

Race, Class, and Sonic Autonomy in the Tower Blocks: Pirate Radio's Exilic Possibilities

LARISA KINGSTON MANN¹
Temple University, USA

Despite 60 years of bans, raids, arrests, confiscations, and fines, unlicensed (“pirate”) radio has persisted in the United Kingdom. Why such persistence, even after the introduction of noncommercial licenses and the rise of Web radio? Many factors influence communities’ choice of media technology: Legality and physical location especially shape a technology’s racial, class, and cultural affordances. During the 1980s–2020s, U.K. pirate radio stations’ physical locations—particularly those in public housing towers—facilitated access to and control of broadcasting by the working-class and Black communities, illustrating how social context shapes technological possibility. This article presents a sociohistorical analysis of pirate radio’s capacity to function as an “exilic space” that fostered collective intimacy and relative autonomy. In doing so, the article identifies what is at stake in the changing legal and technological contexts for broadcast media to better understand its capacity to be liberatory or extractive.

Keywords: radio, pirate, exilic spaces, autonomy, intimacy, broadcasting, dance music

Pirate radio in the United Kingdom is publicly bemoaned by officials and media professionals as a menace, a nuisance, and a sign of moral decay; simultaneously, popular music observers and scholars acknowledge it to be the lifeblood of U.K. popular and dance music (Anderson, 2015; de Lacey, 2021; Hebditch, 2015; Quinn, 2018). Despite more than 50 years of raids, arrests, confiscations, and fines, unlicensed radio broadcasting has persisted, especially in London and other urban centers. Even after the government introduced a variety of noncommercial licenses intended to serve needs not met by commercial or state-run radio, and after the rise of Web radio, pirate radio persists (Birket-Smith, 2012).² Why has this supposedly outdated technology persisted, and what can that persistence tell us?

To understand media, “we should not focus so much on devices, or platforms or apparatuses as such and more on the systems of power that they mobilize” (Galloway, 2012, p. 18). Different factors shape

Larisa Kingston Mann: lkmann@temple.edu

Date submitted: 2021-11-30

¹ Sincere gratitude to Fordham University, Klein College, Dr. G. Baars, Footsie, GullyCat, and Mykaell Riley.

² Amateur fans track pirate stations on the website RadioNecks. See <https://radionecks.co.uk/viewtopic.php?f=4&t=11&start=180> for weekly scans of the airwaves current as of November, 2021.

how and when local communities prefer different broadcast technologies. The following discussion illustrates how the communities and values that flourished on pirate radio could not easily have found a home in licensed broadcasting. Remaining outside the legal system provided benefits beyond saving money on licensing fees: Unlicensed radio broadcasting's social-technological parameters provide certain affordances for specific communities to engage with each other on terms not available via licensed broadcasting. U.K. pirate radio from the 1980s to the present exemplifies how social, architectural, and legal institutions come together to facilitate the creative expressions of the white³ working class and Black communities. These affordances are characteristic of "exilic spaces" (Gray, 2004): physical and discursive sites capable of fostering values not welcome in the dominant society. Analyzing how pirate radio's values, interests, functions, and abilities may be exilic can reveal what is at stake in the changing legal and technological contexts for broadcast media. The experiences of the communities that flourished in pirate radio—and fostered it in return—can explain why legalizing pirate radio can limit its ability to serve the people that bring it such vitality. Moreover, this helps us better understand both what makes a media platform welcoming or hostile to particular communities and its capacity to serve as liberatory or extractive.

Methods

This study draws on the journalism and social history of pirate radio primarily in London during the 1980s–2020s to delineate its social significance and context. Social history, particularly of public housing and of popular and dance music, not only helps us understand pirate radio's local significances but also models how we might identify contextual features that have theoretical implications for our understandings of media technologies' capacities and affordances. As a site of considerable public and mass media attention, pirate radio has inspired a wealth of accounts of notorious, popular, and locally significant pirate stations and disc jockeys (DJs). I supplement these with six interviews conducted with people whose lives intersected with London pirate radio between the 1980s and the 2010s. The voices of those involved in pirate radio include DJs, masters of ceremony (MCs), engineers, and building managers. As a purposive, theoretical sample, these interviewees elucidate aspects of pirate radio in daily life rather than moments of conflict more likely to be covered by the news media. The stories they tell illustrate important dynamics in the community's relationship to this technology and provide theoretical depth and nuance to the story of pirate radio—especially when in dialogue with the voices of others involved in pirate radio that spoke for themselves in contemporaneous music or news media. Although those quoted here do not represent everyone involved in pirate radio, they do illustrate key themes of interest for scholars of media and of concern to media regulators—many of which have not yet been sufficiently accounted for.

The State of Pirate Radio Research

The term "pirate radio" generally describes radio stations that broadcast without obtaining a license from the state's regulatory authorities. While in some contexts "pirate" is pejorative, in the United Kingdom, participants tend to embrace the term. The first wave of U.K. pirate radio stations to garner widespread

³ While capitalizing "Black" but not "white" differs from the APA style guide, it is a political and communicative choice reflecting equity and accuracy, which is supported by AP and well explained here: <https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>.

attention was based offshore, on ships, in the 1960s, set up by people dissatisfied with the programming on the state-controlled British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC; Boyd, 1986). This era is interesting but quite distinct in its significance from what followed. Because the 1960s-era pirate stations did not involve or represent the working class or Black people in the United Kingdom, studying this early period does not shed enough light on pirate radio's relationship with these marginalized communities. After the government shut down the offshore stations, unlicensed radio broadcasting continued, taking on forms that still exist today and are more tied to disenfranchised communities (Birket-Smith, 2012). Because I am particularly interested in pirate radio's ability to serve the interests of marginalized communities and identities, the present work focuses on the second wave of pirate radio, from the 1980s onward.

Scholarship on U.K. pirate radio is spotty although there is a rich archive of popular and journalistic writing. These popular and journalistic works tend to fall into three categories. The first category, comprising Chapman (1992/2012), Johns (2010), and Steve Jones (1988), discusses early offshore stations and their role in popular music, exemplifying struggles for control of media platforms. The second category, perhaps tracking the coming-of-age of people influenced by second-wave pirate radio, comprises works addressing pirate radio as a youth-oriented, rebellious phenomenon (Hind & Mosco, 1985; Yoder, 2002).⁴ These discuss resistant elements of pirate radio but rarely address the intertwining roles of policy, technology, and culture (Goddard, 2011). A common theme is that pirate stations provide content largely unavailable on other stations, thus filling a gap in the broadcast market. A third and more recent category of journalists and writers describe pirate radio's political significance more explicitly, focusing on how it has fostered resistant Black culture (Hancox, 2011).

