

Z-Radio, Boston: Teen Journalism, Political Engagement, and Democratizing the Airwaves

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This article analyzes a youth organization's struggle to start a low-watt community radio station. The project was envisioned as a way to encourage at-risk youth to become media producers and gain technical and communication skills. It was also seen as a medium through which to communicate about important social and political issues affecting the station's predominantly low-income and minority constituency—concerns not prominently covered in the commercial media. Like hundreds of US urban communities excluded from operating low power FM stations under current FCC regulations, this group initiated a 100 milliwatt AM station with hopes of eventually becoming a 100 watt FM station if FCC regulations were to change. Funding, organizational, logistical, and regulatory issues are discussed, along with obstacles and successes of this initiative and the potential for such programs to engage youth in larger issues of democracy and non-commercial expression.

Introduction

On Tuesday evenings at 5:00 p.m., Rebecca Martinelli's¹ mother holds her portable radio up to the kitchen window, tilting it back and forth in attempts to receive the signal for East Boston's community radio station—Z-Radio 1630 AM. The station is physically located less than half a mile away from the Martinelli's house, but the signal is difficult to receive because of transmission limitations imposed on micro radio stations by the U.S. Federal Communication Commission (FCC). Depending on weather conditions and the level of interference from aircraft at Logan International Airport, located just a few blocks from their home, the Martinelli family enjoys what they can decipher of 15-year-old Rebecca's weekly radio show, "Broadway Tunes."

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Established in November of 2004, Z-Radio is one of hundreds of new micro radio stations to emerge in under-served urban communities over the past few years, as part of a growing community radio movement in the United States and abroad.² While micro radio stations have existed in relatively small numbers in the US for several decades, a recent surge in their growth has occurred as a result of FCC regulatory changes made in January 2000. Using Z-Radio as an example, this article will illustrate how these regulatory changes regarding low power FM (LPFM) radio spurred the growth of low power AM radio in urban areas, and how this surge in AM stations has increased pressure on policymakers to broaden public access to the airwaves—something commercial radio lobbyists have fought for years. Discussing ways in which micro radio stations create opportunities for freedom of expression, the article also illustrates how involvement in community radio can increase political awareness and civic engagement among teen participants.

Methodology

The research for this paper took place from December 2006–June 2009 through a combination of one-on-one formal, tape recorded interviews lasting 30–45 minutes each with three Z-Radio adult staff members; four Z-Radio teen deejays; five Z-radio teen “techies” who operate the radio equipment; and twelve teenaged “Z-journalists.” Additional information was gained through a focus group interview with 10 Z-journalists; informal conversations with Z-Radio listeners; and personal observations of radio recording sessions at the station. Historical information was gathered by reviewing scholarly literature on community, pirate, and low power radio stations operating in the US and elsewhere; examining program pamphlets from the non-profit organization that hosts Z-Radio (ZUMIX Youth Outreach Through Music); reading Z-radio funding applications; viewing information available on the ZUMIX website: www.zumix.org; and listening to more than 20 archived and live Z-Radio shows.

A Brief Background on Micro Radio in the US

Low power non-commercial radio stations have existed among non-profit organizations (particularly educational or religious institutions) and citizens’ groups in the United States since the birth of broadcast radio in the 1920s (McChesney, 1988; Soley, 1999). Operating on shoestring budgets and usually run by volunteers, these grassroots stations have historically provided local voices, educational programming, and alternative political views in an overwhelmingly commercial landscape (Brand, 2004; Coyer, Downmunt & Fountain, 2007; Howley, 2005; Opel, 2004). In 1978, however, the FCC adopted new rules that ended the issuance of additional low power broadcast licenses to community-based groups. This step came in response to complaints of spectrum “overcrowding” from high power commercial

stations and, ironically, from the Corporation For Public Broadcasting (Brand, 2004; Opel, 2004), an institution whose stated mission is to “encourage the development of programming that involves creative risks and that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities.”³ Rather than do what it could to assist small, community-based radio stations that transmit the voices of traditionally unserved and underserved communities, the Corporation For Public Broadcasting has treated them with hostility, apparently viewing non-profit community stations as potential competition for listeners and financial supporters.

In an act of resistance against the ousting of community voices from the radio dial and the increasingly concentrated ownership of the public airwaves by a handful of corporate media giants (Bagdikian, 2004; Klinenberg, 2007; McChesney, 1999), unlicensed or “pirate” radio stations, also known as “micro stations,” began to spring up in the 1980s and 1990s to fill the unmet communication needs of local communities. In defiance of FCC regulations, these stations broadcast clandestinely on transmitters of one watt or less—smaller in size than a lunch box—that could be built with inexpensive components and wires available at most electronics stores.

