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The Spirit of Radio

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As a source of information, local radio transcends the conveyance of explicit knowledge about a community and provides a tacit knowledge of the character of a community and a person's place within it. The emergence of radio on the internet provides an opportunity for people living or traveling abroad to stay connected to their place within their home community. One of the finest examples of such a local radio station that has made the move to the internet is 97.3 K-Rock out of Edmonton, Alberta. It is a concern to some, however, that an opportunity to appeal to another culture for radio entertainment will lead to the erosion of local culture. It is with the issue of principal national culture that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has justified introducing Canadian content laws for radio broadcasters in Canada. The speed and pattern of the development of internet radio as an emerging technology is greatly influenced by the decisions of organizations like the CRTC around the world. Such influence will tend to shape the impact internet provided radio has, and the speed at which it develops. The importance of internet radio is that it offers access to a uniquely local media source to a degree that other mediums such as television cannot duplicate, because radio functions as a part of the unconscious experience of daily life. This unique characteristic will increase the importance of local radio stations as they become more ubiquitous around the world, either as a force of cultural diversity and sensitivity or as a force of culturally imperial homogenization.

The acceleration of technological development over the last century has made it increasingly difficult to predict future development and use of new technological applications. The emergence of radio on the internet is an example of the "adoption and adaptation of [a] technology [that is] difficult to predict, owing to the complex interactions between characteristics of information technologies, practices of individuals and organizations, economics, public policy [and] local authorities" (Borgman 1). The original creators of the internet probably did not foresee radio transmission as a possible application, but more important than internet radio's past development is its future. The application is still in its infancy and it is likely that it will become as common as mobile phones once the technology allows it to be more portably accessible. For Borgman, there are two ways that information technology may develop. The first is revolution in which an information system very quickly finds itself being widely used, usually due to a pre-existing technological infrastructure and a high level of application. The other is an evolutionary process in which the information system develops gradually over a longer period of time (31). Internet radio fits awkwardly into both of these categories. On one hand, once the appropriate software was developed many internet broadcasters launched internet radio broadcasts. On the other hand, internet radio can be seen as a continued developmental evolution from AM and FM broadcast radio, and it is clear that internet radio has not yet reached its apex of development and use. Eventually there will be portable receivers that will be installed in cars and personal audio devices so that internet radio will be accessible in the same way broadcast radio can be heard today. The

speed of development will have impact upon the way internet radio will affect the information society as a global community.

The speed of the development of internet radio is largely dependent on the development of the application technology and its ability to make access to internet radio portable, but another important factor is governing bodies such as the CRTC with the power to influence access and content. Were the CRTC to decide to limit the content of internet radio providers on the basis of Canadian content, it would tend to slow the spread of the medium due to the compromised ability to compete with other stations originating outside of Canada. The Canadian content regulations introduced in 1971 retarded the ability of one of the top radio stations in North America in the seventies, CKLW out of Windsor, Ontario, to compete with neighbouring stations south of the boarder (Hayes 78). Such an approach to Canadian internet radio would have a similar effect, putting it out of competition with other foreign and equally accessible providers. The CRTC, however, has sworn not to limit the freedom of internet broadcasters in any way so that when internet radio replaces broadcast radio there will no longer be any Canadian content regulations affecting the medium. An organization that is attempting to control the content of the internet is the Chinese Government, which has set up blockers to keep discriminated information from reaching Chinese citizens. This is an attempt to control the population by controlling the ideas that it is exposed to and this control is likely to extend to internet radio. The problem with this policy, as it would be in Canada if the CRTC were to enforce Canadian content on internet radio providers, is that this will retard China's radio stations' ability to participate in the worldwide radio community. It creates an environment that opts out of participating in the global multiculturalism in the international community.

The radio as a passive entertainment is largely listened to while at work or moving through the city by foot or by car. Most people limit themselves to one or two favourite stations, become used to the voices and personalities on air, and come to associate those sounds with the environmental context; because of this association the radio station actually merges with and becomes indistinguishable from the city landscape. Due to the frequency with which the radio is listened to, it becomes a major access point to the community. In a centre like Edmonton where there is a multitude of radio stations all broadcasting similar information regarding news, weather, and sports, there is an element of personality associated with each station. When a person chooses a radio station it is usually according to his or her own personality. This makes the relationship with the station, and so with the community, a very personal one. When people are away from their home community but still have an opportunity to maintain this connection to their community by listening to their favourite radio station, it strengthens the awareness of one's own culture, making people more culturally secure when emerged in or interacting with other cultures. There is a possibility, however, that internet radio may develop in such a way that there are a few large radio broadcasters with large audiences that are spread around the

world rather than many smaller market broadcasters. This scenario will tend not to enrich cultural diversity but to normalize it by exposing large numbers of people to the same information. The tacit knowledge that a radio station can convey about the community would be lost, thus disassociating people from their local cultures in favour of a cultural environment generated by a medium that is designed according to a lowest common denominator in an attempt to capture the largest audience possible. Loss of awareness of cultural identity would create angst in the face of foreign cultures and would promote disharmonious relations between them, whereas a strong awareness of one's own roots would reinforce personal identity and tend to facilitate awareness and appreciation of other cultures.

There is a connectedness between how local radio stations develop on the internet and the role they will play in the emerging global information society. The way in which this new medium develops will have a strong impact on its role in an increasingly multicultural global society. The depth of the potential impact of internet radio is apparent in the level of tacit connection to culture and identity it is capable of conveying. It is up to local jurisdictions, as a function of limiting control, to what degree they wish to participate in this tacit level of the global community. It is impossible to tell the future impact that internet radio will have on the world society, but it is comforting to think there might be a place in the world market for stations such as Edmonton's classic rock station, 97.3, K-Rock.

Reference

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