Gaywaves: Transcending Boundaries

The Rise and Demise of Britain's First Gay Radio Program

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Introduction

At the beginning of 1982, an array of conflicting forces was working to shape the landscape of Europe's metropolitan radio services, and to alternatively control, commodify or liberate its gay communities.[1] This paper examines the drivers, which inspired *Gaywaves*, a nascent weekly gay community radio program broadcasting to an inner London audience on pirate station Our Radio from May 1982 until March 1983.

Though its primary aim was to inform and connect the disparate and sometimes isolated constituents of London's gay communities, it also sought to connect with gay and lesbian movements further afield – in Europe and America – in an attempt to harness collective strength and solidarity. Despite the brevity of the Gaywaves experiment, it was nonetheless a significant attempt to foreground gay lives and experiences on radio, and to use the airwaves to make meaningful connections with communities inside and outside their broadcast range.

Community Radio in London

In London, in the preceding decades, community groups such as the Local Radio Workshop and Com-Com (Community Communications Group) had cam-

1 | A note on terminology used here. Although LGBTQ is the modern acronym concerning this field of study, in the period of research under consideration, in the early 1980s, the politics of sexuality followed a binary distinction based largely on definitions grounded in the terms gay and lesbian. There were very few references to the concerns of bisexual, trans, transgender and transsexual identities, and the term queer was problematic due to historic associations linked to homophobia. This paper therefore adopts the terms most commonly in use at that time – gay and lesbian – as its key descriptors.

paigned against a local radio duopoly controlled by BBC Radio London and two commercially-run services regulated by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA): Capital Radio and LBC. Arguing for equality of access for marginalized voices, and dedicated community-based programming for minorities, they had succeeded in stimulating debate and raising awareness but failed to change the status quo. (Gray and Lewis 1992: 162)

In 1980, several Com-Com members therefore broke away to form London Open Radio (LOR), a group lobbying for 'open access' radio in London – a service open to the contributions of anyone within its listening community, particularly minority groups meeting its social and humanitarian ideals. The inspiration for the initiative came from overseas. Jim Beatson, a leading member of the group, had been involved with a similar campaign in Australia and hoped to replicate its success in London. As Richard Barbrook, another of Our Radio's founders, recalled: "LOR… took the Australian experience and tried to map it onto Britain. But you have to push much harder to change things in Britain." (Hind and Mosco 1985: 46) The group eventually became disillusioned, so when an Australian woman came forward with a donation of £2,000 they opted for a more practical solution. With support from Radio Active, a Tottenham-based pirate station with anarchist leanings, they bought a pair of transmitters and in February 1982 began broadcasting one night per week as Our Radio, with a small roster of programs aimed at diverse interest groups and minority communities. (Hebditch 2015: 124)

Gay Representation on Radio

It is important to recognize the specific context that characterized notions of disenfranchisement by the media, as experienced by gay communities in the late 1970s. Stereotyped 'gay' TV and radio comedy and drama characters had created a highly distorted public image of gay and lesbian people and their lifestyles. In current affairs programs, representation was generally more sympathetic, if sporadic. However, Nye, Godwin and Hollows, citing lesbian visibility in the 1980s, argue that the spontaneity of radio phone-ins often resulted in fairer access for the audience and more balanced coverage. (1994: 152)

Meanwhile, genuine gay and lesbian involvement in the production of quality speech output on the UK airwaves continued to be blocked by regulated, mainstream radio, until the 1990s. Community activist Philip Cox highlighted the inadequacy of the current situation on radio, arguing "Capital (Radio) is aiming at the middle class housewife…they've done fuck-all for gay people." (Cox 1982: C586/330) At a Com-Com meeting with the broadcasting authorities he asked why they never provided anything for the gay audience and was told they weren't interested in "ghetto broadcasting." Speaking to the weekly

free gay newspaper *Capital Gay*, Cox added "the people at the BBC and IBA will never allow gay people, black people or women to produce, edit or have editorial control over their own input and output. Even if the producer is gay... bias will be controlled." (Capital Gay November 5, 1982: 16) A dedicated amateur enthusiast with experience of pirate radio, he therefore jumped at the opportunity to create the UK's first radio program "by and for" gay people, when he was offered a slot on the new 'open access' pirate station Our Radio. (Radio is my Bomb 1987: 3)

