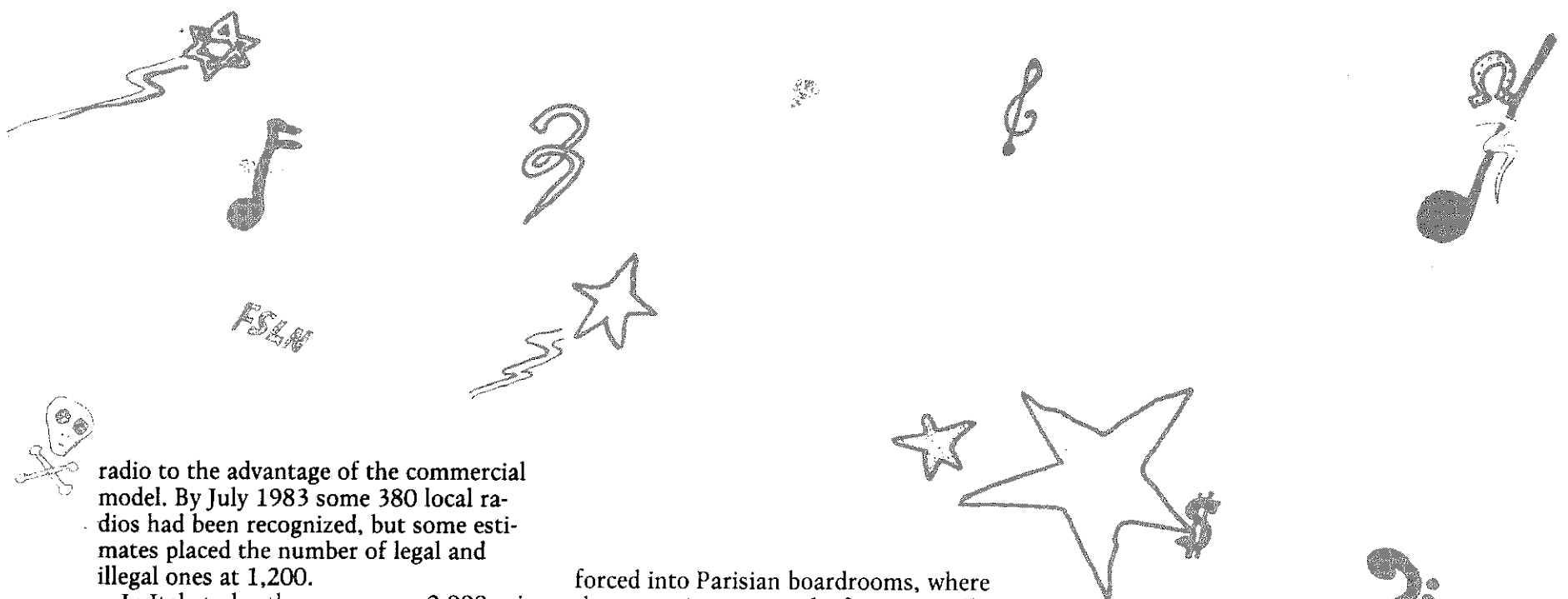
The exception is West Germany. Here, radical radio continues to exhibit its sharpest contradictions. In the Federal Republic of Germany, independent, non-commercial radio is still illegal. Free stations—most of them launched by political movements in the 1970s, beginning in Berlin in 1975—are persecuted by police and authorities in a situation which is the most repressive in western Europe. The German radios, consequently, are still all "political", in the tradition of the early French, Belgian and Italian *radios libres*. In Germany, it is a criminal act to listen to illegal stations, and listeners are liable to have their offending radio sets confiscated.

The POLITICS of RADIO

Media are a reflection of a political context. The political context of the 1980s is not that of the 1970s. Challenged by the free radio movement, the governments of western Europe have moved to legitimize their situation. Conveniently, this political thaw comes at a time when the geopolitical/technological context of broadcasting is rapidly evolving, making the erstwhile state monopolies no longer useful. For example, it no longer makes sense for a government to maintain strict control over channels and frequencies in an era where direct broadcast satellites and fibre optic cable have multiplied available programming. Also, as the Belgian and Italian situations show, the pressure to open up the commercial possibilities of the radio spectrum are too great for governments—even social democratic governments—facing the conservative winds of deregulation.