In academia, especially within communication and media studies, this analysis has been extended by scholars like Hebditch (2015), who identified similar dynamics in pirate radio's history, while it has been grounded in an analysis of space and place by Birket-Smith (2012) and in communities of practice by de Lacey (2021), the latter also providing important groundwork for this article. These works agree that pirate radio fills a market gap for broadcast content, while Dooley (2008) and Anderson (2004) also suggest pirate radio prefigures digital music distribution by quickening and decentralizing how songs circulate and who circulates them. Schlosberg (2011) makes it more explicit that pirate radio is embedded in an "informal" music industry in ways that legal radio cannot replace.

Another theme is policy makers' hostility to informal media platforms despite those platforms generating genres, artists, and radio personalities who cross over into or influence legal radio and popular music. Some scholars focus on this crossover potential: For example, Sims and Michaels (2000) discuss pirate radio as disruptively entrepreneurial. These market-oriented interpretations, however, provide little explanation for why particular communities have been involved at different stages of pirate radio's entrepreneurial activities. For example, when offshore pirates moved onshore, the working class, Black, other minority ethnic groups, and (to some extent) women broadcasters became more involved. Yet, broadcasters that crossed over from pirate stations into legal radio have tended to be white and often middle class. These shifts cannot be explained by either the "content"/"market"-oriented model or the disruption

⁴ Yoder even subtitles his book: "Experience radio's swashbuckling side!"

model. We need to understand how pirate radio is a site of struggle not only over tastes but also over the right of particular communities to occupy cultural spaces.

The specific material and social contexts that gave rise to second-wave pirate radio are key to understanding this site of struggle. One valuable contribution comes from outside formal academia and outside mainstream mass media: Wolton's (2011) "Tortugan Tower Blocks? Pirate Signals From the Margin." Published in the radical politics/electronic music magazine *Datacide*, this piece identifies a key point: Technological and material conditions enabled pirate radio in the 1980s and 1990s to become extremely vital by tightening its relationship with specific communities that needed cultural expression for their own purposes.

I build on this last point to examine how legal expressive practices like licensed radio are not necessarily hospitable to all cultural needs. The history of the second-wave U.K. pirate radio illuminates how marginalized communities use aspects of a hegemonic capitalist white supremacist system without necessarily reinforcing it. This history demonstrates how a particular combination of social, legal, architectural, and urban planning decisions inadvertently enabled sites of cultural expression for (especially) working-class Black and white youth that were in some ways autonomous from state and large-scale commercial control.

Second-wave pirate radio's politics arose neither randomly nor automatically from the choice to broadcast illegally. Pirate radio stations' physical locations and construction, people's cultural practices in those locales, and broadcasting regulations all set the terms of engagement. The legal landscape and the geographical and architectural contexts posed affordances and structural hostilities to the marginalized communities that ended up dominating second-wave pirate radio. To analyze how people negotiated these hostilities, I turn to a concept developed in anticolonial scholarship.

Exilic Spaces: Conditions for Modeling Liberation

"Exilic space" is a useful concept for assessing pirate radio's liberatory potential. The term was developed by Jamaican sociologist Obika Gray (2004) in his research on Jamaica's urban poor. The term describes a set of conditions that enable people to carve out an identity somewhat independent of colonial social values. In Jamaica, exilic spaces provide an alternate cultural power base, wherein people affirm aspects of their shared experience and identity disparaged by the dominant society. Exilic spaces also foster social relationships on terms not dictated by colonial power. As such, exilic spaces have both physical and discursive aspects that provide the necessary context within which people can reframe cultural practices.

The most important aspect of exilic space for this article is that of control: Oppressed communities must control access to the space. Without control over who is present (and how they are present), an oppressed person may not feel safe to express or celebrate aspects of themselves that mark them as "other" in the dominant society. The second key aspect is collective intimacy (Mann, 2019): There must be a capacity for the space to generate moments of shared vulnerability in which it is relatively safe to revel in the ways one does not "fit in" the dominant society. That intimacy can mobilize power when it is shared with others, shoring up a collective identity that in other spaces would make one the object of suspicion or hostility. This

last point also highlights that to be an exilic space the people in control of it must be primarily of oppressed or marginalized identities. Illegality is not a random or arbitrary feature of exilic space but rather enables its orientation away from hegemonic laws and norms.

While this concept illuminates social dynamics in Jamaica, institutions oppressing Jamaicans originated in the United Kingdom. U.K. institutions maintain a sociocultural hierarchy with white people at the top and the colonized people—especially Jamaicans and other Black people—at the bottom. Class structures do not erase hierarchies of race: The anticolonial aspect of exilic space means that an all-white or a white-dominated space lacks the capacity to produce truly exilic conditions because it does not engage with colonial racial hierarchies.

The U.K. case also highlights how illegality, while necessary, is not alone sufficient to engender an exilic space. The 1960s-era offshore pirate radio, while illegal, did not provide a haven for oppressed people to express themselves on their own terms. Working-class presence on the early airwaves appears to have been low, there were no Black British or Jamaican DJs, and the stations played little Jamaican music or music of other colonies. Many pirate radio stations did play U.S. soul music, and the fact that Black American music was popular suggests that white broadcasters distinguished between U.S. and U.K. Black culture. In contrast, Gilroy (1991) describes how later pirate radio stations from within Black communities subverted this dichotomy by choosing to play both soul music and reggae to unify Black communities across sociocultural and taste lines. Such goals (and people) were not much present in 1960s-era offshore pirate broadcasts. Simultaneously, Black people in the United Kingdom were developing a vibrant counterculture due to their exclusion from white-dominated musical and social spaces (Back, 1996/2017). This centered on music and dancing, experienced in alternative cultural spaces via “sound systems” (an assemblage of speakers, music-playing devices—originally turntables, a DJ, and a host/MC). Sound system culture and the West Indian communities at its heart began to participate in onshore pirate radio (Cordell & James, 2021), which suggests that its exilic capacity increased.

