Contradicting Media
Towards a Political Phenomenology of Listening

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The number of human hours, days, weeks spent listening to the radio is phenomenal. The number of radios purchased, possessed, listened to in Canada is phenomenal. It wouldn’t be Canada without radio. Despite noises made with the introduction of TV, radio did not disappear between 1950 and 1960 (though of course it changed). If anything, its constant presence became more constant, since the transistor (and freeways) appeared at about the same time. Radio hasn’t gone away. What did disappear, to a correspondingly phenomenal degree, was critical attention to radio.

Compare the number of publications on TV or film in your local bookstore to those on radio and the culture of sound technology. The last major research projects on radio content and listening habits were conducted in the 1940s. Only in the last two or three years is this absence beginning to register.

This “renaissance” of interest in broadcast sound can be attributed, to a small degree, to the emergence of alternative forms of radio broadcasting, which themselves owe their genesis to major shifts and consolidations in the international and local structurations of technology, economics, power, and cultural production. Though alternative radio takes as many forms as there are cultural and political locations, these different forms of opposition articulate their strategies in relation to a common force: the global network of telecommunications whose musical arms have with unprecedented rapidity entered and transformed every social and cultural community in the world. It is said of music that it dissolves all boundaries of language and location. If that can be argued, we are indebted for both its proof and its counter-proof to the global explorations of the music industry. These explorations both transform boundaries and create the felt necessity for their rearticulation. Whether the "global village" towards which these powerful corporations drive us marks the end or the beginning of autonomous difference depends on a complex interaction of technology, power, and politics within which music plays a very central and unique role. Knowing how the struggle progresses means learning how to listen.

My own attentiveness to radio is logical enough, since I am a musician with a professional interest in media and politics. Also I am Canadian, and (even worse) a Canadian woman, which explains a certain paranoid ear for the discourses of power affected by technology, technological processes, mediated social relationships. At the same time, as I am completely inside of these, I am completely at the margin. But
Radio is an alteration of space and a structuring of time. It extends space if you’re making music; shrinks it if you’re listening. It joins people together and reaches them where they are lonely, which may be why it was embraced so vigorously by Canadians from the beginning. Its national identity is closely related to the geographic scale of the country. Though if we recognize considerations other than the physiological, we have to say that in other respects Canada is a very small country, and that its smallness has had as determinants an impact on the development of its broadcasting. Radio rede- lines space and structures time not only in its acoustic movement over distances but also in its format. Murray Schafer has argued that the joining of geographically and philosophically unrelated items in radio achieves an “irrationality of electroacoustic juxtapositioning” which we should refuse to take for granted. Though Schafer has done as much as anyone to analyse the experiential effects of what he calls the “schizophrenia” of modern sound technology and its splitting of sound from source, we can go farther by recognizing that the principles of juxtaposition that dominate ordinary radio programming are as “rational”, i.e. motivated, as they are irrational, i.e. static.

Radio achieves this rational irrationality by its ability to place together sound messages which are disparate in terms of their origin, their cultural purpose, and their form, in order to create a continuous enveloping rhythm of sound and information. The rhythm’s “reason” isn’t about insight, originality, history, logic, or emancipation. It’s about the market. Since the continuous rhythm of sound is more powerful than any single item enrolled in its progression, the reception of particular items is substantially determined by the larger discourse of radio programming, which teaches us addiction and forgetfulness. In commercial radio, the pleasures of location and identity, of specific recognizability, are sacrificed to the (real) pleasures of the media’s “boundless hospitality”, which defends itself against anxiety by being totalitarian in its mode of address and in its structuring of program, genre, and rhythm. The tempo of events, information, pleasure, and interruption, with its prescribed balance of familiar and unfamiliar, is determined by economics, market research, and convention, before the DJ ever gets there. Music is meted out by measure to reward the listener. The carefully managed rapidity and predictability of pattern maintains what might be called a community of listeners who identify with its generic classifications (Top 40, country, “easy listening”, big band, classical, “new music”, etc., all rigorously carved up by market research and broadcast regulation) and who share a certain locus of informed style.

