

# Community Radio as an Alternative Media in US and WRFU-LP,

Talk by [Danielle Chynoweth](#)<sup>1</sup> from UC-IMC,

with Mugiko from [Harukana Show](#)<sup>2</sup>

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## **Mugiko: Could you introduce yourself in English?**

**Daniell:** My name is Danielle Chynoweth, and I work closely with the Independent Media Center since we started in 2000. It actually started with a group of friends, 12 of us, in a living room. We collectivized our media equipment, and we started to help each other produce radio. It is kind of citizen or amateur journalists. I also helped to get the applications in for WRFU back when we were trying to get a license. That was between 2000 and 2002.

I currently work with a group called the [Prometheus Radio Project](#)<sup>3</sup> and that's a group that helps groups across the United States get licenses to start mostly low-power radio stations like WRFU, which are – it's a 100 watts or less, the power of a light bulb essentially. So I spent a lot of time working to raise money and then to help to pass legislation that would create 100s, if not 1000s, more radio stations across the US.

Then I am currently working on outreach to get the word out to let folks know about this opportunity to start new radio stations.

## **You said about the Prometheus Radio Project. it is just the project to support to set up the WRFU?**

Yes. Prometheus Radio Project is actually responsible in part for the existence of WRFU because of [Pete Tridish](#)<sup>4</sup> who is one of the co-founders of that organization.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://harukanashow.org>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.prometheusradio.org/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://2013.prometheusradio.org/Low\\_Power\\_High\\_Intensity\\_QandA](https://2013.prometheusradio.org/Low_Power_High_Intensity_QandA)

They are kind of a group of radio evangelists we call them. They let us know that there was even an opportunity to apply for a new license. A number of us had worked with WEFT, which is the other community radio station in town. We found that there was not enough room on the dial for everyone who wanted to have a show and especially kind of Eclectic and shows that don't quite fit with Jazz and Blues and World Beat and some other things that they emphasize, especially during the day. So we thought that there was a need for additional community radio. So when Prometheus came to town in a broken down car to let us know that this opportunity was coming, we started to organize, to apply and they really helped us. It's a very difficult process with the federal agency the FCC to apply, not difficult but just bureaucratic.

They helped us navigate the bureaucracy, so that it was actually quite easy for us to apply and then really helped us to get on the air, so we had a barn-raising. There are some photos here in the studio of us actually raising the tower on top of this building with our own hands. All of the things that you see inside the studio like the bookshelves for the CDs were actually made by kids. And there are pictures of the kids over there, screwing together at the different pieces. The wires were actually all soldered by hand, and there are pictures of us actually soldering the wires. So Prometheus helped to teach us how we solder our own wires and how we build our own station and how we put our own tower on the roof. They kind of helped us to raise the roof on the station and launch it.

**I heard about a tower; in the last meeting of WRFU that new tower is coming soon. Could you explain about it? It is also very exciting, good news, so...**

Yes. Sometimes when you don't have a lot of money but you have a lot of people, I feel like the growth is slow but steady. So RFU is kind of an example of when you have people power to do things, you develop over time, and so it is kind of like a flower that grows up and opens its face to the sun. I feel like that's what RFUs have been doing. It is kind of the slow growth towards the sun. We put a temporary tower on the roof when we first launched the radio station in 2005 and that tower goes to

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65 feet, which is not the full height that we can broadcast. So the federal government allows us to broadcast at a 100 feet. At 100 feet, we can reach the entire community, but at 65 feet, there are parts of the community where we cannot be heard because there are other towers and buildings blocking the signal.

So our goal was to put the tower up at the full height and we had to raise the funds to do that. I was not involved with the fundraising but I warmly congratulate and celebrate all the people who were involved in that fundraising. We raised about \$17000 for that new tower. So this fall – in fact I was just talking to the folks who are building the tower today and they are in the process of building it to specifications based on the kind of soil that we have here. And it will be shipped here in October, and we will be putting it up during the month of November.

more people will be able to listen in November and for anyone who is listening, we will have two volunteer days in November where if folks are interested in, 'what is a radio tower and how do you put it up yourself and how do you connect it to a radio station' – it is going to be really exciting. We will have a big crane here and big tower, and it's like a big Lego – it's like a Lego set, you kind of put the pieces of Legos on top of each other. So we would be raising the tower in November and folks can help out if they would like.