Micro stations have been sites for the airing of oppositional political viewpoints that get little or no media coverage in the mainstream media, and many pirate operators see their mission as democratizing the airwaves and challenging existing FCC regulations in attempts to reform them. One of the first and best-known pirate stations in the United States was Zoom Black Liberation Radio, a one-watt station operated by a blind African American man named M’banna Kantako. He built the transmitter himself and ran the station out of his apartment in a low-income housing project in Springfield, Illinois (Opel, 2004; Sakolsky & Dunifer, 1998, p. 94–99; Soley, 1999). Although the station had a broadcast radius of less than two miles, it reached about 70% of Springfield’s African-American community, concentrated in low-income housing buildings in the vicinity (Sakolsky, 2001, p. 86). Risking FCC fines of up to \$10,000 and criminal fines of up to \$100,000, Kantako ignored cease and desist orders from the FCC and continued to broadcast commentary on community issues that were largely ignored in the mainstream press, including police brutality against Black residents, tenants’ rights information, and school traffic safety issues (Anderson, 2001; Bauerlein, 1992; Sakolsky, 1992, p. 88). The station developed a large following in a community with high rates of functional illiteracy and strong oral storytelling traditions, stimulating public conversations and political activism on topics ranging from housing code violations to political corruption in Springfield’s city government (Coyer, Dowmunt & Fountain, 2007, p. 26–27; Sakolsky 1992).

The immense grassroots support for this station and its defiance of the FCC’s repeated attempts to close it down received national media attention, inspiring a profusion of other micro stations across the country (Coyer, 2007; Opel, 2004). Whether inviting senior citizens to tell oral histories, providing health information in multiple languages, broadcasting town council meetings, or reading “lost pet” announcements over the air, micro radio stations have been crucial transmitters of programming to economically, ethnically, and linguistically marginalized populations. They continue to offer a variety of local information not considered

“newsworthy” or profitable enough to be covered by commercial radio or even National Public Radio, whose affiliates are increasingly interested in cutting costs and enlarging donor bases by broadcasting national rather than local news, and concentrating on highbrow topics attractive to upscale listeners (Goodman, 1993; McChesney, 1999; Opel, 2004).

Legacy of the 1996 Telecommunications Act

Rather than improve access to the airwaves for community-based micro radio stations, the telecom policies in the late 1980s and 1990s facilitated even greater spectrum control by mammoth media corporations (Aufderheide, 1999; Horwitz, 1989; McChesney, 1999; McChesney & Nichols, 2002). The historic Telecommunications Act of 1996 and other regulatory changes that followed in its wake gave already dominant media corporations even greater power by scrapping previous limitations on station ownership to allow individual corporations to own as much as 45% of the national market.⁴ In a hearing before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation on June 4, 2003, all five members of the Federal Communications Commission testified that this resulted in too much consolidation in at least some local markets (US Fed News 2/27/09).

This concentrated ownership resulted in a precipitous decline in the coverage of local news, local elections, local sports, and local cultural programming on commercial radio stations across the country, as independently owned stations that had once reported on local issues were purchased by transnational media conglomerates more interested in maximizing profits by transmitting syndicated programming than in serving local community needs (Bates & Chambers, 1999; McChesney, 1999; Opel, 2004). Staff at these stations were frequently laid off and replaced by automated equipment that transmitted generic radio fare to markets across the country—efficiently produced in studios hundreds of miles away from most listening communities (Moyers, 2003a; Washburn, 2002). This loss of localism in commercial radio continues today and, together with the rapid demise of locally owned newspapers and television stations, is part of what many media scholars consider to be a dangerous decline in traditional public sphere spaces where citizens may exchange information and debate ideas (Allen, 2004; Bagdikian, 2000; Boggs, 2000; McChesney, 1999; Moyers, 2003b).

Increasingly, the voices and perspectives that circulate in the US public sphere are those that meet the marketing criteria and political objectives of a shrinking handful of corporate station owners, raising grave concerns not only around issues of free speech and diverse political expression in a democratic society,⁵ but also around issues of local community safety (Leeper, 2000; McChesney, 1999; McConnell, 2000; Pugh, 2002). This point was chillingly illustrated in the case of Minot, North Dakota, when the town’s radio station was purchased by Clear Channel and converted into an unstaffed “auto pilot” facility operated by computers. When a freight train filled with toxic ammonia derailed in the town on January 18, 2002, city officials could

not utilize the station to inform the public of the disaster because the station had no staff to answer the urgent phone calls (Klinenberg, 2007; Moyers, 2003a).

In response to growing public criticism from both the Left and the Right regarding the undemocratic ramifications of the media concentration accelerated by the 1996 Telecom Act, the FCC decided in January 2000 to allow the reintroduction of low-power broadcasting to “create opportunities for new voices on the air waves and to allow local groups including schools, churches, and other community-based organizations to provide programming responsive to local community needs and interests” (Brand, 2004, p. 153; Press Release, August 2003). These new low power radio licenses for non-commercial broadcasters were limited to small 100-watt transmitters, covering a radius of approximately 3.5 miles (in contrast to full-power FM stations that operate 6,000 watt transmitters covering geographic areas of 20 to 80 miles).

