

- recently in Canada, through the 1988 federal legislation which created the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (ICHRDD) (Schmitz, 2004: 17)
2. These core grantees are the International Republican Institute, the Center for International Private Enterprise, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and the AFL-CIO's Free Trade Union Institute.
  3. Kevin Pina, 'Bush, call off your dogs! US can end the killing it started in Haiti', *The Black Commentator* (February 26, 2004). *The Black Commentator* website: [www.blackcommentator.com/79/79\\_haiti\\_dogs\\_pf.html](http://www.blackcommentator.com/79/79_haiti_dogs_pf.html).
  4. In RAMAK's annual report, the incident is acknowledged, though it is described somewhat more euphemistically; according to the report, RAMAK beneficiaries had 'isolated Jean Charles from the radio station management' (Creative Associates International, 2004: 7).

#### References

- Bogdanich, W. and Nordberg, J. (29 January 2006) Mixed US signals helped tilt Haiti toward chaos. *New York Times*, A1.
- Creative Associates International (2004) Haiti Media Assistance and Civic Education Project Year 3 Annual Report (report prepared for USAID) (2004).
- Canadian International Development Agency (2004) Canadian Cooperation With Haiti: reflecting on a decade of 'difficult partnership'.
- Canadian International Development Agency (2005) Media Support: planned project summary information.
- Fenton, A. (2005) Canada's Growing Role In Haitian Affairs, *Haiti-Progres*, accessed through ZNet, Z Magazine website, [www.zmag.org](http://www.zmag.org).
- Pina, K. (Dir.) (2007) *Haiti: we must kill the bandits* (documentary film, produced by Haiti Information Project).
- Saltman, K. (2006) Creative Associates International: Corporate education and 'democracy promotion' in Iraq. In *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 28:1, 25-65.
- Schmitz, G. (2004) *The role of international democracy promotion in Canada's foreign policy*. Montreal, Institute for Research on Public Policy.
- United States Agency for International Development. 'USAID-Haiti', USAID website,

Isabel Macdonald is a freelance journalist who conducted research in Haiti for her MA thesis, 'Covering the Coup: Canadian news reporting, journalists, and sources in the 2004 Haiti crisis' (Joint Programme in Communication and Culture, York University, Toronto, 2007).

## Baboukèt la tonbe! – The muzzle has fallen!

Jane Regan

*Radio played an important role in the resistance to Haiti's brutal three-year coup d'état (1991-94). Not surprisingly, the post-coup period saw a flowering of the popular and community radio movement, with over two dozen stations springing up in just a few years. But the stations did not end up playing the mobilizing role their founders had imagined. Instead, many became little more than educational radios at best, run by small cliques. A number even spawned candidates and became allied with the ruling political party. Before a decade was up, over half had become clients of a U.S. government-funded agency. What happened to the vibrant radio movement and the grassroots organizations that founded them? And how are the stations faring today? What can be learned?¹*

The history of the democratic struggle in Haiti is intimately bound up with the struggle for freedom of speech. When Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier fled the country in 1986, ending the 29-year-long dictatorship, one of the slogans most often heard and scrawled on walls was 'Baboukèt la tonbe!' meaning 'The muzzle has fallen!' – in Creole, the language all Haitians speak, not French, the language of the former colonizers spoken by less than a quarter of the population.

Radio has a long history in Haiti, a country whose illiteracy rate still hovers around 45%. The few newspapers are almost all in French; and the largest paper prints only 20,000 copies, in country of 8 million. In contrast, some 92% of Haitians have access to a radio and listeners spend at least two hours a day tuned in (Drogue, 2008).

U.S. Marines set up the first radio station, broadcasting propaganda during the first U.S. occupation (1915-1934). In the years that followed, those struggling for social change seized the tool with enthusiasm. During the Duvalier dictatorship a few brave commercial and church-related radio stations played major roles broadcasting news, metaphor-laden radio plays, and '*musique engagée*' or 'committed' music of struggle. The stations helped the country's democratic movement coalesce and contributed to the valorization of Haitian Creole, which finally was recognized as an official language in 1987.

In 1990, after four years of tumult and violence, Haitians voted in what is generally considered the country's first free elections. As their president, they chose a last-minute candidate, fiery liberation theology-oriented Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Seven months later he was overthrown in a brutal coup d'état led by army officers connected with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. For three years, soldiers and paramilitary henchmen terrorized journalists, grassroots group members, and anyone who had advocated social and economic justice. Between 2,000 and 3,000 people were killed and thousands more terrified into silence or chased into exile.

Once again, radio was a principal means of political communication, mobilization and resistance. When they dared, commercial stations broadcast news, although sometimes at fatal cost. Across the border in the Dominican Republic, the Catholic church-related Radio Enriquillo, whose signal reached much of Haiti, broke new ground with special anti-coup news programs in Haitian Creole. When the Dominican government outlawed newscasts in Creole, they sang the news. In the capital, several tiny clandestine radios took to the airwaves with news, *musique engagée* and 'resis-

tance' messages.

