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# *Radio Libre* (Skyrock) or talk radio as a mechanism framing heteronormative sexuality

**Déborah Gay**

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# ISSUE

The making of sexualities in the media

# *RADIO LIBRE* (SKYROCK) OR TALK RADIO AS A MECHANISM FRAMING HETERONORMATIVE SEXUALITY<sup>1</sup>

Déborah Gay

Translated from the French by Nonta Libbrecht-Carey

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The programme *Radio Libre* has been broadcast on the French radio station Skyrock since 1997, from 9pm to midnight. For more than 25 years, the station's presenter, host and general manager Difoof, surrounded by several other male co-hosts and one female co-host, Marie, has welcomed listeners to 'say it all' and 'hear it all' – to quote the programme's jingle. A wide range of topics are addressed during the three hours of live broadcasting, ranging from sexuality to racism, relationships between men and women, work, and so on. Difoof has been on the air since 1991, when he was already providing a forum for teenagers on a rival station, *Fun Radio* (Deleu, 2006).

Twenty years after the show's debut, the #MeToo movement broke out in the wake of an article by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey in the *New York Times* and the publication of Ronan Farrow's investigation on the website of *The New Yorker*, which implicated American producer Harvey Weinstein in cases of sexual and gender-based violence. This movement, initiated in 2006 by Tarana Burke, was taken up in France under the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc, launched by journalist Sandra Muller in October 2017. Irrespective of these developments, *Radio Libre* maintained the same approach to taking into account what listeners had to say, often about relationships between men and women, which may have evolved with the revelations of sexual and gender-based violence as part of the #MeToo movement.

Several humanities and social science researchers have studied this programme: Hervé Glévarec has written a book on how this programme has been received, in which he shows its role in 'educating, socializing and publicizing teenagers'<sup>2</sup> (Glévarec, 2005: 252), despite the many criticisms that *Radio Libre* has faced, particularly regarding its reputedly 'pornographic' content. In the same book, Glévarec also notes that "talk radio" programmes reflect completely different male-female dynamics. Here, boys call just as much as girls, share their difficulties, ask questions, learn about girls and vice versa' (ibid.: 233). To ascertain whether these calls are indeed equally split between men and women, Doukhan and colleagues performed an automatic calculation of women's speaking time across all broadcasts of this Skyrock programme over one month of broadcasting, in October 2018 (i.e. 70 hours of content), using the open-source software inaSpeechSegmenter (Doukhan et al., 2018). Their estimate, following this process, is that women spoke only 5.86% of the time – which did not include the periods during which music was playing. I manually counted that in October 2018, 56 female listeners were able to speak, against 227 male listeners: two of the 23 broadcasts studied featured no female listeners on air, and men were always in the majority in live discussions. There are therefore far more boys than girls calling in, and the main female voice heard on all *Radio Libre* broadcasts is that of the programme's female co-host, Marie. This imbalance between the voices of men and

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<sup>2</sup> Glévarec defines publicization as the 'socialization of teenagers into the public sphere' (Glévarec, 2005).

women unfolds within a framework which, in particular, allows for the definition of a heteronormativity that I analyse here.

A few studies have examined the place of women in radio in France, including the study carried out by the GMMP (Global Media Monitoring Project) (Biscarrat et al., 2017) and, for instance, partly in the book *Genre et journalisme* by Béatrice Damian-Gaillard, Sandy Montañola and Eugénie Saitta (2021). However, this work focuses on the question of journalists, reporting, and therefore the place of women in the news. Jean-François Têtu (2004) thus refers to radio as a ‘medium neglected’ by academia. While there has been some research on talk-radio programmes (Cardon, 1995; Deleu, 2006; Glévarec, 2005; Rui, 1995), this observation remains generally accurate. As Marion Sandré explains, ‘For discourses produced for media purposes, this informs the very definition of the genre. This media purpose does not simply add on a layer to the discourse, to allow for it to be disseminated more widely; it is integral to the genre, which shapes the whole communication situation’ (Sandré, 2013: 42).

I use the term ‘gender’ here in the sense of social relations between the sexes, or how women’s voices and behaviour are defined and interpreted in relation to men’s voices and behaviour, within the framework of a relationship of power and domination (Guillaumin, 2016; Delphy, 2013).

My aim, in this article, is to examine how the *Radio Libre* broadcasting format contributes to the construction of gender as social relations between the sexes and to the construction of heteronormativity.

How does the programme further entrench or redefine these social relations through questions pertaining mostly to sexuality, and how does it give rise to a ‘hierarchical system of sexual value’ (Rubin, 2020: 157) that essentializes a sexual norm, heterosexuality? I here analyse the way in which the programme’s broadcasting format enables, develops and structures an act of heteronormative discourse, in a society where the relations between men and women are defined by asymmetrical power dynamics. I am interested not in the veracity of the narrative, but in the way it develops and is received and encouraged by this format, which is as follows: from Monday to Friday between 9pm and midnight, listeners are invited to call the studio, and are received off-air by one of the hosts, before going live. They can share their experiences, ask for advice, and chat with the hosts and listeners. The programme is split between talking sessions on a range of themes – gender relations, sexuality, work, discrimination – and games organized by the hosts. The games are all regular events: some of them take place during each broadcast, such as the *double-appel* (two-way call) – a prank call that connects people who don’t know each other –, while others take place on a weekly basis.

