



AFTERWORD

linking back, looking forward by dorothy kidd

Reading this collection reminded me of another meeting of radical media practitioners. In August 1988, I participated in the World Association of Community Radio (AMARC) Conference in Nicaragua. The conference was a watershed for alternative media. Assembled in the airy Cesar Augusto Silva Convention Centre in Managua were over 350 delegates from 48 countries. The majority were Nicaraguans from the eighteen regional radio stations of CORADEP (Corporación de Radiodifusión del Pueblo: The Peoples' Radio-Diffusion Corporation). Smaller delegations represented Central and South American popular, educational and guerrilla radio; North American campus and community radio, European pirate and local radio, African educational and liberation radio, as well as indigenous and women's radio projects, and other alternative media activists and researchers.¹

In his keynote speech, European communications critic, Armand Mattelart, referred to the different contexts and definitions of our radio practice. The assembly included broadcasters from at least four distinct governing structures and social change strategies. The revolutionary Marxist paradigm of using communications primarily to seize and control state power was still alive and well in Nicaragua, Cuba, and El Salvador; although none strictly followed the vertical transmission model of classical Leninism. Several delegates were there from state-subsidized services in Canada, Europe, and the U.S., as the neoliberal attack on public service broadcasting was just beginning. The majority of faith-based stations were Catholic, with a small number of Bahai-supported stations; there were no protestant fundamentalist stations, now much more numerous. Finally, there were a number of listener-sponsored stations from North America, and a handful of independent projects, whose financial support was neither from the state or corporations.

Despite these differences, Mattelart noted our common orientation, the "construction of a collective identity to build a more just society." AMARC, he suggested, was part of a long-term project of democratizing communication; all types of radical radio were working towards a constantly evolving and building practice, defining new meanings of communication and democracy, production and professional practice, and of people.

After the conference, I travelled with other media activists to some of the CORADEP radio stations around Nicaragua. We were inspired by the local participatory experiments in which new teams of peasants, youth, and musicians took the microphones to broadcast their own news, information, and music and replace canned imported news and music. The sight of bullet-pocked stations in northern Nicaragua, fresh from attacks by the U.S.-financed Contras, elicited lots of stories from around the world. In 1988, community-oriented radio was illegal in most countries: while the Nicaraguans and Salvadorans told of constant military raids, South American and European radio activists faced harassment and closure by government agencies.

Throughout an intense two weeks, we explored the common ground and the differences among us. We exchanged experiences about the form and content of community-oriented radio, how to make programming better fit the experiences, culture, and conditions of the communities we lived in, and how to keep these projects alive in hostile media landscapes dominated by corporate and state media systems. We talked of the continuing problems of sexism, racism, and the marginalization of indigenous peoples; and we schemed of ways to deepen our translocal and transnational links and the wider global movement for the liberation of communications. *A PASSION FOR RADIO*, from Montréal publisher Black Rose Books, documents many of these radio experiences.

Many years, and many miles away, this new Montréal volume feels like a digital re-mix. I can hear a lot of the same chords, lyrics and tones, as well as some decided departures in the choice of instruments and jamming patterns. Although several authors show their historical links with earlier radical media and especially radio and video work, the collection also includes practices, such as the Independent Media Centre (IMC), weblogging, and *ADBUSTERS'* style of culture jamming, which represent significant innovations in practice and organization. As well, while technological inventiveness and global solidarity are long-standing, the rapid pace and global reach of these innovations strikes a new chord.

All of the chapters address, as did Mattelart, the ways media activists are constantly evolving and building new practices, as part of larger movements for social justice. And in the process, redefining the larger, more abstract notions of communications, democracy, subjectivity, agency, and identity. Although the concern for challenging the dominance of corporate

and state media remains, it is a much less prominent feature. The framework of these authors draws much less from Marxism, and perhaps more from the anarchist socialist tradition that radical media historian John Downing describes in his work on the IMC.² He notes the attention given to movements over institutions, prefigurative political activity and direct action, all of which play a role here too. In fact, these are all evident in the collection's emphasis on the day-to-day processes of making democratic communications within radical media projects.

making media, making change

In *FISSURES IN THE MEDIASCAPE*, Clemencia Rodriguez reviews the Spanish and English-language literature about alternative media from the 1970s and 1980s. Several of these researchers and theorists participated in the call for the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), at UNESCO, which, among its recommendations to change global information inequities, gave a prominent role to local small-scale media. During the debate, there was almost complete consensus among the national representatives, with two very important exceptions. The U.S. and U.K. refused to come to an agreement, and instead pulled out from UNESCO; they then shifted their efforts to winning support for neoliberal communications policies, such as the privatization of public systems of broadcasting and telecommunications, and the deregulation of corporate ownership and accountability.

