

**Community Radio,  
Operational Structures, and PAR Methodology: A Case Study**

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## **Introduction**

In an earlier paper titled *Who Gets to Speak?: Access and the Electronic Mass Media in Development Communications* (2001), I suggested that the concept of "access" as it applies to communications must be redefined in order to destabilize the hegemonic structures that serve to oppress marginalized groups, thereby providing them with the mechanisms to find their own voice that could ultimately lead to their empowerment. Access, in my view, could be broken down into two distinct realms: as availability and as participation (Wong 2001:4). I argued that both these kinds of access formed the basic foundation for "true pluralistic and egalitarian public involvement in communication to take place" (2001:4-5), and cited community radio as the ideal embodiment of these accesses, offering communities the possibility of social change in the age of electronic mass media.

Access in and of itself, however, does not merely materialize out of thin air. In order for access to exist and sustain itself in organizations like community radio stations, certain operational frameworks must be established and maintained. In turn, these frameworks themselves must involve an element of democratic participation at a managerial level to ensure that the empowerment of subordinated voices continues and stratification between social groups does not constantly recur.

This is where the application of Participatory Action Research (PAR) principles can be very useful. Community radio is perfectly suited to PAR methodologies. One might have doubts in thinking of a community radio station as a "research" project in the literal sense, yet it is very much so. It must be viewed as an *ongoing* PAR project, the goals of which may not be blatantly obvious but are there nonetheless. Those goals include the preservation of public accessibility to communication facilities offering training, programming, and production tools, as enshrined in

the mission statements of many community radio stations, such as that of my former employer, CHSR FM (Appendix A).

In a more general sense, however, the goal is very simple: to ensure the continued active participation of community members in the running of the station so that it will always remain relevant to *their* needs. To transform this endeavour into a self-sustaining reality, everyone with a stake in the station must essentially take on the role of researcher. Thus, the teacher-students/students-teacher dynamic to which Paolo Freire refers comes into play, with all those involved in the station from within and without assuming both roles (1972:67). In other words, everyone has a contribution to make to the process. This is why the operational structures of community radio stations are so important to their success as exercises in and examples of democratic participatory communication. To illustrate this, I will analyze the operations of the afore-mentioned CHSR FM, a community-based campus radio station located in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, drawing upon my personal experiences, informal surveys with current and former volunteers, and documents from the station.

### **Community Radio and Participatory Communication**

Officially recognized as a legitimate broadcasting sector by the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), which is the Canadian Government's communications regulatory body, community radio in Canada is perceived as having one of the stronger support systems in the world. Many community radio stations broadcast to homogeneous communities, such as indigenous nations and particular ethnic groups; however, many others--especially those in urban milieus-- serve heterogeneous populations, with diversity based on identities of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, and ability--in

other words, as wide a range of people as one would find anywhere on the planet. Oftentimes, these stations will be established at educational institutions, which is why one will frequently find community stations referred to as "community-based campus radio stations," as designated by the CRTC in its campus radio policy (2000-12, sections 18-20).

The "most distinguishing characteristic" of community radio, according to Bruce Girard, "is its commitment to community participation at all levels" (1992:2). This goes beyond mere listenership; as Michel Delorme, former president of the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC), states, "Community radio implies a democratic dimension, popular participation in the *management* of the station as in the production of its programmes" (italics mine) (qtd. in McLaughlin 1992:3). Lewis and Pearlman affirm this, asserting that "The essential feature [of community stations] is democratic control by listeners and workers (paid and volunteer) and users of the station, exercised in meetings or general assemblies which can [vote] the management in or out of office" (qtd. in McLaughlin 1992:4).

Community radio, then, is consistent with C.V. Rajasunderam's thoughts on participatory communication when he writes that

Participatory Communication is driven by the perennial values of compassion and solidarity. As a process of empowerment it can help amplify traditionally-unacknowledged voices. It can strengthen the confidence of all members of a group in the knowledge and capacity of each. The process leads to consciousness-raising and knitting together a shared understanding of problems and a people-sustained vision of the future. (1997:1)

Indeed, a vast majority of community radio stations operate with this notion of citizens' solidarity and empowerment in mind. In a recent survey of its members, AMARC found that "83% of respondents stated that the work of salaried employees is supported with the collaboration of volunteers," with the composition of collaborators within these stations being comprised of 70% volunteers, 19% salaried full-time workers, and 11% salaried part-time workers (1999:3). It is important to stress the collaborative nature of community radio; while a station will have at least one paid staff member involved in the management of its operations, it will also require active volunteer participation from community members to ensure that their station continues to reflect community concerns and interests.

Chin Saik Yoon breaks down democratic participation in a development project--which is what a community radio station essentially is--into four streams:

1. Participation in implementation - People are actively encouraged and mobilized to take part in the actualization of projects. They are given certain responsibilities and set certain tasks or required to contribute specified resources.
2. Participation in evaluation - Upon completion of a project, people are invited to critique its success or failure.
3. Participation in benefit - People take part in enjoying the fruits of a project.
4. Participation in decision-making - People initiate, discuss, conceptualize and plan activities they will do as a community. (1996:2)

All of these streams are encapsulated in community radio. None of these kinds of participation would be possible, however, without a workable managerial structure in place. Some stations offer a model that works very well in this regard, at least in theory.