This experimental aperture in licensing regulations was tentatively approved by the FCC amidst a deluge of complaints from high power commercial stations, alleging that LPFM stations would interfere with their radio signals. Although radio engineering experts at the FCC determined that these claims of spectrum interference were unfounded, and took the extra step of commissioning an independent study by the Mitre Corporation (which also concluded that any interference of 100-watt stations upon 6,000 watt stations would be statistically insignificant),⁶ media corporations with the political and economic clout to influence government policies lobbied hard and ultimately convinced the FCC to require maximum (rather than minimum) spacing requirements between stations on the radio dial. Codified in the Radio Preservation Act of 2000, this requirement meant that in a bandwidth where multiple radio stations could potentially operate simultaneously (allowing low power stations to use electromagnetic spectrum that had been allotted to but unused by commercial stations), only one station would legally be allowed to operate.

Community radio activists and other critics asserted that the interference concerns of high power FM stations regarding comparatively miniscule LPFM transmitters were actually not about signal interference, but about maximizing corporate profits (Bates & Chambers, 1999; Opel, 2004, 106–107). High power stations wanted to prevent these frequencies from being allotted to low power stations, they argued, because corporations wanted to exploit the unused space for future commercial development tied to emerging digital audio broadcasting (Hamilton, 2004, p. 52). Subsequently, the “lack of space” on the radio dial created by the extra wide spacing demands of mega stations has effectively ensured that LPFM stations are virtually non-existent in large urban areas of the US that are home to numerous commercial stations. LPFM stations have more successfully emerged in rural areas where competition from commercial stations is much lower.

LPFM Sparks Interest in Part 15 Stations

Despite the initial national excitement generated by the legalization of LPFM broadcasting in the year 2000, urban community groups today are still without

viable licensed radio broadcasting opportunities. Encouraged by the advent of LPFM stations in rural communities and the findings of the Mitre Corporation's spectrum study, however, many urban schools, churches, public housing developments, linguistic minority groups, youth programs, and other non-profit constituencies have recently opened "Part 15" AM stations with hopes of applying for LPFM licenses if the FCC eventually permits narrower dial spacing. Under present FCC regulations, Part 15 stations are legally allowed to operate on an unlicensed basis, as long as broadcasting is limited to a range of about three city blocks. Part 15 transmitters are limited to 100 milliwatts (a tenth of a watt) which, as one radio programmer jokingly said, "is useful if you want to open a garage door, but not if you want to broadcast."⁷ Yet, the growth in Part 15 AM stations, as limited as their geographical reach is, constitutes part of a continuing national movement of everyday citizens to challenge commercial radio's near monopolization of the airwaves. Neighborhood groups see Part 15 stations as a way to get a foot in the door while community radio activists continue advocating for regulatory changes that would allow LPFM stations in urban areas.

As a way to reach more listeners and, in particular, as an act of protest against the limited broadcast range currently granted to them, some Part 15 stations purposely amplify their power so that they can be heard for a couple of miles rather than just a couple of blocks. In doing so, they actively cross the line into "pirate" territory and risk being closed down by the FCC, if detected. Many micro broadcasters are willing to take the risk in efforts to push the issue of public access to the airwaves. And many have been closed down by the FCC.

The Birth of Z-Radio

ZUMIX: Youth Outreach Through Music is a non-profit cultural organization [501(c)(3)] dedicated to empowering youth and building community through the arts. Located in East Boston, Massachusetts, a working class neighborhood that is geographically and socially isolated from the city's center, ZUMIX works primarily with low-income, racially diverse youth between the ages of 10 to 20. The agency provides music and arts programming as a method of building cultural understanding in a neighborhood that experienced the largest racial demographic shift of any Boston neighborhood during the 1990s.⁸ For more than 15 years, the ZUMIX space has become a cozy "living room" for East Boston youth, their families, and neighbors of diverse ethnicities who avail themselves of affordable music lessons, free community concerts, dance performances, and other arts events.

