Radio Fields

Anthropology and Wireless Sound in the 21st Century

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York and London
2012
I headed out on a chilly, gray afternoon through the overflowing streets of Mexico City, making my way to the studio where my new radio show was set to kick off later that day. I had recently arrived in this massive Latin American capital to study the links between media activism and autonomy and had eventually come across Radio Autónoma, part of the city's burgeoning free radio scene. As a free or pirate radio, Radio Autónoma eschews permits, operating outside the law. Nikita and Simón, two regular voices on the radio, had agreed to cohost a program with me, called Caminos Autónomos, about the meaning and practice of autonomy among social movements in Mexico and beyond. The show, I hoped, would provide a strategic location from which to explore the dynamics of autonomy among free radios in Mexico.

NIKITA: It's important to realize that society is changing constantly and to think about autonomy as a project under permanent construction. We don't know if it's a particular moment that starts the process, or if we can start moving that way little by . . .

LOBO: I think we can, but the question is whether it also helps to have an event that clears the field and opens the space for autonomy. In other words, to what extent do we need spaces that are outside the dominant society, or to what extent can we take advantage of little cracks within . . .

SIMÓN: This is an extremely interesting and productive question because it brings us to the issue of whether autonomy is a rupture, like the classic
concept of revolution, or simply a foundational moment in which new relations are constituted.

NIKITA: But we also need to remember that all societies create institutions constantly. There is no society that does not create its own spaces. The question is whether creating these institutions has to pass through the legal or institutional sphere of the state, or whether there is another way.

The title of the song we had aired sparked a dynamic exchange about the nature of autonomy at Radio Autónoma that echoed a key principle articulated by Cornelius Castoriadis (1987), namely, that autonomous societies are both instituted and instituting, existing as self-reflexive processes of creative self-alteration powered by the "radical imagination" (369–373). Nikita and Simón were very much influenced by this idea, emphasizing a vision of autonomy as a collaborative process of self-construction. Others at the radio saw autonomy more as a radical separation from dominant institutions, social relations, and cultural practices. Nikita and Simón thought that such a separation was neither possible nor desirable. Instead, the goal was to collectively control the terms of such interactions. For Castoriadis, and this is consistent with my own view, as an ideal, the project of autonomy is not about closing oneself off but rather an open process of building new "social-historical forms" through ongoing practices of self-constitution and self-reflection (1991, 162–163). Zapatista communities in Chiapas, the Popular People’s Assembly of Oaxaca (APPO), and decentralized networks of squats, collectives, and free media projects represent concrete manifestations of autonomy in action. Our new radio program, Caminos Autónomos, would provide a space to reflect on these and other movements, including their goals, prospects, and contradictions, as well as debates about the meaning and practice of autonomy within and beyond Radio Autónoma. It would also allow me to reflect ethnographically on the show and its articulation with Radio Autónoma and the wider world of free media in Mexico by becoming an active program participant.

Mexican free radios operate in one of the most highly concentrated media markets in the world. Televisa and TeleAzteca run the majority of television outlets, while radio is controlled by fourteen conglomerates, or "families" (Soria Arenas 2007, 11), leaving little room for noncommercial outlets. Despite the existence of assimilationist “indigenista” radios as well as government- and university-run "cultural" stations, independent community radios have been few and far between. The rise of Ke Huelga Radio during the 1999 student strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) ushered in the recent Mexican free radio boom (ibid., 56–57). Many of the founders of Ke Huelga went on to help create and/or provide material and technical assistance to newly emerging free radios in Mexico City and other regions, including the southern, largely indigenous states of Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca. Some of these stations continue to operate without a license, while others have gone on to secure permits (often after suffering violent state repression) with the help of the Mexican branch of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC). Urban free radios such as Radio Autónoma are immersed in youth-oriented countercultures, but they also link up with rural indigenous free radios through wider free media networks and autonomy movements such as the Zapatista-inspired “Other Campaign.”

