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Hervé GLEVAREC
Arnaud CHOQUET
Centre Lillois d'Etudes et de Recherches Sociologiques et Economiques
CLERSE – IFRESI – Université Lille 1
2, rue des Canonniers
59800 Lille FRANCE
<http://www.univ-lille1.fr/clerse>
Tel : 33 (0)3 20 12 28 20
Fax : 33 (0)3 20 12 58 31
Email: herve.levarec@univ-lille1.fr

Youth and 'free-radio' programmes

Young people's links with radio

Hervé Glevarec with Arnaud Choquet¹

Abstract

What are young people's links with radio? What role does radio play in the lives of adolescents? By focusing on the situation in France – where radio programmes mix 'free radio' in the evening with music, and are highly listened-to by young people – this article examines the structure of youth listening reception. The links listeners make with presenters and with people who phone in, as revealed by the study, suggest the 'in-between' status of radio for youth. On radio, adolescents find a space to express 'youth problems' (sic) and to learn about others' experiences.

Key Words

France
youth radio
libres antennes/free
radio
adolescents
phone-ins

Sophie: Even the listeners, people say there's loads of folk listening. You're not alone.

Ludivine: And then, I mean, there are people listening everywhere. It's a kind of big family.

Interviewer: *A big family.*

Ludivine: Everyone listening to the radio.

Interviewer: *You feel as if you're in contact with ...*

Sophie: If there was no radio, it wouldn't be the same.

Interviewer: *Yeah.*

Ludivine: You wouldn't even think ... and then you'd be less in the know about problems and everything.

Sophie: Because let's face it, it helps. All those things they were saying, I knew nothing about that.

Ludivine: In second year you don't talk about sex, you know, with your parents and that. It's actually a really taboo subject. But they talk about it on the radio and stuff. You're going 'aaah', 'wow'! It was funny.

Interviewer: *So when you're 12 you don't know anything.*

Ludivine: Yeah, that's it. I mean ... it makes you seem older. You're there, talking with your mates, it's, it's cool, know what I mean?

Sophie: Whereas nowadays, 12-year-old girls know more now than we did when we were 12.

1 This article is a part of a sociological research project on youth and radio in France: Hervé Glevarec, with Michel Pinet and Arnaud Choquet, *Radio libre. L'écoute radiophonique des adolescents*, Study Report, Department of Analysis and Forecasting, Ministry of Culture, France, November 2001; from which a book is forthcoming.

2 'Generalist' i.e. broadcasting news, reports, music, games, phone-ins, debates.

Youth radio stations

Youth radio stations have succeeded in one thing: in associating music (and we know how important that is for this age group) with programmes relating to young people. With the exception of the so-called generalist radio stations (France Inter, Europe 1, RTL)² the bulk of the stations listened to by young people in the age group we

- 3 We did in-depth interviews with and observation of fifty girls and boys aged 15 to 16 who listen to radio and live in Lille (in the North of France) and Toulouse (in the South-west).
- 4 The expression 'zoo radio' is common in everyday speech (cf. Peter M Lewis, 'Private passion, public neglect: the cultural status of radio', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3: 2 (2000), pp. 160-67.
- 5 The weak integration which characterizes French secondary schools accentuates this context of distance and non-assimilation of youngsters even when they have completed their schooling. 'Distance, lack of commitment or engagement' characterize most pupils' relationship with the secondary school, according to F Dubet, *Les lycéens*, Points-Seuil, 1991, p. 109.
- 6 88.5 % of 11 to 14-year-olds and 93.3 % of 15 to 19-year-olds in France listen to the radio stations referred to officially as the 'national music programmes' at least once a day: Skyrock (rap), NRJ [pronounced 'energy'] (hit music), Fun radio (groove), Le Mouv' (rock, broadcasting only in big cities), Chérie FM (romantic songs). See data on audiences in Table 1.
- 7 Officially these radios are designed and categorized by the Conseil Supérieur de

studied carry mostly music programmes.³ However, what characterizes youth radio is the presence also of so-called interactive or talk programmes. In the UK and the US this is called zoo radio: 'a kind of mix of pop music, gossip, pop psychology and humour'.⁴ Recognizing the specificity of this object means abandoning such a pejorative description as well as the equation radio = music (for the reason that listening to music from a record and listening to music on radio are not the same thing).

If we agree on a model of increasing contemporary disjunction of social and symbolic spaces (work, the family, social relations, and leisure), leaving aside those few social settings which bring together different dimensions of existence (for example, chaplaincies in secondary schools; the one Alice, 15, is involved in, for example, brings together cultural practices, leisure activities and elements of a 'philosophy of life'), few places achieve cultural associations between spheres as disparate as cultural practice and the airing of subjective problems.⁵ But, seen in this light, this is exactly what youth radio stations have been offering for around ten years. Youth radio displays both the historic autonomy which the period of adolescence has acquired and perhaps a kind of reunification of the dimensions of young people's existence.⁶ Youth radio stations in France broadcast two sorts of programmes each day: music; and, in the evening, between 9 p.m. and midnight – sometimes later – interactive talk.⁷ This second type of programme, which the stations call 'libres antennes' ('free on the air' or 'free radio'), is central and we would like to focus on it. Presenters and listeners who phone in talk about a wide variety of topics, essentially 'problèmes des jeunes': sexual practices, drugs, relationships between girls and boys and others, football, TV programmes, political news ...

