Is This Thing On? An Ethnography of CKUW and Community Radio Production

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Inception

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Method and Site: CKUW and Community Radio

Ethnographic method is, by design, a way to understand the details of a culture or set of practices, such as those that make up the social life of a campus radio station. As Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater note in defining the purpose of ethnography in *FieldWorking*, it has the double advantage of "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (8); as John Van Maanen notes, it always aims to "balance, harmonize, mediate, or otherwise negotiate a tale of two cultures (the fieldworkers' and the others')" (138). I have been immersed in the production of campus community radio at CKUW for 5 years and approached the ethnographic research process as an opportunity to deepen my understanding of cultural practices both by encountering new elements and by enacting reflexive and de-familiarizing tactics such as taking careful field notes and conducting triangulated research. My research and writing have been informed by the goals of improving my

understanding of the culture surrounding radio production at CKUW—primarily by observing details overlooked through over-familiarity—and of sharing this culture with readers who are likely unfamiliar with it.

Ethnography as a method is a particularly sensitive tool for studying culture because the ethnographer is aware of the limits of his or her own situated view and attempts to correct for this by locating and offering balancing views, such as by citing other research or other speakers or informants. A thickened picture of culture emerges from these triangulated accounts and from the reflections of multiple members of a given community. Yet even the most careful ethnography remains a document of social understanding, for "there is no one 'natural' or 'correct' way to write about what one observes. Rather, because descriptions involve issues of perception and interpretation, different accounts of similar or even the same situations and events are both possible and valuable … Descriptive fieldnotes, then, involve *inscriptions* of social life and social discourse" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 6–12). Thus, ethnography remains, at its root, a story or a tale, albeit one informed by methods meant to provide critical insight.

Ethnographic method not only helps the researcher to escape preconceptions and find new angles of vision, but it also allows for a level of generalizability so that the tale can be understood as representative of—or resonant with—other similar places and cultures. This is not simply my story of how CKUW works, nor even simply the story of CKUW as a specific station. Instead, the research narrative has been constructed to capture the details of life at this one campus station on the understanding that these likely recur in close form at other campus stations. Most campus and community radio serve as communication tools used by the local culture in unique and adaptive ways. While the actual making of radio (pushing buttons and playing music) can be measured quantitatively in minutes and counts, the on-air experiences and connections made with community guests and listeners is felt through person-to-person directness. It is primarily a subjective, qualitative experience. By using ethnography to describe

this culture and its participants, I am making the humanistic and experiential aspect of campus and community radio the subject of academic study. Ethnography takes the value of emotional currency into account. As Tedlock observes, culture is more than policy and action, for "experience is meaningful, and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness" (165).

My focus, then, is not primarily on the appeal of the broadcast content to the listening audience, the group usually considered to be the primary targets or beneficiaries of broadcast radio. Instead, I am looking at station life and at the individuals involved in radio production to reveal a culture that is rich and intense, produced by people with audile and sensory knowledge. This report may offer readers unfamiliar with the culture surrounding the production of campus radio an understanding of its unexpected intensity and intimacy, and it may indicate that many of its outcomes—resistant to measurement—are positive and ambient. The energy and creativity that go into the production of community radio also make an implicit argument for the value of funding and continuing such enterprises, as radio is often challenged by financial stress and budget cuts. In taking this approach, my report connects the private and particular to broader currents and events; according to ethnographer Barbara Tedlock, the final report often combines "research design fieldwork and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives" (Denzin, Lincoln, and Tedlock 165). As a document with the potential to inform funding policy, this research story helps make the case that campus radio should not be expendable in hard budget years. It serves those who are part of its production and its listeners with a sense of connection and community in moving and profound ways.

November 11, 2015

8:02 p.m.

