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Free Autonomous Radio in the Netherlands, an Outline of the Current Situation

Philomeen Lelieveldt and Jitse van Leeuwen

As of summer 2006, there is very little free autonomous radio in the Netherlands. This article discusses the way this came about. It will start with a short explanation of the Dutch radio establishment and free radio's position therein. This is followed by a description of free autonomous radio and its history. Finally we will take a look at the situation today and ask, "what is the future of free radio?"

In the Netherlands there are different types of radio. Public national radio stations form the bedrock of the Dutch radio establishment, monopolizing the airwaves until 1992. In the 1980s regional and local public broadcasters were gradually allowed to broadcast.¹ A limited number of nationally operating commercial stations was permitted from 1992, and in 1999 a few regional commercial stations were also permitted.

In the beginning of the 1960s, illegal (or 'pirate') radio reached the Netherlands by way of stations broadcasting from beyond the territorial waters on long wave (AM). The best-known of these offshore radio stations in the Netherlands was Veronica. Whilst Veronica operated primarily with commercial intent, it brought changes to the accepted ways of broadcasting. The station introduced the so-called horizontal programming, the use of jingles and aired the latest pop music from the United States and England. This caused the popularity of this station with the youth to reach epic heights. Offshore radio stations such as Veronica were called free radio stations; they broke with the traditional, staid, public radio and offered a new sound. In this way they played an important role in the wave of democratisation sweeping the country as well as in the rise of the youth-culture of the 1960s. Eventually, Veronica found her place within the public radio establishment (Rutten, 2002).

To this day there are pirate music stations active in the Netherlands, in particular in the countryside. Aided by local advertisers, the music they play is mainly popular music with the emphasis on Dutch-language 'Schlagers'.

Free radio as discussed in this article is anything but commercial. We are talking about local radio, made in a non-hierarchical organizational structure by volunteers with a leftist/activist and anarchistic outlook on life. Funding is obtained through contributions, donations and from the profits from parties organised for this expressed purpose. This anti-authoritarian viewpoint means that decisions are taken in a fundamentally democratic manner, meaning that everyone (ideally) has an equal say in matters. It also, however, means that these organizations do not want to be regulated from above, as is the case with national and local public broadcasters.

Free autonomous radio in the Netherlands arose from a dissatisfaction of alternative groups and movements with the treatment of news and cultural expressions by the regular media. The alternative groups did not feel themselves to be represented by the mainstream media and wanted to counter this by presenting alternative information. Free radio came into being in Amsterdam, at the end of the 1970s, as a result of conflicts concerning the shortage to affordable (youth) housing and the resulting squatter movement. The first free radiobroadcaster, De Vrije Keyser, used to broadcast from the 'De Groote Keyser' squat. Police threatened to evict the squatters, who tried to garner support from the citizens of Amsterdam by means of radio broadcasts. Radio was also used as a means for mobilising activists for demonstrations, the demonstrations themselves and for warnings of possible raids by the authorities on squats. We thus see radio being used as an instrument of mobilization.

There was almost no barrier to participating in the squatter's broadcasts, and participants could have their say on the radio, either via phone-in, or in the studio, without editorial interference (direct-speech). It should be noted, however, that this open access was only exploited by people involved in the squatters movement. With De Vrije Keyser in Amsterdam as an example, local squatters organizations in cities like Utrecht, Den Bosch and Nijmegen also established free radio stations.

Around the middle of the 1980s the squatters movement lost its relevance, due to a change in housing policy. The free radio-makers then started concentrating more on the alternative cultural scene and began experimenting with the medium of radio. Experiments were devised in order to attempt to create the largest possible communication between broadcaster and receiver. The ideal of open access and participation, or rather the Brechtian ideal of radio serving as a means of communication, has led to interesting experiments.

In 1985, for example, an experiment took place in Amsterdam when Radio Factum attempted to find the middle ground between its illegality and the wish of being an 'open radio'.² This led to the 'Radioproeflokaal Marconi', a publicly accessible radio café from which broadcasts took place (Laureys, 2001). People saw how radio was made and could participate if they felt so inclined.

There were also more abstract attempts at being 'open radio', by means of auditive experiments. Radio Rabotnik - and later Radio 100, Radio Patapoe, and Radio Tonka - confronted the listener with extensive soundscapes, where mainstream music, sounds from films and TV series, and public sphere sounds were mixed together. The sounds were thus removed from their original context and de-contextualised or deformed. The aim was to give the listener the chance to interpret the expression, thereby reacting to the univocal stream of information that was presented by 'regular' radio.

Besides this, the time and space of radio as a medium were explored. The idea of valuable broadcasting time resulting from the imposed scarcity of broadcasting of regular radio was challenged by broadcasting soundscapes for hours on end, or by broadcasting sounds from a factory floor, thereby criticizing the entrenched expectation that radio always conveys meaningful information. Experiments involving the concept of (radio) space were performed by crossover projects with more visually oriented cultural expressions. For example, films were broadcast on radio, or microphones were hung on dancers in order to create special auditive experiences.

In their experiments with alternative content and alternative manifestations of radio, aiming to blur the dividing line between broadcaster and receiver, free radio in the Netherlands seems to fit well with the definition of autonomous media as formulated by Langlois and Dubois "What defines these media, and makes them a specific type of alternative media, is that they, first and foremost, undertake to amplify the voices of people and groups normally without access to media. They seek to work autonomously from dominant institutions (e.g. the state, corporations, the church, the military, corporate unions), and they encourage the participation of audiences within their projects. Autonomous media therefore produce communication that is not one-way, from media-makers to media consumers, but instead involves the bilateral participation of people as producers and recipients of information." (Langlois/Dubois 2005, 9)

Whilst illegal free radio was 'legally' tolerated in the 1980s and 1990s, which enabled it to flourish, at the beginning of the new millennium a crackdown was started. Project Zerobase involved the redistribution of the broadcasting frequencies. Commercial broadcasters could obtain a frequency at a controversial frequency auction.³ Before this could take place, however, the radio spectrum had to be rid of possible jamming stations, including a large number of music pirates. Project Ether Flash started on March 1, 2003 and was performed by the Telecom Agency. The project 'cleaned up' the airwaves and led to a 73 percent reduction in radio piracy by the end of 2004. During this cleanup, the free autonomous broadcasters Radio 100, Radio Tonka and Koekoeroe Reedio were removed from the airwaves.