The trauma of the dictatorships and the role radio had played throughout the century contributed to what some have called an almost mythical appreciation for the power of free speech. Added to this was the fact that, even after Aristide returned to Haiti in 1994, there were still few aspects in Haitian political life which could be called democratic. But there was freedom of speech, and its existence almost eclipsed the lack of other democratic freedoms.

The new freedom of speech is at once the imposition of Creole as an official language, the phenomenon of popular radios, the expression of the peasant world long repressed and excluded from the political scene. The freed word is the crystallization of the end of censorship and socio-cultural exclusion [...] The power to denounce everything and anything and to criticize any maneuver judged suspect is considered to be the heart of democratic activity (Jean and Maesshalck, 1999: 171-172).

#### The flowering of radio in the post-coup era

The muzzle was torn away again. In the years following the coup – from 1995 to 2000 – no fewer than 30 'community' and/or 'popular' radios<sup>2</sup> were launched, nearly all of them in tiny hamlets and towns, some of which previously did not even have access to radio signals from the capital.

Peasant organizations, youth groups, community groups, women's associations and unions got together and got on the air, announcing that they were going to be the 'voice of the voiceless' and motors for change. Many had names like 'Voice of the Peasant Radio,' 'People's Liberation Radio,' 'Rebel,' 'Voice of the People Radio,' 'Wozo' and 'Tenite' radios (Wozo is a bamboo plant that, even in violent storms, 'bends but does not break' according to the Haitian proverb, while Tenite is a grass which withstands brutal sun and heat and always grows back.) Founding organizations said their radios would be part of a struggle for 'total, complete change,' for 'another kind of society,' for 'justice.'

Foreign and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), along with UNESCO, moved quickly to help get the radios set up. In some

cases, the NGOs went so far as to go into the field and hand-picked communities and organizations which would receive the aid.

One of the key players was the *Sosyete Animasyon Kominikasyon Sosyal* (SAKS), the Society for the Animation of Social Communication.<sup>3</sup> Between 1994 and 2000, this small NGO helped launch almost two dozen stations. Other NGOs and churches helped found another dozen. At least \$200,000 and probably more like \$400,000 in foreign funding poured in from sources like the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), UNESCO and smaller Canadian, U.S. and British government agencies and NGOs.

Because of this sudden availability of resources, some private local radios suddenly 'communitized' themselves. Perhaps they learned about and agreed with the vision and mission of community and popular radios, as preached by the NGOs in the capital, or perhaps the funding, training and equipment opportunities were the attraction (Chanel,

2001: 9-10).

These stations assisted by SAKS all claimed to be 'popular' or 'community' stations, but in reality they came in all stripes: one had a flag emblazoned with a red hammer and sickle, another ten were aided by the anarchist Radio Free Berkeley in the U.S., some were run by the local priest or pastor, others by the local and regional peasant associations.

#### Fragile beginnings

While grassroots groups' drive to set up the radios was certainly real, many, if not most, lacked the organizational, ideological and perhaps even the political capacity to do so. The principle problem was the fact that most of the groups were popular organizations in name only. In reality they were collections of like-minded people usually dominated by one or several leaders, without much participation or democratic discourse. Writing about the popular and other grassroots organizations in the late 1990s, two researchers at a Haitian NGO

*A shoe repairman listening to the news during the 1991-94 coup d'état period. Photo: Daniel Morel/Wozo Productions.*



explained the main problem:

'The organizations revolved around the leaders who made all of the decisions, sometimes acting like real ayatollahs. This phenomenon had the effect of marginalizing the other members...' (Jean and Maeschalck, 1999: 83)

Another analyst noted that, while dynamic and effervescent, popular organizations, with 'spontaneity, [their] amorphous nature and [their] organizational weakness' were 'a potential danger for the construction of democracy. Anyone may create "his" PO [popular organization] and use it for his personal use or for political manipulation' (Smarth, 1997: 102-126).

Many organizations also lacked ideological and political discipline. Members wanted 'change,' but programs were often little more than a collection of slogans. Some analysts have gone so far as to say Haiti's popular organizations had lost their ideological way as early as 1990, when Aristide became a candidate. Many of the grassroots groups felt they had to choose between supporting his candidacy or continuing their more radical struggles for land reform, social and economic justice (René, 2003: 136).

By the mid-1990s, external factors had also taken their toll. Repression prior to and during the 1991-94 coup had eliminated or scared away members, and in some localities, the radios themselves were targeted. Following the coup, some organizations and their leaders also fell victim to political party or government clientelism. The reigning Lavalas party and other, smaller parties recruited heavily amongst the grassroots organizations. Members became candidates, employees or operatives.

