

## Collaborative Broadcasting

### Models of technological innovation for tactical media

Free media, thanks to the development and adaptation of technologies that transcend the boundaries of individual media, are creating expanded possibilities for communication particularly in socially and geographically marginal zones. They are setting up creative patchworks of technologies and communication systems that are especially well adapted to each respective social, political and spatial context and that open up additional future prospects and expanded scopes of action.

Free media are defined as communications platforms. Public access is simultaneously the precondition and the most important tool for bringing about communication. The mission of communication platforms like free radio stations is to make available opportunities for the expression of opinions and self-representation, to actively involve listeners in the work with the medium and, in contrast to the role of pure consumers, to integrate them into the production process. Anyone can advance directly to the status of producer in this media undertaking and establish a relationship with others via the medium.

One of the central challenges is the low threshold of access to the medium itself, and this is accomplished by providing expertise both with respect to content and technology. This can happen only by means of a confrontation with immediate local and social framework conditions. Who are the users of this medium? How do we reach social groups who aren't being reached by high-tech and new media, and break down their inhibitions about getting involved? How can the media sphere be opened up for all?

In order to open up medial spaces, debates centering on technological developments have taken on increasing relevance in past years. In light of the mission of free media, though, it has not been the demands themselves—for freedom of opinion and information, diversity of opinion, and open access—that are changing; the change has been in the instruments, which have—parallel to social and technological revolutions—undergone an ongoing process of transformation and development. Thus, the strategies and practices have had to transcend the purview of individual media. The analog medium of radio was expanded by digital (network) options (audio streaming, radio-on-demand, databank-based program exchange, etc.) since the, in many cases initially experimental, process of taking advantage of all available possibilities of establishing means of communication functions above all through the permanent expansion and adaptation of the offerings.

In this context, however, the technological innovations and adaptations constantly orient themselves on the concrete needs of those who use them, whereby the demands and challenges are in continual flux. The desire for self-formulation and self-representation expressed by marginalized groups like immigrants has grown significantly in recent years. At the same time, movements critical of globalization have given rise to political activism whose proponents have made use of both analog and digital media. Moreover, the increasing pervasiveness and reach of networks operating via free media can be observed not only in socially but also in geographically peripheral zones.

The objective is still to provide broad and, above all, low-threshold access aimed at closing the "digital divide" within free media communities as well. Undertaking an encounter with and addressing the needs of socially marginalized groups for whom media offerings are otherwise scanty or nonexistent are central components of free media's work. But it is precisely these "fringe groups" that are often excluded from technological develop-

ment due to a variety of mechanisms. For example, the still far from adequate integration of immigrants into digital information society confronts developers with the challenge of not only coming up with intuitive and/or multilingual user interfaces but also of simultaneously minimizing these groups' hesitancy to get started and creating offerings that enable them to apply the available tools.

In light of these circumstances, free media like free radio stations have to permanently confront the issue of access opportunities. How can "old" analog and "new" digital technologies be made and kept useful for and accessible by the various different user groups and communities and for the infrastructure of the free media themselves?

The way free media deal with technical innovation and adaptation functions like a self-designed modular construction system. The individual technological elements are frequently obsolete, working with FM technologies is still for the most part traditional, and the technical infrastructure in actual practice is a patchwork of anything that's available, whereby what is called for is often by no means technical mastery but rather the capability of assembling combinations, selecting serviceable components for immediate objectives, and tinkering together "intelligent patchworks" and versatile systems out of them. Going about this engenders cooperative relationships whose very hybridity is a source of creative and ultimately politically relevant potential. Tech-heads work together with—or are themselves—political activists, artists and immigrants and set up tangible interfaces between the users' communications needs and the technical means available.

This is the way technologies are redefined and reinterpreted, and combinations of digital and analog tools applied. For example, in *Radioballett* by the Hamburg group Ligna, the "old" FM radio technology has been updated and instrumentalized for a political-artistic action. The settings for the performances are railroad stations; a characteristic theme is the prevailing obsession with security and surveillance. Anyone can get involved—the director's instructions are communicated to participants via radio/earphones and carried out collectively. In a "diversion," repressed practices of panhandling and loitering are committed. The combination of streaming and wireless technologies with FM broadcasts make medial communication possible even in the most remote regions. For instance, *Virtual Borders*, a documentary film, radio and Internet project by artist Manu Luksch, provides an account of how the Akha, a people dispersed across five states (China, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma), can communicate across national borders by means of a combination of Internet and radio.

