

## Articles

### **Tuning in to Democracy: Community Radio, Free Speech and the Democratic Promise**

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The historical record is rife with demonstrations of abuses that arise when governments and leaders exploit information and communication channels. The excesses and horrors of the 20th century have revealed how press systems have been utilized to spread dangerous propaganda, instigate conflict, and promote the abuse of human rights. History has witnessed governments manipulating information to control the awareness of their citizens, imposing restrictions on diversity and choice, and effectively closing avenues for citizens to seek redress or air grievances. Guarding against such offenses, at the very least, requires a democratic understanding of free speech and press, a dedicated civic journalistic body, and a public service oriented media system. It would logically follow that countries that endorse the value of democratic governance regard information and communication as essential human rights to be protected and upheld.

Given this understanding, what does it mean when in one of the most authoritarian and repressive regimes, a small independent press promoting democracy could—with difficulty—survive and flourish, and in the alleged democratic leader of the world, a major independent outlet promoting free speech, expression, and diversity was almost crushed? What does this say about the connections between democracy, free speech, and communication?

Analyzing the experiences of two media outlets within two contradicting social systems illuminates a definite break between the theories and ideals of democracy and the reality of their application in the real

world. One story centers around Pacifica Foundation—America's first listener-supported, non-commercial radio network—devoted to exercising free speech and representing diverse and dissenting viewpoints. The Foundation began as one station in California, formed in the late 1940s, to provide a contrast to the rising commercialism of mainstream radio and to promote pacifism. It grew into a network of stations that would become the model for alternative, community-based radio dedicated to democratic and participatory notions of media and communication. Providing a relevant counterpoint is the story of B92, a Serbian radio station (named for its frequency position) that has endured legal repression, state censorship, and outright attacks for trying to maintain an unbiased source of accurate news in an otherwise completely state-controlled media environment. In the midst of a repressive atmosphere, B92's radical, pro-free speech stance transformed the station into a symbol of the potential for a democratic society.

Although these two stations exist within completely different contexts and have encountered different obstacles, many of the underlying issues they both faced are identical. Occupying this common ground is the realization that the relationship between citizens and governments continually proves to be the decisive factor in the existence and maintenance of a democratic culture. For democracy to survive, it must not be left to the devices of governments, but requires the vigilance of citizens to give rights their weight and substance. Unfortunately, too much of history demonstrates that our rights to free speech and expression are only powerful when they are being fought for. In fact, a closer examination of practical examples of media systems and governmental functioning throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century reveal how truly vulnerable and tenuous our hold on democracy is.

### *The Price of Speech*

A wealth of scholarly research and critique has focused on how communication contributes to democracy both from the standpoint of individual access to free speech rights, and in terms of the role that journalism and media systems play in the public discourse.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on journalism and media systems centers on the need for journalistic integrity to analyze and critique the decisions and policies of the government and other power elites within society and to provide a forum for communication

and discussion among a nation's citizens. "Democracy," as Robert McChesney notes, "requires a media system that provides people with a wide range of opinion and analysis and debate on important issues, reflects the diversity of citizens and promotes public accountability of the powers-that-be and the powers-that-want-to-be" (McChesney, 1998). Essential components of a democratic media include journalistic integrity, the journalist as 'watchdog'<sup>2</sup> of the political and economic elite, and the necessity of an independent press not beholden to this elite group to dictate content (Curran, 1996:84). Spaces for community input in the making of media messages form another important—if often overlooked—aspect to democratic communication systems. Patrick Watson of the CBC, Canada's public broadcasting system, notes, "People who equate democracy with the electoral process are missing about 90 per cent of what democracy is all about. It is really about empowering citizens. And that, in turn, is linked to finding ways to express ourselves and to see ourselves as part of a community"(Policy Options/Options politiques, 1995:32).

Interestingly, these specific requirements are more often presented as utopian goals than practical realities, even in the most democratically organized countries. An equal, if not more significant, body of media research and critique has focused on investigating the constraints preventing media from fulfilling its role as promoter and supporter of democracy. There is no shortage of academics and critics that have observed and analyzed these obstacles, underscoring media's frequent use as a tool of social control; its connection and dependence on commercially-based funding; its configuration as a system that usually operates in a unidirectional format with little space for community input; and how it is often wielded as a tool to repress dissent and control social life (Fortner, 1993:46-47). The most definitive examples of media's power are those that demonstrate what happens when media is used to serve the interests of those in power, in blatant disregard for the human rights and dignity of the population as a whole.

### ***Media and Power***

Marc Raboy's UNESCO report on public broadcasting noted, "In many parts of the world, the problem is still one of totalitarianism and the equation of the public interest with the particular interests of the nation state" (Raboy, 1997:78). Politically, media provides powerful interests a

potent vehicle to impart controlled information and spread propaganda to shape public opinion. Dissent is stifled, diversity is sacrificed to bolster conformity and national unity, and lies persist to control public perceptions. For example, no one would argue that the press systems within the State-Communist structures of the USSR, Eastern Europe or China were or are open or free.<sup>3</sup> Censorship and self-censorship have dominated the region's media. Information has been tightly controlled; the leadership, not the population, dictating government policy. But, one cannot deny that these repressive purposes are not limited to authoritarian regimes (Schramm, 1956:105-46). Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman argue "It is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent" (Chomsky and Herman, 1988:1). In this sense, the United States is just as guilty. Propaganda plays a prominent role in the US where it is used to filter news and even report false information for strategic purposes, applied to marginalize dissent, and shaped to serve the needs and agendas of government and dominant private interests.

### *Media in the United States*

The trajectory of media development in the US, especially electronic media forms, has placed media control squarely in corporate hands. It's a configuration that traces back to the introduction of advertising revenue as the main source of media funding, resulting in the commercial-based media system that dominates the American broadcast industry today.<sup>4</sup> Advertising Age, a media industry magazine, published the net advertising revenues (which generates the main source of income) of the top 100 media firms worldwide. The top five: Time Warner, Comcast Corp., Viacom, Walt Disney Co., and NBC Universal (General Electric Co.) each showed 2003 revenues topping 50 billion (Advertising Age Magazine, 2003).

