

# **10 Years of Community Radio in Austria**

## **An Explorative Study of Open Access, Pluralism and Social Cohesion**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the results of a qualitative research project which was initiated by the Austrian Federation of Free Radios (VFRÖ) and financed by the Austrian Regulatory Authority for Broadcasting and Telecommunications (RTR). The research started in spring 2007 and aimed at compiling and describing the effects of Austrian Free Radio on plurality and social cohesion. It was also conducted as a pilot study for further, more comprehensive radio research. Twenty-two group interviews with staff and volunteers focused mainly on the production side of Free Radio. Additionally, multimodal material such as websites, flyers, schedules, broadcasts, network drawings, guest books, e-mails, photos etc. completed the set of data used for the analyses. Here, an overview of only the most important findings shall be introduced and presented.

We invite those who are interested in a more detailed report and read german to take a look at the extensive study published by RTR in 2008.

(<http://www.rtr.at/de/komp/SchriftenreiheNr32008>)

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## **Introduction**

Austria's radio liberalisation is a recent phenomenon: the struggle for free frequencies started in the late 1970s and 1980s in all parts of the country and was emphasized by different 'pirate radio actions'. From the beginning, the political and social dimensions of these efforts were very important. In spring 1989 the European Federation of Free Radios (FERL, Fédération Européenne des Radios Libres) organized a public broadcast in Vienna on the topic of media pluralism which ended with the confiscation of the transmitter. Several pirate radio initiatives founded a "Pressure Group Freies Radio" in 1991; in this year more than 25 member groups existed in Vienna, producing together more than 40 hours of broadcasts every week. At the same time also in the other federal states of Austria several initiatives were actively working towards an end of the monopoly of the state.

In autumn 1989 the association Radio AGORA filed a complaint at the European Court of Human Rights, preceded by an application at the Postdirektion Klagenfurt for a local radio licence for a multilingual and non-commercial radio station which was rejected. Core argument of the complaint was the very restricted access of the slovene minority to multilingual audio-visual media in the region which discriminated against the slovene speaking minority and violated its right on media pluralism. The broadcast time in slovene language at that time was limited to one hour per day in the national radio programme and half an hour per week in the national television programme. The complaint was taken up in Strasbourg together with a complaint of other Austrian private-commercial broadcasters, and in 1993 the Austrian national broadcasting monopoly was abrogated. In the decision of the European Court of Human Rights the argumentation of AGORA is present where it is stated that the emergence of private monopolies in broadcasting should be inhibited and that the rights and needs of specific groups of listeners/viewers in terms of media pluralism are to be taken into account. This decision exceeded former decisions which had led to the end of national monopolies in several other European states by explicitly strengthening minority rights. In 1993 the government decided on the "Regionalradiogesetz" (law on regional radio) which became the basis for the first licences distributed in early 1995.

Except from one licence in Salzburg and a second licence in Vienna, only powerful regional printmedia were given the available licences. The rejected applicants, among

them the non-commercial Free Radio stations, filed a complaint at the Constitutional Court which subsequently cancelled the previously attributed licences. After an amendment of the regional radio act where the newly founded Association of Free Radios Austria (VFRÖ) played a major role, a greater number of frequencies (8 on regional and 40 on local level) were announced.

Most of the Free Radio stations in Austria finally went on air between 1998 and 2000. Today, 14 of the 15 (soon 15 of 16) members of the Austrian Federation of Free Radios (VFRÖ) are active radio stations and radio projects on the internet. The sizes of the stations range from 2 active members to more than 500 radio makers at Radio ORANGE in Vienna. The Charta of Austrian Free Radio Stations which includes ethical and organisational principles for alternative radio dates from 1995 and is still valid today for all members of VFRÖ.

### **Researching alternative media**

In opposition to public and private-commercial media, alternative media are characterized by their different view of the communication processes as well as the producers and recipients involved. While public broadcasting is traditionally linked to informative and educational content that is to be distributed among the members of a (nation) state, private commercial stations are oriented towards a target audience that is defined in close connection to economic factors (e.g. purchasing power, age). The communicative goal is achieved if required quotas in a certain age-group of potential consumers are reached.

Alternative media adhere to a concept of producer and consumer roles that sees these roles as intertwined activities and aims at broad involvement of the audience. According to their view, open access and negotiation of relevant topics is to be made available to a high number of different people (Busch 2004, Atton 2002).

In getting into the goals of research on alternative media, we quickly realized that 'traditional' market-oriented radio research is not adequate for a better understanding of the specific goals and conditions of alternative radio. Also the radio stations stated requests in the group discussions which accompanied the research: for them qualitative research should accompany their own intern evaluations critically and add a view 'from the outside'. Volunteer radio producers were especially interested in knowing their recipients, their way of listening and their needs and routines concerning their radio

station. Research should lead to a more efficient way of dealing with resources (time, finance, etc.) and more exchange between the different radio stations in terms of strategies, broadcasting and content.

