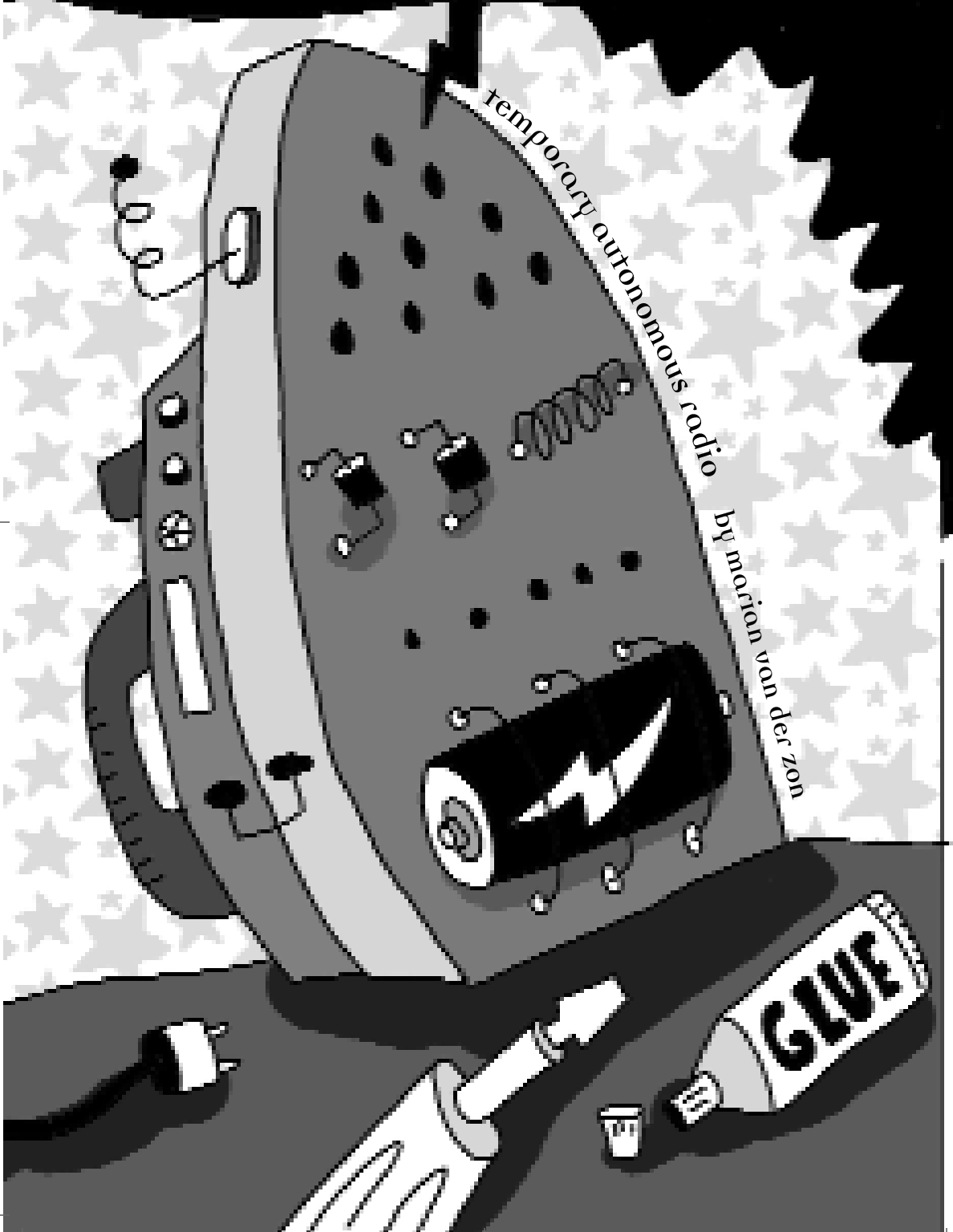


BROADCASTING ON

temporary autonomous radio
by marion van der zoom



OUR OWN TERMS

Welcome. You are listening to TAR, Temporary Autonomous Radio. Today we'll be speaking about the history and philosophy of TAR. TAR is relatively new to the airwaves and today can be found at 90.7 FM here in sunny Montréal.