In Belgium, the first wave of "animation" radios was soon followed by a second group of more commercial, entertainment-oriented ones. Soon there were two radio associations: the Association pour la liberation des ondes (ALO), grouping local, independent, non-profit, self-financing radios opposed to advertising or political subordination; and the Groupement des radios independantes de Belgique (GRIB), whose members were more mass-culture oriented, pro-advertising, and professional. For two years, while the Belgian state monopoly exercised tolerance, the commercial radios took the upper hand. The ALO was soon demanding regulation. In September 1981, a new law recognized independent local radio in Belgium. The legislative framework is supposed to aid "expressive" radio over commercial ones, but the marketplace has marginalised alternative





radio to the advantage of the commercial model. By July 1983 some 380 local radios had been recognized, but some estimates placed the number of legal and illegal ones at 1,200.

In Italy today there are some 2,000 private and concentrates on more-or-less official politics. Radical radio in Italy is found at the local level, where about 200 independent stations of "democratic expression" are currently broadcasting. Democratic radio in Italy means radio with public/audience participation in programming, relying heavily on studio-to-telephone hookups. Since 1981, about 150 of these "democratic" radios are organized in the Association for Democratic Information Broadcasting (LEID). Many of these radios are cooperatively owned. For example, Radio Popolare in Milan has some 12,000 member/owners who control and finance the station.

The political contradictions and frustrations of radical radio are perhaps rawest in France. Here, before May 10, 1981, the situation was at least clear: community radio was an enemy of the state and behaved as such. The unofficial radios were all radios of social and political intervention. Since May 10, radio has also become a movement of cultural expression, in addition to the commercial entrepreneurs, a new type of left-cultural radio "freak" has taken to the air. These broadcasters try to explore new forms of radiophonic language—as opposed to the culturally derivative commercial radios. But only the "intervention" radios are really concerned about the social impact of what they are doing.

An estimated 80,000 people are involved in local radio in France. There are several federations, the most important of which is the Federation nationale des radios libres (300 member stations). The FNRL groups "social expression and communication" radios, that seek financial and political independence and support civic participation. Smaller federations are more "professionalist", and the really commercial operations are not interested in the federations and their negotiations which so far has been hostile with the government—to advertising, which it sees as inviting an Italian/American type situation.

The debate on advertising in France is typical of the type of contradiction inherent in the radio question: both commercial and left cultural/political stations want to be able to sell advertising, the first to make money and the latter to be self-sufficient. The government is opposed to advertising to protect the public interest against American-style commercialism . . . The free radios have been

forced into Parisian boardrooms, where they negotiate protocols, frequency allocations and guidelines for advertising with socialist functionaries. The radical radios have been bureaucratized, and some of the most radical, the most innovative, the most collectivist, have been refused legal status. The irony is thus that now, despite the legalisation and new legitimacy of alternative radio, the exclusion of some of them means there are still outlaw "radio libres" . . .



CAN RADIO
BE A GOOD
THING?

On the road to legitimacy, the "free radios" of Europe have taken a big step closer to their North American colleagues. In 1979, a group of French researchers decried the fact that in Quebec, they found "community" media closely tied to the state, through various legislative/financial mechanisms (Barbier-Bouvet et al). Today, this is becoming increasingly the case in Europe as well. Does this necessarily mean that the emancipatory potential of the medium must be undermined?

The organisers of the Montreal conference, in an attempt to infuse some content to the notion of "community-oriented radio", came up with the following set of characteristics: "democratic, free of any institutional dependency, locally-owned, based on alternative, autonomous participatory practice . . .". Under this umbrella, they found that different contexts led to different traditions and different meanings.

Thus, "community" radio is peculiarly North American, appealing to the sense of belonging fostered by the geographically limited and self-managed communities typical of New England towns and quebecois villages. "Popular" radio, on the other hand, is more meaningful to the movements of Africa, Latin America and mediterranean Europe, and refers to political opposition and struggle against the political authority incarnated in traditional radio. "Free" radio, thirdly, connotes the struggle to occupy a free-speech space outside the authoritarian structure

of state radio monopolies. In Anglo-Saxon cultures, "pirate", "alternative", "sidewalk", and "participatory" radios are all terms used to name the democratic impulse in radio.

Radio thus takes on a different emancipatory focus in different social and political contexts: as human and cultural expression, as social and political intervention, as community-building, as tool of revolutionary struggle. Rather than look for a common thread in these diverse experiences, perhaps it may be most useful to simply marvel that in the present global context people are managing to resist the dominating tendency of mass communication at all. . .

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