

Feminist Grassroots Media in Europe: An anthology

Women's Voices in Public

Contribution from the 'imMEDIATE' project

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Historically, when the audio and visual media were in their early days, women were excluded, particularly from programmes such as news and current affairs because they were not considered to be authoritative enough to present more serious topics. And there were few European women broadcasters until the 1960s and 70s.¹ This reflected a view in the wider society that was supported by many women at that time. The situation is still slow to change, in spite of the increased presence of women in the mainstream media. There is still much to take issue with regarding the content of programmes, for example, with the choices made by mainstream editors, who tend to present the news from a male perspective. Yet in this context it is important to see that with the new opportunities opening up in both internet and community media, we see the beginning of an alternative way of dealing with the world and presenting it from the women's perspective.

Mainstream radio, public broadcasting and commercial, does not reflect feminist thought. But the possibility is there now for feminist women to counteract that, use radio to spread their philosophies and allow women's voices to emerge.

The traditional gender stereotyping of 'deaf men' and 'chatty women' can be challenged. Radio can talk back and object to the dominance of the culture of writing and the image. That means, on the one hand, that it refers to "oral history" and, on the other hand, it can escape from the productions of sexualized images.

Radio enables women to practice with and raise their public voices. Almost every woman knows how problematic it can be to overcome the fear of talking in public places. Within an alternative and supportive environment women can develop their skills and thoughts and prepare themselves to speak to the world. Free radio, in that sense, can provide a protected space to articulate women's voices, to formulate their demands and to make them heard.

In addition to the female voice, there is a feminist perspective on all subjects which needs to be aired. When talking in public, it is not only to defend our position or to complain about something, it is rather to display our successes and achievements and make these more visible. Many countries have yet to change the legislation to bring legal equality to women, and especially in these places radio can offer the hope of subversive acts that will lead to change.

¹ In Spain, for example, no women worked as a correspondent on TV before 1948, because a woman's voice was considered to be 'untrue'.

The imMEDIAtE project

The imMEDIAtE project is a partnership between four small independent European organisations funded by the EU. The European Commission supports actions in adult education and lifelong learning through the Grundtvig Programme.

imMEDIAtE is a joint project of three radio makers from Vienna, Madrid and London and one feminist education collective based in Vienna.² The main aim is for the network to come together to reflect on the current situation and to take action in three ways: the development of concepts of anti-sexist media work, the accumulation of experiences with continuing education programs for women in the field of radio and the exchange of feminist political agendas, theoretical and in practice. These activities simultaneously function as political consciousness-raising within the group and by dissemination, to the wider groups of women who benefit from the training programmes in each country.

The idea is to bring the outputs back into the radio stations and organisations working in community radio in our respective countries. This would be done in combination with training through the exchange of new approaches to training women in media.

Radio ORANGE (Vienna), the lead partner of imMEDIAtE was founded in 1994. The intention was to target the monopoly of the state broadcaster. Up to that point, no private, commercial or community radio was allowed in Austria, which was quite late compared to other countries. ORANGE was one of several organisations to bring this case to the High Court. The outcome was that court forced the government to change the law and make it legally possible to run a private radio station. ORANGE successfully applied for a license 1998, and from then on has run a non-commercial free radio station. Originally this was run by volunteers, and a lot of work is still voluntary, but funding is now given at national level and a modest amount comes from the City of Vienna, which for the past five years has paid for the core cost of staff and basic radio infrastructure. The station is non commercial and has to be on air twenty four hours a day providing open access for diverse groups.

The European Union supported it from the early days in funding international co-

² At its conception, the original project would have included partners from eastern Europe. Yet Grundtvig is organised on a national level and the applications of the colleagues have not been successful. We are very sorry about that.

operation. After the political shift to the right in Austria in 2000, when such media projects were starved of funds, the EU money saved the day and ORANGE would not be able to continue without it. <http://o94.at>

The Women's Radio Group is a training organisation based in London and is a registered charity. It has been running radio production courses and workshops, both technical and creative, since the early 1990s. The WRG has always been open to women from all backgrounds, though in practice this group was self-selecting, and the social networking meetings perhaps reinforced the group stereotype of capable confident middle class women. Nowadays there is the active encouragement of diverse groups. The government was keen to improve the prospects of women from disadvantaged groups, including migrants, refugees and those living in poverty and WRG initiated a number of new training which were designed to include women who had previously been excluded, albeit self-exclusion, from the training. With the growth of community radio in the UK over the last six years there is awareness of the usefulness of broadcasting – local and online – as a tool for 'social gain'. Simultaneously, the concept of lifelong learning and the development of a formal national framework for qualifications encouraged independent training organizations to contribute to the improvement of digital literacy. It is within this context that the current activities for women have developed. The organisation provides accredited training through the Open College Network as well as online broadcasting opportunities to the general membership. www.womeninradio.org.uk