And so, TAR is a one-watt FM band Micro-radio station. I built TAR as an alternative and autonomous source of media. It was certainly inspired by Hakim Bey, an anarchist particularly known for his work around Temporary Autonomous Zones, which he conceptualized as islands or hideouts from our capitalist, consumer-based society, pirate-based intentional communities, if you will.¹ Groups of individuals would rise up and create information networks that were temporary and geographically flexible. Like Temporary Autonomous Zones, TAR strives to be a recurring

“micro-radio lets us speak for ourselves, lets us keep our radios on and take down those fiddles from the wall. By blurring the boundaries between mass media and face-to-face interaction, it puts the former at the disposal of the latter.”² — Jesse Walker

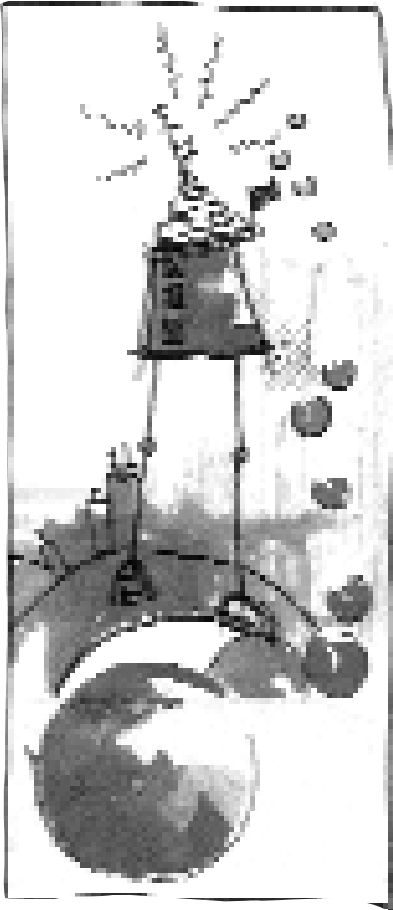
a historical foray into radio

Radio was originally derived from military research and development, with a focus on using radio communication to facilitate social control by the state. It is therefore promising and ironic that there have been increasing avenues for revolutionary involvement in a genre of media with these origins. Radio was initially conceived to benefit the interests of the political, military, and economic powers. According to Robert W. McChesney,³ professor of communications and the author of eight books on media and politics, in the first half of the 1920s, radio began to be accessible to the public and several hundred non-profit broadcasters (the majority were

illegal pirate action that is both temporary and moveable, with alternative content motivated by the participants... and yes, this means you. As such, TAR strives to be radical in terms of its broadcasting philosophy and in terms of its content from contributors. As well, one of the mandates of TAR is to spread the word and encourage others to build their own radio stations—to plug into a network of radical culture.

Radio is easy. Radio is accessible. Start where you will. Come on in and share your world with our listeners. Or build your own world. I can assure you that I too was as novice as they come. But with a willingness to learn, a little experimentation, a community of voices willing to

affiliated to universities and colleges) emerged as the real pioneers of U.S. broadcasting. They were overtaken by corporate, profit-minded interests by the end of the 1920s, a trend that has only increased in the years since.



Criticisms and thus awareness around radio's inaccessibility increased in the 1930s. German poet and playwright, Bertolt Brecht⁴—a well-known name in radio—wanted radio to be a multi-way system of communication. Radio was used in a one-sided manner. This meant that while there were many ears listening only a few mouths were speaking. Brecht realized that the democratic aspect of radio was lost in this model. He was interested in the interactive nature of radio and felt that the audience should be both broadcaster and listener. In other words, every listener should be able to speak as well as to hear.

Access to the airwaves is as important today as it was then. While not every listener wants to be actively engaged with radio, the challenge is to

takeover the airwaves, and imagination, your very own radio station can be born.

come in to the world of activist radio

Why am I here? I love radio... micro-radio, pirate radio, community radio, public radio, corporate radio... local, national, international... some would argue that so long as it is radio, it is a good start. Who's kidding who? Some radio is obviously better than others.

I have held a lifelong passion for radio. Music lovers speak about the sound of the turntable needle hitting vinyl as food for the soul. For me, the component of radio that has always spoken the loudest is the innate capacity within it for imagination. Like other forms of media, there are

create and provide space for those who do want to speak and be heard. At present, the ownership of radio, like other forms of media, lies increasingly in the hands of a few. The monopolizing of public airwaves for private interest opinions and contributions has led to increasingly homogenized content. The result is a corporate radio format with shallow coverage of politics and limited diversity in the views presented. Access must include room for all interested parties to become involved, in terms of content, context, and technology.

