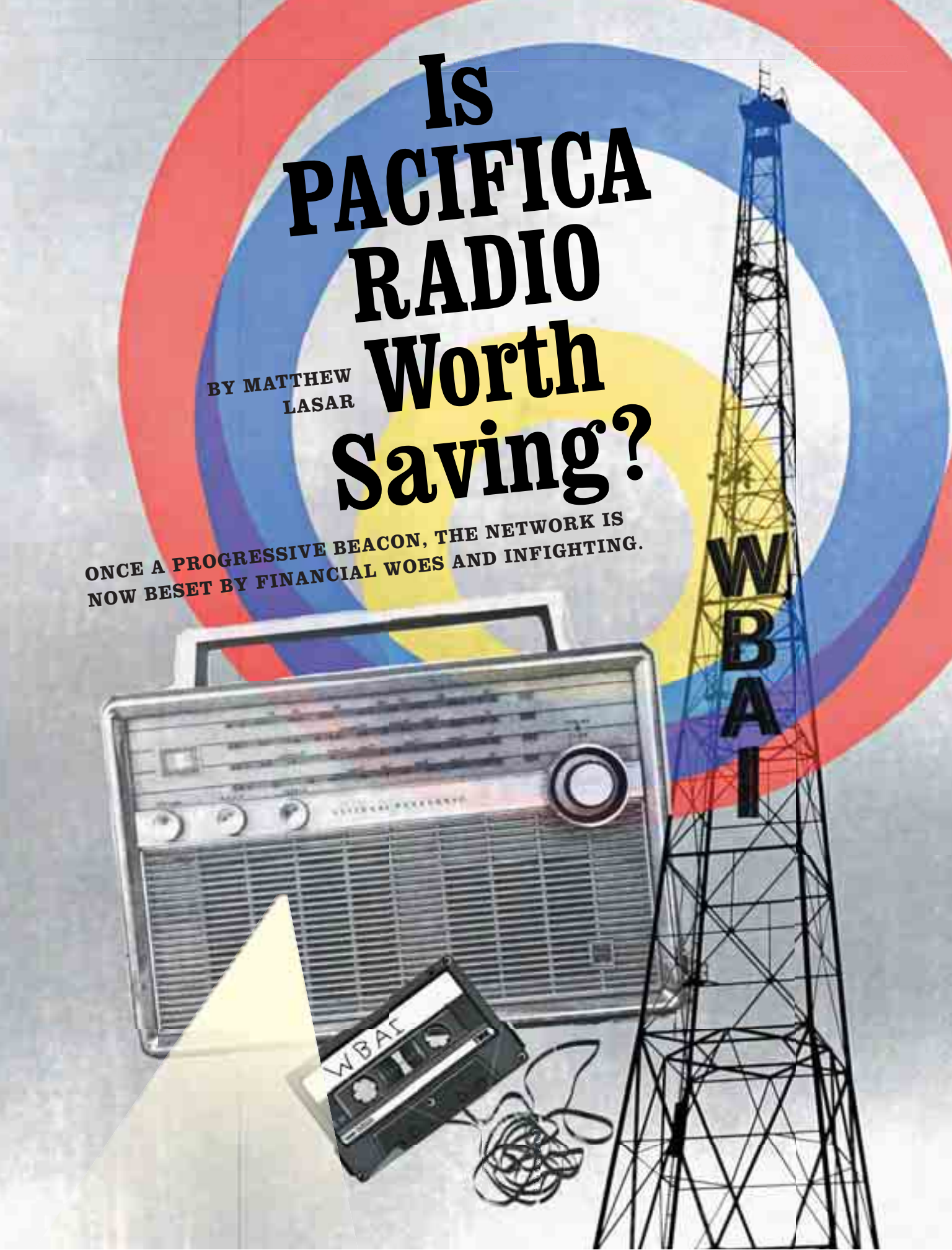
Is PACIFICA RADIO Worth Saving?

BY MATTHEW LASAR

ONCE A PROGRESSIVE BEACON, THE NETWORK IS NOW BESET BY FINANCIAL WOES AND INFIGHTING.



In October 1962, radio reporter Chris Koch was working in his office at Pacifica station WBAI in New York City when his colleague, journalist Richard Elman, dropped by to introduce him to someone. "I'd like you to meet Special Agent Jack Levine, Federal Bureau of Investigation," Elman said. "Oh God, here it comes," Koch thought—the police raid he had anticipated for years. "Former special agent," Levine interjected. Appalled at what he had seen at the bureau, Levine wanted to tell his story. Koch and Elman sat down with him at a tape recorder and listened to every word.

