Soldering Toward Media Democracy: Technical Practice as Symbolic Value in Radio Activism

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Abstract
This article follows radio activists engaged in a combination of policy advocacy and broadening access to technology and skills through hands-on work. In practice, this largely played out as a systematic elevation of “technical” work and downplaying of policy/advocacy expertise, even though both were salient features of their work. The article argues that radio activists cultivated a technical identity that served to mark boundaries between their group and others in the terrain of media democracy work. Technical identity also took on special significance as the group grappled with organizational maturation, mitigating the anxiety felt by workers as they experienced the shift from an inexperienced, though highly driven and successful activist collective, to a more sustainable nonprofit activist organization. The article concludes by naming technological activism as one strategy in the wider spectrum of work to promote media democracy and speculates on the consequences of technical identity within the wider movement.

Keywords
activism, communication technology, media and democracy, social movement, technology

Introduction
In 1998, a raucous group of protesters assembled in front of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) building in Washington, D.C. Seeking legal access to the airwaves for small-scale broadcasting by citizens and community groups, they employed established street theater tactics, including puppets, chants, and speeches; in a less
traditional move, they also flouted the regulators by broadcasting their protest into the building using a portable transmitter (it goes without saying, without a license). In 2000, the FCC reversed its policy and slowly began to issue licenses for new low-power FM (LPFM) stations. By the mid-2000s, people and organizations focused on media democracy regarded LPFM as a victory and were engaged in strategic efforts along a number of other lines, including internet governance, combating media consolidation, and securing support for public and independent media, to name only a few.

Yet LPFM remained a primary concern for some. Many who had pressured the FCC to license “microradio” broadcasters continued to work to expand LPFM, albeit from a different position vis-à-vis the regulatory framework: With the possibility of legal broadcasting, efforts shifted to getting licenses into the hands of community groups, building new stations, and shoring up LPFM’s status within telecommunications policy. This article examines the practices of a small activist organization focused on LPFM during the early period of the institutionalization of LPFM. This site presents a unique combination of advocacy and technical concerns together, in which technical engagement held a special symbolic value within a diverse repertoire of activist practice. In this period, the radio activists wrestled with new problems, especially coping with the growth and success of their organization and the institutionalization of LPFM, yet they also exhibited a strong commitment to hands-on technical practice and work with radio hardware.

However, while the radio activists attached great symbolic importance to technical engagement, these pursuits did not in any way fully represent the range of tasks with which they were occupied, which in practice included everything from convening board meetings to setting up legislative visits, as well as fixing old transmitters and building radio stations. To the extent that there was a central dynamic to the commitments and practices of the radio activists, it was a balancing act. I argue that the LPFM activists’ invocation of technical practice provided them with a symbolic link to their organization’s origins (pirate broadcasting in the 1990s) and connected their work to radical activist politics, including an idealized version of technical expertise as universally accessible. Yet it also served as a resource for drawing a boundary between their organization and others in the domain of media advocacy (mainly in Washington, D.C.), thus enabling them to deal with the change and maturation of their organization in a novel way.

**Wider Historical Background and Sociopolitical Context**

The 1980s and 1990s saw intense mobilization around small-scale broadcasting (Brand, 2004; Coopman, 1999; Opel, 2004; Walker, 2001). In 1978, the FCC ceased to grant noncommercial, low-wattage licenses to not-for-profit educational and community groups, and people subsequently took to the airwaves in “electronic civil disobedience” (Soley, 1998; Walker, 2001). When the FCC experienced difficulty enforcing regulations against unlicensed broadcasting, including highly visible court
battles, then-Chairman William Kennard considered reinstating a license option in the late 1990s.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 removed significant restrictions on radio station ownership, further stoking activist efforts to secure the rights of small-scale broadcasters and calling attention to the problem of media consolidation. At the same time, the struggle for radio access was not reducible to the issue of microradio. Andy Opel argues that “the discourses that developed to promote the revival of this technology were taking place in the context of a larger social movement of media activism or media and democracy” (p. 25), and indeed, the radio activists in this article tied their work with radio to a broad media democracy and social justice framework. Thus, radio activism in this era must be understood as emerging from embedded practices of community media production and pirate radio, “indymedia,” and the transnational “anti-globalization” movement (Juris, 2008; Wolfson, 2008); the emergence of “new media,” including the Internet; and a regulatory environment favoring national broadcasting networks and corporate media consolidation that was opposed by a burgeoning movement for media democracy (see McChesney, 2004). Other antecedents to radio activism also include the Appropriate Technology movement of the 1960s-1970s (Pursell, 1993; Turner, 2006; see also Dunbar-Hester, 2008) and earlier broadcast reform movements (Horwitz, 1997; Pickard, 2011).