Activist individuals and groups have, increasingly, taken it upon themselves to engage with radio and, consequently, the ways in which we can access the airwaves continue to expand, from micro to macro approaches. As the number of avenues for access increases, the possibilities for shared resources and collaboration between practitioners of micro-radio, pirate radio, community radio, and internet streaming gain strength.

Resources can be shared in a number of ways. For example, micro-radio becomes pirate radio when its transmission range extends beyond the national legal limits. These limits vary from country to country, but as a general rule, any broadcast over five watts



many ways imagination can be incorporated into radio-technically, contextually-through content, and above all, in the ways it is received and engaged with by you, the listener. The capacity to imagine within radio is music to my ears.

The capacity to imagine holds within it the ability to be discerning. It holds with it the ability to be alternatively-minded, autonomously-minded, radical, and revolutionary.

Alternatively-minded folks tend to approach radio from the perspective of content. An autonomous approach seeks to address not only content, but also the structure of radio, allowing room for non-hierarchical self-organized

is deemed to be a pirate broadcast and consequently, a criminal act. A low cost micro-radio station can be built for a mere 20 dollars, while internet streaming start-up costs begin at 1000 dollars. Increasingly, micro- and pirate radio practitioners with little financial backing are invited by larger organizations to use internet streaming already in place. This piggy-backing can provide room for safer involvement in situations where micro- and pirate radio are repressed by a government that actively criminalizes micro-broadcasters. Micro- and pirate radio practitioners can upload their audio onto the internet in a clandestine manner. By sharing these resources, activists are able to build global networks, offering an alternative vision of our world, and challenging the corporate control over media at a fraction of the cost.

Following Hakim Bey's concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, activists have striven to make pirate radio, micro-radio, and community radio into autonomous and often temporary experiments. Examples are plenty. Pirate Radio Caroline appeared in the guise of a pirate ship off the coast of Great Britain for the first time in 1964 to offer up the rebellious music of the time and it still broadcasts today. It was soon followed by a number of vessels, quickly latching onto loopholes in British law that allowed more personal freedom of content and control over Britain's airwaves when broadcasting from international waters. Pirate radio has flourished since then and has continued to do so with a diversity of content and intent across the globe.

and technically innovative approaches. For most, the end goal is to take over the airwaves, whether concerning production and maintenance of a radio station, the community experience, the dissemination of marginalized content, or all three combined.

And right now, taking over the airwaves, you are listening to TAR, Temporary Autonomous Radio at 90.7 FM in Montréal. TAR has broadcast from a number of locations in Montréal, Toronto, and Victoria, and today we are talking about TAR's philosophy and creation. We have been talking about the revolutionary possibilities of radio. TAR addresses all three aspects of radio: technology, context, and content.

Micro-radio has also prospered, on a smaller-scale. Some micro-radio operators have chosen to organize themselves by linking up in a series that expanded their transmission/reception range significantly. Other operators are interested in affecting a smaller geographical area for more specialized programming. Community radio tends to be more traditional in technological structure, and like micro- and pirate radio, can be notable for broadcasting alternative- or subculture-specific news, music, and commentary. It often strives to include voices that are typically marginalized. Its members also are more inclined to organize non-hierarchically.

And with possibilities come limitations. Some of the criticisms of community radio include accusations that it is too closely linked with university institutions, that it is not accessible enough, or that it is too accessible at the expense of quality. Involvement on an organizational level is possible, and yet often limited by chair boards and tight social networks. Furthermore, within Canada the CRTC only allows a limited number of licenses and the range of each station varies.

When we turn the gaze to micro-radio, it is criticized for being low-tech, for being ineffective due to its limited range, and for broadcasting what some would consider questionable material, which might include casual



LET ME SPEAK TO YOU ABOUT CONTENT

The broadcast content of TAR is varied to say the least. We strive for a theme of alternative content, which includes spoken word, music, radio art, and radio karaoke. The spoken word tends towards varied social justice issues, not only those related to making radio. Our music leans in the direction of the seldom heard. Our radio art is varied and our very own radio karaoke is another attempt to foster community involvement. Radio karaoke completes every broadcast session, including today's, and consists of rousing renditions of well-known songs. While those in the studio do their karaoke thing, singing in the microphone along with their chosen tune, the listener is encouraged to

conversation, bodily sound effects, or amateur musicianship. Pirate radio is also disparaged for a perceived lack of audience and, of course, while the illegal nature is appealing to some, it is a serious limitation to others.

the importance of content

For many activist radio broadcasters, alternative content is a given. For some, what is broadcast is more important than the technology itself. For this reason, some media activists choose to work inside the corporate media, striving to provide alternative information to a larger audience. This could include extending news coverage to include issues that are relevant to particular ethnic groups, for example. They are interested in swaying larger public opinion within the limits of the corporate format.

