

Radio Orange 94.0 – Viennese Community Radio

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Abstract

Radio Orange 94.0 is the largest community radio station in Austria. It broadcasts daily radio programs produced by volunteers in currently seventeen languages. Founded in Vienna in 1998 after a period of illegal pirate radio initiatives, the station remains to this day non-profit, non-commercial and committed to its DIY roots. This article describes the past and present of Radio Orange 94.0 with a special focus on the role of participatory decision-making bodies in programming and dealing with editorial issues. It also addresses the structural dependencies on funding that have proven to be precarious for Radio Orange 94.0.

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1 *Radio Orange's* Origins and Status quo

Radio Orange 94.0 is the largest community radio station in the German-speaking world. Since its founding in 1998, it has been broadcasting exclusively commercial-free programs produced by more than 400 volunteers. Currently, around 200 different programs go on air, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. *Radio Orange 94.0* provides media space, production resources, terrestrial and digital distribution. It also offers inclusive media education to all people living in Vienna.



Fig. 1: Radio trainer Maiada Hadaia (left) with guest (Photo: Jaqueline Gam).

As a free radio station, *Radio Orange 94.0* is non-profit, non-commercial and non-partisan. It is a member of the *Verband Freier Rundfunk Österreich* («Austrian Free Radio Association») to which all 14 radio stations in Austria as well as two community television stations belong.¹ In Austria, free radio is enshrined as a separate legal entity in the *Privatradiogesetz* («Private Radio Act») and represents the third

¹ The television stations are OKTO, based in Vienna, and FS1, based in Salzburg. For further information see: <https://www.freier-rundfunk.at/>.

sector in the media system alongside commercial and public broadcasting, which was the goal of the early Free Radio Movement.

1.1 Pirates on Air

The Free Radio Movement in Austria emerged from civil society in the late 1980s and was directed against the state broadcasting monopoly of the ORF («Austrian Broadcasting Corporation»). Viennese activists had initially organized themselves in illegal pirate radio initiatives and used to broadcast from subversive locations such as the *Werkstätten- und Kulturhaus* (WUK) or from the roofs of the Vienna University of Technology.

With the Regional Radio Act of 1993, a ruling of the European Court of Justice, the ORF lost its radio monopoly. In 1998, *Radio Orange 94.0* received its frequency and has been broadcasting continuously on VHF FM 94.0 in the Vienna area ever since. Every ten years, an application must be submitted to the *Rundfunk und Telekom Regulierungs-GmbH* (RTR) to renew the broadcasting license. This procedure is subject to certain conditions. For example, a license can be lost if the station is out of operation for more than 72 hours. Overall, interest in VHF broadcasting licenses remains high: Private-sector groups including tabloid giants, compete for the relatively few open terrestrial licenses in Austria, often in direct competition with non-commercial radio projects.

1.2 Goals and Basic Attitude of Free Radios

The goals of the Austrian Free Radio Movement are: Free access to media education, free access to the means of production (such as recording equipment, editing suites, and audio programs on a non-commercial open source basis) and the availability of broadcasting frequencies in order to distribute radio programs via FM or livestream and eventually place them in the radio section of the Cultural Broadcasting Archive (CBA). The basic principle is the demand for open access in order to allow all interested parties – regardless of age, social

class, gender, language, and physical ability among others – to participate in radio broadcasting.

Bertolt Brecht's radio theory from the 1930s, according to which every receiver of media is also a transmitter, was supported by the workers' radio movement in the early days of radio in Austria and beyond, and still plays an essential role 100 years later. The idealistic notion that lay journalism ensures participation in shaping the media and thus in the public sphere has nowadays given way to a sobering pragmatism that no longer seeks to change the entire world, but rather to present spaces of change and portray places of resistance. As a result, today's radio broadcasters often find themselves caught between political self-empowerment on the one hand and increasing their own competence as broadcasters on the other. They see free radio as places of professionalization that also serve as training spaces and experimental laboratories from which to enter professional journalism. Other participants consider free radio as a space for leisure activities, where a creative »hobby« can be pursued.

1.3 Program Creation in Flux

Orange 94.0's programming is heterogeneous and in a constant state of flux due to its diverse contributors. Every year, new broadcasting groups become active, new ideas are submitted, curated, and integrated into the overall program. Every year, however, long-standing broadcasts are also discontinued, as editorial groups disband, lose time or capacity for long-term freelance or voluntary work, leave the city, or pass away. Whereas in 2017 there were around 150 programs on air, five years later *Orange 94.0* broadcasts around 200 programs in seven categories.

The program constantly requires a critical inventory of its content: Who is missing in the program? Who has stopped broadcasting and why? In 2015, *Orange 94.0's* radio program was broadcast in 25 languages; in 2022, it was broadcast in only 17 languages. This tells us that reaching vulnerable communities requires constant support and assistance, ideally from permanent staff. It also shows the extent

to which voluntary work is dependent on the availability of certain resources. As a result, individual broadcasters often face a dilemma between idealistic goals and realistic possibilities.