"Do you suppose that if we broadcast this program," Elman asked after the interview, "that we'll be investigated?" Levine offered a nervous laugh. "I think that it's a thought that should be considered, and I mean that seriously," he said.

WBAI aired the interview some weeks later. Listeners in Manhattan and Brooklyn sat stunned as Levine described a vast, rogue operation dedicated to illegally wiretapping and invading the homes of thousands of Americans. Residents in high-rise apartment buildings walked into the halls to alert neighbors about the show.

A month later, the FBI sent orders across the agency to create dossiers on every Pacifica employee, board member or programmer (on-air host) in the network.

That did not intimidate Pacifica, which had run an unapologetic pro–gay rights documentary at the height of the homophobic 1950s; questioned US involvement in Vietnam long before any other broadcast media; and pioneered the spontaneous tradition of free-form radio, its stations serving as incubators for influential comedy programs like *Firesign Theatre*. Pacifica's tradition of tough, independent news reporting continued through the 1980s, with Larry Bensky's influential, live gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Iran/Contra hearings. As late as the mid-1990s, WBAI was forging ahead with a unique schedule that celebrated New York City as an Afro-Caribbean crossroads and gave birth to what is probably the most successful radio show in the history of the American left, Amy Goodman's *Democracy Now!* By then, Pacifica had acquired five listener-supported radio stations and built an affiliate network.

That was then. Today, Pacifica radio is widely regarded as something akin to the late Ottoman Empire of public broadcasting. Haven to conspiracy theorists, HIV skeptics and dubious health-cure infomercials, the network has for the most part financially abandoned Free Speech Radio News, a crucial daily news service for community radio stations across the country. Alan Minsky, a former program director for Pacifica station KPFK in Los Angeles, has warned that "continuing to rely almost entirely on over-the-air fund drives that feature journalistically and scientifically questionable 'gifts' destroys whatever's left of our reputation and can't possibly do anything more than keep us from drowning." (In 2011, WBAI listeners expressed outrage after programmers promoted a fund-drive premium called Double Helix Water as a cure for cancer.) In New York, WBAI has gutted its paid on-air staff. Pacifica station WPFW in Washington, DC, has struggled through a difficult headquarters move. KPFT in Houston is striving to raise money to fix its transmitter, and the station is operating on a Special Temporary Authority Federal Communications Commission permit.

A report from the Pacifica National Finance Committee's chair has put the network's operating deficit at $2.17 million, with liabilities leading assets by over $4 million. Much of this money is owed to *Democracy Now!* But "we owe money all over the place," Margy Wilkinson, Pacifica's latest executive director, warned me in an interview. Badly needed Corporation for Public Broadcasting support has been delayed, due to what the CPB declared are inadequate accounting practices. And the organization is still reeling from its widely reported midyear debacle in 2014, in which Wilkinson's predecessor and her supporters bivouacked themselves in the Pacifica national office in Berkeley, California, reciting from the book of Joshua. After a lengthy public court hearing, the board drove the old executive director out with a temporary restraining order. On top of all this, California's attorney general is now auditing the organization.

As long as Pacifica relies on its current habits, it will continue to decline, Minsky advised in a position paper, "and while austerity measures combined with more such [fundraising] drives may keep us going for another year, soon thereafter the trend will continue with more contraction." The 4 AM nightmare is involuntary bankruptcy, in which creditors unsympathetic to the mission of Pacifica force it to sell some of its principal assets: five radio licenses and their associated properties, two of which are on the commercial end of the dial. But even if that worst-case scenario does not happen, the obvious question is how Pacifica got to this awful place, followed by the next logical query: What is to be done?

Founded by World War II–era pacifists, Pacifica from 1949 through 1977 acquired five listener-supported, noncommercial radio stations in California; Washington, DC; New York City; and Texas. As Ronald Reagan took the White House in the early 1980s, Pacifica board members asked themselves a pertinent question: How can we turn this resource into something greater than the sum of its parts? The board summoned civil-rights activist Florence Green to audit the organization. Points nine and ten of her report suffice to summarize her conclusions:

> 9) Pacifica was/is a top notch, powerful, important organization. During the 70s, many of the best and brightest left. Many who have remained at Pacifica

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did so because they had no other place to go. They resist change and work against Pacifica upgrading itself….

10) Pacifica is no longer the only game in town. Though it may be that no one does it like Pacifica, to be "Pacifica" is no longer enough to guarantee success.