When I walk into the on-air studio at CKUW, David Tymoshchuk is sitting behind the mic. On the air, he is called Mr. Mumbles, named so for persistent mumbling.
Over the speakers in the studio, there's a fuzzy distorted sound, with the occasional 'whoosh' and 'pop.' My first thought is that it must be a piece of avant-garde experimental music. I ask David about it, expecting some wild story about a reclusive musician, or an eccentric producer. He tells me that he took a handheld recorder with him this week as he walked down Portage Ave to go buy groceries, "coffee and bologna." I'm shocked and amazed, and begin listening as if with a new set of ears. I can now perceive that the lo-fi fuzz is actually the sound of car traffic on Portage Ave, cars whizzing by as David's footsteps crunch in the first snowfall. Further into the recording, you can hear the sound of sliding doors open and the background music of the supermarket playing the LeAnn Rimes song, "Can't Fight the Moonlight." Later, there is the sound of metal clinking as David picks up a shopping cart and his conversation with the butcher. The recording ends with the rustle of plastic bags as David exits the shop. In total the recording is 34 minutes long.
The whole time, he is sitting behind a desk. He moves very little, but he is actively listening. At certain familiar points in the recording, he might make a face, grimace, or smirk. He turns on the microphone at the end of the recording and explains that this episode is accentuating the sound aspect of the show.
He follows up this piece with recordings from around campus, from his recent travels in Europe, as well as ones sourced from elsewhere—cats in a stairwell in Libya.
He muses, "Take away the eyes, and the sound just pops right out at you, doesn't it?"

* * *

Much has been said and perpetuated by the mainstream radio sector and by popular culture about the on-air voice and personality of a radio DJ. Often, commercial radio voices are remarkably smooth, jazzy, and upbeat. For a spoken word or current affairs program, the voices often have an indisputable seriousness of tone. However, hosts of campus and community radio shows change their voice very little between being on-air and being off the microphone. While they might adjust their tone, their rhythm, or their cadence, most hosts speak into the microphone in the same way they speak in everyday conversation. The difference between the tone and delivery of voices on commercial and

community radio has garnered some comparison and even criticism in the larger listening public.

But if we listen with new ears, we can hear that the on-air host on campus and community radio stations actually develops and fosters a sense of intimacy and closeness *because* of his or her status as an 'amateur.' Because the host on a community program is not inhibited by the standards of mainstream radio, he or she can cultivate any desired level of familiarity and warmth.

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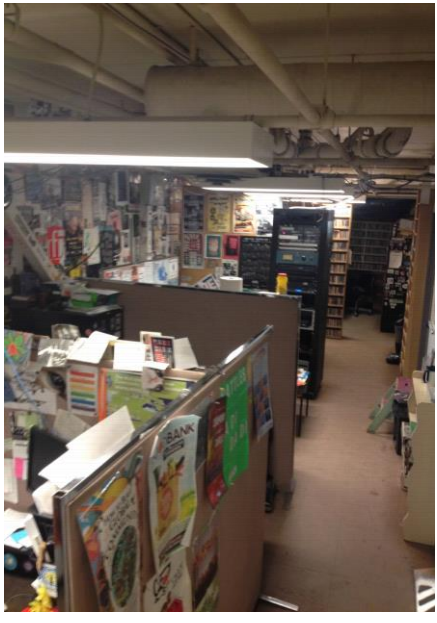
The physical act of making radio has the appearance of most desk jobs. On the surface, there's not a lot to be said about watching one host, or even a pair of co-hosts, delivering a radio show. While they may get up for water, or to use the washroom, or to talk to colleagues in the lobby, most of the time the host sits in the chair behind the desk and remains there throughout the entirety of the show. In the on-air studio at CKUW, there's a swivel chair, and a desk with a computer. Hosts punch information into a keyboard and stare at a screen. In fact, they'll watch the computer screen for most of their show. DJs are required to keep a record of all the songs they play, and they do so by punching information into the computer. Quite often, DJs will also have access to digital formats of music, such as MP3s or online platforms like Bandcamp and Soundcloud. Sometimes, DJs must preview several seconds of a piece of music on a turntable, or on a CD player. While there are always exceptions, from my observation, these actions do not change very much from person to person.

The studio is a very intimate and small space; as such, it is unusual to have more than four people in the booth at a time. There are usually no more than three chairs in the room at a time, and there are only three main microphones. Having more people in a studio than there are microphones is distracting.



When DJs speak into the microphone, they're encouraged to sit up straight. They distance the microphone no more than the width of a fist away from their mouth, and they regularly wear headphones. Staff members stress the importance of wearing headphones for various reasons; the headphones help the DJs become more aware of their voice and diction, and also allow them to hear the full mix of their radio show.

