

November 2008

## Micro Radio and the Internet: Dissent Network Formation in Media Based Collective Action

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### Recommended Citation

Ted Coopman. "Micro Radio and the Internet: Dissent Network Formation in Media Based Collective Action" *National Communication Association Annual Convention* (2008).

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## Micro Radio and the Internet: Dissent Network Formation in Media Based Collective Action

### Introduction

My study and participation in the Micro Radio during the 1990's led me to question the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on the effectiveness of collective action. I was particularly intrigued with the development and emergence of social movements that focus on the creation of alternative infrastructure. Failing to find an adequate theoretical approach, I set about developing my own theory, a theory of dissent networks. I explore my theory here within the context it emerged, the micro radio movement. After outlining my method, I discuss the emergence of measures and dimensions of analysis within the context the micro radio movement. I conclude with a general analysis of the interaction of the movement and my theory.

### Measures and Analysis

The dissent networks perspective resulted from investigating and participating in the MRM. The patterns I detected emerged over multiple studies on various aspects of the MRM. My method consists of historical analysis and participant observation.

The historical analysis of the MRM is derived from my own observations and analysis, scholarly and participant literature, and media accounts from 1993-2002.

I conducted participant-observation both online and offline from 1993 to 2002. It was widely known by participants that I was collecting data for research. The Micro Radio Network (MRN) listserv was the MRM's main communication channel. This listserv is public, although the archives are restricted. This data source is particularly rich because I collected the listserv messages in real time as a participant, which facilitates a deeper understanding of interaction in an online environment (Paccagnella, 1997). All posts were reviewed at the time they appeared

and before they were archived. This data was collected from 1998 to 2002. I utilized conversations with representatives of 13 stations in 9 states and visited over 64 station websites representing 28 states from 1995 to 2002. Movement publications were collected submitted by participants and obtained at gatherings such as the First Micro Radio Conference in San Jose, CA April 1996, the Micro Radio Conference in Berkeley, CA in August, 1999, the Reclaim the Media counter-conventions in San Francisco, CA, in September 2000, and in Seattle, WA, in September 2002, and the Radio Barn Raising in Oroville, CA, in April 2002.

### The Emergence of Measures and Dimensions of Analysis

The development of collective action in and around digital networks (dissent networks) is what dissentworks theory is conceptualized to address (XXXX, 2005). Four basic elements frame dissentwork theory and differentiate it from more traditional social movement approaches. These dimensions are consensus on system failure, relational density, process and resource sharing, and the centrality of digital networks.

#### *Consensus on System Failure*

When a consensus is reached that a particular regime or system no longer meets the perceived needs or requirements of a particular constituency, a dissent network may emerge. This emergence occurs when groups or individuals create structures or disseminate ideas that catch the attention of sympathetic constituencies. These constituencies must be receptive to both the perception of an unmet need as well as a potential alternative and are ready to adopt it and participate in its creation or maintenance (McAdams, 1982)

The two characteristics of consensus forming around a dissent network consist of: (1) a clear delineation between it and an existing regime and (2) the network that emerges in response

to its perceived failures and the determination for the development of this new system. This type of response is in contrast to a traditional social movement approach where members would seek reform of the existing system or other concessions or compliance from existing incumbent power structures. However, another strategy involves individuals and organizations constructing an alternative system to meet these unmet needs. The MRM began with two sets of unmet needs. The first was the belief that radio provides an important and potentially economical tool for community outreach that existing media did not provide. The second perceived unmet need was the belief that the existing media system was broken or corrupt.

### *Micro Radio as an Oppositional Practice*

Micro radio as a practice began with Mbanna Kantako founding WTRA in Springfield IL and coining the term in 1987 (Brinson, 2006; Fiske, 1996; Landay, 1998; Shields & Ogles, 1992; Walker, 2001). Kantako's station exemplified the dual nature of the MRM. First, members were dissatisfied with the state of media in the U.S., consolidation in commercial broadcasting, the increasing "professionalization" of public non-commercial broadcasting, market pressures, new federal regulations, and funding schemes which resulted in much of the public being removed from public radio (Howley, 2004). Many radio veterans and supporters were forced out or became dissatisfied with the emerging status quo. For example, Lyn Gerry, a veteran of the Pacific Radio struggles, co-founded of radio4all.org, which became the hub of the MRM, and the Micro Radio Network listserv, another key venue of MRM activity.<sup>1</sup> Second, activists involved with groups such as Food Not Bombs (feeding the poor and homeless) and EarthFirst! (direct action environmentalism) began exploring the possibilities of using radio as a community organizing tool (Edmondson, 2000; Tashtego, 1998). Micro Radio also made compelling economic sense. Print newspaper print runs could cost a thousand dollars or more, are limited to

a literate English readership, and must be physically distributed. A micro radio station could be put on the air for the same amount of money or less, requires no literacy skills, and can broadcast up-to-date information 24/7.