Nosotras en el Mundo is the women's area of Radio Vallekas, a community radio station with a history going back twenty two years. The station is located in Vallekas, a southern neighbourhood of Madrid, which is a working and migrant area. In the 1960s this suburb was very powerful because of the rich cultural, youth and neighbourhood associations which were fighting for many rights. Radio Vallekas made it possible for people in this community to access and express themselves through radio and also gives tools for participation to many excluded collectives.

For fifteen years now, Radio Vallekas has been working with public funds in different social projects and it is recognized as a community agent for local development. In spite of this financial support the radio station does not hold a broadcasting license. From the legal point of view, it does not exist. Presently many other community radios across Spain are claiming the same legal status that commercial and public media have. They believe they have to be recognized

as part of what is called the Communication Third Sector.

In 2000, the Women's Area of Radio Vallekas was created, broadcasting a daily programme called "Nosotras en el Mundo". It is a multicultural women's group who are producers, broadcasters and trainers. The main goals are: to produce a daily programme to be a channel for women's voices and also to strengthen networks with the feminist movement; to train women in radio and gender issues; to develop a Women's Area as a gender communication project. www.radiovallekas.org

Frauenhetz (Feminist Education, Culture and Politics) is an autonomous centre in Vienna organised by and for women, founded in 1991 and is a voluntary not-for-profit association. The main aim is feminist political education which calls for a space for thinking that interlinks women's knowledge, experiences and positions, self-reflections and criticism. The Collective strives to connect education with interventions that seek to destabilize static gender contracts and dependency relationships. Feminist politics are participatory and entail self-determined involvement in matters relating to public life. They constitute critical voices regarding the factual socio-political constraints. Frauenhetz seeks to strengthen debates among women and is a place that links political discussions and agency with feminist theories and political practices of resistance. The organization works to reduce the impoverishment, marginalization and exploitation of women. It aims to instigate the acknowledgement of women and the differences among them.

The Frauenhetz role within imMEDIAtE was to reinforce concepts of feminist education, methods of self-evaluation and history of political thoughts. www.frauenhetz.at

Role and significance of radio for feminist media activists

Not only western history is characterized by the exclusion of women from the public. This is, however, particularly relevant since democracy is associated with participation in public, i.e. all communal matters. The troublesome history of women's suffrage, the right to vote, is well known; the less evident fact is, however, that beyond the rhetoric of gender equality women had and have no public voice. If you listen carefully, it becomes clear that the public sphere is dominated by male voices and their female ambassadors (the news, talk shows). The representation of general matters in the political, economic, and cultural spheres – with some exceptions – still comes from the lips of men. When the right to vote means the right of co-determination, it only affects the male elite that

structurally excludes everyone who they do not recognize as one of their own. In that sense women are voice-less.

Traditionally, the public sphere of women has always been secret, modest and familial and thus part of the private sphere. Feminist publicity aims at 'translating' the private into the public sphere in order to make these so-called 'women's issues' heard and addressed. This makes it not only transgress the dichotomy between public and private, but also claim the power and right to articulate experiences which have been socially excluded from the dominant discourse, thus implicitly criticising the male domination of all institutions, including language. This means that we are not only speaking of a counter-public, but also of a pluralisation of the public sphere.³

Diverse experiences of feminist radio stations in Europe and globally show the power of radio to spread feminist knowledge, to amplify the voice of women's organisations and to be a tool for dissent against the mass media, which often represents women as sexual objects or as passive victims of any kind of violence. The Feminist movement has struggled to get sexual, labour and political rights for women. It is becoming stronger and has an additional purpose – to include the right of communication for women in the feminist field.

The Women's Area of Radio Vallekas is a distribution channel for women's organisations, feminist concerns, specialist and gender research, emphasizing women's views in all those topics. This copyleft programme is broadcast on four other community radios in Madrid and also available on several websites.⁴ There is collaboration with other women's groups in community radio in Madrid and other parts of Spain and exchanges with journalists in the mass media to share feminist perspectives. Additionally this radio programme has created networks of women in media in Latin America and Mediterranean countries and e.g. created a Centre of Gender and Communication in Corduba in Argentina⁵.