In 2000, the FCC initiated the legal designation of “low-power FM” (LPFM), non-commercial stations operating at 100 watts or less (reaching at most only a few miles from the site of transmission). However, due to a 2000 limitation placed by Congress (acting at the behest of the broadcast lobby), LPFM stations were virtually impossible to license in the U.S. cities (Riismandel, 2002; Spinelli, 2000). Rural areas were favored, where spacing requirements between LPFMs and full-power stations could be met. By early 2009, over 800 LPFMs were on the air. Advocates remained committed to changing legislation to allow LPFMs in more population-dense areas and, in 2011, achieved this goal when President Obama signed the Local Community Radio Act into law. While the group that is the subject of this article espouses left politics, groups across the political spectrum have opposed media consolidation and supported LPFM.

**History of Group**

The activist group comprising the subject of this article formed as a pirate broadcasting collective in Philadelphia, PA, in the mid-1990s, which was raided and shut down by the FCC in 1997. Members subsequently refocused their efforts toward a unique combination of advocacy and technical assistance to community groups seeking radio stations, forming Pandora Radio Project in 1998, and obtaining 501(c)3 (nonprofit public charity) status in 2005. By 2008, Pandora had in partnership with different local community groups built about 10 new radio stations in the United States, a handful of stations abroad, and had assisted countless others in lesser ways. Station-building events, in which volunteers and staff activists put a new station on the air.
over a weekend, are called “barnraisings”; this term is an explicit reference to the Amish practice of community members joining together and emphasizes interdependence and cooperation. In addition to their successful efforts to see LPFM implemented (with allies including organized labor, church groups, civil rights groups, and other advocates; McChesney, 2004), in 2004 Pandora won a historic lawsuit against the FCC opposing proposed rulemaking to allow further media consolidation, which raised their stature in the advocacy field as well as their appeal to potential funders. In the early 2000s, Pandora considered whether and how to expand their mission to “free the airwaves” to include not only radio but Internet-based technologies, especially community Wi-Fi, but FM radio remained their emphasis (Dunbar-Hester, 2009, 2010). This article is concerned with the group’s activities between approximately 2004 and 2007, coinciding with the 5-year anniversary of LPFM and the group’s attainment of charitable nonprofit status.

Research Activities (and Locating the Researcher in Them)

Anthropologist Julian Orr (1996) writes, “. . . the ethnographic study of work practice . . . must be done in the situation in which the work normally occurs, that is, work must be seen as situated practice in which the context is seen as part of the activity” (p. 10). Although Orr’s prescription is deceptively simple, he makes a potent case for taking work seriously and following actors into the varied spaces of their work. Making a significant effort to understand the situated practices of radio activism, this article draws on fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2007. During this period, I spent time as a participant-observer with paid staff, interns, and volunteers in the Philadelphia office and on the road (both building radio stations and conducting advocacy in Washington, D.C.). I volunteered in the office and conducted full-time participant observation in 2004-2005, then pulled back for the observation of special events in 2005-2006. I also conducted about 30 semistructured interviews with activists, policy makers, advocates, and community group members over this period, though for this article I rely more on observational data. This is in part because, as Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda (2001) argue, observation is especially important to understand work “because most work practices are so contextualized that people often cannot articulate how they do what they do, unless they are in the process of doing it” (p. 81). Thus, I conducted my fieldwork with the goal of making meaningful interpretations of the radio activists’ local worlds, exploring their in situ work practices, settings, and meaning(s) starting from the group’s own point of view.

In this account, as in others that comprise my ethnographic treatment of radio activism, I have systematically elevated the status of the radio activists by giving them the most voice and their claims the most analytical attention. I do not strive for a “symmetrical” approach to studying media activism or policy (see Scott, Richards, & Martin, 1990). I also do not claim to have affected a “neutral” stance with regard to the controversy over whether consolidated, for-profit media is harmful to democratic discourse or whether a robust independent media system is preferable; I am convinced
that many of the critiques of the media democracy movement have merit. That said, my aim is to provide a critical, cultural understanding of media activism that is indebted to constructionist social studies of technology; I do not aim to address the policy problems that occupy the activists or offer prescriptive, “upstream” conclusions that would bear on these issues.

Ethnographic truths are always partial. In spite of my commitment to fidelity with regard to the events I observed and participated in, my account is inherently incomplete (Clifford, 1986). In addition, I am aware that my presence in research settings has had the potential to actively change what I was studying (Scott et al., 1990). For example, activists would on occasion question me about what I was taking notes on, actively point out “important” matters to me, or comment that a particular setting or event would be “especially interesting” for me as an analyst; other, more subtle instances also doubtless occurred. All of these factors, as well as countless others, inform the analysis I am able to present; as anthropologist Hugh Gusterson (1996) writes, echoing Donna Haraway, “there is knowledge here, but it is . . . situated knowledge” (p. 13). Thus, I do not claim to offer a complete or generalizable account, presenting instead “true fiction” (Clifford, 1986, p. 6).