The scope of my study of *Radio Libre* is the month of October 2018. I chose this month in order to study a moment in time after the explosion of the #MeToo movement but before the Covid-19 crisis. I was able to conduct a telephone interview with the hosts Marie and Difofo on 9 February 2021, about the *Radio Libre* format and the interactions between men and women on air. This interview was conducted jointly, at the request of the interviewees. With regard to the 70 hours of broadcast, I proceeded by listening very closely, paying attention to the interactions between men and women, whether they were listeners or hosts of the programme. Regarding my use of the terms ‘men’ and ‘women’, I should specify that in the month that I studied, the individuals whom the Skyrock programme invited on air were cisgender, that is, the gender they had been assigned at birth corresponded to their gender identity; no callers or hosts declared themselves to be transgender. The conversations were transcribed, as was the interview, and I sought to identify the repetition of certain patterns or passages that highlighted the format of the *Radio Libre* programme: how does this format encourage the emergence of a particular discourse around sexuality? Does the programme promote a heterosexual norm at the expense of other representations of sexuality?

To answer these questions, I begin by looking at how the programme’s broadcasting format developed in a particular production context in 2018: a specific moment in time – after the #MeToo movement began – and legal context. This format also involves putting several male hosts and only one female host on the air. In the second section, I look at how being a woman is defined by *Radio Libre*, particularly through the figure of Marie, and at the limits of this gender norm. In the final section, I analyse the elements that disrupt and denounce the norms inherent to the discussions about sexuality, as well as the words absent from the programme that reinforce this heteronormativity.

## THE *RADIO LIBRE* FORMAT

In this section I look at how the *Radio Libre* format developed. I analyse the broadcasting context of the 23 broadcasts studied and the way in which the format put a female host on air alongside several male hosts.

### **A specific production context**

In one of the broadcasts in the corpus, from 8 October, a listener calls in because she wants to get her boss, whom she doesn’t like, fired. Difofo then reads out a message from a male listener:

Difofo: ‘Say that he groped you, it’s trendy’, ah, yes, it’s true.

Marie: Yes, but imagine the problems after that.

Listener: Yeah, no, I don't think that's cool.

Difool: Yeah, some people suggest that, you shouldn't do that [...]. The number of messages we get for sexual assault, I know it's trendy these days...

The rest of the discussion then turns to the risks involved in making a false statement, and '*fucking up a guy's life*', according to the co-host Cédric. Difool sees this type of accusation as 'trendy', in an emphatic nod to the #MeToo movement and accusations of sexual and gender-based violence. Yet he takes on an ironic tone to distance himself from the movement. This is the only allusion to #MeToo in the month of October 2018: a brief passage referring to a 'zeitgeist'. As Christophe Deleu (2006: 124) explains:

[...] the media, sometimes relatively unconsciously, set a tolerance threshold for what the public can hear (a threshold that varies from one medium to another and from one time-slot to another). It is therefore not necessarily true to say that the media concertedly prescribe behavioural norms, but what is true is that the media, depending on their audience strategy, welcome particular types of speech and reject others.

By talking about a 'trendy' strategy, Difool disqualifies the feminist discourse underpinning the #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc movements. It would thus seem that such discourse cannot be heard on a station like Skyrock. Talking openly about the possibility of making this type of accusation in order to get someone fired reflects stereotypes that disqualify women's voices. What is more, in our interview, Difool explained that the newfound freedom of speech about sexual assault had not changed the principle of their programme in any way, since:

It's something we've always talked about. On the programme, we've always talked about this kind of subject. So for us, it's nothing new. What is new today is guys calling us to say 'I've been accused of... I didn't do it! They're accusing me of that to prevent me from getting custody of my children'. That's something new. On the other hand, girls who've been harassed, girls who've had a hard time because of men... [...]. It's good that society is addressing this! It's good, but it's true that we've been doing it since the very beginning.

Providing a space for '*painful grievances*', as Christophe Deleu (2006: 132) describes them, is a constant feature of these teenage talk radio programmes, particularly Fun Radio's programme *Lovin' Fun*, which – along with the host – featured the paediatrician Christian Spitz, nicknamed the 'Doc', a serious figure and the programme's scientific guarantor, which Skyrock does not have. Although, since its inception, *Radio Libre* has called on its listeners to share such grievances, the format has not changed in 21 years. Its audience strategy has remained the same: to talk about sexuality completely

freely, using humour and irony to remain entertaining (Glevarec, 2005), without having an expert figure among the hosts, as Fun Radio had had. The fact that men call in to denounce behaviour that calls into question their ex-girlfriends' testimony regarding custody of their children may relate to real problems or, equally as likely, be a masculinist strategy. Édouard Leport has shown that, since the mid-1980s, many fathers in the process of divorcing have accused the mothers of manipulating their children's testimonies or of making false accusations in order to discredit them. Yet these 'waves of false accusations' (Leport, 2022: 122) do not exist. Nor is it a 'new' phenomenon, as Difooll claims. Difooll does not question the veracity of the listener's account, who claims to be calling in response to the #MeToo movement. As Stéphanie Kunert explains, this constitutes a discursive strategy that stigmatizes 'feminism, which is claimed to have tipped the scales against men' (Kunert, 2017: 105). There is therefore a strong anti-feminism implicit in this type of argument – used in particular in child custody cases –, which is difficult to denounce on a programme such as *Radio Libre*. In this specific case, what is implied is precisely that women lie to obtain custody of their children. This discursive strategy is mobilized on a programme on which airtime is already overwhelmingly given to male and heterosexual individuals and which, as we shall see, is sometimes at a loss when it comes to describing sexual violence.

This framework is still governed by a number of legal rules. Following several instances of discussions on the air getting out of hand, the CSA<sup>3</sup>, now Arcom, has regularly warned the programme throughout its existence. It has sent the programme reminders, for example, that 'no radio broadcasting service may broadcast programmes likely to be unsuitable for listeners under the age of 16 between the hours of 6am and 10:30pm' (CSA, 2011). During the month of October 2018, Difooll referred to this institution once, when he listed the names of various pornographic platforms: 'YouPorn, PornHub, and I have to name a third one: *Jacquie et Michel!* There you go, that's for our friends at the CSA, they want more' (broadcast of 30 October). In this sarcastic line, Difooll plays with the idea of having to maintain a balance between the different pornographic sites, just like the CSA counts the speaking time of political parties during election periods, while denouncing what he sees as a conservative bias on the part of this watchdog. An additional website must necessarily be cited, even though pornographic sites are in the CSA's line of fire. Difooll and the broadcasting regulator have been at loggerheads since the presenter's early days on the radio: he was fired from the *Lovin' Fun* programme in 1996, following a warning from the CSA for inciting debauchery (Deleu, 2006).

