
Reinventing the Wheel vs. Grinding the Same Old Axe: An Ethnographic View of the Students and Community Members at a Massachusetts College Radio Station

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Keywords: college radio, community radio, public sphere, ethnography

Abstract

Using the notion of an ‘ideal public sphere’, this article explains and analyzes the democratizing impulses and the clash in intentions as students and local community members negotiate for access to the airwaves at WMUA, a unique hybrid college radio station in Western Massachusetts. Undergraduate students technically control the station, but many of its actual practices fit a Community Radio model that disproportionately favours community members. Students use *their* WMUA for their own entertainment or see it as a place to gain on-air experience and build resumé. Community members, however, use *their* WMUA to produce empowering content for audiences beyond the University. With institutional memory and cultural capital, they largely control WMUA’s structure.

With data from long-term ethnographic research, this article critiques the normative Habermasian public sphere by showing how regulatory practices limit individualistic, developmental goals of the students, even as these practices facilitate the outside community’s progressive agenda.

Introduction

I am not involved in the way I used to be, but I still tend to consider WMUA, 91.9-FM as *my* radio station. WMUA is the ‘Student Voice’ at University of Massachusetts where I was in graduate school for anthropology and where I now teach. As a student of mass media who had worked in radio in the past, the station seemed a natural place to gravitate towards when I first came to the University. I volunteered at WMUA in varying capacities: as a regular and fill-in DJ and also as a Community and ‘underwriting’ representative. Also, from the outset, I was a part-time ethnographer of WMUA ‘culture’, a long-term participant observer, interviewing people involved with the day-to-day running of the station as well as ancillary contributors.¹

I introduce myself and *my* WMUA in this way in order to explain my positionality; how I became ensconced at the station and how the station became part of me. I do this deliberately, calling the University’s WMUA *my* radio station, because my claim could be contested: some station members would reject my involvement.

Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture © 2008 (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 5(1): 44-66. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

Wallace, Reinventing the wheel...

My ‘claim’ on WMUA is as that of a ‘Community member’ and, over the years, some students have disliked Community members. WMUA is their ‘Student Voice’ and I was never a UMass undergraduate student. And, WMUA, at its outset, was supposed to be run by and for the undergraduate students at UMass; that is, usually 18 to 22 year-old students working on four-year Bachelor Degrees. WMUA, however, has evolved into something very different: while labelled the ‘Student Voice’, functioning like a college station for parts of the day, and receiving much of its funding through University sources, WMUA more often seems like a Community radio station dominated by older non-undergraduate students.

In this article, I will describe how WMUA is a hybrid of college radio and of community radio produced by two often very different sets of people – undergraduate students and Community members – with often great variance in their designs for the station. In contrasting these elements and the tensions inherent in their tug-of-war, we see how a local ‘community’ public sphere is alternately envisioned by its participants.

Three American Broadcast Models: Commercial, Public and Community

American radio broadcasting is usually categorized into a few broad types (Bekken 1998: 29-30; *cf.* Hilmes & Loviglio 2002). First, the producers’ goal in *commercial broadcasting* is to make money by selling advertising – radio tries to attract listeners’ ears and sells those “ears” to advertisers. American broadcasting, almost from its inception, was established as dependent on the marketplace.² Government regulation has been relatively minimal and has only become more hands-off in recent decades as market forces have become more prevalent (Douglas 1987, McChesney 1993, 2007).

Public or state broadcasting, whereby the state facilitates most, if not all, transmissions, is the traditionally dominant model in most other parts of the world. The spectrum of American radio has included public broadcasting since the 1960s but it has been a minority presence. Conservatives criticize public broadcasting claiming that it wastes money and leans left ideologically, but proponents argue that the marketplace cannot support all of the cultural and political life necessary in the public sphere. So, for example, UMass houses not just WMUA *college radio*, but also another radio station, WFCR, 88.5-FM, a *public radio* broadcasting syndicated programming from National Public Radio and Public Radio International, as well as in-house produced news and music like opera, jazz, and other non-lucrative genres. It receives a portion of its funding from government-related sources. WFCR relies on the University and other area educational institutions, listener support (through telethon fund-drives), and underwriting from donor businesses (for which contributing businesses receive on-air ‘recognition’ tantamount to advertising) (*cf.*, McCourt 1999, McCauley 2005, Mitchell 2005).³

Community radio is another broadcast type – grassroots broadcasting that serves an area with local programming overlooked by more powerful and better-funded national groups. These stations are usually intended to lift indigent communities out of a disadvantaged state with content useful to their life circumstances and by giving people a chance to represent themselves in mass media. Community radios are almost always Class D broadcasters in the U.S., so they transmit at 250 watts or less, so stations are very close, both literally and figuratively, with their source communities (cf., Downing 2001, Opel 2004, Hilliard & Keith 2005).⁴

Another Broadcast Model: College Radio

Scholars tend to study the three ‘types’ – *commercial*, *public*, and *community radio* – in American media. *College* or *student radio*, however, is a fourth often overlooked type. Despite being common on university campuses – an estimated 1,200 to 1,400 stations are licensed to U.S. institutions of higher education – this radio ‘type’ is often ignored because college radio lacks influence in mainstream media and is not seen as a site of community radio empowerment.⁵

College radio existed in various forms through much of the 20th century. Some stations began as erstwhile experimental physics laboratories for students learning how to build and refine radio transmitters. Then students sought to gain experience in the burgeoning new medium of electronic broadcasting. WMUA exemplifies this, having originated as a UMass radio enthusiasts’ club that began trial runs on an AM frequency in the 1940s, before beginning scheduled transmissions in 1948. In the ensuing decades, WMUA became a place for would-be radio technicians and professional broadcasters to gain experience. It also was an entertainment source as participants simply enjoyed playing their music and talking their talk. Like most American college radio stations, therefore, WMUA could be characterized as having been at some points a training ground and at other moments, a playground.⁶

WMUA, however, evolved beyond small-scale, short range broadcasting to the immediate UMass campus environs. As a ‘Class A’ station with 1000 watts of power by the 1970s, WMUA became the largest college radio station in terms of broadcast range in the New England area. With greater power, a responsibility to the region beyond the University campus evolved. WMUA became a college station with a strong community component, both serving and seeking audiences far beyond the confines of the UMass campus and bringing in Community members to take part in broadcasting. This large broadcast footprint and greater following compelled the station to be on-air considerably more often and made WMUA a college radio ‘superstation’.

