

Don't Touch That Dial, or, The Triumph of the Grumps

One Reason Why People Tire of Freedom

Tim Virkkala

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“I’ve had all the diversity I can stand.”

Thus spake Senator Conrad Burns, several years ago, dismissing the idea that the government should open the airwaves to what is called “micro radio.” The Republican from Montana succinctly makes one of the most common cases against freedom. It really is a matter of what we’ll put up with, what we can stand. And it basically comes down to *taste*.

The Senator was one of the politicians who put the kibosh on real radio deregulation a few years back. He did his part to keep the American airwaves less free.

Radio is hardly a free-market institution. Competition is limited far tighter than the electromagnetic spectrum would allow; the government does this by “licensing out” the existing niches.

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Micro radio – or low-watt FM – is one of the major challenges facing the American radio establishment. Lots of little stations crop up, without benefit of licensing. Pirates, they be. And they navigate their local waters providing music, news, opinion, and oddball entertainment.

No one much complains about micro radio when no one listens, when it’s just a lone crank home-steading some unused portion of the electromagnetic spectrum.

But when a micro broadcaster gets popular, that’s when the complaints rise.

Sometimes it is the local police who complain, since not a few micro broadcasters are especially interested in tracking police brutality in their neighborhoods.

Occasionally it is the local Mrs. Grundy who raises a holler, for she doesn’t like the fact that some young person can be corrupted by raunchy lyrics or even raunchier DJs.

Usually, though, it’s the other, bigger broadcast stations that complain. Sometimes because of interference; usually because they just don’t like to lose listeners to innovative shows. The first problem could be solved in court, without a licensing system. Or by the FCC, if they allowed more than a handful of micros. The second problem is not, really, a problem at all – at least not for those who like freedom.

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But that’s the trouble really. Diversity and freedom go together. If you have freedom, you can’t prevent or limit diversity. One follows from the other. And if you have diversity without freedom, you are apt to lurch into conflict pretty fast. So for the sake of peace, you’d think freedom would be the common, most popular choice.

But you’d be wrong.

For the most part, *most people don’t like freedom*. There are many reasons for this. But certainly one of the most important ones is aesthetic. They like what they like, and they have had, following Senator Burns, just about all the diversity they can stand. Why put up with something that bugs them?

Men Against the State of Boredom

These are not new thoughts. This aesthetic element of the widespread distrust of freedom has been on my mind for years. Probably yours, too. But recently the problem loomed larger as I was reading a new book, Jesse Walker’s *Rebels on the Air: An Alternative History of Radio in America*. While reading this strange take on strange radio, I was fascinated by the author’s obvious prejudice in favor of newness and diversity. Jesse Walker likes stuff that is different, wildly different.

And I thought: the author is young. What would an older person, a “regular guy,” think of the gonzo, unpredictable radio he describes?

Wouldn’t most people side with Conrad Burns? Don’t most people shun diversity and leap to boring crap?

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Most people make do with the music and opinions they learned in high school and college. Why challenge themselves?

Why listen to alternative radio when current radio is good enough?

Walker keeps his actual argument brief:

I am aware that today's radio marketplace is open enough that the stations that survive in it are meeting somebody's needs. I wish such stations no ill. I have no desire to drive those two oxymoron's, "classic rock" and "young country," from the air. I can coexist with "easy listening," with "adult contemporary," with even that unlistenable concoction called "smooth jazz." (That's like calling Scientology "smooth Judaism.") But what kind of musical desert contains *only* those brands of broadcasting?

A freer media landscape, shorn of tight controls, is possible – one that would allow us greater freedom to choose, to create, and to escape.

Though Walker may look down on some normal stuff (Kenny G and "smooth jazz," for instance), he simply asks the powers to make a little more room for a little more diversity. Unlike many with his tastes, he's not asking for government subsidies (NPR listeners may be a bit nonplused with his unconventional discussion of the politics and economics – and aesthetics and ideologies – of their beloved government-subsidized, grant-happy, listener-supported radio). He's asking for freedom.

He's asking for the "freedom to choose" – that is, more options: "more radio formats, more TV channels, more film studios, more publishers. Market forces have already produced much media diversity, and were it not for the barriers erected by the FCC (among others), those forces would produce much more."

He's also asking for the "freedom to create" – that is, "not just the right to choose among five hundred TV stations instead of three, but fewer barriers to setting up a station of your own...."

He's also asking for something a little harder to pin down, a "freedom to escape" – that is, the ability "to withdraw from the thick smoke of mediation and to interact more directly, more convivially, with others." Micro radio, he elaborates, blurs "the boundaries between mass media and face-to-face interaction...."

Walker simply wants alternatives. Diversity. And that's what sets him apart from the men in suits who run America – and the world.

People Wearing Suits That Suit Them Just Fine, Thank You

A few years ago I lived in a small town. Three major cultural classes shared and traded and jostled for power: the retirees, the rednecks, and the ex- or quasi-hippies.

The interesting thing about this third class of players was that, for all their "openness" and so on, these were the most consistently in favor of repressive policies, the most eager to add another new control on the population.

The ex- or quasi-hippies, for all their "openness" and so on, were the consistently in favor of repressive policies, the most eager to add another new control on the population.

