LOW POWER TO THE PEOPLE
PIRATES, PROTEST, AND POLITICS IN FM RADIO ACTIVISM

Christina Dunbar-Hester
Low Power to the People
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Low Power to the People

Pirates, Protest, and Politics in FM Radio Activism

Christina Dunbar-Hester

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I also wish to thank Margy Avery, Katie Persons, my reviewers for MIT Press, and the MIT staff for their enthusiasm about this project and their assistance in bringing the book into being.
On October 4, 1998, a raucous group of protesters assembled in front of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) building in Washington, DC. Seeking legal access to the airwaves for small-scale broadcasting by citizens and community groups, they engaged in established street theater tactics, including puppetry, 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, sans license). Of course this transmission was symbolic; the activists did not so much wish to instrumentally broadcast to the commission as to declare their presence on the airwaves and demand regulators' attention.

By 2000, their efforts had borne fruit. The FCC slowly began to issue licenses for new low-power FM (LPFM) stations; this was the first time in more than twenty years that would-be micro-broadcasters had a legal option for getting on the air. Several hundred new stations were broadcasting by the late 2000s. In the decade following the protest, a burgeoning movement for media democracy regarded LPFM licensing as a victory and mounted 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 low-power radio 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. The latter goal was attained in 2011, when President Obama signed into law the Local Community Radio Act of 2010, authorizing the FCC to grant licenses to additional new LPFM stations.
This book examines the practices of a small activist organization focused on LPFM during the early period of the institutionalization of LPFM, from approximately 2003 to 2007. The group had its origins in the mid-1990s as a pirate broadcasting outfit. But by the early 2000s, they had morphed into a non-profit organization to promote LPFM. The group engaged in a combination of advocacy to expand community media and hands-on technical work to build new stations (having ceased broadcasting themselves after being shut down by the FCC in 1998). This book traces their activities with an eye to the intersection of technical practice and political engagement. It specifically investigates how the radio activists imputed emancipatory politics to radio technology—notably, an “old” medium—against a shifting technical and political landscape that included increasing attention to Internet-based technologies. What is meant by “emancipatory politics”? Activists claimed that FM radio tinkering and broadcasting held the potential to empower everyday people through increasing democratic participation, autonomy, and self-determination at the community level. Their notion that expertise was accessible to all contrasted with more common conceptions of expertise; technology is more often constructed as the province of elite experts, and wider political, moral, and social issues are collapsed into seemingly narrow technical ones.

The politics of technology in media activism is a topic of more than academic interest. These radio activists are important because of their mediating position, situated between “upstream” regulators or policy makers and “downstream” user communities; they are not mere Luddites nor nostalgic hobbyists. Often, they attempted to exert influence in both directions, and their work to interpret, define, and propagate technologies has the potential to affect how ordinary users might understand, access, and make use of the technologies in question. Advocacy work to construct radio as highly local, noncommercial, and accessible to ordinary people had an impact on how policy shaped low-power radio. But the radio activists also exhibited a strong commitment to hands-on technical practice and work with radio hardware.

The sort of reflective technical engagement the radio activists promoted is significant for a variety of reasons. At the core of their technical practice was a commitment to a participatory politics, with attendant challenges and contradictions. In essence, though the radio activists claimed to favor radio as a medium for expression in part because of the ostensibly low barrier to access, attaching an emancipatory politics to tinkering and hands-on work was fraught. Though they valued technical practice as a means to demystify technology and create a political awakening in users, they struggled with the fact that patterns of inclusion and exclusion had
already formed around electronics; historically practiced by elites, whites, and men, tinkering was not equally appealing to members of other groups. This tension between participatory ideals and expert forms of knowledge recurs throughout much of this book.

Anthropologist Jeffrey Juris, writing of anticorporate globalization movements, contends that “activists increasingly express their utopian imaginaries directly through concrete organizational and technological practice.”¹ This is a useful starting point for understanding the practices of these radio activists, who were uniquely focused on technology and technical practice as the foundation for their vision of social change. In this book, I conceptualize the radio activists as “propagators” of technology.² I draw on the meaning of propagation as reproduction and replication and also its sense of creating an effect at a distance (and of course the entendre with radio wave propagation suits this group especially well).³

Although it is not unusual for activists to orient themselves around technologies as a part of a more extensive agenda for social change,⁴ there are features that make these propagators unique. Propagators are special in how they combine mediation or interpretive work with a commitment to material engagement with an artifact. The radio activists hoped to place radio and their prescription for its use into as many hands as possible. Their goal was to set into motion social dynamics through the diffusion of radio technology and associated practices and then step back; they did not seek to oversee the these dynamics on an ongoing basis, instead believing that idealized social relations (including idealized media content) would flow from the act of propagation alone. Propagation was an act of knowledge production; in the radio activists’ imagination, it produced not only hardware but also social relations. Propagation is thus articulating artifacts to politics and vice versa: while the radio activists were building technical artifacts, they were simultaneously building a politics of what might be called “participatory expertise.” They strove to open up technical practice to people who were not technical experts. They understood this form of expertise to extend even beyond the domain of technology itself.

