

REPORT TO THE PACIFICA NATIONAL BOARD
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ON BEING A NETWORK

It's been about six months since I started work as Pacifica's Network Programming Coordinator. Having such a job title leads me to consider what it means to be a network and what a network like Pacifica should be doing. I'm sure I don't have the final answer or analysis, but certainly some thoughts.

From a programming standpoint, being a network means producing, sharing, and airing good national content. Being a network should involve launching new national programs, having the willingness to give these new shows airtime and the presence to know when to let them go, if necessary. Being a network should also include producing and airing excellent national specials around mission-driven themes, topics, and current events that are compelling to listeners. Stations in a well-functioning network should look to national programming as a solid anchor around which to build strong local programming.

In this era, being a network should include building up our web presence and generating digital content, particularly multimedia content. Being a network should also mean being able to figure out who we are, what common visions and goals we share, and marketing that image and our content through an outreach department. Being a network must also include funding and coordinating our technical capacity so that we're able to do all the things mentioned above, recognizing the interdependency of programming, outreach, and technology.

At its most basic level, being a mature network like Pacifica must involve frequent and clear communication, avenues to recognize problems and discuss differences, willingness to learn from each other, make shared plans, and really work together.

Does the Pacifica network do these things? We do some of them some of the time. There is much room for improvement.

LAUNCHING NEW NATIONAL PROGRAMMING

I have included three ideas for new national programming that I think should be developed relatively soon. The first, developing a national afternoon drive program, has been previously suggested by a couple folks but was inspired most recently by a proposal that Free Speech TV pitched to me. The second, producing outstanding documentaries on a regular basis, is something that taps into Pacifica traditions and has been suggested by several local and national staff. The third, developing a national

morning headlines service, is the most requested program service by Pacifica affiliates and would build our news program offerings.

FSTV Proposal

At the beginning of June, I was contacted by the National Program Director for Free Speech TV, looking for Pacifica to partner with them to develop a daily, 59-minute, afternoon/evening joint TV-radio program. According to FSTV's proposal, the program would counter the corporate media spin and use satire to fearlessly cover the 2008 elections. I brought the proposal to recent OC and Program Directors meetings for discussion. We're not a network that is known for being able to commit to this sort of request quickly, and the proposal is still on the table (as of this writing).

In discussing the FSTV proposal, we recognized that we'd do well to first discuss broader questions: Are we willing to seriously consider developing and launching *any* new afternoon drive program? Then if so, is this FSTV proposal what we're looking for?

Idea 1: Towards a national afternoon program

Whether we work with FSTV on this project or not, I think the time is right to seriously explore developing a national afternoon drive program for Pacifica. Many people in the network talk about the need for "another Democracy Now" and bemoan our lack of other flagship programs. We should not literally copy DN, but we do very much need another flagship program. A new daily afternoon drive program could be the other "tent pole" holding up the canvas of our Pacifica listenership (Democracy Now being the morning tent pole). Two of our sister stations currently *re-air* DN in the afternoons, 10+ hours after its live broadcast, for want of an afternoon tent pole program. From a fundraising point of view, many station staff members are feeling financially vulnerable due to declining DN revenues in the last couple years.

Still the network's biggest listenership draw, Democracy Now has really changed its focus from a primarily election-related program (in 1996) to more of an interview-centered, broad coverage of progressive and left-related issues and authors. Free Speech Radio News covers U.S. politics as part of a heavily international-focused newscast. That leaves a void in Pacifica national programming for strong and consistent elections and national news coverage. Meanwhile, election years have traditionally seen significant increases in both listenership and fundraising when Pacifica aired strong elections coverage.

I think a workable format for a new afternoon program would be a national news/news magazine program with space for headlines, investigative & documentary reports, topical & thematic features, live interviews, and more on a wide variety of topics. Ideally, such a program would rely on strong reportage from sister and affiliate stations, as well as a robust volunteer & intern program. If developed soon enough, a major – but not exclusive – focus of the program could be the 2008 elections, laying the foundation for a progressive political analysis of the coming year's issues. It would be best if the program were hard-clocked so local stations could insert content.

Benefits of a national afternoon program

The benefits of a national afternoon drive program would be many-fold, though we will need to act quickly if this is going to happen before the election season has already come and gone. Among the likely benefits of a well-produced, well-organized afternoon drive program:

- *Increased listenership* - a very good program could bring listeners to Pacifica and offer a solid alternative to programs like All Things Considered.

- *Increased fundraising* - with increased listenership comes increased fundraising.
- *Improved service to our communities* – pooling our financial, human, and technical resources to cover news and public affairs would help fulfill our mission of providing news on matters vitally affecting the [national] community and promoting peace and social justice.
- *Development of network identity* - a Pacifica national program would provide something to rally around, promote, and use as our “brand.” It would also bring us together as a network in a real way, with reporters, producers, and hosts from our stations and affiliates working together.
- *Training ground for newer journalists* - we need regular avenues to cultivate new and talented producers. A robust intern program associated with a new program could be such an avenue, and we wouldn’t lose talented producers to outside organizations.