Given the critical role of free and other alternative media in promoting self-managed communication, information sharing, and reflection among grassroots social movements, they are privileged institutional arenas for the construction of autonomy as a discourse, ideal, and mode of social practice. What follows is my initial attempt to begin making sense of the infrastructures, practices, logics, and forms that underlie free radio in Mexico. With respect to the former, radio is inescapably material, built out of complex networks of machines, electronic devices, software, wires, and electromagnetic waves. What distinguishes free radio is a self-conscious commitment to autonomous and democratic uses of technology beyond the constraints imposed by external forces or codes imposed by states and corporations. However, as I quickly learned, technology can also be disruptive, and the frequent technological breakdowns that free radio activists confront often mean that seemingly mundane, material concerns overshadow their more idealistic goals (cf. Larkin 2008).

Moreover, as the vignette of my visit to Radio Autónoma suggests, free radio involves the production of particular modes of sound and communication, entailing a unique approach to audio aesthetics and style, which I analyze in this chapter using Steven Feld’s (1988) metaphor of “lift-up-over sounding.” Finally, free radio projects also have a unique relation to (il)legality and the state. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of “free” as opposed to other forms of noncommercial radio is the practice of unlicensed broadcasting as a strategic component of an overall project of asserting and promoting autonomy. Underlying the cultural practices and logics in each of the spheres just outlined is a tendency toward excess and transgression. Excess in the sociocultural field, or the transgression of the bounds of a prevailing institutional or normative order, can represent a powerful means of challenging that order while shining a critical light on the relations, practices, forms, and representations through which it is constituted. It is in this
sense that we can speak of a “politics of excess” tied to a process of critical reflection regarding received institutions and significations. Free radio activists thus employ excess and transgression as practices to symbolically challenge dominant technological, media, and political-legal orders, particularly in the context of media consolidation under neoliberal globalization. In so doing, they enact a collective subjectivity through alternative modes of autonomous, self-reflexive communication and organization.

However, autonomy as an ideal does not mean anything goes. Rather, the project of autonomy espoused by free radio activists invariably involves the setting of rules and limits, even if they are presumed to derive from a collective process of self-reflexive negotiation rather than symbolic recourse to a transcendent sovereign. Nevertheless, despite this claim, autonomous projects may have contradictory effects, often reproducing dominant modes of power, hierarchy, and governmentality, further constraining the creative, transgressive activity of particular subjects in materially specific ways. Externally instances of authority, such as the state, may also intrude on autonomous projects, more or less violently. In what follows, I examine how the cultural politics of free radio are constituted through a complex interplay between excess and constraint in wider entanglements of technology, aesthetics, and state regulation. As we shall see, ethnographically tracing free radio discourse and practice also raises salient issues with respect to the anthropology of radio and media anthropology more generally.

The Materiality of Free Radio

Much of the recent anthropological work on radio has emphasized the medium's material qualities: its underlying technologies, its insertion into broader networked infrastructures (Fisher 2005; Larkin 2008; Spittelnik 1998–1999, 2002), and the materiality of sound itself (Tacchi 2002; Weidman 2003). Brian Larkin (2008) suggests that in colonial Nigeria the particular material shape of broadcast radio emerged through a complex process of negotiation. More generally, radio was an information order designed to support the colonial regime. At the same time, he notes that technologies are mutable and unruly, having the “capacity to create possibilities in excess of their expected use” (47). This is precisely the power of free radio as an oppositional materiality, transforming an assemblage of technologes initially developed in the service of order and profit into a potent tool of dissent (cf. Buddle 2008; Murillo 2008; O'Connor 2004).

When joining a free radio project such as Radio Autónoma, one immediately confronts the need to become familiar with and use a bewildering se-

ries of technical instruments: computer programs, microphones, mixers, recording devices, and editing software. For the non-technically-minded, this can be disorienting. Licensed radios avoid this problem through a division of labor between technicians, producers, broadcasters, and other workers, but free radio projects lack sufficient material and human resources for such a solution, while their ideology directly challenges logics of specialization.