Put differently, activists turned to technology to express their political beliefs. At a typical technical workshop, people would spend hours in a basement soldering cables, then move to a rooftop to measure an RF (radio frequency) signal, before returning to the basement to try to fix a faulty connection or recalibrate equipment. One summer evening, radio activists and I moved from an electronics repair project in a basement to a scavenging project at a university engineering building slated for demolition. Having deemed it late enough to roam around the bowels of the building
undisturbed, we spent hours digging through equipment that was being cast off. Cables, ammeters, and a horn antenna were among the haul. It was unclear what uses this gear would be put to, but its acquisition represented the values of reuse and repair, sharing, preparedness, and, of course, the requisite technical expertise to identify and imagine uses for the various pieces of equipment we uncovered. Reading a draft of this book, one activist commented to me that I “had written an anthropology of the basement.” Her remark has a double meaning: the radio activists’ office was literally in a church basement, a fact they made much of (and that served to distinguish them in their minds from more established nonprofit organizations). But she also marked the basement as a symbolic space of radio activism, which was not the halls or streets of Washington, DC, but the ubiquitous, grimy spaces of do-it-yourself (DIY) work and leisure. Radio activism was everywhere, and you didn’t need more to participate in it than a soldering iron, your neighbors, and a basement. It was separate from but contiguous with everyday life, and accessible to everyday people. It challenged the separation of technical expertise from lay know-how, and technical practice itself was held to be transformative at the individual and societal levels.

Radio activists are not alone in tying their work with technology to politics. Internet governance geeks and free software developers can also be understood to engage in activism and deeply technical projects. However, in spite of their similar technical commitments and normative claims, they largely differ from the radio activists: they usually achieve a consensus in which technical participation is limited to technical experts, which means they can focus more exclusively on debating and solving technical problems. They frequently leave the job of articulating the meaning of their technical work to mediating groups; mediators, rather than “techies,” tend to translate technical projects and engage in advocacy. (The division of labor between Debian developers and the nonprofit organization Creative Commons within the free culture movement is one such example.) Propagators (who engage in technical practice and ongoing advocacy and mediation) are distinct.

Although a commitment to egalitarianism is not a criterion for the category of propagator, this commitment, however elusive in practice, further marks contrast between some other forms of activist technical projects and the radio activists. Plenty of activist projects around technology simply are not concerned with issues of unequal expertise. In many free and open source software projects, participation may be “open” in the sense that anyone who can contribute to a project is welcome to contribute. But a
uniformly expert status among participants is unquestioned. By contrast, the radio activists were highly committed to drawing novices and laypeople into technical practice. However, they routinely found themselves confounded by the potential for conflict between engineers and laypeople, as well as by patterns of exclusion that ran against the egalitarian values they hoped to tie to technical practice.

Simultaneously, the radio activists were attuned to the fact that their project seemed anachronistic to some; their concentration on an “old,” “dinosaur” technology seemed to belie their relative technological competence and sophistication. And yet “new media” were in many ways deeply and self-consciously implicated in the activists’ propagation of radio. Radio activists—many of whom were well-versed in digital politics and activism—were concerned with alternatives to digital utopianism, resisting Internet-based communication as an analog (no pun intended) for what they understood to be salient and desirable about radio. This led to a situation in which they were, in some ways, defining radio in contrast to dominant ideas about digital media. They were especially interested in propagating an understanding of electronic media that emphasized local- or community-scale purposes, which stood in relief to the ostensible global reach of Internet-based technologies.