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CKUW's space is on the mezzanine level of Centennial Hall at the University of Winnipeg. All together, CKUW is roughly 800 square feet. There are three studios in the space: one main broadcast space, a middle studio, and the production room. There are two areas for the fulltime staff people at the station: one for CKUW's Station Manager and one for CKUW's Program Director. There is a small lobby area with a black leather couch, a table, and a mini-fridge. The music department takes up roughly the back third of the area with one tall shelving unit for records, eight CD shelves, and one filing drawer for the back catalogue, which fits the majority of the collection (some 20,000 CDs). There's also a small half-shelf for tapes. The east wall in the station is covered by posters: gig posters from a plethora of local bands and local shows, set lists, fund drive event posters, letters from former volunteers, stickers, and all the like.

In *Being Ethnographic*, Raymond Madden talks of the relationship between humans and place as "something essential [;] … there is a constant 'dialogue' between humans and the places they inhabit" (38). In the case of CKUW, dialogue is constant, both on air and behind the

scenes, on many different topics, many of them aimed at encouraging citizen engagement in radio-sponsored or core area community-minded events. CKUW's mission statement asserts that it exists to engage the campus and community through radio. In a recently published book, *Music in Range: The Culture of Canadian Campus Radio,* author Brian Fauteux asserts that CKUW is a bit more "out there" than some stations, and that "the station works to sustain a powerful voice in the downtown core from which it broadcasts to transcend the boundaries between university and community" (Fauteux 99).

There are many who have found some sense of purpose or meaning through CKUW and who have a specific connection to its space and what it represents. It is a place where a lot of people come to find solace from feeling like an outsider in a world of conformists who do not share passions for music and broadcasting. In an online article titled *Alternative to What? Finding a Better Definition for Community Radio*, Calgary-based CJSW station manager Myke Atkinson remarked the culture of community radio as "a big mix of people from all walks of life coming together to bring their perspectives, knowledge and passion to make something great despite the differences between us" (Atkinson). Making radio on a grassroots level is a humbling and humanizing experience, and it is a place of shared values and common understandings.

As a part of this ethnography, I relied on observation and formal interviews. When I sat in the booth with the hosts, I mostly tried to make small talk. Sometimes I got the feeling that the on-air host might need a break from me – perhaps they needed to catch up on their logging, so they seemed very distracted, or they were facilitating more than one guest at a time and needed focus, so I would remove myself from the on-air studio to sit in the lobby. There is a large radio and speaker that plays CKUW in the lobby, so I would sit nearby, take notes, and listen to the programming. I realized that formal interviews were totally necessary to the process of understanding this culture. The interview time allowed me to have the focused, uninterrupted attention of

subjects. While I spent time with hosts and observed them in the studio, they were often focusing on the many responsibilities of hosting their program, so it was too difficult, and unfair, to have intentional conversations. The interviews allowed us to have distraction-free time with one another to converse.

During interviews for this ethnography, several hosts remarked that they felt the biggest misconception about campus and community radio in the wider public was that it was "amateurish," and because of this, it was not a credible source of news or information. Robin Eriksson is a fulltime staff person (program director) at CKUW. She has also served on the board of directors for the National Campus and Community Radio Association and actively participates in campus radio matters at a national level. She is also the host of "Hit the Big Wide Strum," a two-hour old-time and bluegrass show. The show has existed in CKUW's schedule for over 15 years. Robin says the goal of her show is "to provide a friendly front porch-ish listening experience with some toe tappin', sing-alongy, hum-alongy kinds of tunes."