It is an ironic situation considering that, "The press as envisioned by its American founders—Paine, Franklin, Jefferson—was the antithesis of the modern corporation. It was individualistic, rebellious, idiosyncratic, and ferociously opinionated. It was expected to poke, pester, and prod powerful institutions" (Matic, 1999). Instead, a media system run by corporations, dependent on consumption, tends to swing focus away from the issues and concerns that might work to counter the underpin-

nings of such a system, such as media activists, political dissenters, low-income and other marginalized populations. Political candidates must purchase slots of expensive broadcast time to air their platforms to the American public (McChesney, 2003:18). Potential candidates, unable to secure the million-dollar price tag simply cannot compete.<sup>5</sup> And media corporations also wield substantial power over elected officials. For example, between 1993 and mid-2000, media corporations gave upwards of \$75 million dollars in campaign contributions to politicians in both political parties, providing these companies with the leverage to push for policy decisions like profitable tax cuts and favorable media ownership rulings (Center for Public Integrity, 2000). It is questionable how this media configuration can foster industry diversity, democratic participation, or an open debate over the issues. It is unclear how this system works to ensure that the needs and interests of these low-income and marginalized groups are included in the agenda. In a market-based environment, the crucial question becomes how and where First Amendment freedoms protected.

According to the First Amendment of the US Constitution, expression is supposed to be free and uncensored, but because broadcast frequencies were deemed a scarce resource, broadcasters would have to bear certain responsibilities inconsistent with First Amendment provisions. Through the Communications Act of 1934, Congress created the Federal Radio Commission, which later became the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), to regulate frequencies. This would serve to prevent overcrowding of the limited space on the electronic spectrum and the intentional and unintentional jamming of other's use of the airwaves. The airwaves would belong to the people but would be leased to private companies for periods of time provided that local stations serve, "the public interest, convenience, and necessity" (McChesney, 1993:245). The term 'public interest' has always remained undefined though, and the legislation that gave rise to this amorphous concept offered no accompanying guidelines to measure it (Krattenmaker and Powe, 1994:34).<sup>6</sup> Difficult to define, it is also difficult to enforce, leaving the system open to potential exploitation. Recognizing the danger of complete corporate control of the airwaves prompted the government to create an alternative, non-commercial broadcasting system to serve the public interest over commercial and political agendas.

Enter the public broadcasting system: federally created to provide a forum for debate and controversy, to grant a voice to groups that are otherwise ignored or marginalized, and represent the true diversity of the American nation. A democratic purpose, indeed. But, critics argue that constant political interference, a highly centralized and conservative organizational structure, and an over-dependence on corporate financial support have only undermined this mission. In failing to create a stable and sustaining funding source for public broadcasting, programs are increasingly underwritten by corporate sponsors, contributing to the increasing commercialism of this purportedly non-commercial system. These sponsors are able to control content by threatening to withhold financial support if a station airs material that damages their public image. The fact that the President appoints CPB members solidifies unavoidable political influence (Barsamian, 2001:10-24). And provisions for diversity and emphasis on chronically underrepresented groups like minorities and the poor do not exist in a substantial way, limiting the extent of community participation or coverage (Tracey, 1997:119). Without adequate funding or regulatory protections, public broadcasting has been increasingly limited in the range of programming it could provide and therefore its potential impact has never been realized.

### ***Public Broadcasting in a post-Communist Environment***

Despite the limitations of the public broadcasting system, the US government has at least demonstrated some intent to provide democratic communication systems. When critiquing the pros and cons of public broadcasting, one must recognize, "in Eastern Europe, in most of Africa, and in much of the rest of the 'transitional' world, public service broadcasting is a distant ideal, not a working reality" (Raboy, 1997:78). The fall of the Berlin wall and the toppling of dictatorships throughout Europe ushered in profound changes and an open orientation towards democratic principles throughout the region. But for European countries transitioning from centralized structures to more socially pluralist constructions, democratizing the media has been a challenging process. As hard as it is for those in control to relinquish their share of power, it is equally difficult for a population, long denied rights and freedoms, to claim and exercise these rights or trust that they will be supported and upheld by a formerly repressive leadership.

Karol Jakubowicz argues “in a demoralized, deeply suspicious and skeptical society, where there is no accepted definition of the public interest, no ideal of public service, no trust in public regulation of social life and in the institutions called upon to develop and enforce such regulation...the conditions for the emergence of public service broadcasting can hardly be said to exist” (Jakubowicz, 1997:125). It’s a chicken and egg argument: media is necessary to promote democracy but requires an already stable democratic society to operate successfully. Jasminka Udovicki asserts that in Yugoslavia and Serbia, although the country made initial efforts towards introducing some progressive press policies, the government still tried to maintain ideological control over political information. She argues that, nationalism, strongly promoted and manipulated by Slobodon Milosevic’s regime, effectively blocked progressive social and political change and halted any real steps towards instituting more democratic laws and policies (Udovicki, 1997:6).

### *Alternative Broadcasting*

To introduce new social values, to carry through a progressive agenda of change, and break through the status quo, requires access to the news agenda. Where in the former Yugoslavia, the government’s attempts to control political information and debate limited the potential for oppositional concepts to be introduced to the mass public. News broadcasts contained no position other than that of the government. Whether struggling against government-controlled information or corporate dominance, both countries’ media systems provided little room for people with alternative viewpoints to participate in the public dialogue, to influence the public agenda, and to realize their right to communicate.

