

Inside Pacifica

A member of KPFK's advisory board goes public

By David Adelson

As a member of the Local Advisory Board (LAB) of Pacifica's KPFK (90.7 FM Los Angeles) I am charged with mediating effective communication between the station and the public. Long-standing rules impede discussion of internal policy over the air, now apparently including a prohibition on announcing events organized to discuss such policy. Further, in a memo dated July 12, 1995, the executive director of Pacifica, Patricia (Pat) Scott, wrote, "The Local Advisory board is hereby directed not to take action that will impede the plans of the station staff. Members of any local Board who do not feel that they can assist Pacifica in its present mission are advised to resign. If there are indications that actions are being taken collectively or individually to countermand the policies, directives, and mandates of the Pacifica Board, the Board will take appropriate steps." But in mid-June the Pacifica National Board of Directors will vote on a resolution modifying Pacifica by-laws which, for the first time, will give the National Board majority control of the board's composition. This change, along with many others now being established, could largely determine what Pacifica will become in the future and towards what ends its assets will be directed. I therefore find it necessary to offer these comments publicly.

Some Background

In 1949 Lew Hill, a Quaker and pacifist, along with a group of conscientious objectors, pioneered the successful concept of listener-sponsored public radio with KPFA, 94.1 FM in Berkeley. In a 1951 essay entitled "The Theory of Listener-Sponsored Radio," Hill held that for most of radio, the people actually involved in broadcasting (including the writer, engineer, producer, etc.) had either little or no personal relationship to the material being broadcast or the audience receiving it. Most radio production was an act in which those creating the program were making a product in order to deliver an audience to those sponsoring the program. The sponsors' dictates were therefore paramount to outcomes. "I have been describing a fact at the level of the industry's staff; it is actually so notorious in the whole tradition and atmosphere of our radio that it precludes anyone of serious talent and reasonable sanity from offering material for broadcast, much less joining a staff. The country's best minds...shun the medium unless the possessor of one happens to be running for office." Hill felt that only by creating an institution which would support the relationship between programmer and audience could listeners obtain programming which treated them and their concerns as a subject, not as a commodity to be manipulated.

In order to serve this mission, public radio would need to escape the market driven pressures plaguing most media. Listener sponsorship would provide the source of funding, while the programmer's freedom to decide the nature of the broadcast would attract great artists and thinkers to become programmers. Hill also noted that advertisers impose a need for shows of reliable consistency so that audience of predictable sizes could be maintained. Thus, the risk of occasional failure implicit in any truly creative act could not be tolerated by advertisers, imposing a numbing uniformity on the medium. Hill reasoned, however, that an approach incorporating creativity and occasional failure, could succeed if listeners felt a relationship to the broadcast causing them to recognize that enduring some failure was necessary to make meaningful success possible.

KPFA began broadcasting and did indeed attract great programming (and some poor programming), as well as listener support. The foundation grew into a network comprising five FM stations - KPFA Berkeley (94.1), KPFK Los Angeles (90.7), WBAI New York (99.5), KPFT Houston (90.1), and WPFW Washington, D.C. (89.3) - in sum capable of reaching one in five U.S. homes, along with over fifty affiliates in twenty seven states, plus the Pacifica Program Service and the Pacifica Radio Archive.

But Hill never addressed how best to balance the desires of individual programmers with the interests of other programmers and a much larger public and so not surprisingly the growth of Pacifica has been accompanied by conflict about who decides who shall be granted the programming freedoms Hill spoke of, for how long, and on what basis.

Governance

Pacifica governance has always been contentious. In an interview published in March 1994 in Z, Peter Franck described an important event in the history of the governance of KPFA.

CG: Did Lou Hill build any democratic structures into KPFA originally, what were they, what happened to them?

PF It's an important question. Lou Hill set it up. I don't know all the details-- this is what I was told by Elsa Knight Thompson: There was a large group of staff and community people which selected the Pacifica board. That's the way it was structured. The Pacifica board, about 1961, simply changed the bylaws to make itself self-perpetuating. It changed itself from a board elected by this staff and community to a board that elected its own members. The FCC ruled that was an illegal change of ownership, but they never did anything about that, they didn't fine the station, and nobody took advantage of the FCC ruling to challenge it. It was a real change in the structure. The democratic vision of a direct link between listeners and the structure of the station was lost.

CG: What was the motivation behind the change.

