

# FCC Steals the Voice of the Poor

**Federal Government raids Free Radio Santa Cruz and seizes its equipment.**

by Becky Johnson

**O**n the morning of September 29, a young woman was leaving her home in Santa Cruz to go to an early class when she saw this man "poking around the bushes." She asked him if he needed help. He did.

He was a U.S. Marshal there at the behest of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to seize any equipment used at that address for broadcasting at 101.1 FM — Free Radio Santa Cruz.

The FCC was there. They had been there many times previously. This was the first time in 10 years that they had a search warrant. Now why would the federal government send six federal FCC agents and 10 armed U.S. Marshals to seize a bunch of stereo equipment?

Free Radio Santa Cruz (FRSC), a tiny 42-watt radio collective, has been broadcasting to the Santa Cruz community for nearly 10 years. In those 10 years, many collective members have provided non-commercial, listener-supported programming as a public service to its listeners.

Free Radio Santa Cruz, which still streams on the Internet at [www.freakradio.org](http://www.freakradio.org), has regularly reported on police harassment of the poor over the years.

In fact, the impetus for starting up a



FCC agents, backed by armed U.S. marshals, raided Free Radio Santa Cruz.

Photo by Bradley, Santa Cruz Independent Media Center

micro-broadcasting radio station began in 1996 when a Santa Cruz chapter of Food Not Bombs was suffering from police harassment, and the organizers couldn't get traditional media to cover the issue.

Free Radio Santa Cruz covered the suspicious, fatal shooting death of Happy

John Dine in 1997, and the jailing of Steve Argue for selling *Street Spirit* newspaper. In 2002, when the federal government raided WAMM, a medical marijuana garden run by Valerie and Mike Corral, Free Radio Santa Cruz reported it.

The FCC was set up in 1937 to manage

the public airwaves and maximize their use by the public. Given the technology in 1937, no station under 100 watts was even considered for licensing.

Fast forward to 1996. Technology had

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advanced so that a transmitter under 100 watts could do a pretty good job of transmitting about six or seven miles in all directions. And the costs, which had formerly been prohibitive, had dropped considerably. So micro-broadcasters sprang up across the country.

The FCC called these people "pirates" and charged them with "stealing" the public airwaves. In actuality, had the FCC lived up to its mission statement and facilitated making the airwaves useful for public benefit, there would be no need for any "pirates."

Only due to the failure of the FCC to accommodate micro-broadcasters, were groups of concerned citizens able to step into the vacuum and provide the kind of public service a local, micro-broadcasting radio station can provide.

But the FCC's failure is not accidental. As corporations continue to monopolize the media outlets, and the voices of fewer and fewer Americans are heard, what chance do poor or homeless people have to air their issues to the public?

Robert Lederman, a famous free speech activist in New York City, was interviewed on Robert Norse's show on FRSC. He said, "Without free speech you are lost. How can you address any other issue if you don't have the right to speak?"

## FCC STEREO HEIST GOES FLAT

As the federal agents who raided Free Radio Santa Cruz loaded nearly \$5000 in equipment, cables, tape-decks, turntables, and the mother board into the back of the FCC's equipment truck, a hissing sound was heard. Darn!! A flat tire.

Across the street, a vehicle another FCC agent had driven got *two* flat tires. Around the corner, all the vehicles the FCC and the U.S. Marshal's had driven up in had flat tires.

As an FCC agent changed the tire on the vehicle assigned to cart off most of FRSC's equipment, Norse mused into a hand-held tape recorder, "The FCC agent is re-tiring the vehicle. Actually, we wish the FCC *would* retire!" By 1:15 p.m., seven tow trucks assembled in the area to remove the disabled vehicles.

## BATHROBESPIERRE'S BROADSIDES

So many poor and homeless people get arrested in Santa Cruz. Their fate can seem uncertain, and they can feel like no one knows where they are or will even miss them.

Free Radio Santa Cruz has a policy of taking all calls placed from a holding cell at the jail and broadcasting them on the air live. Suddenly their plight is turned into a community issue. In the past nine years, a lot of calls aired on FRSC came directly from the holding cell at the Santa Cruz County Jail.