But beyond the mainstream channels, other alternate and community-based media forms exist to break and bend these boundaries. Clemencia Rodriguez offers, “even if the information and communication channels are left untouched, even if the mainstream media structure is left unaltered, citizens’ media are rupturing pre-established power structures, opening spaces that allow for new social identities and new cultural definitions, and, in a word, generating power on the side of the subordinate” (Rodriguez, 2001:160). Although corporate media news outlets and restrictive authoritarian governments may limit the range of perspectives and issues covered, citizens are not necessarily isolated from other potential sources of information and perceptions (Darnofsky, 1995: 223-

232). Just because people live in a totalitarian regime, does not mean they are unaware of the forces of control around them. It does not mean that they are unable to create or contribute to alternative understandings of their social situation, even if such understandings are difficult to build and maintain. Likewise, not all Americans take “all the news that’s fit to print” in the *New York Times* as gospel, and often seek out other information and alternative ways of knowing and understanding.

In Peter Lewis’ study of alternative/community media, he found that most alternative media projects exist to promote the values of free speech and expression and work to actualize democratic media (Lewis, 1984:1). The true character of democracy and democratic media in Serbia did rise in large measure through the contribution of local, community, and alternative media outlets.<sup>7</sup> These media groups educated the citizens of an alternative societal structure, awakened them to new rights and liberties, and invited them to play a role in the shaping of their own government (Kazmir, 2001:5-38). In Serbia, Radio B92 was one of the only broadcast outlets bold enough to criticize the government, constantly directing attention towards critics and dissenters who were otherwise ignored by the state-run news programs. Against brutal force and incredible odds, B92 became a center of cultural and artistic experimentation and political awakening that was able—for a time—to grow almost as strong as the state media machine. By promoting free speech and the principles of democratic governance, B92 was instrumental in introducing these concepts to communities that had no access to information outside of the standard state channels.

Alternative media have also played an essential role in the United States, by helping to raise awareness of causes from civil rights, to free speech, to the acceptance of gay and lesbian life-styles. John Downing, in his extensive research of American alternative media projects, found that alternative media promote community involvement in media making and expand the range of information and dialogue available. They tend to be more inclusive of voices and opinions of those usually not represented on the corporate channels and the issues that never seem to make the mainstream agendas (Downing, 1984:1-54). For example, dissent against the Vietnam War was initially construed as unpatriotic and not considered a thoughtful critique against government policy. The Pacifica Foundation was for many years, the only place where this dissent was addressed and voiced. Pacifica’s coverage provided the ground-

work for the anti-war movement to grow and eventually break through into more mainstream coverage. Always solidly promoting free speech rights, Pacifica stood up against government repression, and in doing so helped to discredit that repression.

B92 and Pacifica were able to offer an alternative to corporate or state-controlled information and contribute to democratic communication by providing a space for dissent and a critique of powerful societal forces, whether governmental or corporate. In doing so, they promoted one of the most important concepts inherent in understanding the value of democratic rights and freedoms. Namely, it is vital to protect dissent because democracy is not necessarily about every person having the exact same opinion or vision. Democracy involves the ability to listen and appreciate even the most unpopular viewpoints because they can open the dialogue to expand understanding and help to envision new possibilities.

### ***The Serbian Context: Radio B92***

Serbia's main media sources were traditionally government run and operated. With information so heavily controlled and filtered through the eyes of the state, civic journalism projects had little space to grow, thrive, or reach a widespread audience. What is so remarkable about the story of Radio B92 is how a small alternative outlet could rise to stand up and challenge such decisive controls and restraints, and not only survive, but succeed. A brief examination of the development of Belgrade's Radio B92 station provides a true testament to the persuasive strength of the democratic promise.

### ***Yugoslavia's Transition***

B92's existence actually traces back to Yugoslavia's distinct history and policy development under the guidance of Josip Broz Tito during his 40-year tenure in office. Yugoslavia was a country structured into six federal republics: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia with two autonomous provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina. Within these republics, Yugoslavia's extremely diverse population consisted of five main ethnic groups, three major religions, and four dominant languages that have tenuously co-existed throughout the

country's existence (Splichal, 1992:200). When he entered office, Tito initially sought to align the country with the Soviet bloc, to obtain economic and political support for his country. As part of this plan, Tito organized the country as a bureaucratically centralized state under a Communist philosophy. Communism had broad appeal, was inclusive of all nationalities, and therefore served to quell the historic ethnic and religious rivalries that had caused past internal warfare and conflict over disputed territories (Bennett, 1995:53). But when the economy languished, Tito was more than willing to introduce some democratic reforms to appeal to the growing profusion of Western aid aimed at stemming the spread of Communism throughout Europe.

Transferring some authority and economic power from the state to the various republics, Tito began allowing room for the sanctioned rise of independent, self managed media groups and progressive media laws that elevated the concepts of free press and expression to the level of constitutional status (Robinson, 1977:18, 41-43). But despite these democratic initiatives, "the government and political parties still tend[ed] to reproduce the old form of hegemony based on the new, but still exclusive political and nationalistic ideology" (Splichal, 1992:200). The State interfered in the organization of broadcast media, from controlling who could obtain a broadcast license to trying to maintain influence over political news content.

### ***The Center Could Not Hold***

One federal economy gave way to eight separate but regionally centralized ones, but increasing decentralization only served to splinter both economic and political power. Efforts to manage an economy from the center while ensuring flexibility to the changing demands of the market, proved futile. Ideas of autonomy and self-determination among the Republics began to take concrete shape, threatening the cohesion of the Federation as a whole. Nationalistic and ethnic pride surged, paving the way for the cultural clashes and warfare that would consume the territory for much of the 1990s. In the various republics, people began to identify themselves by ethnic category, as Croats or Serbs or Slovenes, instead of Yugoslavian (Tepavac, 1997:72).