PF: I think it was a quiet coup. I know Elsa Knight Thompson was very upset about it. At that time, you had station staff that was pretty radical and militant

and a board that was mostly well-heeled liberals, that viewed the staff as the unwashed masses--that was some of the dynamic between the board and the staff.

I don't know, from my own experience, how well this old structure worked. There is always a problem getting community people involved in a station when everyone is busy, and while important, the station is only one of many things in their lives. At the same time, there is considerable resistance to community involvement on the staffs. Most of the staff are volunteers or are paid much less than they would make elsewhere. This leads to a strong feeling among them that they are the station, that they own the station, and that they are the ones that should make the decisions.

The 1961 structural coup did not, however, do away with internal power struggles. Conflicts continued and in 1984, Peter Franck, President of the Pacifica foundation, and like-minded individuals from the community and within Pacifica met in San Luis Obispo, California to discuss the root causes of continuing strife and to propose solutions. They noted that "The Pacifica Network is in serious trouble. In a time of world-wide crisis, instead of responding with depth and passion, Pacifica is purging itself of its most radical elements. Careerism is replacing commitment. Power in Pacifica has become concentrated in the hands of a few. This power block, unaccountable to anyone, is [enacting] a politically selective process of firings and hirings. A process which has been obscured by a smoke-screen of personal attack." They went on to argue, rightly I think, that "this situation could only come into being because of basic weaknesses in Pacifica's present structure and the lack of a sense of vision and purpose." And they also had some proposals for changes.

1. "Station boards should be democratically constituted and representative of the constituencies the stations seek to serve. They should be completely independent of the station manager and accountable directly to those constituencies."
2. "Station administrations should be based on a collective decision-making process. Staff (paid and unpaid) should be represented on the station board."
3. "Final programming decisions and judgements must be made by the listeners and the communities Pacifica seeks to serve."

This 1984 San Luis Obispo gathering was obviously quite prescient. Its analysis is literally indistinguishable from many of the criticisms being directed at Pacifica today. The solutions proposed in 1984 are notable, moreover, not just for their nobility and continuing relevance, but because one of the signatories of that document was Pat Scott, the current CEO of Pacifica and the individual in perhaps the best position to implement such changes, if she were so disposed. However, the available evidence suggests that a course diametrically opposed to that proposed in 1984 by Ms. Scott and twelve other co-signers is presently being pursued. Is the change in Scott's stance due to new wisdom? Or is this an example of an institution with flawed structure hiring its past critics and then compromising their integrity and insight? If Scott would make the reasons for her change of mind public, we would all be in a better position to decide.

From What, to What?

"Until the mid-seventies," Franck indicates, "Pacifica was a very loose corporate umbrella over five essentially separate stations. Around that time, the stations started to get in trouble, especially around issues of accounting and fiscal accountability, and it was decided that there had to be an executive director of the overall foundation to make sure that the stations were fiscally sound and to do the things that were necessary to protect the license and prevent the stations from getting into trouble." The stations contributed money to support the central administration and the position of Pacifica CEO was created. At that time, since the money for the National came from the stations to the central body, the stations were still the centers of "power." But during the deregulatory Reagan era, public broadcasters were given the right to lease their sub-carrier frequencies for commercial purpose and the revenue from these leases provided Pacifica's central administration with an independent stream of money. Not surprisingly, the center of power began to shift accordingly. In simplest terms the structure now is as follows: the National has the authority to hire and fire the CEO, who, since 1995, in turn has authority over hiring and firing the station managers, who in turn have authority over their respective stations. But who composes the National?

The one lever of power that the Local Advisory Boards still hold, for the time being, is the right to name two members from each LAB to the National Board. The National presently comprises fifteen seats, ten filled by LAB "representatives" from the five member stations, and five at-large members which the National itself appoints.

However, the current arrangement, in which the local station advisory boards determine the majority composition of the National Board of Directors, is about to be changed. The new structure will be that each station advisory board will nominate two members of its own board to the National. One of these must be a person of color. The National will then select one of these two nominees. The National will also elect one person from each station signal area who is not on the LAB to be the second area "representative," and will also elect the five at-large members. The proposal therefore gives the National Board, for the first time, direct control over the majority (two-thirds) of its composition, and elective control over the remaining one-third. The stated goals of this change are to "to develop a system of governance that strikes the right balance between local community input and clear national vision in order to follow through on the broader goals of the strategic plan." It is also supposed to facilitate attracting highly qualified national board members while attaining racial balance.

