

No More Safety Valves

The Government Has Approved Low Power FM Stations, but Resistance Radio Continues

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Freedom is a word with many meanings. What makes radio free from an anarchist point of view? In relation to the airwaves, the term commonly refers to a form of direct action broadcasting done without a government-approved license. It is popularly known as pirate radio.

The autonomous broadcasters of the free radio movement actively expand the everyday lived experience of freedom from state regulation by seizing the airwaves from their corporate and government masters, setting up unlicensed stations and helping others to do the same. On the other hand, the Prometheus Radio Project is a non-profit organization created by former radio pirates to facilitate the growth of a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) program known as Low Power FM (LPFM).

Prometheus and other media reformers, often use the terms free radio, pirate radio, community radio, LPFM, low power FM and microradio interchangeably. Unfortunately, the resulting confusion blurs the distinctions between free or pirate radio—which involves unlicensed broadcasting—and the community radio and LPFM radio services which are licensed by the FCC. As to the terms low power fm and microradio, they simply refer to the use of low watt radio technology, which is compatible with either licensed or unlicensed stations.

According to an October 2005 Prometheus press release by Hannah Sassaman, “The Federal Communications Commission initiated the low power FM radio service (LPFM) in 2000 after schools, churches and community organizations advocated for access to the airwaves.” Upon reading this statement, Stephen Dunifer of Free Radio Berkeley, my co-editor for the anthology *Seizing The Airwaves: A Free Radio Handbook*, immediately emailed Sassaman on October 17, 2005. He explained that, from his point of view, her statement was a “rewrite of history” that left the free radio movement out of the narrative.

She then offered to change it by adding “unlicensed broadcasters” to the list of advocacy groups. In Prometheus’ fairy tale version of history quoted above, the free radio movement doesn’t exist as a movement with a pronounced anarchist affinity for freedom from government regulation. Instead, that movement is reduced to an advocacy group for LPFM. Then, according to this line of reasoning, as if in acknowledgment of Prometheus’ leadership role as lobbyists, the free radio movement recedes from history once LPFM is established by the FCC.

Left out of this self-congratulatory picture are the more radical implications of the campaign of radio resistance which forced the FCC’s hand in the first place. While not every pirate station was or is anarchist, they all operated, or operate, outside the law, some by necessity and others by choice. Beyond encouraging stations to go on the air as an act of defiance of corporate control of the airwaves and the government’s collusion in that unequal distribution of the radio frequencies available, anarchist-minded members of the movement have refused licensing in the first place. Instead, they have championed autonomous radio, rather than aspiring to, or settling for, a token LPFM service to be provided by the FCC.

In fact, it was not the polite requests of concerned citizens, or even the lobbying of Prometheus, however well-intentioned, that caused the FCC to initiate LPFM. It was the regulatory agency’s own bureaucratic instincts for self-preservation and self-perpetuation that pushed LPFM into the limelight. Faced with massive refusal of FCC

authority on the part of hundreds of pirate stations around the country, the regulators were rapidly losing control of the situation. It was then that the FCC decided that they needed to coopt anyone in the free radio movement who would bite on the carrot of licensing in return for lowering the Jolly Roger and applying for LPFM status.

This co-optation scenario is not a conspiracy theory, it is merely business as usual. With all due respect for Prometheus' work in challenging the corporate media monopoly, for those who refused this miserabilist licensing deal, the stick of shutdowns remained in effect and raids of pirate stations are now rationalized in the context of the LPFM option. This is a classic divide and conquer strategy. It has worked so well that many of those who have been coopted don't even realize it. Instead, they think they have won.

Never mind that the number of stations made available by LPFM are inadequate even from a liberal reformist perspective; from an anarchist perspective the embrace of LPFM, however reluctantly, by some pirates who have now gone legitimate has been a strategic step backwards for the free radio movement. Yet, while LPFM has succeeded in splitting the free radio movement; it hasn't killed its rebel spirit.

