



# Squatting the Airwaves

## Pirate Radio as Anarchy in Action

*A society which organizes itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and its suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism. Far from being a speculative vision of a future society, it is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society.<sup>1</sup>*

COLIN WARD

**W**HEN COLIN WARD FIRST WROTE *ANARCHY in Action* back in 1973, he included many examples of anarchist social organization in the areas of work, play, education and social welfare. Though he mentions the British squatters' campaign in relation to housing, missing in action was pirate radio. Little is said in Ward's book about communications. One might assume that one of the reasons for this omission is because of the conflation of communications with *mass* communications, the assumption being that because of its massive scale, corporate hierarchy, and/or government bureaucracy, radio was not a suitable topic for tracing embryonic anarchist forms or ruminating on

anarchist possibilities. However, in contrast, pirate radio can be understood as a form of squatting. By using direct action, radio pirates can collectively seize the airwaves and liberate them from institutional control.

Once the DIY-oriented free radio movement began to gather steam in North America in the Nineties, would-be Canadian pirates could get a front row seat on the action. With the ever wider availability of inexpensive micro-power equipment, it was only a matter of time before they too would seek direct participation. A contemporary case in point is Tree Frog Radio in British Columbia. This island-based station, with which I have been involved from its inception, has now been squatting the airwaves for more than seven years. From the start, it was to be an anarchist-initiated project that would be open to the community as a whole. Not everyone on the station is an anarchist, and not all anarchist programmers are always doing programming with specifically or exclusively anarchist content, but its origins and current organizational context are deeply informed by anarchy.

## **Tree Frog Radio**

WHAT THEN ARE TREE FROG RADIO'S AFFINITIES WITH anarchism in Ward's "everyday" terms? In essence, it is the human scale of the relationships within Tree Frog Radio and with its community that has won it broad-based support and widespread participation. As one programmer has explained the appeal of the station in an interview, "Big radio always felt so cold and distant, Tree Frog Radio, like our community hall, recycling center, free store and farmers market, feels involving." Though illegal, it has engendered community involvement because it has embodied autonomous island culture. The station

has motivated community members to nurture and protect it over the course of its history, which began with an on-island showing of *Rebel Radio*, a film about the US pirate radio movement of the Nineties, after which around twenty community people began to envision starting our own station. Collectively, we combined the programming, technical, fundraising and organizational skills needed to launch Tree Frog Radio.

Most of the folks involved did not bat an eyelash in defense of the concept of legality. Though some concern was expressed about the possibility of a government clampdown, legality was not intrinsically linked to possibility. Though riskier, what was illegal was not necessarily dismissed as impossible. Of course, it helped that the island had long been conducive to libertarian living arrangements that were appreciated even by those islanders who would not necessarily identify as squatters or anarchists. In regard to the anti-authoritarian nature of island culture, many of the bohemian residents who came to live here in the Seventies were artists, poets, hippies, and Vietnam-era draft dodgers. While island demographics have changed over the years, the steady stream of free spirits has never really dried up. Most emblematic of the persistent anarchist trace on island is the fact that we have no cops. Because something so seemingly impossible as living in a place with no cops is indeed possible here, islanders are often more receptive than most people to imagining the creation of other autonomous zones. It is precisely this everyday sense of demanding the impossible that animates Tree Frog Radio. With this open attitude in mind, I will now explore the anarchist implications of the station's libertarian organizational structures, such as community participation, volunteer labor, commercial-free programming,

grassroots fundraising, consensus decision-making and community self-defense.

The station was started and continues to flourish as a result of the “sweat equity” of the community members who built and sustain it. From the start, the station has quite naturally been a magnet for political, economic and cultural diversity without ever resorting to such bureaucratic policies as “outreach,” “recruitment” or “affirmative action.” Not only the “usual suspects” among anarchists and punks, but a grassroots assortment of marginalized islanders, drawn from renters (a minority on island but a majority on the station historically), first generation immigrants, Québécoise, and those culturally disenfranchised because of their youth or old age, have readily taken to the airwaves over the years. Though the station welcomes the participation of all islanders as programmers, it has, from the start, been largely the “voice of the voiceless.” As one programmer that I interviewed has put it, “Tree Frog Radio provides the realization of the voice many of us have to share but cannot express otherwise.”