Stephen Dunifer and his high profile federal court battle with the FCC were considered the flash point for the emergence of micro radio as a broader movement. Like Kantako, Dunifer was a long time activist. His electronics skills allowed him to use radio as an organizing and protest tool in local land use and conflicts at KPFA, the flagship station of the Pacifica Radio Network. Ultimately, it was media coverage of the first gulf war in 1990 that set on a path to challenge the medias status quo. In 1993, Dunifer, with the help of other activists, put Free Radio Berkeley on the air as an act of electronic civil disobedience (Coopman, 2000b; Walker, 2001).

The overt plan by early radio activists was to “let a 1000 transmitters bloom” (in Dunifer’s words) (Coopman, 2000b, Background, para 4) and put as many radio stations on the air as possible. This would overwhelm the FCC’s ability to shut them down and result in a forced accommodation of stations operating on open frequencies either through tolerance of their violations or policy. For Dunifer and other micro broadcasters, a broadcasting license was perceived as a contract with the government that gave it unacceptable power over a station. The concept of regulation and dissent co-existing was operationally and philosophically problematic for many micro radio activists. Hamilton (2000, 2004) noted this in his critique of the new Low Power FM Service that emerged from the micro radio movement. He marked the new service a failure because of the incompatibility between government regulation and dissent. The relatively small size of the FCC and widely inconsistent enforcement of broadcast regulations on unlicensed stations provided the rationale for the MRM activists’ strategy (Coopman, 1999; Jones, 1988; Phipps, 1991; Yoder, 1990). This wholesale rejection of the existing media system

as dysfunctional, the regulatory system as illegitimate, and the potential for the construction of a parallel autonomous system formed the foundation for the initial conceptualization of a dissent network.

Early micro radio stations rallied around the call to free the airwaves from corporate control. This extended to public radio, which was increasingly dependent on corporate sponsorship. As community activists, they saw themselves as building media to empower under-represented peoples. Stations offered radical critiques of local policies such as San Francisco's Matrix program against the homeless (San Francisco Liberation Radio), programming on a wide variety of topics from EarthFirst! Radio News' radical environmentalism (Free Radio Santa Cruz), and safe sex tips from The Condom Lady (Radio Mutiny, Philadelphia).

The Committee for Democratic Communication (CDC)<sup>2</sup> had by 1993 prepared to challenge the prohibition on Low Power Radio based on the excessive costs of obtaining a license (National Lawyers Guild, 1992).<sup>3</sup> The CDC found Dunifer and together they developed a three-pronged strategy. First, Dunifer's high profile station would get him cited and into court. Second, they would launch a coordinated effort to get other activists across the country to also engage in acts of electronic civil disobedience. Finally, these activities would put pressure on the FCC to publicly justify its regulatory scheme (Coopman, 2000a). If the regulatory system were ruled invalid, it would open space for an alternative system. This highlights a certain disconnect between the CDC and Dunifer. The CDC was looking at liberalizing existing broadcasting regulations to create equity in awarding licenses. Dunifer was looking for the invalidation of the FCC's right to regulate small-scale non-commercial broadcasting, to create a large national scale system of community radio stations that would be politically and physically impossible to shutdown, or both.

The FCC cited Dunifer in 1993 and the case went to the 9<sup>th</sup> Federal District Court in January 1995. To everyone's surprise, Judge Wilken refused to order an injunction ruling there were potential Constitutional issues, no compelling evidence of interference, and irreparable harm had not been proven to her satisfaction. Although ultimately Wilken would rule in favor of the FCC and order Dunifer off the air in 1998,<sup>4</sup> the 1995 decision would provide an opening for the MRM to expand (Coopman, 2000a). The Wilken decision provoked FCC lead council Silberman to ominously (and accurately) warn it would "open up a can of worms." The following years showed a marked increase in micro radio activity not only from radical activists but also from churches, immigrant and minority populations, and community groups. For example, Excellent Radio was a community station that grew out of an art project in Groves Beach, CA, The Excellent Center for Art and Culture. In March 1995 the group went on the air with a reserve transmitter borrowed from a local NPR affiliate. In an odd twist, shortly thereafter a major storm put every other radio station in the area off the air. This left Excellent Radio as the sole source for local news and information. The NPR affiliate soon wanted its transmitter back. After a short time off the air, Excellent Radio reappeared with its own transmitter obtained through contacts in the MRM. Unfortunately, the eventual defeat of Dunifer in Federal Court and a letter from the FCC forced the station off the air for good in June 1998 (Walker, 2001).

### *Mainstreaming the Movement*

Micro radio tapped into a long simmering frustration with the state of local media (Brinson, 2006). The Dunifer case provided a focal point that attracted a variety of participants who saw the potential of radio for building community and/or perceived the existing media system as corrupt and saw the MRM as a way to address their concerns. This general discontent allowed the MRM to move from its anarchist-activist base to a wider constituency. However,

the movement's popularization facilitated its transition from an insurgent project to develop media outside the sphere of government and corporate control to a more traditional reform effort to modify existing regulations to allow for more small community media outlets. The new participants did not share the movement's founders' antipathy toward authority in general and government regulation in particular. This would ultimately leave the MRM susceptible to participants who were more concerned about their own ability to broadcast than a broader ideological stand.

