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TECHNICAL PRACTICE AND IDENTITY WORK IN
DEMOCRATIC MEDIA ACTIVISM

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Technical Practice and Identity Work in Democratic Media Activism

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ABSTRACT: This paper follows radio activists trying to transform the media system through a combination of advocacy and broadening access to technology and skills. It argues that, through their direct engagement with low-power FM radio (LPFM) and related technology, the activists cultivated a technical identity that served to mark boundaries between their group and others working the terrain of media democracy and media reform. The interaction of technical identity with radio activism lent coherence to the activists’ work and to their self-understanding when interacting with members of other groups. Technical identity also took on special significance as the group grappled with organizational maturation, mitigating the anxiety felt by the workers as they experienced the shift from an inexperienced, though highly driven and successful activist collective to a more sustainable non-profit activist organization. The paper concludes by naming technological activism as one strategy in the wider spectrum of work to promote media democracy, and speculates on the consequences of technical identity within the wider movement.

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the U.S. has seen a groundswell of activism and advocacy to transform the media system.² The Telecommunications Act of 1996 ushered in not only corporate consolidation of traditional media outlets, but a contestation over the future of old and new media technologies. Against this backdrop, this paper examines media activism at the level of practice. It specifically follows the activities of a small non-profit organization that pursues its political beliefs about media democracy through a combination of advocacy work and engagement with technology. The paper shows that members of this group drew on their hands-on work, and on the technical identity it produced, to navigate their transformation from radical outsiders operating an unlicensed “pirate” radio station into an established organization working on an institutionalized issue, low-power community radio policy. Close attention to these dynamics sheds light on one facet of work to change the media system--technological activism--which has implications for the wider movement for democratic media.

Grounded in a close examination of recent activist practice to promote and propagate low-power FM radio in the U.S., this account also illustrates how people’s relationships with technologies may be related to goals for social change.

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Studies of work, particularly accounts that consider worker and occupational identity, orient this analysis (see Abbott 1995; Becker and Carper 1956; Becker 1982; Doing 2004; Orr 1996; see also Terkel 1972). A focus on in situ work practices enables the analyst to interpret the activists’ work routines as they existed in their office and organizing settings, as they interacted with one another and with members of outside groups, including community groups seeking radio stations, lobbyists, regulators, and other advocacy groups, all in support of building radio stations and advocating for noncommercial low-power radio. The paper charts the activist organization’s experiences and relationships as they extend out into the world; their interactions with “outsider” groups provide multiple opportunities for “boundary work” and for reflection on the group’s own identity (Gieryn 1983). I argue that the radio activists expended significant effort constructing and maintaining a “technical identity” which lent coherence to their work and to their self-understanding when interacting with members of other groups. Technical identity also took on special significance for the group as they grappled with organizational maturation, mitigating the anxiety felt by the workers as they experienced the shift from an inexperienced, though highly driven and successful activist collective to a more sustainable non-profit activist organization.

Writing specifically of media activism, William Carroll and Robert Hackett state that there are some key differences between “conventional activism” and media activism, as conventional movements seek to use the media instrumentally in pursuit of their agendas, while media activists view the media system as an end in itself. Much of the literature on new social movements has tended to explore the construction of collective identity. Carroll and Hackett argue that media activism in particular lacks a “clear, regularized collective identity”; this analysis builds on that assertion to emphasize technical identity within the movement for media democracy. Here, I train my focus specifically on the local practices of activist work in order to provide a different, yet complementary, insight into studies of activism and social movements, using the concept of identity work to zoom in on the intersection of political agency and technological engagement. While I do not employ a movement-level analysis, it is

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3 Carroll and Hackett 2006: 88.
4 Melucci 1996; Carroll and Hackett 2006.
5 Carroll and Hackett 2006: 93.
important to recognize that these highly local performances of identity may be related to actors’ self-understanding as being members of a social movement for media democracy, in that they seek to promote community autonomy through media access and production. In other words, while this paper’s focus is on local practices, this is with the acknowledgment that the movement level is implicated in these local practices.

Background
In the U.S., a movement promoting citizen access to the airwaves emerged during the 1980s and 1990s (Coopman, 1999; Brand, 2004; Walker, 2001; see also Horwitz, 1997). In 1978, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ceased to grant noncommercial, low-wattage licenses to not-for-profit educational and community groups, and people subsequently took to the airwaves in “electronic civil disobedience” (Soley, 1998; Walker, 2001). The Telecommunications Act of 1996 removed significant restrictions on radio station ownership, further stoking activist efforts to secure the rights of small-scale community broadcasters and drawing attention to media consolidation more generally. When the FCC experienced difficulty enforcing regulations against unlicensed broadcasting, in the late 1990s, then-Chairman William Kennard considered reinstating some form of license option.