After learning of the low power radio movement in 2002, ZUMIX board members and staff began exploring the idea of starting a community radio station as a way to further promote cross cultural understanding and community activism in the neighborhood and, especially, as a way to engage young people and help youth see themselves as active producers, rather than passive consumers, of media. Staff began attending informational meetings, radio workshops, and "barn raisings"

organized by the Prometheus Radio Project. Dedicated to “freeing the airwaves from corporate control,” as the project’s web site states, Prometheus is a national non-profit organization that provides free education and technical assistance to groups interested in starting low power radio stations.⁹

The first hurdle facing ZUMIX was the need to raise \$30,000 through grant writing and community fundraising events in order to construct a modest recording studio, buy radio equipment, and hire someone knowledgeable in radio to set up the station and train program participants.¹⁰ At the same time, ZUMIX staff and board members needed to learn about the legal issues involved in broadcasting and how to file the paperwork to apply for Part 15 operating status with the FCC. In November 2004, the organization received a “Connections for Tomorrow” (C4T) grant to start a radio station. The entire process took more than 2 years, but by June 2005, the non-profit agency had a transmitter, a part-time radio coordinator, and a small recording studio (located in a former storage closet). The radio coordinator had extensive experience in micro radio and had earlier been instrumental in the founding of the Boston neighborhood stations Radio Free Allston, 106.1 FM; Allston-Brighton Free Radio, 1630 AM; and the all girls’ GRLZ Radio 540 AM in Dorchester. Excitement was high as teens and pre-teens began attending radio trainings where, among other skills, they learned how to build a transmitter and how to operate recording equipment. Today, ZUMIX Radio operates as a non-commercial (NCO) station under Part 15 FCC regulations.

Around the world, low power community radio stations have a history of giving voice to economically, linguistically, or politically marginalized populations. While their listenership may be relatively small compared with commercial radio audiences, these stations have had a significant impact on the lives of the local communities in which they operate. Indigenous peoples, labor unions, women’s groups, grassroots political parties, human rights organizations and other constituents marginalized within mainstream politics and the mass media have all used micro radio to advance social justice agendas (Girard, 1992; Halleck, 2002; McKinley & Jensen, 2003; Murillo, 2003; O’Connor, 2003; Soley, 1999; Vargas, 1995). In addition to being a medium for teaching young people valuable technical and communication skills, Z-Radio was also seen by ZUMIX staff and board members as a vehicle for increasing social and political participation in the community. They hoped the station would educate local youth and adults about ongoing political struggles East Boston faced regarding escalating housing costs, gentrification, development plans for the community’s dilapidated waterfront, battles to convert contaminated former industrial sites into public green space, and a variety of noise, traffic, and environmental problems caused by having one of the country’s busiest airports abutting the neighborhood. But, as the youth began to create their own radio shows, an unanticipated reality unfolded.

From the style of the jingles and sound effects, to the “top 40” songs played relentlessly on mainstream radio, early Z-Radio shows were mirror images of the commercial radio fare that the youth had heard all of their lives. The young programmers experienced themselves as exercising agency, and even felt a sense of resistance to

authority in hosting their own shows, yet their radio productions merely reproduced dominant cultural messages about gender, class, race, and consumerism—an ironic ideological process theorized by Gramsci (1988; 1999). Like most working class and immigrant youth, they were unfamiliar with Boston's college radio stations and had never heard of NPR (nor would they likely have felt connected with the latter's docket of classical music, British inflected reports from abroad, stock market analysis, and the like, if they *had* known about the station). With years of exclusive exposure to for-profit radio in a society saturated with commercial images and values—and no previous models of non-commercial radio to draw upon—the teens were completely unaware of the creative and oppositional potential of radio.

For ZUMIX, then, overcoming its funding, legal, technical, and space obstacles was only the beginning of the struggle to challenge corporate hegemony in the media. It became clear to agency staff that a crucial piece of the radio project would need to be helping young people to think differently about media and to see themselves as active creators of original programming. Staff members began encouraging the teens to use the radio as a way to express their personal interests and the unique concerns of the East Boston community: "On one hand, we wanted the programming to come from them. On the other, we wanted to help them see that there were so many more interesting kinds of shows they could be doing," said Zumix director, Madeleine Steczynski.¹¹

Tuning Into the Non-Commercial Side of Life

One of the earliest teens trained as a Z-Radio deejay, Rebecca Martinelli initially featured only "top 40" music on her weekly show. "But, it got old fast," she noted. "I'd play a song on my show that the deejay before me would have just played, and the person coming after me was going to play." As a student of theater and voice at a public high school called the Boston Arts Academy, and someone who grew up in a family that loved to sing show tunes together, Rebecca eventually decided to develop a weekly show featuring classic renditions of Broadway hits. Lisa Gillmor also started off with a pop music show but soon found it "boring" week after week. A junior at East Boston high school, she realized, "I need to think about getting a job when I graduate!" So she decided to turn her show into the weekly "Teens and Jobs," where she invited people employed in non-traditional vocations to her show to discuss their careers. Guests included a female wrestler, a television makeup artist, and an East Boston teenager who had started a successful bait and tackle franchise at several local marinas. "I wanted to learn how to look for a job and explore the different kinds of jobs out there," Gillmor stated. "I knew there were a lot of other kids in the same position as me."