Wallace, Reinventing the wheel...

By comparison, smaller schools' radio stations have much less invested in their facilities, less ambitious broadcasting schedules, and weaker transmission platforms. A typical 'Class C' college radio station broadcasts at 100 to 250 watts and, with a smaller broadcast range, has more limited listenership. For example, Smith College's WOZQ 91.9-FM, Mount Holyoke College's WMHC 90.7-FM, and Amherst College's WAMH 89.3-FM, are all close to UMass and on-air for limited hours, usually between six and sixteen hours a day. Like most college stations, their programming is 'open format' with a schedule based on when DJs can do shows, not according to any planned on-air profile discernable to a listener (cf. Sauls 2000:3). DJs will usually play whatever they want: at WOZQ, I once heard: "Well, my show's supposed to be UK Indy, but I'm still buzzing from the Ben Folds concert Saturday, so I'm playing him for the next hour..."

These small college stations broadcast only during the academic year, from September to mid-December, then from late-January to early May. When students' schedules change during exam weeks, they are on-air randomly. If a DJ fails to show up for a scheduled program, someone may shut down the transmitter or the station may broadcast automatically programmed music. Or, a station may broadcast dead-air. These smaller college stations are not received much more than ten or twenty miles away from their studios and students seem to forget about serving any listeners beyond the institution, apparently on-air more for their own enjoyment, often discussing classes, bands coming to campus, dining hall food, and laughing at countless in-jokes. They often speak a less accessible 'inside language' of their school, as if unaware that anyone other than their fellow students could possibly be listening. People from outside the college campus are rarely, if ever, in the broadcast booth, so these stations have an insular feel to them, even if they can be heard a dozen miles away.⁷

By comparison, other college radio stations have tried to become consistent and professional-sounding, but this has resulted in stations that have little to do with campus life in general. Some actually have become professional. For example, WBRU at Brown University, a station well-known in Southern New England is a one of a few American 'college' radio stations operating on a commercial basis. While still run by Brown students along with a number of professional staff members, the station long ago was set up as an independent corporation and receives no funding from Brown. WBRU is famous for its alternative rock focus and it has, at various times, won awards as the best radio station in a medium-size market, but, as I would categorize it, the station has left the ranks of college radio. While the station has many college radio-like influences – 'independent' music programming and students still active in its governance – WBRU has become a commercial station with a wide broadcast range that pays relatively little attention to its immediate university surroundings.

WMUA, on the other hand, is a hybrid. It remains a College station but has the activist community involvement of Community Radio, as well as elements of Commercial Radio and Public Radio as it attempts to 'professionalize' its sound, run fund-drives, and sell 'underwriting' (but *not* commercials). Also, with its large broadcast range, WMUA competes for listeners throughout the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts. On-air voices usually pay attention to the world beyond the ivory tower, due in no small part because many voices are themselves from outside of the academic bubble. WMUA tries to be on-air 24/7, broadcasting 365 days a year, through student breaks, exam times and holiday seasons when the University campus is otherwise quiet.⁸ And, while UMass has more than ten times the number of students than smaller area colleges have, the student population is not what allows WMUA so much broadcast time.

Instead, community members make long time-coverage possible and create a sense that a world exists beyond the campus. During the academic year sometimes more than half of the on-air voices at WMUA are not UMass undergraduate students and when undergraduates are not on campus, undergraduates tend to comprise less than a fifth of the participants. Instead, the on-air roster includes area professionals and working class laborers. Graduate students affiliated with University are also in the Community Member category because the station was founded by and for undergraduate students and still receives a goodly sum of its funding from a specifically undergraduate student activities fee. During the school year on weekday evenings, students have a greater share of air time, but suffice to say, over the course of a given year, WMUA has far more community members in the broadcast studio than it does students.

A WMUA Broadcast Day

At six o'clock on a weekday morning, WMUA begins its regularly scheduled broadcast day with the 'Morning Eclectic' block, usually a mixture of folk and acoustic pop music, often with a strong ideological undercurrent. One DJ, for example, has been doing her show for over fifteen years and typically plays women's music and often speaks about women's or gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues. Another morning person always had played a healthy dose of protest music but increasingly brought in more talk of social justice and peace activism during the George W. Bush years. Fittingly, this block ends with 'Democracy Now', a progressive, left-leaning syndicated hour-long news program coming out of New York.

Jazz takes us from nine o'clock until noon. DJs hosting jazz programs over the past twenty years usually have stuck to a fairly standard smooth 'jazz-DJ patter' – announcements, underwriting and naming every musician contributing on each track – yet each DJ has established her or his own style through their music choices.

Wallace, Reinventing the wheel...

Noon brings us to the World block. Many varieties of music and talk fall under the category: it can mean ‘global music tours’ – where Balkan manele can be followed by Burundian drumming by Tuvan throatsinging, etc. – or it means specialty programs. For example, one graduate student explored his love of reggae in his program, while another became a pulpit for a Native American Indian activist. Another World slot sometimes sparked controversy because its graduate student ‘hosts-by-committee’ focused on the Middle East and, depending on who was in-studio, this would be Arab pop or traditional music or perhaps two-plus hours of Middle Eastern political diatribe critiquing or slamming the U.S.-Israel relationship.