Challenges and moving forward

That said, a very real challenge to developing this sort of program is budget. The FY07 uncommitted national programming budget provides enough for a number of national specials, but very little beyond that, and certainly not enough for a project of this size. There are a number of programming models that might reduce the cost of a new program, e.g. drawing on existing content & personnel from local stations, structuring the program to be primarily volunteer-produced, commissioning the program for a 10-week or 13-week pilot, and so on. But any of these models would still require more funds than are currently allocated to programming.

Next to budget, the greatest challenge to producing a new program would be finding the political will to air it. Developing any new national program would require some local shows to be moved, reduced, or cut, and those programmers would probably be pissed off, at least at first. Some would likely be able to organize an opposition. Politically speaking, putting a new national program on the air would probably not be a smooth transition.

But this shouldn’t stop us; we as a network should become a bit more flexible and be willing to try new programs that might better serve our mission and listeners. If we open up the space for national programming, I think that in the long run, stations (and listeners) will be rewarded for it, and local programming will be strengthened around it, and local programmers will have more opportunities for growth and participation in national production.

If we’re serious about launching a program of this sort, we need to do two things quite soon: start talking now about coming up with the money for national programming in FY08, and work towards an agreement of major network-wide stakeholders to develop a new national program.

Idea 2: Documentary production fund

Producing and airing documentaries is perhaps *the* greatest tradition of Pacifica, yet we produce relatively few of them anymore. Audio documentaries production and investigative reports are ideas that a number of people in our network have called for, and are also the two most requested types of special programming in the recently conducted affiliates survey. We need to better institutionalize the production of documentaries and investigative reports that can elevate Pacifica’s standing, perhaps even make some history.

Pacifica’s national programming department could play a key role in this by providing an annual fund for the production of audio documentaries, as well as complementary multimedia material and handsome pledge premiums. These documentaries would focus on crucial contemporary issues,

providing the definitive progressive/radical treatment and in-depth exploration of key issues. Local stations could have a role in identifying the national issues covered in depth. Some suggestions include: the case for impeachment, the movement for a just health care system, immigrant rights vs. the growth of state repression and border vigilantism, energy crises & the environment, the legacy of slavery, etc.

The beauty of this sort of programming is that many listeners would want their own copies to keep, particularly if complemented by attractive print and graphic content. Establishing a national pool for documentaries would require a significant initial investment, but would more than pay for itself come pledge drive time.

Idea 3: National morning headlines

The coming year would also be a good time to begin developing national morning headlines. Currently, each of our sister stations produces morning headlines on their own, typically mixing national and local news stories. A better structural approach – one that would not duplicate work and one that would help build our network culture – would be to bring these production resources together into coordinated national morning headlines, with an optional “out” for local coverage to be inserted.

Staff at some sister stations have already expressed an interest to me in national morning headlines. Adding further impetus to this project idea are the expressed needs of Pacifica affiliate stations from the recently conducted carriage report & survey. Namely, the program service most requested by affiliates is morning headlines. If Pacifica national could develop hourly headlines in the morning, it would be a great service and benefit to all the stations and affiliates in our network.

In the coming year, I plan to continue working on developing a morning headlines service that is solid, reliable, and meets high production standards. However, I want to approach this project deliberately. Before we even begin talking about content or staffing, we will need some improved form of distribution for headlines. Minimally, we would need a streamlined upload process and automation for station downloads through Audioport.org; ideally, we would create an automated headlines webstream that local stations could simply patch into their boards (with some tech support from Pacifica). Given Pacifica’s chronic underfunding of technology, these improvements will take some months to complete. But I will continue to report on the development of this project as it moves forward.

BUILDING DIGITAL CONTENT

As you know, Rob Robinson was recently brought on as a consultant to carry out Pacifica’s licensing and distribution project. He has asked me to work on the steering committee for the project, and I’m happy to do so. Part of being a media network in 2007 must include developing digital platforms – not just putting our radio stations on the web, but actually developing multimedia content that specifically utilizes the strengths of the web.

A good start in building Pacifica’s digital content is a project I’m already working on: to develop a “menu” of national programming. That is, I’m working to identify existing programs around the network that are potentially of national interest, consistently well-produced and reliable, and collectively cover a variety of peace & justice issues. Once we generate a list of programs for this menu, we’ll be able to offer them in syndication to stations and affiliates to build network cohesion and improve service to listeners. We’ll also be able to engage in a coordinated promotional and outreach strategy around our programming. And most importantly for digital content development, we’ll be able to slate these programs into a Pacifica National webstream in the relatively near future (and possibly other digital platforms as they’re developed).