Surely the principal board members and administrators of Pacifica circa 1985 thought that this admired organization could more effectively pool its resources to compete with National Public Radio, which had become increasingly timid politically. So they set to. They expanded the organization's news network. They hired managers at the stations who focused on building more listenable and coherent formats across the crucial morning and afternoon drive-time hours. In the early 1990s, they took some of their guidance from a Corporation for Public Broadcasting initiative that has become central to the demonology of current Pacifica culture: the "Healthy Station Project." But they did not need much prompting to know that if Pacifica's member stations were going to attract a larger audience, they would have to slough off the community radio model, which boiled down to drifting along with checkerboard schedules—single occupancy motels for programmers.

For some time, things seemed to be going well. The network's audience grew. Pacifica had tapped into the talents of a young WBAI talk-show host named Amy Goodman. Her program *Democracy Now!* was a huge hit, not just at the five Pacifica stations, but at affiliate stations too. Meanwhile, the Nation Institute's show *Radio Nation*, broadcast out of KPFK in Los Angeles, won the loyalty of over 100 affiliate members. The network even launched a regular talk-show hosted by none other than the once and now again governor of California, Jerry Brown. It is hard to imagine the chief executive of the eighth-biggest economy on earth taking a break to host a regular show on Pacifica radio today, but there he was then.

But Pacifica's great leap forward rested on very shaky terrain. For starters, most of the organization's support came from listener donations. This was a great thing to brag about during fundraising marathons, but the contributions from supporters were far from enough to capitalize the network for competitive growth; National Public Radio, by contrast, supplemented listener donations with foundation grants and contributions from member stations. Relying on supporters meant that Pacifica overwhelmingly depended upon difficult-to-supervise volunteers.

The five-member organization, however, had been rickety from the beginning. The founders of KPFK in Los Angeles had not wanted it to be part of the same nonprofit that the other Pacifica affiliates belonged to, but lost their case in a governance battle. The progenitor of KPFT in Houston may have only affiliated with Pacifica to ease the process of getting an FCC license. WBAI in New York was an unexpected gift to Pacifica from a corporate executive. Many people at these stations had very little sense of the rest of the network.

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Managing Pacifica meant herding large numbers of very independent, very opinionated and very ideological cats. As Pacifica shed many of these obstreperous felines from its stations, they had few other places to go. In 1996, FM radio was still a dominant electronic media platform. Streaming Internet radio was in its infancy. Terrestrial radio was still primary, and it was being rapidly consolidated by Clear Channel Media, liberated from any national ownership restrictions by the Telecommunications Act of that year. In the mid-1990s, losing a show on a Pacifica public radio station was a big deal.

Pacifica's newly discarded programmers began to reach out to allies, a task made easier by the advent of the World Wide Web. As they conversed in cyberspace, they organized campaigns to "take back" member stations like KPFA and WBAI. "Take Backers," as they came to be called, pushed a common narrative: Pacifica radio was losing any connection with its roots. It was becoming "corporatized." It was moving to the right, aspiring to become little more than a media outlet that operated slightly to the left of NPR.

Democracy Now! and *Radio Nation* listeners at the time often did not share this view. Filmmaker Michael Moore quickly lost patience with the squabbling over Pacifica at a 1996 media conference. "Is it me, or is the left completely nuts?" his *Nation* magazine essay began. "I won't bore you with the details of October's Media and Democracy Congress, but suffice it to say that the left is still in fine form, completely ignoring anything that really matters to the American public. I'm convinced there's a good number of you who are simply addicted to listening to yourselves talk and talk and talk."

Exasperated with the raucous conduct that had become typical at Pacifica board meetings, member stations publicized them less, skirting Corporation for Public Broadcasting transparency rules and thus triggering a CPB audit. Impatient with the network's progress, in 1999 Pacifica's leaders scotched the organization's fragile system of inclusive governance, in which each station's advisory board appointed several members to Pacifica's national board. Moving forward, the national board would select delegates on its own, a move that worried moderates in the organization.

As tensions mounted, Pacifica's leadership was suddenly transferred to two individuals who were unprepared to handle the challenges and complexities of the moment. Healthy Station Project coordinator Lynn Chadwick took the mantle of executive director. Mary Frances Berry, head of the US Civil Rights Commission, became chair of the board. They—particularly Berry—may have been told that the trajectory of Pacifica had been settled and all they

Matthew Lasar is the author of two monographs about the evolution of the Pacifica network. He blogs for radiosurvivor .com and is writing a book about the history of Internet radio, Radio 2.0: Uploading the First Broadcast Medium.

had to do was set the dashboard to cruise control.

The tense situation at Pacifica station KPFA in Berkeley quickly interrupted this comfortable prospect. When Chadwick decided not to renew the contract of KPFA's general manager in April 1999, the station's staff rebelled with on-air protests. In response, she fired dissenters. Then, to the astonishment of the entire city and much of the left, Chadwick hired armed guards to shut KPFA down. Ten thousand demonstrators marched for its reopening in the summer.