### **So resident in the Champaign also can listen to WRFU?**

Yes, RFU is heard in parts of Champaign and Urbana, but once we raise the tower to its full height of about 100 feet, it should be the case that the entire community within the kind of city boundaries will be able to hear us. So yes, especially because we are flat, we have the benefit of being flatly under armed here, which makes it a little bit easier for this signal to go far.

**You said that already there is another community radio station (WEFT) here in the Champaign I think. So WRFU, is there a similarity or difference from other community radio?**

Yes. There is an interesting history of community radio in the US and maybe I could sketch that out because I think it is not just about our community but what community radio has looked like. So in the United States when radio was first born, just like the internet, there was that feeling of openness that it is open frontier and there is a lot that you can do with this new technology and this new communications tool.

Unfortunately the government very quickly gave away most of the spectrum to corporations. There were some radio enthusiasts and some hobbyists who had little tiny radio stations, and there were some educational stations in schools. But generally speaking there was not community radio. The first community radio station in the US really was the Pacifica Network and it came out of the anti-war movement after World War I and World War II. There was kind of a sense that there needed to be an alternative voice to the hawkishness and the warmongering, what we saw in our culture in the United States.

So Pacifica Network really was the first listener-supported radio where there were not advertisements but listeners who tuned in, would donate to the station to keep it afloat. So that was a big precedent and what we saw coming out of the activism of the 60s and early 70s was another push for community radio. So a lot of folks saw how important media was with the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement. So they really pushed for there being more access to the airwaves, and there was a series of licenses given out in the 70s and 80s. Many of what we call full power, the larger community radio stations went on-air at that time.

So [WEFT](http://weft.org/)<sup>5</sup> and Champaign became station in the 80s. [WORT](https://www.wortfm.org)<sup>6</sup> and Madison, which is a wonderful station to the North came online and hundreds of stations across the US in different communities. Many of whom came to the Grassroots Radio Conference a few weeks ago. So those kind of came out of the 60s counterculture.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://weft.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.wortfm.org>

Then there were Black College Radio and ethnic radio stations. They really came out of the 70s, 80s, and 90s and were kind of a separate movement. Then there was the first low-power FM radio licensing and WRFU represents that kind of next phase of radio. Then this upcoming window next year that the FCC will open will be kind of the last spectrum available in the US, it will be given away at that time. So that's kind of what it looks like.

And I think the difference between a place like WEFT and full power stations and WRFU and some of the low-power stations is that this is more of like a niche. On low-power FM stations, you will see a lot of non-English language programming. Small communities that don't have access to communications will use low power. It tends to be very eclectic and kind of interesting, strange mix-up of lots of different kinds of things whereas some of the larger stations have really gone to a more standard format. That's some of the history and some of the differences.

I would just add that I think part of the difference is economics because it costs 10 times the amount of money to run a full power station as it does a low-power station. Full power stations, they have to speak to a broader audience to survive and so often times that means not having as much eclectic or specially language programming, etcetera. So low-power stations like RFU can really speak to a lot of smaller audiences because it costs a little for us to stay afloat. I think it's really important that these little neighborhood radio stations exist to serve that function.

**Now more younger people they don't listen radio so much as they use internet. We have Harukana Show but I feel some difficulty how we can get audience? How do you think that now the radio is not outdated?**

Yes, I think a couple of things. They used to say that when television came, radio is dead and that's not true. Then they said the internet came, the television was dead, also not true. But it is the case that each new media changes the old ones. So I think the exciting thing about radio is that it is extremely accessible and it goes across

borders through walls and people who are in their cars and working can listen to it. It is inherently local. And so when you hear somebody broadcasting on the community radio station, you know that that person is someone who lives in your community down the street from you. So people come together like we do here. There are four of us in the studio collectively having a conversation, which is really different than the internet where people don't necessarily have to come together to curate a space. It is more like everyone has got their own channel.