In 2000, the FCC initiated the legal designation of “low-power FM” (LPFM), noncommercial stations that operate at 100 watts or less (reaching at most only a few miles from the site of transmission). However, due to a 2000 limitation placed by Congress (acting at the behest of the broadcast lobby), LPFM stations were virtually impossible to license in U.S. cities (see Spinelli, 2000; Riismandel, 2002). Rural areas were favored, where the spacing requirements between LPFMs and full-power stations could be met. By early 2009, over 800 LPFMs were on the air. Advocates remained committed to changing legislation to allow LPFMs in more population-dense areas, but as of early 2010, they had not succeeded in this goal.

This paper is about an activist group that formed as a pirate broadcasting collective in Philadelphia, PA in the mid-1990s, which was raided and shut down by the FCC in 1997. They subsequently re-focused their efforts towards a unique combination of advocacy and technical assistance to community groups seeking radio stations, forming the non-profit Pandora Radio Project⁶ in 1998 and obtaining 501(c)3 (non-profit public charity) status in 2005. By 2008, Pandora had in partnership with different local

⁶ This is a pseudonym, as are the names of individuals.
community groups built around ten new radio stations in the U.S., a handful of stations abroad, and had assisted countless others in lesser ways. Pandora calls their station-building events “barnraisings”, an explicit reference to the Amish practice of community members joining together to accomplish a project that an individual or small group alone would struggle to achieve, emphasizing interdependence and cooperation. In addition to their successful efforts to see LPFM implemented (with allies including organized labor, church groups, civil rights groups, and other advocates (McChesney, 2004: 225)), in 2004 Pandora won a historic lawsuit against the FCC opposing proposed rulemaking to allow further media consolidation. In the early 2000s, Pandora considered whether and how to expand their mission to “free the airwaves” to include not only radio but Internet-based technologies, especially community wi-fi, but FM radio remained their emphasis.⁷

Media activism is sometimes viewed as an end in itself, but often people drawn to media activism are involved in other social justice issues, and then identify media access as a key component of work on any issue. Robert McChesney, founder of the advocacy group Free Press, claims that “whatever your first issue of concern, media had better be your second, because without change in the media, the chances of progress in your primary area are far less likely”, a quote he attributes (paraphrased) to former FCC commissioner Nicholas Johnson (McChesney et al., 2005: 11). The media activists in this paper consider their work to occur against the backdrop of a social movement for media democracy and a wider social change agenda. While the group that is the subject of this paper espouses left politics, groups across the political spectrum have opposed media consolidation.

Research Activities and Methods

This account is mainly based on participant observation at the Pandora office and on the road conducted between 2004 and 2007, including time spent with paid staff members as well as interns and volunteers, since the group draws very heavily on resources of unpaid labor. I volunteered in the office and conducted full-time participant observation in 2004-2005, then pulled back for observation of special events in 2005-2006. I also conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with activists, policymakers, advocates, and community group members over this period, though for this article, I rely more on observational data. This is in part because, as Julian Orr states, “…the ethnographic study of

work practice … must be done in the situation in which the work normally occurs, that is, work must be seen as situated practice in which the context is seen as part of the activity”.8 Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda add that observation is especially important to understand work “because most work practices are so contextualized that people often cannot articulate how they do what they do, unless they are in the process of doing it”.9 Thus, for my fieldwork I followed the organizers into the quite varied spaces of their work, with the goal of making meaningful interpretations of the local worlds, and exploring the work and its meaning(s) starting from the group’s own point of view. However, in this analysis, I do not take the group’s account of their work at face value; after all, they valorize and promote technical work and the “frontstage” barnraising events, in which workers and volunteers gather to build a new radio station and hold workshops over a weekend. In fact, much work also occurred in an office setting, especially to prepare for symbolically important events such as barnraisings and presentations in Washington, DC. This office and support work is more mundane, but not less significant in terms of understanding the practices of media activism, and this analysis considers a range of activities.

