Radio, the most prevalent form of media in North America, like other contemporary media, is experiencing ever-increasing corporate concentration (McChesney, 2000). A low power FM (LPFM) movement has emerged, in part as a reaction to this media concentration, as well as from a hundred years of radio history, and represents a unique voice in contemporary radio communication. The history of LPFM is relevant to leisure studies because it exhibits many leisure ideals: communitarianism (Arai and Pedlar, 2001); the potential for emancipatory leisure (Hemingway, 1999); notions of deviant leisure (Rojek, 1999) through civil disobedience; which in turn manifest issues of democracy, resistance and social justice (Welch, 1990).

Radio is an immensely popular leisure pursuit: the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB, 2001) reported that in the U.S. more people own and use radios (575 million) than televisions (219 million) or the Internet (148 million), and 99% percent of U.S. households have radios. NAB purported that radio reaches 96% of consumers each week. Additionally, I argue that the history of radio has been largely ignored and critically uncontested. This has allowed for current broadcasting practices and policies to appear 'natural' or 'given' rather than as continual reconstructions of multiple cultural (social, political, economic) forces. There is evidence to suggest a radio monoculture exists: one media form (commercial radio) that positions itself as the one true form. Unexamined historical factors aid in appearances of naturalness or 'goodness' of this one way to 'do' radio (Hemingway, 1999).

Lastly, a critical examination of the history of LPFM radio provides useful critiques of other contemporary leisure practices and policies. The historical and cultural forces—increasing commercialization, privatization, and professionalization—that have fostered the radio monoculture hostile to LPFM are also at work within the field of leisure (Rojek, 1995). Leisure is not separate from culture. In critiquing culture, we uncover what leisure is, and "the greater our appreciation of the part played by cultural mores, distinctions and conflicts in establishing the parameters of debate" (p. 2). Another intent of this paper is to show that the process of determining what is acceptable radio practice is analogous to that for determining acceptable leisure.

Originally, radio was a public, unregulated space. Its first two decades (1895-1915) consisted of amateur broadcast, military use, and much debate over governmental control of this new electronic frontier. Before commercial broadcasts (circa 1919), ham operators established social networks and even began broadcasting music by placing a microphone in front of a gramophone (White, 1999). However, corresponding with an intensification of consumer culture in the 1920s, the medium was quickly incorporated by broadcasting corporations. The first was Westinghouse, which launched station KDKA in 1920; and also the Radio Corporation of America, created by the U.S. government in 1919 to 'Americanize' the radio industry, that launched its stations in 1921. General Electric and Westinghouse combined with RCA to create the National Broadcasting Company in 1927. Morris Ernst of the American Civil Liberties Union argued against the 1927 Radio Act: "We are deeply concerned in the bill in so far as it relates to the question of censorship and free speech. Even the term 'free speech' is more or less a misnomer when you have to pay $400 an hour to get one of the good New York stations and are lucky if you can get on at all... the whole bill is predicated on money" (quoted in Streeter, 1996, p. 191). The Communications Act of 1934 legislated a shared public/private broadcast configuration, but framed within language ambiguous enough to ensure that political and economic might would make right. Radio was to serve "the public interest, convenience, and necessity" without "unreasonable restraints on trade" (Streeter, 1996, p. 167).

Hendy (2000) noted five different, yet overlapping, sectors of radio broadcasting which may be differentiated in terms of funding and goals: State (government funded, regulated, or operated); public service (e.g., BBC, CBC, or NPR, supposedly outside the commercial realm); commercial (privately owned, for profit); community (legal micro-power radio, promulgating communal and public rights); and lastly underground (illegal, unlicensed). These last two types compose the low power FM sector. LPFM has existed in the U.S. in the form of Class 'D' licenses since 1948. These were created to allow broadcasting at 10 watts (reaching about 2 square miles) within the region of 88 to 92 MHz in what was originally called the 'educational band' of FM radio. This license class was initiated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to bring schools and colleges on the air, as opposed to individuals, thus providing a professional training ground for broadcasters and technicians.

The passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 established a national public radio network that coalesced into National Public Radio (NPR) in 1971. In so doing, policy makers markedly defined what may be considered to 'count' as 'public radio' today: an educational service, with partial (11.6%) federal funding (Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), 2001) that still required support from corporate interests. This moment represents the 'professionalization' of public radio, and the creation of a public radio monoculture along similar lines to commercial radio. In the early 1970s the CPB challenged the legality of Class 'D' student-run stations—because they operated to such varying degrees of quantity and quality—as poor exemplars of 'public radio' which did not serve "the public interest, convenience, and necessity" without "unreasonable restraints on trade" (Streeter, 1996, p. 167). To the CPB, NPR represents the model of public radio operations. The CPB successfully argued that Class 'D' licenses were a "waste of space" (Anderson, 2001). The FCC outlawed LPFM in 1978, citing they were "taking up parts of the spectrum where higher power 'public radio' might otherwise be available" (Anderson, 2001). This represents the continued privilege of profits over public interests, and 'free speech' and 'free choice' equated to
merely market and commodity choices.

