Sound

The Multiplication of the Street
New Impulses for Radio

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Radio demon strated all too often in the past how the community spirit could be stirred and feelings of loneliness and isolation dissolved, according to Dirk van Weelden. Today developments in mobile telephony are providing the medium of radio with a new stimulus. If the network is linked to the city's physical reality this can stretch the significance of the public realm considerably.

Blind Willie

A young body in a cold room. Beside the pillow there is a portable radio-record player. It is dark in there. It is dark outside too, between the blocks of flats and terraced houses, above the grass beside the waterway. Hardly anything moves. Here and there a car slips away, a cat stalks, air brushes across the roof tiles and through the bushes in the back gardens, a breeze flutters and rustles the young growth in the small park. The day receives a final bonus as a few people let their dogs out along the canal. Then it is night and public life lies idle until the sun rises again and the first buses drive out.

The young body lies there, curled up in a ball, an ear against the fusty speaker. That must have happened in the dark, unnoticed. His parents watch over his slumbers. When they hear the radio they know he is not asleep yet and they can disturb him. With the radio he intensifies his isolation in this house. He scents freedom in the difference between him and this world of flats and terraced houses, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, dogs and cats, sheds and bikes, Fiats and Volkswagens.

Loneliness need not imply a lack or loss; it can also be a strength. It will have to be shaped accordingly. The body of this fifteen-year old has initiated a cycle to shape the loneliness. It comprises the postal service, a radio station, a broadcasting ship off the coast, electronic machines and the invisible electromagnetic spectrum. The boy lies there, shivering slightly, from the cold and from excitement. He does not want the heating on in his room at night. A heated bedroom makes him befuddled and weary in the morning. It is also pleasant to curl up with your head and the rest under the blankets and feel the air in the tent of wool and cotton rapidly heat up against your bare skin (he hates pyjamas) ; that is another reason to turn off the radiator.

As he awaits 'his' moment he turns the music and the voice down very low. The radio moment he is waiting for enhances his loneliness ideally. He knows how long the moment will last: two minutes and fifty-eight seconds. From his own country-blues collection. It is called *Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground*. The warm yet metallic voice of Reverend 'Blind Willie' Johnson and his compelling, singing slide guitar. Blues with no beat, a stationary musical phenomenon; it reminds him of the last post that is played on a trumpet at a public ceremony of mourning.

Drawn-out tension followed by a Vast Void.

He tries to remain motionless until the very first hint with which, in his announcement, the DJ mentions his request. 'And now an oldie.' Or, 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, back to the Delta'. This old recording of a strumming, humming preacher sticks out among the hip blues rock and electric city blues like an antique chair in a modern cafeteria.

Without text and without beat this number hangs on for a moment. A moment that always makes him hold his breath. He hears something threatening, a reference to hardships and tragic violence. But something cherishing and dreamy as well; something with the peace and openness of a clear and starry sky. It is the ideal musical component of the radio moment that this boyish body gives itself as a gift. As such a powerful form of loneliness. Almost a weapon.

The postcard went from the suburban post-box to the post office and was sorted there. Some two weeks ago it was transferred into a train to the capital and deposited in the pirate radio station's PO Box. Collected and opened at their office, where the request reached the DJ of the weekly blues programme who decided it was suitable for broadcasting. He must have recorded the programme in the course of the next week. The music and his voice passed via the gramophone and microphone to the magnetic tape.

The tape was transported, first by car and then by motorboat, to the broadcasting ship in the North Sea. There, just outside the 12-mile zone, the tape was placed in the audio equipment in the control room. At eleven o'clock, after the news, commercials and jingles, the tape was started up.

The electromagnetic waves playing his request and his music left the transmitter, as it rocked on the dark sea, in concentric circles over the North Sea and the whole country. Over the sea, the sand dunes, rebounding off wooded areas and fields to reach the city.

The waves multiplied among the brick houses. Between the forsythia shrubs, across the little lawns, through the walls of the house and the roof tiles, through the bookcase and his father's desk in the attic – that far, into the aerial of the radio beside his pillow; into the transistors and resistors, into the vibrating membrane of the fusty speaker. Into his cool ear.