Upon walking into a free radio, one immediately notices the recycled computers, hand-me-down microphones, scratched mixers with missing buttons, cables heid down with duct tape, and dirty walls covered with political propaganda. The material aesthetic is cyberpunk, a romantic rebel expression of the “recycled modernity” (Sundaram 1999; cf. Larkin 2008) that characterizes popular technological cultures in developing countries such as Mexico. These recycled technologies allow free radios to achieve a modicum of material autonomy. However, like the postcolonial technological infrastructures examined by Larkin (2008), they are also prone to failure. The everyday experience of free radio is thus shaped by hard drive crashes, software problems, light and Internet outages, server breakdowns, signal shifts, and antenna malfunctions.

For example, Caminos Autónomos frequently began with frantic attempts to restart the server, replace malfunctioning mikes, or troubleshoot a software glitch. We were often forced to call for help, despite the emphasis on solving our own technical problems. The “culture of repair” (Larkin 2008, 236) reproduced by the more technically proficient members of the radio allowed the project to exceed the technological constraints posed by resource poverty, yet the frequency of breakdown signaled a limit in the speed and fluidity of the autonomous functionality to which the radio aspired. Meanwhile, the constant need for repair reinscribed hierarchies of technical experience, constraining the free radio vision of technological egalitarianism and autonomy.

Another important dimension of free radio materiality is the use of free and pirated software for tasks such as audio editing, storage and transmission, and Internet streaming. Free radio activists generally view free software—that is, software produced with a license requiring the distribution of the source code along with the software itself (Kelty 2008)—as a strategic aspect of their commitment to autonomy with respect to technological infrastructure. Radio Autónoma uses its own Linux-based archive and broadcast software, for example, while many free radio activists use free audio-editing software such as Audacity. As Pancho from Radio Revolución explained during an interview, “Capitalism turns everything into a question of profit. Free software breaks this by building community around technology and software.”
Free software is widely viewed as a way to reinforce autonomy by breaking dependence on proprietary, corporate-driven software. At the same time, limitations may emerge, particularly with respect to nonproprietary operating systems such as Linux. Sandra, from the Mexico City–based Free Media Network, put it this way: “We agree with the principle of Linux, but it makes me dependent—now I can’t edit the video I recorded, and it will take a month to learn.” Efficacy is another concern. With respect to audio editing, for example, some activists felt the available free software was inferior to the proprietary alternatives. In these cases, piracy becomes the preferred mode of transgression, particularly given the widespread practice of unregulated media circulation in developing countries such as Mexico (cf. Larkin 2008). Many activists understand piracy as a latent political practice. As Pancho explained, “Piracy is a form of resistance, even if it isn’t conscious. . . . We have to continue using, distributing, and pirating proprietary programs and using free software where possible.” However, piracy fails to build the autonomous community of technology users that free software does. Piracy and free software thus represent alternative modes of excess and transgression, yet each comes along with its own particular constraints.

Free Radio Aesthetics

Still, it is among urban free radios where a more freewheeling, excessive style is most apparent. Here autonomy means, in part, the freedom to play different, often wildly divergent genres—punk, hip hop, hard core, electronica, reggae, folk, alternative rock (almost always noncommercial, and with a strong preference for fusion styles)—to mix radical politics with music and cultural commentary, to exhibit a playful, nonscripted, often irreverent mode of speech, and, above all, to break out of the highly regimented formats of commercial radio. There is also an emphasis on nonstructured interactive communicational styles, often with background sounds and rhythms, announcers talking over one another, frequent voice-overs, and audios and promos mixing heterogeneous voices, sounds, and musical clips.

The idea of “lift-up-over sounding” employed by Steven Feld (1998) provides a useful metaphor for grasping the unique aesthetic quality of free radio. Lift-up-over sounding is characterized by continuous layers, sequential but not linear; nongapped multiple presences and densities; overlapping chunks without internal breaks; and a spiraling, arching motion tumbling slightly forward, thinning and thickening back again (78–79). Given the popularity of politically conscious hip-hop and the proliferation of fusion and electronica beats, this cut 'n' mix style is highly popular at free radios such as Radio Autónoma. Lift-up-over sounding is not restricted to music; it also encompasses the “egalitarian interactional style” (83) that is so appealing to free radio hosts.