The Block Programming Structure: the typical Weekday Schedule at WMUA for the past decade	
Time	Genre
6 - 8 am	Eclectic (usually folk or more “mellow alterna-pop”)
8 - 9 am	“ <i>Democracy Now!</i> ” (syndicated news program originating in New York)
9 – Noon	Jazz (from swing to bebop to experimental)
Noon-2:30pm	World (a mix or sometimes “speciality”, manele, reggae, Bollywood, etc.)
2:30 - 5 pm	Blues (soul, Delta, jump, swamp, blues-rock, etc.)
5 - 7 pm	News &Talk; (sometimes labor issues, world politics, sports talk, etc.)
7 - 9 pm	Rock (Indy or “College rock”, Emo, Punk, Classic, etc.)
9 - Midnight	“Urban” (hip-hop, old school, Latin, reggaeton, snap, crunk, etc.)
Midnight– 3am	Eclectic (metal, drum & bass, industrial, trance, also talk/call-in/improv)
3 - 6 am	Anything goes (usually a time when “wannabe” DJs gain experience)

World has usually given way to Blues at 2:30 or 3:00 in the afternoon, but this genre often lagged in support, however, from the station membership. It recently succumbed to being an afternoon Eclectic block when two key Community Member Blues DJs dropped their shows. The block still features Blues, but also widely varying student-hosted eclectic pop shows.

Over the past decade, the late afternoon has marked the beginning of an hour of public affairs/spoken word programming. For example, a UMass worker and union activist has focused her weekly program on labor affairs for the past two decades. This contrasts with the always changing personnel of a talk show the next day, wherein I have now listened to a few “generations” of college students give their insights on local and national sport. At 5:30, students produce a news show with incredibly inconsistent results – I have heard professional-sounding students reading news and editorials, yet much more often have cringed as students badly mispronounce names or break into uncontrollable and obviously inappropriate giggles while reading news copy about a suicide bombing. On one occasion I saw why this happened – someone was making faces through the studio glass – and it is hard not to be embarrassed at the childishness of these so-called university students.

The news and public affairs block marks the daily transition in on-air voices. This is particularly interesting for considering WMUA as a student-run, but community member-dominated radio station. Mornings and afternoons, people in their mid-twenties and older are invariably at the microphone – or at least they sound older than the average undergraduate student. Undergraduates who are seriously working on their programming portfolio sometimes gravitate towards the limited day slots that open up from year to year. They prepare their shows with greater attention and adopt more ‘mature voices’.

As evening approaches, the voices become decidedly more youthful, with most in their early twenties and teens. The genres of music that take us into the evening hours typically are some kind of rock – power-pop, classic, alternative/indy, emo, metal. Late evening is followed by “urban”; that is, hip-hop, rap or reggae. Around midnight the music usually will again return to rock, but will have a harder edge as something like nü-metal becomes more common than pop.

With the transition to students, the on-air talk changes as well. Gone, is the semi-professional patter of DJs who know what they want to say and how to say it. Gone, is semi-planned copy as DJs discuss political or cultural issues, read their playlists, and blend into their sound posts. Gone, is a fairly polished *Community Radio* station.

As night falls, we begin to hear the amateurish sound of DJs talking for their own pleasure, giving little thought to their listening audience. In, are DJs learning on the air or searching for what they want to say. In, are the potential rambles and missed cues. In, are the sounds of kids hanging around having a good time, laughing at in-jokes and giving repeated shout-outs to friends. In, are more typical *College Radio* station types of programs.

This not to say that, over the years, WMUA has never had very strong, expert-sounding DJs with well thought-out music or politically informed shows in the evening. Nor has WMUA’s daytime programming not had its share of amateurish gaffes and coarse talk. The tendency, however, has held steady throughout the years: the day is more practiced and with the listener kept in mind; the night is for practice and the potential listener is more likely to be an afterthought. It is the cooked and the raw: WMUA sounds like a semi-professionalized *Community Radio* station by day and like a more recreational and rough-hewn playpen, widely varying *College Radio* station by night.

WMUA therefore, for a major part of its broadcast day, can be referred to as, or at least likened to, ‘community media’, despite being ostensibly categorized ‘college’ or ‘student radio’. We can examine the relative ‘community-ness’ of the station, looking particularly at the differences between ‘Student’ and ‘Community’

participation and how each views the mission of the station or, at least, what each group looks to get out of the station for themselves. This understanding of community as both preached and practiced by WMUA members illuminates the ‘ideal public sphere’ – as social philosopher Jürgen Habermas explains it – and, in providing us with a paradox as *Community Radio* functions in a *College Radio* setting, we can see the normative pressures and dialogic rationality that both allow for a community to flourish yet also stifle individual attempts at innovation within it (Habermas 1989: 129, Delanty 2005: 280-1).

The WMUA Mission, Codified

Over twenty years ago station members wrote a WMUA constitution and community members. Generations of college students have amended its articles or tweaked its bylaws, re-adopting the constitution at least a half dozen times since. Remaining as a preamble to the constitution since 1987, however, has been the following Statement of Objectives in the WMUA Station Manual (2006: 1):

1. WMUA will serve as a training facility in all facets of management and operations of a non-profit radio station.
2. WMUA will promote and support the process of student empowerment.
3. WMUA will serve as a forum for individuals and groups that historically have not had access to broadcast media.
4. WMUA will provide programming and services that promote a sensitivity to the different social and educational needs of the listening area.