At the other end of the spectrum, autonomous radio is criticized for a lack of audience and is therefore deemed ineffective. Alternately, there is the argument that the people involved are preaching to the converted. Perhaps so. Yet, it is important to recognize that autonomous radio can have different purposes. According to Gretchen King,⁵ a long time radio activist, micro- or pirate radio can be used to disseminate tactical information or it can be a space within which to develop and share analysis around specific issues. Examples of tactical information could be in the context of a street mobilization, where the movements of police are broadcast, the movement of protesters is suggested, or simply to broadcast the locations

belt out the tune at home, rounding off the experience in a participatory way. Regardless of its success, the impetus behind it is to provide a community feel and a new form of radio experience.

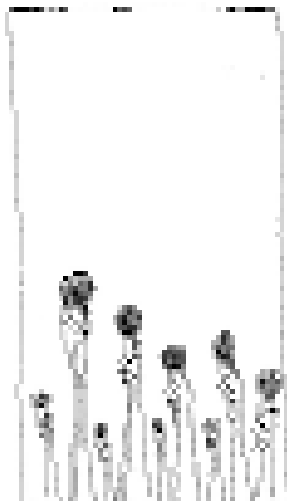
Everyone is welcome to be part of the content of TAR. You are welcome to come into the studio. Wander down Fabre Street, look for the TAR banner draped over our balcony, wander on up, and say hello. We are set-up very casually and have had a lot of first-timers on the air. I remember the first broadcast. It was wonderful. I had a friend stop by with his family: his mother, his aunt, his grandmother. These three generations gathered around the microphone to tell generational family stories and embarrass the youngest. These are people who would never usually get the

of food and other amenities. Additionally, micro- and pirate radio can be used to generate collective memory and encourage historical reflection, especially if broadcasts are archived.

In either instance, micro- and pirate radio work to build community and therefore promote direct engagement. They allow practitioners to post opinions and information via the internet, through streaming, or directly onto the FM dial. As a consequence, this brings Temporary Autonomous Zones, like street mobilizations, to the larger public. From city to city, there is often a common area on the FM band where radio pirates tend to congregate and listeners make it a habit of tuning in to listen. In Montréal this frequency varies from around 90.3, 101, and 104 on the FM dial and in Vancouver, 89.3 FM is a favourite.

contextual considerations for democratic radio

While individuals working within corporate-owned media structures are limited to dealing with content, autonomous radio practitioners can go one step further, concentrating on how radio is organized and what this tangibly means for those involved in the radio project.



opportunity to use radio. It was an empowering act for them to speak their lives out over the airwaves. For all of you who have yet to engage... come on up to TAR: speak your minds!

AND THEN THERE ARE THE CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

TAR was built to encourage active community involvement. Given TAR's three block range, every time we broadcast, a small listening community is assumed. Perhaps you have seen the posters in your neighbourhood. Because of our limited range, as I have already mentioned, TAR provides an accessible radio experience that is not intimidating to first-time broadcasters. And yet, we can still create a viable and alternative information-sharing pool for a select communi-

Democratic radio is increasingly a priority for those with an activist bent. In his article "Organizing Democratic Radio," John L. Hochheimer⁶ argues that democratic radio requires three aspects: the extension of democracy, acknowledgement and encouragement of a pluralist society through media (radio), and centralized decision-making within the institution/station. Radio organizations like Radio Free Cascadia—an online centre for free radio activism coming out of the Cascadia region of Oregon—strive to understand the connections and structures of power in order to proceed with the organization of a truly democratic station. They do this by developing non-hierarchical systems of organization by using committees, free distribution of information and resources. Radio Free Cascadia also uses an online organizing centre to promote local and long-distance participation in its activities. It is this autonomous approach that defines Radio Free Cascadia and which guarantees alternative content.