The dramatic pulls between democratization and authoritarianism could not be sustained. As the Berlin Wall's fall toppled, and Commu-

nist governments fell throughout Eastern Europe, the Yugoslavian federation dissolved as the clash between calls for greater democratic governance and more consolidated nationalistic controls could not be resolved among the Republics. Capitalizing on the wave of nationalistic fervor, Slobodan Milosevic took control of Serbia by promoting a strong rhetoric of Serbian pride while taking aggressive control of political power and the most important media sources. The media had always been a political tool, but Milosevic utilized its potential in true opportunistic fashion. Clearly understanding the power of the visual medium, Milosevic catalyzed support for his political campaign by promoting fear of other republics and systematically excluding domestic opposition from media coverage (Gordy, 1999:71).

It was into this environment that a group of students and media activists launched a bold experiment in democratic media. B92 was the first, and for many years, the only independent radio station in Serbia. It began in Belgrade in 1989 as a student-run, experimental station, granted an initial 15-day license through a connection with the local chapter of the youth Communist league (Collin, 2001:21). In the beginning it served as a cultural showcase of alternative popular culture and news to counter the bland mainstream music and controlled information that dominated the airwaves. It was a bastion of noisy rock and sub-cultural posturing, operating as a refuge for the different and unpopular within society; the world not seen on the state-run channels.

Envisioning its potential, editor-in-chief Veran Matic, sought to center its mission on the principles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically those rights that spoke to freedom of expression, press and personal liberties; rights that were steadily being crushed in Milosevic's regime. Though not aligned to any particular party or platform, Matic believed that if B92 was to serve as a genuine alternative it would have to be completely radical. The station began this track by giving voice to the growing urban resistance against Milosevic.

In December 1990, as Milosevic was confirmed as the president of Serbia in the first multi-party elections in the Republics, he began to establish his regime by imposing strict hold over the society from educational institutions to the courts to the media system (Bennett, 1995:121). Students, angered over the almost complete exclusion of the opposition party in the state-controlled news, exploded in protest on March 9, 1991. Demands for democratic media formed their rallying cry. While armed

forces ruthlessly suppressed the protests, the state media pronounced demonstrators destructive and overtly violent. B92 was the only news outlet besides the independent television station Studio B that covered the events. As a result, the government shut them both down. Only allowed back on the air under the proviso that there would be no news coverage, B92 became increasingly creative, using music to replace words. Songs like Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" and "White Riot" by the Clash purveyed the messages of protest and dissent to the listening audience (Collin, 2001:28). Within a day, B92 resumed operation, with a renewed strength and altered mission.

### *Aggressive Alternative*

B92 defied government warning and threats of station closures to broadcast the 'real' news, and in doing so became the "center of a social movement: anti-war, anti-nationalism; pro-democracy, pro-human rights" (Collin, 2001:56). When fighting broke out in Bosnia in 1992 and the state-media ignored it, B92 told the stories and dragged the conflict into people's living rooms, at the constant threat of closure and attack by State police. After the Dayton Peace Accords—signed in 1995 to end the fighting in Bosnia—Milosevic declared himself the purveyor of peace and savior of the Serb nation. Meanwhile he set about to disqualify the 'democratic' elections that gave a majority of votes to the party of his opposition (Bennett, 1995:208). The democratic promise touted by the government was exposed as a façade prompting over 200,000 citizens to take to the streets to demand the validity of their votes. When the state-media downplayed the protests, B92 aired the voices and noise of the demonstrations. B92 began to openly promote ideals of economic reform and ethnic cooperation and kept lines open to the international community. One listener describing the time said, "we stopped traveling—we stopped living, actually—so the only contact we had with the outside world was through B92"(Collin, 2001:104). As the regime clamped down hard on society, B92's impact began to spread beyond its fashionable urban liberal audience to become the source of information for all those opposed to Milosevic.

Milosevic did not take such open signs of dissent lightly, and attacked B92 repeatedly, arresting and fining journalists, jamming radio signals, and shutting down the station. To counter the attacks, B92 again

devised creatively innovative tactics. Though Milosevic had set out to restrict Internet access to the country, B92 set up an Internet site and connection through the assistance of *XS4ALL*, a free speech web portal in Amsterdam (Pantic, 2001:203). Though the Internet had minimal impact in the country, it proved a crucial strategy to raise awareness in the international community. B92 soon became the focus of protests and demonstrations, not only with Belgrade citizens demanding the return of their trusted media source, but from international media and human rights organizations as well. But B92 found a way to reach domestic and rural territories as well. When shut down, B92 rerouted their broadcasts through the web. The BBC would download the files and rebroadcast the programs, via radio, back into Serbia. The growing international focus and pressure ultimately forced Milosevic to allow B92 to return to the air.

Inspired to extend the reach of the broadcasts in a more sustained way, B92 combined efforts with seven other stations across Serbia to expand the reach of programs and broadcasts across the entire territory. This collaboration became the Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM). Re-transmitting programs through BBC world service, ANEM could cover 70% of the country, even connecting with stations in Kosovo and Montenegro, and "...inspired hopes that a coalition of independent broadcasters could seriously rival the previously unchallenged supremacy of the state media" (Collin, 2001:143). The association created the opportunity for collaboration and program sharing between stations, gave broadcasters the ability to counter misinformation in other parts of the country, and reached a much wider constituency than their frequency limits would otherwise allow.

1999 saw an escalation in fighting in the territory from multiple ends. Milosevic sent troops in to invade Kosovo while the NATO bombing campaign started its assault on the region, going so far as to violate international law and bomb Serbia's state media tower. On the first day NATO bombing strikes began, policemen attempted to silence B92's broadcasts. They went so far as to actually seize the B92 studio, taking over B92's frequency and station identification and installing a pro-government staff that mimicked B92's style to a tee. To the casual listener, nothing had changed in the format or tone of the programs, except for the fact that the station was suddenly broadcasting state propaganda instead of critiques of the system (Collin, 2001:153). B92's staff finally

got back on the air months later, broadcasting as B2-92, utilizing channel space borrowed from the independent TV station Studio B (Committee to Protect Journalists, 1999). The station quickly rose to third most popular news station in the city, garnering around 1.5 to 2 million listeners. ANEM was a vital component in expanding B92's audience share, and for the first time, independent media successfully and directly competed with state radio. The puppet B92 quickly slid down the ranks before dropping out completely (Collin, 2001:182). But it was only in October of 2000, when Milosevic abdicated his rule, that B92 could finally reclaim its original station and frequency (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2000).