**Theorizing Identity in Media Activist Work**

As noted previously, this account is attuned to the activists’ work routines. I portray their *in situ* practices in order to illuminate and interpret the dynamics that structured their activities. I argue that during the period of my fieldwork, which coincided with the institutionalization of LPFM, the radio activists performed a balancing act between the organization’s past, present, and future, and which largely played out as a systematic elevation of “technical” work and downplaying of policy expertise, even though both were salient features of their work.

Social studies of work, particularly accounts that consider worker and occupational identity, orient my analysis (Abbott, 1988; Becker, 1982; Becker & Carper, 1956; Doing, 2004; Orr, 1996; see also Terkel, 1972). Identity work occurred both in internal settings as activists interacted with one another and in their interactions with members of outside groups, including community groups seeking radio stations, lobbyists, regulators, and other advocacy groups. Drawing on theorists of identity and performance who hold identities to be iterative, enacted through practice, I take the activists’ actions and utterances to be performances that reveal key notions about how they envision their own roles, the roles of others, and the relationships that exist between themselves and others. More broadly, as Judith Butler (1990) argues, identity is not fixed or given, but is constantly constructed and remade through signification: “the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (p. 142). Identity work provides the analyst with a conceptual tool to get at parts of human experience that are slippery, constructed, and yet “real” in terms of their effect for actors’ portrayal of self to themselves and to others, including the consequences that flow from these constructions (Dunbar-Hester, 2008). Work selves constitute a significant site of identity construction, which in
this case provides a lens into activist work and activist identity; as Andreas Glaeser (2000) writes, “Work [itself] is communicative action, which can therefore be analyzed in terms of performance” (p. 187; see also Goffman, 1959). The two empirical sections that follow employ this theoretical understanding of iterative identity performance to interpret the media activists’ undertakings within their own group and in their interactions with outsiders. In breaking this material into two sections, I wish to highlight the tension for the activists between these aspects of their work and draw out the contradictions they experienced as they toiled in advocacy while simultaneously nodding to the symbolic significance of their “technical” work; I do not mean to uncritically reproduce the activists’ own narrative that their “technical” work is significantly different from or more important than their “other” work.

William Carroll and Robert Hackett (2006) state that there are key differences between “conventional activism” and media activism, as conventional movements seek to use the media instrumentally in pursuit of their agendas, while media activists view the media system as an end in itself (p. 88). This is consonant with media scholar and advocate Robert McChesney’s call for a media reform movement: “Whatever your first issue of concern, media had better be your second, because without change in the media, the chances of progress in your primary area are far less likely,” a statement he attributes to former FCC commissioner Nicholas Johnson (McChesney, 2005, p. 11; see also Lentz, in press). Although much of the literature on new social movements has tended to explore the construction of collective identity (Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Melucci, 1996), Carroll and Hackett argue that media activism in particular lacks a “clear, regularized collective identity” (p. 93); this analysis picks up that observation and conceives of technical identity as one among many within a wider movement for media democracy. Through a focus on the local practices of activist work, this article provides a distinct, yet complementary, insight into studies of activism and social movements, using the concept of identity work to zoom in on the intersection of political agency and technological engagement. While the article does not employ a movement-level analysis, it is important to recognize that performances with high local identity are related to actors’ self-understanding as being members of a social movement for media democracy. In other words, while this article focuses on local practices, this is with the acknowledgment that the movement level is implicated in these local practices.

**Technical Identity and the Symbolic Importance of Technical Practice**

Work with machines has been theorized as a common site for identity formation (Douglas, 1987; Dunbar-Hester, 2008, 2010; Haring, 2006; Jordan & Taylor, 1998; Orr, 1996; Turkle, 1995). Most elementally, “technical identity” is usually understood as both a cause and a consequence of participation in technical occupations and/or hobbies. Technical identity also conveys a closer relationship with technology than that held by average users and is usually constituted in part by an affective relationship with technology (Haring, 2006).  

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5 The technical identity of the activists is explored in depth in the empirical sections of the article.
This article builds on this useful but rather narrow starting point for understanding technical identity to examine it as a resource for actors whose work is not primarily technical. This differentiates the radio activists from hackers (Coleman, 2004; Jordan & Taylor, 1998; Turkle, 1995), radio hams (Douglas, 1987; Haring, 2006), or machine technicians (Orr, 1996). The radio activists were concerned with producing not only working radio hardware but desirable social relationships, especially a democratic politics of expertise; their work was also not limited to technical engagement, as they also labored in advocacy around policy (discussed as follows) and in significant amounts of paperwork, filing, and other office and organizational work. The article thus extends technical identity theoretically by considering it in a domain where technical engagement is salient but not the actors’ sole pursuit and placing it within a wider repertoire of activist practices and commitments.

Two things are important to note in how I conceive of technology and technical identity. First, “technology” is mainly an actors’ category: The group uses “technical” to refer to audio, computer, and radio transmission hardware and software related to the production of LPFM and community media. I do not wish to imply that other practices they engage in as workers or as individuals, ranging from setting up mailing lists in databases, cleaning the office, instant-messaging, or even cooking, are not “technical practices”; I merely note that these other practices were not important for the group to articulate a position around “technology” and its meaning in their group.