³ Hannah Arendt (in *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed. 1998) says that the public sphere is literally, the political sphere. It differs from the private, the sphere of the necessities of survival, the family and identity politics. The public sphere is ideally characterized by plurality, the voices of many, the articulation of differences – with the goal to shape the world together. Only the appearance in public turns the individual into an acting subject who by participating and taking part is either rejected or accepted but who is, in any case, noticed. According to this meaning, the public space is the expression and the goal of democracy.

⁴ www.radiovallekas.org , www.radioenlace.org , www.radioalmenara.net, www.omcradio.org, www.urcm.net

The Women's Area is also a space for feminist reflection and experimentation with non-sexist communication; it has supported women's organisations at local, national and international levels, for example, the Spanish campaign to get better abortion legislation. It has given a voice to the full range of diversity of women, irrespective of race, age or sexual orientation. The team is currently training women in radio skills to raise their self-esteem and empower them by building their capacity. One of the goals is increasing women's participation in radio through their own radio programmes and by collaborating with this women's area. Also workshops are offered to women's associations on a local level in order to plan their strategies of communication and to introduce the gender perspective.

On the other hand the organization has been part of an international workshop of gender and new technology in Nicaragua (Mujeres en conexión) and in Mexico working with the women's network of AMARC⁶ in Latin America and the Caribbean. Moreover, in the north of Morocco the Women's Area has worked with women through different activities.

Experiences like that of Radio Vallekas draw a panorama where the community and free radio are not only channels for information, but can also become channels for feminist militancy and political participation.

Women generally are aware that there are few experiences across Europe and other regions and many difficulties about resources, free time and combating a sexist environment in community radio. Also women's organizations are not able to take advantage of all kinds of media to strengthen their actions, amplify their voices and spread feminist knowledge. Women's organizations are often not considered important enough to be invited onto programmes as commentators, which serves to reinforce gender discrimination. Another factor is the consequence of mass media showing a negative stereotype of feminist women.

The world situation of the digital literacy gap (affecting mostly women) is the third worry after poverty and gender violence and appears as an important challenge for the international programmes of the United Nations for Development and Gender. But governments and the European Commission do not seem to support women's media in spite of their political gender or equality laws and the European recommendations that ask for changes in the representation of women in the media, including sexist advertising that is damaging to the dignity of

⁵ www.rednosotrasenelmundo.org

⁶ World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters

women.

Community media is an important opportunity for women to get the right of communication and this right has to be included in the feminist political agenda, at the same time the feminist movement has to relate to community radio. Women can build a non sexist media, working with the language and the commitment to equal rights and the improvement of women's access to media. This becomes more possible for larger numbers of women if they can be given the opportunity to develop appropriate skills. This does not mean only the use of equipment and knowledge of journalistic processes. The precondition is that alongside the specific skills should be the encouragement of self-knowledge, self-confidence and self-consciousness.

Training projects for women from diverse backgrounds

For this process of awareness to happen it is important to be able to take people seriously as they are, to motivate and to lead them through a process which combines the topic of the training, the socio-dynamic of the group and the individual needs. The aim of such an access is to enable the participants to reach another level of self-esteem on the one hand and self-reflection on the other. If a critical view of society can be encouraged then a perspective that things can be changed becomes possible.

It is within this context that the current training opportunities for women have been developed by Women's Radio Group in London. Within a supportive, safe environment it becomes easier for women to engage with one another, exchange and develop ideas. It can broaden horizons and is often a catalyst for the change of unsatisfactory circumstances.

The main training project since 2007 has been PEARLS⁷, which is a fully funded twelve week course, running three times a year at the Panjabi Centre in west London⁸. It is an accredited course covering radio production and IT skills. The training is free to women who meet the admissions criteria. Tuition is provided at

⁷ PEARLS is an anagram for Panjabi and Ethnic Entrants Acquiring Radio Learning Skills. It is a joint initiative, the Panjabi Centre being the lead partner in obtaining funding for three years from the London Development Agency. The WRG is contracted to deliver the training.

⁸ The Panjabi Centre in Southall is where one of most successful community radio stations, Desi radio, is based. The WRG has a long history of cooperating with the organisation to deliver training to women there. The women attending the courses are from many different communities, not exclusively Panjabi.

multiple levels, with some people needing to build very basic computing skills and others able to focus on the journalistic.