The program Mezclando Sonidos from Radio Autónoma provides a nice illustration of these aesthetic qualities. The show, hosted by members of a local radical band that plays a fusion of hip-hop, reggae, and world beat, features a complex amalgam of music, live performances, political commentary, and recorded tracks. The overall style is lively, creative, eclectic, and self-consciously rebellious, involving the kind of mixing, blending, and constant voice-over reflected in the idea lift-up-over sounding. For example, one particular Mezclando Sonidos episode during my time in the field combined analysis of the ten-year anniversary of the 1999 UNAM strike, which successfully defeated a plan to begin charging tuition (which striking students saw as the start of privatization), with a live studio performance by a percussion troupe, discussion of West African drumming, recorded music, and political audios. The show began with a track mixing techno, reggae, and drum 'n' bass, interrupted by a live voice-over: “104.1, Mezclando Sonidos starts now!” As the song continued, live percussion kicked in, and the hosts conducted sound tests: “Sí, sí, sí.” That kicked off a round of high-energy dialogue with drumming in the background:
TRUCHA: Welcome to Mezclando Sonidos! We're starting late, but now we're ready to go. We're in the mood to party tonight because we have some great kids here with us—

VENTO: [interrupts with a yelp]: Yoo, yoo, hey, guys!

BAND MEMBER: What's going on, guys, yee, hee, hee! [The DJs and two band members then let out a collective primal scream.]

TRUCHA: These guys are gonna accompany us tonight. They're gonna share their vibrations. We also have some issues to discuss. We're gonna talk about the ten-year anniversary of the strike. . . .

VENTO: That's right, man; we're also gonna be playing some tunes with the band and talking to them and also talking a little about the origin of their drums. . . .

TRUCHA: They also have some lyrics [Viento starts screaming again in the background: “ha, ha, roo, roo, ratata”: their urban poetry, their rap. Stay with us. We're gonna start at any moment. . . .

LEO [who just arrived, with the drummers in the background]: Hey, si, si, greetings to everyone celebrating the strike against the privatization of education. Greetings to everyone at the concert. Want to let everyone know there were two marches today . . .

Leo continues to discuss the strike, as one of the drummers starts to rap about war and violence. Trucha then goes into a segment about the history of African drums, with the band playing in the background. The rest of the program continues in the same vein: fusion tracks mixed with live percussion and rapping, discussion of the sociocultural context of drumming along with analysis of the student strike (always with faint music and drum beats in the background), occasional political audios, and frequent hollering. The program is chaotic, reflecting a self-consciously employed lift-up-over aesthetics, including a creative mix of content, genres, and musical/verbal styles, with frequent dubs, voice-overs, interruptions, and rapid-fire informal interactions.

The emphasis on expression unconstrained by commercial strictures and intentionally distinct from the styles or genres believed to constitute mainstream or regulated broadcast media also resonates with rural indigenous free media. Here the musical tastes are different, less oriented toward urban youth and more directed toward traditional indigenous sounds, but a similar logic of expression is at work. Although indigenous free radios are not as freewheeling as their urban counterparts, they provide critical spaces beyond the bounds of commercial and indigenista radio where local community members can speak their own language; play their own music; talk about traditional culture and medicine; send greetings to friends and family in the community, other parts of Mexico, and the United States; or request their favorite songs. These are immediate forms of expression by people who lack a voice in other media outlets (cf. Salazar 2009).

Other free radio activists stressed the more political dimension of free radio aesthetics. For them, free radio style is about unrestricted freedom of political expression, giving voice to popular struggles, and transcending the problematic notion of objectivity. When I asked Pancho, from Radio Revolución, how he would characterize free radio aesthetics, he replied, “We try to highlight our anticapitalist social movements. There is great diversity: free radios in Oaxaca or Veracruz play the music from their communities; we play more urban music. There is a different worldview. But we are all highlighting grassroots struggles.” Urban and rural free radios thus aspire to exceed established political, cultural, and stylistic bounds and to highlight voices that are otherwise silenced within the mainstream commercial media. However, it is important to point out that although the enhanced circulation of marginalized voices may expand the sphere of democratic communication, it does not necessarily lead to more democratic social relations.