The announcement is perfunctory, he thinks his name, spoken by the DJ, sounds cold and strange. Is it possible that you half recognize something? That is how it felt. It was him the sounds were referring to, yet it wasn't. On the radio his name sounded more anonymous. You could hear that there were perhaps more people with exactly the same name. And he realized, to his alarm, that if friends or acquaintances were listening, they could hear the name and the request. Requests were not very cool.

There is the first chord on the steel National guitar, the preacher's humming gruff voice. He has played it hundreds of times. On this very equipment. The radio is in the same housing as the record player. A 'table model' as it is called. The preacher sounds different on the radio. Technically the sound must have completely different characteristics, he realizes. The original signal picked up with another needle and element has passed through the radio studio's mixing panel, adapted to the requirements for a medium-wave signal and then with the small aerial, the unpretentious radio and further dulled by the limitations of the crappy little speaker.

So it is not the same number, but its public shadow, a remnant that is infinitely greater than the quivering air that hangs in his room when he plays the record himself. He shares his *Dark Night, Cold Ground*, in a somewhat pale, dingy gigantic form, with strangers who, he presumes, have similar tastes. The elements the music holds for him and make it repeatable now drift for two minutes on the waves of the radio distance. Some sound

quality has been lost, but something else has been added. The radio moment on the pirate station where a version of his own record is being played is a cycle in which his loneliness acquires an element of happiness. Just to hear Blind Willie that one time on the radio and the impact of the number is far more powerful for months on end than when he plays the record himself. Impact that keeps him going here in the suburbs, at home, at school, in the hours he pretends to be doing his homework but is mainly reading and writing poetry, listening to records and reading, looking at pictures in history and art books and reading.

The body of this fifteen-year old closes its eyes and stretches to the limit the time the number is played on the radio. The boy wants to absorb every detail, every microsecond. He expects to hear something new in the music now he is listening to it with thousands of other, unknown people.

But it is not as easy as he thought. It sounds different, thinner, less intense, also because of the pathetic volume with which it emerges from the loudspeaker into his ear, ten centimetres away. Listening surreptitiously to a request being played on the radio, of a record he owns himself. It publicizes his love of the song as well as keeping something secret. He will not say anything about it at school. He suspects he will be embarrassed. Why did you do that, they'll ask.

At school they do not like Blind Willie. They only like music everyone else enjoys. They do not know what kind of quiet, light moment it can be when music on the radio reinforces your loneliness. He is even rather proud of his loneliness. There are other people like him, far away, and he can sense that in the tremor running between the hairs on his arm. He does not want to conjure up a café full of country blues fans. The main thing is that, at a distance, the aching drabness is stripped from his physical isolation. Listen, this moves, invisibly and inaudibly for the unaided ear, through the sky and through the countryside, to him. As he lies there, half naked, curled up in a ball, his eyes closed, an ear against the fusty speaker, it is almost like being touched. Something that is really happening, now, throughout the Netherlands, for everyone who goes with a receiver to the square of this broadcasting station. In that square he allows Blind Willie's music to touch him and he knows that everyone knows it, even though he is lying there alone, secretly, in the dark beside the radio.

Flaw

It was late and, on my evening constitutional, I wandered past the cable radio transmitters. A vaguely familiar female voice was shaping sentences which sounded Dutch but comprised a strange idiom.

'Before you go somewhere you can shut yourself off in a form, for example a pyramid or a glass ball. You can also say: I'll put myself in a colour, by quietly asking your higher self for it and wearing that colour when you go there.'

I listened for a whole hour to what turned out to be Jomanda, broadcasting on Radio 192. The popular 'saint', who performes mass faith healings in rural community centres. She was answering letters and talking to callers on the phone. People thanked her, asked for advice, poured out their hearts. I sat with the sick and despairing ('You are the source, Jomanda'), glued to the radio waiting until Jomanda had beamed in on the glass of water I had placed beside the loudspeaker. Two sips before going to bed or a damp cloth on the painful spot for ten minutes. Jomanda exerted herself in humble phrases ('I'm allowed to pass on to you that you need not be afraid') but the effect was arrogant and compelling. The callers' reactions proved just how much they liked it. It provided a sense of great comfort and security. For the first time I had some idea of the intoxication that Jomanda can produce in her followers.