Women who take advantage of the radio production courses are from many diverse backgrounds. The acquisition of practical skills is the obvious advantage for all of them. In order to meet the admission criteria for free courses the funders are most interested in supporting women who are perceived to be most in need - vulnerable, disadvantaged or isolated. This makes it imperative to reach out to marginalised communities and include those women in the training programmes. Obviously it is not accurate to describe all women admitted to the course as “disadvantaged”, nor is this label helpful during the training, but the ability to offer free training has widened participation amongst women who might previously not have considered media literacy to be a possibility. Some women are unemployed and have had a poor experience of education. Others might be well educated, but newcomers to the country, with English as a second language. Others are searching for new directions in their work. Tutors cater for the needs of each individual. Childcare or elderly relative care is paid for, as are travel expenses. The most interesting work is uploaded to the course website, so each woman has a public space in which to promote herself.

Learners get to grips with sound recording and digital editing technology (often a male domain) in a relaxed and encouraging environment, working at their own speed. All these skills help to build personal confidence, but they are also hard skills that will help trainees to get jobs and earn money. Besides that the important benefit is that the women hear one another’s voices and are encouraged to find their own.

At the end of each course trainees are helped to think about how their new skills might be further developed and used in the workplace or in voluntary work. The expansion of multi-media content on the Internet and jobs requiring digital literacy present opportunities beyond traditional radio work.

One of the most important elements is that the tutors should be aware of group dynamics and help the group to get together. This continues to be important after the course finishes because supportive relationships and networks can develop between diverse individuals who might not otherwise have the opportunity to get to know and understand one another. For some women it had been a life changing experience. Most have found a sense of achievement at whatever level they chose to participate.

Over time the WRG is also developing regular online broadcasts to give women the opportunity to produce and present programmes. These women become role models for others. The schedule includes an arts programme, general magazine with discussions, and feminist issues. The broadcasting has increased in importance over the lifetime of the imMEDIAtE project and is being driven by the need to create a space for women in order to encourage the exchange of ideas. This initiative has an unpredictable future because it is not yet financially supported and is organised on a voluntary basis using the good will and enthusiasm built up during the formal training.

Anti-sexist media work

Political radio broadcasting is comparable to political action because it provides an opportunity for alternative, feminist and minority groups to meet the mass media-induced homogenisation of so-called 'public opinion' with a choir of many voices.

Typical of free radio, ORANGE 94.0 gathers a very heterogeneous group of people. This creates a contradiction: on the one hand a variety of diverse perspectives is desirable and on the other hand there is the problem of political correctness. In this respect it will never be resolved, but as long as people make programmes, it is likely that they will continue to discuss the issues.

Through the history of ORANGE 94.0 the issue of sexism has been approached and dealt with on different levels. First there is the level of the actual programme making, where the efforts and diverse approaches of single radio makers are the most relevant. From the start there have been feminist radio makers, who developed their own interpretation of antisexist radio making. Ulla Ebner for example is a member of the editorial group "Women on Air" which broadcasts the development politics series "Global Dialogues". One important principle she bases her work on is to be aware of how women are represented in a radio show and to avoid reproducing stereotypes that are often constructed in mainstream media. *"In the majority, we prefer that the interview partners are female, especially when it comes to so-called expert's interviews. A classic, which consistently occurs in the mainstream media, is: women have their say, but it still is in the victim role. This is something I always tried to completely avoid - so if possible, my experts are women."*⁹

⁹ The statements of the individuals involved in Radio ORANGE 94.0 have been sought in the form of an interview and transferred into the text.

Radio maker Marty Huber works on the queer-feminist programme “Bauch, Bein, Po”¹⁰. She and her colleagues try to bridge various topics, in particular in the field of emancipation movements, policies and theories. They also deal with issues and contexts that exclude women from the media. *“I am interested in women involved in electronic (pop) music, because I find the connection of women with technology - whether synthesizer, computer or on children's toys – refreshing in many ways.”*

The second level of dealing with sexism and antisexism has always been the socio-political positioning of ORANGE 94.0 and finding ways to transform this position into a strong structure. The rejection of sexism, racism and fascism originate in reflection of the processes of the pirate radio scene. This has led to a binding programme policy that each person who is responsible for a broadcast show has to agree to the code by actually signing a contract reflecting the socio-political position of the radio station.

These policies state that though access to the medium of radio is in principle open to all, this does not mean that all can do what they want but, “We decidedly and purposely exclude from our programme racist, sexist, fascist contents, contents which violate human dignity, as well as persons and groups representing these subject matters.” (Status 2007). ORANGE 94.0 refers to these political, ethical principles as “the Big Four.”