There are also important limitations on free radio expression, including the self-imposed guidelines, both formal and informal, prevailing at most Mexican free radio stations. Radio Autónoma, for its part, had internally agreed upon rules against speech that could be construed as sexist, racist, inciting violence, or hateful in any way. It proved difficult, however, to interpret when rules had been violated or what to do in the case of infringement. For example, El Zapo, of another free radio project, Radio Subversión, used to have a program at Radio Autónoma, but he and his collective left the radio after one of them was accused of using sexist language on the air. El Zapo described the situation in this way: “We had a problem with our friend because he used to say crazy things. They called him a misogynist, but that was unfair. He just says things as they come. . . . When we got to the studio one day, there were some folks from the collective, and they wanted to throw our friend out. But we said, ‘No, he's part of our collective. If he goes, we all go.’” Free radio expression is excessive and unbounded, but only to a point—reflecting the limits of the ideal of autonomy espoused by free radio activists. Norms constrain the kinds of things that can be said, while there are often implicit guidelines with respect to style, as different radios are known for distinct musical, political, and aesthetic tastes. In this sense, Zapo’s friend’s behavior reflected the excessiveness of free radio expression, yet it was also a sign of the dangers of communicative excess.
Legality, Excess, and Transgression

Perhaps the most transgressive dimension of free radio is the unlicensed use of an FM frequency. There are many reasons for the decision to broadcast without a permit, including practical considerations such as the high cost of acquiring the approved equipment, the difficulty of meeting the stringent technical guidelines, the need to create a formal civil society association, and the sheer difficulty of winning approval for a broadcast permit. Although the Secretary of Communications and Transportation (SCT) issued a string of permits in the mid-2000s to a series of formerly free radios that had begun to work with AMARC, many of them indigenous, Mexico still has one of the most restrictive media environments in the world (Calleja and Solís 2007).

For many Mexican free radios, however, the decision to broadcast without a permit is an expressly political act linked to their commitment to a broader politics of autonomy. Whereas the radios associated with AMARC are dedicated to the promotion of “communication rights” via the legalization and proliferation of community radios, the free radio movement encourages “communicational autonomy” by taking the airwaves through illegal broadcasts. In this sense, communicational autonomy is based on an explicit policy of transgressing the laws, practices, and institutions of the state. For many free radios, illegality is seen as central to a wider strategy of resisting the neoliberal state’s role as a guarantor of rights (cf. Speed 2008).

Many free radios activists view their commitment to unlicensed broadcasting in precisely such terms. Illegality is seen as a source of political identity and an important tool of liberation. When I asked Pancho from Radio Revolución about the significance of illegality, he replied,

The laws in Mexico are constructed and administered by those who have economic and political power... In this country, radios can only be managed by businesses... The law requires that you have a certain amount of resources to broadcast. We say... the air belongs to everyone, like the land and water... If we are going to build another world, we have to do it now without respecting the laws that benefit a certain class. As Magón said, to be a revolutionary means being an illegal because whoever abides by the law is just a protestor.

For Pancho, the role of a free radio is not simply to provide a space for free expression but also to serve as a tool for revolutionary transformation, which is not possible within the confines of the law. Specifically, the goal is to appropriate and collectively manage the air, along with other resources such as the land and water, for the benefit of the community. On this view, illegality is a political practice intricately tied to the construction of autonomy beyond the market and state.

This discourse of the airwaves as a communal resource to be appropriated and managed collectively in excess of the regulatory techniques and apparatus of the state is also widespread among indigenous free radios, particularly those linked to the “Other Campaign.” As Ricardo, from Radio Mundo, an indigenous free radio in the hills of the Costa Chica in Guerrero, put it, “The airspace above is also part of the territory of a pueblo, and we as a pueblo have decided to use the airwaves to speak, to transmit our voice through our frequency.” This is a kind of subversive twist on the international law principle that the airspace above a territory is part of that territory and is thus subject to state regulation. The claim to autonomous control of the airwaves is thus constructed as analogous to the broader claim for autonomous control of the community’s physical territory, both of which are seen as exceeding claims of state sovereignty.