One can find this model neatly termed and defined by Grazia Borrini-Feyerabend *et al* in their paper on managing natural resources: they call it "co-management." They describe co-management as a "situation in which two or more social actors negotiate, define and guarantee amongst themselves a *fair* sharing of the management functions, entitlements and responsibilities for a given territory, area or set of natural resources" (italics mine) (2000:1). One could certainly replace "natural resources" with any issue of social significance or concern, including communications. The very idea of "co-management" implies that there are multiple stakeholders with an interest in the success of a project who are all working on an equal footing. They are "co-managers."

Taking this apparent lack of hegemony into account, the application of a co-management model to community radio fits nicely with Yoon's streams of participation.

- With respect to **implementation**, everyone has the opportunity to contribute their time and effort into making the station run in a variety of ways--from helping with fundraising events to hosting programs.
- In terms of **evaluation**, one would approach a community radio station as an ongoing project rather than as one that will eventually conclude. To account for this, certain mechanisms are employed to ensure that a continual process of evaluation takes place among and within all the different administrative bodies that may govern a station.
- As far as **benefits** go, stakeholders can take comfort in the fact that they possess and run a communication tool that is accessible to everyone in the community.
- Finally, the structure lends itself to input by all parties in **decision-making** on matters affecting the station's operations. As Yoon states, "participation in decision-making is the most important form to promote. It gives people control over their lives and

environment. At the same time, the people acquire problem-solving skills and acquire full ownership of projects" (1996:3).

Given these levels of participation, it would appear that a station employing a co-managerial framework is well-suited to encouraging commitment of action from its stakeholders. It is a scenario in which each person has different roles, expertise, and responsibilities, none of them necessarily more important than the other; yet, in spite of these differences, the structure allows for everyone to come together to achieve a common goal--making the project work. For community radio, it is a concrete, workable solution that opens the door to democratic participation by the citizenry in the communications process while maintaining a sense of security in the day-to-day operations of their stations. CHSR can be counted among those stations.

### **Background of CHSR**

CHSR first came into existence in 1961 as Radio UNB, starting out as a closed-circuit station. As an initiative of some enthusiastic University of New Brunswick (UNB) students, the station was initially founded to give students a voice on the airwaves. For the next forty years it went through many changes, including acquiring licenses to broadcast first on AM radio, then later on the FM band. CHSR also gained a second academic supporter in St. Thomas University (STU). Through all these changes, one thing remained the same: the management of the station by a combination of paid staff and volunteers.

CHSR's volunteers are comprised of university students and members of a community that encompasses not only the city of Fredericton, but also that of Oromocto as well as the townships of New Brunswick's Southern York County. While most students and community

members tend to be primarily occidental in terms of heritage, the volunteership is not entirely homogeneous. UNB and STU have a high amount of foreign student enrolment, with many students coming from countries and regions such as Malaysia, China, the Caribbean, and East and West Africa. There are also many first- and second-generation immigrant community members who live, work, and study in the area. As for less visible minorities, Fredericton can boast of a substantial gay-bisexual-lesbian-transgendered-queer community and, with respect to religious institutions, one can find a synagogue and a mosque nestled among the city's many Protestant and Catholic churches. All of these minorities, as well as the majority population, are well-represented among CHSR's volunteership.

### **Personal History with CHSR**

I began my association with CHSR in 1994 as a volunteer while studying for my Masters degree at UNB, staying on for two years. During that time I learned how to host and "tech" my own radio show, which was a hybrid of music and spoken word. I gradually became more involved with the internal workings of the station, assuming a number of volunteer positions. I left CHSR following my graduation in 1996, but returned in 1998 to a paid position as the station's Program Director, a position I held until 2001. Thus, considering my multi-leveled participation at CHSR as both volunteer and paid staff, I have been afforded a unique dual perspective on the operations of the station.

What I loved about being at CHSR was that I finally felt I had a voice in the world. When I first joined, my initial intention was simply to learn the technical aspects of doing radio and to play my favourite songs over the airwaves. However, I soon realized that CHSR offered me more opportunities than that. In an atmosphere that encouraged open-mindedness and

outspokenness, I began to explore issues of identity and social justice during my show. As a gay Chinese-Canadian male with a penchant for left-wing politics as well as a love for non-mainstream forms of music, I took full advantage of everything that CHSR had to offer me in my outsider status.

I have noticed, as well, that many of my fellow CHSR volunteers have also experienced those same feelings of empowerment and liberation. In conducting research for this paper, I e-mailed a short questionnaire to current and former CHSR members, asking them about their own experiences at the station and their thoughts on participation and empowerment. Their responses (Appendix C) to questions concerning the impact that their involvement with CHSR has had on them include the following:

- *I felt I had a voice to offer. (Respondent 1)*
- *It's nice to be part of something that is important to its members for all sorts of reasons.(R3)*
- *It was really good in terms of broadening horizons...Fredericton is very straight, white people-ish. So it was good to be exposed to other ways of life...it helped me (and I think it helps everyone who walks or tunes in, regardless of whether they belong to a minority group or not) to realize the diversity of life. (R4)*
- *I felt like what I did mattered to both the station and its audience. Because of this, I became more confident not only in things that I did at the station but also in my own life. Because of the support and opportunities the volunteers and staff gave me, I became a better person. I developed a stronger sense of self and was confident and secure in it [sic]. (R5)*
- *As a woman, I have seen how hard it is to be accepted [as] a person who knows how to run a soundboard, to sell advertising, or to act in a managerial capacity. CHSR provided me with training and the opportunity to do all of these things. I had never encountered this kind of prejudice before. After overcoming it, I realized how important is [sic] was for other disenfranchised and minority groups to see that they could have a home at CHSR.(R5)*
- *C/C [Campus and Community] radio is, above all else, about individuals who stand up and say this is who I am. They may be putting on a persona, they may be engaged in fierce political debate, or they may jjust [sic] be sitting back and playing music they like, but all of it is borne out of a personal decision--that this is what I want to do, and I have control over what I am going to do next. (R9)*
- *It helped me by making [me] comfortable enough to realise that I was a member of a minority/disenfranchised group. (R9)*
- *Internally [to the station], I am able to voice my own thoughts, ideas and opinions, without fear of being ridiculed or disrespected. Externally, my voice is a sort of tool for sharing what is important to me, and may also be important to others in my community. (R10)*

- *I felt empowered because I was given so much control over my show. I made all the decisions about what to play, what stories to run, and if I had other ideas for things the station would help me with it, which is a very different kind of experience from many other volunteer organizations I've seen. (R12)*
- *[CHSR gives] disenfranchised/underrepresented people a voice, they provide the opportunity for people interested in broadcasting and communications [to] get practical experience, and also give listeners valuable insight/exposure to "alternative" music and information. This last point was especially important to me personally (as a teenage girl when I first started listening to the station). (R12)*
- *It made me more confident with public speaking. It was also inspiring to be around all the intelligent and confident women at the station. (R12)*

Exposure to the problems, concerns, and histories of others was an education for me; although I had always been surrounded by human diversity, I had never had to confront what that meant. Being in that environment forced me to reflect on my own advantages and disadvantages, as I am sure it did many other volunteers. Later, when I became Program Director, I discovered that paid staff members also went through this process. Knowing that every day at CHSR was a revelatory experience for each of us, whether volunteer or paid staff, gave us a sense of collectiveness, a common sense of purpose to preserve the special feeling of empowerment that this community radio station conferred upon ordinary people.

It is the right of everyone who has a stake in a station like CHSR to have a say in the way things are run. One need only look at the second sentence in its Statement of Principles to see what forces are driving it: "CHSR FM operates on the principle that all members of the public have a right to participate in the broadcast system" (Appendix B). Structurally, CHSR allows this level of participation to occur through its co-managerial operational framework.

### **CHSR's Operational Structure**

CHSR's stakeholders have certain responsibilities and duties that are expected of them to keep the station running. "Responsibility" is a key word to remember, for it is the philosophical foundation of the station, and is inscribed in a section of the CHSR handbook written by Station

Manager Tristis Ward called "Responsibility vs. Blame." Every stakeholder with a direct involvement in the station's administration, including all volunteers, must go through a training session during which this philosophy is emphasized. "Responsibility for a problem," Ward writes, "comes when you have some power as a member of a collective over what gets done, fixed, or bought by a large institution such as an fm (sic) radio station," as opposed to blame, which "is when someone who is in a position of authority (or who thinks they are) points a finger at you, and says: 'You messed up!'" (CHSR 2000:1). Ward breaks down responsibilities into two types: *indirect responsibilities*, which "are those that [one member] shares with all other members"; and *direct responsibilities*, which are those "that fall squarely on [an individual member's] shoulders" (CHSR 2000:1). By placing responsibility for the running of the station into his or her hands, whether directly or indirectly, the stakeholder feels a sense of inclusion in CHSR's management, and that ultimately leads to a sense of empowerment.

Responsibility, in this regard, can be a great equalizer. No one person should bear more of the burden than the other. CHSR's operational structure distributes responsibility in this manner, opting for a system of overlapping circles rather than hierarchical tiers. In such a system, many stakeholders will find themselves standing within two circles at a given time; this acts as a safeguard against any administrative body isolating itself from the connected whole. Still, each circle is distinct in its own right, and those within a given circle will have particular responsibilities and areas of knowledge that will lead them to action, which in turn will help to solidify the station's standing as a participatory communications medium. These co-managerial circles can be categorized as follows:

1. ***CHSR Club/ General Membership***: CHSR volunteers, as mentioned earlier, can be broken into many distinct sub-groups and cross-sub-groups: women, students,

Bengali students, Bengali female students, etc. To volunteer at CHSR, one must join the "club." The club is technically a separate entity from the station itself; the club collects membership dues (though these can be waived if one's financial status prohibits it) that go towards paying for social gatherings, charitable donations, and other matters of concern that are specific to the members' needs and interests and are not covered by the station's budget. During my four-and-a-half years at the station, the number of official members ranged anywhere from 80 to 150, with usually about forty to sixty percent of them actually active on some level.

Members can join as either individuals or groups, the latter being a situation in which a collective such as the Muslim Students Association decides to gain membership as a collective entity. As members, volunteers gain access to training, a potential spot on the program schedule, access to music, and a direct say in the running of the station. With respect to the latter, the club also doubles as the General Membership, the body which has power over constitutional and policy changes that affect the club, and in particular bears the right to vote representatives onto a number of different volunteer administrative bodies. Such activity takes place during a semi-annual General Membership Meeting. The bodies affected by the voting process include the Executive Committee, the Programming Committee, and the Board of Directors.