The conflict between radio activists and the FCC escalated in 1998 with the rejection of the Dunifer challenge. Between 1997 and 1998, the FCC raided 44 radio stations (Anderson, 2003); however, the FCC claimed to have shut down, either through warnings or equipment seizures, over 250 radio stations in 1998 alone. In that year, the FCC estimated that there were 300-1000 unlicensed radio stations in operation (Curtius, 1998). Although some stations the FCC shut down were quickly back on the air, the Dunifer loss and the specter of armed federal marshals raiding a station forced many new participants off the air. Chased from the air, but still intrigued by the potential of radio, church and community groups were primed for a less radical alternative. A faction with its own agenda for legal "mom and pop" commercial radio, The Amherst Alliance, filed rule-making petitions with the FCC to create a low power FM service. To everyone's surprise, the Commission agreed to open a LPFM rulemaking. Previously, the majority of MRM members had resisted acknowledging the FCC's licensing and regulatory authority. The Dunifer case had challenged the legitimacy of the regulatory scheme. Faced with the potential that a new regulatory scheme that would potentially endanger the frequencies used by unlicensed stations and consolidate control over the remaining open spectrum, movement participants were forced to engage in the rule-making process.<sup>5</sup> This undermined the



revolutionary aspects of the movement and led to the fragmentation of the dissent network and its retraction into a more underground or submerged network (Melucci, 1996).

With the rulemaking's initiation in late 1999, the MRM's focus shifted from insurrection to policy-making. The network that was painstakingly built to support stations provided an ideal network for organizing and lobbying. The MRM network had greatly matured and reached a level of organization that made nationwide coordination possible. Participants within this infrastructure quickly became concerned with drafting rules palatable to participants and regulators, as well as outmaneuvering adversaries such as the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) and NPR. The FCC created draft rules with the input of activists across the nation. Academics and lobbyists, including Michael Bracy of Washington Lobbying firm Bracy, Tucker, Brown, & Valanzano, formed the Media Empowerment Coalition and organizations like the Media Access Project became involved in the lobbying effort. Integrating the points of agreement among factions, I compiled and drafted a Joint Statement on Micro Power Radio (Coopman, 2007). This shift in energy marked the effective collapse of the MRM dissent network, illustrating a weakness in the more ad hoc and self-organizing mode of such dissent networks. These dynamic networks are susceptible to cooptation by more mainstream organizations, transforming a dissent network into a traditional reformist social movement. This appears to be particularly true in cases involving highly regulated activities such as broadcasting. Thus, the MRM tapped into a pre-existing consensus among a distributed segment of the population that the current media were not functioning in the group's best interests or meeting their needs. The MRM also served to inform the public about the mainstream media system and restrictions on access, which while clearly defined in law and practice, conflicted with the general notions of what constitutes a free press. These latent feelings<sup>6</sup> were strong enough to

support the MRM's challenge of federal authority and create an opportunity for sympathetic elements within the FCC and Congress to take action to reform the system (Opel, 2004; Stavitsky, Avery, & Vanhala, 2001). This strategy, where sympathetic elected and appointed government officials are provided with cover to act on reforms and challenge the status quo, is more typical of traditional social movements tactics in influencing policy decisions.

The typical reaction to perceptions of injustice or status quo inadequacies is collective action involving protest and the petitioning authority for redress (McAdam, 1982). Similarly, a consensus on system failure provides the initial impetus for dissent network formation. However, dissent networks respond by presenting an alternative system independent of authority to address issues. The Dunifer court challenge was a tactical move to degrade the FCC's ability to enforce broadcasting regulation; a move widely expected by both the nascent MRM and the FCC to fail. The primary purpose of the Dunifer case was to leverage the courts to destabilize the system and thus allow an opportunity for the number of micro stations to proliferate. The window of opportunity created by Wilken's initial resistance to the injunction allowed participants to mobilize and expand the number of stations and support for the movement. Much of this was done through accessing existing networks of activists and leveraging new communication technology to expand the scope of the MRM.

In the case of the MRM, the dissent network effect of consensus on system failure and the drive to create an alternative system energized the movement such that it became a threat to the regulatory established regime. At that point, more traditional forces both inside and outside government invested in the maintenance of the status quo moved to discipline the insurgency and harness it for pushing their reform agendas or blunting the MRM's ability to disrupt a system in which they were heavily invested. The consensus aspect of dissent network formation may have

utility in explaining early stages of traditionally focused collective action. The possibility of this type of transition point, observed in the MRM, in the formation of other social movements has implications for understanding their early stages.

### *Relational Density*

Relational density is another dissent network characteristic. Network coherency is the primary factor in assessing relational density. Moreover, relational density assesses if dense, complex, and interlocking relationships develop between participants. The development of relational networks is also a characteristic of traditional social movements (McAdam, 1982). In a dissent network, relational density refers to smaller homogeneous networks linking into larger more heterogeneous networks. In the case of micro radio, the development of relational density began with pre-existing activist social networks within specific geographic areas. Stations emerged from community activist groups in New York City (Steal this Radio), Philadelphia (Radio Mutiny), Boston (Free Radio Alston), and Austin (Free Radio Austin), as well individual political agitators in Cleveland (GRID Radio), San Marcos, TX (uKind), and Florida (Loni Kobres and Brewer's "Party Pirate"), among others. Transient activists, students, and squatters and eventually the establishment of websites and listservs brought these different sub-networks together.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, like other regions, activist communities often overlapped. Early micro radio activists exchanged program tapes, equipment, and expertise. Eventually digital networks facilitated membership in multiple communities of practice. These digital networks also allowed participants to act as informational and relational brokers to form bridges between groups that might not ordinarily align (Diani, 2003; Tarrow, 1998).