On Skyrock, pornographic hoaxes are scheduled around midnight, as the last event of the week on Friday nights: Pamela's *rendez-vous des pervers* (rendez-vous for pervers). Pamela is a character

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<sup>3</sup> *Radio Libre* also got into trouble with the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel in 2005, 2006 and 2008, particularly over the description of crude acts on the air.

played by one of the hosts, Romano, who calls men who have left ads on dating websites. The aim is to have live telephone sex with these men, either to get them to come (broadcast of 19 October) or to end the relationship by imitating farting noises, among other things (broadcast of 5 October). These games also promote the defence of a certain form of heteronormativity: while all forms of sexuality can be discussed on *Radio Libre*, this format allows for heterosexual behaviour described as ‘perverse’ to be punished by means of hoaxes. These serve to ‘trace the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal’ (Foucault, 2019). While the question of the place of these games in the *Radio Libre* format and the role of the CSA/Arcom is of particular interest, I wish to take a closer look here at the interactions between the listeners and the members of the programme who promote the defence of this heteronormativity, and of this frontier between what is acceptable and what is not.

### **A female host, several male hosts, and the audibility of heteronormative sexuality**

The *Radio Libre* team is made up of the main host, Difoool, four male co-hosts, Romano, Cédric, Samy and Karim, and a female co-host, Marie. The programme therefore only has one female host, against five male hosts. Coupled with the low number of female listeners who call in, this means that women’s voices are *de facto* in the minority on the programme. Most importantly, as Hervé Glévarec explains, ‘the broadcasting format of Skyrock’s talk radio is such that it is the male hosts, Difoool first and foremost, who stage Marie [...]’ (Glévarec, 2005: 200-201). This staging is mostly sexual. For example, in the broadcast of 9 October, the host asks Marie:

Difoool: Do you have any guys who are very, very into balls stuff? I’m not too into balls stuff myself.

Marie: No, I can’t say that I’ve ever met a guy who was very, very into balls stuff.

Difoool then puts the same question to the other men on the programme, wanting to know if they like ‘*having their balls licked*’, addressing them by their first names one by one. Each of the co-hosts gives a different answer, allowing for different male points of view on this practice to be heard. The host does not ask whether they like to ‘*lick balls*’, as he put it, or whether they ‘*like to lick pussy*’, to keep the same idea, but whether they appreciate the practice about which Marie is being questioned. Similarly, in the broadcast of 18 October, Difoool asks Marie if she ‘*would prefer to be an escort or an actress for Jacquie et Michel*<sup>4</sup>? *Girls, would you prefer to be escorts or actresses for Jacquie et Michel?*’ None of the listeners answer this question. The co-hosts are not presented with the same question: Difoool asks them if they would accept their female partners being escorts or porn actresses, implying that the co-hosts have a say in their partners’ employment as well as their sexuality, and in

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<sup>4</sup> *Jacquie et Michel* is a website that broadcasts amateur pornography.

turn encouraging these men's perception that they have a right of ownership of women's bodies. Nicole-Claude Mathieu argues that 'the bipartition of gender must be mapped on the bipartition of sex, which is itself performed in a normal and normalized form within the framework of heterosexuality' (Mathieu, 2014: 24). This anecdote thus reveals the reproduction of a heterosexuality embedded in male domination, where only men's pleasure is taken into account and where women are seen as means of achieving this pleasure within the framework of a heterosexual relationship. Women's own sexual pleasure was never investigated on the programme during the month of October 2018.

Over the course of a month of broadcasting, only one woman who was openly in a relationship with another woman and one openly gay man called in. During the broadcasts, the host Difooll sometimes asked a male listener if he had a girlfriend or a female listener if she had a boyfriend. Under the guise of equality, the implicit norm audible in the *Radio Libre* broadcasts is primarily heterosexual. While no form of humour was used in relation to the sexual orientation of the two non-heterosexual listeners, practices such as sodomy and fellatio are regularly used as props for mockery among the male hosts, thus promoting a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2014).

In line with Deborah Cameron, I argue that these discussions can serve to perform a sociolinguistic study of heterosexuality: they shed light on 'the role played by institutionalized heterosexuality in the reproduction of unequal gender relations, and of the kinds of femininities and masculinities those relations demand' (Cameron, 2014: 90). Heterosexuality is thus embedded in language, actively contributing to a regime of sexual politics, within the framework of gendered social relations, that defines ways of being a man or a woman. This heteronormativity is all the more evident in the figure of Marie, as she is the only one to have a child:

The fact that Marie has a child, a young boy, a fact known to all regular listeners, appears to be an important dimension of the figure she represents. It radically sets her apart from the other hosts. It takes her out of the teenage world and gives her a responsible and experienced status that contrasts with the carefreeness, immaturity and uncertainty surrounding her fellow hosts (Glévarec, 2005: 200).

This imbalance between men and women among the hosts translates into a hierarchy of practices and genders, reinforcing the audibility of a heterosexual norm that defends men's pleasure above all else. A single heterosexual woman is enough for the programme to represent all the practices and desires of women, whereas the voices of the heterosexual male hosts are plural; there are more of them able to express their point of view on sexual practices and talk about their relationships. Furthermore, this woman, Marie, is the only one embedded in a parenthood regime, which is leveraged to signify that she is more mature than her male colleagues: she takes the position of the serious figure that the Doc

was on Fun Radio. As a mother, however, we will see how her knowledge ties her to an intimate mode and a position of 'care'.