When I was a volunteer, I viewed myself as a co-manager of the station. In the context of PAR, I might also have viewed myself as a co-researcher, bringing to the table all of the knowledge I had acquired from my own personal experiences and taking responsibility for my own participation. Every other member had the same

opportunity. Through this process of sharing our knowledge(s), I felt that we as volunteers cohered into a tight unit, which made a huge difference in terms of getting things done. In many ways, it was a bonding experience akin to what one would find in a family. Stringer states that "researchers increase their effectiveness when they immerse themselves in the richness of group life" (1996:56). Without the "empathic understandings that come about only through close involvement with people" (1996:56), the experience becomes less enjoyable and, therefore, less of a motivating factor to participate.

Because so many of us adopted CHSR as our second home, it was usually quite easy to act upon various issues that might affect the station. During fundraising drives, for example, volunteers would put in their time and, often, their own money to help the station meet its revenue goals. Some of our activities included staffing the phonelines, assisting with events, and promoting the drives.

There have also been times when the membership has combined their energies to defend CHSR. When the STU Student Union decided to hold a referendum in 1999 to determine whether or not to continue funding the station, the volunteers rallied to the cause, launching a promotional campaign that served to inform STU students of the issue and telling them to go out and vote. The result of these volunteers' efforts was the largest turnout for a referendum at STU in twenty years, with the final tally being 60% to 40% in CHSR's favour.

CHSR cannot do without its members. They dictate the direction the station takes. It is their activity that often determines whether or not the station even survives. Somehow, all these people from different backgrounds pull everything

- together to make it work. As Stringer notes, "Our ultimate goal [as researchers] is to provide a context that enables diverse stakeholders to work collaboratively toward solutions to the significant problems that confront them" (1996:57). CHSR must be doing something right, considering the commitment of its volunteers to its operations.
2. ***The Executive Committee***: This committee manages the interests of the club. There are seven positions on this committee: the Spoken Word, Cultural, Music Programming, Production, and Promotions Coordinators, the Secretary/Treasurer, and the Chair. At least fifty percent of the Committee must be women, and the Cultural Coordinator must be someone who can host a cultural show, which generally implies that he or she bears an ethnic heritage that is neither occidentally English nor French in origin.

As far as their responsibilities go, the Committee members will handle any issues that may affect the membership. These can range from organizing parties to negotiating disputes between members to contributing to the CHSR's final budget proposal. As well, each committee member represents the department to which his or her title refers. Thus, for example, the Cultural Coordinator looks after the cultural, or international, shows, the Spoken Word Coordinator takes care of the Spoken Word Department, and the Music Programming Coordinator supervises any music shows that do not fall under the Cultural Coordinator's purview. Other positions, such as the Music Librarian, and News and Sports Coordinators, also exist for sub-departments at CHSR.

As elected representatives of the membership, the Executive are expected to take an active role in station business on the volunteers' behalf. The diverse makeup of the

committee ensures that a wide variety of perspectives are present at any of its meetings, though any non-Executive member can also attend the meetings to have his or her opinion heard. Executive members must always be cognizant of the rest of the membership's interests. For example, when constructing the budget proposal for 2000-2001, the Executive Committee made sure to insert a request for a professional DJ mixer for the turntable artists at the station, in response to complaints from the membership that the studio set-up at that time was inadequate for their needs.

I sat on the Executive Committee myself for a year, first as Music Programming Coordinator, and then as Chair. In the former role, I acted as a liaison between the music programmers, the Programming and Executive Committees, the Music Department, and the staff. As Chair, I acted as a liaison between the Board, the Executive, and the General Membership. In both these roles I always kept in mind that I was representing the best interests of the station and all the people involved in it. As such, I had to listen well to everyone around me at CHSR. It was my responsibility to make sure that "members of all stakeholder groups...[felt] themselves to be represented adequately and that their agendas and perspectives [were] included as significant parts of the process" (Stringer 1996:82). I was, in essence, their eyes, ears, and mouth on the Executive, all the while taking into account not only the *converging* perspectives of the members, but the *diverging* ones, as well (Stringer 1996:84). In addition to my own personal participation at CHSR as an Executive member, I was also acting as a conduit of sorts for the further participation of the membership.

3. ***The Programming Committee***: The three programming coordinators on the Executive Committee also sit on the Programming Committee. In addition to them, the Programming Committee is comprised of two members-at-large voted on to the Committee by the General Membership, and the Program Director who sits in an ex-officio position. The Programming Committee oversees programmers and programming, particularly in the areas of show approval and disciplinary action against wayward programmers. For example, if a programmer makes racist remarks on the air, then it is the Programming Committee's job to discipline that programmer.

The Programming Committee is vital to the station, as it determines its sound--and, in a sense, its image--by approving and removing shows from the schedule. As with the Executive Committee, the Programming Committee participates in station operations on behalf of all other CHSR stakeholders by representing their diverse choices as a heterogeneous community in selecting programs to go on the air. The heterogeneous composition of the committee guarantees this, with the Program Director facilitating the process by acting as a resource for questions related to CRTC and CHSR policies as well as the status of the current schedule.

