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## Free media: issues, challenges and proposals

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### Radio Free Palestine: A Model for Cross-Border Solidarity Broadcasting

9 July 2018, by [KING Gretchen](#), [MAROUF Laith](#)

Community radio stations, as non-profit broadcasters that serve communities as opposed to the interests of states or corporations, have always maximized resources in their attempts to achieve social justice through broadcasting. Stations often pool resources in order to increase networks of community-based stations, as in the case of the Miners' Radio Network, connecting dozens of communities in Bolivia, or the Wawatay Radio Network, linking 49 stations and serving over 30,000 Indigenous people in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Treaty 3 areas.



Picture Radio Free Palestine.

Community radio stations also regularly share content in order to produce syndicated programs, such as *WINGS* [1] (aired in over ten countries), *GroundWire* [2] (broadcast by 20 stations in Canada) and *Sprouts* [3] (aired by 50 stations in the US). Additionally, they regularly host programs within regional or global networks, such as the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (known by its French acronym AMARC), as part of international campaigns like World Water Day, World Food Day and International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

During the 5th World Forum of Free Media (WFFM) held in Montreal at McGill University, as part of the 2016 World Social Forum in Canada, community radio activists hosted a workshop on *Radio Free Palestine*, [4] as a model for cross-border solidarity broadcasting. This article summarizes the role of RFP during the WFFM, drawing on discussions about cross-border solidarity that took place at the recent International Forum on Indigenous and Community Media, held in Oaxaca, and seeks to inspire the 2018 RFP and future cross-border solidarity programs.

### Defining cross-border solidarity broadcasting

Cross-border solidarity broadcasting is a collaborative process that offers special programming aired simultaneously over multiple stations across borders and distances. This tactic provides a means to unite and amplify community voices around an issue that affects all of society, and even the whole world. Breaking through sound barriers created by oppressive and colonial media realities, cross-border solidarity broadcasting is a way to offset the flood of propaganda broadcast by commercial and state broadcasters. By sharing resources, programming, airtime and bandwidth, multiple community broadcasters (who normally operate on scarce resources) can join forces and produce more content and address larger audiences.

One example is the annual Homelessness Radio Marathon, which unites poor and homeless people, and their allies throughout Canada under the theme of "housing is a human right." It was founded in 1998 by US-based broadcaster Jeremy Weir Alderson (aka "Nobody") as an offshoot of his regular radio program on WEOS in Geneva, NY. The program was initiated by CKUT for Canadian audiences for the first time in 2003. Since then, each year in the middle of winter, in one of the world's coldest countries, where deaths due to extreme cold are largely ignored by policy makers, the broadcasting system and public discourse are turned upside down.

The interactive talk show, hosted outside and overnight, features poor and homeless people as experts on the impact of government policies that fail to adequately address poverty and housing. Community radio stations broadcast the show live across the country, creating a mass media platform by and for homeless and poor people in Canada. Listeners can tune in and join the discussion live by phone or in person at any of the locations being broadcast live across the country or in a public listening room. Because the program has been produced every year since 2003, there is now a substantial audio archive documenting the reality of life in the streets and the fight to ensure housing is a human right in Canada.

## A long history of Palestinian resistance over the airwaves

Before the war that created the Zionist Apartheid state of Israel in 1948, radio broadcasting was one tactic used in the fight against settler colonialism in Palestine. In the 1930s, Sawt al-Falestin (or Voice of Palestine), began reporting atrocities and resisting Zionist occupation through broadcasting. [5] At the same time, community radio in North America was focusing on raising awareness of Palestinian human rights and providing Palestinians with a space to tell their own stories in the media. Pacifica Radio's archives include audio recordings from the 1940s about Palestine or featuring Palestinian voices.

The *Voice of Palestine* was first aired in the seventies on Co-op radio in Vancouver and continued until 2012. *Under the Olive Tree* has been broadcast on CKUT radio in Montreal since 2005 and on CFRC radio in Kingston since 2009. These Palestinian radio programs are another example of the long history of community broadcasting in North America by and for Indigenous peoples. [6] Indeed, solidarity broadcasting helped to spread community radio practices worldwide. [7]

Similarly, RFP was initiated by community radio stations and producers to raise awareness of Palestinian human rights. Launched in 2008, the first RFP broadcast marked the 60th anniversary of the Palestinian Nakbah (or catastrophe) that took place on May 15, 1948, and resulted in the creation of Apartheid Israel and the forced expulsion of over 800,000 Indigenous Palestinians from their homeland. *Under the Olive Tree*, the Palestinian community radio program on CKUT, appealed to producers in the English-speaking world reporting on Palestine, with the idea of an international program to air live on participating radio stations. Producers included the International Middle East Media Center, Electronic Intifada, and dozens of community radio stations in Canada, England and the USA. Producers and stations could participate by contributing content, hosting specific slots or rebroadcasting RFP (or sections of it) live or at a later date.