Immediately following the constitution section in the station manual, ‘The WMUA Programming Philosophy’ further lays out the station’s mission (2006:11). The Philosophy explains that, ‘in a climate where both private and public professional radio stations use sophisticated market analysis in order to determine which formats and music will “sell”’, WMUA, ‘as a student, non-commercial station is insulated from the commercial environment.’ Therefore, WMUA ‘does not make programming decisions based on demographics, market research, sponsor demands and other non-musical factors.’ The station is ‘a repository and mouthpiece for musics, new and old, that rarely get heard on the radio’ and ‘that are judged by expert radio marketers to be of limited commercial value.’ As such, WMUA creates an opportunity to learn about and share with its audience, ‘authentic music from various musical subcultures in the United States as well as the great musical cultures of the world’ and ‘is committed to music and public affairs programming that speaks to the diverse University and Pioneer Valley community.’ The Philosophy continues, stating that ‘we are different than most student stations that tend to gear their programming towards a white college-age audience.’

In this Constitution and Programming Philosophy, we can see something generated by the WMUA participants, so it hardly can be called a ‘top down’ directive, a directive coming from the University administration or even from WMUA’s long-established Community participants or Organizational Advisor. Or can it? If we consider that most students who have arrived at the UMass in the past year were not even born when they were written, we may have to consider how much any recent generation of students really feels empowered by WMUA’s ‘Statement of Objectives’ and ‘Philosophy’.

Membership in WMUA - Where the Power Lies

Joining WMUA is easy, but takes basic commitment. Attendance at three consecutive station body meetings qualifies you as a voting member, eligible for WMUA privileges and to be on the air, whether as an undergraduate student or community member. Meetings are held fortnightly during the academic year and membership is maintained through regular attendance.

Undergraduate students ostensibly run the show. The Station Manager and Programmer, both students, lead meetings and the body decides on the issues of running the station. If Community members outnumber undergraduates at a given meeting, station rules prohibit the Community holding the majority in voting – constitutionally, undergraduate students must have 51% of the vote. The rationale is simple: the station is supposed to be the ‘Student Voice of UMass’ and most of the station’s money comes from the undergraduate’s Student Government-administered Activities fund.

Undergraduate students hold almost all WMUA directorships and offices. The highest ranking and only elected of these year-long positions are the General Manager (who supervises seven paid student positions and one unpaid Community Representative) and Program Director (supervisor of nine paid directorships as well as music block ‘captains’),⁹ with the former usually the more influential of the two. They comprise two-thirds of the WMUA Executive Committee, or the EComm. The EComm meets weekly and is charged with implementing the station’s ‘constitution and its associated policies’ and ensuring ‘strict compliance with all Federal Communication Commission rules and regulations, and Student Government Association Registered Student Organization regulations.’

The other third of the EComm is an ‘individual, selected by a search committee of the University of Massachusetts, hired to serve in the capacity of an advisor.’ This is the Organizational Advisor (OA), a professional non-student put in place by the University. WMUA members have no official channels through which they can influence who this person will be.

Wallace, Reinventing the wheel...

At this writing, the current OA has held his job now for over a decade and a half and, while the EComm triumvirate has equal voting power in their decision-making, with his years of experience, the OA holds a decidedly upper hand in setting the WMUA agenda from week to week and year to year, for instance, in keeping jazz, blues, and world shows on-air via block programming.¹⁰ He knows what needs to be done on daily basis, whereas the twenty years-young General Managers and Programmers typically hold their positions for just a year or two and learn on the job, holding what are usually their first ever executive positions. They almost always follow the OA's lead in the administrative routines of the station, such that his social practices are reproduced annually. Now more than twice their ages, the OA has cultural capital and his social juniors cannot oppose him easily. Quite practically, as well, he also knows the ins-and-outs of the very top-heavy University of Massachusetts administration.

At a moment when she was expressing to me her dissatisfaction with the University and the WMUA General Manager, a Programmer once began complaining about the set-up of the station and found herself ultimately blaming the OA. "Yeah," she said,

[the Organizational Advisor] tells us that, 'oh, no, you can't do this, you can't do that, because the University won't let us' and, what am I gonna do? I just have to believe him, 'cuz I don't really know. He's only one-third of EComm, but [he] knows what he's doing, I think he knows how to use the differences between us to get the things that he wants done. So I don't know, I don't know who I'm more pissed off with right now..."

The OA has an institutional memory that he can call upon to reckon with other parts of the UMass bureaucracy and uses this to direct the annually-changing station leadership. The OA's unofficial power, in other words, serves as a conservative factor in WMUA's social practices.

The OA's informal social power also comes from the collective will and the institutional memory of the station's Community members, some of whom have been associated with WMUA for a decade or more. Community members like consistency in the daily schedule and continuity from year to year and therefore favor the block programming of the past twenty years. Indeed, at times Community members have sounded proprietary of the block system, due in no small part, because the blocks keep them with their scheduled shows.

Vincent, a long-time DJ explained the benefits of block programming saying, 'It works better, because listeners know what they can expect of us and, as someone doing a show, I know I can meet expectations of listeners.' Another person, Adriana, a veteran host of a public affairs program focusing on workers and their

workplaces, praised WMUA's consistency because it has allowed her to create a well-known social forum for her progressive political message.

With the people who do the show with me, we've been able to gain a following and [the radio show] is now a place, or a time, for us rally around and, in the mainstream media in the conservative and consumerist climate we live in, it's really important that we have a place for progressive and even radical voices to be heard so we can effect social change.