A characteristic of the world of radio is the importance and the inertia of its labels. It is easy to see that the visibility of audience ratings and the scores of different radio stations are a more prominent element in radio than television or even the press. The influence of labelling is clear in the case of Noémie, a 15-year-old adolescent, when she describes Skyrock, NRJ and Fun Radio as 'with it'. Listening to these stations means exposure to the representations which are attached to them. It is as if one dimension of listening to this medium was played out simply in the dimension of social labelling attached to a particular radio station: coming over as young, as 'with it', are just as important as actually being these things. In one sense, this is what is measured by the 'notoriety index' of radio stations in the surveys conducted by Médiamétrie.⁸ Radio cannot be put to the test of the image and, until the spread of RDS, it has been, and for the great majority of listeners still is, deprived of an identifying visual sign. This autonomization of its

Radios(%)	Total Radio	France Inter	Europe 1	RTL	RMC	NRJ	Fun Radio	Nostal-gie	Sky-rock
All ages	84.5	11.2	09.8	16.5	2.7	12.2	06.8	08.1	07.7
11-14 yrs	88.5	02.9	03.2	06.1	0.4	27.4	17.6	06.0	22.4
15-19 yrs	93.3	01.9	02.3	02.6	0.4	32.6	26.4	04.8	34.7
20-24 yrs	93.6	03.2	05.0	05.1	1.0	29.0	19.9	04.3	19.3
25-34 yrs	85.7	05.4	08.4	10.5	1.3	17.8	09.0	07.8	06.7
35-49 yrs	86.1	12.2	08.4	18.2	2.5	09.8	03.1	12.8	04.0
50-59 yrs	86.0	14.0	14.1	28.5	4.4	03.1	00.5	12.5	01.4
60 yrs +	74.8	20.0	15.4	22.2	4.9	00.7	00.0	03.6	00.1

Radios(%)	Europe 2	RFM	France Info	Chérie FM	RTL 2	MFM	Rire et chansons
All ages	05.2	4.3	11.0	5.2	04.2	1.1	3.2
11-14 yrs	06.7	5.6	02.0	4.3	02.5	1.0	2.9
15-19 yrs	06.9	2.7	01.8	6.0	04.6	0.1	2.2
20-24 yrs	10.4	4.3	09.7	7.2	12.3	0.6	5.6
25-34 yrs	11.4	5.2	12.0	6.5	08.9	1.5	5.7
35-49 yrs	04.9	6.1	15.9	7.6	04.3	1.7	3.7
50-59 yrs	01.6	4.3	11.1	5.0	01.6	1.2	3.4
60 yrs +	00.9	2.1	10.6	1.1	00.2	0.7	0.7

Table 1. Cumulative audience (% of each category) of French national radio stations according to listener age during 1999-2000.

Source : *Enquête 75 000 + Radio Médiamétrie. December 1999 to March 2000. Field: Universe of 11-year-olds and older. 5 a.m. to 12 midnight, Monday-Friday.*

Note: 'Cumulative audience' means the number of persons who declared by phone that they listen to the radio station during the period of reference (daytime here). For example, 27.4% of 11 to 14-year-olds listened to ('had a contact with') NRJ at least once a day between 5 a.m. and 12 midnight during the week (Monday-Friday) in the period December 1999 to March 2000.

field of representations forces it to overload those recognition effects relating to the test of listening.⁹

What might be the outcome of theorizing the world of radio in terms of *fields*?¹⁰ In order to talk, for example, of the field of radio stations, in other words of radio producers, we would have to define the stakes *shared* (the stakes they are playing for ...) by all those operating in the field. What are they? Are they the listeners, the number of listeners, the Accumulated Audience, and, summing up, 'contact weighted by duration'?¹¹ What about stations such as France Musique or France Culture? Is this their objective aim? But different radio stations do not always attract the same audience from the point of view of age, gender, or religion. What are the stakes shared by those stations? In other words, there is nothing to suggest that, if we analyse the radio stations themselves, we will find any kind of common capital (the frequencies?) which make up the stakes for which they are fighting. Do the two-, three- or more-way relation-

l'Audiovisuel as 'radios commerciales à vocation nationale thématiques' (= musicales)', cf. Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare, 'French youth talk radio: the free market and free speech', *Media, Culture and Society*, 21: 1 (January 1999), pp. 93-108.

- 8 Médiamétrie is the private company which conducts audience measurement for the French radio industry.
- 9 For example, one of the social and professional characteristics of the NRJ radio station is a deliberately maintained gap between a very 'with it' labelling of the station (support for 'in' events, for example), and music programming which does not feature the musical avant-garde very much (at least less so than student radio, or Radio campus [0]).
- 10 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge: Polity, 1993.
- 11 This is the criterion used by French advertising agencies to calculate the (financial) value of exposure on air.