Micro-radio works to link people together. Radio becomes a space (both the studio and the airwaves) where the line between those who make radio and those who consume radio is blurred. Diverse ideas, cultures, experiences, and politics are shared within the group producing radio as well as with the audiences in front of their radios. Because micro-radio usually has a weak signal, the purpose changes from broadcasting to narrowcasting. Aside from those listening, it inspires inexperienced individuals to get involved and promotes a sense of community or action.

AUTONOMOUS MEDIA : ACTIVATING RESISTANCE AND DISSENT

ty. All of our broadcasts occur close to a village within the city and word spreads quickly.

Start talking. Come on in; tell your friends. The more contributors we have, the more often we can take over the airwaves. When TAR contributors and supporters gather in TAR's common room to prepare, relax, and listen, the radio experience for the broadcaster/contributor/listener is encompassing. When TAR becomes background noise due to conversation, the intent to dialogue is present and a community is coalescing. With time, this tight community can grow around any Micro-radio station. TAR seeks to encourage community involvement and share knowledge around social issues, culture jamming, alternative media, obscure

Tetsuo Kogawa⁷ experienced this phenomenon first-hand in Japan through the 1980s and came to believe that the potential for mini-FM lies in the communication opportunities for the individuals involved rather than in the purpose of broadcasting. Regardless of how many people are listening, he saw that there is an inherent value in re-organizing groups of people and communities into producers of media. Isolated people could find company, speak thoughts, and share ideas in a locale where dialogue is encouraged. This is impossible in a commercial situation where the bottom line needs to show profit. Micro-radio works particularly well in densely populated areas, such as Tokyo, because a one-watt FM micro-radio broadcasting a half-mile radius can potentially access 10,000 listeners, if they manage to find a less-used frequency on the band.

The potential for autonomous radio is a major draw for anyone who is interested in an organizational structure that is anti-authoritarian and consensus-based. It is this organizational structure that allows for a deeper understanding of the hierarchical structures of power that have come to dominate mainstream media and the information we receive. The type of radio produced by a community news collective, for example, exposes the biases of mainstream news. News produced from the grassroots, within the community, privileges the experiences of the marginalized and will generally focus on stories that avoid reinforcing the status quo. Those living within a community thus become experts on their social real-

music, marginalized experiences, all while encouraging spontaneous, creative participation. Come on up, loosen your tongues, use our resources to begin your own station. Revolutionize your life.

WHAT ABOUT EQUIPMENT AND TECHNOLOGY? WHERE DO I START?

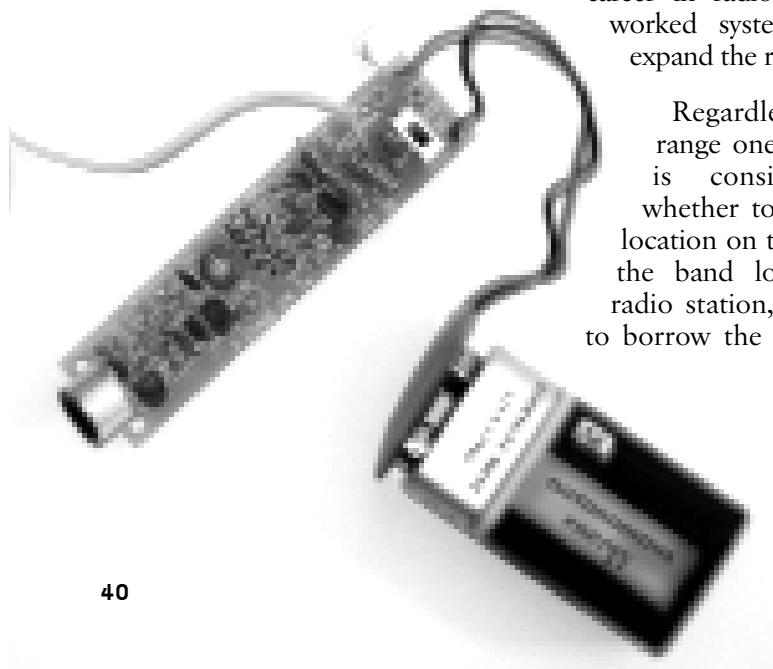
When I decided to build TAR I was a newbie. I knew nothing of circuit boards, oscillators, transistors, capacitors, resistors. What was a girl to do? I picked brains, surfed the net, ordered a 20-dollar kit online, and soon was experimenting with soldering. In short you just need to look, listen, and learn. You might undergo an immense learning curve.

ity, something that is rarely seen within mainstream news, which privileges the voices of big business, government officials, and academic experts.

embracing the possibilities of technology

Because radio technology is relatively cheap, opportunities for activists to start their own revolutionary radio projects abound. Or, for those already engaged, to push the limits by becoming more experienced and inclusive. For some, this might simply take the form of using a more powerful transmitter and moving from the world of micro- to pirate radio. For others, projects could include using micro-radio as a learning tool to begin a career in radio, or developing a networked system of micro-radios to expand the range of existing projects.