Work, Performance, and Technical Identity

Work with machines is a common site for identity formation.11 In this analysis, technical identity conveys a closer relationship with technology than that of average users. And, like other forms of social identity, technical identity produces social categorizations, with the potential consequence of unifying members of this subcultural designation while setting them apart from people who do not share in this identity.12 However, it is important to note is that technical identity is not necessarily quite the same as technical skill. Not everyone in the group of activists is equally skilled with radio hardware, computer hardware, or software. But the deployment of technical identity is a resource on which the workers routinely draw.13 Thus, it is worth disaggregating technical expertise from a

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10 Goffman 1959.
12 See Haring 2006: 8. Haring’s conception of technical identity is dual, applied to both machines and people, whereas I reserve the concept for people.
13 This does not occur without strain, especially with regard to gender roles and identities. See Dunbar-Hester 2008; 2010.
technical identity, or at least allowing that people with relatively less expertise may identify relatively strongly with technology. This is partly because for this group, technical identity is constructed in a somewhat unusual way, in that these actors emphasize technical participation and demystification, rather than viewing technology and technological identity as the exclusive domain of experts. Though there is some overlap both sociologically and analytically, the emphasis on participation and leveling expertise, as well a very explicit engagement with politics, largely sets these radio activists apart from groups such as hackers. However in both cases, affinity for machines and attendant technical identity is significant and analytically relevant.\(^{14}\)

According to Andreas Glaeser, “work is communicative action, which can therefore be analyzed in terms of performance”\(^{15}\). For Glaeser, “In performance, the action does not consume itself, it does not rest in itself or exist for itself. Performance aims to convey a relationship between actors, their action, and an audience”.\(^{16}\) Building on a notion of identity developed by Judith Butler and others, identity is not something which is given, it is constantly constructed and remade: “the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed”.\(^{17}\) In this analysis, the workers’ actions and utterances are taken to be performances that reveal key notions about how they envision their own roles, the roles of others, and the relationships that exist between themselves and others. This notion of fluid, iterative identity is the basis for understanding technical identity and its interaction with activism.

Like the amateur radio operators discussed by Haring and Douglas, these actors have built up many aspects of their identities around their work with radio. Their work with radio hardware, as well as other electronics/computer hardware and programming, is a site of technical identity formation. This identity performance is evidenced for many of them in self-aware interest in “geeky” topics, including tinkering and technical problems, science fiction, historical knowledge of early radio, writing radio

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\(^{15}\) Glaeser 2000: 187.
\(^{16}\) Glaeser 2000: 204-205.
\(^{17}\) Butler 1990: 142; Dunbar-Hester 2008; Dunbar-Hester 2010.
plays. Also, it can be found in self-presentation: one of the Pandora staff wore a 2600 (hacker) sweatshirt on many occasions. A very simple example is the Pandora t-shirts, sold and worn by the group, the backs of which show a schematic for a transmitter (below).

The barnraisings themselves are also an important site where technical identity is forged and promoted. The activists’ stated ideal is that “no one is allowed to do what they already know how to do” at a barnraising; expert engineers and activists are supposed to guide novice volunteers through the assembly of the new radio station, handing tools off to other people who will learn new skills. This is seen as an exercise in community empowerment, and the technical practices are explicitly linked to political engagement. Pandora activist Brian reflected on this practice:

What I hope people can take from the barnraising is that they can extrapolate the DIY [do-it-yourself] attitude to everything else in their lives. … The big part of the barnraisings, about not having the engineers do it, it is a demystification, and making people feel like, oh experts just happen to know this… giving people the feeling, oh, if I just did this enough, I could do this just as well as this guy, as well as this engineer.\(^{18}\)

Whether the activists’ ideals are matched by the social reality (and arguably they are not), the symbolic importance of the barnraising for the activists is that by “getting their hands dirty”, volunteers and activists forge a sense of engagement in a common technological and political project.

\(^{18}\) Interview, 7/5/06.
At barnraisings, a routine fixture was a “soldering station”, a workshop track running alongside other events where people could drop in and learn to solder a radio transmitter board. There are compelling reasons to use transmitter boards to introduce novices to technical work involving radio—they are fairly simple (certainly it is possible to assemble a working transmitter without knowing anything at all about the components or how it works), they are novel and exotic (many people have not ever really considered the inside of an electronic device, let alone soldered, before this experience at a barnraising), they work in a tangible way once they are complete (there are lights that switch on and off, a frequency one can change, and an audible product), and they are very clearly an artifact related to radio, since the transmitter produces from an audio source the RF that is transmitted into the ether.

Another Pandora activist commented on the relationship between technical engagement and the overall goal of systemic media change:

[The barnraising strategy is] the idea that hands-on participation in building the station has a transformative effect on how members of a community feel ownership of the media in question. To state otherwise: applied appropriate technology leads to a demystification of the means of media production, and thus generates the collective will to seize those means.19

Both organizers’ statements illustrate that the Pandorans seek to cultivate in barnraising participants a political consciousness, as well as challenge to elite models of expertise, through hands-on work with technological artifacts. Barnraisings may be sites at which technical identity formation occurs, whether or not technical skill is significantly enhanced. It seems worth speculating that this may be a worthwhile means of building or sustaining identification with the particular sort of activism desired by or necessary to sustain a movement for media reform, which is of course a central goal of the Pandora activists. It is also worth noting that the barnraisings are sites where Pandora activists actively construct and display their own technical commitments, which are the focus of this paper.