Second, it is important to note that technical identity is not necessarily quite the same as technical skill. Certainly not everyone in the group of activists was equally skilled with radio hardware, computer hardware, or software. But the activists routinely displayed a technical identity, and I argue in what follows that this had much to do with their need to draw boundaries between themselves and others in the terrain of media advocacy work; the issue of technical identification was not straightforwardly about technical skill itself. Thus, it is worth disaggregating technical expertise from technical identity, or at least allowing that people with relatively less expertise may identify relatively strongly with technology. This is partly because this group constructed technical identity in a somewhat unusual way, in that these actors emphasize technical participation and demystification, rather than viewing technical expertise and technical identity as the exclusive domain of experts. For example, the radio activists’ emphasis on leveling expertise and increasing participation largely distinguishes them from groups such as hackers. However, in both cases, affinity for machines and attendant technical identity is conspicuous and analytically relevant. And like other forms of social identity, technical identity produces social categorizations, with the potential consequence of unifying members of this subcultural designation while setting them apart from people who do not share in this identity.

Like the amateur radio operators discussed by Haring (2006) and Douglas (1987, especially see Chapter 6), these actors have built up many aspects of their identities around their work with radio. Their work with radio hardware, as well as other electronics/computer hardware and programming, constitutes a site of technical identity formation, evidenced for many of them in self-aware interest in “geeky” topics, including tinkering and technical problems, science fiction, and historical knowledge.
of early radio and electronics (Dunbar-Hester, 2008). Also, it can be found in self-presentation: One Pandora staff member wore a 2600 (hacker) sweatshirt on many occasions. Another simple illustration is Pandora t-shirts, sold and worn by the group, the backs of which showed a schematic for a transmitter (Figure 1).

A prominent example is the radio station barnraisings, which constitute a “front-stage” site where technical identity was forged, promoted, and displayed (Goffman, 1959). The activists’ stated ideal was that “no one is allowed to do what they already know how to do” at a barnraising; expert engineers and activists were supposed to guide novice volunteers through the assembly of the new radio station, handing tools off to other people to learn new skills. This was seen as an exercise in community empowerment, and the technical practices were explicitly linked to political engagement. Staff activist Brian reflected on this practice: “A big part of the barnraisings [is that] it is a demystification, and making people feel like . . . “Oh, if I just did this enough, I could do this just as well . . . as this engineer” (Interview, July 5, 2006). Whether the activists’ ideals were matched by the social reality (and arguably they were not), the symbolic importance of the barnraising for the activists was that by “getting their hands dirty,” volunteers and activists forged a sense of engagement in a common technological and political project.

At barnraisings, a transmitting soldering station was a routine fixture. There are compelling reasons to use transmitter boards to introduce novices to technical work involving radio—they are fairly simple (certainly it is possible to assemble a working transmitter without knowing anything at all about the components or how it works), they are novel and exotic (many people have never really considered the inside of an electronic device, let alone soldered, before this experience at a barnraising), they work in a tangible way once they are complete (there are lights that switch on and off, a frequency one can change, and an audible product), and they are very clearly an

Figure 1. Transmitter schematic on a Pandora Radio Project t-shirt, 2005 (Courtesy PRP)
artifact related to radio, since the transmitter produces from an audio source the RF that is transmitted into the ether (Dunbar-Hester, 2009). Another Pandora activist commented on the relationship between technical engagement and the overall goal of systemic media change: “[The barnraising strategy is] the idea that hands-on participation in building the station has a transformative effect on how members of a community [sic] feel ownership of the media in question” (Email, Renée to basement, September 26, 2006). Both activists’ statements illustrate that the Pandorans sought to cultivate in barnraising participants a political consciousness, as well as to challenge elite models of expertise, through hands-on work with technological artifacts. Barnraisings were sites at which technical identity formation occurred, whether or not technical skill was significantly enhanced, and Pandora activists intended for barnraising participants’ identification with technology to help build and sustain the wider movement for media democracy. As this article highlights, Pandora activists also actively constructed and displayed their own technical commitments at barnraisings.

Andreas Glaeser (2000) writes, “In performance, the action does not consume itself, it does not rest in itself or exist for itself. Performance aims to convey a relationship between actors, their action, and an audience” (pp. 204-205). I argue that another notable performance of technical identity occurred in Louisville, KY, at a rally for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a group of Mexican, Guatemalan, and Haitian migrant workers with whom Pandora built a radio station, Radio Consciencia, in 2003. It was a windy day and the literature kept threatening to blow off the table. Staff activist Jasper ran to the car to get suitable paperweights, ultimately settling on these tools (Figure 2).
The tools prompted many comments from passers-by, just remarks like “Hey, nice paperweights!” Significantly, this rally was in celebration of the CIW’s major labor victory against the corporate parent of fast-food chain Taco Bell, for whom these workers picked tomatoes, and some of the commenters were wearing pro-union t-shirts (Campbell, 2005; see also Klinenberg, 2007). Thus, following Glaeser, I interpret the radio activists’ use of carpentry and electronics tools for paperweights as an act freighted with symbolism; in the simple act of weighting down their literature, they performed solidarity with craftspeople, as well as their belief in a participatory and hands-on relationship with technology, both of which were important markers of identity for their group within the terrain of media democracy work.