Adriana and company express strong ideas about what they are doing in trying to bring people-power to the radio. Another community member, Seth, talked about the verticalization of media and how WMUA provides 'radical alternative media' which they use as a node in larger networks. Seth paraphrased 'radical media' author John Downing (2001, *cf.*, Atton 2002:19-20) to me: 'we are building support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies of the power structure for ourselves as everyday people.'¹¹

Over the years, some community members have argued that they should be represented on WMUA's EComm, reasoning that, as such substantial contributors to the year-in, year-out operation of the station, they should have a more substantial say in its governance. They wish to protect their positions from what they see as the ever-changing whims of the students. As a 'Registered Student Organization' (RSO) at UMass, however, WMUA can only have full-time, Student Government Association-fee paying members as its officers or the station would lose its RSO status, and with it, a large chunk of its funding and space on the UMass campus.¹²

Ironically, however, many of these politically progressive community members are exactly the 'conservative' elements that keep everyday students from effecting the changes that they would like to see. 'It's like they all never got over the sixties', complained Carl, a third-year student who active in the WMUA sports staff,

I mean, I want this place to be for what the students want, not these old people with their axe to grind with Republicans and playing the same old bluegrass folk protest shit,[...] they've been here for, like fifty years, and I've got less than two more years here and so, of course, they're complaining that we want to broadcast a game during their precious time slot.

Carl saw WMUA as springboarding his career as a sports play-by-play announcer. Ultimately, he was successful at becoming part of a motivated sports department that expanded the number of sporting events that WMUA covered. However, he felt that it was unfair that his sports contingent had had to scratch tooth and nail to wrest control from the longer entrenched groups:

Wallace, Reinventing the wheel...

We're supposed to be the Student Voice, not the Old Hippie Voice! We want to talk about the basketball team today, not about something that happened in Latin America twenty years ago. And then they have that show in Spanish, right after. I mean, who's going turn on 98% English WMUA just to here that 2% they do in Spanish? Why should most of us students have to fight so hard for the mike at our own station?

Expectations of Students and Community Members

The Community member supplement to the 'Student Voice' makes WMUA a hybrid college radio 'superstation'. However, the supplementary nature of the 'Community' often dominates the 'Student' part and this creates friction. Undergraduate students typically come to the studios down in the university campus center basement assuming that WMUA is their station, that this is *their* 'Student Radio Voice'. They attend station meetings with a number of intentions in mind.

Many consider WMUA their personal training ground. They may plan to major in journalism and want to get a feel for radio. Or, they may be communication majors frustrated with the coursework: they thought would be preparing themselves for careers in mass media, but instead, find themselves in 'cultural studies' classes deconstructing media and learning 'media literacy', reading Marshall McLuhan, Stuart Hall, and Jean Baudrillard, with nary a how-to-succeed-in-business book in sight. Rather than problematizing mass communication, they want WMUA to be a place where they can learn real business, so they can establish careers in commercial media or in music and entertainment management. WMUA facilitates concrete progress towards their goals and gives them lines in their resumés. Celia, a novice news announcer told me, 'I'm here 'cuz this is the experience I need. I'm a Comm major, but I'm learning it all down here.'¹³

Other undergraduate students are vague in what they want WMUA. Some describe it as 'cool' to have a show and are caught up in the idea of creating a 'public self' and mass-mediating that self. Or, they are music aficionados and feel they need to share their music, spreading their appreciation around.¹⁴ Some cannot tell me about their original motivation. One came to WMUA 'by totally random chance', but discovered she had a good 'mike-voice' and now was trying to secure an agent to find voice-actor work. One guy told me, 'Freshman year, a girl on my floor, she was kind of hot, and wanted someone to go with her to the organizational meeting and, I don't know, it was interesting...' He and some friends had gotten into improvisational theatre subsequently and had done on-air late night comedy, a la 'The Howard Stern Show'.

Whatever the reason for coming to WMUA, many undergraduate students are taken aback by the structure and how hard it can be to establish oneself. First-year students are not surprised at the difficulty of getting a program in their first semester – after all, UMass is a big school and they quickly become accustomed to being treated like a number by University bureaucracy. They do not expect, however, that WMUA will have ‘soooo many slots’ dedicated to music in which they have no interest (i.e., ‘Jazz everyday? Who the hell listens to jazz?’). And, they are turned off by the competition with so many older people, Community members, for coveted show times.

In turn, many Community members have spent years with the station and may have done two or three six-hour on-air shifts during the latest Christmas holidays, etc. Many have built up a following among listeners interested in their genre of music and because of this they bring in underwriting from local businesses that helps justify their worth. When WMUA does its on-air fund drive, these regulars bring in the lion’s share of support from their listeners – they have ‘ears’ that they can sell to the rest of the station.¹⁵

Some Community members have established relationships with artists and small specialized record labels. Others have connections with activist groups and their radio shows give them legitimacy, as well as a platform. They serve as an institutional memory that would otherwise be cyclical as new classes of students come to college every autumn, stay for four or five years and move on. Community members, however, can become territorial about their time slots and roles at WMUA, especially in reaction to new waves of eighteen year-olds, who are all too ready to revolutionize the station without even learning what the station is all about in the first place.

Reinventing the Wheel? Or, a Steady Hand at the Wheel?

Most small college radio stations have an ‘open format’ arrangement, whereby the programming is chaotic. In an effort to provide listeners with predictable programming, however, the WMUA station body, students and Community members, created structure out of what was then free-form programming in the 1980s. This meant that, by the 1990s, from Monday to Friday, the listener generally could expect a WMUA broadcast day to begin with folksy-eclectic music, then jazz, “world”, blues, then public affairs in the early evening, followed by rock and hip-hop. With these consistencies, WMUA grew its listener base and actually made a dent in the marketing charts of commercial and public radio stations in the area, stealing away some of those ‘ears’.

Some say that the structured consistency has ‘steadied’ and ‘professionalized’ WMUA. DJs, having gained experience, have held onto key timeslots and

produced a better-sounding product. The increased listenership has helped attract listener donations and solicit underwriting from area businesses using the American public radio model. With more funds than what just the University student activities budget would provide, WMUA has invested in better studio equipment and expanded its music library. Incoming students have had to fit into this schema and, in doing so, many have gained experience, becoming better disciplined DJs and producers.