Another striking performance of technical identity was in Louisville, KY, at a rally for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a group of Mexican, Guatemalan, and Haitian migrant workers with whom Pandora built a radio station, Radio Consciencia, in 2003. It was a windy day and the literature kept

19 Email, Renée to basement, 9/26/06.
threatening to blow off the table. Jasper ran to the car to get suitable paperweights, ultimately settling on these tools.

The tools prompted many comments from passers-by, just remarks like “Hey, nice paperweights!” Significantly, this rally was in celebration of the CIW’s major labor victory against the corporate parent of fast food chain Taco Bell, for whom these workers picked tomatoes, and some of the people making these comments were wearing pro-union t-shirts.20

Writing of Xerox technicians, Julian Orr notes, “[t]he construction of their identity as technicians occurs both in doing the work and in their stories [about working with and fixing machines]”. As in Orr’s example, the stories told by the Pandora workers may constitute identity performance. Orr quotes Barbara Myerhoff, who points out that “[o]ne of the most persistent but elusive ways that people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves…by telling themselves stories…More than merely self-recognition, self-definition is made possible by means of such showings, for their content may state not only what people think they are but what they should have been or may yet be”.21

Stories of risk, both political and physical, are also a way of demonstrating technical affinity. At a

2005 barnraising, volunteers raised a 100-foot tower with an antenna mounted on top of it, something Pandora had never done before, and which was genuinely terrifying at moments; it was not totally clear until it was over that they would be successful and not drop the tower.

Erecting the antenna tower for WRFN, Pasquo, TN, April 2005. Courtesy Pablo Tao Virgo/PRP.

Volunteers hold up the antenna tower, Pasquo, TN, April 2005. Courtesy Pablo Tao Virgo/PRP.
At home later in the Philadelphia office, Thomas said, “Sue the FCC? No problem. But raising that tower really scared me.” Another volunteer described this process as one with a “high capacity for destruction.” Though Pandora’s activities in the U.S. are strictly legal, they have on occasion smuggled transmitter parts into other countries where they are not legal, and when Jasper narrates his border-crossings he emphasizes how he needs to fib about the electronics components he is carrying. (Even though this analysis does not highlight gender, it is impossible to ignore that these stories contain a whiff of machismo.) These stories told about risk operate to forge a group identity, which is in part based on relationships with radio technology.

Another example was a conversation with Thomas, who confessed that he thought Jasper was crazy when volunteers and Pandora staff unloaded a truck containing two donated old transmitters from the 1970s, which weighed about 1100 pounds each. At a workshop to clean and repair the old transmitters, one of the engineers told the volunteers: “These big transmitters are dangerous. They must be used with respect. No one should ever repair, maintain, or even turn them on alone. They are deadly and you need another person to push you away if you start to fry!”22) Thomas later said he was almost surprised that no one got seriously hurt.

\[22\] Fieldnotes 5/05.
Finally, in working with machines, risk is not merely an abstract concept; shortly after the Tennessee barnraising, an Illinois-based volunteer lost his hand in an accident with a band saw, back home on his property. He did not have health insurance and a collection for his expenses went out over email.

Having established the routine cultivation and deployment of technical identity by this group of radio activists, this analysis now turns to other features of their organization’s work.

Organizational Maturation and Boundary Work

A fairly salient feature of the climate at Pandora during my fieldwork was the group’s disquietude over the prospect of maturing as a non-profit organization. In describing the history of the organization in presentations, activists routinely made reference to the organization’s origins in an unlicensed broadcasting collective. However, they acknowledged the significant changes to the organization since its inception. As the following examples illustrate, the activists were at pains to both differentiate themselves from “mainstream” non-profit organizations and to mark various forms of continuity with their more radical, outsider past.
First, it is worth noting the boundary work on the part of Pandora workers to differentiate themselves as an activist group from mainstream non-profits, even those that share Pandora’s advocacy goals. These examples demonstrate that this boundary is one that Pandora was generally interested in constructing and negotiating. Because of the bounded nature of fieldwork, I necessarily have a particular “snapshot” view of their work over time, but I speculate that this was a relatively recent development, as when Pandora was younger, its members may have been more concerned with securing standing as legitimate spokespeople in advocacy, policy, and other situations requiring expertise beyond that of most community members. More recently, they were instead poised, as they saw it, on a threshold between gaining legitimacy on the one hand and remaining outsiders who retained a critical and activist stance on the other. This is in some ways parallel to the conflict discussed by Steven Epstein for activists who draw initially on outsider, “lay” expertise but who become “inside” enough to participate in decision-making as experts (1996). It seemed important for the actors to retain and display an outsider stance at many junctures in their work.