### BEING A WOMAN ON *RADIO LIBRE*

Although Marie is the only person of the female gender on the air, she performs not just any femininity, but an essentialized femininity that contrasts with a femininity presented as false and profoundly disparaged, namely that of trans women. These trans women are also rejected by the men on the programme, who fiercely defend their heterosexuality.

#### **'The' Marie, an essentialized woman**

Marie is the only woman on the programme, which is what gives her a voice. Listeners readily ask her questions directly. She thus becomes the voice of women, representing all women. In the broadcast of 11 October, Difool asks Marie if '*girls mind if a guy is a bit, uhm... a bit chubby*'. She replies: '*We might like a bit of a pot belly, maybe*'. Marie uses the term 'we', speaking on behalf of all 'girls'. Similarly, in the broadcast of 3 October, Difool, in response to a listener's question about how to talk to a girl he likes, gives the floor to Marie: '*Marie, you're a girl...*'. Her individuality is then linked to her gender: it is because she is a girl, and especially because she is the only 'girl' on the programme, that she can bring a different perspective from that of the male hosts.

Marie is also constantly sexualized, although she maintains a position of care, as in the broadcast of 25 October:

Romano: Have you ever irritated (*sic*) in your anus after sodomy?

Marie: Huh?

Difool: Ah, that's a good question Romano.

Romano: [referring to one of the characters he plays on air] I'm a doctor, I'm a doctor.

Marie: No, no, no. If it hurts, I'll stop, you see.

Romano: No, but irritation afterwards.

Difool: Like, you enjoy yourself, but afterwards...

Romano: Well your anus can get inflamed.

Difool: He goes at it like crazy, he pulls out...

Marie: No.

Difool: ...and then you think 'Phew. God, what's he done to me!'

Marie: I've never had any irritation.

Romano: As they say in medical jargon, he really fucked me up. [...]

Marie: Well, you have to use gel! Even for masturbation.

Samy: Thanks for the advice.

Difool: Thank you, Marie, specialist.

Marie: No, but it's true.

In this setup, Marie's position is all the more diminished as Difool is the main host, and therefore the one who has the final say on the programme and the direction it should take. By stating that it is a '*good question*', he gives the male co-hosts full licence to continue with this line of inquiry. Colette Guillaumin (2016) shows that there exists a relationship of appropriation exercised on the group of women as a whole and on each of them, which is evident here. This situation indeed reveals appropriation of Marie's speaking time: she is constantly cut off, and her opposing opinions are not taken into account. We can also observe sexual appropriation, with Marie regularly being staged in a sexualized way. For example, in the broadcast of 12 October, Difool imitates Marie's voice to say that she likes '*her big-fuck Wednesdays*' or her '*sodomy Thursdays*', while in the broadcast of 16 October, Samy asks: '*And did you dildo yourself today, Marie?*' All the hosts can ask about Marie's sexual practices. There are far fewer such questions between the male hosts, and they often talk about their sexual adventures at their own initiative, without being questioned by the other hosts. Finally, Marie takes on the work of discussing risk prevention, comfort and pleasure in sexual practices, through the question of lubrication. The programme reproduces all the elements of male domination: we are provided with only one representation of femininity, against a hegemonic and schoolboy masculinity, in a binary and asymmetrical world.

Marie, presented as 'the' Marie on the programme, is a woman who defines herself by her fulfilled (heterosexual) sexuality, she is the mother of a little boy, and she has had several partners. She talks openly about her sexuality: she explains that her 'dildos' are in her bedside drawer (16 October) and how she uses her hands when she plays with her partner's anus (31 October), or recounts her sexual misadventures with some of her former partners (11 October). In our interview, Difool explained that he hired Marie not because she '*was a girl*', but because she '*is talented*', before adding that:

What I like about Marie, and she knows it, it's that she... Well, she's sexually liberated, without being a, a, quote unquote, a 'slut' in the sense... in the sense that, well, I like sluts and they have the right to be so, fortunately, because a boy who's hot, he's a lady-killer, and a girl who likes sex, she's often, often a slut. Marie, she does break that perception.

Marie is thus a figure who challenges the stigma of the 'whore' for a predominantly teenage audience, a stigma which Isabelle Clair analyses as follows: 'Thus, the first exclusion clause for girls is that they can be imagined as sexually uninhibited, indulging in visible, active sexuality outside restrictive

frameworks' (Clair, 2012: 69). This image is openly opposed on the show, and Difofo explained in our interview that this is a position he has defended since he first launched *Radio Libre*:

No, there's one thing that's come up a lot since the start of the show, and it's what we were saying earlier, and that's that a girl who wants to have fun, to have fun with boys, is often called a slut [...]. But a boy who's not in a relationship, who's not cheating on anyone, and who wants to fuck lots of chicks, who doesn't make them suffer, no one has a problem with that. And for girls, it would be good if it could be the same. In other words, if at some point in her life a girl wants to fuck a lot of guys, well, why not. Why not. And boys, why not too. So... It's often one of the things that comes up most often for us and has done for a long time.

We can also see from this excerpt that not just any female sexuality is defended by the programme: women have the right to have fun as long as it is with boys, as long as they fall within the heterosexual regime, which naturalizes the relationship between gender and heterosexuality. This relationship is not called into question.