Indigenous radios such as Radio Mundo further base this claim in what they perceive to be the rights of indigenous people encoded in international treaties and in Mexico in the San Andrés Accords, signed by the Zapatistas and the Mexican government yet never implemented by the latter (Speed 2008). Nonetheless, urban free radios make a similar claim about their right to collectively use the airwaves, much like any natural resource. The major limitation here, beyond the real and perceived omnipresent threat of state repression, is that the airwaves, like physical territory, are not in unlimited supply, and without regulation, they would become saturated by signal interference, particularly in the major cities. Against the argument for state regulation, however, free radio activists hold that community-based radios should be able to autonomously coordinate their signals without the need for intervention by an external authority. Both rural-indigenous and urban free radios express the broader logic of an ideal autonomy with respect to control of territory, law making, and self-regulation.

However, there are important differences between indigenous free radios and their urban counterparts with respect to the conception of illegality as political practice. This can be seen in Radio Mundo’s response to an offer of a permit by the Mexican government following the government’s failed effort to physically dismantle the radio. Two hours into an assembly of free radios at Radio Mundo’s fourth-anniversary celebration, which I attended along with dozens of Mexico City–based activists, Miguel, from the radio’s coordinating committee, read the following:
Given that for many years we have tried to become an integral part of our country, to be recognized as an indigenous people, yes, we would like a permit. . . . We would like it as part of the recognition of our collective rights. . . . [But] as long as the conditions do not exist in this country [for] a full recognition of our rights, we are going to continue broadcasting . . . with the permission of our people.

This text is extremely ambiguous, lacking a clear rejection of the idea of a permit, in contrast to the more oppositional stance of many urban free radio activists. For the latter, breaking the law is an end in itself, an expression of autonomy that directly challenges the state, whereas for indigenous radio stations such as Radio Mundo, illegality is a means to a related yet different goal: full recognition of indigenous autonomy and rights within a transformed pluricultural state.

In this sense, Radio Mundo does not view itself as engaged in illegal activity, as Ricardo explains: “The radio is not breaking any laws. Why? Because we are transmitting our voice on the airwaves. . . . This is a recognized part of our rights as indigenous people. We are not harming anyone; we are simply speaking in our own language to strengthen our identity as an indigenous people.” Ricardo is referring to a higher law and a set of “natural” rights that are prior to and exceed the state (Speed 2008). Radio Mundo is struggling together with a larger indigenous movement for a reconfiguration of the state along pluricultural lines so that the collective rights and autonomy of indigenous peoples will be fully recognized. There is nothing inherently wrong with a permit, but it would have to be issued from a state that is viewed as legitimate, and it would have to allow for a full expression of autonomy. Radio Mundo posits a sphere of autonomous authority transcending the state, as do its urban free radio counterparts, who reject the very idea of the state and its right to issue permits. In both cases, unlicensed broadcasting represents a communal politics of excess.

This same transgression provokes a key external constraint to free radio practice reflected in the legal and repressive apparatus of the state itself. For many practitioners, particularly those who perceive autonomy as necessarily in opposition to the law and the state, free radio autonomy requires illegality. Autonomy in this sense intends to provoke and contest the authority of the state to police its own boundaries and laws as a way to articulate alternative definitions of politics, citizenship, and belonging. In doing so, however, such provocations may endanger the very project of autonomous free radio by unleashing the full force of repression and co-optation on the part of the state, reflecting a key contradiction of free radio practice.

