Alternative Radio

A Personal Testimony

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I have been a radio interventionist, doing combat on the airwaves, since 1978. Alternative Radio, my 'organisation', is part of a burgeoning movement of community based, non-commercial stations in alliance with independent producers.

I produce and distribute a weekly one-hour public affairs programme that is broadcast on more than one hundred stations in the United States and Canada, as well as to over seventy countries via shortwave. The technical aspect is not very complicated and the cost is quite modest. The US, with all its media problems, has by far the most developed and evolved network of community radio stations in the world. There are about 100 such stations in the country. For example, Pacifica, established in 1949, has five stations: New York, Houston, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

A little background first. I moved to Boulder, Colorado in July 1978. A friend who picked me up at the airport told me that KGNU had recently gone on the air and was looking for people to do radio. I quickly submitted a proposal and before I knew it I was doing a weekly one-hour programme which later expanded to two-and-a-half hours. Mind you I had no background in the medium. KGNU was open and supportive, but actual training in radio art and craft was limited due to the usual formula: too few staff, doing too much work. Much of what I learned about 'doing' radio came on and off the air in an auto-didactic fashion. I gradually developed my editing, production, interviewing and other skills. Some grants and awards followed, which were all very gratifying. But I was still very much a local voice.

A significant turn in my audio evolution came in 1986. I was appointed programme director of KRZA, a new bilingual station in Alamosa, in the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado. During my tenure there I learned the intricacies and mysteries of the satellite system. I began Alternative Radio in late 1986 in a bizarre way. I did something unheard of: I put up, on the satellite in one block, three-and-a-half hours of Noam Chomsky, a ninety-minute lecture followed by four thirty-minute interviews. It was my first national broadcast. No one told me that most stations usually only have half-hour or one-hour slots. It was the proverbial learning experience. However, the Pacifica network did pick up the programmes and listener response was tremendous. AR was on its way.

How do I do a programme? First of all I use professional equipment: a SONY TC-D5M portable tape recorder that costs about $ 600, an Electrovoice RE-50 microphone which runs to about $ 150, SONY MDR-V600 headphones, $ 70, and an AKG mic stand, $ 30.

There are of course other configurations. Some producers prefer a SONY Walkman-PRO or a Marantz tape recorder. Others are advocating DAT machines. Whatever you get, don't chintz. Get good reliable equipment. Forget K-Mart bargains and completely forget using cheap tape. Always record on chrome cassettes from name manufacturers. I use Maxell, but the others, TDK, Fuji, etc. are comparable. And it is best for recording purposes to have 90 or 100-minute cassettes.

Know your equipment well and have full confidence in it and yourself before you venture out into the field. If the financial aspect is daunting, then most stations, with conditions, will permit you to borrow equipment. Secondly, I tape and edit a lecture or interview. Let's say Winona LaDuke is giving a talk in Boulder at the University of Colorado. Her topic is "Social Justice, Racism and the Environmental Movement". I get her permission to record before she speaks. I record her presentation. It is brilliant. I decide to turn it into an AR national programme. My associate Sandy Adler transcribes the tape. The transcript helps me enormously for I can see the tape. I time all the paragraphs and then start the actual editing process. I boil the programme down to some fifty-odd minutes, tack on my music theme on both ends, add an introduction and closing and it is ready to go up on 'the bird', the satellite.

Another example. I want to do an interview with Marilyn Young, the historian who teaches at New York University. Her book *The Vietnam Wars* is impressive. I contact her to see if she would like to be interviewed. She agrees. I go to New York and interview her. I then go through the same procedure as with LaDuke although this time I have expended much more time and money in the collection process. Some of my programmes are locally generated but frequently I have to travel to find what I am looking for. I often feel that I am a hunter and gatherer. I go out and get tape and then bring it back to be cooked! A heartening development in the last couple of years is that I have established a coterie of field producers in various parts of the US and Canada who send me tapes which I then turn into programmes.Thirdly, most of the cooking is done at KGNU studios where I continue to do local political and world music programmes. I was Station Office Manager in 1981 and then from 1987 to 1991 I was the News and Public Affairs Director.

There is a healthy give and take between me and the station. I give them tapes to offer to listeners who become members during their fundraisers, and I help with on-air pledge rapping, i.e. asking listeners to send in money, as well as in a variety of other ways.

Finally, I reserve in advance a regular time, day and channel on the satellite. I express the completed programme to the uplink. I use the one in Ames, Iowa. The satellite system is the electronic umbilical cord linking hundreds of stations. It is run by National Public Radio. But fear not. All they want is your money. I have never heard a peep from them about the content of any of my programmes. Some 400-plus stations have dishes or downlinks, i.e. they are capable of receiving programmes. There are some 20 uplinks through which programmes are distributed. Working with satellite deadlines is a constant stimulation. It is like having a Damocles sword of tape over your head at all times. The programme has to be at the uplink before the scheduled uplink time. Stations record the programme off the satellite and air it during a designated time. It is possible to broadcast live off the satellite and that is the case for news and breaking events, hearings, marches, etc.