Marie also plays on her femininity, for instance in the broadcast of 4 October: Difofo says that he feels like a tennis player as one of the co-hosts, Cédric, throws his cigarette butts at him and he throws them back. Marie speaks up: *'Romano, it's the same with me, and sometimes between my breasts!'* Marie talks about her breasts, thus reifying her body, and about her sexuality. As Béatrice Damian-Gaillard, Sandy Montañola and Aurélie Olivesi explain, 'The action of assigning consists in attributing to a person a place, a function, a role, and more specifically in expecting them to perform it by conforming to the social expectations constructed around gender identities, based on whether they are perceived to be a man or a woman' (Damian-Gaillard et al. 2014: 13). Marie was hired based on Difofo's impression over 20 years ago, and she is still expected to perform that role. Under a transgressive veneer, the programme conveys conservative discourse, through a setup featuring a female host caught between contradictory injunctions: she defines herself as sexually liberated and talks about her partners and her sexual adventures, while remaining assigned to this role, and having to be careful not to be a 'slut', without this term being further defined. It is thus difficult for Marie not to talk about her own sexuality during the broadcasts: she is part of this framework, as a heterosexual woman who talks about her sexual adventures with men. This position has already been analysed by Clare Walsh (2001), as Deborah Cameron and Sylvia Shaw have pointed out (2016): if women are invited into certain spaces where they are in the minority, on the pretext that there are certain roles which they are able to play that are not the same as those of men, then these roles constitute the limit and the constraint placed on their capacity for action.

Marie's femininity is valued: she challenges the stigma of the 'whore', and to some extent denounces this stigma. Women are encouraged to have sexual partners, as long as they are men. The boundary of the norm still exists; it has been moved, but has not disappeared: it has landed firmly at the feet of trans women.

### **To not be a trans woman**

These broadcasts thus produce discourses on gender norms and unacceptable forms of femininity, and on Skyrock, the norm's limit is drawn at trans identity. Trans women are the victims of sexist and misogynistic violence, while both the male hosts and the female host cover up these attacks with humour.

On the programme, trans people are sometimes referred to as '*transvestites*', and discussed only in the context of sex work. In the broadcast of 4 October, Difoole also has this to say about trans people: '*There are guys like that who let themselves get sucked off by... [implying a trans person], each to their own*'. He then asks one of the co-hosts: '*What if one day you feel like it?*' The co-host replies: '*I'll call a psychiatrist*'. In this programme, being or loving a trans person is a mental illness. This assertion is reiterated on the air in the broadcast of 25 October, where trans identity is reduced to what one wears, with womanhood being essentialized by a few key items of clothing: a skirt and heels. This transphobia also involves the fetishization of trans bodies. In the broadcast of 26 October, a listener asks for advice because she is interested in having a relationship with a woman, but only because she is attracted to breasts:

Samy: Why don't you go and see a trans man? It's a guy with a dick and tits.

Cédric: Ha, that's messed up though.

Marie: Ah, that's weird...

Romano: Show some respect Cedric!

Samy: Show some respect!

Cédric: No, but I respect it, but she's talking about a chick, you're telling her about a trans man.

Samy: No, she wants tits!

Romano: And why not?

Samy: She wants tits and she'll get the dick.

Cédric: She's talking about a chick.

Samy: She'll get both, dude.

Difoole: Samy sees the practical side of things.

In this conversation, the hosts are concerned above all with respecting the listener, not a trans person. A trans woman is misgendered as a 'trans man', reduced to a practical tool for fulfilling a fantasy. As sociologist Emmanuel Beaubatie argues, 'Talking to a trans woman using masculine pronouns is a way of signifying to her that her femininity constitutes an unacceptable downgrading and that the male sex is not something one can surrender' (Beaubatie, 2021: 70). In his book, he shows that trans women thus experience downward social mobility, in a patriarchal society where there is a hierarchy between the masculine and the feminine. The *Radio Libre* programme echoes and emphasizes this observation, with the only trans women mentioned being prostitutes, sometimes presented by listeners as migrant women: 'Thai women' or 'Brazilian women' (broadcast of 18 October). These trans women are marginalized as a gender minority and as women of colour. As Jilly Boyce Kay notes, while it is difficult for women to speak out, some women are more likely to be unheard than others: 'it is poor women, migrant women, indigenous women, Muslim women, queer women, trans women, sex workers and women of colour who are most at risk of violence and whose voices are most quickly and viciously attacked or silenced' (Kay, 2020: 8).

The very format of the programme does not give access to the voices of these women, who are not among the listeners who call in to the programme. They are not subjects of their own discourse, but objects of the discourse of others. They are inaudible and fantasized. Mélanie Gourarier argues that this distancing of a specific category, namely women and men with a 'masculinity deficit', to whom we can add trans women who have thus left their assigned gender class, 'reinforces masculine cohesion' (Gourarier, 2017: 120).

There is no mention of trans men in the month of broadcasts analysed: they officially do not exist in the imaginary of *Radio Libre*. Trans men are far less known in the public sphere, and while this allows them to escape the insults and abuse, their existence is denied, obscured by the silence surrounding them.

Regarding trans women, aside from their gender, the sexual practices associated with them are the focus of interest for the men of the programme. In the broadcast of 12 October 2019, Samy tries to find out whether the listener, a 23-year-old truck driver, has had paid relationships with trans women: 'And have you ever done stuff with trannies in car parks? You know, to pass the time'. When the young man denies this, Romano adds: 'No, but you can'. The truck driver nevertheless explains that he regularly gets 'hit on, they come on to me and they won't leave me alone' and adds that it is 'a paid service', in response to a question from one of the hosts. Difoole then asks: 'Do you have any colleagues who have already gone there? Or do you know any colleagues who go to trannies? A violently transphobic sequence ensues, in which trans women are referred to as 'chicks with dicks,

*things, a horrifying thought, "it"*. With voyeuristic interest and a certain fascination, the hosts ask the listener to share a sexual story involving a trans woman, under the guise of benevolence – ‘*you can*’, before dismissing these women as an abomination.