### *Leveraging Existing Networks*

Relational density facilitates a robust network structure comprised of official and ad hoc communication channels. Early attempts at using listservs depended on using those developed by existing organizations such as RockRap Confidential and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The pirate shortwave community began to take notice of the rise in FM activity and featured it on sites like Bry's Pirate Radio and Hockey Pages and the ACE (Association of Clandestine Enthusiasts) newsletter. Activists who were battling with Pacifica Radio<sup>7</sup> management (specifically KPFA in Berkeley) over worker control embraced the nascent movement. Lyn Gerry and Sean Ewald developed Radio4all, a largely hypertext indexing website, in 1996 as well as the Micro Radio Network (MRN) listserv in 1998. The Free Radio Network (FRN) began as a Bulletin Board (BBS) dedicated to pirate and shortwave radio, transitioning to the web in 1998 and hosting the "Grapevine" conversation forum. The About.com (formerly the Mining Company) Pirate/Free Radio Page established in 1997 by John Anderson also became a major resource for information and an access point for the movement. The Association of Micro Power Broadcasters (AMPB) newsletter evolved from a photocopied Zine to a combined list of email addresses gathered by Paul Griffin of Free Radio Berkeley at various gatherings. As the general online presence and press coverage increased, a wider variety of participants became aware of the network. This process began to link homogeneous nodes and sub-networks into a larger heterogeneous movement. The participation of activists from across the country, such as Kind Micro Radio in Texas, BEAT radio in Minneapolis, and Free Radio Allston in Boston, Radio Mutiny in Philadelphia, and the Party Pirate in Tampa introduced new perspectives to the movement. Overall, the network's distributed structure made it proactive and dynamic, thus able to respond and cooperate in novel ways. This cooperation was evidenced by

solidarity, operational techniques and technical assistance, sharing of program content and sometimes supplying replacement gear after an FCC raid.

### *Relational Networks Expand*

The inclusion of churches, community groups, and affiliated allies increased the MRM's dimensionality. Some MRM participants also acted as important brokers to existing organizations. Jesse Walker, an editor at the Libertarian *Reason* magazine, was a regular listserv participant and agitator often in conflict with Dunifer and other MRM regulars for his left libertarian and free market ideology. Moreover, his connection with the Cato Institute and other libertarian think tanks provided exposure for the movement and its goals. Despite overlaps in their views of authority and the role of government, Walker's libertarian ideology often clashed with movement anarchists' on a variety of issues. Walker's willingness to take and give verbal abuse in these debates and the unwillingness of the MRN listserv administrators to limit participation based on ideology blunted groupthink. The openness of a dissent network and its distributed nature allows for the inclusion of dissenting voices that enable other participants in expressing doubts over strategies. Combining this openness with the asynchronous nature of online deliberation and discussion fosters heterogeneity in the network (Hobman, Bordia, and Irmer, 2002; Postmes, Spears, and Lea, 2000; Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997; van Dijk, 1996). For example, Walker would inject ideas and opinions into the listserv discussions that opponents ignored, but other participants would support. They, in turn, would re-introduce these ideas back into the discussion. In this way, dissenting voices influenced broader discussions.

Much of the MRM's post-rulemaking success can be attributed to the early relational networks (Brinson, 2006; Opel, 2004). The MRM's communication infrastructure fostered nationwide campaigns, such as the drive to obtain statements of support from city councils for

local unlicensed stations and comments for the eventual FCC rule-making. The Joint Statement of Micro Radio, which integrated overlapping positions from multiple factions, was negotiated from a position I had established in the MRM. My reputation as a broker with no set factional alliances provided me with a standing in multiple groups that allowed me to leverage relationships to gain cooperation (Opel, 2004).

The MRM's loose boundaries and openness facilitated the dilution and moderation of the more radical founders' positions and tactics. Unlike traditional Leninist movements, movement intellectuals and founders were unable to discipline other movement members. Thus, the large numbers of new entrants and those activated by the movement but not directly connected to its founders or history were able to shift the focus from rebellion to a reform. While a loosely organized and emergent dissent network is prone to cooptation by more traditional social movement processes, the early establishment of dense rational networks can carry over and enhance the organizational ability of the more traditional collective action. However, once the movement has achieved a more moderate reformist goal, in this case the establishment of a weakened and limited LPFM service under government control, much of the supporting infrastructure and relational networks collapsed. This collapse was due to the undermining of coalition solidarity by creating winners and losers, submission to a regulatory process outside the participants' control, and shifting resources into expensive and time consuming lobbying campaigns controlled by established organizations and those with the required policy expertise and connections.