Sam Russell, a VISTA volunteer who helped train the ZUMIX teen radio producers, observed: "When we first started, it was 'All Britney Spears All the Time.' We talked with them about the value of doing something not already happening on mainstream

radio, but it was up to them to decide. After a few months, they started experimenting with different kinds of formats and even started to compete with each other to see who could do the most unique show. Even the music-oriented shows began to differentiate into diverse genres like punk, disco, hip hop, oldies, Brazilian music, and Spanish rock, rather than top forty."¹²

One of the most innovative ZUMIX initiatives to encourage youth to understand and get more involved in community life was the implementation of the Z-Journalism program. This program trains youth to research and write about local issues, interview community activists, and report on public neighborhood meetings—exactly the type of coverage generally neglected by commercial stations. For most of these youth, this was the first time they were encouraged to actively examine socio-political issues taking place in their neighborhood. A 15-year-old female participant observed: "When they first said 'journalism,' I thought we were just gonna talk on the radio. I never realized we would really be *reporting* on issues, 'cause the radio stations I would listen to was just about music, and just talking about the stars. I never thought I would have to write stuff and have deadlines!"

As part of their training, the teen journalists, who range in age from 11 to 19, have visited non-profit radio stations such as the Emerson College radio station (WERS), and Boston's NPR affiliates (WGBH and WBUR). They have toured these facilities, talked with radio journalists from news and public affairs shows, and tried out the professional equipment. "A lot of these kids have never been anywhere but East Boston. They lead a pretty parochial existence," said Z-Radio coordinator Steve Provizer. "For them to observe how a professional news organization works, and use the mikes and headsets to do practice interviews is inspirational. Hearing from station staff about the mission of non-commercial radio helps inculcate in them the importance of covering local issues, and some of them start to see radio as a possible career."¹³ While the magnitude of these professional studios can sometimes seem daunting for the young visitors, it is also empowering for them to see that many basic elements, such as the audio monitors, the professional consoles, and the use of Pro Tools recording and editing equipment, are exactly the same apparatus they use at Z-Radio. Thus, the teens realize that the work that everyday people like themselves carry out at community stations is "real" radio.

The Z-journalists receive ongoing training in writing, editing, interviewing, and research skills, along with training on how to use the radio equipment and how to develop their speaking voices and diction. While participating in Z-Radio inspires some teens to want to pursue journalism or other media related professions, most say that they see their experience less as a future vocation and more as an eye opening opportunity to disseminate important information and serve the public good. They have enthusiastically researched and reported on an impressive variety of topics, including the impending disappearance of East Boston's remaining wetlands to corporate development projects; resident complaints about unfixed potholes and inadequate garbage collection; and public opposition to an 80% hike in Boston subway fares. They have conducted radio interviews with elected officials such as State Representative Michael Capuano and City Councilor Salvatore LaMattina

regarding community opposition to the construction of a new runway at Logan Airport (Marchi, 2005) and related concerns about unhealthy levels of noise and air pollution impacting local residents. They have also interviewed former City Transportation Commissioner, John Vitagliano, about environmental problems caused by the airport, including the dumping of excess plane de-icing fluids and oils into storm water outfalls that empty into East Boston's bays.

The teens now create and produce most of their own story ideas each week, including movie reviews, call-in talk shows, opinion pieces, and investigative specials on important local issues. Recent productions include a series of interviews with parents, librarians, university professors, and other teens airing diverse perspectives about the impact of video games on youth; a series of interviews focused on gang violence and immigration raids in the community, teen viewpoints on the legalization of marijuana, and a discussion with a representative of the City's Office of New Bostonians regarding available city services for newcomer populations. Z-journalists also produced a series of radio reports about Logan Airport's plans to tear down an historic community building. "It amazes me how seriously these kids take their jobs as reporters, and how dedicated they are," says Steczynski. New youth are volunteering to do Z-Radio shows each month—developing a loyal following of listeners within the broadcast radius. To date, Z-Radio transmits live on the air for 20 hours per week, and broadcasts using automation during the rest of the time, providing 24-hour programming seven days per week. It can be heard on the Internet at www.zumix.org/radio/.

Conclusion: A Small Station With Big Potential

Prior to becoming involved in Z-Radio, a number of the Z-journalists experienced academic and disciplinary problems in school. Others felt they had no direction in life. As one 19-year-old participant who now hopes to pursue a career in radio told me, "I just hung around on the corner for three years before I came here. I wish I knew about this earlier." In their baggy jeans, oversized hooded sweatshirts, and saucer-sized earrings, these teens appear, at first glance, to be unlikely muckrakers. Yet they are so committed to the radio station, staff say, that it is difficult to get them to leave at the end of the day. Illustrating this point, when grant funding ran out to pay the teens, who initially received weekly stipends to research and produce news stories, the youth continued to show up for work each day. New funding was eventually acquired to pay them, but the teens unanimously told me that they would continue working at the station whether or not they were paid, because it gave them a sense of purpose and connectedness to each other and to the world around them.