### *A Progressive Solution*

Milosevic left a failing economy, a war-torn landscape, and tens of thousands of displaced citizens in his wake. The struggle to build the foundation of a new society requires a strong media system, but Serbia lacked the leadership necessary to monitor its progress. Many media companies throughout the former Yugoslavia were torn by contradictory impulses. They hoped to reorient their organizations and adapt their systems to market forces while developing a new regulatory broadcast legislation to undo the damage of the previous regime. The goal of this legislation was to transform Radio-Television Serbia (RTS), the state-run media, into a public service broadcaster and establish a Broadcasting Agency to regulate the communications industry. Despite the initial enthusiasm over the project, the legislation garnered criticism from media organizations wanting more democratic provisions, and political groups wanting to maintain a more centralized media system. With much political haranguing, the finalized legislation did not pass until two years after the fall of Milosevic (International Federation of Journalists, 2002).

The language of the legislation shows a dedication to upholding some ideals of a public broadcasting system. In the new Serbian Broadcast Law, community input is relatively limited but the emphasis on independent productions and the requirements that broadcasters serve the needs and interests of minority groups within society, demonstrates positive acknowledgment of the need for pluralistic programming (B92 Online - b92.net, 2002). The language of free speech permeates throughout the legislation, as does the recognition that the independence of public media outlets is necessary to guarantee of the overall development of

democracy and social harmony. The Law goes on to prohibit censorship, call for principles of impartiality and fairness in political information and require that broadcasters give free and balanced time to candidates without discrimination. It also maintains non-discriminatory and transparent procedures for issuing broadcast licenses.

In a clear departure from the American model, Serbian broadcasters are required to pay a fee for the right to broadcast. This fee is justified by the understanding that broadcasters benefit from the use of the airwaves, and should therefore help to provide for their maintenance. As added incentive, broadcasters pay reduced fees if their programming provides a public service. Public broadcasting is additionally sustained through a mandatory fee on owners of television and radio receivers. The public is required to pay for media, which is not necessarily in accordance with the goals of universal accessibility, but not too far from proposals that media funding be included into government tax laws as a public service. There are specific controls to prohibit media concentration including limits on the number of media outlets one person or company can own. Where in the US a broadcaster can own up to 8 radio stations in a single market, in Serbia the limit is one television and radio outlet per area, with percentage limits on control and market share of other media in the same area.

### *Hesitant Victory*

Despite its progressive language, the unfortunate fact is that implementation of the Serbian Broadcast Law is behind schedule and not being followed with open disclosure of activities or full adherence to the new rules. In 2004, debates are still raging, especially over the appointment of the Broadcast Agency members, who will be responsible for ensuring the independence of the public broadcasting system (Beta News Agency, 2004). These delays and problems only serve to question how committed Serbia is to rectifying the legacy of Milosevic's media control. Serbian authorities seem unwilling to break old practices having taken only modest departures from the former regime's policies of media control. In a joint statement by ANEM, media organizations throughout Yugoslavia held that, "neither the political nor the social elite displays a sufficient grasp of the independent position of media and the importance of this position for the success of social reform and the pursuit of the public interest"(B92 Online -b92.net, 2002). Ultimately—though it presents

well on paper—it will be a matter of time before we can consider with any validity, whether the Serbian Broadcast Law is or will be able to contribute to a more democratic communications system and thereby support the establishment of a democratic government and a culture of rights.

***The American Context: The Pacifica Foundation***

While the obstacles facing B92 were easily recognizable and overt, those plaguing Pacifica were more puzzling and complex because they dealt with assumed a priori American rights—including access to certain freedoms and liberties—that are broadly assumed to exist without question. Pacifica's story reveals the failures of the American public broadcasting system and the limits of the US's commercial media environment that have narrowed avenues for oppositional movements and alternative perspectives to seek representation and redress. Though it formed before the advent of the PBS system, the Pacifica Foundation has always stood as the 'other' model of public broadcasting, an alternative more closely aligned with the spirit contained in PBS's founding documents.

The nation's first listener-supported and only non-commercial radio network, the Pacifica Foundation, founded in 1949 in Berkeley, California, was devoted to representing diverse and dissenting viewpoints. The original inspiration for the station was to create the antithesis of the free market model of communications increasingly dominating the airwaves. More specifically, Pacifica operated under a philosophy of broadcast communication committed to First Amendment freedoms, a Quaker-inspired pacifism and an effort to provide a true voice for the people (Downing, 2001:325). Pacifica's Articles of Incorporation contain the mission: "...to promote the full distribution of public information; to obtain access to sources of news not commonly brought together in the same medium; and to employ such varied sources in the public presentation of accurate, objective, comprehensive news of all matters affecting the community" (Koch, 1968:1).

The Pacifica Foundation actually began as one station, KPFA, taking its place on the newly emerging FM frequency. Eventually Pacifica would grow to a network, five stations strong, with 800,000 listeners, serving as the largest media outlet on the left, and setting the benchmark for public-service radio (Dinges, 2003). Pacifica's development as a community radio station was not an instantaneous inspiration, but actu-

ally a progressive ladder of experiments. Though adhering to First Amendment rights would always be the underlying theme, Pacifica struggled both internally and externally to find its orientation.