Because of increased mobility, transportation, shopping centres, centralization and marginalization, conditions which radio structures but is simultaneously incapable of transcending, the listening community rarely exists today without radio having first brought it together. Imagine how different radio would be if there were real urban planning. The listening community is predominantly constituted, at least by ordinary radio, on the basis of a paradoxical and abstract relationship to depression, if I can use this precariously psychological term. We listen to radio, or rather, hear radio without always having to listen too closely (and in fact hear less and less) to keep from being depressed or isolated, to feel connected to something, to unfold ourselves in its envelope of pleasure, information, power, while the absence of any spontaneous or innovative event, or of any specific (vs. abstract) intimacy, contributes ultimately precisely to depression, which after all is merely a sideways description of powerlessness, of being prevented in various ways from achieving anything spontaneous or innovative, of having or living a new idea.

But this can be re-presented in economic terms, by locating the actual development of radio language in relation to the developing structural integration of the various sections of the communications industries. Radio entered the marketplace in the 1920s, the same decade in which American entertainers began the sweep of concentration and integration which now dominates the international production and dissemination of music and music technology. The first record companies were established in that decade, and linked, via corporate ownership, to the production of radios, records, record players, music publishing, and film. The entertainment monopolies have triumphed through a process of continuous centralization and integration of all the salient elements of music production and dissemination; their imperatives of growth have marked the development of music technology and its communicative discourse from the beginning of broadcasting.

Commercial broadcasting has become the dominant mode of promotion for musical culture. The profit-driven forces are dependent on the strategies of those record companies for its musical programming. DJs and local program directors have become a substantively irrelevant embellishment, and the medium of radio a totally instrumentalized form of communication. The record company is in turn dependent on the airtime acquired through various infamous strategies (though most communities have their own exceptions to point to). The profitability of record production contributes to the continuous economic centralization, which itself depends on exploiting the “strategic margins” of the recorded music industry, the labels and innovative trends. But such centralization of power also contributes to symbolic centralization, whereby the dynamics of technical innovation led by the big companies create more and more sophisticated sound production values, through which listeners learn to judge musical value. The changing modes of musical performance are, if not determined, certainly mediated by the evolving strategies of the big companies for the development of new technologies and the marketing of music as a whole. In terms of the dominant discourse, there are only two kinds of music, either the “commercial” or the “alternative”, the rest are shadows, or so it would seem, flabby imitations, or marginal testaments to the mythology of “boundless hospitality” by means of which the industrial powers weave their web.

Of course this is not the whole story, since behind this bland mask of boundlessness is the productivity of music itself, which is always also a social productivity. The traces of this are audible in the rup- tures of rock, in black music, third world or “ethnics” musics, the “experiments” with space of new music, in all the spaces where location names itself and makes itself heard. The history of communications technology is not only that of the discourses of power, but also of opposition and difference, and of the production of these. At certain times the cultural productivity of making music becomes also an oppositional expression of new social formations and values, and even when such cultural productivity becomes oppositional practice, it is important to understand more precisely how cultural formation works, and how it means not only its own structures of imprisoned desire but also its own alternatives and oppositions.
American broadcasting has been officially private (with notable exceptions) since the 1927 Radio Act, a government decision that established a public service self-denial which empowered the newly formed Federal Communications Commission to license and regulate radio communications "as a public service, interest, or necessity requires." 1927 was also the year that NBC and CBS took control of programming and production. Obviously, "public interest" offers a controversial framework for broadcast regulations, as indeed it has been in Canada since the federal government bestowed itself to create an alternative public broadcasting system in the 1930s. The American interpretation of "public interest" represented a clear victory for private interest and thus, explicitly, for direct broadcast advertising. The consequent strategic imperatives were imposed on broadcasters uniformly. They entailed the maximization of audience size in order to increase advertising revenue, and this meant both a continuous standardization of musical styles and forms and an increasing reliance on the mass-produced recorded music of the big companies. Such music, while cheaply produced through increasingly sophisticated processes, which encouraged the entrenchment of powerful implicit values of what constitutes "good" music. This control of technology is the real motor of symbolic centralization, rewarding listeners with continuous pleasure and thus continuing confidence in the freedom of our pleasured ears.

But most of us, like our comrades in the "developing" nations, don't need to be reminded of what "free speech" really means in terms of American communications policy. As its horizons expand, we can enjoy wonderful things from Cuba, Warsaw, Liverpool, Kingston, Harlem, Nigeria, or Kamloops, B.C. We are in a particularly advantageous position to celebrate what McLuhan called the "global village." This privilege, like the Trojan horse, introduces the power dynamics of the technological conquering of space, and this has also been the case since broadcasting began.

edge their way into the various centres of African music (which itself has never been a single style or discourse), they transform its social organization and, to some extent, its form. Africans themselves have, in response, begun to mobilize their own music production through various strategies of technological appropriation-cassette tapes and broadcasting policy in those countries, like many others, have become central to campaigns for cultural self-production. What we hear as "African" is increasingly inflected with the stratified language of such resistance/appropriation.