Thoreau (1849/1986, p. 273) wrote "Unjust laws exist: Shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?" The first rise of resistance emerged in LPFM in the late 1980s. Most notable was Mbanna Kantako, who in 1987 began operating the 1-watt "WTRA - Human Rights Radio" to publicize police brutality in his neighbourhood. In 1993, Stephen Dunifer founded Free Radio Berkeley, a 40-watt station in San Francisco. Both represent a resurrection of the Class 'D' concept of public radio (Anderson, 2001). Dunifer, for example, argued that the airwaves were public domain and were protected by the First Amendment. Accordingly, radio's role in a democratic society should be serving 'the people' rather than corporate interests (Anderson, 2001). These latter interests conflict with communitarian notions (Arai and Pedlar, 2001).

Current broadcasting legislation is prohibitive to local, community LPFM radio. Under the Telecommunications Act of 1996, one corporation may operate as many as eight radio stations in any one market, with no maximum cap in place for ownership of stations nation-wide. Today six media conglomerates operate over 70% of the stations in the U.S. (Hazen & Winokur, 1997). Through ABC Radio, Walt Disney Co. controls over 3,400 stations covering 25% of U.S. households. Clear Channel Communications operates 1,170 stations. McChesney stated that "this rampant commercialization of communication poses a severe challenge to the social capacity to generate a democratic political culture and public sphere... all known theories of political democracy would suggest that such a concentration of media and communication in a handful of mostly unaccountable interests is little short of an unmitigated disaster" (1996, p. 98). As "perhaps one of the most corrupt pieces of legislation in U.S. history...effectively written by and for business" (McChesney, 1996, p. 98), the 1996 Act spurred a grassroots backlash of civil disobedience in "one of the most striking bursts of [radio] activity in recent years" hailed as "the second rise of LPFM" (Anderson, 2001). Hemingway (1999) emphasized leisure's "social capacity to generate a democratic political culture and public sphere." He also stressed the importance of a "plurivocity and polyphony" (many voices and themes) in historically existing leisure practices—both are strikingly absent in mainstream radio broadcasting (1999, p. 492).

Federally sanctioned media concentration allows for the belief that the market compels media firms to "give the people what they want" and that limits the ability of citizens to grasp corporate media's true intent and seductive power (McChesney, 2000). Many LPFM advocates seek to expose and disrupt this myth by taking to the airwaves in unlicensed protest or seeking to create legal licenses for LPFM. Three people petitioned the FCC to press for a legalized LPFM service in February of 1998. The FCC invited public comment about the proposals: "In 1998 alone the FCC fielded more than 20,000 inquiries from citizens who wanted to start their own stations" (Anderson, 2001).

A legal low power FM radio class was approved by the FCC on January 20th, 2000. More than 700 applications were submitted in June 2000. Before those licenses could be distributed, however, Congress—heavily lobbied by NAB and NPR—stepped in and froze the process, claiming that LPFM would create chaos on the airwaves. To date, 3,247 applications for LPFM licenses have been filed with the FCC. Only 112 have thus far been granted (3.5%) and only five may possibly represent any programmatic threat to mainstream, urban, corporate broadcasting. Thus, attempts to achieve transformation of the airwaves under the auspices of legalized LPFM have been rendered largely ineffectual.

As a result, many low power advocates have returned illegally to the airwaves, and the FCC has stepped up its campaign to shut down "illegal" broadcasters. Some 'pirates' in Colorado "broadcast from the back of a van in gleeful violation of the law" (Roberts, 2001, p. 18). One LPFM advocate stated: "I had a choice to make. The whole idea of the federal government taking a natural resource, which is what the radio spectrum is, and selling it almost exclusively to two or three big corporations like Clear Channel is like Disney buying national parks. Little guys like me don't have a chance if we play by the rules. So, I decided not to" (Roberts, 2001, p.20).

Welch (1990) wrote of the ethical risk taken toward realizing a "beloved community" and a vision of social justice: Together, citizens must work for this vision without waiting for, or necessarily wanting, conventional political power, and move forward with courage and commitment. Facing continued FCC prohibition of LPFM radio, LPFM advocates have continued to broadcast, refuse to pay their fines, or endure repeated police raids and confiscation of their equipment (Anderson, 2001). The issues surrounding radio, leisure and justice are concealed by skewed political policy and a lack of historical acuity. Leisure research must first explicate and redress these conditions. We may then open the "emancipatory social space at which critical theory aims" (Hemingway, 1999, p. 497) in order for citizens to create a greater public good (Arai and Pedlar, 2001). While LPFM radio has been deemed deviant leisure, Rojek (1999) claimed "deviant leisure plays a seminal role in social change" (p. 92). By problematizing "the coercive structures which regulate our sense of justice, order, and normality" leisure "may be studied historically... but it is also evident concretely, in the role that leisure plays in supporting and developing identity politics and critical social movements" (p. 92). Critique of radio's historical practices, policies and social movements thus illuminates contemporary leisure.

References


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ABSTRACTS

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