Second-Wave Pirate Radio in Social Context

Second-wave pirate radio gained some of its unique vitality from the physical infrastructure that it often occupied when it moved onshore. The architectural feature, iconic in representations of pirate radio in film and visual media, is the “tower block”: tall buildings of multiple apartments designated for low-income renters in urban areas. These buildings’ most dramatic vertical expansion began in the “slum clearance” projects in London that flourished from the late 1950s to the late 1970s. Such projects were focused on locations where council housing (“public housing” in the United States) was already evident: For example, London’s East End, a historically poor and working-class area (Greater London Council, Daly, 1971, as cited in Hamnett, 2003), was converted or built over with tall residential unit complexes. Economies of scale in construction—especially in the poor economic climate during the 1960s and 1970s—and demographic pressures heightened the interest in large multiunit buildings rather than more dispersed or smaller units.

While inner London became more middle class in the 1970s and 1980s, tower blocks were not converted into luxury flats. Instead, working-class residents were further squeezed into “residual areas” (Hamnett, 2003, p. 2413), such as Tower Hamlets in Hackney. The towers remained, until very recently,

dominated by the poor and working class. Even when regulations on access loosened, middle-class people stayed away, primarily because living in tall apartment buildings contradicts a dominant aspiration of middle-class English life: a house and a garden (Severs, 2010). The desirable landscape of houses and gardens, however, disadvantaged middle-class participation in radio broadcasting in two ways: First, the higher a transmitter is, the less power is needed for it to cover a long distance. Second, more spread-out populations mean fewer people can be reached via broadcasting compared with densely populated areas. Thus, council housing tower blocks provided a structural advantage in on-air broadcasting to their residents and communities.

This advantage helps explain the increased presence of the working class, Blacks, and other ethnic minorities broadcasting on pirate radio. Patterns of residential class segregation and ethnic clustering (Phillips, 1998), intentional or not, meant that those most easily able to hear the broadcasts would be concentrated within specific social groups, which could help embed the station in a cultural milieu. A former pirate radio worker whose wife had been a South London housing manager in a tower block with primarily Black residents recounted that she “was firmly of the belief that there was a conscious ghettoization happening” (in 1970s council housing policy; Participant #5). When I asked how his wife felt when people came to her with complaints related to pirate radio, he said, “She supported the music!” He also pointed out that as a Black woman “she had more empathy and understanding” than her white managers when dealing with noise complaints “and people complaining about, you know, *smells* [with a dramatic pause and significant look]—food or spices or stuff like that . . . where you’d have [complaining] people that surrounded by [other] people of a similar hue or cultural background” (Participant #5). In this account, my interlocutor draws a parallel between music and food as necessary cultural expressions that others might complain about and implies a pattern of complaints regarding sounds/smells associated with oppressed, marginalized, or “ghettoized” communities. His emphasis when telling the story also suggests racialized undertones of complaints about “smells” or smelly food, in which skin tone (“hue”) or culture might be related to the nature of the complaint. In his interpretation, his wife did not see complaints as a describing objective problem of smelliness or noisiness but instead reflecting cultural or racial differences. He implies that these complaints can best be addressed through empathy and understanding, and not, for example, by stopping or homogenizing sounds or smells. For him, and for the sympathetic housing manager to whom he is married, the sounds of pirate radio are cultural expressions of ghettoized communities who deserve to be heard.

Who Controls the Space?

Just as tall, multistory buildings could be dizzyingly confusing for outsiders to navigate, the streets surrounding public housing estates also tend to be organized in a way not easily understandable to those from outside. This design was initially meant to discourage pass-through traffic and isolate residents from commuters and nonresidents. The complexity of the street layout, however, ends up granting control to locals because a path through them to a particular destination would not be intuitive to outsiders. When I was in Tower Hamlets in 2015, I encountered the following street layout firsthand, which seemed pretty much guaranteed to confuse anyone not local:

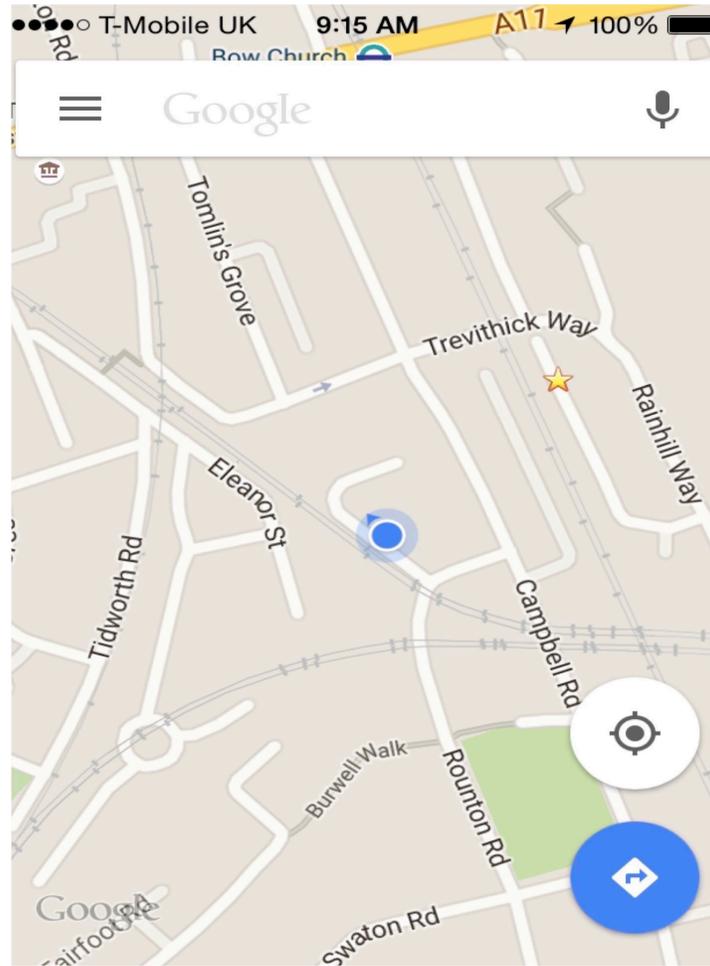


Figure 1. The streets of Tower Hamlets. (Source: Author.)