Afterwards, many Latin American communications advocates suggested that alternative media act as a counter balance to media consolidation and communications, and cultural imperialism. However, they offered little systematic analysis, as Rodriguez argues, of how citizen groups and grassroots organizations could contribute to the democratization of communications. In *FISSURES*, Rodriguez sets out to fill in this gap, with the careful documentation of what she calls "citizen's media," and an analysis of how democratic communications happens within their practices.

radical media, radical movements

The authors in this collection address the same questions. Combining roles as researchers and media activists, they map a wide range of projects in Canada. Many of these projects, as one of the Vancouver writers, Scott Uzelman, notes, operate within the contemporary movement of movements

for radical and global social change. He underscores the importance of communications in movements for “social and environmental justice, which are dependent upon the establishment and maintenance of local spaces and diffuse networks of communication through which communities are imagined, developed and mobilized for action.”

Several of the authors discuss the connection between radical media and social justice movements. For David Widginton the close relationship with the activist community is a defining part of being a video activist. This link may include the short-term documentation of an action or demonstration to advance an immediate agenda, or the longer-term historical documentation of a “changing society from the perspective of those [...] actively attempting to change it.” Similarly, in Andréa Schmidt’s account, activist journalists at the campus/community radio station CKUT collaborate with groups fighting poverty and immigration injustices, among others. As well, homeless and low-income people provide at least 50% of the content of the street newspaper, *L’ITINÉRAIRE*, described by Isabelle Mailloux-Béique.

This nexus between activism and activist media is by no means new. However, its role in the expansion of global activism has been raised to a new level. Partly as a result of the work of David Garcia, Geert Lovink and the Next Five Minutes (N5M) crew in Amsterdam, many now call it “tactical media.”³ Weblogging is only one of the new open source innovations in the contemporary activist’s repertoire. Dawn Paley explains how weblogging is used to quickly circulate research and knowledge as part of the grassroots pressure to keep political processes transparent and authorities accountable. She notes this kind of tactical media use is ever more urgent during these times of “information manipulating governments” such as the Liberal government in British Columbia. Widginton and van der Zon describe video and radio tactical media uses. Activist video makers provide their work to movements for debriefing after an action, to encourage reflection and self-criticism, as evidence for effective defenses in court, to identify police infiltrators, and for witnessing human rights violations. As well, as Marian van der Zon describes, activists can use low-powered radio during demonstrations to provide updates on the “movement of police or protesters, or to broadcast locations in order to access food and other amenities.”

The globalization of these links between communications networks of social justice activists, and media activists has led to some inspiring

transnational collaborations. For example, Widginton describes the campaign initiated when a video shot at a bauxite mine in India, by a Toronto-based videographer, was shown in Montréal, where Alcan, the mine's major shareholder has its head office. Schmidt describes the communicative bridges created between Palestine and Iraq, Europe and North America "that compels people in one struggle to take action that supports the desire for justice and the right to self-determination of people in another. [...] In projecting words and voices from those who are seldom heard, explaining the significance, the costs and the hopes of their struggles, media activists seek to catalyze active and effective solidarity movements in their countries of origin."

the tools of choice for social change

This leap forward in local and global media collaborations is partly made possible by the inventive adaptation of new information and communications technologies. Both Paley and Langlois give a central place of mention to the free and open source software movement which allows for distributed collaboration, local adaptation and free distribution of technologies such as weblogging and open publishing. David Widginton describes the interface between old and new technologies in "global collaboration among video activists;" they share footage and finished videos using the latest inexpensive desk-top technologies, as well as the older methods of face-to-face exchange. The increased power of groups like Witness to challenge human rights abuses around the world, is partly made possible by an "arsenal of computers, imaging and editing software, satellite phones, and email in the struggle for justice." Closer to home, while the radio kits discussed by Marian van der Zon have been circulating by word of mouth and hand-to-hand around the Canadian aboriginal broadcasting communities for years, she found the do-it-yourself version on the internet.

This leap in the connective capacities of global resistance networks is partly the result of a contradiction within the global capitalist system. In his earlier research on the Vancouver IMC, Scott Uzelman drew on the autonomist Marxist work of Nick Dyer-Witford to outline how global capitalism must constantly update the training and equipment of workers and consumers around the world. While this abundance of lower-cost, easy-to-use, media production equipment, and training is an integral part of capitalist control of global production and marketing, it has also

allowed for a “series of individual and collective re-appropriations.”⁴ Many groups around the world have seized the possibilities for new terrains of communications relatively independent of the processes of capitalist accumulation.

After a decade of naïve idealism and some costly technical miscues and misfits in activist organizations, these authors reveal a much more sophisticated and circumspect understanding of technology. Frédéric Dubois discusses the importance of carefully assessing the needs and communications culture of the group before selecting the appropriate technologies. For example, the Grassroots Radio Network values their face-to-face annual conferences; while satellite dishes and video editing equipment are essential for the Deep Dish network.

