

Some Thoughts on KPFA and Pacifica

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I was elected to the KPFA LSB as a member of the SaveKPFA slate in Fall 2010 and took office in January 2011. There were nine listener representatives to be elected (staff representatives are elected separately by the staff) by a process of ranked choice voting. Much to my surprise, I came in third in a field of around 25. When, after some months, the dust settled, SaveKPFA had 14 seats on the LSB and ICR (Independents for Community had 10, with one unaligned elected member. We had won – or so it seemed.

In fact, because of their tight alliance with Arlene Engelhart, Pacifica's Executive Director, and with a majority on the Pacifica National Board, the ICR can very effectively prevail even though it has only 40% of the votes on the KPFA LSB.

Those who persuaded me to run for the Board told me that it was important for the future of the station and that a bunch of lefties who had been through the wars of the 60's and 70's and hadn't given up in the subsequent decades could really make a difference. So I decided to join with a bunch of old comrades from the Free Speech Movement, the anti Vietnam War Movement, the struggles to free the Soledad Brothers and Angela Davis, who went their separate ways into unions, civil liberties, and anti – racist movements and go out for one last hurrah. It seemed like a good movie script.

Others of my comrades from those movements looked askance at my decision to run, some warning me that I was getting in over my head with the other side in this fight, they being the craziest collection of people that existed in the Bay Area. One, whom I hold particularly dear, simply said: "You fool" and then broke out a bottle of bourbon.

So here I am, halfway through my term. The Morning Show is still off

the air, the recall of Tracy Rosenberg continues to be stalled by Pacifica, and we're waiting to see if Arlene Engelhart, Pacifica's Executive Director, will honor the bylaws and choose the next KPFA General Manager from the list that the LSB sent up.

I'd like to take this moment to tell you some of the things that I think that I've learned. These fall into two categories:

- What are the different visions for KPFA that the two sides have?
- How do those differences play out in the governance structures of KPFA and Pacifica?

The different visions for KPFA can be framed around two issues: professionalism in broadcasting and the identification and role of audience.

Professionalism means different things to the two sides. SaveKPFA views professionalism as a descriptor of skill and sound on the air. Our expectation is that the overwhelming majority of the on-air broadcasters, whether paid or unpaid, should deliver professional level radio. Some of these broadcasters will have learned their skills in a formal setting, others by working their way up the ladder. Some people, no matter what their other talents may be, should simply not be on the radio.

I, for example, should never be on the radio. I speak very slowly, take a long time to make my point, and sometimes get excitable. I think that I have something to offer in conversation, but not on the radio. I don't sound good.

The ICR equates "professionalism" with elitism and claims that criterion keeps ordinary, unlettered people off the radio; they should have access to radio as well. I think that it is very important for broadcasters on a progressive station to regularly be interviewing people who are involved in the day-to-day struggles of life. But I do not think that everyone who thinks that they have something to say should be given 30 minutes a month to say it on air.

This is the context within which the ICR and Andrew Phillips, the Interim General Manager, attack CWA, the staff union, as being elitist and preventing the "real community" from having access to the airwaves. Outside of this context, it isn't possible to comprehend how the ICR LSB members (Greens and Social Justice activists) could be attacking a trade union and its members. The

paid and unpaid staff that broadcast professional level radio violate their vision of “community radio”. They authentically believe that at KPFA, journalism should be practiced by “citizen journalists” who are not paid for their work. They believe that professional journalists at KPFA make the station equivalent to NPR. There are an exception or two to their rule. If, for example, a paid broadcaster has a relentlessly shrill voice, one that reveals both atrocity and conspiracy at every turn then, despite being paid and belonging to the union, is an honorary citizen journalist.

At recent meetings the ICR has been relentlessly criticizing the leadership of the KPFA Crafts Fair and the leadership of the KPFA speaker program for reasons that they will not directly divulge. The stated reasons have to do with the financial viability of these programs, despite their financial reports indicating health and substantial contribution to the station. So what’s going on here? In the absence of direct statement by the ICR crowd, I would venture the guess that the social and political breadth of these programs are uncomfortable and threatening to the vision of “community radio”, hermetically sealed from the rest of the world.