Pacifica's founder Lewis Hill, felt the motivation for radio should be enlightenment and objective information without the influence of a profit or power motive. He applied this value system not only to content and programming but also to the structure of the organization. He created a radical internal structure by dismantling traditional formations of staff hierarchy, allowing those who did the broadcasting to make the policy decisions. Pacifica's self-perpetuating Board members were initially drawn from station workers (Koch, 1968:11-12).

Though KPFA's programs developed with creativity and innovative style, internally there were major problems. Funding would always remain the network's Achilles heel. In arguably his most revolutionary move, Hill rejected an ad-based funding stream as well as the prospect of government money in order to prevent the influence of the political and economic elite. But Pacifica still required money to function. Hill finally decided to follow Gandhi's philosophy, which holds that public institutions should be voluntarily supported by those who benefit from the offered services. Listener donations became a major income source. Foundations like the Ford Foundation, which saw Pacifica's potential to speak to issues and areas not addressed by other media, provided another significant funding stream (Downing, 2001:328).

Initially, programming was intended to support the politics of pacifism through a town hall type format. In reality, the station served more as a culture of refuge, a safe haven to protect those with controversial ideas and the most unpopular views. Despite the all-inclusive approach, relations among programmers were not always harmonious. There was always a crisis over personality or ideology or the direction and mission of the station. Combined with the constant budgetary shortcomings and growing popularity of television that caused an initial downturn in the FM market, Pacifica was a hotbed of pressure and emotion. Plagued by these persistent problems as well as personal troubles, Lewis Hill committed suicide in 1957. Ironically, his death came just before the FM market rebounded and KPFA was awarded the George Foster Peabody Award for Public Service, radio's highest award. Two years later two new stations were added to the Pacifica network, KPFK in Los Angeles and WBAI in New York, fulfilling Hill's ambitious visions for the future

expansion of the Foundation into larger and more diverse communities (Koch, 1968:14).

### ***First Amendment Radio***

In the 1960s, infused with the energy of Berkeley's burgeoning student activism and the Free Speech Movement (FSM), KPFA became a clearinghouse of grassroots activist voices promoting democracy and populism and scrutiny of the status quo. In 1962, WBAI aired an interview with a whistle blowing FBI agent, the first broadcast attack and critique of the FBI and Director Herbert Hoover. Though the story became a major topic in the mainstream news, Pacifica would bear the brunt of government retaliation. The Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS) immediately set out to investigate Pacifica for possible Communist affiliations. In broadcasting the subsequent hearings, Pacifica played a major role in publicizing the real intent of SISS and The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) to a wider audience. It helped unmask McCarthy's crusade for what it was; an attempt to undermine and discredit liberals and radicals more than stem the "red tide" (Koch, 1968:14).

Surviving these government attacks facilitated a shift in Pacifica's direction. Before his death, Hill had felt that freedom and individual rights were the secondary mission of the foundation, and that peaceable communication among humans was of paramount importance. Forced to fight for their constitutional rights, the Board shifted this order, and in doing so, the Pacifica Foundation invented what was to become the basis of alternative radio—aka First Amendment Radio (Lasar, 1999:165). The concerns with balanced programming were overshadowed by what was considered a growing need to supply what was lacking in commercial broadcasting. They wanted Pacifica to present information that couldn't be found in other sources, most specifically the voices of dissent. This was not because they necessarily agreed with these voices, but because no one else would allow them a fair platform.

This new mission would allow the stations to explore more aggressive critiques of social, economic, and political aspects of public life. Pacifica opened the door to allow new categories of marginalized voices and burgeoning social movements an avenue of expression, including racial minorities, the gay and lesbian movement, and women's liberation movement, among others. It was a courageous and bold step. Pacifica

would be among the first to air anti-Vietnam war voices. Chris Koch from WBAI became the first American to cover the war from Hanoi. Pacifica broadcast a live interview with Che Guevara before his assassination. Pacifica claimed to be the only news organization willing to broadcast Seymour Hersh's story of the My Lai massacre (Lasar, 1999:220).

### *Competition in a Changing Context*

The 70s welcomed two more stations into the fold, KPFT in Houston, Texas and WPFW in Washington D.C. (WPFW was notable in that it was meant to establish a black voice in a majority black city). It also welcomed in a new debate about the mission of the network, its ultimate purpose. Mike Shuster, a Pacifica reporter in this period noted, "Pacifica was great in the early seventies, but when the war ended in 1975, and even before when the antiwar movement petered out, Pacifica began to grope for what to do. That was when the splinter programming came in" (Dinges, 2000:5).

The numerous social movements in the 1970s made for an increasingly fragmented sphere of issues and influence. To keep in line with the times, the foundation's spokespersons shifted the mission once again, redefining Pacifica as 'community radio,' where community was not confined to a local geography, but to a diverse array of interest groups, cultural constituencies, and political activists (Lasar, 2003:68). Pacifica's emphasis on diversity continued to provide an outlet for community groups and voices still marginalized in the mainstream. At the same time, the varied mix of programming tended to appeal to increasingly selective audiences, which actually worked to fragment its base of progressive listeners, rather than bind them together. This broad orientation led to worries that Pacifica would just become a soap box stand for any person or position to air their grievances and travails, but not connected to a broader picture of social change or civic engagement.

During this third phase, the structure of the communications system and industry was also undergoing major changes, both weakening Pacifica's potential influence as well as reinforcing its importance in the world of community media. Congress introduced the public broadcasting system and the National Public Radio (NPR) service in the late 1970s, supported by federal funding. All at once, Pacifica no longer held the franchise on public-service radio (Lasar, 2003:64). NPR created a

nation-wide noncommercial programming style that appealed to a listening base confused by the increasingly patchwork nature of Pacifica's community focus. Facing competition from NPR's more even and centralized programming, Pacifica would eventually have to receive funding from CPB, though many within the Foundation would balk at the concession (Dinges, 2000:5-11).

