ABSTRACT

At the turn of the millennium, scholars and pundits reflected on how communication systems could shape events and societies, often while basking in the perceived glow of the then-novel Internet. Others pled for reasoned engagement with the interplay between communication infrastructures and the social life of knowledge, a much-needed corrective in a moment of rampant breathless digital utopianism. This article explores the interplay between communication infrastructures and the social life of knowledge through specific sociotechnical arrangements, low-power FM (LPFM) radio and large-scale commercial Internet-based ‘platforms’, both of which exist in our historical present. In particular, I use the formation of LPFM, which occurred at the same time that commercial Internet traffic picked up steam, in order to ‘excavate the future’: I return to a not-so-distant past to consider what might yet be. The article’s central claim is that the case of LPFM is even more relevant now than at its inception, in a context where behemoth commercial Internet ‘platforms’ have come to dominate electronic communication.

KEYWORDS

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At the turn of the millennium, historian of France Robert Darnton wrote that ‘every age [is] an age of information, each in its own way, and that communication systems have always shaped events’ (2000). This may seem like an uncontroversial, even stinkingly obvious statement. But in the context of that historical moment, a few years after the Internet was opened to commercial traffic, Darnton’s statement was a plea for reasoned engagement with the interplay between communication infrastructures and the social life of knowledge. This was a much-needed correction in a moment when one was far more likely to encounter a statement like, ‘Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony,’ opined by MIT Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte in 1995 (quoted in Dunbar-Hester 2014: xiii).

The aim of this article is to explore the interplay between communication infrastructures and the social life of knowledge through specific sociotechnical arrangements, low-power FM radio and large-scale commercial Internet-based ‘platforms,’ both of which exist in our historical present. In particular, I use the formation of LPFM, which occurred at the same time that commercial Internet traffic picked up steam, in order to ‘excavate the future’: I return to a not so distant past to consider what might yet be (Davis 1990). The central claim of this article is that the case of LPFM is even more relevant now than at its inception, in a context where behemoth commercial Internet ‘platforms’ have come to dominate electronic communication.

In June 2018, a new low-power FM radio (LPFM) station went on the air in Santa Ana, California, United States (see Figure 1). LPFMs are low-watt community radio stations that have a small range, covering a neighbourhood or small town, and are non-commercial. Santa Ana is a city in Orange County 35 miles south of Los Angeles. Seventy-eight per cent of its population is Latinx (Nagourney and Medina 2016). Orange County generally was whiter and a solidly Republican area for decades; downtown Santa Ana has a massive federal courthouse named after former President Ronald Reagan. But in a sign of changing political fortunes, the county ‘went blue’ and elected Democratic representatives to Congress for the first time in the 2018 midterm election.

Santa Ana’s new radio station fits into a pattern of rising political power for the Latinx community here, where just prior to the 2018 national midterms, all seven members of the local elected municipal school board were Latinx (Nagourney and Medina 2016). The LPFM founders have been active organizing for housing rights, and immigration issues and the right to cross borders are also close at hand (see Figure 2); they intend to use the station to amplify these efforts. But this new LPFM station also represents the culmination of organizing by advocates for community radio that began decades before, in the 1990s, in a context that is in some ways fairly different from the current one.

Activists’ promotion of FM radio concurrent with the rise of Internet-based communication was not a rejection of digital communication and the Internet tout court. Rather, it was technologically savvy ‘resistance’ to digital utopianism as a panacea for community communication needs and desires (Wyatt 2003). In particular, the public sphere needs of democratic societies are not well served by consolidated, commercial outlets that prize economies of scale. Local communities saw their news sources thinned and deracinated by media consolidation, even before the rise of social media platforms. In more recent years, platforms such as Facebook have accumulated power as intermediating gatekeepers that sit between community members and news sources; they
have in effect become news sources, but without paying for journalistic labour or being accountable for the integrity of the news they provide. Towns, cities and regions, as well as important social issues, lack for locally tied reporting; and local reporting may find that it cannot reach an audience without subjecting itself to the dictates of platform economies. This article explores how the values around which activists shaped LPFM (non-commercialism, economies of scale, community accountability) hold lessons for a range of communication media, including Internet-based communication (Dunbar-Hester 2019). It argues that the problem of information delaminated from source needs to be interrogated using tools from political economy and sociology of knowledge. The production of trusted knowledge is reliant on accountability, tethering claims to sources of authority. The emergence of new LPFM stations like Radio Santa Ana, even in an era of mammoth consolidated Internet-based platforms, offers a whisper of alternate media systems to which we should pay close attention.
BACKGROUND