Figure 1 shows a 2015 screenshot of a mobile phone map application. The blue dot marks my location, and the yellow star marks the tower I was trying to reach. The thick white lines represent streets, the thin gray double lines represent train tracks, and the green squares represent parks (some of which are surrounded by walls not shown on the map). Navigating this neighborhood without the global positioning system would have been difficult. The curved streets keep visibility to half a block at best, and at least half the streets dead-end into a backyard or railway tracks. Thus, people living in these locations had an advantage over outsiders—especially in the era before smartphones. This was even more true of tower blocks themselves: It would be difficult to find someone who disappeared inside one of several 27-story buildings with 99 flats, particularly if neighbors were uncooperative. This situation heightens the exilic possibilities of council housing. Despite being government institutions by definition, these council housing towers have architectural and geographic features that give community residents a measure of practical control over their space.

Also consistent with characteristics of exilic space, local control has been reinforced by varying levels of government neglect. Conservative media have regularly decried tower blocks as dangerous, perhaps especially when abandoned by government oversight. But this regular and often long-term state neglect has provided advantages as well as disadvantages. Housing management neglect could produce dangerous and unsafe spaces, but the same neglect also increases accessibility to spaces that people want to use and fosters some privacy from the state's regulatory eye. Police absence has a similar dynamic. Although some residents certainly wish for the police to prevent certain kinds of harm, the police cannot be trusted to recognize locals' priorities or rights. Police attention can result in split-up families or violence directed at community members, while their absence allows residents to conduct activities they value but that might otherwise be shut down. For those interested in unlicensed broadcasting, the impenetrability of the architecture, the distribution of knowledge about the landscape, and the periodic inattention by authorities enable residents to control their environs and foster exilic spaces.

In the 1980s as pirate radio began to take hold in council housing, these social and architectural forces shaped who participated. People who came to the tower blocks to broadcast had to be recognized and at least tacitly approved of by local residents to gain access; if the residents themselves took an interest they could participate more easily than an outsider. I interviewed one former pirate radio DJ, a lower-middle-class white man, who had initially come from outside the community that hosted a station. He told me that when he first came to play on a station in the early 1990s, "I remember when the station was in Chervil Rise, Heath Town, which is like a maze! I got lost! This old Jamaican man clocked my bag and said 'You looking for the studio?' and helped me find it" (Participant #1). As an outsider, he needed help from someone who was familiar with the maze-like streets. His mention of a Jamaican man corroborates a widely described reality of Jamaican influence in pirate radio. It is also significant that his record bag marked him as someone who had a reason to be there—an identifier that the Jamaican man understood and did not find threatening: Having records in a bag signified locally comprehensible values.

My interlocutor put this aspect of controlled access more explicitly in a later conversation:

When I first started going there it was scary stuff. But after a while—the guy that run the station was fairly heavy in the area, no one fucked with the station—within about a couple of months, if I turned up to do my show at the block, and there was some really dodgy people about [they'd know] "he's the white boy from the radio, he's cool." (Participant #1)

Here, his fear suggests several dynamics at play—perhaps fear of the unknown, but also, given his projection of others identifying him as "the white boy," a racialized fear as well. The radio becomes the mechanism by which he can enter the space, but his entry is on terms defined by the locals in the community. The terms of inclusion bear little relation to the legal criteria for housing or mainstream markers of "respectability" and instead hinge on social and cultural signals defined in the towers.

Pirate radio DJs and others who lived and worked in council housing whom I interviewed described residents' relationship with the stations as ranging from uneasy to positive. My sample comprised mainly the DJs, who have an interest in portraying this relationship as positive. But many also describe experiences

of stations being run by residents. One longtime pirate radio DJ described his surprise the first time he came to an East London pirate station:

The only thing that I was surprised by was—I always thought it [the studio] would be in somebody *else's* flat. Like they would pay someone [to rent the space] . . . but the first studio I went to it was one of the guys' on the station, it was in his own flat! I got to realize as time went on, people were dedicated to the cause, whether it be climbing up onto tower blocks, or having a tenancy for a flat, which he was willing to lose, so the radio could be on. (Participant #2)

In this account, the speaker identifies the station-runner's level of commitment—risking his own tenancy—and also describes how the pirate radio station was intertwined in the daily life in a tower block.

Quite a few DJs I spoke with described their station having positive (if mixed) associations with other local residents:

The first station I was in was in my local area: the studio, the transmitter . . . and all the people as well, hmm, not all of them, but probably the core 10 or 12 people that were on there, we all grew up together, right? So everybody fucking knew us! And everybody knew what we were up to . . . People would know: I'm on *this* radio station that broadcasts from *this* address! I guess apart from the people that were upset because of the noise, most people were quite happy for you to get on with it. And if anything, a little bit proud that they know you and they can listen to you on the radio, they know where you are. (Participant #2)

While the complaints of noise and people coming in at all hours from neighbors echo the common complaints of residents in densely occupied living situation anywhere, this experience of pride is notable. Pirate stations put voices and communities on air that were not always heard, and local residents recognized that this was something of which to be proud.

Even local officials sometimes affirmed the value of pirate radio to the community. Despite being paid by the city and thus potentially hostile to illegal and/or unsanctioned cultural practices, housing managers also could recognize local values. One even framed this as preserving a community's rights to spaces for cultural expression: "People have a right to enjoy themselves right? And that's not only being quiet. You might want to hear music!" (Participant #3). He saw residents' "right to enjoyment" as something he was tasked with protecting—not only with enforcing quiet.

The rights protected by allowing noise are particularly salient for communities historically underrepresented on legal radio. This helps explain the ongoing faithfulness of Black listeners to pirate radio. Black audience engagement likely began with stations like the 1980s-era Dread Broadcasting Corporation (DBC), where majority-Black DJs like DJ Miss P described the DBC's mandate to play music from Black artists "that would otherwise never be heard publicly" (Hebdige, 2003, p. 155) but has continued over the years. A 2007 study found that 16% (or more than 1 million) of all London's radio listeners listened to pirate

radio and that an impressive 40% of Black radio listeners in London listened to pirate radio (Office of Communications, 2007). Both council housing demographics, the ongoing historic connections between Black British music and pirate radio and the exilic capacity of pirate radio to foster collective intimacy, explain this ongoing connection (Schlosberg, 2011).

