

RADIO FREE AMERIKA

OR WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PUBLIC RADIO



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BY DAN ARMSTRONG

Recent management problems at the Pacifica Foundation verify concerns for the diminishing voice of alternative radio. Pacifica is five large, left leaning public radio stations in Berkeley, Los Angeles, Houston, New York and Washington. During the last six months, internal struggles motivated by increasing centralization of power into Pacifica's national board, talk of selling KPFA-FM Berkeley, and a new ratings-driven commercialized direction have caused lock-outs, firings, and demonstrations in Berkeley reminiscent of the antiwar years. One of America's most important dissenting voices is under siege.

When Lewis Hill first conceived of KPFA in 1947, he set the standard for what public radio was about: freedom of expression and listener sponsorship. KPFA was really an experiment in non-commercial radio and an attempt to build a station with money and talent from listeners, not advertising. This was the origin of community radio. Simply people rising up out of listenerships, volunteering, creating their own shows, doing their own engineering, and raising funds in any way from radio-thons to rummage sales. Community radio has long provided and still does provide an important though modest balance to the glut of commercial radio that fills the airwaves.

In the 1960s, as commercial radio boomed and the little community stations struggled along, it was felt that public radio could be strengthened through networking — that is, building an infrastructure for funding and programming available to the community. In 1967, Congress passed the Public Broadcasting Act to do just this for both public television and public radio by creating the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private, non-profit corporation to oversee the distribution of federal funding. Three years later, National Public Radio came into being as an adjunct to CPB and a national programming distribution service for public radio. In 1971, NPR produced its first news show, the hugely popular and successful *All Things Considered*. NPR news shows are aired today by over 600 public radio stations (which includes Astoria's KMUN-FM) to some 14,000,000 listeners in the United States — and millions more in Europe, Asia, and our military installations around the world.

In 1979, through funding from the CPB, NPR installed its own satellite system. This enables stations not only to receive programs from NPR, but to also exchange programming among

themselves. The network was in place and expanding. Several new public radio-programming services — like American Public Radio and Public Radio International — have since come into being. Today community radio stations have access to a variety of syndicated national shows and news services (as well as world news services like the British Broadcasting Corporation and Monitor Radio) that they weave into their local programming.)

Partly due to Newt Gingrich's blustering in the mid-1990s about withdrawing public funding from public broadcasting and partly due to the changing face of public radio in America, community radio is no longer non-commercial. There are exceptions, but in general, the corporate hand has become more and more visible in what was once grassroots radio. Unfortunately, it seems that those agencies which initially empowered public radio, the CPB and NPR, now tend to shape it for the market.

For instance, CPB guidelines for funding essentially dictate an operating structure for community stations. Compliance with these guidelines is critical to getting federal money, yet too often, getting that money becomes the primary consideration in station management. In the case of Pacifica, compliance with these federal regulations and its relationship with the CPB have become a central bone of contention between Pacifica's five local advisory boards and its national advisory board. These kinds of CPB management intrusions and interceding corporate complications are contrary to the original vision of public radio — freedom for small, local voices.

Similarly, NPR programming, the hourly news updates, *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, *Talk of the Nation*, has become such a community radio standard, that the sound and format of these stations tend to conform to a NPR template. Local music shows and community news are spliced between NPR news shows and regularly punctuated with the NPR manner — the soft horn interludes or jazzy flute accents. Oh, yes, it's pleasant to the ear. But, sadly, it has all begun to sound the same. Whether you are in Eugene (Oregon), Topeka (Kansas), or New York City. The individuality and freedom of the community station has become 600 public radio clones running the same news and feature shows. What's up with this? Certainly nothing Lewis Hill had in mind.

Let's take a deeper look. Consider the background of Robert Coonrod, CEO of CPB. He was deputy director of Voice of America. He oversaw the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (including Radio & TV Marti) and Worldnet Television. Prior to VOA, he held senior positions at the U.S. Information Agency's Bureau for Educational & Cultural Affairs.

Kevin Klose, the CEO of NPR was director of the U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau, which oversees Voice of America, Worldnet Television, and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. He was President of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He also worked as an editor and reporter at the Washington Post, and served as the Washington Post bureau chief in Moscow and Chicago.