Groups of free radio makers, united in the Association of Free Radio Netherlands and the Foundation for the promotion of Free Expression, researched the possibilities of legalizing free radio. For instance the Amsterdam station Radio 100 participated - in vain - in the frequency auction of May 26, 2003. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, that was responsible for the media policy and for judging the applicants' plans, did not know how to evaluate this station, as it was neither public nor commercial. On the June 14, 2003 a free radio demonstration named *100.000 Antennas*, was organised by all free autonomous radio stations in the Netherlands. In this demonstration the government was called upon to recognize a third category of radio: "The only real solution is to recognize non-commercial, non-public radio as a third legal category and give it low budget access to the ether in several regions in the Netherlands."⁴

In June and December 2003, the Second Chamber of the Dutch parliament tabled motions asking the minister to research whether it was possible to assign the remaining frequencies to free radio stations. The Minister's answer was that this was not possible, due to technical and legal obstructions, but mainly because of the scarcity of the frequencies available. He did, however, commit to taking a closer look at the need for a solution for radio piracy within a few years (Agentschap Telecom, 2004, 13).

At present (June 2006), there are just three free autonomous radio broadcasters broadcasting illegally. These are Radio Banzai in Den Bosch, Radio Patapoe in Amsterdam and Radio Wanklank in Wageningen. The latter two also broadcast via Internet. A number of free autonomous radio stations that used to broadcast via the air, nowadays only broadcast via Internet, due to pressure from the authorities. Examples of these are Koekoeroe Reedio from

Leiden and Radio DFM rtv Int. from Amsterdam (which originated from Radio 100). Could it be that Internet is the future of free autonomous radio?

Internet radio can not yet be seen as a replacement for radio via the airwaves: free radio's requirements of open access and mobility cannot yet be met by Internet Radio. Besides this, free radio is primarily a community radio with a local character. This function disappears in the complex mishmash of (niche) Internet radios. Free radio makers actually specifically consider an audience that consists of local people who find free radio on the FM band and are surprised (pleasantly or otherwise) by the distinctive sound. This is not to say that Internet radio has not seen some interesting developments, an example of which can be seen in the portal radio Indymedia.org of the Indymedia network, which offers a new perspective by exchanging and broadcasting otherwise locally oriented programs over the entire globe (Coyer 2005).

The Hague's Radio Tonka has been forced to participate in the local broadcaster Radio Stad Den Haag. This broadcaster, as well as other local broadcasters such as SALTO in Amsterdam, act partially as an 'access radio', by offering the opportunity for social groups and individual radio makers to create a program, albeit at less attractive times of the day. While this construction seems appealing, the scope for free autonomous radio is relatively limited, due in part to the legal conditions to which local public broadcasters need comply.

Even though Radio Tonka has total freedom of choice in what they broadcast, the anti-authoritarian character and the form- and content experiments of free radio can come into conflict with the institution of the local public broadcaster, which is subject to legal restrictions. Thus, a fundamental question is if a free autonomous radio station can still be autonomous if it is institutionally embedded, and if it can really be considered 'open radio'.

Free autonomous radio has demonstrated in the past that it can survive well without disturbing the legal radio stations – illegally, but tolerated. Yet the political climate in the Netherlands is changing. There is less lenience in public policy for the toleration of illegal activities such as soft drugs, squatting and illegal radio. This is brought about both by European legislation and by national tendencies. The politician Pim Fortuyn's performance in public debate from 2000 to 2002 has allowed many Dutch citizens and politicians to become more vocal in the expression of their dissatisfaction with 'back-room politics' and the free interpretation of the

laws of the land.⁵ Alas, in this climate it is impossible to predict what the future has in store for free autonomous radio.

¹ There are 13 regional en 297 local broadcasters. Each province and municipality is permitted a radio station. The number of local stations can vary from time to time due to municipal rearrangements. See <http://www.olonprogrammabank.nl/publiek/200409984.html> (05-07-2006).

² Radio Factum, Radio WHS and Radio Rabotnik merged to form Radio 100 in 1986.

³ The decision was based on a so-called 'comparative test'. Applicants could bid once on nine lots; for five of these the rationale behind the applicants offer was taken into account, as well as the size of their financial offer.

⁴ <http://freeteam.nl/patapoe/pix/freeradiohasaright.jpg> (01-06-2006).

⁵ On May 6, 2002 an environmentalist fired six bullets at the popular politician Pim Fortuyn, bringing an abrupt end to the sensational career of a political adventurer. Within a period of only a few months, Fortuyn had completely overturned the political landscape of the Netherlands. His party, the Pim Fortuyn List, was on the verge of becoming the biggest party, and he himself was preparing to become Prime minister.

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Dutch Free Radiostations on the Internet:

Radio Patapoe: <http://freeteam.nl/patapoe/index.htm>

Radio Wanklank: <http://www.wanklank.nl/framed/index.html>

Koekoeroe Reedio: <http://squat.net/koekoeroe/algemeen/main.htm>

DFM rtv Int.: <http://dfm.nu/>

Radio Tonka: <http://www.radiotonka.nl/>