It is important to remember the larger context as this micro-drama unfolded in Berkeley. The web was now in full throttle—"indie media" sites popped up in every major city in the United States and around the world. Soon after the KPFA crisis, demonstrators flooded Seattle, site of a World Trade Organization conference. Clear Channel's acquisition of over 1,200 radio stations by 2001 provoked a huge outcry across the country. Media activists pushed the FCC not to further deregulate its media-ownership rules—already substantially loosened by the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

With all this going on, it was easy for the Take Back movement to frame Chadwick's shuttering of the world's longest-running listener-supported radio station as part of a narrative of corporate consolidation. And it was easy for the left to see it as such. "The [Pacifica] directorate doesn't like anything that smacks of the unmanageable," declared *Nation* columnist Alexander Cockburn during the KPFA crisis. "It doesn't like radicalism. It wants respectable NPR-type stuff."

Those who did not view the situation in political or psychological terms tried to frame Pacifica's troubles as growing pains on the path to a more effective and relevant organization. But by 2000, Pacifica had probably gone as far as it could down that road. It is unclear whether it possessed the combination of talent and money necessary to get much further. In any event, thuggish management tactics and alarming memos about coup-style station sales prompted a season of craziness across Pacifica, particularly at WBAI. Several high-profile lawsuits demanded that principals of the national board step down. The attorney general of the state of California signed on to the cause. In late 2001, Pacifica's governors and defenders, exhausted and demoralized, pleaded for peace. The Take Backers had won, and they proceeded to reconstruct the network according to their vision of the organization's mission.

In a long and torturous process, Pacifica "democratized" its bylaws. The Pacifica national governing board was now granted as many as twenty-three members, most of them delegates from the network's five newly minted local station boards (LSBs, each comprising twenty-four members), which received enhanced authority over station budgets and management hires. Thus, Pacifica was saddled with an across-the-network board of over 120 individuals. This did not count community advisory boards (required for each station by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting), which had from eight to twelve members each. In addition, Pacifica's entire subscriber base and staff received the right to vote for LSB delegates two out of every three years, although only around 10 percent of Pacifica's listener-subscribers ever bothered to do it. If everyone actively involved in governance—on a voting, a board-member or a CPB-required advisory level—were counted, the total would be well over 7,000 people. Here was a system of checks and balances that was heavy on checks and very light on balance.

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Some of the advocates for this remarkable board system expected that it would purge Pacifica of "entrenched staff"—those who had gone along with the general direction of centralization at Pacifica over the previous two decades. But to the surprise and dismay of Take Backers, the new bylaws often empowered staffers to dominate boards. They were, after all, the only individuals many of these new voters knew, and so their endorsements carried more weight. Across the network, "staff" and "take back" electoral slates bitterly fought each other (full disclosure: I supported a staff slate at KPFA for some years, then gave up on the process). As one of Pacifica's many election supervisors, Terry Boricius, later noted, the network's election system acted like a "pre-filter" that favored "self-important, ego-driven individuals, skilled at waging battles, while discouraging many mild-mannered and cooperative members of the Foundation who might make excellent board members." Or as Minsky put it in his essay, "Almost all progressive activists know enough to steer clear of the Pacifica Boards."

Board costs have skyrocketed under the new system. In 2005, Pacifica spent over $400,000 on board expenses and elections. These costs could have easily surpassed $3 million since the beginning of the democratization period. As boards became bitter stalemate zones, governance activists resorted to technical expulsions or recall campaigns to try to purge others from authority. Staff turnover became a given—the term "interim" often appearing before the titles "station manager" and "program director." Not surprisingly, the politicized chaos led to lawsuits galore. According to one audit, in the fiscal year ending September 30, 2011, "legal fees" ran to $466,676 and "settlement fees" ran to over $71,000. For 2006, settlement fees came to $131,000; add another $150,000 for 2007.

In addition to dumping dozens of inexperienced governors into the system on a constant basis, Pacifica's bylaws required the national board to appoint a new chairperson, vice chairperson and secretary each year. Taken as a whole, these bylaws turned the Pacifica governance system into a sort of annualized version of the movie *Groundhog Day*. But while in the film Bill Murray learns something new and constructive each time Sonny and Cher wake him up via his hotel clock alarm at 6 AM, at Pacifica each successive board put additional vigor into the oft-quoted definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over while

expecting a different result.