Though centered on radio, the dynamics this book explores are much broader. If we listen, articulation of values and political agendas to artifacts becomes audible. This radio case study is a model for other studies of technology. Too often claims about what the Internet is or does unquestioningly locate values and politics “inside” the artifact. Breathless exultations such as, “Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony” (as stated by Wired magazine’s Nicholas Negroponte in 1995) are ubiquitous across punditry. The unbridled enthusiasm for “the digital” is not the only reason we should not accept these statements at face value. We need to recontextualize such declarations as part of a dynamic of articulation; they are rhetorical claims whose effect is to crystallize particular notions about what the Internet is. Radio activists’ evangelism exemplifies how links are actively forged between politics and the technologies they engage. This phenomenon is as relevant to “the digital” as to older technologies such as radio. Indeed, it is only the hype-driven Internet mythology that causes us to think of anything associated with the Internet as new and anything analog-related (like radio) as old.

During the period of my fieldwork, the radio activist group I followed faced organizational maturation and mission recalibration. They struggled to retain a sense of coherence in their work. Radical politics and technical
engagement were of great symbolic importance, but these concerns did not in any way fully represent the range of projects the group was occupied with (which included everything from advocacy in Washington, DC, to researching health insurance policies for their organization, to fixing up old transmitters, to building radio stations). The radio activists pursued a unique combination of advocacy and technical work, which required a balancing act. Technical engagement nonetheless held a special symbolic value within their diverse repertoire.

*Low Power to the People* is organized as follows. Chapter 1 provides a historical introduction to my site, placing the radio activists into a wider cultural and historical context. Radio activism in this era must be understood as issuing from distinct yet interwoven social, cultural, technical, and political strands including: embedded practices of community media production and pirate radio; “Indymedia” and the transnational anticorporate globalization movement; 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 growing movement for media democracy. Other antecedents to radio activism include ham and citizens band radio, the Appropriate Technology movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and earlier broadcast reform movements. Even readers familiar with LPFM and its history will wish to read this chapter because it is here that I situate radio activism within earlier cultural formations and delineate the activists’ specific priorities during my fieldwork. These priorities determined what I was able to observe and thus interpret: during this period, their attentions were split among fighting media consolidation, advocating for the expansion of LPFM, and building radio stations.

My own empirical work begins in chapter 2. This chapter takes up the issue of the activists’ commitment to technical practice, focusing on their weekly tinkering group in their hometown of Philadelphia as well as the most significant symbolic site of their activism, the radio station “barn-raising.” This was the name activists gave to their radio station-building events, in which volunteers and staff activists joined together to put a new LPFM station on the air over a weekend. Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to the concept of “identity work,” a thread that runs throughout much of the book (see also chapters 5 and 7). I show how the radio activists cultivated a geeky technical identity and how this interacted with other identities, including activist identity, countercultural identity, and gender identity. I argue that rather than existing as stable or inherent categories, these identities functioned as social tools; they were resources on which the activists drew, with varying consequences. The symbolic importance of technical
practice for the activists also recurs throughout the book, especially in chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7.

In chapter 4, I continue to explore the radio activists’ technical undertakings, focusing on the productive and affective priorities of this form of technological activism. This chapter focuses on a pedagogical workshop the activists held over a weekend—the barnraising ethos in miniature, with attendant advantages and difficulties for activists, novices, and expert participants. I draw out some of the dynamics surrounding expertise that vexed the activists as they tried to realize a political vision that called for equality. I show that one consequence of promoting technology as a platform for emancipatory politics is that this can result in a constant battle with unequally distributed expertise.

I turn in chapter 5 to an examination of the role that technical affinity played as the group underwent organizational maturation. This largely played out as the systematic elevation of “technical” work and the downplaying of policy-advocacy expertise (even though both were salient in their work). I argue that the radio activists cultivated a technical identity that served to mark boundaries between their group and others in the terrain of media democracy work, which was especially important as they struggled to retain radical activist criticality and to resist being transformed into a “mainstream” nonprofit organization. At the same time, technical identity worked to downplay potentially troubling disjunctures within the activist organization. It marked continuity between the activists’ past, present, and future, and it enabled them to assign coherence to a diverse range of tasks that might otherwise seem incongruent. I refer to this dynamic as “boundary effacement.”

Chapter 6 examines the discursive practices by which LPFM advocates attempted to redefine radio’s use and meaning. During the 1990s and 2000s, radio broadcasting (a familiar and decades-old technology) remained the site of intense contestation (even in the wake of “new” media and Internet-based technologies). Echoing past reformers, radio activists (and other advocates with whom they were not always in full accord) defined FM radio as noncommercial, well-suited to local or community-level use, and a medium for political expression and organizing. The activists’ role as propagators of technology was evident as they sought not only to diffuse the artifact of LPFM, but also to shape interpretations of broadcasting.