If it had been television I would probably have watched like a biologist observing a bird displaying strange behaviour. Television, with its combination of sound and moving pictures, suggests completeness. Video as the accepted simulation of reality, as experienced without media.

Radio is frankly flawed. Radio: only the listener's hearing has become telepathic, the other senses remain natural. They do, however, make us 'clairaudial', yet as blind as those who do not wish to see. We are in our own surroundings, we have freedom of movement and in fact do all kinds of things, and yet there is another, invisible world present within us.

Our nervous system is not good at separating sight and hearing. Especially not if the ear is being further stimulated as well. An alarm bell rings. Listening to the radio causes a breakdown, a shortcoming, a provoking, sensory vacuum. In sensory terms, the radio signal is incomplete and our system is inclined to make up for that shortfall.

We make good the flaw using our imagination. It not only fills the gap with images, but with sounds, smells and moods as well. All manner of sensory experiences that are in no way transmitted by radio. It resembles reading. As is the case with reading, the discrepancy between symbolic excess and the lack of sensory stimuli activates the imagination. We have to 'finish off' the radio. We add ideas of spaces, situations, faces, landscapes and smells to the words, voices, sounds and music on the radio. We become accomplices.

It is not we ourselves but our bodies, nervous systems, brains that embody the sounds, music and messages from afar. The complicity occurring when we listen to the radio is not a conscious effort or achievement. It is anchored in the sensory/physical state into which we are brought by the radio. There is physical contact between radio and listener. That involuntary effect is, to my mind, the basis of what is known as the intimacy of the medium. Perhaps we should call it 'intensity'. Even when listening to a deadly dull or irritating radio programme, you are expressively involved with the broadcast. It is played, completed within you. In that way you are part of a mass, even if only in abstract terms: in your lonely body, in your consciousness, is the public voice of your transmission range, and that is the range of your neighbours, colleagues, enemies and family. Resonance.

Traditional radio is a signal transmitted through the air on electromagnetic waves; the signal conveys a sound message for the public domain in the transmission range. A radio station has a certain range and is part of the public media space of all people in its area. Even if they consider the station's broadcasts to be banal, disgusting or objectionable. If everything is properly arranged, every town, region or country has a great many highly divergent radio transmitters, comparable with neighbourhoods, squares, pubs, restaurants, theatres and concert halls that vary in type and scope. Even if a random inhabitant does not appreciate all of those places; still, he can consider them to be his and be proud of them.

The potential intensity of radio can be used to build scattered but closely-knit communities. In the days of 'pillarisation' in Dutch society, the mere signature tune associated with one's 'own' broadcast association was enough to evoke secure and warm feelings. Jomanda's broadcast is a reminder that such intensity can take on hypnotic forms. All very nice for programmes featuring religion, poetry, serious music or radio plays. But dangerous and inflammatory too, like the rabidly right-wing talk radio in the United States. The fatal intensity of radio was an important tool wielded by Hitler and Goebbels. The Rwandan 'Thousand Hills' radio station conducted hate propaganda against the Tutsis for years, resulting in hideously efficient genocide.

The impact of radio is founded on the unity of space and time (transmission range and simultaneity for all) and the fusion of intimacy and distance. Radio is good for producing a sense of fellowship. At the end of the 1920s, the American federal government supported

the founding of a network of radio transmitters in the vast, sparsely-populated agricultural states in the north. It had ascertained that the negative consequences of loneliness in those areas was threatening productivity and social cohesion alike. It was thought that radio could alleviate those feelings of loneliness.

Radio is a loneliness regulator. The voices and the music above what the artist Lucebert called 'the soiled path between abandonment and community'.

Soundtrack

'Rotten for you that you stutter, being a radio person.'

'No, it depends on how and when you stutter.'

'You're not stuttering now.'

'No, it happens when I'm s-s-speaking on the phone to puh-people in authority or puh-professionals.'

'Oh, I understand, and you stutter during the broadcast. You make sure the listener identifies with your stammering.'

