

Engaging Radio

Proposal for Seed Grant

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Project Narrative

The radio could be the finest possible communications apparatus in public life, a vast system of channels. That is, it could be so, if it understood how to receive as well as transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a network instead of isolating him. - Bertolt Brecht¹

Tuning into the radio becomes a sort of tuning into sociality... - Daniel Miller²

As one of the oldest and most pervasive forms of mass communications, radio has formed an integral but often unnoticed part of the background of everyday life in the 20th and 21st centuries. Located in the borderland between public discourse and private enjoyment, radio can be a device for communication and a medium for artistic practice and experimentation. It may serve as a tool for propaganda or protest, a collector's item, or a site for familial and community building. Today, new trends in radio programming, controversies over broadcast content and regulation, and technologies such as digital and satellite radio have brought the long-invisible landscape of radio back into public focus. Although radio has been studied in traditional mass communications research, it is often with an emphasis on industrial, technical, and policy structures of broadcasting that gives little sense of listeners' complex responses to and interactions with the medium. Only quite recently have a few humanities scholars begun to examine the social, cultural, material and artistic dimensions of radio; this project will make a substantive contribution to this emergent scholarly field.

As our title indicates, the **Engaging Radio** project will focus on the qualitative dimensions of people's historical and contemporary interactions with radio as a mass medium, a vehicle of expression, and a series of ubiquitous material objects. Drawing on the diverse expertise of scholars in literary and cultural history, media studies, anthropology, design, and science and technology studies, Engaging Radio will explore the social, cultural and material experience of radio from a variety of perspectives. These include:

1. Radio as material object, a product of processes of design and manufacturing, a ubiquitous physical presence in homes, cars, public spaces, and even attached to people's moving bodies
2. Radio as a mass medium produced by competing commercial, governmental, and nonprofit interests, with content ranging from news to music to serial drama
3. Experimental and artistic uses of radio from its inception to the present
4. Implications of new technological developments (e.g. digital radio and satellite radio) for altering the social relations and contexts of the medium

¹ Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as a Communications Apparatus," in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, ed. Marc Silberman, (London: Methuen Press, 2000), 42

² Daniel Miller, "Why Some Things Matter," in *Material Cultures*, ed. Daniel Miller, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 15

Grants Sought

The end results of the project will include a variety of innovative public projects that will actively engage audiences in the process of seeing, hearing, and thinking critically about the role of radio in public culture and personal lives.

As the **Engaging Radio** group includes seven members and therefore the ability to write multiple grant proposals, we intend to send in applications to the NEH as well as the NSF, as outlined below.

- a. NEH Radio Projects: Development and Production Grants
Deadline: March 22, 2006
- b. NEH Collaborative Research Grants
Deadline: November 01, 2005
- c. NSF Digital Society and Technologies NSF 03-611
Deadline: December 06, 2005
- d. NSF Science & Technology Studies Collaborative Research NSF 04-531
Deadline: August 01, 2005

Goals & Outcomes

Funds awarded through the IHR competitive seed grant will be used towards the expenses we expect to incur in the planning of the larger grant, either through NEH and/or NSF.

The NEH/NSF grant will be used towards the creation of the following.

A pilot database of theoretical essays, images, sound files, and other archival materials, which will provide us with a digitally-accessible roadmap to the rich history of radio as it is conceived theoretically, visually, materially, legally and aurally. In addition, the database will form the foundation for a web-based version of the physical exhibition (described below), and will aid the development of an online learning community with research tools such as glossaries, annotation tools for online collaborative writing, communication areas such as threaded discussion lists and real-time chats.

An exhibit titled **Engaging Radio** that will focus on sound, the materiality of radio as well as cultures of sound production, distribution and consumption. This exhibit will exist as a traveling exhibition in museum spaces across the United States, as a live radio broadcast over the airwaves, and as a streaming audio broadcast in webspace.

A radio series in collaboration with KAET or other stations that will include sound productions, interviews with radio sound artists, and lectures and discussions.

Publications to document the process and content, which will include a catalog of the exhibition, journal articles, and publicity material in the popular press.

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