

by Brian Bard

Lovers of democracy now have a potent opportunity to curb the dominance of large corporations over the communications media: in a rare moment, a US government entity is actually supporting access to a broadcast medium for US residents. FCC Chairman William Kennard has recognized the great untapped potential of micro-radio and asked the people who will benefit from this opening to assist him in persuading others of its merits. To do this, members of Congress and the other FCC commissioners must hear from listeners who are not well served by the current radio offerings, and from speakers who cannot get on the air.

Corporate control of media outlets is a well-known obstacle to progressive activists. Disney, General Electric, and Westinghouse own ABC, NBC, and CBS respectively, and this provides just a glimpse of the interests which control what the citizenry can hear, see, and read. Another glimpse of corporate domination of the media and its horrifying implications came during the sickening coverage of the Gulf War which continues to rage almost ten years later.

Stephen Dunifer was one of many filled with "total and absolute disgust" by the war coverage, outraged that "the media essentially moved into a spare office in the Pentagon and tried to make it some national celebration that we [the U.S. government] murdered several hundred thousand people in that part of the world." The pain of those days helped motivate Dunifer toward the process which resulted in Free Radio Berkeley, a low power community radio station which he intended not only to operate, but to go to court to defend. Court? Read on.

## Who Controls Radio?

Radio is the oldest form of electronic mass media and remains critical today. About one billion radios play in the US, and 95% of the population listens everyday for an average of two and a half hours. Fifteen years after Italian electrical engineer Guglielmo Marconi introduced radio to the colonial powers, hundreds of early broadcasters were already operating in the US. By the 1920's, radio stations numbered in the tens of thousands, and over two thirds of them were non-commercial. The US Congress passed the Radio Act of 1927 and created the Federal Radio Commission which, despite the democratic language of its charter to serve the "public interest, convenience, and necessity", quickly became a tool of corporate repression. Due to the pro-business policies of the FRC, non-commercial radio had shrunk to about 2% of total airtime by 1934 with NBC and CBS alone controlling 70% of broadcast time.

The FRC was transformed into today's

FCC by the Federal Communications Act of 1934. The FCC has continued to respond to pressure from large corporate interests and their political representatives (notably under the Reagan administration) to keep this means of communication out of public hands. In 1978 big broadcasters, NPR prominent among them, finally convinced the FCC to discontinue "Class D" licenses for small community stations. So, for the past twenty years, new stations have been required to operate with at least 100 watts of power. Because of this regulation and others, the estimated cost of launching a station which the FCC will consider licensing is from \$80-100,000: National Corporate Radio has attained its goal of silencing the citizenry, to the benefit of the wealthy.

Yet, among this citizenry are those who have known little else but repression from the corporate-run government and have long traditions of resistance including civil disobedience. One of the earliest micro-broadcasters was Mbanna Kantako who began broadcasting to his Illinois ghetto after being blinded by the local police. He operated with relative immunity until he began reporting on other incidences of police brutality in his neighborhood and was attacked by the FCC and eventually shutdown. But of course, just as resistance emerges anew everywhere among the oppressed, so more small radio stations spring up everyday. While the FCC has shut down 300 small stations in the last year, Radio Mutiny of Philadelphia pledges to help ten new stations begin broadcasting for every one harassed by the FCC, and the numbers suggest that this is happening.

After 13,000 requests for low power licenses in 1998, the FCC recognized two formal rulemaking petitions, RM-9242 and 9208, which presented two plans for re-legalizing community radio. As required by law, the FCC conducted a public-comments period and arrived at its own plan, in support of which agency commissioners voted four to one. The FCC plan calls for strict ownership limits of no more than five to ten stations per owner. Current license holders would be restricted from the new service. These limits are intended to prohibit the existing broadcast empires from eventually absorbing the new stations.

Still, community radio activists point out that ownership limits for existing stations were lifted two years ago. In this time, 40% of the nation's commercial stations have changed hands, most absorbed by conglomerates—the ten largest holders of radio stations now own 57% more stations than they did before this change. GE (CBS) owns 27% of the radio stations in the top ten markets with 50% of the news and talk listeners there. Chancellor Media owns another 25% of those markets. The corporate lobby would likely eliminate ownership limits for LPFM stations in the future.

Many free-speech and community activists insist that the maximum wattage be kept down to 100-250 watts, that there be

only one station per owner who must live within 25-50 miles of his/her station, and that all new stations be strictly non-commercial.

## Reclaim the Airwaves

A public comment period on the plan began February 11, 1999 and will last until June 1, 1999; it will be followed by a "reply-comment" period of 30 days. While micro-broadcasters have powerful allies including US Congressman David Bonior of Michigan, FCC staff members have openly expressed their dismay over the excessive influence wielded in the past by high-priced lobbyists during FCC rule making procedures. The agency has asked for the active participation of community and civic groups and individuals: church groups, labor, city councils, third parties, ethnic and cultural organizations, land-use groups etc. are all urged to participate by filing comments to be included in the official record. In addition to technical commentary, the agency seeks opinions about the cultural and socioeconomic issues, and generally how community radio will benefit the people.

**In an unprecedented move, the FCC has agreed to allow for electronic filing of comments in this procedure, in order to accommodate the greatest number of voices. Interested parties can get more information from [www.fcc.gov/mmb/prd/lpfm](http://www.fcc.gov/mmb/prd/lpfm) or by contacting the Michigan Music is World Class Campaign at (248)542-8090, [jamrag@usnmail.com](mailto:jamrag@usnmail.com).**

Locally, with the help of Councilwoman Elisabeth Daley, the Huron Valley Greens have already succeeded in having a resolution in support of LPFM passed by Ann Arbor City Council. They continue working to see more resolutions passed by local governments before the end of the comments period on July 1, 1999. The Greens can be reached at

(734)663-3555, or [migreens@mutiny.net](mailto:migreens@mutiny.net).

FCC Chairman Kennard summed up the matter quite well recently: "Radio has become the province of multibillion dollar corporations... the loss of small religious stations and local programming is very unfortunate... In a society where most people get all their news and information from the broadcast industry, how can we have a strong democracy when the media is concentrated in the hands of a few? ... This issue cannot come down to a battle between the rich and the very wealthy, as do so many of the battles we have in Washington. These issues are fundamental to our democracy."

While the case of Free Radio Berkeley drew on in the 9th Federal District Court, Stephen Dunifer and the Free Communications Coalition used the protection afforded by micro-broadcasting's legal indeterminateness to make and give away over 400 transmitter kits to incipient stations which could then broadcast 10-30 watts into a 2-5 mile range. Finally, after two Federal Court decisions had upheld Dunifer's right to broadcast, the FCC was granted an injunction to shut down the station in June of 1998.

Yet, the micro-broadcasting movement he helped to promote shows enormous vibrancy. Activists from some 1,000 outlawed radio stations convened in Philadelphia from April 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>, 1998 for their first conference. The movement is strong. The success is stunning. And the promise of a wide range and abundance of music, free-form, talk, organizing, news, and language is endless. I hope that all who prefer activism to malaise and complaint will step up and reveal an unexpected vigilance as this work goes on. ☑