These sequences are repeated many times. Observing them affords insight into how the men of the programme defend an almost paranoid construction of heterosexual masculinity: they are heterosexual men because they do not fantasize about trans women, who are identified as men and who could therefore reveal an underlying homosexual desire in heterosexual men. Florian Vörös explains how heteronormative sexual humour thus ‘constitutes a point of fixation – a common space – for male camaraderie’ (Vörös, 2020: 66) that is built in opposition to homosexuality. While ‘homosexual panic’, as analysed by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick (2008), is no longer acceptable on the air (gay listeners are welcome on the programme), it is evolving and shifting from cisgender people (gay men) to transgender people (trans women) in what could be described as a ‘trans panic’. In the broadcast of 18 October 2018, Romano warns of prostitutes who ‘*don’t declare the gear from the outset*’, ‘*ladies with dicks*’ as Difofo describes them, while in the broadcast of 25 October 2018 a listener gives advice to two other listeners, to avoid ending up with ‘*trannies*’ when visiting prostitutes in Amsterdam. Trans women are thus presented as women who could trap heterosexual men<sup>5</sup> and be desired even though they have (or had) a penis, and thus reveal a potential homosexuality in these men that would be seen as particularly monstrous, at the very bottom of the scale of sexual values described by Gayle Rubin (2020). Romano thus states that he would rather receive oral sex from a man than from a trans woman (broadcast of 12 October 2018), an opinion backed by Difofo.

Trans women are therefore rejected and inaudible, deprived of a voice. Yet some hosts refuse to engage in such performance. For example, in the broadcast of 3 October:

Difofo: Karim was hit on by transvestites.

Karim: Yeah, I bumped into a team of trans people. [...] We had tea together and everything.

Difofo: Each to their own.

Karim does not engage in the game of oppressive humour against transgender people, uses the term ‘trans’ rather than ‘transvestite’, and humanizes an encounter in a positive way, without any sexual objectification. Difofo then cuts the conversation short and changes the subject. The format thus becomes clear: the stories are interesting only if they retain some sensationalism.

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<sup>5</sup> This panic about the trap embodied by trans women is also mirrored in certain conservative anti-trans feminist movements, which present trans women as men pretending to be women in order to get closer to them and sexually assault them.

In this section we have thus seen how men come together and define their masculinities, their heterosexuality, and a certain homosociality partly through the objectification of the feminine, particularly of Marie, and through the rejection of trans women. Marie takes on the care work of the programme, a responsibility reinforced by the fact that she is the only person on the programme to have a child. While we have focused on ‘how to be a woman’ in this section, ‘how to be a man’ is revealed as a counterpoint, though this is beyond the scope of this article. Each of the hosts embodies a certain character, from Cédric ‘the Belgian’ to Romano, who crudely recounts his sex stories, and Difofo, who manages this little world as a hardened bachelor, defining different scales of masculinity.

## A FRAMEWORK THAT TRANSPIRES WHEN IT FAILS

In this section we look at certain elements that transpire in the broadcasting framework and that denounce it. The role of silence on the radio seems to offer an interesting point of entry for the study of a talk radio programme, which is based on uninterrupted conversation. Some words are also absent on the air: those relating to gay and lesbian identities and those denoting tragedies such as illness or gender-based violence. These gaps and absences highlight the limits of the programme.

### **Time for silence**

During the three hours of broadcasting every night, the male hosts and Marie manage the phone lines while also talking on the air. Some questions are addressed directly to one of the male hosts or Marie, others are put to the whole team; they can answer, challenge one another, or react in various ways. Only Difofo does not also answer phone calls and, as the main host, he decides who speaks, or asks questions to get the co-hosts to interact.

Generally speaking, on radio, the talking must never stop, and repetition is important to avoid losing listeners who have just tuned in. While some segments are pre-scripted, such as a feature or news bulletin, others are prepared but not fully scripted, for instance when there are guests on the show. The *Radio Libre* setup relies on the hosts’ ability to improvise and to share ideas live. This is something that Difofo emphasized in our interview, just after he had interrupted Marie:

Marie: But you can take over, there’s no problem.

Difofo: That’s my radio side, as soon as there’s a little blank space, as soon as there’s a little something...

Marie: Exactly. We’re used to it after all these years.

Deborah Tannen points out that interruption can be a demonstration of enthusiastic participation in the conversation, but also an attempt to reclaim the floor in a power struggle. It is almost impossible to know which way the scales are tipped during a radio programme, especially when the interruption comes from the host. The host's role is to prevent the radio from going silent, and to track time precisely, for jingles, music programming, commercial breaks, etc. They are responsible for time keeping and for the running-order sheet<sup>6</sup> during broadcasts. Tannen goes even further: 'Silence alone, however, is not a self-evident sign of powerlessness, nor volubility a self-evident sign of domination' (Tannen, 1993: 176). Refusing to respond and to play along with this radio logorrhoea can thus be seen as an act of defiance and resistance, and is therefore not necessarily proof of submission. Refusing to speak on the radio does not mean refusing to be heard. In the broadcast of 9 October, for example, Marie speaks a lot, and cuts off Difoole. He then asks her a direct and intrusive question:

Difoole: Yesterday we had a *Sky* listener whose girlfriend had bitten his ball, and on top of that she'd caused him a testicular torsion.

Marie: Yes, true!

Difoole: So that means she had to be going to town on his balls, I don't know how, but she had to go...

Marie: ...to straight up bite you've really gotta go for it...

Difoole: ...she had to be going at it like crazy.

Marie: [imitates the sound of something being bitten into].

Difoole: Do you like eating balls, Marie?

Marie: Not particularly, no. What kind of question is that? Shit, see I didn't see that question coming. Damn, I'm speechless.