Currently, the project is coming along at a steady pace. I have drafted basic criteria that programs need to meet to be included, and I'm talking with Program Directors at sister stations for their recommendations of programs that should be on the menu. I will be developing an application form for current programmers to apply to be part of the menu, and plan to open it to any programmer who wants to apply. With a review committee, I'll evaluate the applications received and will hopefully get this programming menu and national webstream up and running in the not-too-distant future. I expect the menu and webstream schedule will be reviewed on a regular basis.

PRODUCING & AIRING NATIONAL SPECIALS

With other staff, I'm currently planning budgets for national programming specials in FY2008. Building on my national programming calendar of anniversaries and events, we're looking at how to best cover national elections and related issues in 2008. Again, there is a relatively small uncommitted budget for national programming in FY07, which will need to be increased in FY08 if we're going to do the thorough election coverage that our stations and listeners expect.

Since the last PNB meeting, we've had a fairly robust schedule of national specials. Recent specials have included:

- May Day – a partnership with FSRN, primarily focusing on immigration and labor angles
- “Cages and Dreams,” marking the 40th Anniversary of the invasion of Palestine – this program featured producers from KPFA, KPFT, and WPFW.
- “The War on Immigrants” – a bicoastal broadcast, hosted from KPFA and WBAI, and in conjunction with FSRN reporters
- Juneteenth – “Is Juneteenth Revolutionary?” from WPFW and modular segments from KPFT
- “Pride and Resistance” LGBT Pride special – with feature producers from every sister station
- U.S. Social Forum – with reporters from every sister station and partnering with AMARC, we broadcast 60 minutes in English and 30 minutes in Spanish each day of the Forum (4 days). We also provided daily hands-on training to fledgling grassroots radio journalists at the Social Forum.
- “Web Radio in Peril” – a news documentary about the webcasting royalty fee hikes on July 15
- “The Carlin Case” – a production from KPFT and PRA for July 4th, exploring the Carlin Case (FCC v. Pacifica) and freedom of speech

In addition, I have also coordinated reporters from some big events, including the Mumia Abu-Jamal appeal in May, the Kent State anniversary in May, and the Troy Anthony Davis case in July. In each of these cases, Pacifica had a reporter on the ground, whose contact info I sent around to our network listservs and sister station News Directors. In each case, several local newsrooms called the on-the-ground reporters for phone tape.

NETWORK COMMUNICATION & COOPERATION

Program Directors meetings

Without communication and cooperation among various staff at the local stations and national level, a network like Pacifica will flounder. Operations staff need to be talking with other operations staff, web staff with other web staff, and so on. To that end, I have been convening the Program Directors every 2-3 weeks for a meeting since the April PNB meeting. Our discussions have been good, and I think we're beginning to build some sense of "network-hood" at least in our sector. But there's still a ways to go.

Evaluation tools & processes

One of the projects that came out of our April PNB programming discussion was to collect, review, and eventually harmonize our stations' program evaluation tools. Each sister station is at a different stage in the process of developing a program evaluation tool and process. I'm currently collecting all of these eval process drafts for review, and I'm facilitating ongoing discussions with PDs at our meetings about developing these processes at individual stations and sharing our experiences with each other.

Joint budgeting for national programming, outreach & operations

I have been working closely together with other national staff on a variety of projects, working particularly closely with the National Technical Director, the Affiliates/Outreach Coordinator, and the Internet Project Manager. Over recent weeks, we have come to realize how interwoven our respective departments really are. Mirroring that, national funding in FY2008 for programming, outreach, and operations are integrally connected and should be considered together.

COORDINATING OPERATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

As you know, the Operations Collective passed a quickly drafted operational policy on Indecency, Profanity, and Obscenity in January 2007. Board members, programmers, and others around the network provided feedback and critique and the PNB asked for a review of the policy. I have been coordinating a workgroup of the Operations Collective that has critically examined the original policy, gathered and reviewed feedback, and developed a new draft. This draft will have gone to the full OC for review by the time you read this. I think it's a much better document and look forward to its approval.

TRAINING & WORKSHOPS

Developing training programs for new volunteers

In June, I began to gather radio journalism training materials from a variety of sources ranging from the BBC to a local Pacifica affiliate. I compiled these documents onto a CD-ROM, originally for the training component of our involvement at the US Social Forum, though I think the collection will prove useful long past the USSF. In the coming months, I hope to post these materials online for use around the network and beyond.

Encouraging involvement in the programming and production infrastructure

As a brief follow up to my April report, I have developed a National Programming workshop and am hosting it with programmers at sister stations as I slowly make my way to each of them. The goal of my station visits in this cycle is for every programmer to have the opportunity to learn how national programming works and how to contact me to get involved. So far, I have also conducted a few other radio production skills workshops during my station visits.

PERSONAL SCHEDULE

Following this July PNB meeting, I will be working from Madison, Wisconsin briefly so that I can do the final pack-up of my household for permanent move to Washington. My wife Lisa has finished her internship and will be moving down here with me. I'm looking forward to this greatly. Also, I will be taking about a week's vacation in late August. The Executive Director has approved my request.