While many of our programmers do not own land, even those that do tend to be unusual — radical libertarians, back-to-the-landers, co-housing land partners, permaculture activists, unruly wage slaves, gender rebels, counter-culture mavens, habitues of the underground economy, and eccentrics of all stripes. Until recently, the local Residents Association had been called the Ratepayers Association, reflecting in its previous incarnation the assumption that it was the more established property owners on the island who were the rightful community decision-makers. Of course, renters indirectly pay property taxes in the form of soaring island rents that have increased partly as a result of the local property owners

passing the costs of their land taxes to their tenants. Yet, even though the name Ratepayers has now been changed to Residents, the fully-enfranchised islander is still unofficially conceived of as an adult property owner. Consequently, the voice of the more affluent property owner is heard most often in public debate at Residents Association meetings, and those with little or no legally taxable income from employment or retirement pensions are rarely part of the public debate. Though the latter are not officially excluded, the alienating culture of formal meetings can often seem unappetizing or unwelcoming to those on the fringes, who choose instead, intentionally or in effect, to withhold their consent.

At Tree Frog Radio, there is no such aura of propertied legitimacy or elitist atmosphere of entitlement. Instead, the station’s free-wheeling lack of formalities attracts a different type of participant than the Residents Association. On the airwaves, the voice of the propertyless or atypical property owner holds center stage. Though the latter might own land, they do not claim a privileged status or act the part of landed gentry. As one Tree Frogger has explained, “My own experience as a programmer has allowed me to test out and express opinions that are radical departures from mainstream analyses.” Consequently, the political opinions expressed on our shows offer the listener access to a much broader spectrum of island politics than that to which one can be exposed by attending a Residents Association meeting, where, even with the best of intentions, the participatory spirit is stifled by the straitjacket of Robert’s Rules of Order. On island, there is no media outlet other than Tree Frog where you can regularly hear radical political commentary on local gentrification issues or regional development threats like a proposed coal mine on nearby Vancouver Island. There

is nowhere else to listen to a scathing critique of Canadian oppression of indigenous peoples and hear news of their resistance to the forces of colonization, or to get spirited ongoing coverage by islanders of the Occupy Movement, with firsthand reports on Occupy Vancouver during its heyday.

Although the programmers at licensed campus and community radio stations are volunteers, the managers are typically paid and have permanent jobs. Tree Frog has no managers; it is an all-volunteer affair. There is no paid staff, so it is all a labor of love (though not without a pinch of ego thrown into the mix). All in all, we are a non-hierarchical and self-managing bunch. At this point, Tree Frog meetings (which are open to all programmers and technical support folks) are mainly concerned with making consensual decisions about programming schedules, community fundraisers and station maintenance. In the past, more philosophical and sometimes contentious issues, such as whether to accept local business sponsorship for individual programs as a way of fundraising or whether to apply for a low watt (5 watt probationary) license, were passionately debated. Both ideas were rejected as inappropriate and unnecessary after much internal discussion.

In terms of becoming licensed, the anarchists at the station were not the only contingent opposed to going legit. For other programmers as well, the process of “legalizing” the station was generally considered to be too expensive, prolonged and bureaucratic to pursue. As charter programmer Sheila Nopper has explained our history elsewhere, “We created our own station, on our own terms, free from hierarchical power structures of authoritarian decision-making, free from the repressive confines of capitalism’s obsession with objectifying

everything — and everyone — into some kind of branded marketable product.”<sup>2</sup>

By now the station flows pretty smoothly on its own steam with only occasional programmer meetings and the use of a Tree Frog email list for information-sharing and troubleshooting. If an islander wants to do a show, we’ll find her a slot in the schedule, offer some technical training and put that person on air asap. And because we do not have scheduled programming 24 hours/7 days per week, aside from our publicized programming, we allow for sporadic unscheduled broadcasts by any of our deejays or guest deejays during times when none of our regular programmers are slated to do shows. Since there is no commercial advertising on the station, we rely on grassroots fundraising to pay the bills, which now consist of \$35 a month for electricity and incidental costs incurred in maintaining, upgrading and replacing the equipment. The land on which our tiny trailer/studio sits has been donated to us rent-free, and the trailer itself was sold to us at a discounted rate by an islander who supported our efforts.

