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Chapter XXV

Radio B-92 in Belgrade Harnesses the Power of a Media Activist Community During the War to Keep Broadcasting Despite Terrestrial Ban

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During the 1999 war between NATO and the former Yugoslavia, an opposition radio station in Belgrade used the Internet to continue to disseminate news and music despite having their terrestrial transmitting equipment confiscated by Serbian authorities. This article will discuss how Radio B-92 was able to do this through the close coordination of radio station staff in Serbia and their partners from within the European media activist community. This article will begin by setting the activities of Radio B-92 and its partners during the Spring of 1999 in a historical context by discussing the use of broadcast and other media during the wars and conflicts of the past.

Alternative Sources of Information at Times of War

During times of war and civil unrest, governments are often keen to control the flow of information. In occupied Europe during the Second World War, strict Nazi media policies gave rise to clandestine resistance newsletters and pirate radio stations. These new channels of information were used to bypass censorship and provided an independent source of news about the war for those who were otherwise

bombarded with Nazi propaganda. Again during the May 1968 revolution in France, students and others involved in the general strike against the Gaullist government used pirate radio, art, and leaflets to further their cause. DeGaulle, realising the power of the media, placed heavy guards at government radio and television stations, and initiated strict policies limiting the freedom of the media, and forcing them to broadcast only pro-government viewpoints. It has been suggested that the failure of the May revolutionaries to gain political power is, in large part, due to their failure to wrest control of the media from DeGaulle (Barbrook, 1995).

For nearly a decade, activists working in war zones or areas of civil unrest have had access to advanced communications technologies, such as satellite telephones, fax machines and the Internet. Not only can they use these technologies to access news from the outside world, but also to transmit their own information and views. In recent years we have seen a number of examples of activists spontaneously utilising these new communications technologies.

In 1989, student protestors were seen running through Tiannenman Square with e-mail printouts and faxes of support from around the world. During the Gulf War, unfiltered news trickled out of Kuwait through e-mail and IRC chat rooms. During recent political turmoil in Malaysia, the government heavily censored the media. Western Web sites, according to news reports, became very popular during the crisis as they were "one of the few places where Malaysians could participate in no-holds-barred debate, or access uncensored information [about the trial of Anwar Ibrahim and the ruling regime]" (Denny, 1999, brackets added). There were even reports of newspaper vendors selling stacks of photocopies taken from printouts of Western Web sites while pro-regime newspapers went largely unsold.

In the age of the Internet, it is incredibly difficult for governments to effectively stop such information being made available across national borders short of cutting off all telephone services or through the large scale use of proxy servers which can be used to filter "objectionable" information. The ability to route around blockages or damage to the network was recognised by early pioneers of the ARPAnet, the precursor of today's Internet, who suggested that the Internet could potentially survive a nuclear attack (Hafner & Lyon, 1996). During Spring 1999, a group of on-line activists exploited the geographically distributed nature of the Internet to disseminate news and viewpoints about the war in Yugoslavia.

Radio B-92

Radio B-92 (http://www.b92.net) is an independent FM radio station based in Belgrade which has won a number of international press and media awards, including the prestigious "Free Your Mind" award presented to them by MTV Europe in 1998. Their broadcasts of music and uncensored news were, until the 2nd of April 1999, heard across Serbia through a network of local partner stations. Their signal was also picked up by the BBC World Service and retransmitted via satellite around the world. In December 1996, B-92 began using technology from Real Networks to stream live audio broadcasts and short video clips over the Internet.