It is important to note that none of the Z-journalists were particularly interested in local politics before getting involved with the radio station. Their work as radio journalists increased their awareness of socio-political issues in the neighborhood and gave them a sense that they could positively impact the community by reporting

on them. When asked what they felt was useful about Z-Radio, many of the teens commented on the importance of transmitting neighborhood information. One 16-year-old said, "It is important for residents to be educated on subjects they need to make decisions on." A 15-year-old stated, "I'm gonna do a story next week about teen pregnancy. It's important because a lot of teens around here are ruining their lives at a young age and dropping out of school." A 14-year-old commented, "I think that without the interviews we do, a lot of vital news would escape us, like stuff people say that wouldn't get known otherwise." He added: "My first semester in the program, I worked on a story about drugs and how they affect the community here in East Boston . . . I did drug percentages and interviewed police and the people across the street at The White Hen [convenience store] and the laundromat." The teens also valued the training they received in writing, speech, and technical skills. In the words of a 15-year-old female radio technician, "It makes you feel good when you can control a huge mixing board that people get overwhelmed with." A 13-year-old boy commented: "I thought it was impossible to be on the radio. I thought it was only for older people. Now people hear me every week."

Or rather, *some* people hear him every week. The station's few block radius reaches only a small fraction of the nearly 40,000 people living in East Boston. While those with Internet access can download Z-Radio shows as pod casts at zumix.radio.blogspot.com, many residents in this economically struggling neighborhood do not own computers. Nonetheless, there *is* an audience, and the Zumix radio team hopes they can expand their broadcast range if FCC regulations eventually change to allow LPFM stations to locate in large cities like Boston. The current prospects seem promising.

As a result of ongoing advocacy work by low power radio advocates and other community media proponents, the FCC released a set of proposed new rules on December 11, 2007, intended to make it easier for LPFM stations to operate in urban areas. Among other things, the proposed rules sought to remove the requirement that low power stations must protect full-power stations operating on third adjacent channels. This would reduce the spacing requirements between stations and open up space on the spectrum. In the US House and Senate, legislation was proposed—the Local Community Radio Act (HR 2802 and Senate Bill 1675)—to support the FCC's recommendations. The legislation also stipulated that anyone who had previously operated an unlicensed micro station, including pirate stations, could apply for LPFM licenses in the future (something prohibited under existing FCC rules). Although the Act won the support of over 100 congressional members, it failed to pass in the last Congress of 2008, due to the strenuous lobbying efforts of commercial broadcasters. However, with the new administration of President Barack Obama (who was one of the senators to introduce the previous legislation), and a new Congress elected in what is widely considered to be a national mandate for change, the Local Community Radio Act of 2009 was introduced on February 24, 2009 (HR 1147). If passed, this legislation will implement the FCC recommendations regarding low power radio, opening the door for new LPFM stations in urban areas across the country. The wording of the Act clearly emphasizes the disservice to the

public inherent in the current system of spectrum allocation, where corporate giants are allowed to virtually monopolize one of the public's most important resources—the airwaves. Among other things, the language notes that during various local community emergencies, including Hurricane Katrina, low power radio stations, rather than commercial conglomerates, have been the *only* sources disseminating local public safety information. The Act states:

As a result of consolidation of media ownership, there have been strong financial incentives for companies to reduce local programming and rely instead on syndicated programming produced for hundreds of stations. A renewal of commitment to localism—local operations, local research, local management, locally originated programming, local artists, and local news and events—would bolster radio's service to the public.¹⁴

It is important to keep in mind that even in the digital age, radio continues to be the most affordable and accessible medium for the majority of people on the planet, particularly for low-income communities whether they live in developing countries or the US. There are presently some 50 micro radio stations in the Greater Boston area (see Appendix), and thousands of Part 15 stations across the country. With the opening of each new station, greater numbers of people have become interested in community radio and, while the quantity of listeners may appear relatively small compared to commercial radio audiences, the recent micro radio surge illustrates the public's desire to diversify programming and expand local content. The growth of Part 15 stations in the US has occurred predominantly in communities that are economically, culturally, linguistically or otherwise marginalized by the mainstream. For policymakers, this has been an important indicator of the demand for local radio, both to serve the unmet needs of diverse populations and to expand opportunities for democratic expression. As the teens at Z-Radio illustrate, when average citizens gain first hand access to an electronic medium, they gain a chance to be cultural producers and politically engaged members of their communities, contributing to the creation of a public sphere where people think in new ways about the content, uses, and accessibility of media (Halleck, 2002; Howley, 2005; King & Mele, 1999; Murillo, 2003). Z-Radio journalists, deejays, and their audiences hope that FCC regulations will change this year. In the words of 14-year-old José Lopez, whose family lives just beyond Z-Radio's broadcast range: "I'd love it if someday my radio shows could be heard in my house."