Audience Participation as Programming Power

In serving and representing underserved communities, pirate radio also gives people a kind of cultural authority and influence that would have been impossible on legal radio. Compared with their legal counterparts, pirate stations' audience response has more of a chance to affect DJs', performers', and producers' creative decisions. The real-time feedback helps shape the development of the music and the community. Heightened feedback among DJs, producers, and listeners is especially useful for stations associated with dance music, a genre that is designed to be interactive. Pirate radio has long been closely connected with dance music events, to the extent that DJs have sometimes paid for their own airtime to advertise their skill, building their audiences for gigs. Dance music literally moves people to dance, which cannot be observed without a connection with an audience. Neither these musical nor cultural practices would be given much space on a legal station.

Like pirate radio broadcasters (and DJs), listeners have subverted communication technologies for their own aims. A 2003 *Sunday Times* article describes one strategy:

If listeners like a tune, they call in and then ring off, so the studio mobile registers a "missed call." This costs callers nothing [British Telecom in 2003 did not charge for missed calls]. If Xtreme receives over 20 missed calls from different numbers before a track ends, the DJs play it again. (Munday, 2003, para. 8)

These radio listeners innovated a free way to communicate through a non-free system. In general, successful pirate radio stations' listeners are active and embedded in a dense social network including DJs, vocalists, and producers. Even when alone in the studios, radio DJs receive and share messages from listeners: "Desmond in Stockwell says happy birthday to Darla and her crew." Listeners are sometimes identified by their location and sometimes by a name that marks them as a DJ, producer, or an MC themselves, illustrating a networked creative community (Morley, 2002). Through these feedback loops and collective intimacy, the on-air broadcast itself becomes an exilic space.

The close dynamic between pirate radio listeners and the radio program is a clear example of a system in which a community of listeners has significant influence over station policies. While this relationship coincidentally fulfills one requirement for a legal community radio license, this interactive structure is neither formalized nor transparent to outsiders. This makes it hard to legitimize in the formal legal system.

The Affordances of Legalization: Why Is Pirate Radio So Rarely Legalized?

As in most countries, in the United Kingdom the government regulates the broadcast airwaves, and the BBC initially divided the spectrum into sectors it owned and controlled in 1922. The first wave of pirate

radio broadcasters in the early 1960s focused especially on U.S. rock'n'roll music and challenged the state radio monopoly. This challenge ultimately led the state to create some private commercial radio licenses in 1972 (Barbrook, 1990). One might have expected these newly licensed stations to provide programming for the audiences (or markets) unmet by the BBC. But while advertiser-funded radio stations provided music for rock music fans, they programmed very little music associated with people from former colonies, such as Jamaicans or Indians living in the United Kingdom. The BBC's well-documented ongoing hostility to music from Black British and West Indian communities (Bradley, 2001; Simon Jones, 1988) also clarifies why these communities turned to other platforms for cultural expression.

In theory, community radio licenses could serve ethnic minority communities excluded from other platforms. Indeed, broadcasters who apply for community radio licenses are expected to "provide representation to social groups that are under-served, marginalised, neglected, or misrepresented by mainstream media" (Scifo, 2011, p. 44). Pirate radio, for the geographical and architectural reasons described above, does meet this requirement. But these audiences have not found an easy home in community radio licensing.

One explanation for this is the content broadcast by pirates and how it is understood: Most second-wave pirate radio broadcasters play music, especially dance music. Although scholars of popular culture and social dance describe well how dance music serves communities in need (Buckland, 2002; Fikentscher, 2000; O'Hagan, 2004; Stanley-Niaah, 2010), the state does not recognize this value and has even seen it as antithetical to state interests (varying on the ideological orientation of state actors at various times). At times the U.K. government has specifically recognized dance music as antisocial; for example, following a moral panic over the occupation of public and private spaces by dance music events, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 banned "any gathering of 20 or more people where . . . 'music' includes 'sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats'" (1994, § V section 63(1)(b)). Music genres fostered by pirate radio have been the subject of moral panic that knits together concerns over illegal broadcasting, threatening or disrespectful "youth culture," and thinly masked racial fears of Black and other youth of color seen as uncivilized or dangerous. This pattern has persisted through to more recent music genres like grime in the 2000s and drill in the 2010s, which were popularized on pirate radio and associated especially with Black British communities (Adams, 2019; Hancox, 2016; Thapar, 2018), whose reputations make them unattractive to community radio licensors.

Additionally, most pirate stations cannot meet the "noncommercial" requirement for a community radio license. Often started by a DJ or group of DJs who purchase their own equipment, pirate stations usually fund operations through a combination of advertising and subscriptions from DJs themselves (Sawyer, 2008). As Schlosberg (2011) notes, this "commercialism is often an unavoidable means of survival rather than an end in itself" (p. 10). In addition, the nature of that commercialism is local and culturally specific. Advertisers are embedded in the particular communities that host the pirate stations and serve cultural niches—from Black hairdressers to Caribbean restaurants, and from record stores to nightclubs or raves—and money spent on pirate radio tends to circulate through the local community. "Commercial," in this case, is not the opposite of "community."

Party politics also make community radio licenses less secure than "legalization" might suggest. When a political party hostile to the audiences or missions of community radio is in power (e.g., during the

Thatcher era), the state revokes licenses and cuts funding. Licensed noncommercial radio is thus dependent on political whims, while pirates may have greater resiliency because they control their resources more directly (Scifo, 2011).

Another structural impediment to acquiring a community radio license are the government-mandated transparent reporting and documentation requirements. Potential applicants' familiarity with (or adaptability to) licensing agency procedures requires cultural capital. The level of formal accountability that state oversight requires increases the cost of obtaining and keeping a license and restricts content as well. One longtime DJ spoke of the time when a station he had worked at finally got a community radio license:

When I looked at the paperwork and the shit that they had to go through, it was a five-year period! It wasn't like they applied for it and they got it. It was five years of hard slog, going to meetings, putting your balls on the line, financially. (Participant #6)

But the amount of work is not the only issue. Elsewhere, he pointed out that he had done a lot of work in that same station when it was a pirate station: "A lot of my heart and soul is [there], I gave a lot of blood sweat and tears to that station as a pirate. Setting up transmitters, being in the studios, looking after DJs." But, he says, he and the original DJs were not able to pursue legalization because, as he put it, "we were pirate kids. If anything we were scared of the authorities. We didn't want to sit with them and have a meeting, we'd been running away from them our whole life!" (Participant #6). These DJs' extralegal orientation, developed from long experience of being legal targets, made them at least uncomfortable with, and at worst suspicious of, working with the authorities.