Each member of the committee possesses some knowledge that no one else does. For example, the Cultural Coordinator might have a perspective on what ethnicities are under- or over-represented on the schedule. Others on the committee may not notice this because they might not have the sensitivity towards cultural representation that someone belonging to a specific disenfranchised group would. These varying perspectives serve to protect the integrity of the schedule so that it remains a community endeavour, not that of a particular sub-group.

4. ***The Board of Directors:*** The Chair of the Executive Committee represents both that body and the entire membership on the Board of Directors. Other seats on the Board are reserved for: two CHSR at-large members voted into their positions by the General Membership; four UNB students; two STU students; one UNB graduate student; one UNB administrator; one STU administrator; one community member; and two at-large representatives from any of the constituent groups. The Station Manager also sits ex-officio on the Board, and the Program Director is expected to attend the meetings. The Board handles matters relating to the license, budget, and personnel, including the hiring and firing of the Station Manager.

While the composition of the Board may seem unusually large, there is a reason for this. Funding for CHSR comes from many different sources. Each of those seats, aside from those belonging to CHSR's membership, represents a source of funding to the main budget. Thus, one can draw more overlapping circles based on these sources, as well, including UNB, STU, their respective student unions, the UNB graduate students, and the Fredericton community. In this regard, the Board allows all major stakeholding groups to have a say through their representatives in decisions on the issues administered by that body. One could say that the Board, Programming Committee, and Executive Committee can be likened to Stringer's concept of a "joint account working party," a group assembled during the research process "that includes representation from each stakeholding group" (1996:85). They exist, after all, to interpret, on behalf of the stakeholders, the research data that may affect the station and, therefore, the community as a whole. It is necessary to have these administrative

bodies organized the way they are as a security measure for the stakeholding groups, so that their voices are present when the important decisions are made.

5. *The Fredericton Community*: This co-managerial entity plays a slightly less visible role in the running of the station than others. Though many CHSR members are also Fredericton residents, the majority of the city's 50,000 people obviously do not participate directly in the management of the station as far as volunteering is concerned. However, they are active participants in many other ways that are just as crucial to the success of the station as those in more administrative positions.

The most common mode of participation is through feedback. According to Yoon, "Feedback is when people react to stories or programs conceived independently by the media workers" (1996:8). In this situation, the community responds to what they have heard after the fact, and their responses may be either positive or negative. This kind of participation can be useful to a station, in that it informs the programmers what areas they can improve upon, or what they are doing right.

Yoon also mentions another audience response mechanism--the "feedforward" approach: "Feedforward is when people tell the media workers what is important for media coverage, and which is the best angle and way of covering these issues" (1996:8). This is a more proactive method of audience/community participation, in which citizens use their own knowledge and expertise to direct the media outlets to deal with the issues through the community's eyes. CHSR employs both these approaches, offering a feedback system for people to comment on programming, and

recruiting volunteers from the community and reserving seats for them on various committees as a means of providing feedforward access.

Involvement in CHSR's fundraising efforts is another way the community participates. During our Fundrives, Frederictonians would frequently pledge money in support of their favourite shows, or would attend special events that we had organized. Contributing funds is a way of making a statement showing support towards the station and what it does for and represents to the community. Even in a more general sense, the money aids the survival of the station.

On a more political level, the community sometimes participates in a very dramatic way. When the UNB Student Union decided to cut CHSR's funding in 1999, there was a major outcry from our listeners. E-mail and phone messages began to pour into the Student Union and University President's offices from all over the country as well as the U.S.A. and even London and Pakistan, expressing outrage over the cut. These were former members, local listeners, and recent Internet audience members who believed in the mandate of CHSR and spontaneously erupted in a show of support. That support saved us from the Student Union's knife, proving that the community plays just as much a managerial role in station operations as any of the internal administrative bodies.

6. ***Staff Members:*** At present there are two full-time, three part-time, and one commissioned paid positions on staff at CHSR. Full-time staff is comprised of the Station Manager and the Program Director. The Station Manager is in charge of the business aspects of the station, such as the budget, equipment purchase, and personnel. In addition to sitting on the Board, she is also generally present at all

Executive Committee and General Membership meetings, and holds a staff meeting once a week as a support mechanism for personnel. The Program Director oversees all matters relating to programming, including paperwork, training, and program scheduling. On top of his duties with the Programming Committee and the Board, the Program Director, like the Station Manager, attends all Executive and General Membership meetings.

The three part-time staff members are the Music Director, Fundraising Coordinator, and Technical Coordinator. The Music Director manages the Music Department, assembling the weekly music charts and soliciting record companies for free radio play copies of all music genres. The Fundraising Coordinator creates and oversees fundraising campaigns and events. The Technical Coordinator assists with basic reparations of equipment as well as rentals of sound gear. The one commissioned position is the Ad Salesperson, who solicits local businesses for advertising revenue. All of these positions require frequent contact with the volunteers, due to the help required with the voluminous amount of work that their individual departments entail.

If anyone assumes the role of facilitator in the management of the station, it is a staff member, particularly the Program Director. He is the person most other stakeholders encounter on a regular basis, and is usually the first point of contact at the station, due mostly to his role as the primary on-air trainer. As such, it is important that he be aware of his demeanour and persona at the station, for he is the one most likely to set the tone and atmosphere.