The same phenomenological representation matters American music, in a completely different sense. Its power signals not only the entrepreneurial prowess of the "big 5" of the music industries, but also the symbolic powers attached to American formulations of the modern, the free, and the fun. American and African music articulate different kinds of aspirations for listeners in various locations. This difference is also a relationship, again not only economic, but also in terms of symbolized value systems struggling over formulations of the modern, the free, and the fun. Of course it is people who actually struggle, not symbolic systems. In all this global symbolic warfare, this "creative" tension between centre and articulate margins, where do we stand?

When you hear Canadian music, its Canadian-ness doesn't often reach our ears and there's no note sounds. It becomes an issue, so to speak, after the fact. This is part of how we are constituted as listeners. We may know that Rough Trade or Joni Mitchell or Burton Cummings or Ann Murray are Canadian but we mainly know this factually, not musically.

To ask whether the music we listen to is knowable musically as Canadian raises a number of questions which in themselves have been dubiously productive. Here I place native and Quebecois music in brackets. In any case, hearing "prairies" or "Toronto" as a climactic aura framing the voice may be an externally informed part of the experience of listening, but it is part of it nonetheless. We still claim what we want it of us ours. What arises more readily as an immanent question from our historical experience as listeners concerns what we hear and how we hear what we hear. How we hear what we hear has, from the moment there was a listening "we", been predominantly from the radio. Because of this fact, and the specific patterns it implies, now we hear what we hear has been a question as long as we have heard it, and so this question is part of what we have always heard, though we haven't always heard it musically.

This historical centrality of radio to Canadian cultural experience is a function of geography, which was given, and of attention, which was mobilized, by the radio. It is not long after American radio had firmly taken root, as a conscious strategy of public purpose in the name of national unity, that the CBC developed a radically different approach to broadcasting and specifically to music broadcasting. That fascinating history of cultural self-defense (mediated by colonial elitism) which remains largely unwritten. For some decades, the CBC was the single most influential system for the production and dissemination of Canadian music. Composers and historians maintain that without CBC radio there would not have been a community of music producers able to conceive of the possibility of making music. The CBC organized, produced, and broadcast across the country a range of musical performances, from new operas to a prize-winning pipe band of CNR employees, from big bands to Irish folk songs, from commissioned compositions for radio and film documentaries and dramas to national talent-hunt singing contests.

No doubt it was an inspiring moment, that bringing together of so many voices under the protective roof of the CBC. Listeners congregated in rural living rooms and wrote letters about being truly thrilled by the sound of the bells ringing out from the roof of Ossian hill-top... they seemed to fit like so much state-sponsored maple syrup. But clearly something was happening in Canada in the 40s and 50s. Regions and communities had their voices and their voices could be heard. The CBC provided a space for this to happen, if not the context for the larger search for some sort ofCanadian coherence in a political sense. They proved that when people themselves produce such complex sociality, the juxtaposition of messages and messages becomes intelligible (rather than "coherent"), a term that implies singularity. The provision of resources for expressive social communication, and the making of such communication in a continually new and different way, rather than simply the making of new things are held to be more important, by its growing vulnerability to commercial pressures and decreasing protection from the Canadian state.

These pressures led to the consolidation of broadcasting conventions in which music broadcasting in urban centres (especially the more "serious" FM) has become largely predictable and predictable and as its predictable and transient on the private stations. The terrestrial interdependency of music production and broadcasting, which would have required the consumption of music and greater economic thinking, has, mostly given way to the triumph of the economic and formal interdependency of broadcasting space, and pre-recordings. Former CBC music producer argues that this change has worked to discourage imagination, to decrease the range of options over the final broadcast format, and to sever the relationship between host and musician. The effects of the transformed mode of musical packaging are passed on to the listener.

to whom the daily spell of music becomes simply a component of the familiar daily environment. Music on radio ceases to matter. Against such an attitude it is all the more difficult for the radio producer of imagination and originality to make his
own demands on the time and special attention of his potential audience. . . . The will to create, to experiment in hitherto untried and significant new forms, indeed to provide musical services as only radio can, seemed to be far less influential than formerly."