For many pirates, old and new, LPFM is not and never has been the culmination of the free radio dream. These newly licensed LPFM stations are most often run by "respectable" non-profit organizations, "bootstrapper" minority entrepreneurs or religious zealots. While there are some progressive stations which may harbor anarchist-oriented programmers in the LPFM mix, these would-be pirates are only allowed to harmlessly blow off a little steam within a highly circumscribed government safety-valve program that offers the trappings of free radio without the substance.

Moreover, after five years of FCC shilly-shallying, the future of LPFM seems to be just as tenuous as when it began. Perhaps, when the time is right, if the free radio movement is no longer a serious threat, the FCC will dismantle LPFM completely at the behest of the corporate moguls of the National Association of Broadcasters and the government suits at National Public Radio or simply allow it to die on the vine of neglect. What the government giveth, it can taketh away...

For anarchists, government-licensing has always been seen as a way of corralling dissidence by attempting to legalize the boundaries of contested terrain or to re-establish control over officially unsanctioned occupations of space. From the FCC's point of view, if the airwaves are being squatted and things are getting out of hand, just license a small number of potential squatters and you can keep the lid on the movement. In this sense, LPFM, though offering alternative programming within the realm of licensed radio, is part of the problem.

This is not to deny the glowing reports that I have heard about what an uplifting experience Prometheus' "radio barn-raising" can be for the participants. In Prometheus' lingo, a "radio barn-raising" involves volunteers coming together to physically construct a newly licensed LPFM station, from the technology in the studio to the setting up of the tower. While they may be empowering hands-on projects, from an anarchist point of view, they are problematic as models of social change.

Remember that the original pioneer barn-raising in American history were done by settlers (many of whom were former squatters) on private property that was now subject to government land use controls. In fact, it had just recently been converted from the commons, and before that was Native land.

While the act of barn-raising feels good because it is a cooperative activity which draws heavily on the anarchist spirit of mutual aid, it is not anarchist in practice if it is part and parcel of a government program aimed at protecting the larger interests of private property by putting the fence of licensing around the radio commons. Such a government-initiated legalization strategy is more about electronic enclosure than free speech, in much the same way that "free speech pens" at demonstrations limit freedom to a circumscribed geographical space rather than facilitating its expansion.

Anarchists may ask, why not just build the radio "barn" without a license and liberate the airwaves from both commercial and government interests in one fell swoop?

Prometheus does a few high profile "radio barn-raising" annually, usually with one of the relatively small number of progressive LPFM station applicants that are granted licenses in any given year. Rather than being anarchist, I find the Prometheus strategy to be remarkably like that of the private sector's Habitat for Humanity in some ways.

Using Habitat's charitable approach, a bunch of Christian do-gooders get together as a feel-good gesture to build a few affordable private housing units each year without ever seriously making a dent in the institution of

private property or the increasingly gentrified housing market. While Prometheus, to its credit, builds stations for community not private use, their approach is subject to the limitations of the government licensing process.

Those few who are helped by such acts of concerned citizenship, whether it is through Habitat for Humanity or Prometheus, can always be counted upon to be grateful, but what about all those who are left out in the cold? Compare the Habitat approach to the direct action of squatting by the homeless, and you can begin to connect the dots. Radio pirates squat the airwaves through a process of gaining access without concern for legal approval. Yet, lately, in a bid to appropriate the language of its own pirate past without its essence, Prometheus has taken to using the term “community-authorized pirate stations” to describe some LPFM affiliates, leaving one to wonder who “authorizes” them, and what will happen to those increasingly defenseless stations not so authorized. Pirates by definition operate outside of governmental authority structures, but Prometheus wants to have it both ways.

From the perspective of media reform, LPFM is a moderate success. Yet from an anarchist perspective, having an existing or potential pirate station “go LPFM” is a formula for capture by, and dependency upon, the state bureaucratic apparatus. Rather than reducing the power of the state, it perpetuates it. Demanding government-sanctioned change is not an anarchist strategy. Instead of getting mired in the reformist politics of government regulatory agencies, a free radio strategy expands the realm of autonomy from the state in decidedly anarchist directions.

Let’s turn up the heat—no more safety-valves!

Note: This polemic was originally delivered on November 9, 2005 as part of my *Creating Anarchy* book tour stop in Seattle hosted by Reclaim The Media.

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