And yet these were all people who, when young, had preached freedom and tolerance and all sorts of other good things. But, as they got older, and got into power, they "benignly" worked to increase the regulations that they and their neighbors had to work under.

It would be easy to dismiss these people as hypocrites. But they weren't, and aren't. They had advocated freedom when out of power, and are still tolerant of most of the things they've always been tolerant of. But they never had any real interest in being tolerant of ugliness, for instance. They've found a beautiful town, and they have every intention of making sure no one paints their house the wrong color. They've bought their houses, and they want to make sure that too many other people don't come into the area and crowd the place up, taking away their town's "character."

So what you have here is a not wholly unreasonable aesthetic case against freedom. Because if your neighbor is allowed to paint her house purple with green racing stripes, well, doesn't that just send you careening to dystopia?

Not surprisingly, it was the rednecks who were the most tolerant of diversity in that town. They may have made fun of the one Jamaican in dreadlocks, or tittered at all the guys in pony tails (including me), but for the most part they rarely rocked the boat, rarely demanded increased controls.

It is the yuppified ex-hippies whose ideological regress interests me here. For it is they who combined a strong aesthetic sense and a political commitment to diversity, and it is they who are now the enemies of *real* diversity.

Their regress is probably not just a result of getting wealthier and more powerful. It is a very universal story. It is, I think, the story of growing old.

When you are young, you are still exploring. Yes, young fuddy-duddies exist. But most people go through some glimmering of the youthful drive for novelty; it is at this point in their life that they are most likely to be receptive to diversity and strangeness, most likely to resist restrictions and limits.

But as you age, you learn what you like. You settle on your tastes. And your patience with things you don't like decreases.

And as this happens, your resistance to restrictions *decreases*. You've found yours, and can't be bothered with others' tastes. Diversity is not likely to remain important. Freedom thus ceases to be a personal issue.

You become, in many ways, a person in a suit. You may have chosen precisely the kind of suit you wear, but it remains a suit, a uniform. A fixed form. And you have more important things to worry about than "the freedom to escape." Mortgages, kids, taxes, etc. And how you look in your suit.

Which is why men and women in suits tend to shut down the upstart radio stations that Jesse Walker writes about in *Rebels on the Air*. Rebels merely upset the settled patterns of older people who've had just about all the diversity they can stand.

Rereading the Problem

I don't listen to radio much. In the car, yes. Sometimes I'll listen to the classical radio station. But mostly, I resist programming by others.

For music, I have a vast collection of CDs, tapes, LPs and some MP3s, too. For entertainment, I go to a movie, or watch one of three or four excellent TV shows. Or, more likely, read a novel from my rather large private library.

The idea of following someone else's tastes, hour after hour, strikes me as odd.

I prefer reading *about* diversity in the pages of one book, like Jesse Walker's, than actually experiencing it!

So why do I follow young Mr. Jesse Walker to support a greater freedom in radio?

It's not because it is a personal issue. It is because I've internalized the argument for freedom, one that I picked up in my youth, when I was more experimental, more adventuresome, less staid. Freedom seems like a good idea to me, for many reasons, and diversity is something ...I'm not against.

Make sure you aren't giving aid and comfort to censors and regulators and established cultural mavens.

Oh, I may not be completely settled in my tastes. As a reader, I like philosophically comic writers like George Meredith and Iris Murdoch and James Branch Cabell. But I also enjoy much more realistic fiction, as in A. N. Wilson or Arnold Bennett. And I'm always finding something new to love – even if it's old, like the once wildly popular but now mostly forgotten writer F. Marion Crawford. In music, I mainly listen to classical works – if written after 1900. I like popular music, but don't go out of my way to listen to it: I figure it's always "there," omnipresent, in our society.

Reading Jesse Walker's *Rebels on the Air*, I realize that there's a lot of information and art that never makes it my way. I may complain that radio rarely plays what I like, but it so rarely plays anything outside of the cultural mainstream that I can't really know what I'm missing. My tastes are rarely challenged because the market is severely restricted. In a freer society, a random search of my dial might turn up something like:

- The Crazy Cajun Show
- "Progressive Country"
- A civil-rights advocate followed by a racist rant

- A station that plays opera, John Cage, bluegrass, and Javanese Gamelan – all within the same hour, and not according to a predictable schedule or a management-defined timeslot.

This is just a sample of the hundreds of strange programs that a few people around the country have been blessed with, simply because a DJ here or an entrepreneur there decided to break away from the well-established rut. These rebels on the air offered something different, something worthwhile for someone – and that someone could be very much like you or me.

There's a lesson here. Before you, the reader, and I, the humble reviewer, calcify our tastes into shards of brittle, opinionated dogmas, maybe we should stand up for the freedom and diversity that could be ours, if only we would speak up at the opportune moment.

When your neighbor seeks to restrain his neighbor from painting her house bright green, question his tolerance.

When your senator leaps to the defense of conglomerate-owned format radio, ask him if he really likes being a lackey for big business and a tyrant over the little guy.

When you, or I, or our barber, ridicules someone else's taste, make sure we aren't giving aid and comfort to censors and regulators and established cultural mavens. Let us ensure that we are not helping the people who trounce on the creativity of those freer souls who haven't yet given up on the possibility that they can learn to like something new.

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