Critics say this structure has entrenched the experienced Community members so much that it shuts out opportunities for the people WMUA is intended for, the undergraduate students. They argue that the system has calcified such that innovation is squelched at the outset. Students cannot find a foothold and give up quickly because they find WMUA heavily bureaucratized:

I thought that it'd be a blast to do a show, y'know, play music and do some fun stuff with my friends. But, I'm listening to people interrupt each other with Robert's Rules of Order and I'm like, where's the fun in that? It's too much work; I mean I have to study for classes, so I don't want to study a frickin' hundred page station manual just so I can go for boring training just so I can get a three in the morning 'training show'...

At one of my first ever station meetings in 1994, a first-year student told me this during a period of his apparently fleeting interest. I never saw that student again. In late 2007, I talked to a Communication major who had been interested in improving her employability and thought it would be fun to get some radio station experience and, all this time later, her words were similar:

Somebody in my first week here told me the station manual was on-line and I'm thinking, OK, station manual? Sure, OK, and I start scrolling down and it's a hundred pages! And it's three months of classes, training labs, sit-ins, practice shows, and then an exam? [...] Then I went to a station meeting and there were all these people who have nothing to do with UMass and I thought, yeah, maybe next year, and I never got back to it... ¹⁶

Students who have stuck with it have told me that they have felt forced to accept a system that limits their freedom to develop the station as they would like. An on-again, off-again DJ, David, told me, 'It's like all these rules and regulations to keep us from ever doing anything; it's a lot of work to ever get yourself established here.' He wanted to learn how to DJ, playing 'classic college radio stuff, y'know, indy rock' but the competition for shows was fierce, he said, 'and it's always like about empowering anybody else but me.'

When I asked Rachel, a station officer, about what her initial expectations had been for WMUA, after some careful thought, she put it this way:

It's hard to remember what I thought WMUA would be like because I guess I'm so caught up in the way that the station is run... I guess I sometimes think the station is running me. A lot of the ideas that I had about doing college radio, like doing really freeform stuff, didn't really fit the way WMUA is done. So I guess I kind of fit myself in here.

Did she regret this? 'Not really,' she continued,

'if I hadn't tried to fit in with the station, I guess I'd have kept listening to the crap music I listened to in high school or just evolved into another shoegazer, emo-whiner white-kid college rock fan. I never would've tried to get a World show during the day and never have gotten into all these different kinds of music that I know about now...

During my first year with the station, I attended a contentious station meeting wherein a group of students was trying abolish block programming or at least radically alter the weekly schedule. At one point, I looked over at a veteran DJ with a popular weekend morning program whom I had recently met and I let out a sigh of exasperation. He chuckled, 'oh, let'em spin their wheels, let'em think they're reinventing the wheel; they'll get busy with partying, get behind on their classes, and they'll calm down soon enough...'

College and Community at WMUA: Static?

If we consider WMUA in Habermasian terms, the station is a local public sphere – 'the sphere of private people com[ing] together as a public' – where every voice has a chance for its input in a mass-mediated 'ideal speech situation' (Habermas 1989: 27). We can see this as WMUA's goal if we look at the Programming Philosophy that rejects decision-making 'based on demographics, market research, sponsor demands and other non-musical factors.' Habermas espouses the 'communicative rationality' that he sees necessary for participatory democracy outside of 'refeudalized' mass communication controlled by commercial interests, consumerism and 'mere media markets' (Habermas 1989: 150, 175-8). The WMUA structure creates an associational model of working concert to facilitate three key participatory features as individuals come together to produce a public community: one is *inclusiveness*, with participation supposedly open to all; the second is *egalitarianism*, whereby all participants are considered equal in how public dialogue is enacted; and the third, is *openness*, such that any issue or artistic taste can be raised for consideration in the public sphere (Habermas 1992: 461-2; Benton 2005; cf. Benhabib 1996: 78).

At WMUA, however, we see that this inclusiveness and egalitarianism is continually called into question as the undergraduate students and Community

Wallace, Reinventing the wheel...

members pull in opposite directions. Kitty van Vuuren (2006: 388-9), writing about community radio in Australia, analyzes the problems of inclusiveness and equal access by considering the community broadcasting as a resource to which people have ‘common property rights’. She finds that many community stations hold to a ‘normative ideal’ of a public sphere and thus focus on the quality of discussion (or ‘rationality of communication’) and they overlook the nature of the resource itself, the means of media production, and who actually has access to that means. While not downplaying the importance of the communicated message, she explains how the emphasis on media output tends to push more experienced community radio practitioners (i.e., WMUA Community members) towards competition with the mainstream market’s slickly produced offerings. The lower quality output from newer or less efficacious volunteers (i.e., WMUA undergraduate students) thus sounds inappropriate and undeserving of airtime despite an implicit mandate to give people a chance to represent themselves in mass media:

[A] community radio licence is representative of, and managed by, its community. Far from being an open-access sphere, however, a community public sphere is a more or less bounded domain, since open access to this sphere can undermine its value (van Vuuren 2006: 389).

van Vuuren’s ‘commons’ approach sees community radio stations as “best understood and evaluated from the perspective of their community development functions” (ibid., 390) and thus helps illuminate tension between the long-termers Community members and always-just-arriving undergraduate students .

Ironically, WMUA, as it was originally chartered, was supposed to function on behalf of the UMass campus community, allowing students to develop as radio broadcasters. Politically and economically, as well as by tradition as a *college radio station*, WMUA is supposed to be controlled by the undergraduate students, hence their 51% voting power in station meetings. Community members and the Organizational Advisor, looking to strengthen output quality, in actual practice have the wherewithal to control the overall agenda of the meeting through their influence and station *habitus*. New generations of students may “spin their wheels”, and in any given year, this might increase friction between students’ individualistic desires and Community members’ progressive communitarianism, but WMUA as a mass media vehicle continues in a direction set out generations before (*cf.*, Coyer 2005:39).