A few illuminating moments occurred during a February 2005 trip to Washington, DC with Pandora. At a board meeting (their second ever), held in a board member’s apartment in Washington, the group discussed challenges they faced in their work. Activist Ellen claimed that Pandora’s work was harder than that of some other groups that do media advocacy, because in her words, “Unlike [other advocacy groups] we don’t carpetbag organize. We have to pay attention to the grassroots.” For Pandora, who had decided to move into some complex policy areas regarding spectrum management, this was particularly tough, because members of the public simply did not know about the issues and there was little grassroots demand for attention to them. Yet they were very uneasy about making the decision to pursue this policy agenda without a grassroots mandate, if only because it would signal to them that they were polluting their identity as Washington outsiders. They also expressed concern at the board meeting that since they had gained legitimacy from their lawsuit, they have been forced to devote more

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23 Fieldnotes 2/6/05.
24 See Dunbar-Hester 2009 for more on this topic.
resources to grantwriting and policy work, and their technical services to applicants were suffering; they requested that the board forcefully remind them of their mission to conduct these technical projects.

Later that week, Pandora held a meeting in the offices of a non-profit, Common Cause, to teach members of the public to urge their elected officials to pass a bill that would strengthen and expand LPFM, ultimately permitting many new stations to be built.\(^{25}\) Pandora itself cannot participate in formal lobbying activities, but their lobbyist allies in Washington attended the meeting to offer guidance. Here, both Pandora and the professional advocates reinforced the notion that Pandora is in a role that is between that of “ordinary” citizen and lobbyist. Ellen told attendees that “We hate that we have to get you up to do this and undo the bad work of the [broadcast lobby]—we’d rather concentrate on expanding LPFM and building more stations, but we have to do this first.” One lobbyist emphasized the role of the citizens: “Without people here in the field, [my organization is] just three smart lawyers talking to ourselves.” Both lobbyists and Pandora members were on hand to accompany citizens on legislative visits; people were told not to worry because they would have an “expert” with them, but Pandora did not view themselves as being fully expert. Ellen at another point in this meeting described Washington itself as a “crazy place full of magical buildings and towers that we [Pandora] don’t understand all that well.”\(^{26}\) This illustrates the fact that Pandora sought to embody a role in between that of expert Washington “insider” and the citizens they were advising; they downplayed their advocacy expertise and highlighted their mission as being more about their work in the field to build new stations.

This lobbying exercise was in conjunction with another example of Pandora’s work as advocates, in which the FCC hosted Pandora, other advocates, and LPFM stationholders from around the country for Forum on Low Power FM. This was largely a symbolic exercise on both sides, as advocates knew the FCC was not going to announce any major changes to rules that would positively affect LPFM. At the

\(^{25}\) At the time of this writing in early 2010, this legislative goal remained elusive.

\(^{26}\) Fieldnotes 2/7/05.
same time, it was an act of good faith for activists and broadcasters to attend and remind the FCC that they were waiting for improvements to the LPFM service; there was also an undertone of sentiment that these people did not wish their issue to be ignored by the FCC. At the forum, representatives from LPFM stations addressed the five members of the Commission, each of whom was in attendance for at least part of the forum.

Pandora’s attitude towards the preparations for “LPFM Day” tacked between enthusiasm and ambivalence. Jasper more than once referred to the event as “the FCC’s dog-and-pony show.” But the activists were genuinely excited to meet with community groups and stationholders. Here it is worth noting that in the late 1990s, before the initiation of the LPFM service, some activists who went on to found Pandora had repeatedly participated in street theater outside the FCC; one notable protest event in 1998 in fact included protestors operating an unlicensed transmitter and broadcasting their protest into the FCC building.
Thus, it is not entirely surprising that the activists of 2005 expressed some regret about being invited inside to make their case legally, on terms set by the FCC.

At home in the office in Philadelphia, Pandora activists routinely teased each other for acting like “other” non-profits, including using words like “constituents” and “deliverables” when talking about their work. Although they did use these terms, they were usually peppered with comments like “Oh, I can’t believe I just said ‘deliverables’—that’s so horrible!” They clearly felt that they drew their strength and unique identity as an organization from the fact that they were in touch with the grassroots, which differed from their perception of mainstream (especially “Beltway”) advocacy groups. Ellen perfectly expressed the tension over this boundary for her when she described having bought a pair of “Congress pants” in a thrift store; that is, pants that she feels look like part of the “uniform” worn by lobbyists and other Washington insiders, and which she only wears to dress up for occasions when she has to meet with members of this “other” group. On the one hand, she had clothes that made her feel like she “fit in” with the members of these other groups when she needed to, but she was clearly stating that for her they were a “costume”—and she didn’t pay retail for them, in fact having bought them second-hand. Ellen also made a notable statement in an email to the office list. Pandora was asked to be a part of a coalition of advocacy groups working on media and democracy issues; they agreed to this, but they had a number of issues with the way this coalition was being managed, not least of which that it often required them to travel to Washington, DC, for meetings,
which they resented (they regarded lobbying activities and visits to Congress as necessary reasons to visit Washington, but would try to manage coalition meetings by conference call, for example).