The radio activism that is the subject of this article has a complex regulatory and cultural context, which can only be sketched here. In the United States, the spectrum was conceived of as being ‘owned’ by the citizenry, but regulated and licensed by the federal government, which required broadcasters to serve the public interest. However, ‘public interest’ was largely interpreted to exalt commercialism, and after an initial period of experimentation, broadcasting was established as predominantly a commercial, networked medium, due to regulatory choices made in the 1930s (McChesney 1999; Streeter 1996). Initially, AM was dominant, but in the 1960s, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) forced companies that owned stations broadcasting over both AM and FM to programme AM and FM separately, leading to a period of reconsideration and experimentation in FM. Subsequently, FM radio grew, eclipsing AM’s audience by 1979. As the FM spectrum became increasingly valuable, regulatory moves to limit access for smaller broadcasters occurred, including the cessation of licensing for low-watt non-commercial stations in 1978. This led to a pushback by activists who saw spectrum access as a civil rights issue, and in the 1980s and 1990s, a ‘microradio’ movement flourished,
which saw the birth of many unlicensed FM stations broadcasting as civil disobedience.

In 1996, the FCC overhauled policy, responding to alarm from ‘traditional’ media at a new upstart, Internet-based communication. Broadcast media perceived its operations (and in particular, its revenue stream) to be under threat and lobbied the FCC for new rules. The FCC obliged, allowing unprecedented consolidation in commercial radio station ownership, which led to immediate intense concentration of the industry. A single entity, Clear Channel Communications (now IHeartMedia), managed to acquire over 1,200 radio stations by 2001; this represented a 3,000 per cent increase (not a typographical error) in consolidation in only five years. This led to even greater agitation for counterbalance, as activists demanded a response from the FCC.

Then, in response to widespread dismay at this increased consolidation, and the ongoing microradio movement, in 2000, the FCC created a new class of small-scale broadcasting license, LPFM, non-commercial stations that could broadcast with 100 watts of power (reaching a small town or a neighbourhood). The first round of LPFM licensing did not permit as many stations to be built as advocates had sought (around were licensed 850 nationally), so LPFM partisans spent the early years of LPFM attempting to shore it up. In 2011, after a protracted policy battle, President Barack Obama signed the Local Community Radio Act, expanding LPFM to allow more stations to be built (up to a couple thousand nationally) (see Riismandel 2020). The radio activists in this article were involved in unlicensed microradio in the 1990s and later in building new legal LPFM stations (see Figure 3).

This regulatory history informs the practices of a group of radio activists who came together in the mid-1990s as a pirate radio collective in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a large post-industrial city in the eastern United States. After they were raided and shut down by the FCC for unlicensed broadcasting in 1998, they stopped broadcasting and turned towards policy advocacy and building radio stations. In their post-pirate guise, they adopted the name Prometheus Radio Project, borrowing from the Greek myth wherein mortals steal heavenly fire from the gods. Prometheus and other microradio activists are analytically significant for how they articulated values around electronic communication and linked these values to the social and material practices of broadcasting, or what I have elsewhere called propagation (Dunbar-Hester 2014). This mediation is a more general phenomenon, occurring during contestations over technological choices, and is worth our attention in cases beyond radio activism.

Next, I explore radio activists’ interpretive work as they negotiated the meaning of FM radio, in comparison and contrast to other technological configurations. The events narrated in this article are situated within a US regulatory environment, but the lessons of LPFM are relevant in other national and civic contexts.

COMMUNITY RADIO: ALTERNATIVES TO ‘INFORMATION’

A widely held conception of media technologies is that their purpose or main use is to transmit or communicate ‘information’, ‘messages’ or ‘content’. ‘Information’ is a ‘keyword’ in the sense invoked by cultural historian Raymond Williams. Its use to describe and understand media constitutes a significant site for understanding its meaning in the wider culture. Conceptions of media
technologies as tools for ‘transmission of information’ usually encompass both a more limited technical sense, and the notion that ‘information’ is a social force. Information as a social force relates to the idea that communication technologies are inherently oriented towards progress and moral betterment. Radio, for example, was understood in its early days as a means of fulfilling ‘social destiny’. For many, broadcasting promised the end of demagogy, the advent of a more reflexive polity and the rise of national unity amidst growing diversity (Douglas 1999).