12 Momo is a listener-presenter who phones in to the station during football matches with context, comment and results.

ships which constitute the real sites of competition point towards the appropriateness of a theoretical analysis in terms of 'fields'? Moreover, what would be the meaning of this field if it imploded into a multiplicity of sub-fields which were reducible to a series of binary, ternary or quaternary relationships which might or might not be connected in the way that two overlapping sets would be? But joined sets have never constituted a field involving at the very least stakes or capital *common to all*. What, if any, common value applies to all radio operators? They do not agree either on a common object, certainly not music, nor on a common customer or addressee. A field implies by definition closure, but there is no symbolic frontier enclosing the 'space' of radio stations. Would this be radio, good radio? Radio stations do not constitute a unified field because the only specific capital they covet (the audience) is not the same. If all listeners are equivalent from the point of view of their numeric value, they are nevertheless in no sense interchangeable. For any particular radio station, not only does a 13-year-old boy not have the same weight as a 50-year-old woman, but young people themselves are defined by a style which makes them partly unsubstitutable or only marginally substitutable.

Radio schedules and cultural forms

A constant mixing of registers characterizes the programming of free radio during the evening. The items succeed each other in such a way that a live link with Momo¹² on his mobile in a football stadium can be followed – without any attempt at continuity – by a young girl talking about the incest she suffered at the hands of her father. In other words, on free radio, very different themes and registers (dialogue, challenges, confessions, advice, appeals, arguments between relatives or friends) follow each other in rapid succession. Similarly, while the organization of the different phases of the schedule is agreed in advance along very broad lines, the actual hourly programming, minute by minute, of free radio, is left relatively open.

According to one of our interviewees, Nicolas:

In fact, what's good about Skyrock, for example, is that a subject has been covered at nine o'clock, but if someone still wants to talk about it at ten o'clock, he can. About that particular subject. There are several subjects, but you can talk about any of them whenever you want, in fact, and then relate to the people who phone in.

Listening to free radio is something which happens on a daily and continuing basis:

I don't think you can listen to Max [the presenter of Fun Radio in the evening] for five or ten minutes, [says Richard, another interviewee]. You

have to listen for an hour, or an hour and a half every evening. In case Max announces: 'we'll be doing this on such-and-such a day'. Sometimes there are listeners who like to follow a story as it develops, who try to remember who phoned in, who phoned in on such-and-such a day and will call again tomorrow.

We have to articulate this diachronic listening with a contextualized listening. Likewise, it coexists with listening patterns which rely very little on knowledge of the programming schedules.

Interviewer: If you had to write down NRJ's schedule, do you think you would find it difficult?

Béatrice: Oh yes! I'd put 'music' and then, well ...

(Béatrice, 15, 5th year, Castelginest village nr Toulouse, NRJ listener)

If we want to characterize the positioning of youth radio stations we need to take seriously the ways in which they differ in this from television, other radio stations and even magazines. Whereas television stations' competitors are neither mentioned nor mocked by themselves, youth radio stations are media which construct themselves on-air partly in opposition to their competitors. They organize games which bring out which radio stations are listened to by French listeners. In the morning Skyrock's presenters dial up a telephone number. The person on the other end of the line, caught off-guard by a whole series of signs of conversational disrespect (the first being the fact that the callers do not introduce themselves, the second being familiarity, but also continuing speaking when the other person has lifted the receiver), has to answer 'Skyrock' to the question 'What is your favourite radio station?' in order to win '10,000 francs'. Caught out in terms of their tastes, those listeners who, given their social position, do not listen to the station and are unable to give the right answer to the station which has called are then ridiculed. Hilarious canned laughter then follows. On the other hand, in one notable edition of this game, a genuine Skyrock listener – as shown by his subsequent recognition of Difoof and Marie – nevertheless, in his eagerness, answered 'Fun radio!', but still won the CD of the week.

Radio stations work like echo chambers. They are the staff waiting rooms, the kitchens of the media scene. In other words, their positioning is not like that of television stations. The radio stations turn their handicap – the absence of images – into an asset. It transforms their objective characteristic into a cultural form.

Structure of listening

The central characteristic of youth radio stations is their mixed, or what we call their 'in-between' nature. This dimension is essential

- 13 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: an essay on the organization of experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.

in order to characterize what is going on there, the type of link which is established with the presenters, and the enjoyment of the adolescents. In fact, the link and the enjoyment of the listeners is based on the fact that the presenters are not in fact presenters in the institutional sense of the word, which would tie them down to a specific role, 'radio-men' as one of our interviewees, Jérémie, says. They exist in-between: between two social spaces, being both institutional and friendly, presenter and pal, presenter and switchboard operator. Youth radio stations – and the point has not been made before – operate essentially between two frames, to use Goffman's concept.¹³ 'Perhaps in one sense he [Difool] knows how to speak to young people, but it's also the fact that he's not forced to speak that way either,' says Jérémie. If he were forced, for Jérémie, that would make Difool a professional presenter, just another of the 'radio-men'.

Peers and elders

There is one absolutely decisive structure as regards listening to youth radio stations: the one which articulates the three-way relationship, presenter/caller/listener. The caller is a decisive element in the phenomenology of this type of listening, above all because of his or her age. The most recurrent or at least most significant structure for 15 to 16-year-olds whom we have met is the one which brings a young listener together with an older caller. These first experiences of deliberate, or active listening – most commonly around the ages of 12, 13 or 14 – become ones in which young adolescents hear older teenagers on air.

Interviewer: What are the subjects which he [Max on Fun Radio] brings up?

Richard: The subjects ...