Stories of risk, both political and physical, were also a way of demonstrating technical affinity. Writing of Xerox technicians, Julian Orr (1990) notes, “[t]he construction of their identity as technicians occurs both in doing the work and in their stories” (p. 187). As in Orr’s case, the stories told by the Pandora workers constitute identity performance. Orr quotes Barbara Myerhoff, who points out that “one of the most persistent but elusive ways that people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves . . . by telling themselves stories. . . . More than merely self-recognition, self-definition is made possible by means of such showings, for their content may state not only what people think they are but what they should have been or may yet be” (quoted in Orr, 1990, p. 187). At a 2005 barnraising, volunteers raised a 100-foot tower with an antenna mounted on top of it, something Pandora had never done before, and which was genuinely terrifying at moments; it was not totally clear until it was over that the tower would not come crashing down. This episode was later woven into narratives about the group’s activities. At home in the Philadelphia office, staff activist Thomas said, “Sue the FCC? No problem. But raising that tower really scared me” (Fieldnotes, July 2005). The bodily and craft relationships with machines that the activists invoked in telling about their “real” work are significant: Thomas marked the contrast between “suing the FCC” and raising an antenna tower—namely, that the latter was imbued with gravitas and import whereas the former was no big deal—even though both were significant aspects of Pandora’s output, and failure in either of those efforts would have had major consequences. This indicates that the full complement of machinery, risk, and successful communal undertaking that the antenna tower incident represented held special import for the group’s self-understanding. A regular volunteer also referred to the antenna incident as an activity with a “high capacity for destruction” (notably, months after the barnraising, thus indicating that this story was attaining mythic status; Fieldnotes, August 2005).

Other examples of risk narratives proliferated. Thomas offered another one when he confessed that he thought Jasper was “crazy” when volunteers and Pandora staff unloaded a truck containing two donated old transmitters from the 1970s, which weighed about 1100 pounds each (Fieldnotes, July 2005; Figure 3). Like raising the antenna, Thomas later said he was almost surprised that no one got seriously hurt at the workshop.
And, though Pandora’s efforts in the United States are strictly legal, they occasionally smuggled transmitter parts into other countries where they were not authorized; when Jasper narrated his border-crossings, he emphasized the illegality of this behavior and how he needed to fib to officials about the tools and electronics components he carried. Thus, as expressed by both staff activists and volunteers, told to one another and to outsiders, these iterative stories told about risk and technology operated to forge an in-group identity. The smuggling of transmitter parts across national borders could also be read as a performance of continuity with the organization’s radical origins as pirate broadcasters, nearly 10 years prior.

Having described the radio activists’ celebration of the “technical” in their practice, I now delineate their efforts to maintain an “outsider” stance vis-à-vis “other” civil society organizations in the domain of media democracy work.

**Boundary Work Around Advocacy and Organizational Maturation**

A salient feature of the climate at Pandora during my fieldwork was disquietude over the prospect of transforming from radical activists into a nonprofit organization. In describing their history, activists routinely made reference to the organization’s origins in a ragtag pirate broadcasting collective. However, they acknowledged the significant changes to the organization since its inception. As the following examples illustrate, the activists were at pains to both differentiate themselves from “mainstream” nonprofit organizations and to mark various forms of continuity with their more radical, outsider past.

![Figure 3. Unloading a huge transmitter, Philadelphia, 2005 (Courtesy PRP)](image-url)
Pandora’s interactions with “outsider” groups provided multiple opportunities for “boundary work” and for reflection on the group’s own identity (Gieryn, 1983). Because of the bounded nature of my fieldwork, I necessarily have a particular “snapshot” view of their work over time, but I speculate that this was a relatively recent development, as when Pandora was younger, its members may have been more concerned with securing standing as legitimate spokespeople in advocacy, policy, and other situations requiring expertise beyond that of most members of the public. As their organization matured, they were instead poised, as they saw it, on a threshold between gaining legitimacy on the one hand and remaining outsiders who retained a critical and activist stance on the other. This is in some ways parallel to the conflict discussed by Steven Epstein (1996) for activists who draw initially on outsider, “lay” expertise but who become “inside” enough to participate in decision making as experts.