Statements about information are so ubiquitous in contemporary society that they hardly stand out; Darnton’s, above, is an exemplar. It is nonetheless worth taking note of some specific statements. One was expressed particularly forcefully by a founder of the community centre in Imbaseni, Tanzania, with whom Prometheus activists built a low-power community radio station in 2005. The centre’s founder, an American Black Panther living in exile, stated,

I’m particularly impressed with the fact that Prometheus has given [us] this very, very, very powerful tool, this radio station, that will allow us to disseminate information. My old compatriot, Brother Eldridge Cleaver, once said that ‘information is the raw material of new ideas’. I’m going to repeat that, Information is the raw material of new ideas.

(Dunbar-Hester 2014: 190)

A statement by US Congress Representative Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) also illustrates the common belief that broadcasting technologies transmit information. In a statement to the Progressive Caucus of House lawmakers in 2005, Hinchey said that the nation was witnessing the culmination of ‘a twenty-year right-wing plan to control information people receive…’ (Dunbar-Hester 2014: 190). In both of these statements, information is held to be a social force, and media technology is central to how information is conveyed.

By contrast, the radio activists themselves invoked radio’s power to ‘transmit information’ relatively infrequently. They instead privileged the notions that media technologies promoted empowerment, ‘community’, pluralism and localism (Dunbar-Hester 2014). Drawing out ‘information’ as a value illuminates the policy disputes over radio and other Internet-based options for electronic communication in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The national networked public broadcaster, National Public Radio (NPR), was a significant player in the debate over the FCC’s decision to introduce LPFM and opposed the creation of LPFM. NPR stated,

The benefits associated with the [LPFM] proposal may be better realized through other means of electronic communication, such as the Internet. The Internet is revolutionary because it connects individuals with distinct interests, whether those individuals reside within the same town or on opposite sides of the planet.


NPR suggested that what was important in choosing an electronic communication platform or technology was the potential to serve and cohere communities of interest. They implied that ‘local’ communities bound by geography, ethnos or other spatiocultural factors were less important. This resulted in NPR proposing that would-be LPFM broadcasters congregate in cyberspace, not the ether. It would be easy to interpret this statement as having no more
significance than NPR’s desire to deflate and dismiss the goals of LPFM advocates. Indeed, NPR was doubtless motivated by that agenda.

But there was more at stake in NPR’s claims. In privileging ‘communities of interest’ whose members could be distributed anywhere from the same town to the opposite side of the earth, NPR drew on what could be termed an ‘informational’ discourse. Implicitly, this discourse rests on the notion that what is paramount in electronic communication is the exchange of ‘information’. That information is divorced from context, from bodies, from space and from place. NPR was likely unaware of the full implications of its exhortation to ‘go on the Internet instead’, but this statement reveals why critical attention to the interpretative work surrounding technologies is warranted. This disagreement was about far more than the ‘purely’ technical properties of the respective artefacts. Indeed, efforts to differentiate between the properties of technological artefacts are important because they are never merely descriptive; they always serve to bind artefacts to meanings.

The radio activists clearly were uncomfortable with the idea that media technologies are primarily conduits for information (pace Darnton). Conversely, other social groups with whom they interacted (such as the community groups and legislators in the previous examples) were more likely to highlight the primacy of ‘information’. In the radio activists’ conception,
low-power community radio did not simply ‘transmit information’. (That framing would leave LPFM open to charges of interchangeability with the Internet, which they opposed.) For the activists, ‘local-’ or community-level origination of information was an important consideration, which was distinct from the freedom to exchange information in a general sense. They promoted a vision of ‘community’ based on geography and common interest in a locality, as opposed to a geographically dispersed community of interest.

TECHNOLOGIES? CONTEXT, KNOWLEDGE AND AUTHORITY

Two decades into the twenty-first century, this episode of interpretive work on the part of the radio activists matters all the more, because it offers insight into some of the problems in our present media system. In an era where cries of ‘fake news!’ dominate discourse, and conspiracy theories and outright lies in mainstream discourse are indicators that the Enlightenment project is wobbling on its base, citizens of democracies across the globe are polarized and suspicious of one another. While I would not claim that community radio is a panacea for these troubles – or that local radio is inherently progressive, as Rwandans know (Straus 2007) – the values that radio activists attempted to inscribe in LPFM are instructive, as they provide a counterpoint to some of the most toxic features of our contemporary media landscape.

A main feature of community radio is that it resists the delamination of knowledge from source. This is not a technologically deterministic argument – it is not reducible to the technical artefacts that ‘transmit’ ‘messages’. It is to say that how artefacts are bound to practices, and how discourses and institutions create conditions for the circulation of information or knowledge, has consequences for what sorts of knowledge, information and fact we encounter (Sismondo 2017).