“this is what democracy looks like”

I first heard that chant in the streets of Seattle in the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization. For me, it signifies a direct action approach in which people do not wait for their representatives to lead them, but prefigure the world they envision through their own action. It is also an important theme running through this collection. Scott Uzelman argues that the attention to “new forms of participatory and democratic communication” are what distinguish autonomous media practices from alternative media. If the latter focus on regulatory reform of the institutions, and the provision of counter-content, autonomist media activists focus on changing “the ways we communicate by encouraging participation and dialogue,” and “experimenting with new forms of democratic communication that are relatively independent from corporate and government power.”⁵

Uzelman describes some of the mainstays of the participatory approach, including the careful attention to breaking down authoritarian power regimes through consensual decision-making and the sharing of skills. In David Widginton’s account, video activist collectives are not just content-oriented but also “take the time to discuss issues, make decisions by consensus, share skills and responsibilities, and take collective credit for their successes.” These principles of sharing go beyond their immediate collectives and extend to other groups in a coalition, and to the audiences with which they discuss their work.

As a counter-point, Andréa Schmidt illustrates the problems when there is not that attention to dialogue with your audience, or other groups with whom you are working in common cause. As an independent reporter in Iraq, she and her other colleagues worked separately from the “embedded” reporters and also stayed outside of the “foreigner” enclaves. However, seldom, if ever, did the activists sending reports from the “North American and European anti-war and anti-occupation movements engage Iraqis in the process of media production. [...] They did not ask Iraqis to frame the questions, nor did they ask them about their reactions to and critiques of the reports we produced.” She argues for a longer-term approach, to “promote the participation of both the intended audience and those whose voices it amplifies.”

Tom Liacas also critiques the consequences of not widening the circles of participation. For him, the best part of culture jamming is the do-it-yourself participation in responding immediately to your environment and changing “things that need fixing.” He contrasts this with the practice of The Media Foundation, with whom he worked in Vancouver. While they have effectively promoted the cause around the world, too often they were the only ones enabled to do the culture jamming. New recruits who wanted to participate were instead addressed as consumers, and sold the group’s commodities—the magazine, poster, or website.

The insider perspective of *AUTONOMOUS MEDIA: ACTIVATING RESISTANCE AND DISSENT*’s writers also allows them to test some of the new orthodoxies about democratic practice. For Andrea Langlois, difficulties arise in practice. In her article on open publishing, she describes how the IMC adapted this open source software to “create a free information network based on a democratic model of production and distribution [...] based on collaboration and reciprocity.” Their adaptation of this new technology, as some of us from earlier generations of media activists have witnessed, by-passed the hard-wired limitations of earlier electronic communications technologies, which had privileged central control systems and professional gate-keepers. Links opened up between media activists working in different media.⁶

Nevertheless, removing the electronic gates has not removed the inequalities in access, or participation that exist off-line. Not only are many of the IMC sites regularly attacked by police and state authorities, but

barraged from within by everything from the most vile racist and sexist hate messages, to the most mundane idiocies. Langlois documents how the IMC collectives have invented new software and negotiated new editorial practices to bring their commitment to fighting oppressions of gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and knowledge about technology in line with the meaning of open publishing.⁷ She ends with the prefigurative comment that these discussions “provide insights as to what a democratic and participatory media environment looks like.”

Isabelle Mailloux-Béique shows some other complications of democratizing communications practices and participation, amidst a mediascape still very much dominated by corporate and state logics, institutions and regimes of power. *L'ITINÉRAIRE*, the Montréal street newspaper is not, in the strictest sense, an autonomous media institution; it is funded by the government and staffed by a small team of professionals, who work with paid street vendors and volunteer “street” reporters. Amidst these real power imbalances, the non-profit paper aims to be both “participatory” and “inclusive.” Daily production and distribution of the paper requires constant negotiation over “hierarchies, performance, and productivity.”

For Mailloux-Béique, the paper’s real contribution to democracy is allowing space in the larger public discourse for the expression of homeless or low-income people, one of the most marginalized groups in North America. The paper’s writers challenge the dominant media’s reliance on the expertise of a small “exclusive minority of institutionalized and professionalized “experts.”⁸ In the process of providing insider’s “truths” about critical issues such as housing, health care, employment, and social services, the street journalists not only stretch the public discourse, but also “forge and reclaim their own identities.” Some vendors also take on new roles as “important players in the street: because of their ability to listen and share with strangers.”