The entrance of cable and satellite systems in the 1980s and the exponential increase in channel choice also resulted in increasingly segmented audiences. The new abundance of choice led the government to question the viability of public broadcasting because the scarcity rationale no longer applied to the broadcast space (Krattenmaker and Powe, 1994:217-218). Seeking to quantify impact, audience numbers began to prove the significance of public broadcasting. In the mid-80s, NPR produced a report, the *Audience-Building Task Force Report*, which called for public radio stations to build audiences by professionalizing formats (Goodman, 2003). CPB began to gradually increase audience requirements for public radio stations to receive funding, resulting in the channeling of federal dollars towards the larger stations. Smaller stations, most specifically those serving minority and rural communities, were increasingly swallowed up by the bigger players (Dunaway, 2002:67). It would soon become almost impossible to create more listener-supposed radio stations in an urban region (Lasar, 2003:64). Audience share had never constituted a central concern at Pacifica, but now it stood as the critical measure of Pacifica's impact and relevance.

The most immediate effect of pressures for audience and financial independence translated into the hardening of formats into proven money-makers to appeal to educated, suburban, and middle-class listeners with future donation potential (Barsamian, 2001:27-35). In the face of declining government funding, many community broadcasters would resort to introducing more corporate underwriting and replacing niche programs with more mainstreamed fare, like NPR news programs. The problem with NPR is that it is an expensive resource that doesn't provide the representation or diversity one would expect from a non-commercial and alternative media source. The cost to air NPR news programs runs upwards of \$50,000 a year, a prohibitive expense for many low-budget community stations even despite high audience demand (Goodman, 2000). Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) conducted a report on urban public radio stations and NPR programs and discovered trends

similar to corporate station formats. The FAIR study found that host and news anchors were primarily white (87%) and male (69%), and did not reflect the diversity of the metropolitan areas the stations serve (Rendall and Creeley, 2002). In contrast, Pacifica offered news and public affairs programs and satellite distribution services at a much lower cost. A growing number of community and grassroots radio stations turned to Pacifica as a more affordable alternative. In doing so, they bolstered the impact of Pacifica programming by broadcasting its shows to a larger audience (Dinges, 2000:10).

Pacifica remained a vibrant media source because it was one of the few major venues open to community-based broadcasting. But in this kind of environment with the shift in public radio programming priorities, there grew a scarcity of space to provide for the influx of alternative and minority, cultural and political groups wanting airspace, especially those with smaller overall constituencies. Trying to appease all sides led to internal tensions and power struggles among Pacifica's programmers because no one wanted to lose time for their own broadcasts. To contain the mounting problem, Pacifica tried to centralize its organizational structure. While many felt that this was a step back from an ideological commitment to a democratic configuration, it allowed the station to try some innovative experiments, including the creation of nation-wide programs. In the rush for audience share, the hope was that this new program venture would compete with NPR and attract more listeners. One such program, *Democracy Now!*, a nationally-based, independent public affairs and news program, spearheaded by Amy Goodman, quickly became one of the most popular, respected, and recognized programs on the network (Lasar, 2003:65). "The project resulted in the most dramatic increase in audience in Pacifica Radio history, expanding its potential audience to 25 million households" (Democracy Now—democracy-now.org). At the same time, the new centralized orientation would ultimately set the stage for the most severe dilemmas to affect the station.

### ***The Politics of Deregulation***

During this time, changes in the larger United States media environment applied another set of pressures onto Pacifica and other community broadcasters. Despite the government sponsoring the development of public radio, new legislative developments would relax requirements for commercial broadcasters to program in the "public interest." One major

loss was the Fairness Doctrine; a FCC legislation that had stood as the cornerstone of public interest broadcasting. This legislation encapsulated a journalistic, ethical code of balanced and objective information to guide decision-making. In many ways, it stood, "as a symbol of what Americans hope for (and many demand from) the broadcast industry: neutral, detached presentation of significant public issues," that would educate and enlighten the population without manipulating voter decisions or values (Krattenmaker and Powe, 1994:239).

As with the public interest concept, the Fairness Doctrine was left open to broad interpretation and application, which had actually provided a powerful tool for organizations to obtain media access. For many years the legislation was employed by environmental and health groups, among others, to "ensure voters had the information they needed to make informed decisions at the ballot box" (Krinsky, 1994). In 1987, Congress and the Senate had actually voted to make the doctrine law, which would legally require the FCC to make sure media groups were in compliance with the legislation. But in a 1987 court case, *Meredith Corp. v. FCC*, the courts declared that enforcement of the Fairness Doctrine was subject to the FCC's discretion. Months later, the Congressional vote was vetoed by President Reagan, part of a long line of anti-regulation actions during his presidency. These events ultimately gave the FCC the power to dissolve the doctrine, which it did later that same year (*Encyclopedia of Television*).

The passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (also known as the Telecom Act) solidified the trend to dismantle programming in the public interest while profoundly changing the shape of the media landscape. This landmark antitrust legislation, ironically, opened the doors for corporate broadcast outlets to rapidly consolidate their share of the media market under the impetus that competition provides the best incentive to offer the widest range of fare. In 1983, Ben Bagdikian, author of *The Media Monopoly*, wrote that American media production was dominated by fifty companies whose control extends across the board from television and film to newspapers, magazines and book publishing. While his prognosis was dim for the future of communication access, he was criticized for not having faith in the free market system to provide numerous alternatives. With every following edition though, the number shrank, bottoming out at a mere five companies dominating the mediascape by his latest edition, released in 2004 (Bagdikian, 2000:viii).

Despite the variety of media types and outlets available to citizens and consumers, this consolidated ownership only provides the illusion of choice, diversity, and competition.

The most powerful rationale behind the removal of the Fairness Doctrine and the introduction of the Telecom Act was the addition of new media forms, namely cable in the 1980s and the Internet in the 1990s, which brought an exponential explosion of new media outlets and venues to the scene. The argument held that the sheer amount of media channels now available allows citizens infinite access to a diversity of media and therefore government intervention in the market is no longer warranted. The scarcity rationale that inspired the legislation in the first place seemed to no longer apply. But many channels don't translate into more diversity.