This issue of professionalism vs. community radio is the framework for understanding why ICR, Tracy Rosenberg, and Arlene Engelhart pushed the Morning Show off the air and refuse to consider putting it back on. They have deliberately installed amateur hour in the morning in place of the hallmark show of KPFA, its greatest fundraiser. They have consequently reduced the fundraising capability of the station.

So then you come to a puzzle. Is there another facet to why Pacifica management and the CIR would be willing to put their ideology before the financial health of the station? Here life becomes a bit tricky to follow so we have to be prepared to go down the rabbit hole. Consider just what a completely ICR controlled station would look like. Most of the paid broadcasters and some of the technical staff would be eliminated in favor of unpaid volunteers, resulting in a major drop in the expenses of the station. This would have the consequence of a reduction in listenership and fundraising, but enough to support a skeleton staff and, above all, a well paid management.

Most important, in the ICR vision, the station would be returned to “the community” and to volunteers who will be its staff; amateur radio for a narrow audience.

SaveKPFA has a different view of the station. While authentically attending to the need to reflect community issues, we think KPFA has the mission to reach out to the broader progressive audience of Northern California with wide ranging programming in news, political and social analysis, arts and literature, really good music, drawing progressives away from their reliance on NPR for the really good stuff. The station needs to develop its on-line and social media operation.

So my summary is that SaveKPFA has an open view of the station and ICR has a closed and isolated view, always on guard to protect itself from the sinister forces of the outside world.

This fear of complexity and openness is a perfect lead in to a discussion of how the ICR and the Pacifica management behave as they do, misusing the bureaucratic processes of Pacifica to win victories that they cannot win through openness. Let's give some examples:

1. The Morning Show was removed from the air through the combined work of Arlene Engelhart and Tracy Rosenberg just in advance of the seating of the newly elected SaveKPFA majority LSB in December 2010. The decision was made in secret, bypassing all of the local KPFA institutions. Tracy Rosenberg, a LSB and PNB (Pacifica National Board) member was in direct violation of the bylaws prohibiting board members from participating in management decisions. The ICR people applauded Tracy and her violation of these bylaws.

2. The ICR- dominated KPFA election committee, again in the Dec 2010 election, decided that they would disallow the votes of Brian Edwards – Tiekert, Mitch Jeserich, and Laura Prives in the election for staff representative, thereby preventing Lewis Sawyer, a SaveKPFA candidate, from winning a seat. This was accomplished after the election by examining the bar codes on the presumably anonymous staff ballots, associating those bar codes with the individuals who voted, and discarding the three. Secret ballot anyone??

SaveKPFA had to take this matter to court in order for Lewis to be able to take his seat. This litigation cost KPFA money.

3. Right after the votes in that election were counted, Tracy Rosenberg, using an unconfirmed SF Chronicle story, persuaded the PNB to deny Dan Siegel his seat on the LSB and the PNB. This required legal action against the PNB. We won; Dan was ordered seated; the PNB has filed an appeal to that decision. More KPFA money is then committed for legal bills.

4. Let's briefly skip over Tracy Rosenberg appropriating the holy of holies, KPFA's email list, and installing it on her Media Alliance computer in order to send out promotional material for the Morning Mix, the show that she created to displace the Morning Show. In one of the most surreal LSB meetings that I've attended, each and every ICR LSB member and their supporters rose to applaud Tracy's action. They claimed that she did it for a good cause.

Now when my friends force me to address the question "Please tell me just what's going on at KPFA?", I try platitudes, claiming that it's very difficult to unravel in just a few words and they'll get bored with me. Pressed to the wall, and plied with drink (I've noticed that I don't get invited to parties where they smoke dope), I tell a few tales. The response after about one minute is "WHAT, HOW CAN THEY GET AWAY WITH THAT?" I tell them, as I'm telling you, that they get away with it because Arlene Engelhart enables Tracy Rosenberg to exercise control over the station.

That's why we need to recall Tracy. And we can do it as soon as Summer Reese, the PNB Chair, sends out the ballots. That's the first step.