The final empirical chapter of this book follows radio activists’ assessments of emerging Internet-based technologies (primarily wi-fi networks). Particularly for urban areas where LPFM licenses were out of reach, the activists considered other “appropriate technologies” to promote citizen
media production. I show that the radio activists were selective in their adoption of or resistance to various options, some of which they largely rejected (such as webcasting) and others of which they cautiously embraced (such as community wi-fi networks). Having identified radio as the artifact with which their politics best aligned, they were circumspect about the propagation of other technologies that were less obviously tied to the values they identified in radio.

In the book’s conclusion, I argue that in their efforts to define and propagate radio, the activists demonstrated an understanding of media technologies as tools for transmission of information, promotion of “community,” and redistribution of power. But I contend that they privileged promotion of community and redistribution of power over transmission of information. This stands in contrast to some strains of digital utopianist thought, which view access to electronic communication technologies as tools to disseminate information. Here the value of analyzing contestations around an old technology becomes more apparent: listening to the debates around contemporary meanings of broadcasting helps us tease apart differing values surrounding electronic communication in general. This book’s final point is that because technical expertise is unequally distributed, there are real risks in fetishizing technology as a platform for egalitarian politics.

What This Book Does Not Do

First and foremost, this is not a book about the future of radio, the end of radio, or the future of digital technology. In some ways, it is not even a book about radio; rather, it is a book about questions that precede all of those topics: how do certain artifacts come to have particular political meanings? Do certain beliefs about the role of technology in human affairs lead to particular choices about technology? Do politics have artifacts? And, in which ways do people’s close relationships with technologies (including tinkering and pleasures in technology) come to shape wider interpretations of technology?

This is a book about people tying politics to artifact—it examines the construction and implementation of specific beliefs about what technology can do, what technology should do, or what artifact is most appropriate to enact a set of politics. This story offers wider lessons for scholars of technology and broadens the relevance of this topic beyond the issue of radio per se. That said, the fact that radio activism is the object of study is of course wholly relevant: this case is not presented as a generalizable one, but it is an especially interesting one in part because it affords an opportunity to trace
the trajectory of a familiar technology into its ninth decade of existence (roughly locating the origin of broadcasting, as distinct from radio telegraphy, circa 1920). Far from being a “settled” technology, radio reverberated with renewed vibrancy and relevance in the contestations that I chronicle.

The media institutions and artifacts we have (as well as those we have had in the past and might have in the future) are in part the product of political activities oriented to certain policy goals. Although policy ideas matter very much in the shaping of media technologies and institutions, this is not a book primarily about policy. Though telecommunications policy was of course hugely implicated in what the radio activists were enabled to do (or how they were constrained), here I am less interested in commenting on policy or critiquing dominant policy discourses. Instead I take an approach consistent with what anthropologist Hugh Gusterson has called “a cultural perspective on a policy problem.”

I am concerned with how people structure beliefs around artifacts (or how politics form around normative ideas about what technology should do). I ask how and why these activists sought to produce the social and technical arrangements they deemed most desirable. My aim is to explore the lifeworld of low-power radio activism, and in so doing shed light on the cultural processes involved in activists attaching a particular emancipatory politics to a decades-old communication technology. I show the radio activists’ efforts to construct meanings for radio broadcasting that include its viability for local communities, its potential as a political medium, and its continuing vibrancy at the turn of the twenty-first century. I seek to explain the significance of their pursuit of radio in an era when many dominant discourses had become focused exclusively on “new media” and “the digital.”

It also must be stated at the outset that though my object of study—technologically oriented media activism—is related to what might be termed a social movement, my analysis is not at the level of a movement. Rather, I examine media activism at the level of practice, seeking to understand how social groups attempt to build politics around communication technologies and vice versa. I ethnographically interrogate activism as a creative and productive activity, even while acknowledging that actors’ practice was often related to their self-understanding as being members of a movement. To refer to this movement, I use “media democracy movement” most frequently, but it is important to note that this is a disputed label. Indeed, the issue of whether this is actually “a” single movement is also contestable.

I am concerned with generating a practice-oriented understanding of activism, as opposed to taking activism as a category for granted. Though Edward Woodhouse et al. usefully define “activism” as “a range of methods
used by groups with relatively little institutional power attempting to influence opinion, policy, or practice, this sheds relatively little light on what the granular practices of activism are. In particular, how may some activities that look very different from one another all be understood to be activism? Or conversely, how may activities that appear similar from the outside be distinguished as activism—or not activism—according to actors’ understandings? This work also differs from other studies of media activism that offer meso- and macro-level analyses addressing typologies of media activism, as opposed to practice.