Flourishing in the Cracks

Pirate radio exists in what Schlosberg (2011) calls a "policy stalemate" (p. 17). Existing licenses poorly fit the dominant practices or economic needs of pirate radio operators and DJs, and there is little political energy to create licenses that would suit pirate radio's needs. This lack exists both on the government side and on the pirate radio side where many are ambivalent about the level of visibility they want. Some stations and DJs desire to be legalized, and some stations successfully become so. Despite this, pirate broadcasting has persisted. Some participants, like MC Maxwell D, suggest that these integrations can come at a cultural cost:

I would say Rinse does [represent the community], because they're still babies in this legal license thing and do still have their ear to the underground. The others, I would say NAH! They've been taken over by corporations, which is sad. You may think they have the ear to the street because they know how to get the underground artists on the station but the station, in general, is run by a corporation and eventually washes them out. (as cited in Brosnan, 2014, para. 12)

With legality comes a weakening of local social, economic, and cultural ties with creative communities, which is why pirate radio communities can only make unsteady claims on legalized airwaves (Schlosberg, 2011).

In the face of these unsteady claims, pirate radio has fostered close and interwoven social relationships. The exilic aspects of pirate radio, including its illegality and disrepute, are what allow it to serve important economic and creative functions for musicians, vocalists, producers, and record labels. Even if they do not generate performance royalties (as would U.K. commercial radio airplay), it is on the pirate stations that new artists can build an audience, especially through the intense feedback loop and collective intimacy among listeners, performers, and live performances. The local and bounded nature of pirate radio ties it to a community of listeners and fans who can be harshly critical and competitive. Simultaneously, the locality and shared language provide more space for learning and experimentation (Birket-Smith, 2012).

This feedback loop can help artists develop and grow in dialogue with a creative community, an invaluable resource for those not likely to receive such support from the formal music industry. The ephemerality of radio contributes to its intimacy: In a *New York Times* interview, Jama Little (a.k.a. Jammz), a 27-year-old grime MC from Hackney, described pirate radio as “the last safe space you have as an artist to make mistakes” (as cited in Quinn, 2018, para. 22).

The parameters of this creative community are bounded by the social context of pirate radio and dance music, with different requirements from those on commercial or BBC radio, bound as they are by commercial mandates, programming directives, copyright law, and the interests of large advertisers. Thus, pirate radio provides a site for learning and experimentation—specifically tied to marginalized communities—not possible on legal music radio.

Entertainment Versus Politics

Schlosberg (2011), like many scholars and policy makers discussing pirate radio, suggests that “the service that most pirates provide is best characterized as entertainment rather than community oriented” (p. 16). “Entertainment” for marginalized communities, however, cannot be easily separated from political organization and discourse. For people whose culture is not represented by the dominant media, the very fact of expressing shared culture has political significance. Music has an especial capacity to support conditions of collective intimacy, through the embodied acts of listening and/or dancing. For oppressed people, this is where music can be a “site of repair of cultural injuries” (Gray, 2004, p. 1994). However, popular media and the law itself identified dance music as culturally risky content, continually linking it to both marginalized communities and categories of behavior like crime and drug use (Hesmondhalgh, 1997). These stigmatized reputations can preserve some intimacy and control in an exilic way, by scaring off people comfortable in (and comforted by) the dominant culture. However, the negative associations can also spark moral panic, also often heavily racially coded (Hancox, 2016; Thapar, 2018), which can be used to justify increased intervention such as the 1994 Criminal Justice Act’s ban on “repetitive beats.” These historically informed dynamics structure U.K. mass media platforms by normalizing both the exploitative relationship the British empire had with its colonies and the inequalities between the Global North and the Global South in which British colonialism played a foundational role. In this light, sites allowing more autonomous expressions of one’s own culture can provide a way to assert one’s own value in the face of racial and class hierarchy. In exilic spaces, outside the firm control of state power and respectability, communities generated musical forms including reggae, house, hardcore, jungle, garage, grime, and dubstep that especially

embodied Black people's claims to cultural space (Cordell & James, 2021; Hancox, 2016; Palmer, 2021). These musical forms were all fostered on pirate radio.

Conclusion: Why Should We Care About Media Technology's Exilic Capacities?

Media technologies have the capacity to disrupt dominant social orders and/or to be useful to marginalized communities. But these capacities are not a given, and they are not dependent solely on whether a technology is new or old, legal or illegal, digital or analog. The interaction between a technology and its social context shapes its capacity to foster subversion, resistance, or escape from the dominant social order.

Participants in early pirate radio culture often analogize to the Internet. As MC Maxwell D put it,

If you wanted to hear what raves you had to go to, new tracks from the hottest artist, or even different views on social issues, pirate radio was the thing to be locked into. You really felt part of it. The pirates created a hub for community before the Internet and computers were readily available to everyone. (As cited in Brosnan, 2014, para. 4)

But pirate radio's technologies and networks were the strongest among a very different demographic than where computers and the Internet first took hold: The poor, working-class, Black, and immigrant urban communities. Computer-based communication is less available to the poor and marginalized (Gilbert, 2010; Maier, 2015) and increasingly filters its content through copyright enforcement and other supposed monetization algorithms (Macmillan, 1998; Mann, 2016). This means pirate radio is embodied in and relies on different relationships and hierarchies than does computer-based communication.