In the summer of 1996, homeless activist Robert Norse started broadcasting his show, *Bathrobespierre's BroadSides: Civil Rights for the Poor*, twice a week. Dan Hopkin's seven-month vigil at City Hall against the Sleeping Ban was recorded twice-weekly.

The show is a mix of in-studio guests, Norse editorials, offbeat protest songs, and his signature street interviews. Norse provides a platform where listeners can hear directly the stories of homeless people who have their cars towed for unpaid tickets and their kids snatched by Child Protective Services.

It broadcasts the stories of kids who have been displaced from where they hang out because ATM machines now have 50-foot "no-sitting" zones around them. Another show featured a mother whose van was torched by person's unknown only a month after she'd found housing for herself and her two surviving children (her baby had recently died).

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FCC agents seize a turntable belonging to Free Radio Santa Cruz — an act of theft.



Protesters lined the streets to warn the public that an FCC raid was in progress.



Protesters let the air out of the tires of the vehicles used by the FCC in the raid. Seven tow trucks had to be summoned to remove the disabled FCC cars and vans.



A large number of FCC agents and armed U.S. marshals raided this house.



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All these stories tell what it is like to survive on the streets of Santa Cruz. Norse once interviewed a retired veteran with a painful bladder disease who parked his camper on the streets of Santa Cruz, using the handicapped parking spots, no less! He showed Robert the back end of his camper where he says the cops banged a flashlight at 2:30 a.m., demanding he wake up. The dents were clearly visible. They had interrupted his painful and slow process of self-catherization.

He interviewed a couple who had arrived from Kentucky with four kids, only to have them seized by Child Protective Services and removed for over a year. The flimsy pretenses never panned out, but the state refused to return the children. The parents went public with their plight, and due to the combined pressure of two very determined parents, an advocate from the community, and public scrutiny, all four children were eventually returned to live with their parents.

On a recent show, Norse interviewed investigative reporter Robert Whitaker, who outlined the perils of psychiatric abuse — often applied to homeless people. Norse interviewed David Busch, a homeless activist from Venice, about civil rights abuses in Venice, Santa Monica, and Los Angeles. Norse also reported on the progress of Camp Dignity in Portland, Oregon, and provided blow-by-blow coverage of Camp Paradise, the homeless encampment in Santa Cruz that was demolished by law enforcement.

Poor and homeless people have appeared on *Bathrobespierre's BroadSides*, but so have city officials including Sheriff Mark Tracy, Vice-Mayor Mike Rotkin, and former Mayor Christopher Krohn. Even *Sentinel* editor Tom Honig has appeared on the show. All sides of homeless issues have been covered.

Norse has played tapes of Santa Cruz City Council members as they danced and dodged when critics demanded to know why they were arresting homeless people

for the act of sleeping at night.

Other shows on FRSC that feature homeless issues include "The Hobo Music Show" with D. J. T which features travelin' music and stories. In addition to locally produced shows, FRSC airs Free Speech Radio News, Democracy Now! with Amy Goodman, and Flashpoints.

Given the political repression of the last four years and the attacks on free speech, small community radio stations like Free Radio Santa Cruz are needed more than ever to provide a regular stream of alternative information to counter the commercialized "mainstream" media and the Clear Channel corporate monopoly.

#### FEDERAL SUPPRESSION OF DISSENT

Many people know that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was organizing a Poor People's Campaign when he was assassinated in 1968. Now, in the last days of the Bush campaign's effort to retain office, any use of federal resources to attack free speech and poor people's organizing is justified, apparently — even a raid on a tiny, community radio collective which has the support of the community in which it is based. Can our own government be that worried about poor people getting organized?

On September 30, one day after 16 federal agents carted off the equipment for Free Radio Santa Cruz, President George W. Bush went on television and said, "America stands for freedom." Not my community's freedom to dissent. Not the voice of the voiceless. Homeless people have no voice in George W. Bush's free new world.

What will happen now to the Free Radio Santa Cruz collective? "We have a forward attitude towards the situation, and plan to come back louder, better, and harder to get to," promised Phil Free of the FRSC collective.

Free Radio Santa Cruz streams on the internet at [www.freakradio.org](http://www.freakradio.org). Becky Johnson can be reached at [becky\\_johnson@sbcglobal.net](mailto:becky_johnson@sbcglobal.net)