Interviewer: The different subjects he brings up during his programme and the ones that interest you in particular?

Richard: It's often young people's problems and often things, the ones that crop up during the break, the ones you discuss with your mates. Except in the beginning when I was listening I was in third year, I was 13 and since the average age of the people who call in is often, I'd say, between 17 and 20 or 21 and it's true that it wasn't really the same problems. Little by little I began to ... later I began to identify with that.

(Richard, 16, fifth year, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Fun Radio listener)

This age gap is central to free-radio programming. Should we therefore assume a desire among adolescents to know, with the radio stations taking on the role of providers of this desired information and knowledge? As we shall see later, this is a dimension of free-radio listening which is entirely different from straightforward identifica-

tion by listeners with the points of view aired; which, by contrast, will be seen to characterize the relationship between older adolescents and this youth-radio programme content.

Interviewer: *Have your experiences always been different from what you have heard on the radio?*

Delphine: Let's say that I've never been able to relate to those kinds of programmes, I've never been able to see any kind of parallel by telling myself ...

Interviewer: *You've never recognized yourself?*

Delphine: No.

Interviewer: *When the listeners called in, what did you say? 'That doesn't sound like me'?*

Delphine: No.

Interviewer: *'Their life is different from mine?'*

Delphine: Yes that's it. But, well, the listeners who called in were also older so obviously we didn't have the same mentality and the problems they had weren't the same as mine, so, that's normal, perhaps if ... Well, now I listen to these kinds of things more, perhaps because it concerns me more, but, well, I like them more so I listen to them more. But it's true that at that time it wasn't really my age group in second year. The people who called in were mostly in sixth form.

Interviewer: *You were younger than the people calling in?*

Delphine: Oh yes, yes, that why it didn't concern me. But well I listened because I discovered new things, I learned things. I mean, it's like, to use a comparison, it's like a young boy going and looking at *Playboy* whatever. It's by and large that except that it's through...

Interviewer: *It's through the radio.*

Delphine: It's through the radio.

(Delphine, 16, 5th year boarding school, Toulouse, Skyrock/RFM listener)

Delphine's point of view here is backed up by another interviewee, Alice, in a kind of paradox of listening. Alice says that she listened to Skyrock when she was 'a bit young', whereas now that it corresponds to her age she does not listen to it any more. We have to accept this subjective paradox of listening to free radio as a given:

Interviewer: *When you used to listen to Skyrock, did you think it was speaking to you?*

Alice: No, not necessarily, because in a sense I was a bit young to listen to that so I enjoyed it.

Interviewer: *You think that it was speaking to people a bit older?*

Alice: A bit older, yeah, my age now in fact.

Interviewer: *What makes you say that?*

Alice: It's true that when I was 12, 13, there were subjects which because of my parents I never brought up, we never brought them up, which I maybe shouldn't have known right away, in fact, that was my parents' point of view. In a sense I think that too. In a sense it's good because it made me think early on. At the same time a bit too soon.

Interviewer: Are you thinking of anything in particular, even if it's personal or private things?

Alice: Oh, it was often about sex or politics as well. OK it's true I would often laugh when my father was watching the news, when he was listening to some politician's speech I would often laugh. My father would say 'Be quiet, it's very interesting'. It's true I would often laugh, but then hearing it again on the radio that made me change a bit.

(Alice, 15 1/2, 5th year, Lille, listens to Chérie FM, NRJ, and Belgian stations)

Free radio evidently brings together young people who listen but who consider themselves too young to do so, and listeners who 'get together' on radio and who undoubtedly call in more. Indirectly (or perhaps more directly, through the audience figures) the radio stations know this. Skyrock itself constructs the pre-adolescent category by calling them the 'pyjamas'. The pyjamas are young children, in other words, those aged 10, 11, 12, and 13, whether they are listening or not. At a certain time Difool rings a bell which is supposed to signal bedtime for the pyjamas, because more daring themes are now going to be brought up. On Fun Radio, Max addresses his listeners as 'virgins and married people'. Sometimes the male and female presenters are left floundering when very young adolescents send in slightly provocative e-mails. How should they respond? 'They're so young,' says one of Fun Radio's female presenters on air.

So the awareness of still having to grow up is very strong among some adolescents we met. They know their psychological or social age. The younger ones know that they're 'only' 14, for example, and say so explicitly during the interviews. On the morning of 7 November 2001 the Skyrock team phoned a family of immigrant origin, offering the chance of winning 10,000 francs in the game already described above. The father answered, recognized the radio station and put his son on the phone, saying: 'It's him who listens to Skyrock.' They have thus already won even before the question about their favourite radio station has been asked. The son comes to the phone and when asked about his age answers that he's a 'pyjama' and that he's 10 (or 12). In other words, he has accepted the station's categorization of the type of listener he is. Also, what pre-adolescents find when they listen to free radio are, above all, experiences related by others who are often older than they are.