Preceding the campaign director’s visit to Philadelphia, Ellen stated in an email, “[S]o, it would be nice to impress the campaign director of this coalition of doom and also pain, but it isn’t the most important thing on my mind. [A]t any rate, he’s coming up on [F]riday to meet with [P]hiladelphia organizations, so we should suggest some he should meet with.”27 It is obvious from both her language “coalition of doom and also pain” and her blasé attitude about the need to impress the director that she was not especially thrilled about working with or identifying with what she perceived as an unwieldy coalition, some of whose other members were more “mainstream” advocacy non-profit groups.

Another example they cited of not being a “normal” non-profit was the t-shirt logo for the organization (below). Jasper repeatedly stated that, “often when a non-profit gets to be around five years old, they become more serious. We didn’t want to do that and so we had the new t-shirts made and they are really gory.”28

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27 Ellen to basement, 2/17/06.
28 Fieldnotes DATE XXXX.
The t-shirt depicts an image of a figure chained to a rock with a bird of prey picking at his viscera, from which the bird pulls radio equipment. It stood in contrast to Pandora’s earlier t-shirt logo, which was a flaming microphone being passed from one hand to another. Whether or not it is true that “other” non-profits become more stodgy after a few years of existence, it is clear that this belief, and Jasper’s telling of this story to outsiders as well as other members of Pandora, was doing some work for him as he explained how Pandora was wrestling with the Weberian process of becoming a more bureaucratic organization. Folklorist Michael Owen Jones has noted that in institutional settings (and others), the expressive culture of a group may provide continual reminders of who “we” are as opposed to “them” (regardless of what may be actually “true”). By expressive culture he refers to an assemblage of stock narratives and shared sentiment that a group periodically expresses to remind its members of a shared belief system. These perpetual reminders serve to foster group solidarity. Clearly, this narrative of the t-shirt design reminded Pandora of an imagined contrast between themselves and other groups.

Pandora also manifested a notable display during a job search. During fieldwork, the full-time paid staff increased from three to four people. They had decided that they could afford to hire someone to take on more of the technical work and applicant services, and they performed a search for a “technical director.” During this search, Jasper and Ellen had a minor dispute over the job description Jasper had drafted. He had listed “Must not be afraid of mice, our office sometimes has a lot of them”\(^{30}\) in the list of attributes desired in a candidate. Ellen was dismayed by this, asking him, How can you expect anyone to take us seriously if we don’t take ourselves seriously? Other interns and volunteers thought this description was funny, not inaccurate, and acceptable to leave in the call, but it was agreed that she would rewrite the description, and she removed this part of it. She did however not contest his original language, “Dress is casual, though on occasion you may need to bathe and pull on something that has no holes in it.”\(^{31}\)

The actual hiring stage of the search was illuminating as well. After interviews, the staff had narrowed the pool down to three or four qualified candidates, each with strengths and weaknesses. It was agreed that two of the applicants, Brian and a woman Robin, were very strong and had attributes that complemented each other. The decision was made to offer the job as two half-time positions to them. Ultimately, Robin found a different job and turned them down, resulting in Brian being hired to fill the position full-time. This is not an unusual situation, until one considers that Robin’s politics were so fully radicalized that she did not believe in government regulation of the airwaves and acknowledged that she would not deal with the FCC if she took the job. In spite of this, the Pandora staff was fully willing to hire her as long as they also hired Brian to cover the parts of the work that would require dealing with the FCC. It may be telling that the match was not good because she turned the job down, but it is notable that the organization was enthusiastic about hiring her anyway. This should serve to illustrate their commitment to fairly left politics and discomfort over becoming, or being perceived as, an overly mainstream or “Beltway” organization.