Regardless of the broadcast range one is working with, there is considerable debate on whether to choose a vacant band location on the dial or stepping into the band location of an existing radio station, a tactic used in order to borrow the larger listenership of a



I sure did with the construction of TAR. After two weeks, my self-taught course in electronics was completed. There before me sat TAR, my newly completed radio station. I looked at this item, about three-by-one inches, looked at the various components sticking out of it—all of which I had painstakingly soldered onto this tiny circuit board—and realized that at long last, it was time to tune TAR onto the FM band. Of course, doubts about the functional ability of the transmitter overwhelmed my brain, but my mule-like nature pushed me forward and a two-day bout of tuning began.

Besides the radio transmitter itself, I had made a dipole antenna, stolen from an unused television set (I've always

commercial station. As broadcast range increases, these debates become more important. Despite scare-tactic information, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) does not generally interfere with micro- or pirate radio broadcasters unless they have received complaints. These complaints arise from commercial broadcasters who have had their signal overridden by a pirate.

During Seattle's World Trade Organization convention and popular uprising in 1999, there were a number of micro, pirate, and community radio stations working to provide coverage of the battle on the streets from a grassroots perspective. The pirate radio collective, Voices of Occupied Seattle, spent time pasting flyers and stickers around the downtown area that listed local available FM frequencies. Broadcasts came out of Free Radio Seattle and the pirate station Y2WTKO, transmitted from a tree on the Olympic Peninsula. It was also imported online by Eugene, Oregon's Radio Free Cascadia collective.⁸ Individuals involved wore broadcasting equipment under their clothing in order to broadcast via high points in the city. In other instances, cell phones were used to get up-to-the-minute reports on what was happening on the ground. Individuals used suitcase transmitters with umbrella antennas to broadcast within the protest itself. Free Radio Seattle linked up to Radio X to stream live audio content via the internet.

chosen radio over television) and was using two 6-volt lantern batteries in series as a power source. Slowly but surely, through sheer persistence, I began to hear the beginnings of TAR trickling through my radio. A friend was quickly brought onboard, allowing me to hang off my balcony, pushing my low-tech antenna mounted on a broom handle further out into the cosmos. She listened at the radio, shouting out encouragement as the clarity began to improve. With all the shouting, jumping, and back patting, one would think a new baby had arrived. And indeed, TAR was born right here on 90.7 FM on a brisk autumn day in Montréal. TAR was on the air. TAR is back on the air today. Listen up.

The results varied. Due to a lack of communication between independent organizations, efforts were not always consolidated but rather divided. On one occasion, Free Radio Seattle was bumped up the band by Y2WTKO because of discrepancies with locations on the dial. Yet, the advantage of so many approaches was that news was coming out of a number of pirate sources. In some cases, the transmission range was fairly extensive because it was picked up by pirate radio stations or streamed over the internet. In other cases, broadcasts were not making it out of the protest zone. Despite criticism of the anti-WTO uprising and popular movements in general, the ability to offer up revolutionary, alternative, and autonomous media is alive and on-going. The people involved continue to experiment, and together, these experiments are catalysts for social awareness and change.

The *Radio Libertad* project is one recent example of media solidarity between activists in Montréal and Indigenous communities in Guerrero, Mexico.⁹ Individuals within this alliance recognize issues of inequality in terms of access to technological resources, and activists in Canada offer help in the form of fundraising efforts, training, and information dissemination. The *Radio Libertad* project has been undertaken primarily by the *Organización Independiente de Pueblos Mixteco y Tlapaneco* (OIPMT) in Mexico and strives to supply an autonomous community radio station to the Mixteco and Tlapaneco peoples in order to combat the prevalent political and military repression.