Teaming up with likeminded friends, notably Gary James and Neil Hoechst, the group began discussions about the concept and aims of the program before it went on air. In surviving recordings of these meetings Cox recognizes the diversity of the likely audience and expresses his desire to take a varied and inclusive approach - airing news stories which the straight media ignore, yet also freely criticizing the gay press (Gay News and Capital Gay) and exploitations of the commercial gay scene. He noted gay radio's potential to "reach a far wider audience than those going to pubs and clubs" and the "radicalizing effect [on those] listening in their bedrooms, wherever they are." (Cox 1982: C586/330) Their agreed aim was therefore to give a united voice to London's many gay rights organizations and support groups whilst simultaneously creating connections with isolated listeners affiliated to none.

Lesbian news and events were covered in the show, but initial attempts to get lesbian program input were unsuccessful. Cox later acknowledged that gay men were "our self-defined audience." (Gaywaves 1983a) He instead encouraged gay women to contribute to Our Radio's *Women on the Waves* (which targeted both straight and gay women), or to come forward with a proposal for a dedicated program of their own.

The Gaywaves Agenda

The program was broadcast on a Wednesday, between 7 and 9pm, usually consisting of a series of pre-recorded items (features, interviews, location recordings), linked together by "Anvil Chime", Cox's *nom de radio*, made with equipment in his own flat. Some of the content suffered a little from technical amateurism (which Cox was unapologetic about), while other elements, such as the comedic skits and satires, demonstrated higher production values comparable to legitimate, network radio.

A duality of interests and responses – sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting – was inherent in the way the program was approached, and was to be one of the defining experiences of Gaywaves over the course of its short life. It also created a curious paradox. Gaywaves was an act of transgressive activism, challenging hegemony on two fronts – the duopoly of licensed

radio that ignored community voices, while promoting gay and lesbian stories in the heteronormative media landscape. Unlike most pirate radio, it spurned the easy option of transmitting pop or hi-NRG dance music into gay homes in favor of something much more ambitious – a form of speech-based public service broadcasting. A damning and demoralizing review of the pilot program by listings magazine *City Limits* should have given the program makers credit for this. (City Limits: June 18, 1982: 75) Gaywaves negotiated a difficult line between the interests of out and proud club-goers, those of isolated individuals living outside the 'scene', and the many who fell somewhere in between.

It must also be remembered that Our Radio was itself unlicensed, and operating illegally. It was therefore an occupational hazard for equipment to be seized during Home Office raids, which in turn meant programs were periodically off air, and there were constant appeals to raise funds to replace confiscated kit. Furthermore, the Gaywaves producers and presenters were also potentially open to prosecution as accessories, hence their use of pseudonyms.

Gaywaves and the International Frontier

One aspect of establishing this new frontier of gay broadcasting was to explore the lives of gay men and lesbians in other communities, both at home and abroad. As Pullen argues, there is no diaspora for LGBT communities, no point of origin, unlike focal points experienced by ethnic communities. (Pullen 2012: 76) Gaywaves was not reflecting a vision of a former 'homeland', or the shared cultural roots of its target audience, but rather exploring the common interests of a disseminated community inhabiting new urban heartlands. It also sought to rise above the fray of local inter-community quarrels by fostering links beyond the London metropolis, sharing the experience of international partners and of overseas travelers.

An analysis of the archive of 31 editions of Gaywaves held at the British Library (Philip Cox 'Gaywaves' Collection: C586), reveals various ways the program makers approached this rich seam of transnational content.

For instance, the program initiated an occasional feature, starting on July 28, 1982 (audio tape C586/343), in which visiting guests were invited to share their insights into gay life beyond UK shores. Journalist and campaigner Roger Baker discussed a recent visit to Malta but avoided name-checking gay clubs and services. Distancing himself from the travel 'advice' purveyed by established gay tourist guide Spartacus, which some felt encouraged an exploitative form of sex tourism, Baker urged the Gaywaves audience to empathize with the native Maltese experience. In a subsequent program (audio tape C356/351: September 22, 1982) 'Paul' shared his first-hand observations of life as experi-

enced by gay residents of communist East Berlin and gave measured advice to listeners tempted to travel.