Much of the consumer electronics that constitute our studio equipment have been scavenged (at the island “free store”), picked up cheap at a nearby thrift store, or donated (mixer, CD players, turntable, mics, and tape decks). Other studio equipment has been rebuilt, such as the computer, or was purchased new, like the mixer and turntable, after our original ones died and could not be easily replaced. We even had a second transmitter donated to us for live remotes by the person who built it at one of Stephen Dunifer’s free radio workshops in Berkeley, California. At one point, we ended up giving it away with his consent as a gesture of solidarity to a sister pirate station that wanted to start up on a nearby island.

As to our monthly electricity costs, they are paid for by the recycling of bottles. The station has its own Tree Frog bin at the island recycling center, and anyone can support us by simply depositing their beer and wine bottles in our designated repository. Though all of the other bins are for legal community groups, from the theatre group to the land conservancy, no one seems to mind that we are illegal since it's obvious that we are providing a service to the community and not harming anyone in the process. If someone disapproves, they can just put their bottles elsewhere. Since our bin is always full of bottles, either our usual compliment of 12 to 15 programmers are really heavy drinkers, or the community must think we are doing something right.

At first we had to do fundraising to pay for the trailer and the original radio transmission technology (transmitter, antenna, power supply, compressor/limiter) at a total cost of around \$1,500, but now our only fixed cost is electricity, which tends to be payable through our recycling dividends, with the occasional fundraiser used to purchase a piece of equipment. These fundraisers have typically taken the form of dance parties which are deejayed by our programmers or, on occasion, themed sit-down dinner parties. Both take place at the community hall as would be the case for any other island fundraiser. In each case, attendees get to participate in supporting the station while enjoying a community social event in return. In the ensuing direct interaction, we get to meet our listeners face-to-face, though the latter happens informally all the time at the recycling center, general store, bookstore, bakery or café. Typically, the station's supporters use fundraising occasions to obtain an updated copy of the schedule, arrange to go on-air in the future themselves, or tell us personally what they enjoy or find

problematic about our shows (any complaints go directly to the programmer rather than to the station as a whole). We also get the occasional unsolicited personal check or cash (the latter is preferred, since for obvious reasons we have no bank account) at these fundraising events. Yet, in the eyes of the Canadian government, we at Tree Frog are viewed as lawbreakers simply because we want to communicate with our neighbors without a license.

Because of our illegal status, and our desire to be “underground” but not entirely clandestine (as is evidenced by this article), we are aware of the possible danger that we might be shut down by Industry Canada, which is the enforcement arm of the Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). However, the CRTC typically operates on a complaint-driven basis, except when they accidentally come upon a station during their routine survey operations. Therefore, unless someone complains about a station's existence, it is pretty safe. Industry Canada does not have the mandate, budget or staff to go around hunting for pirate stations without a prior complaint. Complaints are typically from commercial broadcasters in relation to pirate signals that they contend are interfering with their licensed signal. Therefore, unless a pirate station is intentionally trying to interfere with the CBC or a corporate station's signal (and most are not), the chances of drawing a complaint are relatively small, though the risk still exists.

Another kind of possible complaint might come from unintentional interference with low power tourist information or emergency broadcast frequencies, and so care must be taken to avoid such problematic overlap. Finally, a disgruntled listener who is offended by a station's programming and contacts the CRTC can ask them to

shut down the station. Though this scenario has never happened at Tree Frog, such complaints typically are the result of a listener being upset by political content, scatological language, denigrating personal innuendo, or sometimes just from a grudge against one or more of the programmers. Rarely do they take the form of a moral crusade against lawlessness.

At Tree Frog, we are not trying to intentionally interfere with another station's broadcasts by crowding their frequency partly because this would interfere with ours as well, so complaints in that regard are less likely. Moreover, our visible role on the island means that we have confidence enough in community support to risk a complaint. Any islander who complained to the CRTC about us would be depriving the entire community of a cultural amenity that has become a quite well-entrenched part of island life at this point. Consequently, they might think twice about attempting to shut us down. As we say, if you don't like what's on Tree Frog Radio, you can either become a programmer yourself, change the channel, shut it off, or just choose not to listen in the first place. In terms of the latter options, we do not lose any advertising revenue based on listenership statistics since there is no advertising. This in turn allows us not to have our programming options restricted by the constraints of marketing research studies and "audience share" data.