It is no wonder, to add an apparent aside, that increased content quotas are treated with such aversion by the Canadian public. (Though significantly this is more true with respect to TV.) To suggest further restriction and regulation of the present precarious frameworks of broadcasting is bound to invite opposition in this context, not least because of the systematic training of cultural value through which American modernization effects its strategies, though this is important; but I think, because "content" remains an empty formula for evoking public sympathy as long as the more essential "content" of media discourse - its unending, unbreakable flow - continues to reproduce itself through productive and regulatory processes which allow little participation other than consumptive choice (coke or pepsi?). The public chooses "freedom of choice". A militant defense of freedom points to the absence of the real thing. So what else is new?

RECLAIMING THE DISCOURSE

I said earlier that the recent emergence of alternative broadcasting is tied to major shifts in the international and local structuration of technology, economies, power, and cultural production. While this statement is true, and the different forms of the new media often affect the local forms vary, as do strategies of local mobilization and cultural opposition. For many years "alternative" broadcasting in Canada took the form of a national public network (demanded and fought for by Canadians) whose mandate was to broadcast on behalf of a national community whose identity it simultaneously sought to build. That mandate could only have been fulfilled by allowing a far more complex and multiple concept of "public" than the dual imperatives of national (cultural) defense and the economy of dependency permitted. The failure of the CBC, joins with the simultaneous effects of a more universal colonitzation of musical resources, which make cultural opposition at once more international and more local. The "margins" reassert their power and find mutual recognition. The potential strength of CKLN is that it can exemplify and reinforce this dialectic of internationalism and localism; both are strengthened as it participates in the evolution of cultural self-determination within, and between, the various musical communities in Toronto.

As the station's manager explained to me, CKLN has no difficulty fulfilling Canadian content requirements because they like to play local music. A resource can be a catalyst: after a year of broadcasting, their library now contains two hundred and fifty local cassette tapes. Without CKLN (I speak from experience) many of these would not have been made. Many won't be heard elsewhere. The more complex and open the musical thinking of the station's programmers, the more autonomous, and "significant" as communication, can be the musical thinking that goes into making these tapes. It is not so much the individual authorship of music which is important within the programming discourse of the station, but the control and creative use of the medium as it mediates our musicality and our sociality. This can only evolve through an interaction between the station and the community, between listening and playing, and between music and other issues and activities. The programs in which local tapes appear are not ordinarily organized around Canadian-ness, though there are special programs on local music (as on women's music, Reggae, blues, imported music, experimental music, jazz; musical "location" is a funny thing). Most frequently they are woven into a fabric of music discourse which connects with other connections in many different directions. Nowhere else would you hear the particular combinations and threads connecting those pieces of music. The juxtapositions cutting across time or space pull different sound thoughts together, as (for instance) when I heard "The Birthday Party follow Janis Joplin, and suddenly recognized something about the voices of west-coast angst, or when I heard a series of pieces by the end of which I Really Heard the guitar. Such enfranchisement can change as it responds to - is produced by - the community which is also the listening public. This process of enfranchisement has political effects, evident in the production of "documentary" calls on social issues in which the music intervenes, not (reduced as illustration, not inflated) as propaganda, but as a separate-but-equal moment of musically embodied expressive response to a politicized world. The station's evolving strategies of mediation make possible the development of a political phenomenology of listening, without which no emancipatory strategy in sound is possible.

NOTES

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2. I am indebted here to Keith Tait (National Public Radio, U.S.A.) who confers his own depression and refuses himself out of it to Radio Renaissance, N.Y., 1983


5. MacMillan, "Broadcasting".


Some recent publications and resources on radio:


Relay: The Other Magazine about the Airwaves, 23 St. Pauls Road, London N.J.


Other relevant publications:


Leonard, Neil Jazz and the White Americans, Jazz Rock (Tasb, London, 1964)


Towell, John Canadian Broadcasting History. Resources in English: Critical Mass or Measly Spectrum Diaries, O.V. Dept., Toronto

Willis, Roger and Kristen Malm, Big Sounds from Small People: The music industry in small countries. Constable, London, 1984
The game was easy,
posing,
no real threat to the trapper.

The language I speak “within myself”
is not of my time;
it is prey, by nature,
to ideological suspicion.

Whatever he wanted was there.
It was new, exciting,
yet somehow, natural.

The new is not a fashion
it is a value,
the basis of all criticism.