The MRM founders, mainly anarchist/libertarian activists, were denied licenses for past illegal activities,<sup>8</sup> effectively marginalizing this group from the movement. The founders' ability to continue broadcasting suffered with the loss of the collective cover afforded by the larger and

more diverse movement. With a so-called viable legal option to broadcast, any legal pleadings or calls for local support were greatly weakened in all but the most progressive locales.<sup>9</sup> The Amherst Alliance petitioners were also eliminated when the FCC decided to create a solely non-commercial service. The Amherst Alliance shifted their energies to lobbying for Low Power AM and other initiatives. Most large market urban stations were disenfranchised when Congress intervened and limited the LPFM service's (H.R. 3439, Radio Broadcasting Preservation Act of 2000) available frequencies.<sup>10</sup> Many groups turned their efforts to lobbying for more channels or web-based media. However, many others simply disbanded. Once the LPFM service was authorized established groups with policy expertise such as Free Press or the Media Access Project dominated the discussion. Focus shifted to issues like media consolidation and open access to networks and away from the expansion of LPFM or liberalization of broadcastings regulations.<sup>11</sup> The development of relational density fostered the expansion and sustained the MRM during its battles with the FCC and the subsequent effort to create a LPFM. The movement fragmented and the remains absorbed into the broader media democracy/reform movement, Indymedia, and other web-based projects.

While relational networks form the core of social movements, the reach and ease of use afforded by access to ICTs facilitates a diversity of participation that is simultaneously a strength and weakness in the development of alternative structures. The specific gravity of existing regimes and modes of action is strong and provides a compelling rationale for accommodation. This is further fueled by the inclusion of comparatively mainstream and traditionally structured resource-rich organizations either directly or through overlapping memberships. The threat of financial or legal sanctions further accelerates accommodation. However, relational density enhanced by ICTs can withstand the collapse of the larger dissent network by transitioning into

pre-existing networks or evolving into new sub-networks. The relative ease of maintaining these sub-networks and the potential for aggregating into new dissent networks has implications for broader political processes. Moreover, the diffusion of dissent network sub-networks as well as the ability of participants to maintain the benefits of affinity and affiliation may prove more challenging to existing regimes of control than the initial dissent network. The residual transversal effect of relational structures, organizational intelligence, and history of successes persist and form potential avenues for future action (Bleiker, 2001).

### *Process and Resource Sharing*

Despite its distributed nature, a dissent network functions through its ability to collapse mobilization and latency into one process. That is, the building of the movement and the mobilization of the movement to take action largely meld into a process called resource sharing. Member participation facilitates identity building, socializes participants, and develops best practices through direct action, resource sharing, and detail to organizational process. A dissent network involves perpetual mobilization in which participants construct and maintain an alternative structure. For the MRM, the ability for many stations to get on the air stemmed directly from MRM members providing technical and tactical support.

Proposed collective responses to FCC and NAB actions were varied, depending on resources and interest. FCC written warnings or actual raids and equipment seizures drew the biggest responses. Cash or equipment donations, referrals to legal help, and solidarity were the most common responses and became more sophisticated and organized over time with the founding of a secure listserv for sympathetic lawyers and the Micro Radio Bust Network for announcements and quick responses.



The early MRM was a resource sharing collectivist endeavor. Much of the movement's energy focused on the rigors of getting a station on the air and keeping it there. The primary foe was not the FCC but equipment failure, lack of funds, and locating friendly technicians. Resource poor activists were adept at raising funds and local bands were more than happy to support stations that were often their only outlets. The ethics and methods of fundraising were also debated, such as DJ dues (derisively called "fee radio" by Free Radio Austin members) or underwriting and sponsorships. The strict anti-capitalist stance versus supporting local progressive businesses and the need for cash were regularly discussed on MRN. Getting ideas for different fundraising techniques and securing equipment donations was a prime resource benefit of the network.

### *Resource Issues*

Resource issues impacted political and legal struggles. Interference with licensed broadcasters was for a time the preferred attack used against the MRM. Faulty equipment was often to blame, despite few documented instances of interference. Interference was more likely in areas outside the primary footprint of the full power licensed station<sup>12</sup> or in the immediate vicinity of the micro radio stations antenna. NPR affiliate KUSP in Santa Cruz contacted FRSC about such transmitter proximate interference and FRSC changing frequencies. Despite NAB propaganda about "irresponsible pirates," most micro radio stations actively avoided interference and anything else that would attract undue attention.<sup>13</sup> Still, the specter of interference was a powerful tool for MRM opponents. Alleged interference with ground-to-aircraft communications or the "planes falling from the sky" tactic threatened to undermine the movement, but investigative reporters aligned with the MRM found the fault was a long-running systemic deficiency with the ground-to-aircraft communication system. Moreover, interference from

licensed sources was more frequent and had been tolerated for years (Bilotta-Daily and Siska, 1999). The pooling of current and historical information on interference claims helped in efforts to defeat that argument against micro radio.

Troubleshooting existing problems and equipment recommendations were regular topics on MRN and other forums. Participants discussed complex strategies for deflecting or hiding signals from FCC surveillance and remotely linking transmitters to studios. However, the problems often were much more mundane, such as how to solder transmitter kit connections and strategies on how to get free or cheap gear.