"Yes we're a bunch of amateurs, but that doesn't make what we do any less important, or worse, or better than what you hear on other stations or in other media platforms," Robin remarks on the subject of credibility. "I think it actually enhances a lot of what we do because we're able to engage more with the material than what commercial stations get to do." Robin explains that something she has seen through her involvement with community radio is how campus radio fits into the larger picture of the Canadian mediasphere. One thing in particular that she notes to be particularly fascinating is:

> How we fit together to compliment one another and broaden the sector, [and] the leeway that we have on campus and community radio to curate our own material. I really didn't appreciate what that meant and how as amateurs, that's an expression of interest, and passion, and knowledge, and life experience, and all sorts of things. That is our biggest selling point. (Eriksson)

Along with Robin, one of the hosts interviewed was David Tymoshchuk. David is a part-time staff person at CKUW. Before becoming a staff person or even a CKUW volunteer, David was a long-time listener. In our interview, he identified that the overnight programming in particular drew him in to CKUW. He is now the host of an overnight show called "Trouble with the Sandman" which runs from midnight to 6 a.m. on Thursdays. When asked why he does his program, he says it is a "great opportunity to give some poor shmuck who was working a night shift or an insomniac some sort of hope as far as music goes, instead of repeat programming or talk of UFOs from Texas" (Tymoshchuk). On the topic of connecting with overnight listeners on campus and community radio, he said:

> As a listener, I would feel that there's a connection with the immediacy of live to air radio, especially in this ungodly hour of three to four in the morning. It's a sort of lifeline almost, I think. The night listener is a different creature than the day listener.

Of all the shows I sat in on and spent time with, "Blast or Bust" arguably played the most abrasive genres of music. The show is an hour long and is hosted by Sam Doucet, known on-air as DJ Smilin' Sam. The show focuses primarily on grindcore music, which is a particularly aggressive and 'thrashy' subgenre of punk, described by Sam as "short, fast, and loud." One might assume that a genre of music known for its ferocity would assume an equally ferocious DJ. But Sam takes a different and personal approach, describing his on-air personality as almost, "overbearing, overprotective, 'Come on down and sit on my lap, I love you so much' listeners' kind of vibe." He elaborates:

> One thing that I do, in part because I feel like I have to and also because it's part of my natural demeanor, is I try to be very happy-go-lucky and fun lovin'. 'Cause I don't want to dumb down my show by being like, 'I hope this is ok, I hope this isn't too aggressive for you.' I make no apologies or warnings about how nuts the music is going to be. So I approach it from a very honest lens for me, because I love this stuff and it just speaks to me so I try to transmit this love of the music … I try to be very jovial, and welcoming.

These hosts all foster intimacy and closeness with their listener inherently within the intention of their program by playing music and presenting ideas that they are passionate about. As well as providing an authentic experience for listeners, independent community radio also plays music that might otherwise go unheard. In talking about the streams of independent media that emerged from the punk scene in San Diego in the 1990s, author Ryan Moore of Florida Atlantic University identifies the DIY efforts of punk-inspired independent media as offering, "genuine opportunities for cultural participation and creative expression … Independent media allow people to communicate their ideas and experiences with one another and in the process discover a sense of community" (Moore 468).

In the article, "Young People, Community Radio, Urban Life," author Catherine Wilkinson writes about the transformational power of community radio to empower young people and help them find their voice. Talking on a similar topic, about pirate radio, Wilkinson cites, "through pirate radio, people claimed the right to be heard instead of spoken to, as was typical in traditional mass media broadcasting … [H]uman communication was one of the most fundamental motives for radio pirates; they desired to find and define themselves through radio" (Wilkinson 130)

All together, the ability to create independent media on subjects and genres that hosts are passionate about presents them with a sense of responsibility and ownership over their programming, and "broadcasting policy ensures that campus stations do not sound like commercial or public stations" (Fauteux 100). Hosts speak passionately about issues, ideas, and music they care about and thus connect with their listener by sharing what they love. The desire for alternative programming that rejects mainstream norms and values, along with the passion for music and issues, is what bonds the community radio host and their listener.

Looking Out From CKUW's Music Collection

Methodology

To conduct this ethnography, I observed five programs (for program and host descriptions, see attached Table 1: CKUW Program Descriptions in Appendices). I intentionally selected these programs for observation because I identified them as holding some form of "otherness" for me. In the case of "Hit the Big Wide Strum," "S.A.N.E.*," and "Blast of Bust," these shows focus on genres of music (old-time/bluegrass, sound art/experimental, and grindcore) that I am largely unfamiliar with. Similarly, with "Smorgasoundbord," Daniel Emberg creates spoken word programming on a topic that I am totally unfamiliar with. Lastly, the narrative of "The Exile Files" is driven by Dave's personal story of living in exile. All of these shows (with the exception of "Hit the Big Wide Strum") broadcast at times that are different from when I do my own programming. To conduct this ethnography, I focused on three methods: observation, interviewing, and constructing the final report.