\(^{30}\) Email, Jasper to basement, 12/2/2004.
\(^{31}\) Email, Ellen to basement, 12/18/2004.
Lastly, Pandora not only negotiated boundaries vis-à-vis “mainstream” non-profits but also vis-à-vis other members of the microradio community whose politics were more radicalized. Eric Klinenberg writes that “By cooperating with the FCC, [they found themselves] opposed to pirate leaders such as Dunifer of Free Radio Berkeley and Kantako from Human Rights Radio [unlicensed broadcasters who had famously battled the FCC in court in the 1980s and 1990s].”32 In a 2005 staff meeting discussing coordination for an upcoming conference on community radio, Pandora activists talked about the potential for conflict between Dunifer and FCC members. They were unsure whether Dunifer might “be nasty to the FCC, or encourage other people to be nasty to them”, as he opposed regulation of the airwaves. They were also concerned that if Dunifer led transmitter-building workshops in which he encouraged people to use the transmitters for unlicensed broadcasting, the FCC might be unappreciative. Jasper said, “I don’t know, this presents a dilemma. But [Commissioner Jonathan] Adelstein is pretty cool with pirates.”33 Ellen said that one solution would be to just state explicitly that the transmitters would be used internationally, outside of the FCC’s domain, and likened the situation to buying a pipe for smoking marijuana: “Have you ever been to a headshop? You need to say, ‘I’d like to see your water-pipes, please.’ Just watch the language and it’ll be okay.”34 Ultimately Dunifer did not attend the conference (thus rendering moot the Pandorans’ kidding about putting him and the FCC on the same panel), but the head of the FCC’s audio division attended and spoke at the conference. Pandora’s needed to feel credible themselves while respecting both “pirates” whom they were not sure would “play nice” as well as the FCC put them in a position where they felt they needed to reflect on these differences as well as their own role.

Thus, this paper argues that the radio activists were generally concerned with maintaining a critical, radical stance even as their organization underwent change from radical outsiders to the legislative process to one with a higher profile and more legitimacy. They held admiration for pirates, and

32 Klinenberg 2007: 256.
33 Fieldnotes 4/27/05.
34 Fieldnotes 4/27/05.
retained an affection for such traditional protest tactics as street theater. Meanwhile, mainstream advocacy groups were viewed by these actors as suspicious, at least sometimes, for being too close to establishment values, for not being radicalized enough, and crucially, for their potential to transform activists into insiders who have lost sight of their activism.35

Technical Identity in Activist Work: Conclusions

In the empirical sections above, this article has laid out two main features of the radio activists’ work: first, their assertion of a technical identity and second, their effort to construct a self-understanding as being different from other groups in the domain of media advocacy. This paper does not claim that the latter phenomenon is unique to technological activism or to this group; indeed the tension for an activist organization over becoming more institutionalized is a common one. However, what is significant about this case is the interplay between technical identity and the practices of activism. This paper argues that technical identity aids the group in attenuating its anxiety over organizational maturation. Indeed, technical identity is involved in a perhaps counterintuitive manner, in that it is used to reinforce an organizational identity that is not professional, is decidedly anti-technocratic, and is not white-collar.

The issue of a technical identity that is not white-collar necessitates a brief foray into the complexity of class when considering technological activism. These extremely hard-working yet low-paid workers at Pandora often held undergraduate degrees from elite institutions and drew on other reserves of cultural and social capital,36 not to mention possessing higher than average levels of political capital. Yet they rejected a pedigreed elitism, making statements like, “Even if you don’t have a fancy degree, [you can understand policy and serve your community with a radio station better than a corporation] your

35 Thanks to Mike Lynch for raising this point.
36 Bourdieu 1986.
neighborhood group can probably do a better job serving your community than the greedy jokers that own everything now!” Categories of class, identity, and technical work are not easily parsed or cleanly designated: examples include Carla Freeman’s “high-tech” office workers who identify as middle-class while making relatively low wages, but whose work with computers in a multinational corporate office environment has high status in Barbados where they work (2000), as well as relatively specialized technical workers who, despite formal education and other characteristics that might link them to the managerial class, identify more with traditional working class identities, as discussed by Sean Creighton and Randy Hodson (1997). Even while these categories resist simplistic readings, it is clear that the radio activists mounted a critique of a mainstream bourgeois identity when they opted not to dress in a “professional” manner, wore unkempt beards, and kept nonstandard business hours, which was expressed even in their job descriptions. Thomas underscored this when he said in an interview, “I’m a bearded guy in a basement,” indicating that the organization’s work occurred in a setting that might not seem like a traditional one. Additionally, during office discussions of obtaining health insurance, Brian brought up the issue of unionizing the office. He professed his intent to join the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World), stating that it might be good in their fee-for-service projects when they were working alongside tradespeople. This should be read as another rejection of white-collar professional identity and expression of solidarity with a traditional working-class identity.

Indeed, these were “professionals” who had to remind each other to be on time for Congressional meetings, saying “You know, some people actually go to their jobs at nine in the morning.”