### *Process and Organization*

Exchanging organizational philosophies and techniques, such as how to make decisions or structure a station, was a common theme on the MRN listserv, meet-ups, and conferences. As in many activist groups in the 1990s, the MRM was highly interested in process. The importance of a functional structure that still reflected the station members' philosophies and ideologies was clear to most participants, as were the consequences for failure. For example, Free Radio Gainesville (FL) contacted the MRN listserv for input on its own structure as well as a workshop the station was facilitating at the upcoming April 1998 East Coast Micropowered Radio Conference in Philadelphia. While listserv members agreed that consensus decision making was ideal, participants viewed this as a goal not easily attained. The lack of functional process at even high-profile stations like Free Radio Berkeley was cited as a reason for disengagement from a station and the movement. Resistance to organizational structure and equating structure with hierarchy also complicated establishing functional governance at the stations. Moreover, many station announcers avoided participation in governance and just focused on their own shows resulting in a small inner circle operating the station. However,

when a conflict arose charges of hierarchy or “power tripping” was often leveled. Stations adopted their own mediation systems with varying degrees of success. Conflicts often caused factionalism that led some collectives to collapse or splinter.

A dissent network’s organizational structure tends to replicate itself on the local, intermediate, and network wide levels. In the MRM’s case, many local level organizational and management issues confronted the movement as a whole. In a dissent network, governance falls to those willing and able to do specific work at a given moment. In contrast, more traditional leftist/Leninist movements are characterized by a vanguard naturally taking overall control. With a highly distributed movement such as dissent network, consensus and process are almost a fetish (Epstein, 2001) producing a natural tendency for “wholearchies”<sup>14</sup> composed of more traditional leaders or movement intellectuals to emerge (Eyerman & Jamison, 1992).

Wholearchies may cause conflicts and infighting, discouraging participation by current or future members, slow down necessary decision making, delaying critical actions, and driving out or alienating the most productive members. While the dynamism of highly flexible systems can create advantages over more traditionally organized and better-resourced opponents, the networks’ dynamic nature can cause internal problems that undercut their overall effectiveness.

The MRM dissent network combined mobilization and latency into one process. Adding stations built a larger movement, increased resources and expertise, and formed the core of its mobilization. This organizational integration process actualized the movement’s goals by creating an alternative media infrastructure. Expanding stations’ infrastructures also served to overburden already-stretched FCC resources, reducing the potential for a raid on a given station.

The MRM’s transition from a dissent network focused on expanding the number of stations and supporting existing outlets to a more traditional effort of reforming existing media

regulation and law brought with it a need for legal experts rather than technical ones. In the movement's early stages, the Do-it-yourself (DIY) nuts and bolts operation of stations and production of content formed the latency/mobilization bridge. The need to interface with the FCC, navigate regulations, media law, and the legislative process required different techniques, knowledge, and skills that most movement participants did not possess. These are the traditional barriers to citizen participation in the media regulation process. The MRM's center of control shifted to those with experience and investment in the existing regime. Distributed participation and involvement were curtailed breaking the latency/mobilization link and fostered the collapse of the dissent network.

The continuous integration of mobilization and latency fosters the development and maintenance of the MRM dissent network. However, this level of integration and action would not have been possible with the introduction of accessible digital networks.

#### *Centrality of Digital Networks*

At the core of the dissent networks typology is the creation of social bonds via the centrality of digital networks. The development of new media technologies and digital networks facilitates the ability to project power over wider areas, greatly reducing the need for a traditional organizational structure and physical infrastructure, and lowering transaction costs (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Flanagin & Stohl, 2005). Moreover, the ease of access to these networks greatly reduces the need for physical co-location to reinforce interest and participation (Tarrow, 1998). Through email, listservs, and web access individuals and groups have the ability to discover, participate, and add resources to the network. Every new member is a node that connects the network with that node's pre-existing associates. For example, Tom Ness' interest in micro radio created a bridge between the MRM and the local

music promoting Michigan Music is World Class! Campaign. Ness linked the MRM's and local music fans goals. Digital networks allow for functionality without the drawbacks of centralized process and resource control. MRM participants could coordinate individually or with groups as needed based on mutually advantageous agendas and resources. General solidarity can be maintained with direct involvement or validation by other nodes in the network. The removal of one node, such as an organization, station, or individual, could not collapse the network.<sup>15</sup> Finally, these networks allow for greater flexibility and adaptability to local environments and can overcome coordination and organizational issues for widely distributed national or global groups.

### *Early Adoption*

Early use of ICTs by micro radio activists roughly followed early adopters in the creation of web browsers and use email in the early to mid 1990s. Pre-existing networks and online resources hosted initial organizing efforts. Meet-ups such as the first micro radio conferences in Oakland and San Jose, CA, in 1996 provided opportunities for participants to gather email addresses for mass mailing lists. Another example of early adoption of online technology was the Association of Micro Power Broadcasters (AMPB) newsletter developed by Paul Griffin of Free Radio Berkeley beginning in 1994. The AMPB newsletter transitioned from paper to mass emailing and finally to regular listserv postings (Coopman, 2000). Still, communication using mass emails was cumbersome and introduced a variety of logistical issues for dialogue and user errors. While effective for announcements, mass emailing did not foster regular communication within the movement. As the conflict with the FCC escalated, some tech-savvy participants created a listserv that greatly increased the effectiveness of the movement.