The Pandorans took pains to differentiate themselves as an activist group from “mainstream” nonprofits, even those that shared Pandora’s advocacy goals. A number of illuminating moments occurred during a February 2005 trip to Washington, D.C. At a meeting in the offices of a large advocacy organization, Pandora members trained members of the public for visits with legislators in which community members would urge elected officials to permit many new LPFM stations to be built.9 Pandora itself cannot participate in formal lobbying activities, but lobbyist allies in Washington were in attendance to offer guidance. At the meeting, Pandora reinforced the notion that their members inhabited positions in between those of “ordinary” citizens and experts. Staff activist Ellen told attendees that “We hate that we have to get you up to do this and undo the bad work of the [broadcast lobby]—we’d rather . . . build more stations, but we have to do this first” (Fieldnotes, February 7, 2005). Both the expert advocates and Pandora members were on hand to accompany citizens on legislative visits; people were told not to worry because they would have an “expert” with them, but the Pandora activists portrayed themselves as not being fully expert. At another point in this meeting, Ellen described Washington itself as a “crazy place full of magical buildings and towers that we [Pandora] don’t understand all that well.” This illustrates the fact that Pandora sought to embody a mediating role in between that of expert Washington “insider” and the community members they were advising; they downplayed their advocacy expertise and highlighted their mission as being more about their hands-on technical work to build new stations.

This lobbying exercise occurred in conjunction with another example of Pandora’s work as advocates, in which the FCC hosted Pandora, other advocates, and LPFM stationholders from around the country for Forum on LPFM (Figure 4). This was largely a symbolic exercise on both sides, as advocates knew the FCC was not going to announce any major changes to rules that would positively affect LPFM. At the same time, it was an act of good faith for activists and broadcasters to attend and remind the FCC that they were waiting for improvements to the LPFM service; there was also an undertone of sentiment that these people did not wish to be ignored by the FCC. At the forum, representatives from LPFM stations addressed the five members of the commission, each of whom was in attendance for at least part of the forum.
Pandora’s attitude toward the preparations for “LPFM Day” tacked between enthusiasm and ambivalence. Jasper more than once referred to the event as “the FCC’s dog-and-pony show.” But the activists were genuinely excited to meet with community groups and stationholders. Here it is worth noting that in the late 1990s, before the initiation of the LPFM service, some activists who went on to found Pandora had pressured the FCC to revisit its policy towards microbroadcasting; as stated in the introduction, one notable event in 1998 included protesters operating an unlicensed transmitter and broadcasting their protest into the FCC building (Figure 5). Thus, in noting the contrast between these events, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that the activists of 2005 expressed some regret about being invited inside to make their case legally, on terms set by the FCC.

Furthermore, at home in the office in Philadelphia, Pandora activists routinely teased each other for acting like “other” nonprofits, including using words like “constituents” and “deliverables” when talking about their work. Although they did use these terms, they were usually peppered with comments like, “Oh, I can’t believe I just said ‘deliverables’—that’s so horrible!” They clearly felt that they drew their strength and unique identity as an organization from the fact that they were in touch with the
grassroots, which differed from their perception of mainstream (especially “Beltway”) advocacy groups. Ellen perfectly expressed the tension over this boundary for her when she described having bought a pair of “Congress pants” in a thrift store; that is, pants that she felt looked like part of the “uniform” worn by lobbyists and other Washington insiders, and which she only wore to dress up for occasions when she had to meet with members of this “other” group. On the one hand, she had clothes that made her feel like she “fit in” with the members of these other groups when she needed to, but she stated clearly that for her they were a “costume”—and she didn’t pay retail for them, having bought them second-hand.

Last, Pandora not only negotiated boundaries vis-à-vis “mainstream” nonprofits but also vis-à-vis other members of the microradio community whose politics were more radicalized. Eric Klinenberg (2007) writes that “By cooperating with the FCC, [they found themselves] opposed to pirate leaders such as Dunifer of Free Radio Berkeley and Kantako from Human Rights Radio [unlicensed broadcasters who had famously battled the FCC in court in the 1980s and 1990s]” (p. 256). In a 2005 staff meeting discussing coordination for an upcoming conference on community radio, Pandora activists talked about the potential for conflict between Dunifer and FCC members, who were all invited to the conference. They expressed concern over whether Dunifer might “be nasty to the FCC, or encourage other people to be nasty to them,” as he opposed regulation of the airwaves. They also worried that if Dunifer led transmitter-building workshops in which he encouraged people to use the transmitters for unlicensed broadcasting, the FCC might be unappreciative. Jasper said, “I don’t know, this presents a dilemma. But [FCC Commissioner Jonathan] Adelstein is pretty
cool with pirates” (Fieldnotes, April 27, 2005). Whether or not this was “true”, at
times it certainly mattered to the Pandorans to not seem too estranged from the
FCC’s viewpoint. Yet Ellen offered that one potential solution would be to state
explicitly that the transmitters would be used internationally, outside of the FCC’s
domain, and likened the situation to buying a pipe for smoking marijuana: “Have you
ever been to a headshop? You need to say, ‘I’d like to see your water-pipes, please.’
Just watch the language and it’ll be okay” (Fieldnotes, April 27, 2005). She framed the
activists’ position as one of tolerating, or even favoring illegal behavior, but not flaunt-
ing it. This episode illustrates that activists needed to walk a line where they felt true
to their identities and organizational mission, while respecting both “pirates” and the
FCC.  