Scholars have pointed out that there are some key differences between “conventional activism” and media activism, because conventional movements seek to use the media instrumentally in pursuit of their agendas, whereas media activists view media as an end in itself. The media democracy movement is thus an “umbrella” movement: people working around other issues often come to media activism after identifying media as a linchpin that will constrain or enable their organizing around their original topic. This movement’s constituency is wide and not always exclusively committed to media issues. Much of the literature on new social movements has tended to explore the construction of collective identity. William Carroll and Robert Hackett argue that media activism in particular lacks a “clear, regularized collective identity,” in part because of the way it serves as an umbrella or perhaps meta-movement. I do in some way share with theorists of social movements an interest in identity. But rather than attending to how people construct and negotiate collective identities within a movement, I focus on how differing commitments and identities interact with technical practice (particularly at the intersection of political agency and technological engagement). I examine the local practices of activist work and identity construction, without much regard to how these might play out at a movement level. Though these iterations of identity (and the complements and conflicts between them I uncover) might very well be relevant at a movement level as well, those dynamics are not a focus of this book. My interest in affective relationships people form with technologies may have resonance with cultural approaches to social movements that seek to understand the construction and role of affect in social movements, but is not directly analogous.

**Research Activities, Methods, Position**

This project combines a deep, single-site ethnographic inquiry focused on one group of radio activists with interviewing and observation at other critical sites. My fieldwork began in 2003. I spent that summer in Philadelphia.
conducting interviews and participant-observation with a group of media activists who gathered weekly to tinker (referred to as “Geek Group”). I identified Prometheus Radio Project, a small organization devoted to radio activism, as my main field site during this period. Prometheus stood out among media advocacy groups (others of which do not generally combine policy advocacy with hands-on technical work). They provided an excellent focal point to engage themes related to politics of technology, technological engagement and skill, and negotiation between technological options. I volunteered with Prometheus in 2004–2005 and immersed myself in participant observation, which included working and observing in the office and observing activities in Philadelphia. I also accompanied Prometheus on trips to Washington, DC, to attend meetings with lobbyists, FCC members, members of Congress and their staffers, and community groups seeking to obtain LPFMs. We also traveled to Chicago multiple times to meet with community members and advocacy groups working on wi-fi networks. I spent a month with an organizer on a speaking tour across parts of the Midwest and the South. I attended LPFM radio station barn-raising events in Pasquo, Tennessee and Florence, Massachusetts, as well as a similar station-building event in a village outside of Arusha, Tanzania, in East Africa. In 2005–2006 I pulled away from full-time participant observation, but I conducted additional interviews and I continued to attend and observe special or significant events, including one additional barn-raising in Woodburn, Oregon, in 2006. I also attended Prometheus workshops on community wi-fi and proceedings on municipal wi-fi in front of the Philadelphia City Council. In all, I conducted twenty-nine semistructured interviews, most of which were recorded digitally and manually (I took detailed notes that I used to guide me when I went back over the audio recordings); I conducted additional informal interviewing in settings such as barnraisings. These interviews included not only activists but also members of regulatory bodies (the Federal Communications Commission and Congress), the corporate broadcast lobby, and other media reform advocacy groups. I also met with LPFM radio station station holders and volunteers, academic institutions, and foundations that fund media reform work. I complemented my ethnographic fieldwork with documentary research on activism and policy from 1996 to 2006. This included comments and petitions filed at the FCC and documents produced by advocacy groups, National Public Radio, and the telecommunications trade association, the National Association of Broadcasters, all of whom weighed in on the shaping of LPFM. This decade, marked by the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the decision of the Federal Communications Commission to start
licensing low-power stations again, was crucial to the evolution of media activism in the United States.

According to Wiebe Bijker, “Actors provide an effective starting point from which to identify relevant social groups”22 for understanding how technologies acquire specific meanings and importance. My account follows the activists’ involvement in contestations around radio but does not attempt to “balance” their concerns with those of other social groups, including regulators, media policy groups, incumbent broadcasters, lawmakers, members of the public, and groups who desired to broadcast. Instead, I take the relational positioning work on the part of the activists as they attempted to influence other groups as central to the analysis.23 I allow the activities of the radio activists to largely define my priorities in terms of identifying other groups relevant for inclusion in this account. Other groups’ voices can be heard most plainly in chapters 5 through 7.