Although she stops talking and refuses to answer, a few minutes later the host asks her again: '*Marie, you didn't reply, why don't you like eating balls*'. Marie does not speak much for the remaining three hours. Difoole tries to get her to participate over the course of the broadcast, with a listener on the air who works at a fairground: '*Would you have a problem, Marie, with getting stuffed?*' Again, Marie refuses to answer: '*What kind of question is that? Gee but you've got some weird questions for me tonight*'. As Marion Sandré explains, 'Interruption inevitably creates a power dynamic between the speaker who interrupts and the speaker who is interrupted' (Sandré, 2009: 77), but the power dynamic can be flipped on its head: Marie has agency stemming from the programme's broadcasting format.

Silence does not go unnoticed on the radio, and is a denunciation in itself; despite follow ups and questions from the main host, Marie can refuse to speak and to play the radio game.

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<sup>6</sup> The running-order sheet is a document indicating the timeline of the broadcast minute by minute, along with the times and running times of features, advertisements, music, planned interruptions, etc.

## Words that don't exist

In addition to this denunciation of the main host's behaviour through silence, the broadcasting framework is also revealed by the absence of certain words.

During the month of October 2018, the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' were barely uttered even though, in two different broadcasts, a male and female listener called in to explain that they were in relationships (or enjoyed sexualities) that were not heterosexual. Judith Butler notes that 'it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible' (Butler, 2021: 5). While Marie does say that the listener '*likes girls*', the absence of the terms 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'homosexual' operates a shift from a sexual identity to an affective identity. *Radio Libre* then only discusses problems linked to individuals and not more political issues, such as structural homophobia, which are not core topics of the programme.

In the month of October 2018, the word 'lesbian' was used only once on *Radio Libre*: a listener called on 25 October because she wanted to do '*lesbian shows*' with a '*girlfriend*' at nightclubs, and was looking for help to set up this project. These lesbian shows are openly aimed at an audience of heterosexual men and are therefore not representative of the lesbian community; the use of the term 'lesbian' serves to invoke a fantasy, a pornographic objectification of female couples for the outside male gaze. As Heather Butler reminds us: 'The "lesbian" as she is usually represented in heterosexual pornography is thus most often involved in scenes preliminary to sexual intercourse between a man and a woman' (Butler, 2015: 162). The lesbian woman is then not the subject of her sexuality: instead, her sexuality is an object of fantasy for an outside male gaze. Of course, the fact that non-heterosexual male or female listeners refuse to call themselves gay, lesbian, bisexual or pansexual could stem from them refusing to be labelled. It is interesting to note, however, that this term is still used to talk about practices that fetishize the bodies of women among themselves. Out of the 70 hours of broadcasting, this is the only time the word is used. According to Judith Butler 'discourse produces the effects that it names' (Butler, 2014: 2). By not pausing on the use of the term 'lesbian' to talk about this show, in that month of broadcasting, Skyrock's broadcasting framework reinforced the stereotype of lesbian sexuality as catering to heterosexual men and existing only in the context of this male gaze on them. Heterosexuality remains the show's default sexual identity, a heteronormativity also reflected in the choice of words to define the heterosexual practice of 'lesbian' shows which, by contrast, obscures same-sex couples. These are not the only terms that are conspicuous by their absence.

The programme's primary aim is to entertain, and there are other words that seem taboo in discussions about heterosexual sexuality, starting with anything to do with sexually transmitted diseases such as

HIV/AIDS. In the broadcast of 18 October, a listener calls in to ask whether it's 'normal' to be aroused by menstrual blood. While Romano and Marie explain that it's perfectly fine to make love during menstruation, another caller warns that 'you can get diseases like that'. Romano and Marie both exclaim: 'With blood, you have to be careful'. At no point is the word 'HIV/AIDS' uttered, or even the name of other diseases that can be transmitted through sexual intercourse. Yet in a press article in the newspaper *Libération* (Peigne-Giuly, 2000), Difool had explained that a programme like *Lovin' Fun* made it possible to talk about 'AIDS and inform young people'. On *Radio Libre*, we can therefore assume either that the absence of an authority figure prevents open discussions about the virus, or that the hosts must avoid talking about serious subjects that would dampen the mood, which is meant to remain entertaining. In the case of this particular broadcast, fairly vague warnings are nevertheless still possible, by putting another listener on air: the format thus allows for prevention talk by getting an outsider to step in, without the hosts having to take responsibility for it and show some seriousness on an entertainment programme, or assume the position of a moral figure.

This obscuring of certain terms is all the more obvious when it comes to sexual violence. In the broadcast of 22 October, a call goes out for testimonies from people who are 'sex addicts'. Sonia calls at 11:44pm to explain that she once lived with a man who fitted this description:

Sonia: Basically he was an addict, but like crazy.

Difool: It's just that he never slowed down the pace [chuckles in the background]

Sonia: No, but like, you know, when you're ill, you're feeling achy, you want to throw up and everything...

Marie: The guy's not having it.

Romano: Yeah, you've got to fuck.

Cédric: Come on, blow me before you puke.

[...]

Sonia: Yeah, that, yeah, for example, in the morning I absolutely had to do something, even if I was asleep, he'd wake me up, you know.

Romano: Yeah, go on, it's time to blow.

Cédric: Yeah, go back to sleep, go back to sleep.

Marie: A beast...

Difool: But it's still nice for waking up, every day, you wake up, it's not the easiest moment, but you know you're fucking, it's cool.

Marie: Ah but when it's your boyfriend's sex all the time, like that, that's not possible.

[...]

Sonia: No, but he didn't give a shit. I didn't want to. And when he wakes you up at 6am when you only start at 12 or 1pm...

Difool: Ah, because he was waking you up to fuck.