APPENDIX

Partial List of Greater Boston Low Power/ Unlicensed Radio Stations

Compiled by radio activist Bruce Conti—updated November 10, 2008; Retrieved from www.Bamlog.com on June 29, 2009.

- 530** *R. Planet Compas*, Randolph French Caribbean; **off the air**. <www.planetcompas.com>
- 540** *GRLZ*, Dorchester R&B/urban contemporary; after-school program for girls' leadership training. Reported off the air; Internet still active Mar 29. <www.grlz540.com>
- 720** Dorchester Haitian/Caribbean; religion.
- 870** Boston Classical and jazz music days, French Caribbean zouk nights. Back on the air, Feb 2007.
- 1580** *WRCB R. Concorde*, Mattapan French Caribbean. <www.radioconcorde.com>
- 1580** Brockton Haitian/Caribbean.
- 1610** Lowell Lowell National Historical Park info. <www.nps.gov/lowe>
- 1610** *WQEA969* Hyannis Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket Steamship Authority.
- 1610** *WPZS690 Great Bay Radio*, Durham Environmental information; University of New Hampshire.
- 1610** *WPKW775 Maine Turnpike Authority's Highway Advisory Radio System* Construction info.
- 1620** *R. Energy*, Boston French Caribbean. <www.radioenergyboston.com>
- 1620** *R. Soleil International*, Brockton French Caribbean—MOVED TO 1710 kHz.
- 1620** *WPRI268* Leominster Relays 162.525 MHz *WNG575* Pack Monadnock, NOAA Weather.
- 1630** *Zumix Radio*, East Boston 202 Maverick St.; free-format. <www.zumix.org/>
- 1630** Cambridge Religion.
- 1630** *Variety AM*, Marlborough <www.varietyam1630.com>
- 1630** *WQAM781* Natick Emergency info.
- 1640** *WRNM R. Nouveauté*, Boston Reported shutdown, fined by FCC, Jan '06. <www.radiounveaute.com>
- 1640** *R. Creole Inter*, Brockton Relays 1690 *WRCI* Lynn.
- 1640** *WQGG781* Massachusetts Turnpike Authority Construction info.
- 1640** *WQFH340 Fish and Wildlife Outdoors Radio*, York, Maine outdoor sports info. <www.mefishwildlife.com>
- 1650** *WQBE789/WQBQ732* East Boston Logan Airport airline terminal assignments.
- 1670** *WRVD R. Voix Divine*, Mattapan French; formerly *WRDI*. <www.radiovoixdivine.com>
- 1670** *R. Communautaire de Brockton*, Brockton French Caribbean.
- 1680** *WRUI R. Union International*, Boston Continuous French Caribbean zouk. <www.radiounioninter.com>
- 1690** *WRCI R. Creole Inter*, Lynn French news/talk, AM Stereo. <www.radiocreoleinter.com>
- 1690** *Adventist Radio*, Brockton French, religion.

- 1700 *R. Bèl Ayiti*, Boston French Caribbean. <www.belayiti.com>
- 1700 *R. Luz/R. Palabra de Vida*, Lawrence Spanish contemporary Christian music and preaching.
- 1700 *R. Derry*, Derry NH Local information. <www.radioderry.com>
- 1710 *R. Top Inter*, Hyde Park-Dorchester 24 hr. French Caribbean, relayed on 98.9 FM.
- 1710 *R. Soleil International*, Brockton French Caribbean, ex-1620. <www.radiosoleilinternational.com>
- 88.5 *R. Free Cambridge*, Cambridge
- 88.5 *Happy FM*, Dedham Middle Eastern. <www.happyfm.fm>
- 88.5 *Off-Coast Radio* Rock music.
- 89.1 Fall River Haitian.
- 89.3 *R. Planet Compas*, Randolph, Mattapan, Brockton French news/talk, "Compas FM." Fined by FCC, Feb '06. <www.planetcompas.com>
- 89.3 WDOA Worcester Indie music. Shut-down 1997, continues broadcasting via Internet. <www.wdoa.com>
- 90.1 Brockton Gospel music.
- 91.3 *Bel Mizik FM*, Dorchester Haitian/Caribbean. <<http://belmizikfm.com>>
- 91.3 *R. Superstars*, Everett French news/talk. **Off the air.**
- 93.5 *R. Mercure Int'l*, Boston Musique compas, jazz, and gospel. **Off the air, 2006.** <www.radiomercureinter.com>
- 96.5 *SoCaribe Radio*, Dorchester Caribbean; reggae, soca, gospel. <www.myspace.com/socaribe>
- 96.5 *Brockton Heat*, Brockton French Creole and Portuguese, "Serving the Cape Verdean and Haitian community." <<http://brocktonheat.com>>
- 98.9 *R. Top Inter*, Hyde Park-Mattapan French Caribbean, parallel 1710. On the air weekends and overnight weekdays. <www.radiotopinter.com>
- 98.9 *R. Top Inter*, Brockton Relays 1710/98.9 Boston. **Off the air, 2007**, after FCC notification of unlicensed operation.
- 99.7 WNEX *Next Level Radio*, Dorchester Gospel. <<http://nextlevelradio.net/>>
- 99.9 *La Voz de Fe*, Lawrence Religion in Spanish. <www.lavozdefe.com/principal.htm>
- 100.1 Dorchester Caribbean. **Off the air, 2006**, after FCC notification of unlicensed operation.
- 100.3 Boston French Caribbean, French pop, African highlife. Often open carrier during the day. Off air?
- 101.3 *Big City Radio*, Boston Urban/Tropical. <www.myspace.com/djdrunyce>
- 101.3 Brockton Haitian/Caribbean.
- 102.1 WRCI *R. Continentale/Power FM*, Boston R&B/Haitian/Hispanic. Has been off the air for extended periods; irregular schedule. <www.radiocontinentale.com>
- 102.1 WRCX *R. Continentale/Power FM*, Brockton R&B/Haitian/Hispanic. Off air? <www.metrocompas.com>