Ethnographic truths are always partial. Though I observe and make an effort to narrate the events in this account with a commitment to fidelity, my account is inherently incomplete.24 (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.) I am aware that my presence in research settings had the potential to actively change what I was studying.25 Activists would on occasion question me about what I was taking notes on. They would occasionally 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 writes, echoing Donna Haraway, “there is knowledge here, but it is … situated knowledge.”26 I do not claim to offer a complete or generalizable account. I am instead presenting ethnographic “true fiction.”27

Anthropologist of science Sharon Traweek writes, “The fieldworker needs to remain marginal. If she were to become a fully integrated participant in the community, its sociocultural assumptions would no longer stand out in the foreground of her attention; and in any case it would no longer then be appropriate for her to be asking questions about the meaning of social actions.”28 I approached researching the radio activists as a novice to electronics and with no skills in journalism or audio production. My greatest exposure to radio production prior to this fieldwork was occasionally sitting in on the monthly radio show my best friend had in college. I did, however, have office and writing experience and a distant background in youth
activism (though nothing that resembled the organizing campaigns at Prometheus). In some ways, it seemed a hindrance that I was not more versed in the skills of the group, because I could then perhaps have contributed more fully to the projects and work undertaken by the activists. But at the same time, my relative unfamiliarity was a benefit in terms of being able to make critical sense of social actions, as mentioned by Traweek. Because many of the group’s events (including barnraisings and Geek Group) were purportedly about imparting skills, there was merit in learning as an active participant, rather than trying to reconstruct learning through interviews or observation. There would also be less pedagogy to observe if everyone in a group were relatively expert, so novice status was additionally useful in that regard. In terms of the analysis I make on gender (as well as race and class, though gender receives greater attention here), my own positionality as a middle-class white woman pursuing an advanced degree is certainly worth consideration. I cannot say that my experience in the group was a universal one, not least because I was there as an observer and social scientist. I was also a female person trying to learn. The geeks’ treatment of me, and interest in my experience as a novice, woman, ethnographer, and participant in the group of course contribute to the observations and analysis I offer here.

Especially at barnraisings, it was often difficult for me to stick to my own research agenda. I participated as “ethnographer” but also as a volunteer, not least because of the fact that so much work needed to be accomplished. Through mutual negotiation, the activists saw me as somewhat beholden to them for ethnographic access. There are multiple ways to characterize this dynamic: because the dominant feature of this environment was purposive (and often frantic) activity, not being on call to pitch in would have been puzzling to the activists, if not outright offensive. I was often concerned about appearing diligent and engaged, even if I did not feel self-directed and un-self-conscious in my activities. I felt strongly that being too self-directed in supporting the activists’ mission was contrary to my agenda as a researcher. Even though I became more comfortable with the group over time, I was often internally conflicted and anxious about these dynamics. Nonetheless, at their request, I ran errands, moved furniture, cleaned, staffed registration, soldered cables, hammered nails, and once, helped run ongoing soldering work at a barnraising (more responsibility than I desired or intended to take on). I also dropped into workshops and work stations to observe, ask questions, and help out.

In many social studies of science and technology, “fieldworkers enter scientific fields which they do not know, and try to learn enough about
them to do sociological analyses. Rarely, however, do they reach the level of expertise of a full-blown participant. In the case of the esoteric sciences, the fieldworker hardly ever participates in the science itself.”

Given that the radio activists held a decidedly different attitude toward expertise than do members of the “esoteric sciences,” as I learned more, they were comfortable putting me in leadership roles in tasks I was not even sure I was qualified to do, especially when they put me in charge of the soldering track at a barnraising. This gave me a valuable firsthand glimpse into some of the activists’ notions about leveling expertise. I admit to feeling some discomfort at being put on the spot when more expert “geeks” would look to me first to answer questions posed by newcomers about transmitter components. At the same time, there were often times when I felt that the activists’ perception that I was able to contribute to “productive” activities detracted from my autonomy as a researcher. At the barnraising where I was teaching others to solder, I was not as free to circulate with my notebook. I felt my agenda as a researcher strained by having been enrolled into the pedagogical dynamic I was ostensibly studying. At the next barnraising I attended, I deliberately hung back more and tried to remain more autonomous. I did not commit to any single work activity that would prevent me from moving around freely. I doubt my malingering was noticed in the crush of activity, and in any event, I felt (perhaps unjustifiably) that I had “earned” this liberty after having permitted the activists to define my agenda at the previous barnraising.