I think that the power of bringing together broadcast, which is accessible, very local, relevant and bringing news and events that are relevant to people's community connected with the internet via broadcast or live stream or whatever maybe, to be able to connect global audiences and share content and archive and hear back from audiences is a really powerful connection. So I think the future of radio is that you broadcast to your community issues that are of relevance to your community. No other radio station does that except community radio. All the corporate radio stations, they don't speak to the community anymore. It's all commercial music.

So there is a very unique role there. At the same time, there is this global connection like you are doing with this show. This is really kind of an example or exemplary show of what can happen when you cross boundaries, national boundaries, etcetera, and you use technology to connect people you are able to translate and do multilingual programming. I feel like the result of that could be that we develop a consciousness of ourselves as living in community in connection with other communities not mediated by corporate interests because right now the government keeps us from moving across borders and corporations to control the messages. Community media, radio, internet, video, etcetera, is an opportunity for us to really speak directly to one another, not mediated through those corporate interests or having to respect those national boundaries. Offering of community radio is not radio, its community. That's the unique offering. We lack community information and so community radio offers that. I think sometimes people focus on the technology when actually the offering is that there aren't venues locally for people, ordinary folks like ourselves to get on the air and express ourselves and share information, news and events, etcetera.

So at the Independent Media Center, we integrate all the media we use, everything at our disposal and the next tool that comes, that is born, we will use that tool as well for community members to be able to communicate with each other and organize to make change in their communities. If we don't have that aspect, then I don't really know how we can have democracy because I feel like that's the kind of a fertilizer for any kind of democratic city is to have the ability to communicate with each other and discuss things.

**Also in the US, community radio is now expanding. It means a new act; Local Community Radio Act is working. Finally the question is that, could you explain about the Local Community Radio Act and what this act will make for the future?**

[The Local Community Radio Act](#)<sup>7</sup> came out of an intense frustration that many people had. Corporations had taken over pretty much in almost all of the airwaves and that there was a little space for communities to speak. So we knew that with these large stations, there were little pockets in between the big stations where you could still locate new radio stations. And so activists urge the Federal Communications Commission to make a new service called the low-power service that would allow local non-commercial community-based groups to have a voice on the air. That service after a lot of pressure mostly by radio pirates who were broadcasting unlicensed stations, that service was created in 2000. Unfortunately, the corporate vultures were circling and they came and put pressure on Congress and convinced Congress to limit low-power FM, low-power radio in all areas but rural areas. Urbana is about the biggest space, the biggest community that got a low-power station in their first round. Anything bigger than Champaign or Urbana was completely cut out of having these low-power stations.

So the Local Community Radio Act was a response to that to get the Congress to overturn its decision in 2000 to limit low-power radio to rural areas. Activists fought

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<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local\\_Community\\_Radio\\_Act](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_Community_Radio_Act)

for 10 years to pass that bill. In 2011, Obama signed it into law after it passed Congress. I was working with Prometheus at the time and we kind of shepherded that law through at the very end of the year.

What that means is huge. We are facing the biggest expansion of community radio in US history with over doubling the numbers of community radio stations, including in urban areas for the first time. So Atlanta, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Miami, places like these are going to have space for community radio in some ways for the first time and that licensing window is coming next year, and it would be a one-time chance to get those licenses. It will be very competitive. There will be thousands of groups applying. We are hoping that we can help community groups that are truly representative of their local communities to apply and win these licenses.

**So did you discuss about the issue in the Grassroots Radio Conference?**

Yes, we did and we are working with folks who are interested in starting stations, teaching them how they could go about applying for licensing and getting on-air.

**It is time for ending of the show. Thank you for coming to Harukana Show.**

Thank you. Well, for those listening in Japan, I would like to invite everyone to come visit us sometime here in Urbana, Illinois at WRFU. We would love to have you and love to make global connections across borders and boundaries because we have a lot in common.