This is also not a ‘digital’ versus ‘analog’ distinction. Not only is this binary (no pun intended) not as clean as it may appear in loose usage (Sterne 2016), the issues that are raised by the radio activists about autonomy in the means of knowledge production are – and were – front and centre in many alternative and radical conceptions of Internet-based communication (Milan 2013). For example, some feminist conceptions of digital technology explicitly foreground contextual relations, as in this list of principles to be enshrined in the architecture of feminist servers:

A feminist server:
Is a situated technology
Is run for and by a community that cares enough for her in order to make her exist
Builds on the materiality of software, hardware and the bodies gathered around it
Avoids efficiency, ease-of-use, scaleability and immediacy because they can be traps
Knows that networking is actually an awkward, promiscuous and parasitic practice
Is autonomous in the sense that she decides for her own dependencies

c. 2013, quoted in Dunbar-Hester 2020: 113–14

Feminist servers, as collectively imagined by feminist hackers, refer to hardware running on free software that explicitly enshrines feminist principles,
which include care and awareness of being situated. They are critical of values that have proliferated in gargantuan platforms such as infinite scale, and they recognize autonomy and dependency as being intimately tied, rejecting masculinist and universalist visions of technological dominance, or software ‘eating the world’.

Lessons from much earlier episodes in history of media remind us of the importance of relationships between artefacts, practices, discourses and institutions, too. In his painstaking response to arguments that the printing press was an agent of social change through the revolutionary invention of movable type, historian of science Adrian Johns (1998) delved into how print came to play a role in establishing modern knowledge regimes and found that technological changes alone were insufficient to explain how knowledge circulated, accumulated and came to be regarded. Johns excavates the figure of the Stationer, a guild role, responsible for not only operating printing presses but vouchsafing the contents of printed works. A fragile, complex and contingent system of trust ran through the Stationers (and commercial, domestic and public spaces) and this, Johns argues, was the construction that allowed for the ‘modern fact’ to emerge, not the presses alone. Though I do not wish to overstate parallels between the seventeenth-century European world and the present, understanding the contingency and fragility of knowledge and expertise is highly relevant to placing contemporary communication technologies (and debates about them) into proper context. Johns’ nuanced account fleshes out Darnton’s quote – communication systems have always shaped events – but does not attribute them to technologies per se.

**NOT ENTIRELY ANALOG(OUS): COMMUNITIES, RELATIONS AND KNOWLEDGE**

How radio activists underscored particular interpretations of electronic communications technologies is illuminating. But it should be taken less as guidance about what is compelling about radio, and more as points of entry into broader conversations about our media and news environments, irrespective of medium or platform (Dunbar-Hester 2019). The implications of LPFM activists’ positions for our civic life should not be underestimated.

In certain ways, the radio activists’ discussions may seem almost quaint. For instance, LPFM proponents objected to the relationship between media content and the commercial interests of for-profit media (or parent) companies. In 1998 comments to the FCC weighing on the initial shaping of LPFM, an advocate wrote:

> A serious issue is the interlocking financial relationships of news media outlets and organizations with other financial interests. It would be foolish to try to get unbiased reporting of issues around the nuclear industry from CBS [a national commercial network], which is owned by Westinghouse, which is a leading manufacturer of nuclear power plants. Of course, we do have many choices in America’s media today: for example, you could look for your information about nuclear energy from another network, such as NBC [another national commercial network] – the only problem is that they are owned by General Electric, another major manufacturer of nuclear power plants. **Media must be independent to be credible.**

This fails to anticipate the maelstrom of polarizing and misleading information that has crept into our present-day news and civic environments. There are at present massive, commercial, monopolistic entities that gatekeep how audiences participate in much public sphere activity, fuelled by the attentional (ad revenue-driven) economies that dictate how Facebook and Google (both its search engine and video platform, YouTube) push information to their users (see, e.g., Dojcinovic 2017). The political economy of mass media critique did not account for intermediaries whose concern was less the framing or content of news stories but rather to promote ‘clicking’, attentional prompts designed to drive audiences to linger on the platforms longer (and thus collect data on the users, which is, in turn, used to further sell and capture their attention). We are only recently coming to recognize the momentous effects of a series of decisions YouTube made starting in 2012 to tweak the platform’s algorithms in ways that privileged time on the site, which drew viewers to polarizing and extreme content (Roose 2019; see also Bridle 2017). Again, technical decisions interweave with practice and institutional gatekeeping to cleave knowledge from source, disincentivizing fact-based reality checks and critical thinking. Furthermore, human editorial judgement is augmented by algorithms (see Bonini and Gandini 2019); which speech is even audible in the public sphere is newly affected by logics that are suited to a big-data volume of speech. ‘[P]latforms solicit, moderate, circulate, interpret, and rank speech of all kinds’, embedding communicative acts with probabilistic controls that condition which communicative acts are likely to circulate (Ananny 2019, original emphasis).