*Primary Nodes*

The Micro Radio Network listserv (MRN) came online in January 1998 after the legal setbacks in the Dunifer case<sup>16</sup> and the high off federal repression. As listserv co-founder Lyn Gerry stated in her first post to the listserv, “The list, it is hoped, will be a tool in assisting with organizing politically, legally and technically for our mutual defense against the current stepped up campaign of attacks by corporate media and their government allies” (Coopman, 2000b, The Micro Radio Network, para 1). MRN was a project of the Radio4all website, which was established in October 1996. The site originally was created in response to the reorganization of KPFA (Pacifica Radio Network). The staff purges at Pacifica sent experienced programmers to Free Radio Berkeley, bringing in participants with years of media and activist experience. Radio4all had already become a popular index and information site and MRN caught on immediately. Reflecting on that time, Lyn Gerry said, “I perceived that there was a need for a nexus of information, and expanded the site accordingly” (Coopman, 2000a, The Micro Radio Network para 2) The combination of the website and the new listserv increased traffic at the Radio4all site, which averaged 400 hits per day as of January 1998 (a total of approximately 1/2 million hits).<sup>17</sup> According to listserv operators, MRN had 119 subscribers as of August 1998. On average the listserv added 1 or 2 subscribers every week<sup>18</sup> and reached 200 subscribers in 2000. Knowledge of the listserv spread beyond the initial membership through personal relationships forged in other campaigns.

Radio4all also spawned the A Infos Radio Project, an early file-sharing site for radio programs. Debuting in October 1997, the site allowed programmers to upload content to share with others stations. This greatly increased the amount and quality of programming available to micro stations and helped forge links among participants with similar interests. Programs like

EarthFirst! Radio News as well special programs or reports from protests not only provided a variety of programming, but familiarized active participants with those from other parts of the country. The website also facilitated the wide distribution of information about the movement and its goals as the site was available to community and public radio stations free of charge. Financing came from appeals for direct donations via the website and listservs that serviced the alternative and non-profit radio community. In addition, those involved in the project were committed to downloading and sharing programs with those without Internet access. Bridging new and old media in this and similar ways commonly occurred in the MRM. Radio4all, MRN, and the A Infos Radio Project provide demonstrate how individuals leveraged digital networks to connect interpersonal and more traditional media with movement participants and disseminated movement goals. Leveraging digital networks also materially assisted in the creation and operation of micro radio stations, simultaneously facilitating mobilization and latency.

Another example was About.com Pirate/Free Radio<sup>19</sup> website. Radio journalist John Anderson developed this site into one of the primary information and networking site for the MRM. While its commercial nature raised the ire of some movement participants, Anderson's dedication, the site's resource utility, its status as part of larger network of sites on About.com, and the site's high production values and features lent legitimacy to the MRM. The Pirate/Free Radio formed an important gateway into the movement and a clearinghouse for pro-movement information. Through his journalistic skills, personal connections, press accounts, and FCC news releases, Anderson created an FCC Enforcement Database that tracked FCC activities. His detailed knowledge and participation in movement strategy discussions on MRN made him a key movement intellectual (Opel, 2004). This type of connectivity brought many central players into the movement from outside the founders' activist networks.

Beginning in 1997, MRM-related websites and listservs created a progressively more robust network that supported and expanded the movement as the conflict escalated in 1998-99. Increased FCC raids and seizures forced many stations to lower their local operational profile, but the electronic network connecting participants maintained solidarity and mutual aid. By 1999 the movement had extended into community groups and churches that petitioned local city councils for proclamations of support and generated negative local press when federal marshals shut down stations. The FCC, searching for a way to avoid the escalating public conflict, moved on the petitions to create a Low Power Radio Service. The development of digital infrastructure during the 1990s was a key element in the success of the MRM and later the creation of LPFM. The complex networks of websites, listservs, and personal contacts via email provided the structure that facilitated the formation of the MRM dissent network.

### Conclusion

The MRM brought together a wide variety of participants who shared the perception that the existing media system was not meeting their own needs, the needs of their communities, and the media's obligations in the general maintenance of democracy. The parallel development and popularization of the Internet provided the foundation for geographically dispersed groups and individuals to discover the MRM and participate. Moreover, the organizational advantages of comparatively fast and inexpensive communication allowed the movement to maximize scarce resources and coordinate on efforts in their struggle against the FCC and incumbent broadcasters. Radical activist technicians with both an interest in computers and radio helped propel free radio and the MRM into the Information Age (Coopman, 2000a, 2000c, Edmonson, 2000). Anarchist organizational strategies, inexpensive computing power, fast communication via email and



listservs, indexing websites, and audio compression that facilitated the sharing of content proved to be highly effective in promoting the movement. The efficiencies and economies of scale that fueled the dot com boom also enabled a small number of media activists with scant resources to launch and maintain a national movement that eventually altered America's communication policy (Coopman, 2000b, 2000c).