On the other hand, research on alternative radio should work as an external evaluation, and help to assess the relevance of radio work and its impact on the negotiation of issues in society.

We are trying to contribute to the emerging field of qualitative radio research with a special view on the social effects and impacts of this specific media environment (Bonfadelli 2008, Day 2008, Lewis 2008). Our study was exploratory and, due to limited time and resources, only able to take a look at the production side of Austrian Free Radio. Recipients as well as most of the contents of broadcasts need to be looked at closer in following research projects.

### **Data and methodology**

This paper is based on data from all Free Radio stations in Austria, interviews were conducted in nine of them and a total number of 22 interviews and group discussions took place in summer 2007. Together with members of the radio stations the goals as well as the findings of the study were discussed on several occasions. We are very grateful for this input and think that seeking exchange with radio staff and volunteers about the research process and the outcomes was crucial for our research. Very important were not only the extensive talks we had but also the impressions we got as participant observers and observing (and observed) participants.

We do of course know that what we chose for our study was only to some extent a participatory approach to research. And we think that more integration between radio staff and research teams is highly recommendable for further research in order to a) meet the diverse research needs of the radio stations in spite of low research budgets and b) make efficient use of the significant amount of practical and theoretical expert knowledge accumulated by the radio stations themselves.

## Participants in Austrian Free Radio Stations

	On air since	Staff	Volunteers administration	in Volunteers producing shows*
Radio Helsinki	1998	4	17	621
FRFreistadt	2005	1	6	170
FRSalzkammergut	1999	5	5	130
FREIRAD	2002	2	5–10	350
PROTON	1998	2	4–5	20
FREEQUENNS	1999	2	30	27
ORANGE	1998	8	4	770
FRO	1998	8	2	400
Radiofabrik	1998	5	5	280
AGORA	1998	5	1	50
Radio Y	1999	1	15	30-40
Campusradio	2002	1	70-100	40-70
Aufdraht	1997	1	2	2-8
MORA (off air)	1999-2001			

\* includes those being trained at the moment.

These figures were collected from the radio stations and allow an impression of how many people were actively involved in Free Radio in autumn 2007. A total number of more than 3000 active participants can be assumed, numbers are growing constantly.

## Results and findings

### Diversity of opinion, pluralism

According to the above cited decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, free media are especially well placed to promote the diversity of opinions in public, even more so when it comes to marginalized communities or minority groups. The Charta of Free Radios in Austria highlights this point as central mission for Free Radio in Austria and the radio stations try to make the opinion of many “othered” communities known and heard. Airtime is attributed following mainly criteria of social and media based marginalization and whilst in the beginnings of Free Radio the aim of filling 24/24 programming was to the fore, nowadays new shows are more and more carefully selected. In order to achieve internal pluralism, Free Radio stations try to involve as many different people as possible and make them speak from their own standpoint. This strategy also leads to the emergence of new and experimental radio formats which may question genres and properties of radio but may as well challenge the audiences’ listening routines.

Free Radio stations are less exposed to the driving forces of free markets: their independence is audible through the absence of commercials on air but also through the greater freedom radio volunteers enjoy when it comes to structuring their broadcast time. Just some examples: music may extend the 3-minute-slots prevalent in commercial radio, a characteristic well appreciated by listeners, interviews might last for an hour if the producers favor this format and the choice of language(s) is (usually) ceded to the persons involved whereby multilingual programming is especially welcome.

The radio stations abstain from exerting power over the radio producers and do not influence the content of the broadcasts as long as the principles of the Charta and the station are respected. Responsibility widely stays with the producers and their limits and rules (due to communication law, Charta and mission statement) are regulated in a contract that has to be signed and periodically renewed. The principles in the Charta of Free Radio as well as the mission statements include primarily a ban on sexist, racist, fascist and discriminatory content and language and a commitment to minority broadcasting. In case of violations of this contract, talks are scheduled with the producers in question and in the worst case on-air-time can be withdrawn temporarily or permanently. In general responsibility is taken very seriously and the radio stations are seen as a common place with a common purpose and an optimally strong involvement of the volunteers. The latter benefit from their participation in the larger structure of a media organisation by strengthening their position in the community - they experience acceptance and valorisation and report a better access to information due to their journalistic activities. Moreover, educational offers are geared for supporting the volunteers in finding their own voices and developing their potentials concerning technical skills as well as content related abilities.