But the bigger point – which a political economy critique gets right, even if theorists and activists were not anticipating platform intermediaries – is that these commercial giants pose a huge risk to democratic communication and the public sphere, even if they do not seek to frame issues a certain way or promote or foreclose a particular point of view (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Their profit motive, along with their market share and business model, is inherently threatening to democratic communication (see Bagdikian 2000). As radio activists (amongst others) astutely point out, the value of media, including local news and political affairs, is not well suited to market logics, nor to market metrics (Coyer 2006; Dunbar-Hester 2014; Rodriguez 2001). Indeed, a market logic on steroids (not an ideological commitment to a particular political viewpoint, beyond perhaps a diffuse libertarianism or pro-capitalistic stance) is what has led the gargantuan platforms to seed the contemporary public sphere with highly polarizing news stories, and outright disinformation.

Radio activists’ routine promotion of the ‘community’ aspect of community radio (and in some contexts, broadband community Wi-Fi) bears out Raymond Williams’s (1976) assertion that ‘community’ is imbued with a powerful and positive meaning. It is worth interrogating further what the activists meant by ‘community’, given that the term is utterly vague, save for its positive connotation. Historically, the term marked a contrast between ‘society’ or ‘the state’ and smaller-scale associations (including shared belief, kinship or shared place). For the radio activists, ‘community’ seemed to combine geographic proximity and shared concerns.

This stands in subtle contrast to the concept as promoted by proponents of networked computing and ‘virtual community’, such as Howard Rheingold and Stewart Brand. They idealized disembodied, geographically distributed networks of users who were nonetheless participants in shared, collaborative
and even intimate sociality (Turner 2006). They believed that information wants to be free: free of embodiment, freely flowing, freely commodified and exchanged. The radio activists were more reluctant to ‘free’ their ideals for electronic communication technologies from the local roots and intertwined social networks that might exist in a neighbourhood or a municipality. Their commitment to radical politics and time-honoured material practices of community organizing such as knocking on doors may have predisposed them to value a notion of bounded localism. The radio activists believed that LPFM was suited to a ‘community’ scale of use (Pursell 1993) and to the promotion and maintenance of that community. In essence, even as the radio activists recognized the ability for communications networks to be distributed freely in time and space, they remained committed to the notion of proximal community, with its immediacy, contextual meaning and relationships between neighbouring bodies (bodies in all senses). The point here is not that the radio activists are ‘right’ and that digital utopianists are ‘wrong’. It is that careful attention to discursive claims around the meaning and value of different technologies should be a goal of scholars, activists, policy-makers and others seeking to shape our media ecosystem.

During the historical moment that the radio activists’ efforts occurred, the Internet as a mass and commercial phenomenon was fairly new. The last restrictions on commercial traffic on the Internet were lifted in 1995 (one year before a change in regulation, the Telecommunications Act of 1996, that ushered in unprecedented broadcast consolidation). Crucially, many of the features and corporations that shape our contemporary online experiences were either not yet created or not widely adopted – in particular, giant commercial platforms like Facebook, Google and Amazon were not the monopolistic gatekeepers they are today.

The radio activists did not anticipate, let alone argue against, the explicit forms that our online environment has taken. For obvious reasons, the existing and emerging technological options (and attending social, political and economic arrangements) to which they compared and contrasted LPFM were commercial networked broadcasting, webcasting and community Wi-Fi networks – not social media platforms, or podcasting, and so on. But it would be a mistake to therefore dismiss their interpretive work as irrelevant to our present historical moment. If we zoom out from the ‘boxes’ that ‘contain’ our communicative acts, we can hear the articulation of values that are of ongoing, vital importance to our expressive media landscape.