However, should Industry Canada for some reason be dispatched to the island to ferret us out, warn us to cease and desist, close us down and/or confiscate our equipment, our first line of community self-defense is the ferry. Sympathetic ferrygoers are our early warning system that trouble might be headed our way in the form of an Industry Canada triangulator van. As it stands, whenever an Industry Canada vehicle is noticed getting on the ferry,

we usually get a heads-up call from someone. Similarly, many islanders, though not themselves affiliated with the radio station, let us know that they have our backs when it comes to Industry Canada by alerting us as to when it might be prudent to temporarily go off-air while the feds are on-island on other business. For example, when the Industry Canada van is scheduled to check the volunteer fire department's emergency broadcast signal, we usually hear about it through the grapevine so that we can lay low during their visit. And, of course, the various grassroots lines of defense publicly mentioned in the above paragraph do not include more covert means of obtaining sensitive information about regulatory surveillance or the use of subterfuge to keep Industry Canada guessing about our location.

### **A Tree Frog in the Berry Patch of Anarchy**

TREE FROG RADIO IS BOTH A REFUSAL AND AN AFFIRMATION. It is a refusal of the demeaning and disempowering passivity of the bureaucratic model of licensed mass communications, and it is an affirmation of an everyday anarchism that is rooted in mutual aid and individual freedom. While the squatted airwaves of pirate radio can be seen as an example of Ward's "seed beneath the snow," we can look to the ubiquitous on-island presence of the blackberry vine as a way of expanding upon that metaphor. Since wild blackberry seeds have a hard seed coat, they can remain dormant even under winter snow. Rather than constantly requiring cultivation during the growing season, the self-propagating nature of blackberries implies the opening of artificially enclosed space for wildness to flourish. New blackberry bushes can start

not only from seeds (which are typically not planted but spread by animal droppings) but from subsurface rhizomes or crown regrowth as well.

Stephen Collis has expressed the affinity between the humble blackberry and anarchy in his poem “Blackberries,” which he read here on-island one summer evening in 2007. Here is an excerpt:

*the fruit which I celebrate  
growing everywhere we cannot purchase  
  
what no one owns shared  
thus our blackberries remnant commons<sup>3</sup>*

Unlike the garden variety blackberry, which might be compared to licensed radio, the notoriously difficult to control wild blackberry, capable of springing up anywhere, might be likened to the unruliness of pirate radio’s squatted frequencies. In essence, the gardener’s nightmare of a wild blackberry invasion might alternatively be understood as the wildcrafting gatherer’s utopian dream of ease and abundance. In fact, the relationship between the gardener and the gatherer are not necessarily mutually exclusive in that the same person might be engaged in both activities. One person’s steadfast commitment to gardening a plot of land need not be condemned in order to appreciate the wandering life of the gatherer and vice versa. For some, it is finding the right balance between the two which makes the whole meaningful.

In the case of Tree Frog Radio, it has been the community that has provided the space and the nurturing soil, with the spark of direct action generating enough light and heat to facilitate the initial growth. However, once

up and running, like a spreading underground rhizome, the subversive tendrils of free radio can spontaneously proliferate with the brambled tenacity of wild island blackberries.

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*This article is dedicated to all Tree Frog programmers and our ace tech support crew for providing the energy which animates the station, and to our community which has enabled us to flourish. Personal thanks to all Tree Frog participants for their encouragement and support in the writing of this article, and particularly to Bruce, Jerry and Ed respectively for allowing me to interview them and quote their words on what the radio station means to them. With a shoutout to our fallen free radio comrade, Neskie Manuel...*

## Endnotes

- 1 Colin Ward. *Anarchy in Action*. London: Freedom Press, 1973/82, p. 14.
- 2 Sheila Nopper. “Freedom Soundz: A Programmer’s Journey Beyond Licensed Community Radio” in *Islands of Resistance: Pirate Radio in Canada*. Vancouver, BC: New Star Books, 2010, pp. 67-68.
- 3 Stephen Collis. *Blackberries*. Toronto: Book Thug, 2005/06, pp. 15 and 35.