Meanwhile, many free radio stations have been facilitating everyday operations by making use of various digital, Internet-based applications. The possibility of swapping broadcasts among stations has improved tremendously thanks to this being handled by mp3 audio databanks. And many radio station are now equipped with automatic playback control—programs produced in advance no longer have to be set up in the studio as a minidisc and started manually; instead, they can be played back by computer as an mp3. Thus, these tools do a lot to compensate for the financial and personnel resources that are in such short supply.

These combinations of technical improvisation und communicative interaction expand free media's ability to act and to a certain extent are even what make cooperative undertakings possible in the first place. These developments are assuming increasing prominence, particularly in light of international networking and technological prospects for the future. Alternative media in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, for example, are presently limited to the Internet domain, so that joint ventures have to build upon these technical framework conditions.

The Radio FRO Conference addresses these developments and discusses the latest

communications tools, strategies and prospects in order to utilize technological and medial options to create real occasions for communication and participation. How do free media make high-tech useful in a concrete way? How can these tools expand and support communication? Where are they nevertheless reserved for limited elites? How can they be made accessible to a population of users that is as broad as possible? Which models exist for decentralized and collaborative forms of production and distribution by means of a combination of different technologies? What impact do they have on processes of emancipatory and participative use of media?

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald

**Radio FRO** |■■■■■■■■■■

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Freie Medien schaffen über die Entwicklung und Adaption medienübergreifender Technologien vor allem in den gesellschaftlichen und geografischen Randzonen erweiterte Kommunikationsmöglichkeiten. Sie gestalten an die jeweiligen sozialen, politischen und räumlichen Kontexte angepasste kreative Patchworks von Technologien und Kommunikationssystemen, die zusätzliche Perspektiven und Handlungsspielräume eröffnen.

Freie Medien verstehen sich als Kommunikationsplattformen. Das Angebot „Public Access“ ist die Voraussetzung und zugleich das wichtigste Werkzeug, um Kommunikation herzustellen. Solche Kommunikationsplattformen wie etwa die Freien Radios haben zum Ziel, Möglichkeiten der Meinungsäußerung und Selbstrepräsentation bereitzustellen, die Rezipienten in die Arbeit mit dem Medium aktiv einzubinden und sie aus einer reinen Konsumenten-Rolle aktiv in den Produktionsprozess einzubeziehen. Jeder kann unmittelbar zum Produzenten dieser Mediengesellschaft werden und sich über das Medium in Beziehung mit anderen setzen.

Eine der zentralen Herausforderungen ist die Niederschwelligkeit der Zugänge zum Medium selbst; durch Vermittlung von Medienkompetenz in inhaltlicher genauso wie in technischer Hinsicht. Das kann nur durch Auseinandersetzung mit den unmittelbaren lokalen und gesellschaftlichen Rahmenbedingungen geschehen. Wer sind die Nutzer dieses Mediums? Wie können auch technik- und medien-ferne Gesellschaftsgruppen angesprochen und Berührungsängste abgebaut werden? Wie kann der mediale Raum für alle geöffnet werden?

Um mediale Räume zu öffnen wurde die Auseinandersetzung mit technologischen Entwicklungen in den vergangenen Jahren zunehmend relevant. Vor dem Hintergrund der zentralen Zielsetzungen Freier Medien ändern sich zwar nicht die Forderungen selbst – jene nach Meinungs- und Informationsfreiheit, Meinungsvielfalt, offenem Zugang –, allerdings unterliegen die Werkzeuge – parallel zu gesellschaftlichen und technologischen Veränderungen – einem ständigen Wandlungs- und Entwicklungsprozess. Die Strategien und Praxen sind dabei zwingend medienübergreifend geworden: Das analoge Medium Radio wurde um digitale (Netz-)Optionen erweitert (Audio-Streaming, Radio On Demand, datenbankbasierter Programmaustausch etc.) – das vielfach zunächst experimentelle Nutzbarmachen aller vorhandenen Mittel zur Herstellung von Kommunikation funktioniert vor allem durch die permanente Erweiterung und Adaption des Angebots.