Finally, the economic factor cannot be overlooked. The poorest country in the hemisphere, Haiti's economic and social indicators declined steadily throughout the 1990s, with the cost of living going up and the economic outlook ever bleaker. Unemployment hovered between 60 to 70% during the late 1990s and, according to the World Bank, two-thirds of Haiti's rural residents lived below the absolute poverty line.

The local and foreign NGOs, for their part, also fell short. Either they lacked the proper theoretical understanding of what factors are key to the success of community and/or popular media ventures, or, in their verve, decided to skip such factors. The strength and authenticity of founding organizations and the importance of community participation were two elements evidently not stressed.

Father Pedro Rouquoy of Radio Enriquillo remembered a meeting with members of the Aristide government in exile in 1992 or 1993:

'We talked a lot about the roles community radios can play... I said, "Look, we should make it so that all community organizations in Haiti can set up a little radio." And I remember that there was a big discussion in Washington and some said, "But they won't be able to manage them! It will be disorganized!" But I said, "That's not what's important now. It's important for everyone in Haiti, all the community organizations, to get a little radio station. Let's organize that, and afterwards we'll see how we can organize them, how we can coordinate them.'

The fact that the idea of the radio stations came 'from above' is not necessarily fatal, but 'founding' organizations need to be empowered from the outset. In this particular case, three years out the station was run by 'a group of young people from town' and the peasant organization, which was still limping along in 2002, had been completely excluded.

The decision to rush in with equipment and funding also took its toll. The most impoverished country in the hemisphere, for decades dependent on both foreign assistance and remittances from the diaspora, Haiti is afflicted with what many researchers call a 'culture of dependency' (Birns: 2005). The manner in which many of the radio stations were set up fed right into this culture. As Chateaugat noted in 1997, the stations he visited had 'a state of mind of dependence' and had decided that NGO funding was the only way to keep their doors open (Chateaugat, 1997: 36).

The manner in which many stations were 'implanted' also had a negative effect on their

surrounding populations. In many localities, people said their meager contributions were not needed because, they concluded, the stations obviously had access to *'pwòjè'* ('projects,' meaning grants). They saw the stations suddenly appear, with new equipment and with visits from foreigners or NGO people from the capital. In all four of the case study radios, stations got only a small portion – 20% at most – of their revenues from the area.

#### Lessons learned

By 2002, seven of the 30 stations born between 1994 and 2000 were off the air. Most of the rest were run as private radio stations; the founding organizations had withered to a small group of people – most of them men – involved in the station.

In an overwhelming number of stations, the only community participation came in the form of announcements. In many Haitian localities, the stations are most appreciated because they serve as a 'telephone' – people could come in with messages about a funeral or a cock fight or a stolen goat, and the radio host would read it on the air.

The foundering of the radios came as no surprise, since the democratic movement was also at perhaps its lowest point since under the Duvalier dictatorship. A member of one radio station said 'the popular struggle has been broken' and continued:

'That has consequences for radios which were tools of that struggle, which were supposed to represent the demands of the masses. We were supposed to accompany the movement, but if the movement is dead, what is our role?'

The most successful social movement media projects are always connected to social movement organizations, as many researchers have repeatedly pointed out. As the organizations weakened and even disappeared, so too, did the 'popular' or 'community' aspects of the radio stations.

The programming on most stations reflected this ratcheting back. They played mostly music, along with educational series on human rights,

women's rights, and other issues supplied by NGOs and agencies from the capital. Some had local news once or several times a week and a few also had talk shows. These local radios were certainly listened to, but survey respondents complained about that they were not invited to participate, and that there was not enough local news. Still, they were almost universally proud they had 'their own' radio, which broadcast at least some programming in their language, Creole.

By 2002, however, the financial situations of 18 of the surviving stations had driven them to sign contracts with a U.S. government-funded institution which promised new equipment and training in exchange for the stations' bartering away their autonomy and original, more radical orientation.<sup>4</sup> Analysts at SAKS and other NGOs considered this to be a major blow and a sign that something had gone very wrong.

If funders and NGOs like SAKS had taken a harder look at the organizations backing the radios, they might have spent time helping them democratize themselves and become (re-)rooted in their communities, whether geographic, political or otherwise. Likewise, if they had made a bigger difference between lending solidarity and creating dependency, perhaps the stations would have not been as quick to seize only external assistance and funding, no matter the source.

#### Moving forward

The experience of Haiti's explosion of community and popular radio stations – especially the manner in which they were established – illustrates a great deal. The health – political, financial, organizational, and related to community participation – of a community or popular radio station is intrinsically linked to the health of its parent organization. And participation, a vital element of any organization, no matter the ideological orientation it chooses, cannot be pushed to the side without consequences being felt.