For example, the Mexican state had attempted to close down Radio Mundo during a violent raid meant to arrest participants and seize the transmitter. It was the rapid, determined response by community members that prevented the arrests and seizures. Only after the failed raid did the Mexican government offer a legal permit as an alternative strategy of bringing the radio under the direct control of the state. Beyond the question of state legitimacy, Radio Mundo also rejected the permit due to the associated regulations that effectively discipline neoliberal subjects with respect to particular kinds of citizenship and participation (cf. Ong 2003; Poster 2006; Speed 2008). These include requirements, many of which are beyond the financial reach of grassroots communities and/or contradict the idea and practice of autonomy, such as the creation of a civil society association, the use of authorized equipment, and the broadcast of certain programming including campaign ads, the national hour, and the national anthem.

Whereas transmitting without a permit had previously been treated as a civil violation, the Mexican state has recently begun to prosecute unlicensed radio broadcasters for violating “national patrimony,” a federal offense that carries heavy fines and jail sentences. The Mexican state is thus beginning to criminalize free radio to justify raids and crackdowns, while holding out the olive branch of legal permits—a form of neoliberal governmentality that shapes political subjects in particular ways—to projects that have been able to resist repression. The main limitation is that many free radios lack either the capacity or the level of community support needed to effectively resist state crackdowns. It was in this context that many formerly free indigenous radios decided to seek legal permits. The most long-lasting free radio projects, such as Radio Mundo or Radio Autónoma, have depended on the support of the community, in the former case, and the protection afforded by the autonomous status of the wider university from which the radio broadcasts, in the latter. Many other free radios have been shut down, have decided to seek legal status, or have turned to Internet transmissions. Meanwhile, free radios that have been able to continue broadcasting on the air have been forced to expend increasing time and resources on security issues and less on developing their projects of autonomous expression.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the dynamics of autonomy within Mexican free radios in terms of three areas of concern to the anthropology of radio and media anthropology: technology, aesthetics, and state regulation. I have suggested that autonomy, as an ideal, does not mean complete separation.
from dominant institutional spheres. Rather, as Cornelius Castoriadis (1991) maintains, autonomy has more to do with the generation of new social practices, subjects, and representations that always exist in relation to received institutional boundaries. It is in this sense that autonomy as a set of guiding values and subjectivities among free radio activists can be viewed as a politics of excess and transgression. However, the notion of autonomy deployed in free radio practice also entails constraints. This involves both self-imposed limits and complex dynamics of power that surround the stations, which we saw in the conflicts over style and aesthetics at Radio Autónoma. There are also important external limitations, including periodic technological breakdowns or the strategies of co-optation and repression enacted by the state. In the context of free radio practice, autonomy, as I have argued, thus involves a complex interplay between the politics of excess and constraint.

Given the critical role of the media in producing and circulating representations of social, cultural, and political reality, free media are seen as a key dimension of the wider project of autonomy. On the one hand, like other forms of alternative media, free radio provides a space for informing about, analyzing, and communicating movements for autonomy, such as the Zapatista struggle in Chiapas, the popular rebellion in Oaxaca, or the UNAM strike in Mexico City. Free radios have played key roles as command and control centers during conflicts (Stephen, chap. 6 in this volume), as well as spaces for representing and circulating those struggles to a wider audience. On the other hand, free radio projects also represent concrete projects for realizing local visions of autonomy in their own right, small-scale experiments in generating new cultural practices, social relations, and institutional forms that attempt to move beyond dominant institutional spheres.

At the same time, free radio also raises issues that are relevant to the anthropology of radio and media anthropology more broadly has to do with the political implications of radio broadcasting for subaltern groups. Much of the literature on indigenous media emphasizes the democratizing effect of the production and inclusion of marginalized images and voices within dominant and alternative media spheres, reflecting an underlying liberal bias. Free radio shifts the focus from the simple expansion of democratic public spheres to the issue of who controls and manages the underlying technologies, infrastructures, and resources on which media production and transmission are based. As we have seen, for many free radio activists, unlicensed broadcasting is a part of a wider social project that views the airwaves as a common resource to be managed collectively like the land or the water. However, whereas for many urban free radio activists, illegality is seen as a critical dimension of their opposition to the state, many indigenous free radio activists have a more complex position, viewing unlicensed broadcasting as a legitimate form of social, cultural, and political expression authorized by the community and enshrined in international accords. Nevertheless, both rural-indigenous and urban free radios intentionally exceed the regulatory bounds of the state, provoking state responses ranging from efforts to legalize free radios in order to produce acceptable modes of neoliberal participation to direct, sometimes violent repression.