To aid Pacifica administration and station managers in dealing with questions and complaints about these governance changes which potentially reduce local (employee) and listener input to near nil, Pacifica's recently hired, first ever Communications Director, Burt Glass, provided PR advice by way of what he referred to as a "cheat sheet" distributed as a confidential memorandum dated March 11, 1997. Glass noted: "While there is nothing in this document that is untrue or incriminating, please do not make and distribute copies to others." In response to questions as to why Pacifica is reducing the number of seats on Pacifica's board of directors for local advisory board members Glass recommends answering that "The number of board directors from our five station areas remains unchanged. In fact, two-thirds of our board are required to reside in our five station areas -- reaffirming our commitment to remain close to the needs of grassroots community radio. One-third of our board will be elected at-large." The answer deftly sidesteps the transfer of power from stations to what becomes a self-

regulated and self appointing National Board. Glass's "cheat sheet" also contains suggested responses to questions about charges that Pacifica has engaged in union-busting, changes in programming emphasis, elevating efficiency above democracy, changed modes of funding, and other topics. These are all dealt with in a similar PR fashion, avoiding real issues with clever rhetorical ploys. The Glass "cheat sheet" was explicitly confidential yet it was leaked almost immediately and made available to a group of decidedly angry dissidents who maintain a web site (<http://www.radio4all.org/freepacifica>) of documentary evidence of the struggles at Pacifica. Similarly, a number of other documents marked confidential have been leaked and posted at this web site, the one place listeners can go to get some first hand information, demonstrating the existence of genuine dissent at all levels of the institution.

Two ideas

One has to wonder whether the discussions of the National Board and top management over such things as hired union busters or reducing democracy have been without conflict and unanimous, or whether they been subject to disagreement? Since it has been impossible to obtain specific details about internal debate at the National level, the following ideas are fragmentary, speculative, and tentative. Nonetheless, they are drawn from a series of comments made by KPDK's National representatives and General Manager at various points over the past seven months.

Apparently, WBAI (New York) volunteers, programmers, staff, and LAB have been extremely uncooperative with the changes which the Pacifica administration are imposing. At the same time, conversations have been held at the national level about the possibility of selling WBAI, which has recently been conservatively estimated to be worth upwards of \$90 million in the newly deregulated media market. The sale of the station, when discussed, has apparently been considered in terms of a station swap, i.e. another signal in the public part of the spectrum, albeit necessarily weaker and with a lesser reach, would be acquired. Such a transaction would keep a Pacifica station in New York and net the foundation a vast cash reserve. A station swap would also provide a natural opportunity to "lose" the most intransigent WBAI people, who in some instances

have been protected by strong union contracts, or the union itself. The strategic 5-year plan indicates, "Pacifica shares a commitment to at least five strong local stations," but does not specify a commitment to the five presently existing stations.

Some members of the National Board have dissented regarding treatment of WBAI and apparently this internal conflict has played a role in the ongoing vacancy of the fifth at-large seat on the National Board. Be that as it may, the possibility of the sale of Pacifica Foundation assets raises a crucial question: Who would control the revenues generated from the sale of such assets? If the proposed governance changes are adopted this month, the answer would be: a group of fifteen people with majority control over their own composition, only one-third membership in actual broadcast stations, no organized links to listenership, and a track record of jealously guarding their privacy in decision-making, dealing aggressively with dissenters, and manipulating public opinion to obscure meaningful public participation. Even if there were no other motives, control over a cash bank account of \$90 million would provide quite a large incentive for

centralization, one might deduce. Apparently, if current trends continue, all of the constituencies of Pacifica are to be left unable to do anything about such matters but hope and trust that this small group will "do the right thing."

So how does anyone impact the on-going deliberations and decisions? For a listener, it is nearly impossible to learn of the internal policies of the network, much less participate in or influence them. Moreover, in my discussions with various station personnel and programmers I have found that they too have essentially no concept of the larger structural issues involved, although there is a clear sense that criticism of the administration is risky if one wishes to keep one's job. Even as a local advisory board member, it has required stubborn and persistent effort to fight through what the Glass memo demonstrates are intentional efforts at preventing meaningful understanding and engagement. One thing that is clearly needed for "outsiders" to have an informed opinion is clarity about Pacifica administration logic.