COME AND GET IT. GO AND DO IT

Are you motivated yet? TAR provides an autonomous and alternative radio experience. The size, range, method of construction, reliance on friends, spontaneous and organized call for contributors to come forward with self-defined alternative content, and transitory nature of TAR have all contributed to a vibrant, positive environment. And above all, this is only a beginning. We have limited times of broadcast, limited range, a small audience, but it is the act of doing that is essential. TAR creates a sense of community that emerges out of the live process. From here, the options are endless.

Despite confiscation of equipment and the disappearances of activists across Mexico, *Radio Libertad* is moving forward, joining the over 400 free radio stations across Mexico, working to maintain Indigenous rights and culture. *Radio Libertad* is an example of autonomous radio being built in a location where there is little to no infrastructure for radio. Because it is operated by community members, community issues are put at the forefront with informational broadcasts and organizing tactics. Within its context, it is an important move, that will provide a viable media alternative to government sponsored media. Solidarity between activists in Montréal and the OIPMT provides the advantage of sharing economic resources to fund and create the station. The collaboration also allows *Radio Libertad* to have a greater chance of success by informing a potential international audience—through webcasting and information dissemination on behalf of the Montréal chapter—of the issues of repression faced by the peoples from the Mexican state of Guerrero. As was illustrated by the media efforts of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, over the past 15 years, global alliances are crucially important for resisting state-sponsored injustices, and working towards self-determination.

The use of radio for activist pursuits takes many forms, thus allowing for the development and overlapping of a number of tactics and approaches to radical media that affect individuals and communities, both locally and globally. Media can be structured around personal engagement and

In the long-term future, TAR will continue to pop up and build an audience of contributors and listeners. They will continue to transform their lives and link together in a new community. Today, this is only one beginning for TAR. Temporary Autonomous Radio is only one small example out of the endless radio opportunities available to us all.

You've been listening to TAR on 90.7 FM. Coming up next is the ever infamous, radio karaoke. First song up: get ready for it... Rage Against the Machine and Guerrilla Radio.¹⁰

concern for the struggles of others, rather than solely for economic benefits. Temporary autonomous radio permits tactical information and dissenting opinions to be disseminated, provides individual empowerment, and room for the silenced to speak. A more permanent autonomous radio facilitates collective memory, promotes radio activism to more people, and creates communities and networks passionate about access to public airwaves.

The challenge is to continue imagining and unearthing revolutionary, radical, autonomous, spontaneous, creative ways of accessing the airwaves and filling them with the voices of many.

notes

¹ For more on Temporary Autonomous Zones, read: Bey, Hakim. (1991) : *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. New York: Autonomedia. Published online at: <http://www.flashback.se/archive/taz/> [accessed June 1, 2004].

² Walker, Jesse. (2001). *Rebels on the Air: An Alternative History of Radio in America*. New York: New York University Press.

³ McChesney, Robert W. "The Battle for the U.S. Airwaves, 1928-1935," *Journal of Communication*. Vol. 40 (4), Autumn 1990, pgs. 29-57.

⁴ Brecht, Bertolt. (1979). "Radio as a Means of Communication: A Talk of the Function of Radio (Germany, 1930)," *Communication and Class Struggle*. Vol. 2, Mattelart, Armand & Seth Siegelau (eds.). New York: International General, pgs. 169-171.

⁵ King, Gretchen. (October 2004). Micro-radio, pirate radio, and community radio activist. Personal Interview.

⁶ Hockheimer, John L. "Organizing Democratic Radio: Issues of Practice," *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 15, No.3, July 1993.

⁷ For the full case-study of Tetsuo Kogawa's Tokyo experience, check out: Kogawa, Tetsuo. (1994). "Toward Polymorphous Radio," *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound and Transmission*. Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, pgs. 287-300.

⁸ The full history of Radio Cascadia, as told by miscreant. Published online at: <http://riseup.net/radiofreecascadia/y2wtko/aural.htm> [accessed November 12, 2004].

⁹ Ahooja, Sarita. (October 2004). Activist with *Radio Libertad*. Personal email interview.

¹⁰ The audio version of this segment of "Broadcasting on Our Own Terms" can be heard at <http://www.cumuluspress.com>

web resources

Pirate Radio Caroline: www.radiocaroline.co.uk

Radio for All: www.radio4all.org

Radio Free Cascadia: www.riseup.net/radiofreecascadia

Radio X: www.radiox.wirerimmed.com

Y2WTKO: www.riseup.net/radiofreecascadia/y2wtko