Richard: You hear people with experience, so at the same time you become aware of certain experiences but in the end it's up to you. Because you hear people who have had this or that experience in their love life, various people who have split up, who have gone through difficult times. It's true that I've never really had those kind of experiences. At least not too often, I haven't had any real experiences. At the same time, it's true that people don't open up easily about this kind of thing. They don't just tell you their life story like that, it's true that on radio they find it easy to tell it. And since they're obviously talking about their own experiences, let's say that it's true that you become aware of certain things, certain situations which are entirely possible. That helps me to solve my own problems, well at least I'm in the know and later I can come up against the same ones. It's not the radio which has given me the solution, it's not because they've found the solution that if a week later I had the same problem the solution would be on the radio. It's not that that would help me, it's me, it's my friends, my parents.

Interviewer: If you have a problem you turn to your friends and family first?

Richard: Yes.

Interviewer: You wouldn't call the radio station?

Richard: I would never call the radio for that. Maybe there was a time when I would have done it but now I wouldn't, I wouldn't call, it's more to (laughs) to feel good, to hear people talk.

(Richard, 16, 5th year, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Fun Radio listener)

14 Max and Mélanie on Fun Radio; Bob, Isa and Martin on Fun Radio; Maurad on NRJ; Difoof, Romano, Marie on Skyrock; Jessica on Le Mouv'. Presenters are 20 to 30-years-old.

As you might expect, on more student-oriented stations like Le Mouv' the 'discussion forums,' as one interviewee, Céline, calls them, primarily involve students; in other words, people whose age and status are quite different from the secondary-school children who can also listen to these programmes.

The presenters and the construction of their role *In-between status: neither professional nor mate*

Comparing some of the programme schedules reveals that the way in which the male and female presenters are addressed varies as one moves towards stations with an older audience. Youth stations use first names, nicknames and pet names for their presenters, whereas stations with an older audience stick to family names or the actual civil identity of their presenters.¹⁴ The presenter on youth stations is therefore not defined by his social identity but in terms drawn from the sphere of friends or family: it's clear that both the presenter's role and social identity are configured according to these more intimate, filial and domestic worlds.

- 15 Dominique Pasquier, *La culture des sentiments. L'expérience télévisuelle des adolescents*, Paris: Editions Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1999.

From a general point of view, the attraction of these free-radio presenters is due to the fact that they have remained young in their heads. 'In any case, they have to stay young, it's a young person's station [Skyrock]. If they started to grow old in their heads it wouldn't work any more, they wouldn't be up to it,' says our interviewee Lucille, who thinks that Difool hasn't changed over time. Maxence, another interviewee, points out that Max has been on Fun Radio for eight years and he hasn't got tired of his programme: 'He always manages to come up with something new in his programme, to keep up the pace, it's not always the same old patter which crops up all the time.' If it's the ability of the presenters to stay young which interests adolescents, so far the sight of their faces on the stations' websites or on television has not contradicted this judgement incurably.

It is common for the social dynamics which surround certain television serials to be accompanied by relationships of strong admiration and idealization of the characters or the people who act in the programmes.¹⁵ This seems to happen more infrequently in relation to television presenters, rather than soap actors. But it does happen on radio as well. Max is an 'idol' for some listeners, above all boys, even a 'guru' (sic). This position is taken on board by some presenters who turn it into the driving force of part of their performance. This approach can border on a kind of conversion. Some adolescents have acknowledged the almost mesmeric charisma which a presenter such as Max exercises over them. This can, however, lead to a refusal by others to join in. Céline, for example, refuses to go along with the presenter who styles himself the 'king of radio' (Arthur on Fun Radio). She doesn't like Max or Arthur when they 'tell callers to get lost'.

Richard: I think he's someone [Max] who's in my life, who brings me things just like my parents or my friends. Let's say it's part of the whole given that I listen in from time to time for an hour. That's it, he's someone who's in my life, someone I know very well, even if ... In his programme he never lets go completely, he hardly ever gives much away about his private life, but that's OK, it's more the presenter I'm interested in than the man.

Interviewer: *You know him personally in inverted commas, I mean, do you know for example if he has a wife or kids ...*

Richard: Yes, he's got a girlfriend at the moment, but he's not married even though his girlfriend lives in Lille. What's more I know that he's got an older brother, but apart from that he hardly ever talks about his parents, that's true. There's a time of year when his birthday comes round and then his switchboard operators play little tricks on him, they call up his parents and his friends to take part in the programme and suddenly, it's true that they get

together, at the same time, in fact, it might even be his idea. You never know, you can't tell, but, well, it's as if it was a surprise. So, on his birthday, I mean, at that time of year you hear a bit more about his private life, about him, what he is. It's that suddenly, after spending loads of time listening, there are little bits of information that slip out. In fact there's something I'm already sure of, his first name isn't real, it's actually Franck. Apart from that I also know his age.

Interviewer: What is his age?

Richard: Thirty-one (laughter). There you are, I wouldn't go so far as to say that he's my idol but it's not far off. There you are, he's someone I admire (laughter).

(Richard, 16, 5th year, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Fun Radio listener)

As regards socialization processes, it seems that the presenters play a role alongside family, peers and school. Their contribution is at the level of offering an understanding of the world. Whether it's Difool or Max or their co-presenters they promote respect for differences and customs. What one interviewee, Nicolas, appreciates about Difool is the way he 'says what he thinks'.

Christopher, another interviewee, also enjoys the radio personality of Difool. Difool, he feels, knows how to look after himself, a bit of a loudmouth, he is at the same time nice. Christopher values his loyalty. He no doubt recognizes in Difool behaviour traits connected to the importance which not losing face has for young boys from the working classes and which has to be seen in the context of his social position.¹⁶

Interviewer: So you like Arthur?