Ernest Stringer notes that it is important "to establish a positive climate of interaction and activity that engages the energy and enthusiasm of all stakeholders" (1996:42). Participants will engage in an activity if and because they want to engage in it. They cannot be forced to become active in a community radio station; that defeats the purpose of having one in the first place. Their motivation must come from within, from a desire to have their voice heard on the airwaves. Thus, only when the environment instills within the volunteers that confidence in themselves and in the broadcasting medium will they feel they have ownership of the station.

When I walked through the door of CHSR the very first time, I was immediately greeted with warmth and acceptance. Tristis Ward, the Program Director at the time, made it very clear to me that CHSR was as much my station as anyone else's, and that my voice deserved to be heard. It did not matter that I was gay and Chinese-Canadian--I had knowledge and wisdom that no one else had, that was my own and relevant, yet neither greater nor lesser than any other person's. Knowing this inspired me to action at the station, and I threw myself into a number of activities wholeheartedly, sharing in the responsibility for the station's operations. As John Gaventa notes, "popular production and recovery of the common person's knowledge is also a means of gaining strength" (1993:38).

When I assumed the role of Program Director myself, I wanted to make sure that the same ideologies infused in me by Ward were passed on to the volunteers I trained. As a facilitator of sorts, it is my own responsibility to inform the volunteers of all the possibilities that are available to them at CHSR, and what the ultimate purpose of the station is, in keeping with Stringer's recommendations (1996:44). With the diversity

of people who join CHSR, it is also imperative that my "presentation of self should be as neutral and non-threatening as possible" (1996:45). For example, I would always give plenty of personal body space between a volunteer and myself so that I would not seem imposing, especially to women.

Further to training is the idea of incorporating and applying the cultural nuances of certain volunteers into their sessions. Different people have different approaches to learning, and a trainer must always keep this in mind while teaching and explaining. It is never a good idea to set the rules of training for the volunteer; that only perpetuates top-down relationships, and as Yoon contends, "top-down, teacher-to-student methods should be avoided wherever possible" (1996:12). In my experience I found that women, for example, tended to learn differently from men, particularly in the technical aspects of radio. Men preferred to know simply what each knob and button was and filled in the blanks for themselves. Women, on the other hand, wanted to know why certain devices worked the way they did, seeking the logic behind them. If I started training a female volunteer the same way as I would a male, then she would usually stop me and ask me to go over or repeat parts of the lesson in greater detail. Each trainee I had taught me more about training than I would have learned on my own. Yoon agrees with this approach, saying that "communicators [should be] trained in the indigenous communication methods of the people, so that they can participate effectively in the communication systems of the community" (1996:12).

For trainers, the ability to communicate in another group's "language" can be a difficult goal to achieve. Yoon says that "such communication skills are learned over

a lifetime and are probably difficult to acquire if one were an 'outsider'" (1996:12). An ideal situation would see some trained members assuming the responsibility of training new volunteers who may hail from their respective identity groups. Thus, female volunteers would train other female volunteers, Chinese members would train other Chinese members, etc. It makes sense to do this, because then the channels of communication are not only clearer, but also equalized.

As a staff member, I knew that I was integral to the operations of the station. However, I also knew that I was not really a manager, but a *co*-manager. The volunteers, the community--they had as much power as I did in running the station. I was neither more nor less important than any other CHSR stakeholder. Part of my participation there was simply knowing when to step back from conveying my own knowledge to others and let them introduce and apply their own.

Clearly, there is no single body dominating the governance of CHSR. Instead, everyone is a co-manager, which means that everyone shares in the power, is accountable to each other, and both teaches and learns from one another. Relationships between groups intersect and intertwine. This is not merely a two-way dialogue at work--it is a multi-directional conversation. Everyone participates in the station's operations to some degree. CHSR's operational structure, then, would seem to be an ideal one. However, it is not without its drawbacks.

### **Problems Facing Participation at CHSR**

Any operational structure can be idealized in theory. Frequently, the theory will even translate successfully into practice. However, this translation is never wholly realized. Inevitably, fissures will emerge that reveal some major weaknesses in the structure. This holds

true for CHSR, indeed for participatory communication in general. As John L. Hochheimer, paraphrasing France Vreg (1990), points out, "The media can only be as democratic, free, and pluralistic as the society within which they exist" (1991:5). It is rare, if impossible, to find a society that is truly and absolutely "democratic, free, and pluralistic," although certainly many strive for it. When setting up and operating community media outlets such as radio stations, there are certain problems that may arise that could have a negative impact on the participatory nature of such media. CHSR has certainly faced some of these problems, some of which Hochheimer (1991) has identified and defined.