In light of the preceding analysis, what can we make of the future prospects for free radio in Mexico? On one level, the situation looks grim, given the growing criminalization of free radio, on the one hand, and the increasing willingness of existing free radio projects, particularly in the most
vulnerable urban areas and indigenous communities, to enter into a process of legalization, on the other. Whether or not a critical mass of free radios will be able to survive in the current climate of repression remains to be seen. On another level, though, the continued strength and vitality of long-running projects such as Radio Autónoma, Radio Revolución, and Radio Mundo suggests that a small number of free radios with strong institutional cover and/or community support may be able to withstand the current onslaught. Such projects continue to circulate and communicate diverse grassroots struggles in Mexico and abroad, while serving as autonomous laboratories for the generation of new sociohistorical practices, representations, and forms. At the same time, the politics of excess tell us as much about the dominant institutional orders transcended as about the alternatives themselves. In this sense, free radios and other autonomous media shine a light on the increasing commercialization and consolidation of mass-media spheres in an age of neoliberal globalization, signaling the need for alternative regulatory frameworks to ensure space for innovative, free-form, politically engaged, and truly community-based media.

NOTES

1. I have used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of particular free radio projects, except for historical passages when I provide information that is publicly available.

2. The names of individuals that appear in this chapter are pseudonyms as well, replacing the nicknames used by most free radio activists in Mexico.

3. This chapter is based on fourteen months of ethnographic research, funded, in part, by a postdoctoral research grant from the National Autonomous University of Mexico from September 1, 2008, to August 31, 2009 (the grant was administered by the Coordinator of Humanities, and I was affiliated with the Institute for Social Research).

4. Lobo, meaning “wolf” is a pseudonym for my own nickname at the radio.

5. The Other Campaign is an alliance of anticapitalist movements in Mexico struggling for autonomy. It was convened by the Zapatistas as an alternative to the electoral Left and the PRD’s candidate, Manuel López Obrador, during the 2006 presidential campaign.

6. On the contrary, the term autonomy comes from the root autos-nomos: to give oneself laws (Castoriadis 1991, 164).

7. In Mexico, this means broadcasting without a permiso (permit) from the Federal Commission of Telecommunications (COFETEL) and formerly from the Secretary of Communications and Transportation (SCT). Commercial broadcasters are licensed through a concesión (concession), which allows them to sell commercial air time, which is prohibited for radios operating with a permit (Soria Arenas 2007, 30–35).

8. In much recent anthropological writing (see, for example, De Genova 2002, 2003), illegality is conceived in Foucauldian terms as a kind of excess produced by the state to construct certain groups and practices as criminal, delinquent, or deviant. In contrast, for Heyman and Smart (1999), illegality should also be seen as “an option, a resource, that diverse groups use at varied times” (13; see also De Genova 2002, 430). In this sense, illegality can be viewed as a tool of resistance actively appropriated by grassroots actors struggling for autonomy and social justice.

9. Pancho is referring here to Ricardo Flores Magón, the Mexican anarchist and revolutionary who was one of the major intellectuals of the Mexican Revolution.

REFERENCES


“Foreign Voices”

Multicultural Broadcasting and Immigrant Representation at Germany’s Radio MultiKulti

KIRA KOSNICK

In the wake of labor migration that brought large numbers of migrants from the Mediterranean region to Germany during the 1960s and 70s, radio broadcasting emerged as the most important media technology to supply so-called guest workers with media contents in their native languages. During a period in which the development of information and communication technology did not yet allow for the transnational circulation of media contents, German public service broadcasters developed special foreign-language radio programs to service labor migrants as both orientation help and a “bridge to home” (Kosnick 2000). Over time, the purpose of this programming changed: with labor migration increasingly recognized as an immigration process rather than a temporary sojourn, public service broadcasters sought to provide integration-oriented programs and developed...