Crucially, pirate sympathies were not foreign to the activists; indeed, the oft-
told origin myth of their organization located their roots firmly within pirate broad-
casting. At the same time, they could no longer espouse fully piratical politics.

Thus, I argue that the radio activists were generally concerned with maintaining a
critical, radical stance even as they underwent change from radical outsiders to the
legislative process to becoming members of an organization with a higher profile and
more legitimacy in policy and advocacy environments. They held admiration for
pirates and retained an affection for such traditional protest tactics as street theater.
Meanwhile, they viewed mainstream advocacy groups as suspicious, at least some-
times, for being too close to establishment values, for not being radicalized enough,
and crucially, for their potential to transform activists into insiders who have lost sight
of their activism.

Conclusions: Technical Identity in Activist Work

In the previous sections, this article has laid out two main features of the radio activists’
work: first, their assertion of a technical identity, and second, their effort to construct
a self-understanding as being different from other groups in the domain of media advo-
cacy. This article does not claim that the latter phenomenon is unique to technological
activism or to this group; indeed the tension for an activist organization over becoming
more institutionalized is a common one. However, what is significant about this case
is the interplay between technical identity and other practices of media activism. In
invoking work with technology, the activists bound their efforts to a particular politics
of technical demystification and participation. This was especially important as they
dealt with greater organizational stature and policy expertise concomitant with the
maturation of their organization. Thus, at this juncture, Pandora members systemati-
cally devalued their advocacy expertise while elevating their technical practice, por-
traying themselves as radically populist “techies” who stood apart from policy
“wonks.” Curiously, this resulted in technical identity being deployed in a perhaps
counterintuitive manner, in that it was used to reinforce an organizational identity that
was not professional, was decidedly antitechnocratic, and was not white-collar.

The issue of a technical identity that is not white-collar necessitates a brief foray
into the complexity of class when considering technological activism. These extremely
hard-working yet low-paid workers at Pandora often held undergraduate degrees from elite institutions and drew on other reserves of cultural and social capital, not to mention possessing higher-than-average levels of political capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Yet they rejected a pedigreed elitism, making statements like, “Even if you don’t have a fancy degree, your neighborhood group can probably do a better job serving your community than the greedy jokers that own everything now [you can understand policy, and serve your community with a radio station better than a corporation]!” (Pandora Radio Project brochure, © 2004 [Pandora] Radio, emphasis in original).

Categories of class, identity, and technical work are not easily parsed or cleanly designated: Examples include Carla Freeman’s (2000) “high-tech” office workers who identify as middle-class while making relatively low wages but whose work with computers in a multinational corporate office environment has high status in Barbados where they work, as well as relatively specialized technical workers who, despite formal education and other characteristics that might link them to the managerial class, identify more with traditional working-class identities, as discussed by Sean Creighton and Randy Hodson (1997). Even though these categories resist simplistic readings, it is clear that the radio activists mounted a critique of a mainstream bourgeois identity when they wore unkempt beards, kept nonstandard business hours, and opted not to dress in a “professional” manner (a Pandora job ad read: “Dress is casual, though on occasion you may need to bathe and pull on something that has no holes in it”); email, Ellen to basement, December 18, 2004). Thomas underscored this when he said in an interview, “I’m a bearded guy in a basement,” emphasizing both his “nonprofessional” (or even “antiprofessional”) appearance and that the organization’s work occurred in a setting that might not seem like a traditional office (Interview, February 2, 2006).

Indeed, these were “professionals” who had to remind each other to be on time for Congressional meetings, teasing, “You know, some people actually go to their jobs at nine in the morning” (Fieldnotes, February 2005). Relatedly, Pandora activists made repeated references to members’ pasts in such pursuits as Las Vegas card counter and black-market carpenter, again exhibiting an oppositional stance vis-à-vis bourgeois or professional occupations. They also resisted stable occupational titles (see Becker & Carper, 1956). A woman who had volunteered for Pandora for several years stepped up her involvement and asked about the title she should use, to which Jasper replied, “everyone at [Pandora] gets to make up their own title. it is an initiation. how about Spectral Director? or Chief of Rainbows? Wave Associate? You can’t have Director of Electromagnetism, that’s mine!” (Email, Jasper to basement, March 9, 2006).

Here, Jasper playfully resisted the practice of a stable occupational title; equally significantly, his reply also highlighted the technical and material properties of spectrum.