1. Service is a major issue for Hochheimer. In a homogeneous community, it is easier to define who the community is and what its needs are since the population is less segmented (1991:6). In a heterogeneous community like Fredericton, on the other hand, there can be a greater difficulty in pinpointing who the community members are because there are so many different social groups that may comprise the community. CHSR tries to be all things to all people, and that works both in and against its favour. It wants to be simultaneously *of* and *for* the community (Hochheimer 1991:6-7), which is a noble goal that is very difficult to achieve. The stakeholders of CHSR have managed to hold things together thus far, but one might ask how long can that last?
2. Getting a representative sample of the various groups that constitute the community to become active at the station can pose a problem, for "not everyone wants to speak, nor does everyone wish to be heard" (Hochheimer 1991:7). The people who walk in the door may ultimately be the more advantaged members of the community, because they "have the easiest means of access to the station, e.g., transportation, time off

from work...etc." (Hochheimer 1991:8). Thus, some voices may have a greater chance to be heard than others, and may end up speaking on behalf of groups for whom they may not have the right to do so. To combat this, it is critical that CHSR promote its mandate with vigour to as many different segments of Fredericton society as possible; this may result in attracting a more diverse sampling of volunteers to the station that could, at the very least, lessen the likelihood of particular voices dominating the discourse.

3. Entrenchment of power can become an enormous obstacle to democratic participation in communication. Hochheimer argues that "once people begin to participate, frequently they see themselves as the most knowledgeable spokespeople from the community segment they serve" (1991:10). At CHSR, where there is a high turnover rate of volunteers, those stakeholders who remain with the station for a number of years can become rigid in their seniority and resist efforts from newer members to participate in a meaningful way. This is counterproductive to the very idea of participatory communication, creating a hierarchical environment that can be oppressive and intolerable to those with a sincere commitment to the ideological foundation of the station.

To cite an example: in 1996, the membership representatives of CHSR on the Board of Directors, including the Chair and two members-at-large, were involved in the firing of the Station Manager at that time. This stunned the membership, which was given no indication that this might happen and believed that there was no justification for the action. Following several meetings at which the Board reps gave no adequate answers to members' questions--coming across as secretive and smug--

the members, including myself, were given the impression that these individuals were not representing the best interests of the station. Instead, they appeared to be acting on their own personal feelings. This concerned the membership greatly, so we held an emergency meeting during which we removed the representatives in question.

Co-managers must always be leery of the potentiality for other co-managers to veer away from the democratic mandate of community media, attempting to wrest control for themselves. It sours the experience for all those concerned, and endangers the very *raison d'être* of community media's existence. Acting for one's own self-interest is not what CHSR or any participatory medium is about.

4. Hochheimer also lists decision-making in the operational structure as an issue that needs to be addressed (1991:10). While supporters of community radio reject mainstream media for their "hierarchical, non-democratic" structures (1991:11), alternative media still "need some kind of structure to maintain themselves" (1991:12). Structures in community radio stations differ from their mainstream counterparts in terms of "authority, rules, social control, social relations, recruitment and advancement, incentive structure, social stratification, and differentiation" (1991:12). All of these can be affected negatively by a number of factors, such as "time, homogeneity, emotional intensity, nondemocratic individuals, environmental constraints, individual differences, and the non-reflexivity of broadcast time and resources" (1991:16).

In CHSR's case, the combination of all these factors and variables that are essentially built in to its structure has had a less-than favourable impact on a number of volunteers. In my survey of former and current CHSR volunteers, a number of

them were critical of the operational structure, disagreeing with the idea that the structure lent itself to true participation.

- *I know everyone made a great effort to make it seem [participatory], but it always felt more like we were pawns. (R4)*
- *I'm not convinced that it is run by volunteers, except in theory. (R4)*
- *The thing that drove me nuts was Fundrive. Because people are volunteers, it's obviously not a full-time commitment, but the expectation was always for more, more, more participation. Some people, however, were already giving all they could, in my opinion, and were then made to feel pretty crappy...when they either couldn't raise the money or couldn't find other ways to contribute to the station. The fee to join was annoying enough, but then to be told that your level of participation was not adequate kind of seems like a slap in the face. Like, do you want me here or not? (R4)*
- *Honestly, I don't know if an egalitarian structure exists, if it can exist, or if it is even a good idea that it should exist. (R6)*
- *...at the end of the day the nature of volunteering is that only a few people can be relied on and a disproportionate amount of the work falls to them--with that must also fall a disproportionate share of decision-making. (R7)*
- *I think it is impossible that the station be completely run by volunteers. (R9)*
- *I think the Board structure was bad, and that certainly caused problems. (R9)*
- *It's difficult, given the fact that there is a mix of paid staff, volunteer positions of responsibility and regular volunteer work, to run such an organization in a fully egalitarian way. (R10)*
- *The staff ran the station. [The volunteers] simply did the socials. (R11)*
- *Our volunteer participation was minor and had little effect on the running of the station other than filling the programming slots and organizing unsuccessful socials. (R11)*

They also pinpointed the behaviour of some volunteers as having an impact on managerial participation.

- *...a majority of the membership has always maintained an apathetic stance toward matters of station structure...it is enough for most to show up, play their music, and leave. (R5)*
- *While I still feel like the individual station member can effect change in the station's processes it seems as though fewer people are interested in the possibility...leaving decisions and policy making up to those in charge and those few who have an interest in such matters. (R6)*
- *It is a tough one...You try to create an esprit de corps through various events, but campus radio people are by nature inherently iconoclastic.(R7)*

- *People have too much to do to put too much time into one thing, like the radio station. This makes equality in decision-making tough. (R8)*
- *...certainly, volunteers were able and encouraged to participate in decision-making--it's just that many of them never bothered, and somebody needs to make decisions. Really, these kinds of organization are really fragile things, and the personalities involved determine how things are going to work more than the structure does. You have a bunch of keen individuals, things will happen--you have a bunch of schleps, and no amount of good structure is going to make the place work better. (R9)*
- *I think the basic structure is there to make the station as egalitarian as it can be and that everyone has the best intentions. However, I do think that personality conflicts potentially pose a large problem in the way the station operates. At times, there appears to be power-tripping and cliquishness in some station members towards others, which causes a lot of friction, lowers morale and discourages others from getting involved. (R12)*

Most of the respondents, however, indicated an attitude of resignation towards the operational structure of CHSR, noting that they could not think of a better way to run the station.