My study of and participation in the MRM illustrated to me the value and impact of digital networks and new communication technologies in aiding collective action against resource-rich opponents. At its core, the formulation of dissentworks theory resides in four fundamental practical impacts. First, digital communication networks and advances in computing greatly reduce costs to participants and increase their ability to meaningfully engage in collective action. Second, these networks allow participants to share resources, especially intellectual resources such as expertise, in a highly efficient manner, thus lowering the cost of collective action irrespective of physical distance or distribution. Third, the Internet's organizational infrastructure provides the basis for organizing a dissent network, reducing the need to develop an entirely new structure or to rely on outside institutions, which may have their own agendas, to provide it. Finally, these three factors interact to create opportunities for developing semi-autonomous structures that meet participants' needs and goals without depending on government or other institutions to actuate the group's demands.

The MRM reveals dissentworks theory's constituent elements. The movement began with a consensus among elements of the population that the current system was failing to meet community needs. The movement's formation centered on articulating the unmet need and creating a viable plan to address it. Over time, dense relational networks within and among pre-existing groups emerged, creating a heterogeneous network of homogeneous sub-networks and

nodes. The construction of movement identity (latency) and marshalling resources to take action (mobilization), become the same overall process. The act of member participation facilitates identity building, socializes participants, and fosters the development of best practices through direct action, resource sharing, and detail to organizational process. Finally, the digital networks prove central in building effective bonds necessary for the articulating a consensus on the system's failure, cultivating relational density through ease of interaction, and enmeshing latency and mobilization into one process. Dissent networks represent a shift into a new mode of collective action under the impact of pervasive digital communication networks.

While the MRM ultimately was co-opted by the regulatory system that it sought to escape, the creation of a LPFM service was closer to a coerced government validation of an existing emergent and insurgent regime than a petition for authorities to create relief for perceived wrongs or inadequacies in the status quo than its critics admit. That is, the MRM created a parallel nationwide network of small community FM stations and proved that those stations were operationally viable, that there was a demand for their services, and public interest in operating the stations. If such a system could exist ad hoc and extra-legally, than a sanctioned system would certainly be possible. Thus, the MRM provided proof of concept, not only for LPFM, but also for the ability of a distributed and under-resourced movement to challenge incumbent power and change the status quo within a highly regulated and controlled government-run system and in opposition to powerful political and economic forces.

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<sup>1</sup> KPFA has had problems over the years balancing its mostly volunteer community labor and professional management. This has led to numerous protests.

<sup>2</sup> The CDC is part of the National Lawyers Guild and focuses on issues of equitable access to all forms of communication, particularly electronic.

<sup>3</sup> It was originally prepared for Kantako who declined to be the test case (National Lawyers Guild, 1992; Shields & Ogles, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> It was ruled that Dunifer had no legal standing to challenge the FCC since he had never applied for a license, so the merits of the case were never heard.

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the fear by the FCC that the whole regulatory scheme might be invalidated in court was seen as a prime motivator in the acceptance of the LPFM petition.

<sup>6</sup> These same feeling reemerged in the fight over new media ownership rules in 2003 (McChesney, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> The Pacifica Radio Network is a listener supported non-profit FM radio network that consists of 5 stations (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Huston, Washington D.C., and New York City) established in the late 1940s. Clashes between the largely radical left volunteer announcers and the liberal management are perennial.

<sup>8</sup> This blanket prohibition was later overturned in *Ruggiero v. FCC* 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Free Radio Santa Cruz was raided in 2004 and local city council members turned out to protest the seizure and local police refused to assist the FCC. The result was the slashing of all FCC and Federal Marshall's vehicles tires as police stood nearby directly traffic.

<sup>10</sup> Limiting stations to first adjacent channels from the proposed first and second adjacent channels effectively eliminated any open frequencies in crowded large urban markets.

<sup>11</sup> This in spite of the Congressionally mandated study by Mitre that found that the use of second adjacent frequencies posed no interference threat, which also was the primary stated reason for restricting the LPFM service.

<sup>12</sup> The footprint of a station is the coverage area it is legally entitled to, although many stations want to protect areas that their signal reaches outside this protected area. The interference complaint against FRB was for an area outside the stations footprint.

<sup>13</sup> Nothing will draw an FCC visit faster than an interference complaint.

<sup>14</sup> A wholearchy is a naturally occurring power structure that ideally consists of a rotating roster of participants taking leadership roles that suits their interests, expertise, and availability. I first heard this term from Indymedia's Sheri Herndon.

<sup>15</sup> Although clearly some nodes have greater importance than others and would cause more disruption if they were eliminated.

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<sup>16</sup> The uncertainty caused by the Wilken decision in 1995 to not grant an injunction to shut down FRB ended in June 1998 when the FCC prevailed and FRB was enjoined from broadcasting.

<sup>17</sup> According to Lyn Gerry, she did not have the ability to measure website traffic before January 1998. It was her estimation that it had increased traffic (personal communication, August 17, 1998 and March 12, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Subscribers do not accurately reflect the number of participants. At this stage of the development of the Internet access was more limited and often (usually poor) activists shared accounts. For example, all members of the Free Radio Cascadia (OR) collective used the same account and name (thuja) when posting.

<sup>19</sup> About.com (previously the Mining Company) was started in 1997 with the concept of giving volunteer guides (lay experts and hobbyists) web space and minimal stipends to construct information archives to compete with the periods rudimentary search engines.