Christopher: He's OK, he's funny but well there are days when he's a bit on the cheesy side (laughter).

Interviewer: Meaning?

Christopher: Without being rude, he's a bit of a prick at times (laughter). Sometimes he gets up to wheezes which have nothing to do with real life. Whereas when Difool talks, you know, he's maybe the same age as Christian [an educator he likes very much] I think. Difool once said so on the radio, but I can't remember, I don't really know how old he is. I know that, what's certain is that he's between 25 and 35. But if I ever get to meet Difool in real life I'll shake his hand. Because you don't meet someone like him every day, especially not on radio. Well, you can't find someone like Marie [co-presenter with Difool] every day either. Difool says really horrible things to her, but she doesn't say anything, she just has a laugh. They know it's always just a laugh, you know. It's like that. That's why I listen to Difool as well, you have a laugh all the time in fact. [...]

16 'At P [the name of the school] you must never let yourself get pushed around. At P. the day anyone lets themselves get pushed around, it's over,' Christopher said.

Interviewer: What do you like about him?

Christopher: His personality and his lifestyle. [...] I'd shake Difoof's hand because he's got personality, he knows how to make you laugh. He's not someone who let's himself get pushed around, you know. And I like him even though he's not there in front of me and I'm only listening to him on the radio. I think that he's, you know, he'd be a good mate, you know. He's someone you wouldn't want to play too many dirty tricks on because he can come up with real beezers.

Interviewer: And you like Marie as well?

Christopher: Marie is cool as well, she's got personality, a good personality, the personality of a girl who doesn't let herself get pushed around. When someone said to her, for example, once on the radio, it was on a programme with Difoof, someone phoned in and said, 'Marie, I'd like to fuck you,' she started to slap him around but on the phone, if I'd been in his shoes I'd have hung up seeing the way she was talking to him, I'd have hung up, honestly, I'd have hung up. You know, she's a girl who doesn't let herself get pushed around either. And there's Florian, I think, or Florent, I can't remember what the other one's called, he's the one who's always getting it in the neck, in fact.

Interviewer: Do you prefer it when Difoof is on his own or when he's with others?

Christopher: No, when he's with Marie, Florian, with everyone, you know, with all the presenters.

(Christopher, 16, left school, listens to Skyrock, Fun, Contact FM)

It's the team 'everyone', as Christopher puts it, showing clearly the public validity he confers on them, rather than the presenter on his own, which is appreciated.

There's the one whose nickname is Difoof, he's really young and he seems a bit crazy, but in the end he often has the right answers, I mean I think he has the right answers. Anyway, that's what I think, but he really speaks to young people and gives them advice.

(Jéréemie, 17 1/2, 6th form, Sainghin, listens to Nostalgie, Chérie FM, Skyrock, Fun Radio)

The words chosen by the adolescents to describe the presenters relate to their social experience. Some use the term 'animateur' thereby foregrounding their presenter's function as mentor, others use 'présentateur' like Christopher. In a slip of the tongue which isn't really one, Youssef calls Difoof a 'tutor: people call in with a problem. They talk to Difoof, Skyrock's tutor'. For Youssef, free radio takes on the meaning of a space of social experience and legitimacy. Skyrock is a continuation of Youssef's educational and

social experience, since he was put in the care of a female tutor on being expelled from school. Being particularly careful about how to behave, he finds an extension of his concerns through free radio, especially on questions of sex, violence, and robbery. In other words, Youssef feels a certain closeness not just with particular themes brought up on the radio, but with a moral and symbolic space which makes sense for him.

It is therefore possible to identify a kind of generic link to the presenters which relates to their symbolic place.

Interviewer: *What does Difoof represent for you? Is he a mate, a pal ... ?*

Jérémie: That's a bit of a trick question in fact. No, maybe not exactly a mate for me, but someone you can see from time to time and you can talk to.

Interviewer: *Is he a kind of confidant, a journalist?*

Jérémie: Maybe not a confidant, no, but someone, the kind of person if you meet them you don't find it difficult to speak to them, but that doesn't mean you're going to tell them everything, someone you can speak to easily.

(Jérémie, 17 1/2, 6th form, Sainghin, listens to Nostalgie, Chérie FM, Skyrock, Fun Radio)

This link with the presenters is a result of their in-between status, between the institutional sphere and the friendship sphere, the institutional position and the friendship position. It does not, however, appear to relate either to the link with a confessor, or an expert – both positions which are linked to 'roles' – or quite to the link with a mate, or a parent – both positions linked to the domestic or friendship sphere. This position is not simply an observable fact, it is a central feature of the listeners' attachment to presenters who aren't quite presenters. And Jérémie gives us the real story behind this position when he compares his favourites to other radio stations, those his parents listen to:

Interviewer: *What would you criticize above all about RTL, or what would you laugh at?*

Jérémie: The games and sometimes the presenters.

Interviewer: *What do you think of them, what do you have against them?*

Jérémie: Some of them are frankly odd.