Central to the Pacifica administration's justifications for the vesting of management with greater authority than ever before, is the concept of accountability. The word is used a lot by KPFK's National Board representatives and General Manager, and it appears frequently in memoranda from the national level (e.g. the Glass memo). Everyone agrees that Pacifica is an immense resource built over decades by many people and a large audience. The idea that Pacifica's actors should be accountable rather than have unlimited control over these public assets therefore strikes a powerful chord. Everyone involved at every level readily agrees that some few individual programmers, or staffers, or volunteers should not direct Pacifica's resources based solely on their personal inclinations. Programmers and staff must be accountable. But what about some few managers or national board members directing Pacifica's resources based solely on their personal inclinations? Why is that not only okay, but an overriding goal?

The governance changes do not institute a mechanism for accountability or removal of Board members if they do things that harm the institution or that are objectionable to other Pacifica constituencies. Quite the opposite. The proposed changes assure that the National Board is accountable only to itself. Accountability, in the sense that the Pacifica administration uses the word, therefore, refers not to the honorable idea that there should be democratic means for affected constituencies to impact Pacifica, but to the unrestrained ability of the administration to act decisively to meet what it alone determines to be Pacifica's mission. If a particular programmer or staff person is not effectively serving the goals articulated by the administration, accountability means that the programmer or staff person can be expeditiously removed. Accountability at Pacifica means the freedom of administration to function as it pleases, without oversight. This is likely also the issue at the heart of the Pacifica union conflicts that have been widely written about; management wants to be as unencumbered as possible in deciding who will do what when, who will be hired, and who will be fired.

Board members admit that the decision process at their level has been arduous with much compromise, but there is no way to know what the differences were about. One wonders, for example, whether members of the National Board and the administration have made serious attempts at conceiving legitimate alternatives to the autocratic, hierarchical structure presently being imposed, in which essentially all power rests with Pacifica National staff and station managers, with none of the kinds of checks on that power which would lead to true accountability. If so, I would like to know what other proposals were considered and why they were rejected. If there have been no

alternative innovations discussed, I would like to know why that is considered a "professional" approach to problem solving.

By way of explanation Pacifica management also argues that things had been going downhill at Pacifica for some time before the present efforts at change were begun. But I have yet to hear any person--administration, staff, volunteer, or "dissident"--claim that KPDK before the Scott administration was a healthy and creative environment. By all accounts it was a place characterized by extraordinary territoriality and factionalism in which expressions of disrespect were severe and frequent. Lack of a structure in which creative leadership could translate into policy handicapped positive progress, and administrative and technological systems were rudimentary at best. But while opinion of the situation prior to the arrival of Scott is universally negative, this is in no sense a logical justification for now imposing a completely autocratic decision-making structure.

The Scott administration stepped into the void created by the absence of healthy structure. Particular people were identified as the reasons for the impossibility of positive change, and management acted decisively to have those people removed, often with the support of many who remained. Critics of the Scott administration similarly have often identified specific people as the source of injustice. In my view, however, neither of these positions accurately describes the situation. Both before and after Ms. Scott was named CEO, Pacifica's problems were primarily the result of structural features, not "bad people." Before Scott, for example, among other problems adequate means of efficiently and satisfactorily arbitrating differences were lacking. Subsequently, rather than fixing this and other problems in ways consistent with creating a democratic institution, an autocratic structure has been imposed. Not surprisingly personal battles and acrimony remain, though they are now expressed differently, such as the grotesque "screw you" memo from National Program Director Gail Christian sent to WBAI programmer Mario Murillo, which triggered Alexander Cockburn to break his silence about Pacifica in *The Nation*.

Pacifica attracts resources on the basis of an alternative vision of what would be necessary to achieve social justice. If Pacifica isn't willing to make the ideals broadcast by Pacifica stations work at home, then doesn't the whole effort become a crass exercise in deceit?

Effects on the air

Despite repeated mention of Pacifica's strategic 5-year plan, I have yet to outline its most important features. The plan is intended to create a more powerful network capable of distributing its product more broadly, and to insure a product of increasingly professional quality to attract and hold more of the people it reaches, all in the service of promoting "positive social change." Internally, the goal is to increase resources (money) and to use those resources more efficiently in the creation and distribution of a high-quality product. "Professionalizing" both the institution and the product are not conceived to have impacts on content, only on form. However, this change in form is supposed to dramatically alter listener levels and support. Democratic mechanisms of oversight are absent from the plan.