- 102.9** WCFM *Choice FM*, Dorchester-Boston “Number one in Boston for Caribbean music.” 2 kW. Fined by FCC, Feb 2007. <www.choice1029.com>
- 103.1** *Cool FM*, Brockton Haitian/Caribbean. **Off the air**, antenna downed by storm.
- 105.3** Chelsea Boston Brazilian music. Website of the Brazil embassy in Washington DC lists 105.3 Boston.
- 105.3** *Vibe*, Dorchester Caribbean. <www.105vibe.com/>
- 106.1** WTCH-LP *Touch FM*, Boston “The fabric of the Black community,” urban contemporary/R&B/soul. <www.touchfm.org> **Off the air** after FCC fine 2008.
- 107.5** Dorchester/Mattapan French Caribbean.

Notes

¹Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of youth interview participants.

²For more on the growth of community radio, see Coyer, Downumt & Fountain 2007; Dunaway 2005; Opel 2004; Brand 2004; Hamilton 2004; Spinelli 2000.

³Excerpt from the CPB’s mission statement, retrieved on March 21, 2009 from the CPB’s web site: <http://www.cpb.org/aboutcpb/goals/>

⁴For example, radio giant Clear Channel now owns over 1,200 radio stations in the US. In 1996, before the radio industry was deregulated, there were 80 major media companies in the US and the largest radio owners at that time controlled fewer than 65 stations. Today only six major conglomerates—Viacom, Walt Disney, Time Warner, News Corp, CBS and NBC/GE control all commercial TV networks, most cable channels, and enormous holdings in radio, publishing, film studios, the music industry, and the Internet. Data retrieved on 3/4/09 from Stopbigmedia.com/chart.php and www.stopbigmedia.com/chart.php?chart=radio.

⁵The conservative owners of Clear Channel, for example, have banned from their airwaves public figures and entertainers such as Howard Stern and the Dixie Chicks, whose political views they found “offensive.” Because of the unprecedented number of stations owned by this one company, they have been accused of effectively censoring dissident views from huge segments of the national listenership and striking fear into would-be dissidents because of the far reaching ramifications of being banned from such a colossal media venue.

⁶The results of the Mitre Corporation study were released on July 13, 2003 and stated that “No significant LPFM-related degradation to a full power station’s signal was ever identified.” (Mitre Corporation 2003.)

⁷Personal communication with radio activist, January 4, 2007.

⁸According to US Census Bureau data (2000), the community changed from being more than 90% Italian American to about 50% Latino, and is gaining new Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, and African American residents. While episodes of overt racial violence have been relatively rare, racial tensions simmer beneath the surface and youth gang activity is growing. Through the arts, ZUMIX attempts to encourage cross-cultural exchanges and peaceful coexistence.

⁹“Barn raising” is the term used by Prometheus to describe the physical birth of an LPFM station. These are usually weekend-long events where volunteers come together to collectively build a transmitter and recording studio, much as American farmers used to collectively build barns.

¹⁰As of July 2009, the station costs between \$30,000–\$40,000 per year to operate, with the majority of funds used to pay an experienced radio staffer (part-time) to train and supervise the youth.

¹¹Personal interview with Madeleine Steczynski, East Boston, MA, December 11, 2006.

¹²Personal interview with Sam Russell, East Boston, MA, March 23, 2008.

¹³Phone interview with Z-Radio coordinator, Steve Provizer, February 11, 2009.

¹⁴Text from section (3) of the Local Community Radio Act of 2009 (H.R. 1147), Library of Congress website: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c111:H.R.1147>, retrieved on March 19, 2009.

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