

SUBVERSIVE TECHNOLOGY

Japanese block-wide radiocasts

*Where smaller is better
and more informative*

BY TETSUO KOGAWA
in Tokyo, Japan

IT WAS UNHEARD OF. An FM radio station that reached only a few blocks. Once, when some talk show guests began to debate serious political affairs, several listeners walked to the station to join the discussion. The technology that could have kept them apart was, instead, drawing them together. Everybody was interested.

This type of broadcasting—or perhaps it should be called narrowcasting—could be useful anywhere, but it is of particular interest in Japan where input in mass media is limited and there are no public-access television stations. With only three FM radio stations in Tokyo, for example, the public's demand for more diverse programs has been very strong.

Some friends and I became interested in the free radio movement in Italy and France. While studying the Japanese Radio Law, to see if we could legally open a free radio station, I came across an article saying that "a station whose broadcasting wave is of a very low frequency needs no licenses." Another article defined "low-frequency" as a wave that registers "below 15 microvolts per meter 100 meters from the transmitter."

Tetsuo Kogawa listens to radio—both narrow and broadcasting—in Tokyo's Shibuya ward.



It may reach only a city block, but in Japan, that's not a bad audience.

Such surprisingly easy and legal access to airwaves which are otherwise strictly regulated is intended to accommodate things like wireless microphones, garage-door openers and model airplanes. Although at first, it seemed to have nothing to do with free radio, when I experimented with a small FM transmitter using an appropriate antenna, it turned out that this inexpensive toy reached an entire block of houses. The next step was to find the right kind of transmitter.

I found a small company which sold

transmitters with the maximum power legally allowed. The transmitter had a 0.3-mile range, an area which, in a densely populated city, can house 20,000 residents, all potential listeners. It was so cheap anyone could buy one. After we repeated our "narrowcasting" experiment in the center of Tokyo, my students at Wako University established a station called Radio Polybucket.

At the same time, other people became interested in opening up legal FM stations using this type of transmitter. Some of them succeeded in stirring pub-

lic curiosity and mimicked mass media programming—thus by-passing the radical idea of free radio.

Withing a few months, hundreds of imitators opened stations on campuses, in coffee shops and stores. Newspapers and magazines began reporting on "how to open a 'mini FM' station." My book *This is Free Radio* added fuel to the fire. By the end of 1983 an estimated seven hundred stations had opened across the country.

While hundreds of "mini FM" stations rose and fell in the next three years, at least fifty survive in Tokyo alone. There are more than 100 across the country. Some, less designed to communicate than to entertain, broadcast mainly talk shows and music shows hosted by disc jockeys in "satellite studios" set up in stores and coffee shops.

Others, interested in establishing an alternative to traditional radio, broadcast programs of music, news and discussions intended to inform and educate their listeners. Some even have established large networks with relay systems and monthly program guides. The third type of station, and one of the more viable uses of "mini FM," is one that serves as a neighborhood meeting point.

It would be ridiculous, from a conventional mass media perspective, which wants to attract as large an audience as possible, to be restricted to a 0.3-mile radius. When people within walking distance want to communicate, some would say it is easier to meet than to broadcast to each other. The truth is, these are not incompatible concepts.

At Radio Home Run—the successor to Radio Polybucket—listeners frequently visit the station; it naturally became a gathering place. This could be the most positive function of "mini FM." Radio Home Run is now consciously developing this centripetal function.

In an odd but welcome twist, "mini-FM" stations like Radio Home Run are showing how a new collectivity can emerge from electronic technology. It has reactivated individual desire for free, spontaneous communion. ♦