At KPDK a number of steps have already been taken to further the goals and strategies

expressed in the 5-year plan. Before the tenure of the current KPFK GM, Mark Schubb, the program schedule catered to a diversity of audiences. Particular, distinct audiences would tune in for one show and out for the next. The program schedule was fragmented. Changes made in the programming and scheduling since then have successfully increased listening hours (technically, the Average Quarter Hourly, or AQH), while the total number of listeners who tune in the station at some point during a week (the CUME) has declined slightly. These measures are important as they are related to those used to determine Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) matching funds and probably also spectrum allocation as analog FM broadcasting is replaced by digital broadcasting. But one has to wonder whether the issue of numbers of hours spent listening or numbers of people who listen should be definitive gauges for the success of Pacifica stations. What about the quality of the listening experience? What about the progressive effect of the information conveyed? If one is market driven, ten percent more (consumer oriented) listeners is better than ten percent fewer with a 100% or 500% more meaningful and politically empowering experience for those who do listen.

Pacifica's financial independence is considered paramount in all discussions and memoranda I have encountered. It is certainly true that if the institution cannot survive financially, it cannot serve its audiences in any useful manner at all. But in my opinion, Pacifica's financial independence is most undesirable if it means independence from listener support and responsiveness as Lew Hill conceived of it. What is most desirable is precisely Pacifica's dependence, at all times, on its listener-sponsors. Returning to Hill: "Anyone can understand the rationale of listener sponsorship - that unless the station is supported by those who value it, no one can listen to it, including those who value it. But beyond this, actually sending in the subscription, which one does not have to send in unless one particularly wants to, implies the kind of cultural engagement, as some French philosophers call it, that is surely indispensable for the sake of the whole culture." Here is the central point: the engagement of the listeners which is indispensable for the sake of the whole culture. In this conception, it is not just more money which is needed. To go that route is to lose. What is needed is to engage the community in the battle to define whether the ability to compete in the market model is what will determine the survival of public service resources. Thus, those concerned with the possibility of Pacifica fulfilling its promise must not only act to insure that it survives the current challenges from within, but the attempts from without at imposing upon it inherently destructive standards.

Alternatives

Given my criticisms of the present structure, I feel compelled to offer possible alternatives. Alternative proposals which might increase true accountability and bring the listeners into the process in a real sense without interfering with the power of management to implement desirable changes, might include the following:

1. Retention of the policy that a 2/3 majority of National Board seats are elected by the Local Advisory Boards,
2. Making a majority of the Local Advisory Boards elected by the listener-sponsors on a one person one vote basis with proportional representation, and having some number of Local Advisory Board

- seats elected by staff, programmers and/or volunteers, and
3. Instituting a weekly or biweekly radio program during which internal policies, so-called "dirty laundry," can be discussed with the General Manager, Program Manager and a panel of Advisory Board members who might, for example, respond to listener questions.

Naturally these proposals contradict the current desires of management, and many long-time observers of Pacifica may believe them unworkable. Other solutions may be superior, but any should include some form of direct accountability to the listener other than the accountability that comes from the audience's freedom not to listen and not to contribute. Pacifica is too valuable an institution to offer only this "negative" lever. We are also free not to buy Nike shoes, but without some way to publicize the abuses that accompany their production, Nike will always find a willing market. Listener-sponsors should have some means of actually influencing policy, including the ability to know what is going on and to have their proposals seriously considered. The design of such mechanisms should ensure that they are not disruptive nor overwhelming, but they should give listeners some measure of real power. As to the objection that such mechanisms are inefficient, I respond that they may be inefficient toward the goal of creating a radio product capable of attracting the widest possible audience. However, following Lew Hill, this type of solution may be the most efficient means of creating listeners with a sense that their opinion and their action have import and meaning, and as a result may be the most efficient means of promoting "positive social change." Naturally, I recognize that such proposals are threatening to people at every level of the existing hierarchy, so that they are unlikely to be spontaneously implemented by those same individuals. What is needed, therefore, is open discussion and debate, and then some form of intervention from without on behalf of progressive values and listeners alike. I have always given money to Pacifica not just to pay for programming, but because I felt I was contributing to a different kind of institution. I believed the rhetoric Pacifica broadcasts about what is required to establish a just society and I believed Cornel West when he said on Pacifica that the central problem of our society is the inability of everyday people to interrogate power. Those who choose not to make themselves heard regarding Pacifica's future may console themselves with the knowledge that larger audiences will be able to consume a more professional and reliable radio product presenting admirable ideals (at least in the near term) which apparently are unworkable.

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[The governance changes described herein will be voted upon at the next meeting of the Pacifica National Board of Directors scheduled for June 13-15 at the Oakland Marriot, Oakland, CA.](#)