Of all the electronic media there is no question that radio is the least expensive. And as far as I am concerned it is the most satisfying. There is something very intimate about radio. It doesn't rob or pre-empt the listener's imagination. And for spoken words, which is what I do, it is the best. An hour is a decent amount of time to cover a subject.

Alternative Radio programmes focus on the media, US foreign policy, racism, the environment, indigenous rights, NAFTA/GATT, economic issues and other topics. Recent programmes have included Elaine Bernard on "Creating a New Party", Juliet Schor on "The Overworked American", Ali Mazrui on "Afrocentricity and Multiculturalism", Edward Said on the "Israel/PLO Accord", Helena Norberg-Hodge on "Rethinking Development", a two-part debate on NAFTA, and Michael Parenti on "The Struggle for Democracy".

I distribute via satellite. Fees run about $ 100 per programme. The fee also gets me into the DACS (Direct Access Communications System). It is a device somewhat akin to a news wire. Every station that has a satellite dish has one. The DACS is the eyes and ears of the satellite. Programme and news directors check it to find out what's up! The DACS tells them for example that on Tuesday, November 9 at 1400 eastern time on channel 6, Alternative Radio is offering a programme on GATT featuring Herbert Chao Gunther. The DACS is a direct way to reach all the stations that are interconnected to the satellite system. I mail, fax and phone stations to nudge them further. Unfortunately, the satellite system is limited to the US. That means I have to send tapes via mail to Canada, Australia and elsewhere – clearly an expensive and inefficient method.

I look forward to the day when we'll be globally connected. How do I support my 'operation'? Directly through the sale of printed transcripts and audio cassettes to listeners. I don't charge the stations. It is important that the programmes be broadcast so I make it as simple and as painless as possible for stations. My goal is to disseminate diverse perspectives and views. It does me little good to produce a programme and then have it sit on a shelf. There are stations and there are stations. Some of them won't go anywhere near my work. Most of these stations are NPR (National Public Radio) types. Their licences are mostly controlled by colleges and universities and their schedules consist of lots of NPR news and other network produced programmes with a good dollop of classical music and/or jazz. Sometimes stations like WGBH in Boston, KCFR in Denver or WHYY in Philadelphia are not institution based but nevertheless have very narrow politics. NPR type programme directors and managers worship at the chimerical icons of balance and objectivity, the kind exemplified by "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered". AR represents to them a bias. It is advocacy radio and hence anathema to their ears. Listeners must be protected from ideas outside the framework of received wisdom.

However, scattered around the country there are a handful of NPR type stations that are willing to take risks and explore. They need to be encouraged and their numbers need to increase. A two-pronged strategy seems appropriate. We need to create our own media as well as penetrate existing structures. One of my goals is getting beyond the choir. Certainly our friends need information, news and analyses but simply preaching to the converted is neither intellectually, nor emotionally satisfying. It is not easy, but I can attest from my own experience that breakthroughs do happen. A sustainable media movement cannot abandon these possibilities.The other category is community run stations where there is a

pluralism in programming and certainly more diversity in terms of gender and race among staff and volunteers. Community-run stations have been growing steadily in numbers since the mid-1970s.

Noam Chomsky has observed that when he visits a town or city that has a station, people tend to be more informed and aware of what is going on. Radio provides a means of intellectual self-defense and a vehicle for connecting with others. One of the things I love to do is visit stations like KMUD in Garberville, California or KMUN in Astoria, Oregon or WERU in E. Orland, Maine or Co-op Radio in Vancouver, British Columbia. Though lacking in resources, the vitality, energy and sense of commitment at these stations is inspiring. And yes, there is political infighting and there are struggles, but the positives far outweigh the negatives. The overwhelming number of on-air programmers are volunteers. It is the exact opposite of the NPR group where virtually only paid staff are on-air and volunteers are used for answering the phone during fundraisers.

A new development with potential is low-watt micro radio, sometimes referred to as pirate radio. It is a mechanism that does an end-run around the stations which are the gatekeepers of the airwaves. Micro radio has the virtue of being cheap. However, its narrow signal range limits its audience. William Barlow of Howard University writes that community radio "has more democratic potential than any other form of mass media operating in the United States". Activists should seriously consider radio as a medium for action and engagement. There are more and more signs that that is happening.

All these efforts are to be encouraged, but they must locate themselves in a larger context. Edward Herman wrote in the very first *Z Papers* that "a full-fledged democratisation of the media can only occur in connection with a thoroughgoing political revolution". The trend towards greater media concentration will continue. The amount of literature documenting corporate control and domination of media is staggering. We have done our homework and while that critique is ongoing, I believe it is essential for psychological, as well as political reasons, to project and produce positive alternatives. It is vital that it happen. And radio offers just such an opportunity.

Alternative Radio (http://www.alternativeradio.org) is a weekly one-hour public affairs programme offered free to all public radio stations in the US, Canada, Europe, South Africa, Australia, and on short-wave on Radio for Peace International.

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