2 Ownership and Organizational Structure

Radio Orange 94.0 is managed by a non-profit association of publishers, Freies Radio Wien, which appoints a six-member board of directors every two years. The directors perform their strategic advisory function on a voluntary basis and are liable for two-thirds of total operations. The Executive Management is appointed by the board and is responsible for the remaining third. One of its main tasks is to represent the radio cooperative externally, which also makes it the first point of contact for funding bodies.

Radio Orange sees itself as a learning, democratic and participatory media education organization. The team works part-time in the areas of program coordination and development, education, public relations and public affairs, project coordination, information or audio technology and programming, as well as office, finance, and controlling. The content, which is created on a volunteer basis and first broadcast by the radio, belongs to the radio producers. Creative Commons licenses are used. Freies Radio Wien is the owner of the non-profit radio station including its infrastructure (such as offices, studios, broadcasting equipment, and devices) and employs all part-time staff.

In addition, there are three bodies for participatory programming: the *Orangenes Gremium* («Orange Board»), the program advisory board, and the radio makers' association. The Orange Board, which is made up of equal numbers of management, volunteer radio makers and team members, as well as administration, regularly discusses and documents all relevant issues at an annual forum, to which everyone involved in *Radio Orange* is invited. The program advisory board receives new program proposals and provides technical and content feedback to the submitters. Those with similar proposals are then networked together. Ultimately, the radio makers' association is a kind of works council for volunteers working in radio.

Volunteers receive an expense allowance for the time they spend on the board so that there is no permanent imbalance in meeting times and arrangements between staff and volunteers. Every two years, the radio makers elect new delegates to the committees.

3 Financing in Times of Political and Technological Change

As a non-commercial radio station, *Radio Orange 94.0* is dependent on the public media funding structure. The total annual budget has to be renewed every year by applying for funding from the federal and state governments, RTR, and the City of Vienna, as well as through several smaller tenders from cultural and media education initiatives. More than 90 percent of the total income comes from subsidies and grants, less than 10 percent from donations, radio subscriptions, and participation fees for training courses.

Free Radio in Vienna therefore depends on the commitment of its sponsors. Although *Orange 94.0*, being a community medium, is financially secure as of now, budget cuts can occur at any time, as demonstrated by the funding freeze for the Viennese community TV station Okto. In the spring of 2022, the City of Vienna surprisingly stopped funding Okto with immediate effect, leaving their future uncertain after 16 years on air. To date, Okto has managed to keep the station running, albeit in a limited capacity.

In the face of this looming threat, *Orange 94.0* is looking to generate additional revenue without sacrificing its basic principle of independence from advertisers. The *Freier Radio Beitrag* (»free radio contribution«) offers listeners the opportunity to support the radio station financially on an annual basis. However, the parallel organization of such crowdfunding efforts and operational financing logic is very resource-intensive. Moreover, free media formats do not automatically find an audience willing to pay for their free content.

The role of non-commercial media as a central building block of a democratic information society is rarely discussed in Austrian media policy. A total of nine Austrian governments have been in office in

the last 20 years, including two right-wing conservative coalitions for about nine years, which were neither politically close to public service media nor to non-commercial broadcasting stations, nor did they appreciate their value as such. The fact that Austrian media policy is caught up in massive patronage politics has become widely known as a result of various media corruption scandals. In recent years, there has been an increasing redistribution of taxpayers' money to supplement funding for commercial private media: While overall funding for journalism and the press has stagnated at a low level for quite some time, the government has recently launched large digitization and transformation funds that include significant structural barriers for the non-profit media sector. Taxpayers' money is being used to support commercial media operations without requiring democratically transparent operating structures.

All business development programs, and especially digitization funding, are tied to a 50 percent self-financing ratio. This poses an almost insurmountable hurdle for non-commercial media and increases the pressure to turn to sponsorships and crowdfunding. Marginalization thus persists, and the third sector of the media system is trapped in latent invisibility. Usual revenue models for media outlets such as advertising, sponsorships, audio on demand, and subscription fees are not adequate for non-commercial radio as they create a dependency on the private sector.

4 Outlook

Radio Orange 94.0 is committed to further development of a non-commercial, open source, non-profit technology infrastructure. Ultimately, we want to make all non-commercial media and cultural productions accessible in a networked space that is open to the public. As quality content becomes increasingly discoverable through non-commercial algorithms, total independence from advertising in the context of a democratic information society is within reach.

Non-profit practices, such as the adoption and development of open software and the DIY principle in program creation, stand in oppo-

sition to a funding landscape that is primarily committed to market radicalism and profit maximization. The latter is in line with the EU's idea of competition, which largely ignores the non-profit principle of community radio in structural terms.

Although the Council of Europe has repeatedly emphasized the central importance of community media – including free radio stations – for media plurality, cultural and linguistic diversity, intercultural dialogue, and local reporting in Europe, *Radio Orange 94.0* will probably be in a similar phase of upheaval in ten years' time as it is today. Our future, like that of all community radio stations, depends on social and economic stability. The recent past has reinforced the notion that a secure energy supply and reasonable electricity prices are a prerequisite for digital media in all phases from production to reception.

We are convinced that as advertising budgets decline, the pressure to meet quotas will disappear. As a result, qualitative criteria for media could become more important. This shift in the debate – away from sales, towards content – may well be an utopian concept in late capitalism. We are working on it.

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