Frédéric Dubois notes the need to carefully weigh the value of internal procedures of participation against other democratic values. In his article about the Québec Alternative Media Network (RMA), he discusses the tension between practices of “individual equality” and “democratic participation” with a network’s other goals of producing and circulating social justice media content outside their own circle. His network opted for a more representational governance structure, which also allowed for

more fluidity in the emergence of leaders. In their account of radical libertarian media of 1970s England, the authors of *What a way to build a railroad* describe very similar tensions, between task needs, team needs and individual needs, that need to be weighed in building democratic decision-making structures.⁹

prefiguring autonomous communications

This collection contributes to a growing literature on radical media. Combining analyses and personal reflections from the ground up, the authors courageously examine their own collective practices, refusing to accept the collective amnesia which has led to generations repeating many of the same mistakes. In carefully documenting the values of participation, reciprocity, and solidarity, they provide a glimmer, or a prefiguring of what democratic communications could look like.

The volume quite rightly focuses on radical media projects. However, many of the articles delve into the overlap with related strategies of democratizing communications within social justice movements. It is my hope that future action research widens the frame to look at the values and practices among all those working to liberate communications. Our efforts to create collective projects of autonomous communications are no longer as isolated. If the extension of the world-wide social factory, shopping mall, and satellite TV, has meant a relentless attempt of global capitalism to extend the working day 24/7 everywhere, it has also meant a growing commonality of experience.

There are many different contexts, strategies, time-tables, and commitments among us, not least of which are the deepening scourges and divisions exacerbated by multiple forms of domination. What is also evident are how practices and new regimes of autonomous communications are rising up everywhere, inside, outside, and around the back of dominant institutions and logics of communications. The creation of radical media projects and institutions, autonomous of the dominant systems, are crucial. Those efforts need also to link with national and international campaigns whose goals are the re-appropriation of communications access, rights, and representation from the existing corporate and state systems; and also to support the communications efforts of people at the grassroots in widening the discourse and the franchise, in all the nooks and crannies still open to public debate and knowledge sharing.

I now live in San Francisco, a city, like Montréal, well-known for its legacy of community organizing, international solidarity and radical media. While situated far from Washington, we are subject to the same low intensity media barrage directed internally at the people in the U.S. In this new conjuncture, I feel a greater urgency to envision a project of social change, which is more inclusive of all of the ways that people are resisting, imagining, creating, and sustaining space and time for collective communications projects, independent of the rule of capital. Another world is possible, only because there are so many everywhere who are, often at great risk, seizing the time, space, and media to make it happen. Fortunately, as this volume makes clear, it's well worth it.

notes

* This title comes from Dawn Paley, in this volume: "Re/writing : Weblogs as Autonomous Spaces."

¹ AMARC began in Montréal in 1983, at the initiation of the Québec Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, and still has an office there. In 1986, Vancouver Cooperative Radio, where I worked, sponsored the conference. Moving to Managua, Nicaragua, AMARC temporarily shifted its geographical reference outside of the dominant capitalist countries of the north, and to Latin America, the region, with the strongest legacy of alternative radio and of documentation of radical media's role in social movements and social change. Working with the full support of the revolutionary Sandinista government, which was committed to the democratization of the media system, also provided opportunities to witness some of the new participatory communications projects at the CORADEP stations.

² Downing, John. (2003). "The Independent Media Centre Movement and the Anarchist Socialist Tradition," *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World*, Couldry, Nick & James Curran. (eds.). Lanham, U.K.: Rowman & Littlefield.

³ Garcia, David & Geert Lovink. (1997). "The ABC of Tactical Media." Published online at: <http://www.ljudmila.org/nettime/zkp4/74.htm> [accessed March 26, 2005].

⁴ Dyer-Withford, Nick. (1999). *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-technology Capitalism*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press; Uzelman, Scott. (2002). *Catalyzing Participatory Communication: Independent Media Centre And The Politics Of Direct Action*. Unpublished Master's thesis: Simon Fraser University.

⁵ His argument is much more fully developed in his earlier work: *Catalyzing Participatory Communication: Independent Media Centre and the Politics of Direct Action*.

⁶ Halleck, Dee Dee. (2002). *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media*. New York: Fordham University Press; Kidd, Dorothy. (2004). "From Carnival to Commons: the Global IMC Network." *Confronting Capitalism: Dispatches from a Global Movement*, Yuen, Eddie et al. (eds.). Brooklyn, N.Y., U.S.: Soft Skull Press.

⁷ See also Brooten, Lisa. (2004). "Gender and the Independent Media Centre: How Alternative Is this Alternative?" Presentation at the International Association of Media and Communication Researchers 2004 Conference, Porto Alegre, Brazil.

⁸ See Kevin Howley's account of Halifax's Street Feat. Howley, Kevin. (2003). "A Poverty of Voices: Street Papers as Communicative Democracy," *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* Vol. 4 (3), pgs. 273-292.

⁹ Landry, Charles et al. (1985). *What a Way to Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Failure*. London, U.K.: Comedia.

web resources

Communication Rights in the Information Society: www.crisinfo.norg

Next Five Minutes: www.next5minutes.org

Our Media: www.ourmedianet.org

World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters: www.amarc.org

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