Ironically, even though it is constructed as accessible to members of the public and is intended to bolster a sense of unity among activists, this iteration of technical identity carries its own exclusiveness. Technological activists may pride themselves on their geekiness, including a failure to cultivate the slicker interpersonal style of lobbyists and of political insiders. The above examples—from “Congress pants” to Pandora’s
reflection on their own position between pirates and the FCC—demonstrate that the radio activists made significant efforts to resist embodying the role of Beltway insider. And of course they prided themselves on what lobbyists and political insiders ostensibly lack: getting their hands dirty, actually building something. To underscore this, at a 2005 “birthday party” for LPFM in Washington (celebrating the 5-year anniversary of the FCC’s designation of LPFM service), Pandora made a symbolic display when they presented their lawyer with a handmade radio receiver from South Africa: This was not only an expression of gratitude, it was a way of demonstrating that her “difference” was overcome, placing her on the “inside” of the boundary they policed when they valorized technical engagement.

Thus, the maintenance and assertion of technical identity in these circumstances was a way of managing anxiety about the attenuation of radical activist ideals in the face of a more professionalized, more expert work environment. It served to efface boundaries between the organization’s past and present (and even future), drawing continuity based on the symbolic value of technical practice. Yet it also erected boundaries: The activists’ emphasis on technical identity was very much a way of performing a “we’re not them” position vis-à-vis more professionalized insiders and experts, whom they encountered both in other nonprofit settings and in policy settings and against whom they wished to define themselves in contrast. Of course, as noted by Michael Owen Jones (1991), such distinctions between groups in institutional settings are not necessarily “true”; echoing points raised by Orr and Myerhoff about stories, a group’s expressive culture may provide continual reminders of its shared belief system, of who “we” are as opposed to “them” (both in Orr, 1990). Indeed, this expressive culture performed work in the minds of the Pandora workers as they struggled to mature as an organization, refine their mission, and yet continue to work in a manner that was perceived to be in line with activist ideals. And this strategy seems uniquely adapted to the history and commitments of this crew of radio activists; other groups not engaged in a technological form of activism may find different strategies to manage the maintenance of an activist identity in the face of organizational change.

Of course, this is only one site of many within a sprawling and heterogeneous movement for media democracy, and technological activism is but one strategy of many within media democracy work; I do not claim that this site (or any) is representative of the movement as a whole. As Carroll and Hackett (2006) discuss, different groups employ different modes of action in their pursuit of media democracy, and certainly, the movement has room for a multiplicity of groups and strategies (see also Lentz, 2010). Nonetheless, the creation and assertion of technical identity has implications that extend beyond the radio activists’ internal struggle to refine their organization’s mission and propagate community radio. Within the spectrum of media activism, it is possible that groups who share something akin to technical identity may find collaboration across organizations to be more seamless; conversely, working on campaigns with organizations whose members identify differently, or against whom the technological activists define themselves, may prove more challenging. Both analysts and
practitioners of media activism would thus be wise to heed the symbolic role of technology in activist strategies to both erect and efface boundaries between groups.

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**Notes**

1. Spinelli (2000) notes that some activists as well as commentators were more ambivalent, regarding the attainment of legal LPFM as a half-measure, but nonetheless LPFM was regarded by many as a political victory around which to rally.
2. I refer to the organization and its members pseudonymously.
3. Here my invocation of “fidelity” evades simplistic realism; although I build this account on carefully conducted research, I do not seek to “merely represent” the activists’ milieu, nor do I consider this “objective” mode of representation to be possible or desirable.
4. This is not to suggest that identities are endlessly fluid (see Butler, 1993; Dunbar-Hester, 2008).
5. Haring (2006) argues for a dual sense of technical identity, possessed by both people and machines, mutually reinforcing and coproduced. However, I find her argument more convincing as it applies to people and thus do not take it up to explain the attribution of meaning to artifacts by people.
6. I eliminate a description of paperwork, filing, and like activities from this discussion due to space limitation.
7. See Coleman, 2004; Hess, 2005; Jordan and Taylor, 1998; and Kelty, 2005, for more on hackers’ politics. See Dunbar-Hester, 2009, for more on sociological and analytical overlaps and contrasts between radio activism and hackers.
8. Even though this analysis does not highlight gender, it is impossible to ignore that these stories contain at least a whiff of machismo.
10. Ultimately Dunifer did not attend the conference, thus rendering moot the Pandorans’ kidding about putting him and the FCC on the same panel, but the head of the FCC’s audio division gave a presentation.
11. Thanks to Mike Lynch for raising this point.
12. Of course, the option to leave one’s face unshaven is mainly restricted to the masculine gender, yet women activists and volunteers also complained about whether to shave (armpits, legs) for trips to Congress.
13. Since this remark was made via email, I reproduce Jasper’s original capitalization.
14. Whether this phenomenon even constitutes a movement is contested (see Napoli, 2009).
15. Though perhaps not: The radio activists’ notion of anti-technocratic decision making not only puts them at odds with hackers but with some technologically-oriented nongovernmental organizations interested in internet governance as discussed by Mueller (2002; see also McLaughlin & Pickard, 2005).

References


Bio

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