In any event, maintaining some distance was of value. Another choice about “distance” had to do with my deliberate decision to distance myself and therefore my analysis from the occasional workplace squabbling that arose at Prometheus. As is likely common in organizations of this size, the members struggled with organizational growth and defining appropriate priorities and divisions of labor. Only one full-time person had been with Prometheus since the beginning, and he had something of a “charismatic leader” quality to him. This manifestation of so-called “founder’s syndrome” presented some difficulty for newer staff organizers, whose contributions to the organization’s work and trajectory were also significant. (It was at times troubling for this staff member as well, as he sought to delegate responsibility and support efforts to make the organization self-sustaining and less dependent on the vision and legacy of a single individual.) Hoping to avoid being drawn into these conflicts, I found that occasional offers of reassurance that I was not intending to air Prometheus’s “dirty laundry” soothed a newer organizer in particular. Not only did this smooth our interactions, it felt like the least I could do, given that the activists were
generally incredibly open, tolerant, and trusting toward me. This was the case even when I asked them to share their experiences with potentially sensitive subject matters or to critique their own actions or campaigns. I do not feel that this relative remove hindered my ability to conduct a project that assessed the intersection between technological negotiation and political agency. The decision to remain essentially willfully ignorant of the details of interpersonal flare-ups may have helped me analytically. I did not feel that I was ever close enough to any particular individual to be perceived as being on any particular “side” of any particular conflict.

We might characterize my experience in the field as one in which I attained interactional expertise, sufficient “to interact interestingly with participants and carry out a sociological analysis.” Yet unlike studies in which the researcher “studies up,” studying actors with more social capital and status than the researcher, I might characterize my experience studying activists as “studying sideways,” a concept I borrow from anthropologist Ulf Hannerz. Interestingly, when I began the study, one of my key informants and I had the opportunity to converse about topics familiar to science and technology studies (STS), because he had, in a self-designed undergraduate major, been exposed to canonical works, including those by Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway. I wonder if his familiarity with this scholarship made him more open and at ease with me. Certainly his comfort with me paved the way for my acceptance by the other activists. As a doctoral student, my similar age, economic status, and level of educational attainment placed me on similar footing to the actors in many ways. Social scientists and activists (similar to journalists, the objects of Hannerz’s research) are engaged in social mediation and cultural production. Throughout my research, these juxtapositions generated absorbing conversations; I unexpectedly ran into a radio activist at an annual meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science that she was “checking out”(!). She later remarked to me that “[if] technology is the Trojan horse for social and political agendas, we [activists] can play that game too, position ourselves as technology experts.”

Nonetheless, my status as an “academic” still marked me as different. I perceived this in many ways, including having another informant regularly bring up my practice of note-taking, feeling differences in my own personal and professional style of work from that of the activists (which, had I not reminded myself that I was there to observe, I might have found more frustrating), and being occasionally introduced as “our anthropologist.” (Even though I did not identify myself as having a particular disciplinary affiliation beyond my doctoral work in STS, activists occasionally would
playfully refer to the popular understanding of the anthropological practice of “studying tribes” as a way to make my presence comprehensible. One activist expressed this attitude when he wrote in an e-mail, “It is great to be part of the onward march of science, if only as a lab rat!”

This lighthearted marking of “difference” between activist position and academic position belies potentially profound tensions. As noted previously, activists and scholars are united in social and cultural mediation. Yet their goals, methods, and products often vary intensely. In some ways this is a subset of a tension common in ethnography; a researcher will often embed herself deeply enough in the practices of the community to gain a feeling for its priorities, practices, and values. But fieldwork, even if not fully bounded or discrete, ends. And indeed, in the moments at which the researcher’s focus shifts to reflection, narration, and abstraction, her priorities are brought into contrast and even conflict with the material and political commitments of actors she in these moments represents.

This is not to suggest that academic projects always differ from activist ones. Academic research may overlap with activism, or be conducted in sympathy or solidarity. Yet the difficulties collaborating across these communities of practice are real. In the realm of media democracy, I have heard people in nonacademic roles raise the difficulty of understanding academic writing. Some questioned whether engagement of academics with activist-advocacy topics was conducted in sympathy with them, because it seemed impossible to determine this from the academic products. In this project, I was fortunate to be received by informants who were sufficiently open and trusting toward me to allow us to have productive, reflective conversations and to avoid conflict. I arrived at this project with political commitments that in some ways mirror theirs: I care greatly about the struggle for a more just and more equal social world. I have a strong sense that the current US media system, built to support and extend corporate interests, is a missed opportunity for social change, and thus is ripe for meaningful intervention.