'Not with stuttering as such, but with the awkwardness and shame you feel with people in important positions. They appear more than lu-lu-life-size with that st-st-stammering.'

'And with courage and perseverance, I suppose, you don't make a radio programme in order to be sent packing.'

'Of c-c-c-course not. My stammer wears down the person I'm talking to. I c-c-can c-c-c-ash in on their irritation.'

'They have to take great care not to i-in-inter-, butt in and that takes their mind off their text. Sometimes they blurt things out that they wouldn't otherwise have said so f-f-frankly.'

'With all the consequences.'

'Ruh-right, yes. Stammering and stuttering is a hype, a gimmick to piss the authorities about. There's even a rap single, made up entirely of stuttering. Highly cu-cu-cu-comical.'

Through her sunglasses the statue in the centre of the fountain resembles a tourist postcard. The partly uneven, party smoothly-polished body of the imaginary creature in the pond pouring water out of the shells and strands of water plants draped over it, shines with a fabulous sheen and bright colour. Water emerges in unpredictable waves and rhythms. Added to which the 'alien-elf', which is the fountain's nickname, revolves on its axis every ten seconds. The town's cultural elite call it a fairground attraction. She likes it, it reminds her of her favourite game.

en is nowhere in sight. Yet it is definitely eleven o'clock. She walks around the fountain, takes a sip of water from the bottle in her bag. She rings Jen, who has been having problems with her scooter. She's on her way. Then she hails the alien-elf. Since the local government had chosen multiplication of the street as one of its primary objectives, thousands of places, objects and people have turned into mini-radio stations. However, they do not broadcast on the air, like traditional radio, but on the network.

The elf recognises her, asks if she has any nice sound documents to share with people in the square. She sends a number she had recorded the previous evening on Ivo's roof terrace, where a few people were playing music after they had finished dinner. She adds a few photos in case anyone is interested. Then she listens to an interview with an Argentine animal rights activist. Until she has had enough; then she listens to nursery rhymes and

made-up stories left behind by the class of children who come to play here every day. A neighbour's child used to go to that school and she still listens to the school channel when she is near the fountain. In the past she would say 'hello' or record an invitation for the little girl and her friend. Now she no longer knows anyone at that school.

Jen is blond and tanned, as usual. A bit plumper. She wants some new shoes. They walk from the square into a busy street that will take them to the arcade with the best shoe shops. Halfway along that street there is an old concrete house with a recess in the façade. It was the house belonging to the homosexual imam Rachid al Rusjd, who was murdered, shot three times on his own doorstep two years ago. All you can see in the recess is a perspex-covered photo of a Nike slipper in a pool of blood. Al Rusjd's followers are brilliant hackers and they jam all mobile equipment going through the street. Even when phones and modems are switched off they manage to activate them by remote control. The police have frequently tried to stop them. The supporters leave behind notices and newsletters. Sometimes they just send sms text messages with splendid logos of the eating-house where the imam operated, or else your voicemail is filled with the hip music playing there. Now, as the girls pass by, they are startled by a booming beat and an angry voice, echoing from their phones. This is the most crass kind of intrusion the al Rusjd followers have ever used. The harangue suggests that the Christian-Democrats have again sided with the fundamentalist imams and that a liberal female Muslim is in danger of being thrown out of the municipal executive.

Extract from the City and Network Policy Document by the Alderman for Communication

The multiplication of the street consists of an intensive linking of the network and the physical reality of the city. The more buildings, spaces and objects in the public domain there are with a communicative presence in the telematic domain of the network and mobile communication, the easier it is for citizens to visualize how the public domain can be reconquered from the business world and its media. Radio, i.e. the broadcasting of music and the spoken word intended for everyone physically present within the transmission range, is a fine model with which to achieve that. Especially if it is enhanced with differentiation in stream, interactive and podcast. The more wireless and mobile the world is, the clearer it becomes that the parts of the human environment that were previously so intangible (memories, fantasies, fears, delusions, dreams, mass psychoses) exchange their immateriality for a technical, medial and, consequently, physical presence. Radio is the most sensorily committed medium and as such it is the key to the multiplication of the street. Mobile technology enables us to make the switch from mass medium to social medium.

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Tags

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