Kenneth P. Stern, Vice President of NPR holds a J.D. degree from Yale Law School. He was a senior advisor and consultant to the U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau, a job that included management responsibilities for Voice of America, Radio & TV Marti, and Worldnet TV. He was Deputy General Counsel for the Clinton/Gore 1996 campaign and held management and legal consultant positions for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

These three resumes show incredible similarity and overlap. Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Cuba Broadcasting are essentially powerful pro-American (of the Oliver North old school of patriotism) propaganda interests. The IBB and IAB are also pro-American information services. These men come from the highest order of the establishment network. This is not the kind of networking that the original charter of the CPB

intended for public radio. And we haven't even mentioned the corporate and political connections that are integrated into the boards of directors of both the CPB and NPR. It's sad but true; the two most powerful institutions in public radio are run by men whose backgrounds are steeped in American jingoism. They are company men of the corporate kind. They do not represent the voice of community radio or anything even faintly resembling an alternative voice.

All Things Considered, *Morning Edition*, *Weekend Edition*, these are some of the best news shows offered on radio. They are the favored news sources for America's intelligentsia. They are presented in a sophisticated information collage of music and voice. The subtle nuance of each word, each phrase, each musical note are critical to the meaning. When all the facts are otherwise correctly aligned, the suggestion of each story sways on the slightest intimation. Of course, we know this. Information always comes with a spin and counter-spin. And NPR is no exception. Hardly. Between news blurbs from NPR international reporters and anecdotal stories with musical scores we have the repeated reminder: "Funding for this program has been supplied by..." Merrill Lynch or Archer-Daniels-Midland or the John D. MacArthur Foundation or the Ford Trust or the Rockefeller Foundation. In other words, these programs have been paid for by some of the biggest names in the American Aristocracy. Regardless of how the little university radio station intersperses its local news, blues shows, community messages, and rock&roll, this is propaganda from the highest financial order. Radio Free Amerika

The situation at Pacifica is merely predictable fallout from the corporatization of public radio. "Bottom-line" management has steadily replaced listener sponsorship. Corporate censorship more and more has crowded in upon freedom of expression. And one of the grand old flagships of public radio KPFA has now become a very marketable radio interest.

But what is there to argue with this? We have watched the United States move progressively more conservative through the Clinton years. Democrats and Republicans are harder and harder to tell apart. We live in the new age of corporate democracy. Look at our trim-line new President. Perhaps his title should be CEO of the USA. Because, of course, good business is good business — for a country as well as a small community radio station.

And perhaps all this satellite streamlining and business-wise efficiency is necessary for public radio to keep up to speed on the multi-media information highway. Perhaps it is an unavoidable evolution in the concept of community radio as our society complicates into the 21st century.

Perhaps.
But perhaps not.
Let's try a bigger picture.

The consolidation and syndication of information works in direct opposition to the freedom and the stability of our democracy. Media mergers, software giants, and the incorporation of publishing houses with financial institutions are antithetical to the dream of our founding fathers. Freedom of speech may be the dearest right the Constitution promises, but something happens to that freedom when money can buy that right, when just a handful of voices have the power and influence to drown out all the rest.

The last ten years have seen just this. Rupert Murdoch, John C. Malone, Reinhard Mohn, the Newhouse family of New York, the Randolph Hearst family, Time-Warner-AOL, Disney — these are powerful broadcasting and publishing giants with agendas and loud voices. The CPB with its wide ranging radio and television funding influence and NPR/PBS with its worldwide audience of tens of millions of the generally best educated of the world has become a comparable media force. Public radio has become a megalith in sheep's clothing. Whether intentional or not this has changed community radio from many little voices into one that is large and establishment compliant. The alternative voice is no longer alternative. The changes at Pacifica are symptomatic.

Dan Armstrong is a frequent contributor to the NCTE. His most recent article appeared in the Winter 2000 issue (*Odious Debt: Jubilee 2000 vs the International Credit Cartel*). After several years residence in Astoria, he has moved back to Eugene.

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