### **Creating public space(s), overcoming categorizations**

Broadcasts in Free Radio stations often show close links to social or cultural initiatives that are active in the region. These initiatives are often explicitly invited by the stations for their expertise in a certain field but in ten years of presence and engagement in their regional cultural scenes, some of the radios have been successful in positioning themselves as an important niche-medium for social, political and cultural broadcasting. For the NGOs (non-governmental organisations) radio is one way among others to

make their association known and to reach an interested public. It is not only a platform for the presentation of information, it is also a place for negotiation and where people speak up about concerns that are usually ignored or only superficially presented in mainstream-media.

In spite of its character as a medium that potentially reaches many thousands of recipients, Free Radio turns out to be also a place where it is possible to speak about experiences that need a safe and self-determinable environment to be approached. Radio guarantees both, publicness and anonymity. This quality especially benefits topics like HIV/Aids, sexual abuse or violence as well as persons who feel their place in society is precarious or instable. Producing a radio broadcast or participating in it can be used (from a certain point in the process) as a practicable strategy to overcome the silence that often follows traumatic experiences and to attain a more powerful position in one's own story. The volunteers we interviewed and who work e.g. with support groups, offer their interlocutors security through an environment that is to a great extent controllable by themselves. For example timeframes can be determined by the interviewees and joint preproduction allows revision of what was said. Volunteers also reported that the "outcome" – the cd with one's own story on it was an important thing to hold in hands for many persons they were working with. Sensational, audience-grabbing rendering of personal stories is avoided and thus the acoustic medium becomes a channel for a respectful way of talking about trauma, taboos and difficulties in society.

Free Radio can further be seen as a major platform for broadcasts in migrant and minority languages. Especially this area is one that is ceded to the Free Radio stations while the public broadcasting service is continually refusing or cutting down air time for other languages than German, thus withdrawing from its mission. A high number of broadcasts in minority languages or multilingual formats as well as above-average listener participation show that Free Radio stations are filling a crucial gap here.

Right from the beginning, minority languages were very present in Free Radio. During the first years one language was very often linked to one broadcast; nowadays several broadcasts react to the different voices in the communities and reflect diverse needs, interests, age groups, tastes, positions etc. Many producers make use of the possibility to diversify the radio programmes and also open up spaces which connect different audiences. Phone-in-programmes are popular formats, as well as legal advice and practical information concerning for example schooling, bureaucracy or health care in

the local context. Apart from these “classical” formats there are also e.g. youth shows, literature broadcasts, poetry, music for younger generations, news formats etc. Also the interest in experimenting with multilingual formats is growing.

A diversity of broadcasts opens up the opportunity for members of the communities to bring in divergent viewpoints and linguistic repertoires. Also volunteers and listeners speaking minority languages have the chance to choose their shows according to their interests instead of having to follow predefined stereotypical categories. Through the focus on different perspectives, people are taken into account in their individuality and a reduction to ethnic categories is more likely to be overcome. In this way, Free Radio Stations have been actively working on leaving behind essentialist views of identity and the old idea of an ethnic “colorfulness”, both, in programming and at the administrative/organisational level.

### **Empowerment and media education**

According to their self-declared mission, the great number of volunteer producers is at the center of the radio stations’ interest. Consequently the experiences of these volunteers are one of the radio stations’ major concerns: Free Radio stations define themselves not only as media but also as learning and teaching environments.

Many volunteers experience changes due to their participation in media production:

Besides the acquisition of journalistic and technical skills volunteers describe a boost in self confidence as well as benefits brought about by their new role. Certain qualifications can be transferred directly to other areas of life, radio work develops contacts and networks and teamwork as well as cooperations enhance social skills.

Participants are inspired to reflect upon journalistic practice (e.g. editing or interviewing), they learn how to communicate issues to different audiences and start to question communicative and journalistic routines. Already the attribution of broadcasting time which is appropriated very quickly by the volunteers implies a kind of “public” appreciation: my/our idea/concern is important enough to be given airtime. Reactions from staff, other volunteers or the public confirm the legitimacy of the concerns and support volunteers in reflecting upon their own subject positions. (Fairclough 1989, Foucault 1993).

How relevant shows are for the volunteer producers can be told from the vehemence with which they cling to their shows and try to keep their airtime: Even if other duties

(like work, family etc.) start to demand more time, most of the radio makers try to keep their show and would rather broadcast less frequently than stop for good.

One reason might be that participation in radio opens doors: being part of a radio station facilitates the access to information and people. Furthermore the volunteers can draw on the accumulated knowledge of an experienced organization. This knowledge is tried to convey also in trainings in addition to technical know-how.