RFP's content prioritizes the Palestinian point-of-view, covering diverse aspects of Palestinian opinion and culture that are underrepresented or misrepresented by most media. We opted for a marathon format in order to counteract a media system that marginalizes Palestinian voices, as well as to provide a much-needed historical context of the Nakbah and the international struggle for a Free Palestine. The programming included on-the-ground reports from Palestine produced by IMEMC, Radio Pacifica archives from the 1940s, and reports produced by various contributors. Listeners were engaged with programming that focused on marginalized voices within the Palestinian community, including local diaspora voices, women and LGBTQ leaders, popular non-violent movements, and a multitude of flourishing liberationist arts and culture initiatives.

RFP received the "Special Programming" Award at the National Community Radio Conference held in Canada in 2009. Since then, RFP has aired in 2010 and 2017. The next RFP marathon will be organized to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the ongoing Nakbah on May 15, 2018.

## Reviewing the organization and impact of RFP

RFP is organized in such a way that the individual responsibilities of broadcasters are minimized while amplifying the effect of their contributions. For each RFP broadcast, *Under the Olive Tree* coordinated the program and managed all technical aspects by securing CKUT airtime for the duration of RFP as a broadcasting base and ensuring a clean feed for the programming and rebroadcasting. IMEMC, EI and all other producers either hosted slots or provided pre-produced content for the program. Throughout the show, the IMEMC provided live updates from historic Palestine on Nakbah actions and commemorations undertaken by Palestinians, and relayed the brutal response from the Apartheid regime.

RFP's programming grid was also aligned to the regular shows scheduled by the host station CKUT. This meant that the producers and listeners of the shows that RFP was disrupting felt included and comfortable listening to programs they may not have listened to otherwise. So, for example, a slot that usually featured female musicians, focused instead on Palestinian female musicians. A slot that featured Latin American issues, instead discussed the historic relation between Palestinian resistance and Latin American resistance to colonialism and imperialism, and so forth.

Other radio stations took part in different ways. Some stations – typically ones that hosted Palestine-focused programs and producers working on Palestine issues – produced certain slots. Other stations opted to just broadcast RFP live, either in its entirety or just a few hours. And some broadcasters chose to air the RFP archives (in sections or in its entirety) at a later date. Ultimately, this way of working helped make RFP a smooth and enjoyable experience for producers, stations, and audiences.

During the 2016 World Social Forum in Canada, we organized an information session where several RFP producers shared their experiences. It was a way to contribute to the history of collaborative community radio broadcasting and express solidarity with social justice movements. The session provided an overview of the history, organization and impact of RFP, as well giving participants the opportunity to be involved in the 2017 program.

RFP organizers also attended the International Forum on Indigenous and Community Media held by the communications commission in Mexico (IFT) and UNESCO in Oaxaca in August 2017. We were asked to present a workshop on how cross-border solidarity broadcasting in a radio marathon format could be utilized to highlight Indigenous women and gender issues on International Women's Day from the perspective of World Majority women. Dozens of producers and staff from Indigenous and community radio stations across Latin America participated in the workshop.

Participants considered the history and benefits of cross-border solidarity broadcasting, and tackled the problems of femicide, sexism, and racism in an international context, with participants sharing their experiences of oppression in their communities and radio stations. The workshop concluded with participants affirming that these experiences are anything but uncommon, and that cross-border solidarity broadcasting can help raise awareness of women's human rights from a World Majority perspective.

The benefits of collaborative cross-border solidarity broadcasting in a radio marathon format are many. For one, if produced by oppressed groups, thus voicing their concerns, the marathon format has powerful amplification effects. For RFP, this means taking the voice of the Palestinian diaspora out of the confines of their community and national borders and putting them on the world stage. Secondly, the cross-border aspect of the program can highlight international parallels and global realities of a specific issue. RFP and other cross-border solidarity programs contribute to dispelling the exceptionalist and supremacist tendencies within international/Western broadcasters' coverage of global issues. Thirdly, the collaborative aspect of the program means that a small number of producers with few resources can create a radio broadcasting platform that reaches an audience as big as that of other mass media outlets. And finally, the program's emphasis on solidarity, where participants from diverse backgrounds work together as allies, fosters cultural understanding, future collaboration and lasting comradery.

## 70 years of the Palestinian Nakbah and resistance: Join RFP!

Building on the above experiences, RFP is also planning its program for the 70th anniversary of the ongoing Palestinian Nakbah and resistance to Israeli Apartheid in May 2018. We are appealing to all producers and stations worldwide interested in participating in this new radio marathon. The program will be multilingual and international in scope.

*We would like to encourage all those who read this article and are interested in participating to send any inquiries and expressions of interest to: [RadioFreePalestine2018@gmail.com](mailto:RadioFreePalestine2018@gmail.com).*

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### Notes

- [1] <http://www.wings.org>
- [2] <http://groundwirenews.ca>
- [3] <http://pacificanetwork.org/sprouts/>
- [4] Or RFP archived online at <https://archive.org/details/RFP2017>
- [5] Soley, L. (1982). "Radio: Clandestine broadcasting, 1948–1967." *Journal of Communication* 32(1): 165–180.
- [6] Brady, M., and Kelly, J., (2017). *We Interrupt This Program. Indigenous Media Tactics in Canadian Culture*. UBC Press: Vancouver.
- [7] King, G. (2017). "History of Struggle: The Global Story of Community Broadcasting Practices, or a Brief History of Community Radio." *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 12(2), 18–36.

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