The relationships and hierarchies on pirate radio did not mean it was equally accessible to all, even within the communities living around the station. Alongside race and class, gender plays an understudied role both in how pirates function and in the broader broadcast landscape: Pirate radio and the U.K. DJ culture is unquestionably male-dominated. But while gender, race, and class structured who was able to participate in pirate radio, a person's ability to profit from radio via crossing over into a job on a legal station may have had different parameters. On legal radio, white purveyors of Black music on the radio have had notable success: The primary example is David Rodigan, who, while not finding a permanent home on the BBC due to its continuing hostility to Jamaican popular music, did start a show playing Jamaican music on the first licensed commercial station, Capital Radio, in October 1979, before any Jamaican or Jamaican-British DJs were on legal radio (Burrell, 2012). Such dynamics suggest the social positions of different actors create different affordances in relation to illegality and legality.

Overall, operating outside of the law has allowed marginalized communities to foster moments of more autonomous cultural practice. But this autonomy is not wholly separable from engagement in the system. Exilic spaces like pirate radio have the power to confer a cultural authority on musical practitioners that mainstream purveyors eventually make space for or attempt to co-opt. Mainstream commodification of Black culture has many harmful effects, but critiques of "selling out" can obscure the double-edged nature of such re-exploitation. Goodman (2010) has suggested that the relationship is a kind of mutual parasitism,

wherein legal radio and music industries rely on pirate practices and spaces at the same time as those practices rely on those infrastructures' loopholes. While from an industry perspective this may be the case, this has not prevented the repeated state incursions to arrest, brutalize, and confiscate equipment or simply limit people's ability to move about the city (or go onto a rooftop). These incursions reinforce racialized and classed attitudes about culture making.

Pirate radio is a continuing site of negotiation and struggle over the right to take up space and make culture. While there are degrees of mutual parasitism, at the same time it is also useful to identify points of resistant or transformative possibility. One such point has arisen from the way pirate radio has at times been able to foster Black and other marginalized voices whose creative practices challenge colonial authority and respectability. This reflects an exilic possibility of pirate radio. It is also notable that in different places, pirate radio has been further from or closer to different communities; for example, Palmer (2021) suggests Birmingham pirate radio may be the closest to Jamaican communities. Dynamics discussed here might help us understand why that is, enabling us to consider questions such as the following: What other spaces existed for culture making, and what were the physical, cultural, and legal contexts structuring musical engagement and control of access? To what extent are they exilic, and do they foster collective intimacy among participants? Living in public housing is not necessarily a condition of exile, but when accompanied by neglect, segregation, and architectural isolation, it can paradoxically grant a kind of local authority. This is a key aspect of exilic spaces—not simply exclusion, but that the terms of participation are to some extent defined by the marginalized people rather than by the dominant social hierarchies.

Cultural Autonomy in Shifting Platforms

Illegality can grant a measure of autonomy to communities. Legal licenses reflect the outcomes of battles between ideologies and political interests. The authorities' targeting of pirates appears to serve a public relations purpose by signaling the state's ability or willingness to intervene in and discipline marginalized communities. Taking these facts into account suggests that the decriminalization of pirate radio, rather than its legalization, might serve communities better although the clashing interests between commercial and community control would still require careful attention.

Currently the rise of Internet radio is also affecting pirate radio's social function. Live broadcasting embedded in a networked community in some ways seems perfectly suited to the Internet, but the relaxing and reshaping of geographic and cultural limitations may have negative consequences. The 21st-century Internet is even less exilic than legal radio. Most importantly there is no structural advantage or local control by the poor and working class: Broadband and the technology to access it are limited by race and class in all cities in the world. Online communication itself is increasingly monitored by commercial and state entities; with the technology to monitor audio as well as text and visual imagery improving, regulation and appropriation can occur on many levels (Mann, 2019). Increased accessibility can further fuel appropriation. Similarly, while sampling and sonic reuse are common in pirate radio cultures, these original practices occur *within* marginalized communities with agreed-on norms and shared interests. Online, those who make sample-based music but cannot afford to license samples may see their music kept out of copyright-filtered online circulation, while those who have resources or industry ties may reuse much more easily. Relatively privileged actors can thus reuse the sounds of the marginalized for their own profit. Will Internet radio simply increase the chances of this

happening, as well-heeled and well-connected broadcasters and DJs crowd out the new but unprivileged, extending the privilege of white and middle-class purveyors of Black, Indigenous, and people of color cultures? Will this shorten the learning curve of new talent who are thrown into a broader audio pond without a community to support them? An influx of relatively privileged outsider listeners and performers would limit a station's ability to serve and reflect marginalized communities. Re-prioritizing policies away from criminalization and attending to the need for unsupervised, ephemeral, non-tracked, and community-controlled cultural expression could allow these practices room to breathe on old and new technological platforms.

References

- Adams, R. (2019). "Home sweet home, that's where I come from, where I got my knowledge of the road and the flow from": Grime music as an expression of identity in postcolonial London. *Popular Music and Society*, 42(4), 438–455. doi:10.1080/03007766.2018.1471774
- Anderson, J. N. (2004). *A can of worms: Pirate radio as public intransigence on the public airwaves* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison.
- Anderson, S. (2015, December 21). How pirate radio made grime great, again. *The FADER*. Retrieved from <http://www.thefader.com/2015/12/21/how-pirate-radio-made-grime-great-again>
- Back, L. (2017). *New ethnicities and urban culture: Social identity and racism in the lives of young people* [electronic book version]. London, UK: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315164601 (Original work published 1996)
- Barbrook, R. (1990). Melodies or rhythms?: The competition for the Greater London FM radio licence. *Popular Music*, 9(2), 203–219. doi:10.1017/S0261143000003913
- Birket-Smith, F. (2012). *Just 4 U London: Pirate radio in a geographic perspective*. Saarbrücken, Germany: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Boyd, D. A. (1986). Pirate radio in Britain: A programming alternative. *Journal of Communication*, 36(2), 83–94. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1986.tb01426
- Bradley, L. (2001). *This is reggae music: The story of Jamaica's music*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Brosnan, L. (2014, October 28). "I really miss the community spirit of pirate radio": An interview with Pay As U Go Cartel member, Maxwell D. Complex UK. Retrieved from <http://uk.complex.com/music/2014/10/maxwell-d-interview>
- Buckland, F. (2002). *Impossible dance: Club culture and queer world-making*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