Interviewer: *What do you mean by 'odd'?*

Jérémie: 'Odd', they're people who are really difficult to pin down. In fact you ask yourself who they are and then you wonder if they aren't just 'radio people', in fact, and that their life is being on radio and they're there, they turn up every day and then they go home again. [...]

Interviewer: When you say they're 'radio people', what do you mean by 'radio people'?

Jérémie: As I was saying, they turn up, they do their programme and then you'd think that that was all they do with their lives and they go home afterwards. You get the impression that they only exist for radio, in fact.

Interviewer: What's the difference with Difoool, for example?

Jérémie: You can easily imagine Difoool having another life and all that, whereas you get the impression that radio is their whole life.

Interviewer: Why does that bother you? Do you find it excessive?

Jérémie: I don't know but if the presenters have a life, even if it's not an ordinary life, but at least a life you can pin down, I think that's more interesting for the listeners.

(Jérémie, 17 1/2, 6th form, Sainghin, listens to Nostalgie, Chérie FM, Skyrock, Fun Radio)

It's all as if, according to Jérémie, the big difference between Difoool and the other presenters is the fact that Difoool doesn't act the professional. We asked Jérémie what he thought motivated Difoool: 'Perhaps he's found what he wanted to do, I don't know, maybe it helps him as well to talk to young people, maybe it's a question of money as well,' he replied. In other words, although it seems difficult to find an unequivocal reason to explain the radio presenter's actions, perhaps his position resides in the fact that he also finds in presenting and in radio conversations what his listeners are looking for too. In any case he is not pushed back on to one somewhat derogatory reason: doing it for money, power, notoriety, image, or again, because he's a professional.

It is, then, easy to understand that the presenter's various roles can acquire a certain depth. He can play the proper radio presenter, adopting the voice of the smooth talker for aunts and mothers who have been tricked by their offspring into tuning in; and the false presenter (a game or hoax which is common on Fun Radio). It is also possible to talk of the defunctionalization of the roles of the presenter on youth radio. In fact, this is a central dimension of the output of free radio, the games they play with these roles during the programmes.

There is a main presenter, Max or Difoool, for example. But other people also take part on air. Who are they? What is their function? They can be, for example, the switchboard operators (Anneka and Aurélie on Fun Radio). In other words, the switchboard operators are defined by their function within the organization of the station. The minute they start talking on air their roles become mixed up and suddenly the whole discursive infrastructure of the programme broadens out (whether this is deliberate or not is unimportant here), to include switchboard operators who then become ordinary

people. The whole aim of the medium, and of the radio station in particular, is to bring about this playing with roles. In fact, in this way, it moves forward as regards interpretive frameworks. On *Le Mouv'*, Nico, a technician and console operator, joins in sporadically along with Jessica, the presenter.

There are times when they don't bother with the switchboard and just talk. Recently there have been switchboard operators who have been taking calls every evening. He [Max] had his mobile and he was setting off on some mission or other. There were missions to carry out. [...] At the same time, they get on very well together. In fact, there are two male switchboard operators who in my opinion are good mates of Max. [...] Each year there's a different switchboard operator on placement. I've been listening since I was in third year, now there's a new one, there was one at the beginning, there's one every year, slowly but surely they develop their personality within the team.

(Richard, 16, 5th year, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Fun Radio listener)

Even though they are a practical element of the presenting team, the switchboard operators also speak on air, that is to say they go beyond their professional function. They are there as switchboard operators and not as presenters. In other words, when they speak into the microphone, they are there in their capacity as ordinary people. 'Florent and Marie answer on the switchboard and then they join in,' says interviewee Ludivine. Another sign of this in-between position is the subjective involvement of the presenters. As Ludivine says of Marie on *Skyrock*: 'She was telling of her experiences when she was 13. You can see that doing it too early didn't help her at all. The bloke must have been 18, she did it like that, a bit wild, you know. In the end she said it was a mistake. She was 13, he was 18. He couldn't have cared less, in fact. He dumped her.'

The portraits the adolescents paint of the presenters are done with very broad brushstrokes. They are described on the basis of distinguishing characteristics. 'They pass Romano [Difool's co-presenter on *Skyrock*] off as a real pervert, as real ugly mug,' says Ludovic. This description of Romano is crude and exaggerated: he's not just ugly but 'a real ugly mug', he's not a pervert but a 'real pervert'. The exaggeration of features is a register used to broach subject matter which is marked as taboo. Delphine also asks herself what it is that Marie does in the *Skyrock* programmes with Difool:

At a pinch, I would say that the one who thought most clearly was Marie. But I really wonder what Marie was doing on that programme, because she has a kid. He was little at the time. A little kid. And a programme that goes from nine o'clock till midnight, it wasn't the obvious thing to do. [...] She was the one who gave the best answers to the questions and some-

17 We should add what Ludivine says a few minutes later: '... for example, as regards Romano, what they say about him isn't all true. They do it more for a laugh. Sometimes it's also a personality trait, like Marie. She's the girl who's more or less experienced it all. So, even though I think it's a personality trait, I mean, they exaggerate it more or less to make it funny.'

times she was also good at putting the others in their place, above all Difoole. [...] He's obsessed, so he was always looking for details, things like that.