By now Free Radio stations have become important players in the sector of media training. On the one hand they offer internships for students and on the other hand several journalists have started their career with experiments or a show in Free Radio.

Especially for adults who have chosen another profession Free Radio can be a second-chance education. These volunteers appreciate that they can live their passion and talent in their spare time and gain significant expertise.

### **Places of negotiation and social involvement**

It is an essential merit of Free Radio to make social diversity heard. More than all other media it is committed to marginalized communities and viewpoints and manages to bring many of them on air. In the program as well as in the stations there is space for encounters that demand and foster interaction with other people and their opinions. There is space for public negotiation and controversial discussion also for otherwise poorly represented concerns whereby the stations become an important place for individuals, communities and groups. All of them use their access to the public in order to improve the status quo according to *their* view and show a keen willingness to support 'good'/collective causes like protection of the environment, health issues, human rights or socio-political counter-information.

For the negotiation of conflicts it is essential for all parties to know their position and to be able to represent it autonomously. Over time radio work empowers participants to better know their standpoints and experience what others think and why. This empowerment touches also a wider circle of people occasionally involved in a show who are committed to active listenership and social action. They invest punctual support for the volunteers or the stations and receive in exchange support and access to a site of social commitment.

Unlike for example the model of "open channel" (Offener Kanal) as it is practiced in some German Länder, Free Radio stations define themselves as more than the sum of their broadcasts. Critique from both, volunteers and staff, often concerns missing

interaction between producers of single shows or between volunteers and staff. Nevertheless stations reported deliberate efforts to better include volunteers into the common project and its development which were successful.

Taking a look at the development Austrian Free Radio has taken since its beginning in 1998 it can be stated that the activities could be consolidated and that the stations succeed increasingly well in extending the representation of diverse social positions and viewpoints in their programmes. Simplistic identity constructions and categorizations are unsettled and new constellations and alliances form.

The stations are conscious of the fact that there are still barriers to be removed and overcome. Especially (usually short term) project funding and individual efforts have enabled the stations to tackle specific problems and develop effective measures in order to improve the access for disadvantaged participants. Some of the measures that have been developed in some stations include for example that information about access and participation is offered in more languages, that trainings have been adapted to the needs of different age groups, genders, language communities, physical abilities, or that the physical spaces of the studios have been made autonomously usable for blind persons or persons with wheelchairs. Targeted funding could help to implement these measures more broadly and permanently.

### **Regional relevance and translocal networks**

Another strength of the radio stations that participated in the study is regional relevance and translocal interconnectedness at the same time. Especially local cultural scenes, music groups and social initiatives profit from a radio station's ties to the local environment. The staff repeatedly pointed out the importance of interesting and sustainable job opportunities offered by the Free Radio station in their region.

For local organisations the stations are not only a medium and a way to inform their public about important events but also a nodal point where interests meet and ideas emerge. In addition to being local initiators, Free Radio stations also arrange translocal networks and seize various opportunities in order to collect different local audiences: Cross-border cooperations in neighbour regions brought forth creative multilingual formats as well as collaborations on the basis of common languages. Herein some Free Radios have been doing exemplary work in comparison to commercial and also public radio. Other translocal connections set out from concrete (cultural or political) events, e.g. the annual live coverage of the Frankfurt Book Fair.

The added value of a translocal perspective consists in maintaining the connectedness to the local and yet breaking its narrowness. For all participants a chance opens up to attain a different perspective on categories like 'centre' and 'periphery'. Issues and areas which were before conceived as marginal move to the centre and can be considered from a new perspective. This very shift is a precondition for empathy and therefore for social cohesion.

## **Conclusions**

Of course there are still enough problems for Free Radio stations. After ten years of intensive organizing and development (often enough despite very little resources) the quality of the antennas and signals as well as the uncertain financial situation which does not cover basic costs for all of the stations and varies from federal state to state constitute two of the main obstacles today. Especially stable basic funding would be necessary in order to make better use of the Free Radio stations' potential to contribute to social cohesion and pluralism, both, as media and as institutions of media education.

Already in the chapter "Researching alternative media" we tried to emphasize that participatory, alternative, local media are to be seen as an own category of audiovisual media. Their achievement and potential lies within their dynamic, negotiation-oriented approach to journalistic practice. They do not only see themselves as media but also as organizers of societal and medial participation, each radio station taking into account its own specific local and translocal context.

An emphasis on self-determination and adaptation to the needs and ideas of the volunteer producers allows for the emergence of new and adequate journalistic formats and achieves a significant diversification of perspectives.

Herein lies also the chance for an ongoing challenge of „the public“, be it through multilingual broadcasting, thematizing taboos or actively dealing and doing away with barriers in audiovisual media.

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