In addition the delicate balance between internal and community dynamism and indigenous participation and support on the one hand, and external intervention with training, funding and equipment on the other, must be

protected. Organizations and projects in historically exploited and impoverished communities or countries will need solidarity from those with greater means for years to come. But if and when that solidarity is tinged with paternalism and/or encouraged dependency, it can be deadly.

A half-decade later, many of the original 30 radios are on the air, partly because of equipment and assistance from RAMAK. But, according to a recent study (Reynold, 2008), only a handful could be considered truly 'community' and perhaps none 'popular,' and most remain dependent on grants from organizations in the capital. Thus, even if the future of the stations as fixtures in their localities is not entirely in jeopardy, the positive social role they might play – beyond relaying programming produced in the capital – is not assured.

Today, SAKS, at least, is in the midst of making a concerted effort to encourage radios to cultivate more community participation. At the same time, there are signs that at least some of the organizations in Haiti's democratic movement are attempting to 'redynamize themselves at the political and organizational level' (Reynold, 2008: 8). Perhaps the dialectical relationship between the radios and their parent organizations can help in this process, enabling the organizations to build themselves up again at the same time as they open their doors to their neighbors, Haiti's 'voiceless.' ■

#### Notes

1. This article is drawn in large part from my field work – focusing on about two dozen radios with four case study stations, and my thesis – 'Baboukèt la tonbe! (The muzzle has fallen!): The contribution of Haiti's popular and community radios to the country's democratic and popular movement (1995-2002)' – written in 2004 in fulfillment of a Masters of Philosophy in Communications Studies for the University of the West Indies Caribbean Institute of Media and Communications.
2. While these two labels were used interchangeably in Haiti in the mid-1990s, by 2000 or so, a 'popular' radio had come to mean a station run by one or several popular organizations which consider themselves part of the democratic movement advocating structural and therefore sometimes radical social, economic and political change. A 'community' radio was a station run by (a) less radical organization(s), with a less radical and overtly political mandate. These terms will be used here.

3. The author was a member of SAKS' Board of Directors (1997-2003) and also a part-time staffer (1998-99 and 2002).
4. Each radio had to agree to play a series on civic education, distribute civic education materials, establish a board of directors that would include a broad representation of 'members of civil society' who would be 'guardians of the community's goods,' the new equipment which remained property of the U.S. funded group until after September, 2004. The group was called RAMAK – Rasanbleman Medya pou Aksyon Kominotè (Grouping of Media for Community Actions) and was part of U.S. AID's 'democracy enhancement' work in Haiti. See Robinson (1996) and Regan (1994) for more on Washington's 'democracy enhancement' work.

#### References

- Birns, Larry (2005). 'In Haiti, hope for democracy, future wanes,' *The Boston Globe*, April 26, 2005. March 1, 2008. <<http://www.haiti-info.com/sppip.php?article3586>>
- Chanel, Yves Marie (2001). 'Enquete sur les radios communautaires.' In Edwige Balutansky, (Ed.). *Les radios communautaires*. Port-au-Prince: Fondation La Roche, 5-47.
- Chateau-Degat, Richard (1997). 'Radios communautaires pour la démocratie en Haiti – UNESCO / Rapport de la mission d'évaluation,' internal report.
- Drogue, C. (2008). 'Haiti: Le défi de l'information,' *Alterpresse*, February 20, 2008. March 1, 2008. <[http://www.alterpresse.org/sppip.php?article6954&cvar\\_recherche=gallup/](http://www.alterpresse.org/sppip.php?article6954&cvar_recherche=gallup/)>
- Jean, Jean-Claude, and Marc Maeschalek (1999). *Transition politique en Haiti – Radiographie du pouvoir Lavalas*. Paris, France: L'Harmattan.
- Regan, Jane (1994). 'A.I.D.ing U.S. Interests in Haiti.' *CovertAction Quarterly*, Winter 1994-1995, 7-13.
- René, Alex (2003). *La Séduction Populiste – Essai sur la crise systématique Haïtienne et le phénomène Aristide (1986-1991)*. Port-au-Prince, Haiti: privately published.
- Reynold, Sanon 'Kout je sou mouvman radyo kominotè ann Ayiti' research paper, March 1, 2008, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Unpublished research paper.
- Robinson, William I. (1996). *Promoting Polyarchy – Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony*. New York: University of Cambridge Press.
- Smarth, Luc (1997) 'Popular Organizations and the Transition to Democracy in Haiti' in Michael Kaufman and Haroldo Dilla Alfonso, eds., *Community Power and Grassroots Democracy*. London: 1997 Zed books. March 5, 2008 <<http://www.idrc.ca/openbooks/784-1/>>

Jane Regan is a filmmaker, journalist and scholar who spent 12 years living in Haiti. She has been a communicator for over 25 years and lives in the Hudson Valley, north of New York City.