There are in fact two radio configurations. The configuration we have just analysed, which is a pragmatic form playing on mixing the institutional and the ordinary features of the roles and functions of each person; and a second configuration which is just as important, which is the social scenario. What is at stake here are roles, no longer in the institutional sense, but in the sense of social theatre. Ludivine says:

There's Difoole. Well, him, he's the boss. There's also Marie. So she's the girl. There's Romano and he's the local lad. I mean, they insult him all the time but that's the way it is. There's Florent. He's more the serious type.

The personality of each person mediates the articulation of these two positions. No doubt Florent must be a bit more serious than Romano in normal life. We should add the shift of register carried out by Ludivine: 'I mean, not serious, I mean he's the calmest of them all. You don't hear him very often'. When saying this she moves Florent from the role she gives him in a social scenario on the radio, a role he no doubt takes on during the programme, to a description which relates more to his normal behaviour. This work on the roles and personalities of the presenters, not boxing them in to professional roles or a social scenario, is essential for defining how the listeners engage with them.¹⁷ Who stages this social scenario?

Role play in the teams: entering a social scenario

Interviewer: Do you prefer it when there are several of them or do you prefer it when he [Difoole] is on his own?

Nicolas: No, it's better when there are several of them. Because sometimes he says something, then Marie says something else and he slaps her down and it's funny.

(Nicolas, 16, unemployed, Lille, listens to Skyrock and Fun Radio)

It is possible, and plausible from the point of view of the way those involved want things to be construed, to consider the organization of the radio programmes as articulated around specific roles. In order to fully appreciate certain remarks and certain interactions on air, we have to bear in mind that the playing of a series of character roles defines the positions of the team members. Romano's 'scatological' remarks on Skyrock correspond to the place he occupies as court jester, given a certain amount of licence, hence his licentious

remarks, bearing in mind that it is Difoool who is the master of ceremonies and guarantor of a discursive space more or less under the control of the remarks made, according to the liberties taken by Romano and sometimes his own. 'He tends to play the role of the "stud"', says Laëtitia. 'On Thursdays they take the "problem of the month" from those fashion magazines for yokels, they take stories, anything to do with arses or anuses, they take the piss out of Romano,' says Ludovic, 15, who listens to Skyrock. Likewise Marie plays the role of someone girls can talk to and a specialist in girls' problems. 'When they need to take a girl as an example, when a girl calls in and wants some kind of girly advice, they speak to Marie about it,' says Faïza about Skyrock.

Interviewer: Do you know the people who work with Difoool?

Michèle: Manu, Romano, Florent.

Maxence: All the switchboard operators. They even join in the programme, they have a certain role.

Lucile: That's good.

Maxence: It's not just one presenter running the whole show.

Lucile: They join in from time to time. Some of them better at some things than others. Marie gets involved mostly when girls call in, sometimes they ask Marie for a bit of help. The others also get their oar in, Romano, Florent.

Interviewer: Do you prefer it when there are several of them or when it's just Difoool on his own?

Lucile: Oh no, the others need to be there too. There's more atmosphere that way. They don't always agree, sometimes they argue.

The role-play is such that it never comes over to the adolescents as a potentially sexist set-up, despite the dominant position occupied by men at the station. We asked: 'They put women down a bit. Are they a bit macho underneath it all?' 'In a sense yeah but on radio you can't complain. It's just for a laugh,' said Laëtitia. It is in fact the second-degree register which makes it possible to maintain both ordinary remarks which a content analysis would perhaps make appear partly sexist and a general framework of civil respect for individuals and in particular women. Laëtitia added, in connection with Romano, who often makes licentious remarks: 'He doesn't have the time to be macho. He speaks and all the time there's someone waiting behind his back to put him down. So, well, he gets put upon.'

Conclusion

A notable inflexion has occurred between *Lovin' Fun*¹⁸ and contemporary free-radio broadcasts. By moving from a framework of expertise – calling up Doc and Difoool to ask a question, seek advice – to a framework of testimony and self-production of the programme, we

18 The programme *Lovin' Fun* began in October 1992. It was a successful evening phone-in (one of the first) on Fun Radio between young people, and a studio team with Difoool and a doctor, talking about sex, drugs, and relationships.

19 Oswald Ducrot, *Le dire et le dit*, Paris: Minuit, 1984.

20 This 'frame widening', this 'in-between' may be a modern feature of media frameworks; for instance those Reality TV devices which blur the production frame.

have moved from a site of appearance polarized by the expert word to a site polarized by testimony and the simultaneous involvement of the other listeners. In some way the framework has broadened, the dimension of polarized transfer has diminished to the benefit of a series of identificatory and participatory positions. The set-up of the team rather than the single presenter, the disappearance of the expert (doctor or other) and radio's concrete involvement in relationships, are all contributing to this opening out of the game of positions. If Marie can 'put Difoole in his place', as Lisa says, it's because Difoole has more of a margin for manoeuvre than if he was on his own. This is a basic feature of polyphony.¹⁹ The series of positions occupied by a speaking subject increases to the extent that he is able to offload earlier positions on to others. If youth radio seems less highbrow than other advice broadcasts operating within a traditional framework of medical or journalistic expertise, it has nevertheless diversified the game and identification space for listeners.²⁰ We can therefore see the importance of radio for young people in France and how radio plays a role in socializing them to adjust to many features of adult social life, such as the possible diversity of places or roles which an individual can inhabit simultaneously.