- Burrell, I. (2012, November 22). DJ David Rodigan resigns from Kiss FM over "marginalisation" of reggae music. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/dj-david-rodigan-resigns-from-kiss-fm-over-marginalisation-of-reggae-music-8344087.html>
- Chapman, R. (2012). *Selling the sixties: The pirates and pop music radio* [electronic book version]. London, UK: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203182178 (Original work published 1992)
- Cordell, T., & James, M. (2021). Mutualism, massive and the city to come: Jungle pirate radio in 1990s London. *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 77, 109–120. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/791327>
- Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994*, c. 33 § V. Retrieved from <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/contents>
- de Lacey, A. (2021). Pirate mentality: How London radio has shaped creative practice in grime music. *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 19(1), 197–215. doi:10.1386/rjao_00041_1
- Dooley, J. (2008). *Noise annoys: Pirate radio and the distribution of music in the digital age* (Doctoral dissertation). Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.
- Fikentscher, K. (2000). *"You better work!": Underground dance music in New York City*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Galloway, A. R. (2012). *The interface effect*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Gilbert, M. (2010). Theorizing digital and urban inequalities: Critical geographies of "race," gender and technological capital. *Information, Communication & Society*, 13(7), 1000–1018. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2010.499954
- Gilroy, P. (1991). *"There ain't no black in the Union Jack": The cultural politics of race and nation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Goddard, G. (2011). *KISS FM: From radical radio to big business: The inside story of a London pirate radio station's path to success*. London, UK: Radio Books.
- Goodman, S. (2010). *Sonic warfare: Sound, affect, and the ecology of fear*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gray, O. (2004). *Demeaned but empowered: The social power of the urban poor in Jamaica*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press.

- Hamnett, C. (2003). Gentrification and the middle-class remaking of inner London, 1961–2001. *Urban Studies*, 40(12), 2401–2426. doi:10.1080/0042098032000136138
- Hancox, D. (2011, September 8). Pirate radio rave tapes: “You can’t Google this stuff.” *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/sep/08/pirate-radio-rave-tapes>
- Hancox, D. (2016, February 18). Party politics: Why grime defines the sound of protest in 2016. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/feb/18/party-politics-why-grime-defines-the-sound-of-protest-in-2016>
- Hebdige, D. (2003). *Cut ‘n’ mix: Culture, identity and Caribbean music* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hebditch, S. (2015). *London’s pirate pioneers: The illegal broadcasters who changed British radio*. London, UK: TX Publications.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (1997). The cultural politics of dance music. *Soundings*, 5(35), 167–178. Retrieved from <https://banmarchive.org.uk/soundings/soundings-issue-5-spring-1997/the-cultural-politics-of-dance-music/>
- Hind, J., & Mosco, S. (1985). *Rebel radio: The full story of British pirate radio*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Johns, A. (2010). *Death of a pirate: British radio and the making of the information age*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Jones, S. (1988). *Black culture, white youth: The reggae tradition from JA to UK*. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Education.
- Jones, S. (1988, July). *Making waves: Pirate radio and popular music*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Portland, OR. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=ED295272>
- Macmillan, F. (1998). Copyright, culture and private power. *Prometheus*, 16(3), 305–316. doi:10.1080/08109029808629284
- Maier, G. (2015, October 18). *Addressing digital inequality in the United Kingdom*. London School of Economics Undergraduate Political Review. Retrieved from <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseupr/2015/10/18/addressing-digital-inequality-in-the-united-kingdom/>
- Mann, L. K. (2016). White faces in intimate spaces: Jamaican popular music in global circulation. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 9(2), 266–283. doi:10.1111/cccr.12106

- Mann, L. K. (2019). Booming at the margins: Ethnic radio, intimacy, and nonlinear innovation in media. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 383–401. Retrieved from <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/8591>
- Morley, D. (2002). *Home territories: Media, mobility and identity*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Munday, M. (2003, September 7). Criminal records. *The Sunday Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/criminal-records-g5cIn9dg9z9>
- Office of Communications. (2007, April 19). *Illegal broadcasting—Understanding the issues*. Retrieved from <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/other/radio-research/illegal-broadcasting/>
- O'Hagan, C. (2004). Gospel music and Baptist worship in the U.K. garage scene. In G. St John (Ed.), *Rave culture and religion* (pp. 185–196). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Palmer, L. A. (2021). "Dem a call us pirates, dem a call us illegal broadcasters!": "Pirates' anthem," PCRL and the struggle for Black free radio in Birmingham. In W. Henry & M. Worley (Eds.), *Narratives from beyond the U.K. reggae bassline: The system is sound* (pp. 163–183). Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Phillips, D. (1998). Black minority ethnic concentration, segregation and dispersal in Britain. *Urban Studies*, 35(10), 1681–1702.
- Quinn, A. (2018, October 3). London's radio pirates changed music. Then came the Internet. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/03/arts/music/london-pirate-radio.html>
- Sawyer, M. (2008, November 2). You may think they're a bunch of amateurs . . . *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2008/nov/02/radio-radio>
- Schlosberg, J. (2011). Transmit/disrupt: Why does illegal broadcasting continue to thrive in the age of spectrum liberalization? *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 9(1), 7–24. doi:10.1386/rjao.9.1.7_1
- Scifo, S. (2011). *The origins and development of community radio in Britain under New Labour (1997–2007)* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Westminster, London, England. Retrieved from <http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/12210/>
- Severs, D. (2010). Rookeries and no-go estates: St. Giles and Broadwater Farm, or middle-class fear of "non-street" housing. *The Journal of Architecture*, 15(4), 449–497. doi:10.1080/13602365.2010.507526

Sims, M., & Michaels, R. (2000). From DJ to VC: How the pirate radio experience has guided a new media investor. *InterMedia*, 28(6-7), 12-14.

Stanley-Niaah, S. (2010). *DanceHall: From slave ship to ghetto*. Ottawa, Canada: University of Ottawa Press.

Thapar, C. (2018, September 12). The moral panic against U.K. drill is deeply misguided. *Pitchfork*. Retrieved from <https://pitchfork.com/the-pitch/the-moral-panic-against-uk-drill-is-deeply-misguided/>

Wolton, A. (2011, March 26). Tortugan tower blocks? Pirate signals from the margins. *Datacide 11*. Retrieved from <https://datacide-magazine.com/tortugan-tower-blocks-pirate-signals-from-the-margins/>

Yoder, A. R. (2002). *Pirate radio stations: Tuning in to underground broadcasts in the air and online*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.