- *Volunteers are ok...but a core staff keeps everyone in check and tends to stay longer and knows how things are run. (R2)*
- *I felt like I was an active participant in the running of the station, as much as I wanted to feel. It's what you decide to put into it. (R3)*
- *I don't know [how I would improve things]! Which could be why I never felt compelled to work for change. If you can't think of a better way to do it, then shut up! (R4)*
- *I am a believer of Michel's Iron Law of Oligarchy (i.e., that all structures will inevitably be run by a few). I think as long as the station maintains an explicit and underlying commitment to a flat democratic structure, it minimizes that effect. (R7)*
- *Staff are going to have more power by the nature of the organization--they have to do the day to day holding together. (R9)*
- *A station run completely by volunteers never gets off the ground; a station run completely by staff shuts out community and volunteer empowerment. A middle ground is necessary. (R9)*

There will always be holes in any structure. It is true that decision-making powers are an inherent right to all stakeholders involving themselves in participatory media; however, when one factors in individuality, human nature, and unpredictable occurrences, then truly democratic participation remains relegated to theory and not

practice. There are simply some things that cannot be avoided, no matter how strong the framework.

All things considered, CHSR employs its structure well. There is a wide array of voices not only on the air, but also in the station's management. Those voices may not represent the community in its entirety, but that does not mean that the voices left out will not be represented somewhere down the road. What stakeholders need to do to ensure that democratic participation takes place is to engage continually in a process of self-reflection, as Paolo Freire (1972) would recommend, and not focus all their energies simply on action. As Janice L. Ristock and Joan Pennell state,

In empowerment research we strive for reflexivity: that is self-awareness...It is helpful to keep all these senses of 'reflexivity' in mind throughout the course of a research project, from design to implementation: reflecting on our own perceptions and decisions, on the aims and impact of our research, on the ways in which that research is and is not empowering. (1996:48)

In the context of community radio and CHSR, self-reflection is a way of imbuing one's actions with personal meaning, which aids in enlightening individuals on their own power and how it affects others around them.

Without reflection to accompany action, stratification is more likely to ensue. Many CHSR co-managers neglect self-reflexivity, however, which may explain some of the station's concerns with respect to participation. Some stakeholders become marginalized or disinterested because they do not feel empowered enough to become active. The station ends up meeting the needs of only a few people, betraying its original mission. The structure itself is not the

problem; the fault lies with how stakeholders apply themselves to the structure. All interested parties *can* be co-managers in CHSR's operations; the question is whether they would recognize that it is a shared responsibility. Educating and training stakeholders in PAR methodology would certainly go a long way towards leading them to this realization.

## **Conclusion**

In a heterogeneous community, there is a disparity of power that can be difficult to overcome. There is also a wealth of knowledge that is often neglected or ignored. Community media outlets like CHSR recognize this, and employ PAR principles to empower members of the community (and, in turn, the community as a whole), by giving them a forum where they may apply their knowledge towards a collaborative research project--in this case, a community radio station. As Ristock and Pennell assert,

Research as empowerment seeks to include within its research communities individuals and groups who are likely to hold alternative views. Thus it involves people in research who are not conventionally thought of as having the knowledge and skills to design, conduct, or appraise research. (1996:12)

Such knowledge may include expertise in a particular genre of music, awareness of the idioms of a certain culture, or comprehension of an issue based on personal experience. Under a PAR schematic, any and all of these kinds of expertise are invaluable to the successful operations of CHSR. In this sense, every stakeholder is also a researcher, regardless of background.

CHSR's operational structure fits well with PAR principles. That does not mean that everything runs smoothly at the station; judging from the experiences of some of the people I

questioned, the feeling that all stakeholders are also co-managers is not unanimous. However, the structure itself does offer this opportunity for all who wish to take advantage of it.

Stakeholders must constantly be informed and reminded that this community station is theirs, and that the process of keeping it alive is a collective effort. It is there for them to co-manage; they only need to be made aware of that, as some volunteers have inferred.

- *I don't think I would change the structure. But I would change the promotion of it. More often than not, people either don't know to come to a meeting until a few days prior to the day, or they don't think it is worthwhile to participate. A combination of promotion and incentive would bring out more participation.. (R5)*
- *I would up the level of communication between staff, executive, and volunteers at large, in order to promote the importance of involvement in the running of the station for all members. (R10)*
- *...I think that I should have been more generally aware of the way the station was run. Part of the problem was that although there were ways that the station encouraged its volunteers to participate in the decision-making...attendance wasn't enforced so most people didn't bother showing up. (R12)*

Indeed, effective communication is the most essential ingredient to the successful application of PAR methods to community media.

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