In a piece entitled ‘Radio Dada Manifesto’, John Corbett (1993:83) wrote,

Within the academic institution, the radio station has become a place of experimentation and teaching . The tension between these two functions ... is belied by the ‘educational role’ of college radio. Is it a place where one

learns how to do radio-cum-industry, or is it a space outside of that circuit, where the industry itself can be questioned, pushed, or perhaps ignored?

In the description of WMUA I have laid out, we can see a further tug-of-war of interests, in a third direction: while Corbett keys on the pull between the training ground and experimental function of the station, the hybrid WMUA brings in a Community component that makes the college radio station accountable to the idea of servicing a listening audience throughout the larger broadcast range of the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts.

This plays out as a paradox. On the one hand, the Organizational Advisor and the entrenched old-timers preserve the immediate status quo in order to keep to a progressive educational and communitarian mandate reaching beyond the student body. They hold their places with their cultural capital in the field of production and this works against the egalitarianism and inclusivity of an ‘ideal’ public sphere (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:101, Peterson 2003:177-8). That is, many students feel spurned by the station, perceiving the long-timers there to only serve themselves.

On the other hand, WMUA annually experiences a continued renewal of students entering the station, some of whom stick with it and struggle to gain influence – after all, they are constitutionally empowered to do so by their 51% control. And, with the yearly influx, students bring their radio-cum-industry educational focus and usually individualist goals, focusing on the future employability, audio portfolios, and resumé material. In a WMUA discussion group, one student put it simply: ‘It seems that many Community members forget that this is a student run organization on a college campus, and one of its main roles is to serve as a place for students to learn’.¹⁷ Community members, however, often characterize these career-oriented students as conservative, capitalocentric, and eschewing any overt community-service ideology or giving it no more than lip service.

We have static at the radio as the students try to change the tune – institutional structure holds steady as annual waves of new students look to change it to fit their needs. The students and community members repeat the acts of their WMUA participation and this reproduces the structure – people are “structured by” even as they “structure” (Giddens 1984:2; cf., Giddens & Pierson 1998: 77). Institutionally, WMUA practices lead the individual students into the patterns of the station’s commonsensical traditions, the regularities of its social reproduction, and this-is-just-the-way-it’s-done-ness. The Habermasian public sphere, borne of the communicative rationality that, in this case, takes college radio’s ‘open format’ and creates block programming, finds the limits of its democratizing ideals in the limits – ‘for their own good!’ – of WMUA’s social practices.

Students typically understand *their* WMUA as a stepping stone towards some other destination. The station is a means for enjoyment and for learning radio skills as media message-producers. What that message actually is or who is actually hearing that message is generally of secondary importance. ‘Community’ at WMUA means ‘their immediate selves’ and not necessarily the people around them. Having a ‘professionalized’ station with block programming actually helps those communication majors who are not interested in critical media theory but instead want to learn ‘the business’ because they learn professionalism. The normative discipline of block programming also forces students, or at least those with more motivation, to explore genres of music that they may never have been exposed to otherwise and this can become a questioning of the music-industry’s domination of American taste. However, the ultimate irony is that students find that they are limited in their chances to create something on their own at *their* WMUA. Instead, to gain access, they must fit their individual desires into pre-existing timeslots.

Community members, while deriving pleasure from their production work, see their “message” as of paramount importance – whether teaching about labor issues, the Bush-Cheney administration, or the philosophy of jazz – and they are, as long-time residents of their communities, aware of the quality they need to reach their audiences. Community members claim *their* WMUA as a destination at which they have arrived: it is a good place to be and many stay there, some for thirty years on-air. They have the strength of continuity and the tool of institutional memory, along with political-economic relationships with listeners beyond the university campus. Community members aspire to a democratizing and progressive agenda of communitarianism as they espouse social change, but they use the regulatory conservatism of the WMUA structure to keep in check individual development and keep students in their places.

Notes

¹ My research methodology has been that of longitudinal ethnography; that is, long-term participant observation and interviews over a dozen years, on-again and off-again as the demands of my course work, teaching, and primary fieldwork (in Slovakia and Croatia) for my graduate degrees took me to and from the UMass and WMUA setting in any given academic year. In doing so, I observed WMUA’s longer term trends and this article takes various synchronic “slice-of-time” readings of the station and threads them together giving a diachronic view showing continuities and social reproduction, as well as ruptures and reinventions. This is not a rigidly methodic sampling of views of the station – in recent years my conversations and interviews concerning the station were usually opportunistic, but based on having a good background on WMUA from the late 1990s when I more deliberately had sought out people who represented various perspectives on the station.

² Beyond classifying types by producers' goals, we also can look at 'radio types' in terms of the technological means of content delivery (i.e., analogue or digital, satellite or internet-streaming), but that is not my aim here (WMUA is on the internet at www.wmua.org, but I have found it working only intermittently over the years).

³ When an underwriter 'sponsors' a program, the host reads a fifteen second spot, naming the business, its offerings, and contact information. Underwriting is legal for non-profits like WFCR and WMUA because an underwriting spot disallows qualitative language praising a business's offerings and thus differs from advertising. Nonetheless, in my experience, most businesses see it as advertising with the social good implied by helping a non-profit organization simply a nice addition to the ultimate benefit of 'selling to ears' (cf., Sauls 2000: 126-133).

⁴ The struggle of Low-powered FM broadcasters in the U.S., as 'pirate radio' or 'community radio', has been difficult and has far fewer 'success stories' than in countries like Great Britain, but that is not the focus of this article. For more information about LPFM/Community broadcasting read Soley (1999), McChesney (1999), Fairchild (2001) and Carpenter (2004); also edited volumes from Strauss (1993), and Hilmes & Loviglio (2002).