Nonetheless, my interests ultimately lie not with “the media system” but with people’s relationships to technology. My scholarship centers on how these relationships are inscribed in our social and material world. As Bruno Latour writes, “technology is society made durable.” And thus my interests tend to be more analytical than instrumentally oriented. This is not an easy position to occupy—I am in fact drawn to study activism because of an affinity for many activist goals. Sometimes I wish I could more embody a deeply proactive stance (beyond that of critique). Yet by temperament, I ask questions and reflect. This is a way of saying “must it be so?”—an act of
questioning and ideation that also drives activism. But mine is a different route and produces different outcomes. The radio activists are better at asking (and answering) “must it be so?” about the media system (and society) into which they hope to intervene than I could ever hope to be. Nonetheless, I hope that what I may contribute is a different layer of cultural mediation, one that is not incommensurate with the activism I interpret. What I offer is a reflection and critique of some activist methods; in particular I interrogate the consequences of tethering a politics of empowerment to technical practice. I do not wish to reduce activist practice to a “spectacle,” but my terms and commitments are not identical, either. My hope is that there are some lessons in my accounting for those who would identify technology as a platform for social change. I also hope that my critiques and activists’ technical interventions can be juxtaposed in productive and collaborative ways to advance commitments we share.

On Names
In this book, I refer to the primary organization by their actual name: Prometheus Radio Project. I use pseudonyms to refer to individual actors associated with the organization. This represents a shift from earlier presentations of this work, where the organization was thinly pseudonymized. My goal has never been to deeply anonymize the group, but rather to separate people’s identities as individuals from the comments and actions I narrate and interpret. It would be close to impossible to fully anonymize the group because they are too individualistic; no one else combines policy and technical work on low-power radio the way they do. The group’s actual identity would doubtless have been discerned by readers familiar with US media activism anyway. (Even their participation in pirate radio is part of activists’ public narrative. A Human Subjects Board review rightly flagged the issue of potential identification of individuals involved in illegal activity. But in this case, the radio activists were already “out” publicly about this activity; their pirate history routinely surfaced in presentations they gave and in media accounts.) In naming the organization but not the individuals, I hope to provide fidelity to the historical record. Prometheus is widely known in media policy and activism circles, as well as being the plaintiff in the lawsuit Prometheus Radio Project v. FCC. As a result, it seemed nearly absurd to strike their name from my account. At the same time, I wanted to adhere to the longstanding ethnographic convention of not naming individuals. Pseudonyms provide a layer of artifice that protects individual people from having their true identities associated with their every utterance, decision, and action.
Whether or not to name the group here was not a straightforward matter. In a true sense, the site that I studied no longer exists: between the period of my fieldwork and the writing of this book, the activists’ primary legislative goal during the 2000s was at last accomplished. The political climate in which they were working changed with the election of a Democratic president. The organization further matured, and staff turned over nearly completely (to say nothing of volunteers and interns, who constantly paraded in and out). In some ways the period represented by this book now seems like an alternate reality that is of interest because of the priorities sealed within it. I am relatively unconcerned with connecting these events to the present or to predicting the future. Instead I offer a narrative about people tying politics to an artifact based on specific beliefs about what that technology can and should do, situated within and flowing from their understanding of a particular historical moment.

Because the events I recount can now only be partially reconstructed, in ways that reflect my own priorities, I present the actors as players in an ethnographic true fiction. The primary informants are always pseudonymous, but some peripheral organizations and people with public profiles who were not primary informants are called by their real names. The distinctions are not always entirely clear-cut. This acknowledges that although real events that occurred are at the core of my analysis, I have often blurred the sites and especially the players just a bit. But as the focal range shifts, my more micro story bleeds into matters of historical, journalistic, and policy record (and thus extends beyond the borders of my more intimate accounting). Disguising the features of the wider social movement and policy issues would render radio activism unintelligible, so I do not attempt to do so. One main informant said of an early draft of this ethnography that it was a struggle for him to read through because it was “like reading your therapist’s notes from five years ago.” This reaction alone seems like another reason to offer a veneer of anonymity. An interviewee commented that the draft had an “allegorical aura about it,” specifically relating to how I employed anonymity. I took his reaction as a signal that I had struck an appropriate balance in disguising the most particular aspects of this story while retaining the broad meanings of events and interactions I narrate and interpret.
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