In August (audio tape C586/344), Cox interviewed Carl Hill about "Letter to America," a weekly gay rights feature recorded in London by Hill and producer Neil Stewart, then mailed to the USA for broadcast in the San Francisco Bay area by KPFA, a founding station of the Pacifica Radio Network. This new and rare instance of a transnational community radio partnership arose from a notorious incident in which Hill and journalist Michael Mason, travelling to the USA to cover the 1979 Pride parade, were detained by US immigration simply for being gay. The case shone a torch on the US's shockingly discriminatory immigration policy, but was also instrumental in forging an enduring partnership of mutual support between the US-based Stonewall group and British gay rights groups such as CHE.

These attempts to connect the Gaywaves audience with communities and civil rights groups overseas continued into the autumn, including a three-part interview (C586/347, 349, 350) with Pierre Gandonnière, a founder member of French pressure group GILH (*Groupe d'information et de libération homosexuelle*) and presenter of Mauvaises Fréquentations, a weekly gay and lesbian show on Radio Léon, a Lyon-based pirate which had recently been legalised by the Mitterand administration. Gandonnière may also have been Cox's introduction to another of France's newly licensed free radio stations, Fréquence Gaie (FG). This station quickly established a large listener base following its launch in October 1981, but endured months of both internal and external conflict before emerging in 1982 as the world's first 24-hour gay radio station. Fréquence Gaie came under pressure to share its FM wavelength with other newly licensed stations. Opposition to this may have provided the impetus for the station's decision to appoint an outreach officer, Jean-Luc Romero, to raise its profile and attempt to extend its reach to other European urban gay communities. For instance, the station ran a competition in London's gay press, the winners of which were to be announced at an event at the London Apprentice pub on January 27.

Romero or Yann Helise – one of the station's founders and presenters – discussed with Cox the possibility of establishing a live two-way connection between the two stations for a simulcast from this London Apprentice event. For Gaywaves this was impossible since Our Radio was not equipped with a 'link' transmitter and could neither broadcast directly to air from its 'studio' location, nor relay from a third location.

The two stations may also have had discussions about a much more far-reaching transnational undertaking – the Paris station's idea to broadcast on AM directly to four of Europe's biggest urban gay communities – London, Berlin, Amsterdam and Brussels. This could have presented an opportunity for Cox to realize two key ambitions – the legalization of Gaywaves' status by

switching transmission from the doomed Our Radio to Fréquence Gaie's proposed European AM service, while simultaneously extending its reach to a large and vibrant transnational audience. However, in the edition of January 19 (C586/364) Cox demonstrated for the Gaywaves audience a critical technical difficulty which FG would have to overcome to make this possible – the fact that night time longwave reception in London is extremely poor. The idea was never realized.

In the end, on the 2nd February Cox was able to broadcast a recording of the live Fréquence Gaie relay to Paris from the London Apprentice event and used this to ramp up a campaign to establish a Gaywaves support network. The team hosted an awareness raising event and published a press release setting out their reconfigured aims. Central to this was a plan to strengthen Our Radio's gay offering by establishing a sister program for gay women in order to "ensure that gay programming would be an integral part of any future C.R.A.D.L.E. (Community Radio Licensed Experiment) station." (Gaywaves 1983b)

But these ambitions finally came to an end after a Home Office raid in December which seized their equipment, putting the station off air for several weeks. The program briefly returned to the air in 1983, but when the replacement transmitter was also lost, possibly stolen by a rival pirate station, the Our Radio and Gaywaves projects were permanently abandoned.

Conclusion

Despite the brevity of Gaywaves on the radio, the programs proved to be a remarkable and ground-breaking contribution to evolving notions of gay broadcasting: what it would sound like, who would listen and what meanings could be deduced. Subsequent ideas around developing gay identity have focused on sharing experiences and personal stories. (Plummer 1995: 87) Gaywaves provided a platform for the framing and dissemination of these stories. The surviving programs provide a snapshot of some of the recurring themes of gay metropolitan life in the early 1980s, such as narratives foregrounding police surveillance and harassment; the struggle to secure a lesbian and gay community space in London; fighting for greater visibility and equality in political, social and cultural environments. In reflecting these concerns, the program also took the bold step to reach further afield, to hear from contributors in other countries and cultures, to compare and share experiences, creating a nascent cross-border network. Crucially, and tragically, this short-lived experiment was just on the verge of providing much needed connections of local, national and transnational gay information and community support at the vital moment when the HIV/AIDS crisis was about to emerge. Had Gaywaves continued, it

might have made an important contribution to the media management of a global epidemic.

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