Romano: No, but to get you to blow.  
Cédric: To get a blow job.  
Marie: Crazy.  
Romano: Yeah, he wakes up like, come on, you've got to get up now.  
Cédric: You have to suck. Suck it!  
[...]  
Marie: The guy, ultimately he had no respect for you.  
Presenters: Argh, pff...  
Sonia: No but Marie's right [indistinct noises].  
Difool: We can't hear you anymore, Sonia. No, but you're taking it far, Marie.  
Marie: No, I'm sorry but...  
Sonia: No, she's right though.  
Difool: I'd say rather that he loved you very much.  
Marie: Yeah, right...  
Difool: He really wanted to show you his love.  
Marie: No mercy.  
Sonia: We don't have the same love then.  
Romano: No, but the guy's a bit of a pig.  
Difool: He had a big stiff love all the time.

In this long discussion lasting over four minutes on air, we hear descriptions of non-consensual sexual relations between Sonia and her ex-partner. Although there are different parts to the discussion, the male hosts use crass humour, and only Marie steps in and questions the ex-partner's behaviour. The male hosts seem more shocked by the fact that Sonia was asleep when intercourse began and that Marie talks about '*respect*' than by the ex-partner's practices per se, or the fact that Sonia had to perform sexual acts even when she was ill or didn't feel like it. This conversation reinforces the impression that there is a '*boys club*', as Martine Delvaux describes it, where 'humour, mockery, sarcasm and the humiliation that ensues serve as a bonding mechanism' (Delvaux, 2021: 219) between men. We can also draw a parallel here with what Christophe Deleu (2006) has already identified. In his work on *L'Émission de Christophe Dechavanne*, the researcher shows that the viewer, even when calling about a serious, difficult situation, implicitly agrees to engage in the framework of the programme, which is a comedy programme, as was also the case on *Lovin' Fun* and is repeated on Skyrock. Sonia, the listener, is familiar with the programme and, in spite of everything, takes the risk of telling a painful story.

In the words of the British academic Jilly Boyce Kay: 'What does this tell us about the conditions put on the *audibility* of the traumatised voice?' (Kay, 2020: 66). In other words, while this woman is indeed listened to, how can she be heard? The format of the programme disqualifies her voice, despite

Marie's attempts to defend her. The humour makes this violence impossible to hear and reinforces the image of a 'boys club' and an asymmetry between men and women within a heteronormative regime.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I studied the 23 broadcasts of the Skyrock programme *Radio Libre* in October 2018. The analysis of this month of broadcasting provided a starting point for understanding how *Radio Libre* has operated in terms of the representation of sexualities and gender, for more than 20 years. I was interested not in the veracity of the listeners' accounts, but in the reactions to these accounts, as well as the interactions with the male hosts and the female host, and between them.

The analysis of these talk-radio broadcasts reveals the norm intrinsic to *Radio Libre*, a norm that is reinforced by the format of the programme, which disregards the #MeToo movement while remaining constrained by Arcom rules. This analysis reveals a strong heteronormativity, with few non-heterosexual men and women on air, and both the female host and the male hosts being heterosexual. This heteronormativity is embedded in gender relations and male domination, with the programme's format encouraging the representation of a form of femininity that remains essentialized: one woman speaks on behalf of all women, she is a mother, and she performs the 'care' work on the programme. This female host is assigned certain roles typically given to women, and she is used as an object of fantasy while being disparaged, thus promoting heterosexuality and a 'boys' club' among the hosts. Marie nevertheless also challenges the stereotype of the 'whore', and her liberated sexuality is encouraged – as long as it stays within the confines of a space that remains blurry; she is not allowed to be a 'slut'. The norm has thus shifted, and trans women constitute the boundary that delimits the programme's normative framework more clearly: they are the outer frontier of women, the object of insults, contempt and scorn. Beyond what is said in the broadcasts, Skyrock radio acts as a technology of gender (De Lauretis, 2007), a distorting mirror that reinforces a male-female binarity and, in the process, supports a gendered hierarchy of voices and people. It also acts as a technology of sexuality, promoting certain sexualities – with heterosexuality being essentialized by the framework of the programme – and rejecting others as a 'caste [of] the most shameful' (Rubin, 2020: 157), which includes the sexual practices and attractions associated with trans women. This framework becomes particularly visible when it fails, especially when there is resistance. The role of silence is important with a 'talkative' medium like radio, where only advertising, music and jingles interrupt the continuous flow of the presenters' and hosts' speech. Concealment and refusal to utter certain words thus constitute the only limit to 'say[ing] it all' and 'hear[ing] it all': 'lesbian', 'gay', 'HIV/AIDS' and 'rape' are all terms that are completely absent from the programme. Entertainment is more important than topics such as the identity politics of sexuality, illness, or sexual violence, an

imperative that is reinforced by the absence of a 'serious' figure such as that of the Doc in the days of *Lovin' Fun*.

These factors may explain why it is difficult for female listeners to express themselves on the programme. As Jilly Boyce Kay points out, '*to speak in public at this historical juncture [the #MeToo movement] is necessarily to speak via communicative architectures that function in ways that are not conducive to meaningful care for those who have been abused. However, to remain silent is itself an intolerable injustice*' (Kay, 2020: 61). Skyrock's talk radio programme is one such architecture, and speaking out in this media context, to denounce behaviour, ask for help or share testimonies, is not without risk for female listeners. Speaking out may seem easy, but that is not to say that the person will be listened to or cared for. In line with Deborah Cameron and Sylvia Shaw, we can assume that '*gender is not just a characteristic of individual persons but also a property of institutions*' (Cameron & Shaw, 2016: 11), as is the case within the broadcasting framework of Skyrock's *Radio Libre*. This framework is also informed by a particular marketing positioning, that of a private radio station aimed at young urbanites aged between the ages of 15 and 25, which relies on advertisers who contribute to imposing these gender and sexuality norms.

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