Fiona Steinert was significantly involved in the foundation of ORANGE 94.0. Until 2003 she was chairperson of the association “Free Radio of Vienna” (the media owner and publisher of ORANGE 94.0). She describes the development of the guidelines: *“From the first minute of broadcasting the content of shows has been disputed. I think the debate has moved on from the theoretical level into the guidelines, which then of course has turned into a constant reality check. That is an ongoing process of debate and dispute.”*

After developing a strong socio-political position and putting these principles into a binding document, ORANGE 94.0 is developing ways to secure these principles into the daily routine of radio making. With the reviewing and revision of the guidelines, a stronger structural basis for dealing with sexist, racist, fascist and the human dignity infringing contents and practices was created in 2007. The

¹⁰ Bauch, Bein, Po (Belly, Legs, Butt) is a reference to the German aerobics synonym, which is dealing with so-called female “Problemzonen” - problematic zones. The jingle of the programme pushes this question further: “Belly, Legs, Butt - the programme for the whole woman. We don't let ourselves be dismembered!” (<http://sendungsarchiv.o94.at/showSeries.php/094se51>)

formation of the so called Programme Advisory Board was included into the guidelines. This board has the power to enforce radio makers to stick to the principles of the radio station and it was specified that only people who have radio making qualifications and skills or have experience in the areas of Interculturalism or Feminism/Queer can apply for election into this board.

One more structure for dealing with antisexism is education and training. At the moment there are efforts taken to set a standard in the field of training that strengthen the communication and awareness of antisexism and the other principles among all the people involved in the radio. As Helga Schwarzwald who has been executive coordinator since 2004, puts it: *“This is what will be taught in the workshops, in terms of socio-political framework of ORANGE 94.0. I am strongly about bringing starter kits to a standard, which clearly implies trainers accepting the challenge of mediating an awareness of sexism, racism, fascism and human dignity.”*

The active debate on the ‘Big Four’ has to run simultaneously on different levels of the radio operation. Structures, personnel decisions and claimed perspectives can bring forward the space in which to employ participants who are in line with the principles of free radio, as imposed in the workshops for new radio makers or the programme advisory committee. Since its emergence from the pirate radio scene, ORANGE 94.0 has been evolving in this direction.

Conclusion

In societies that are characterised by mass media, we can hardly speak of an open-minded understanding of the public space. Where only ratings count the so-called majority opinion becomes the public opinion. And public opinion is subject to economic criteria and categories of representation such as rhetoric, bias and pseudo-democratic processes. Anyone who fits into a specific set of norms – and who can be used to make money – can enter the stage. This form of participation is tantamount to a deflated democracy. The effect is the de-politicisation of the public sphere.

Radio broadcasting is closer to the open public/political sphere in terms of emancipation and gender equality insofar as it is able to escape the patriarchal subject-object division more easily than the regime of image-production can. As a political activity, action does not aim at the production of objects, but rather tries to ensure the communication between multitudes of people. Considering this, listening is more autonomous, as it provides people with space for individual imagination and creativity, and with time for ideas and reflection.

Speaking and listening belong together, which can make political radio broadcasting comparable to political action. The precondition for this is the diversity, the plurality of people, on condition that the producers and the audience do not belong to one self-referential community that is only concerned with its own mirror. Conversely, at this self-reflecting point in community and free radio broadcasting, it is of great importance that those who have none find a voice in order to be able to face the adventure called the public sphere, limited as it may be. It follows that democracy can only exist if everyone has a voice and a vote in the public sphere and is thus enabled to have a say in the political process.

It is necessary to keep striving for the political participation of women. Participation means owning part of and taking part in a whole which is at nobody's sole disposal. Self-determination is the source of all independent activity in society, without which it would be impossible to arrive at any kind of deliberate communal activity. Participation is a way of acting in relation to a community/society which requires individual self-determination. Furthermore, co-determination is the specific requirement of any political organisation. In the case of most women and so-called minorities, the situation is that experience in and factual knowledge of the areas of self- and co- determination are still rare.

A central task of feminist and anti-sexist media is to provide a general framework

for creating non-discriminatory environments for women. In this context, education predominantly means awareness raising and the imparting of knowledge about rights, about the exertion of social influence, and about the active shaping of public affairs. Behind the acquisition of specific practical skills should be the encouragement and support of self-knowledge, self-confidence and self-consciousness. It is not only about just complaining, defending and protesting but about being enabled to take positive action.