It is given that communication technologies will continue to change. In our current landscape, podcasting, for example, combines Internet-based circulation with an audio form that owes much to radio. A ‘new’ technology bears traces of the old, both in terms of social practice and artefactual form. But rather than meditating on the ‘form’ of communication technologies, it is preferable to situate their use within both political economy and sociology of knowledge (see Graves 2016). We should foreground how producers and audiences can remain accountable to one another, within economies of scale where knowledge about local conditions is tied to local context, and where cultural authority can be constructed without the conflicting incentive of profit maximization. A perhaps unexpected bright spot in the fractured 2018 US media and political landscape is that trust in local news (where it still exists) far outpaces trust in national news (Guess et al. 2018). Though it is undesirable for local provinces to be the sole arbiters of ‘what’s true’ for a wider democratic polity (or even their own smaller polities), it is impossible to argue
that present conditions have not tipped too far in an opposing direction, with centralized, non-transparent, profit-maximizing, non-accountable platforms dominating and fully intermediating our public sphere.

Needless to say, what is happening with the Internet is far from settled: quite recently in the United States, the Trump administration rolled back Obama-era regulatory designations to keep corporate Internet service providers and their partners from privileging Internet traffic from their own content over that of independent content (the so-called ‘net neutrality’ provisions) (Newman 2019). The day this decision was announced, a radio activist and I kidded that, ‘on the bright side, LPFM just got a lot more important’ (Personal communication, 14 December 2017). In Europe, the General Data Protection Regulation and threat of anti-trust enforcement have potential to staunch some of the abuses of data capture and trading at global scale, but it is not clear the degree to which these regulations will affect the platforms’ architectures and behaviour; the platforms largely govern themselves. And threats to journalism and liberal democracy persist globally.

If we accept that knowledge (not information) is always bound to context (Bowker 2010), it becomes clearer that market logics and the consolidated profit-oriented companies that chase them cannot serve the requirements of democratic communications. By their design, they will pursue concentrated market power, which scales to the circulation of decontextualized information. By contrast, the production of news and civic information with community accountability will always necessarily be limited in scale but can accommodate community needs and input. If we accept that these values cannot be reconciled with rank commercialism or a high degree of consolidation, we can force a more honest conversation about how to pay for this kind of media and journalism (see Konieczna 2018; Pickard 2020). This is made harder when the companies responsible for commercial-platform-based intermediation of online environments seek to evade regulatory scrutiny and debates by sowing confusion over whether they are ‘tech companies’, ‘media companies’ or ‘platforms’ (Napoli and Caplan 2017). One suggestion is to form a new social contract and break up and tax the platforms to pay for public media (Pickard 2020).

LPFM is by no means the best or only technical artefact for a better social contract – but it can help us think through how we might build for and regulate the digital communication environment of the present in order to amplify those values in the future. Debates about the values we want our electronic communication media to embody are crucial at many junctures. Material and discursive contestations around ‘old’ technologies have much to offer if we can learn to listen. Feminist hackers’ delectable visions notwithstanding, the autonomy of infrastructure that is plainly lacking with present Internet-based communication systems is actually possible – now and in the futures – with community radio. Advocacy for FM radio at the turn of the millennium thus serves as a prompt for deepening our understanding of values in electronic communication (Dunbar-Hester 2019). Its advocates de-emphasize commercialism, for some forms of communication do not (and should not) cohere with market logics; relatedly, they make a case for public sphere/news environments that are not subject to rampant consolidation. Finally, they highlight the importance of circulating situated, contextual knowledge, which is accountable to the community. Thus, LPFM is of great symbolic importance (apart from its material impact\(^2\)). It offers a cultural space to articulate alternatives to the status quo embodied by ‘digital’ electronic communication,
especially our present-day commercial platform-based news and communication environment.

In summary, I will remark on another binary that does not necessarily hold up to scrutiny. This call to carefully consider LPFM as a template for meaningful values in communication systems is not a call to elevate ‘the human’ as necessarily possessing – or denigrate the algorithm as necessarily lacking – the warmth with which we imbue ‘community’. The human flourishing vaunted as the highest Enlightenment ideal has been accompanied by regimes of extraction, othering and even extinction, major contributors to the political turmoil facing contemporary democracies (and the planetary peril faced by us all). Though this article has considered media systems and infrastructures in a fairly narrow and traditional sense, we could take the intimate, contextual relations that LPFM can help us realize in order to imagine creation of knowledges, relations and mutualisms across a wide range of entities, not only compatriots and neighbours, but rats,3 (feminist) servers and mushrooms (Tsing 2015). For our most hopeful and convivial futures, it is past time to broaden our coalitions and cultivate solidarities across categories of difference, but without seeking to erase difference (Illich 1973; Haraway 1991; Arvin et al. 2013).

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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