To observe the hosts, I tried to choose my vantage point very carefully. I avoided sitting right beside them, where they would need to constantly turn their head to look at me. I didn't want to be a distraction. Rather, I hoped to be welcome company.

The other method that I relied on was structured and formal interviews. All were one-on-one and hand-transcribed. Most interviews were 30–40 minutes in length. Subjects were asked roughly the same series of questions. Interviews were recorded using a basic Zoom-brand recorder. Formal interviews were conducted with Robin Eriksson, Sam Doucet, David Tymoschuk, Mike Furnish, and Daniel Emberg and Kent Davies.

Writing It Up: Why a Radio Ethnography?

In Ruth Behar's work *The Vulnerable Observe*r, she takes account of how standpoint research develops new and useful perspectives. She recounts Clifford Geertz's assertion that ethnographic reports are a hybrid form, "a strange cross between author-saturated and author-evacuated texts, neither romance nor lab report, but something in between" (7). In many ways, this captures my own sense of my attempt to balance the known, the reconsidered, and the freshly observed in writing this ethnography. I have attempted to present these elements as something more than the product of my own immersion and fascination.

After getting involved in my first year of university, I have now worked in some capacity at CKUW for just over five years, currently as CKUW's volunteer coordinator. Getting involved with the station has allowed me to tap into culture, music, and ideas. Yet I still have much to learn, for

the scope of programming and work that is created not only at CKUW but also across the sector of campus and community radio is broad and diverse. From music programming to a variety of spoken word topics, there is a whole host of genres and concepts that I am still largely unfamiliar with. In writing this ethnography, I have tried to fill in my knowledge gaps by conducting research consisting mainly of qualified testimonials and data.

In *Tales of the Field,* John van Maanen describes ethnographies as "portraits of diversity in an increasingly homogenous world" (xiii). As it relates to campus and community radio's place in the large mediasphere, this notion becomes particularly relevant and emphasizes the importance of media ethnographies. As more and more media outlets come under the control of large conglomerates, others shut down. In this struggle with increasing corporate control, the autonomy and independence afforded to community broadcasters is becoming a rarity. Creating these portraits of media cultures helps to emphasize and showcase the work being done in sectors of independent and alternative media. These portraits are not only archival documents of the work being done, but can also be used to testify to the multi-level value of radio culture.

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All photos taken by Victoria King.

Table 1: CKUW Program Descriptions

Time	Show	Description (from CKUW.ca)
Tuesdays 3–5 p.m.	Hit the Big Wide Strum! *Hosted by Robin Eriksson*	"Hit the Big Wide Strum!" pays tribute to Appalachian mountain music. You'll hear fiddle and banjo music that brings the "high and lonesome sound" of old-time and bluegrass into the modern era. Tune in weekly for a toe-tappin' treat.
Wednesdays 8–9 p.m.	S.A.N.E.* *Hosted by Daniel Emberg, David Tymoschuk, Mike Furnish*	"S.A.N.E.*" Radio = Sound art, noise, experimental music, and explorations further into the ether.
Wednesdays 9–10 p.m.	Blast or Bust *Hosted by Sam Doucet*	The merciless, aggressive precision of the blast beat is showcased relentlessly on "Blast or Bust." Short, fast, loud, all that is fit to be played in grindcore and powerviolence is here. Mincing and grinding, stopping and starting, highs and low vocals, for an hour every Wednesday.
Wednesdays 10–10:30 p.m.	Smorgasoundbord *Hosted by Daniel Emberg*	A trip through the tools people use to make and manipulate sounds. It's all fair game here, from snapping fingers to sound poems to the latest software. One week might look at your favourite instrument; the next at some curio you didn't know existed.
Wednesdays 10:30 p.m.– Midnight	Exile Files *Hosted by Dave Quanbury*	True story: host, Dave Quanbury, is an exile. Each week's show starts with an anecdote related to his experience at the border and introduces the week's musical theme. The music spans the gamut of genres keeping to the weekly theme.