⁵ As an example of the inattention afforded college radio in the U.S., consider Sterling & Keith's edited three-volume *Encyclopedia of Radio*: of 600+ entries spanning 1696 pages, only one is entitled 'college radio'. No specific college radio stations are mentioned in the index; it is but a very minor format treated under larger rubrics.

S. J. Sauls' *The Culture of American College Radio* tries to fill this gap, ostensibly emphasizing the distinctive character of college radio as well as institutional and economic structures behind it in the U.S. (2000:5). However, the book is more of a practical manual for running a college station than a cultural (or ethnographic) analysis and gives little attention to community input into college radio (146-8). Nonetheless, his account gives the uninitiated a look at a part of American radio neglected by most media scholars.

Tim Wall's recent article "Finding an alternative: Music programming in U.S. college radio" gives a succinct overview of the history of college radio before analyzing different kinds of "alternativeness" at three different college stations in the northeast United States (2007: 42). Wall's five years of research are ethnographic in nature and quite similar to the work I have done for this article with one notable exception – he interviewed "key station personnel" while I also include conversations and interviews with people who never became key to WMUA.

⁶ The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued class D ten-watt station licenses for the new FM band in the 1960s. However, by the mid-1970s, as FM eclipsed AM in popularity, competition intensified for FM channels. The FCC, swayed by the National Association of Broadcasters and NPR, decided that low-power stations hindered larger broadcasters and stopped issuing class D licenses in

1979. The FCC let large stations force the Class D's off the air if they were in their broadcast footprint. Faced with aggressive commercial and public radio expansion, some college stations disappeared, while others spent relative fortunes upgrading transmitters in order to stay on-air.

⁷ In order to be comprehensive, I should note that UMass has had in the past, WOCH, a small low-wattage station broadcasting from the basement of a dormitory (cf., Crolus 2000). About a dozen years ago, a small group of students who were disgruntled with their lack of access with WMUA tried to revive WOCH, but were discouraged to find the equipment in utter disrepair. When I saw it, the studio looked more archaeological than functional.

⁸ Having DJs on-air at 4:00 in the morning is difficult, therefore many broadcast days tend to be about 21 hours.

⁹ The Station Manager oversees the Finance, Visual Media, Publicity, Sales and Underwriting, and Fund Drive Directors, and the Technical and Office Coordinators, as well as the Community Representative. The Programmer oversees the Music, News Operations, News Production, Production, Sports Operations, Sports Production, Training, ALANA (African, Latino, Asian, Native American) Affairs, and Women's Affairs Director as well as 'Captains' who lead separate music blocks for Blues, World, Jazz, Folk, Loud Rock/Metal, Rock, and Urban Music.

¹⁰ The Organizational Advisor's protective oversight of certain programming at WMUA reflects R. Wilfred Tremblay's 2003 article in *Journal of Radio Studies* that summarized his survey of two dozen faculty advisors at college stations. Advisors held to 'jazz, blues and alternative music' with a 'traditional college radio ideology' of being an 'alternative to commercial radio' (173, 179; cf., Sauls 2000, Wall 2007: 41).

¹¹ 'Vincent', 'Adriana', 'Seth' and all names that follow are invented according to University of Massachusetts Human Subject Review guidelines as they applied at the time of my research. Also, reflective of the longitudinal nature of my fieldwork, I should note that some timeframes are skewed, i.e., in the paragraph to which this footnote refers, the quotes date from 2001, 1998, and 2007, respectively.

¹² According to the by-laws of the UMass Student Government Association (Title VII, Chapter 8, Section 4), 'Officers must be full-time students, in addition to the SGA membership requirement. Part-time students, and non-SGA members of an RSO, may not hold full officer positions.' Also, Title I, Chapter 1 states: 'Any person, subject to, and having paid the Student Activities Fee, shall be a member of the SGA for the period of calendar time to which her/his paid Student Activities Fee is applicable' ("The Constitution of the Student Government Association of the University of Massachusetts Amherst", 2008: 5, 95).

¹³ Students' *realist discourse* about 'employability' while gaining a degree in 'critical studies' kinds of disciplines, particularly in media studies fields, is an on-going problem in the academy. In 'Chasing the Real: "Employability" and the Media

Studies Curriculum’, Thornham & O’Sullivan address this, outlining arguments between proponents of universities offering ‘media literacy’ pedagogy vs. ‘vocational media training’ in the UK (720-2, 733-4).

¹⁴ Interestingly, the advent of the mp3 blog seems to have only complemented the desire for playing music on the radio instead of supplanting interest in WMUA.

¹⁵ WMUA holds its annual fund-drive in October. Every on-air person on every program is expected to participate, asking listeners for donation pledges. Since its inception in the late 1980s, the drive has taken in tens of thousands of dollars for the station, with over 90% coming from Community member shows. The hosts of the weekend morning polka programs alone typically account for more than two-thirds of the funds raised. Traditionally Polish families live in WMUA’s broadcast range and polka remains very popular. Listeners know that if they want it to continue at the station, they need to contribute and this strengthens Community members’ positions at WMUA.

¹⁶ For the record, the latest *WMUA Station Manual*, last revised 28th November 2006, and most recently downloaded on 9th March 2008, is 83 pages long. The six weeks of training involve a lecture, four weekly labs, then an exam. Thereafter, a trainee “sits-in” for five shows with an experienced DJ and two overnight practice shows. Training can take three months and does not guarantee anyone a show. More information can be found at www.wmua.org/training.php.

¹⁷ WMUA discussion list, 25th March 2001 (now defunct).

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Wallace, Reinventing the wheel...

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