The net result of all this was about a dozen years of waste and paralysis. Pacifica might have fared better under its current bizarre governance system in the 1990s. But by 2000, the innovative forces on the Internet that encouraged the democratization of Pacifica now competed with it for attention: progressive blogs like Daily Kos, "pure-play" Internet radio stations propelled by services like SHOUTcast, mega-sites like Myspace (followed by Facebook and Twitter) and podcasts. A Pacifica with a clear and stable leadership might have been able to better integrate these innovations to the organization's advantage. But Pacifica faced this onslaught and the punishing recession year of 2009 without any rudder, leaving it to crash upon the shore.

Broadly speaking, Pacifica and its supporters across the United States now have two options: they can attempt to creatively dismantle the organization, transferring its five listener-supported stations to locally based independent nonprofits, or they can try to repair the organization. Let's call the first possibility the Pacifica Nuclear Option. The nuclear trajectory would surely begin with the suspension of these board elections. Because of the complexities of Pacifica's bylaws-amendment process, the network might not be authorized to do this internally. Thus the organization's principals might have to plead with its nonprofit overseer, California's secretary of state, for permission to do so on an emergency basis. Given this necessity, Pacifica might have to explore court receivership.

Next, Pacifica might need to look at voluntary bankruptcy and reorganization. The network is burdened with two challenging and, at this point, incompatible tasks. The first is managing the administrative affairs of five listener-supported radio stations. The second is funding and distributing national programming across the community radio system in the United States and elsewhere. As Pacifica sought greater influence in the 1990s, its principals hoped the five affiliate stations would perform well enough to bring in funding to support programming and distribution. It obviously hasn't worked out that way, which suggests Pacifica might be better served by transferring its licenses to independent nonprofits; under that plan, Pacifica or a new foundation, backed by an array of stronger community radio stations, could take up the tasks of program support and distribution.

The problem with this scenario is that the Pacifica Affiliate Network, run by dedicated community radio advocate Ursula Ruedenberg, is in fact the one remaining relatively healthy baby in the Pacifica bathwater. "People often see Pacifica owned and operated stations as a 'network,' but I beg to differ," said radio pioneer Jeremy Lansman in an e-mail. "The real network is the organization headed by Ursula, a national network of many stations." Despite all the craziness at Pacifica, the affiliate network continues to distribute Pacifica programming to around 160 affiliates with its satellite resources, and to help affiliates produce and distribute their own content via its "Audioport" system.

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The Pacifica Radio Archives should also be kept in mind. The PRA has digitized significant portions of its huge trove of historic Pacifica content, but it still has a way to go. As executive director Wilkinson noted in her memo, the PRA has been "falling short of cash" and "borrowing from the national office to make payroll," in large part because some Pacifica stations have not been making their contributions to the service.

So in the end, there are at least two ways to look at Pacifica radio, a kind of philosophical-historical way, and a pragmatic way. Here's the historical way: the remarkable story of Pacifica radio may be that of an organization whose growth was half inspirational and half accidental. Over sixty-six years, the Pacifica Foundation accomplished an enormous amount, given its resources and opportunities. Now, both ends of the candle are burning perilously close to each other, and the time has come to douse what is left of the fire. There are many new and extant community-based radio stations in a better position to carry on.

The pragmatic observer, however, looks at the situation differently. For all its insanity, dysfunction and decline—and despite Spotify, SoundCloud and NPR.org—Pacifica radio is still here. At least several thousand programmers across the organization stream their content over five radio stations. Much of it is so-so, some of it is appalling, but a significant amount of it is good and even excellent. Meanwhile, the organization also distributes and coordinates community radio–based content across the country, an offering of huge significance as the FCC licenses hundreds of new low-power FM radio stations every month.

But if Pacifica is to be put back on a sustainable footing, it cannot be repaired from the inside out—there are too many people within Pacifica right now who cannot remember a day when they did not post a Facebook comment or send an e-mail attacking someone. Following the resolution to democratize in 2001, much of the American left walked away from Pacifica. Those who felt that they lost the struggle fled in bitterness. But famous figures who encouraged Pacifica's democratization also left to build new organizations, create networks or further their careers. If Pacifica is going to survive, these people and their allies will have to stop standing on the sidelines and shaking their heads as if they never had anything to do with this strange saga.

In 1949, the same year that Pacifica founder Lewis Hill launched his first radio station, KPFA-FM in Berkeley, a young author named Arthur Miller finished writing a play with a line that, sixty-six years later, speaks to this moment. "Attention must be paid," Linda Loman, one of the principal characters, desperately warned on behalf of her reckless and delusional husband. So it must be for the mother of alternative radio: attention must be paid, and soon. ■