Relatedly, Pandora activists made repeated references to members’ pasts in such pursuits as Las Vegas

37 Pandora Radio Project brochure, © 2004 [Pandora] Radio. This reinforces the groups’s efforts to emphasize the accessibility of technical or policy expertise to “ordinary people” as opposed to deferring to elite expertise.
38 Of course the option to leave one’s face unshaven is mainly restricted to the masculine gender, yet women activists and volunteers also complained about whether to shave (armpits, legs) for trips to Congress.
39 Interview 2/16/06.
40 Brian to basement, 2/21/06.
41 Fieldnotes 2/05.
card counter and black-market carpenter (especially when communicating with their board), again exhibiting an oppositional stance vis-à-vis bourgeois or professional occupations. They also resisted stable occupational titles. A woman who had volunteered for Pandora for years stepped up her involvement and asked about the title she should use, to which Jasper replied, “everyone at [Pandora] gets to make up their own title. it is an initiation. how about Spectral Director? or Chief of Rainbows? Wave Associate? You can’t have Director of Electromagnetism, that’s mine!”42 Notably, the mainstream practice of a stable occupational title is resisted in favor of playfulness and not insignificantly, highlighting the technical and material properties of spectrum.43

Ironically, this iteration of technical identity carries its own exclusiveness, even though it is constructed as accessible to members of the public and is intended to bolster a sense of unity amongst activists. Technological activists may pride themselves on their geekiness, including a failure to cultivate the slicker interpersonal style of lobbyists and of political insiders. The above examples—from “Congress pants” to Pandora’s reflection on their own position between pirates and the FCC—demonstrate that the radio activists do make significant effort to resist falling into the role of insider. And of course they prided themselves on what lobbyists and political insiders ostensibly lack: the desire and ability to get their hands dirty, to actually build something. At a 2005 “birthday party” for LPFM in Washington (celebrating the five-year anniversary of the FCC’s designation of LPFM service), Pandora made a symbolic display when they presented their lawyer with a homemade radio from South Africa: this was not only an expression of gratitude, it was a way of demonstrating that she was no longer “outside” or that her difference had been overcome.

42 Jasper to basement email list, 3/9/06.
43 See Becker and Carper 1956: 342 on occupational titles.
Technical identity may also enable the radio activists to assign meaningful coherence to the diverse range of tasks they encounter. This is important not only for the symbolic frontstage moments like barnraisings or entering the halls of power in Washington but fundamental backstage activities like routine and even tedious work like paperwork, staff meetings, maintaining databases, sending out mailings, and the like. The primacy of a technical identity gives the radio activists a powerful reminder that there is a raison d’être behind all sorts of onerous or seemingly fragmented activities; it can potentially recuperate labor and brand it as fundamental to the activist goals of the organization.

Thus, the maintenance and assertion of technical identity in these circumstances was a way of managing anxiety about the attenuation of radical activist ideals in the face of a more professionalized, more expert work environment. It served to efface boundaries between the organization’s past and present (and even future). It also erected boundaries: the activists’ emphasis on technical identity was very much a way of performing a “we’re not them” position vis-à-vis a more professionalized insiders and experts, whom they encountered both in other non-profit settings and in policy settings, and against whom they wished to define themselves in contrast. Of course, as noted by Jones, these distinctions between groups are not necessarily “true”; rather, they performed work in the minds of the Pandora workers as they sought to mature as an organization, refine their mission, and yet continue to work in a manner that was perceived to be in line with activist ideals. And this strategy seems uniquely adapted to the history and commitments of this crew of radio activists; other groups not engaged in a technological form of activism may have to find different strategies to manage the maintenance of an activist identity in the face of organizational change.

The creation and assertion of technical identity also has implications that extend beyond the radio activists’ internal struggle to refine their organization’s mission and propagate community radio.
While it is beyond the scope of this paper to characterize the nature of the interventions of a wider range of advocates, technologically-oriented activism is but one of many strategies to bring about a more democratic media environment. As Carroll and Hackett discuss, different groups employ different modes of action in their pursuit of media democracy, and certainly, the movement has room for a multiplicity of groups and strategies. However, within the movement, it is possible that groups who share something akin to technical identity may find collaboration across organizations to be more seamless; conversely, working on campaigns with organizations whose members identify differently, or against whom the technological activists define themselves, may prove more challenging. Both analysts and practitioners of media activism would then be wise to heed the consequences of activist strategies to both erect and efface boundaries between groups.

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44 Though perhaps not: the radio activists’ notion of anti-technocratic decisionmaking not only puts them at odds with hackers but with some technically-oriented non-governmental organizations interested in internet governance as discussed by Mueller (2002).