Contrary to popular opinion, the Internet is plagued with the same staggering consolidation by the same media conglomerates that control information offline. According to Nielson/Netratings—the self-professed global industry standard for Internet audience analysis—over 90% of Americans use the following search engines to maneuver through the Internet; Google, Yahoo, MSN, AOL, which are owned, operated by, or maintain close partnerships with one or more of the top five media organizations (Sullivan, 2004). According to Hindeman and Cukier's studies of Internet usage patterns, "Relying on links and search engines, most people are directed to a few very successful sites; the rest remain invisible to the majority of users" (Hindman and Cukier, 2004). Though the Internet does provide important access to information and innovative ways for activists to organize and communicate, the question is whether the Internet can break through the dominance of the corporate mediated websites to alter way the majority of Americans access news.

The elimination of public interest requirements is the most fundamental problem in the current US media system. 'Public interest' was important enough that it was listed over 100 times in the Communications Act of 1934. Now these requirements hardly exist, resulting in a marked decrease in program standards. Even some commercial broadcasters agree. According to Barry Diller, creator of FOX broadcasting and former head of media giants including Paramount and ABC Entertainment, "If we had said in this Communications Act of '96 that we would actually impose real public service obligations on broadcasters and not tossed them out, much of this consolidation would have (still)

happened, but it would have allowed other voices to come in. The public service quotient gave some sense of responsibility at least to remind broadcasters that the airwaves still belong to the public. There was some measure of balance involved" (Moyers, 2003). Without even the semblance of required standards, public affairs programming is on the decline and information and news content is increasingly combined with entertainment that spotlights sensationalism over the ongoing issues that more materially affect the way people live.

Corporate dominance over media outlets has not only affected content but has led to the increasing restriction of citizens' access to radio broadcast space. Virtually every local radio market is dominated by only a handful of firms. The largest four firms in most small markets control 90 percent of market share or more. One company, Clear Channel, offers the most extreme case of consolidation. After the 1996 Telecom Act, the company's ownership of stations grew from 40 radio stations to 1,240. Potential competitors don't even control a fourth of this number (Toomey, 2003). Interestingly, a *New York Times* study found that in this same period, the listenership for community and public radio had been growing at a remarkable rate from less than 10 million in 1985 to almost 20 million in 1995 (Dunaway, 2002:65). This study provides clear evidence; as consolidation and commercialism grows unbridled, people want an alternative.

Pacifica's National Board claimed that in this rapidly changing media environment it was necessary to appeal to a broader audience and to become more profitable in order to better demonstrate Pacifica's relevance. They wanted to get rid of the checkerboard programming and focus more on national programs that would air on affiliate stations and bolster Pacific's overall audience share. The more traditional and long-time supporters of the Network contended that this new strategy could only work at the expense of Pacifica's mission, its programming mandate, and the integrity of the network. They claimed that it would only contribute to the increasing containment of the airwaves (Dinges, 2000:6). Despite their stated intentions, the Board ultimately employed tactics that triggered a crisis, and almost destroyed the network in the process.

### ***Crisis on the Dial***

The crisis began when the Pacifica Foundation Board began to systematically remove democratic processes from the organizational structure, creating a more Board-centralized power dynamic. The Board dismantled the Local Advisory Boards that had previously served as the major vehicle for community feedback and participation. They also withheld the minutes from Board meetings, which violated Pacifica's policies, as well as the dictates of the 1934 Communications Act. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999, the Foundation's Executive Director, fired KPFA's long-time general manager without notice or community consultation. This action was swift and shocking and prompted immediate protest. A number of coalitions all representing various constituencies formed to organize demonstrations and file various lawsuits against the foundation for breach of its mission. With names like *Save Pacifica* and *Committee for a Democratic Pacifica*, outraged listeners projected the general sentiment of Pacifica as a sinking ship. They contended "democracy is more than a word you put on a mass mailing to get someone to send you a cheque" (Lasar, 1999:1).

These Board actions proved to be a stark contradiction to the Pacifica's founding principles. Dennis Bernstein, a long time broadcaster for Pacifica News Network described the Board's tactics as more closely resembling a corporate takeover. The Board hired lawyers experienced in fighting unions, security firms specializing in 'hostile terminations' and a PR firm to handle public reception of the changes. Bernstein asserted that the government also played a role in that these actions, "took place with the connivance of the government's Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which worked closely with the top Pacifica management and encouraged the move away from local oversight" (Bernstein, 2000).

The Board countered the protest with claims that their aim was to bring more diversity to the network and to better allocate Pacifica's already scarce resources, a factor that they felt justified the rapid turnover of staff and program content. But this explanation seemed to contradict their actions including purging the stations of representatives of people of color, including the head of KPFA's Third World department. When a memo detailing plans to sell KPFA or WBAI was accidentally intercepted, it left no doubt in many minds that diversity was not the only motivation for the many changes. The memo insinuated that the Pacifica

Board intended to sell either of the stations, worth upwards of \$50 and \$80 million respectively, at the time, in order to endow the Foundation and to help deal with financial and budgetary shortcomings (Dinges, 2000:3). Though the Board denied any serious consideration of the proposal, the leak led to a quick loss of credibility for the Network.

Concerned with rising tensions within the station, the Board hired armed security guards to patrol the offices and called in union busting firms to fragment the network of employees and volunteers at the various stations. They also maintained a gag rule to prevent staff from discussing the policy issues over the air. Those staff unwilling to leave their audience in the dark found their programs shut off. Over 100 staff at the smaller stations, KPFK, KPFT, and WBFN were fired for violating the rule despite the fact that the issue was a major topic in large papers like the *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* (Buffa, 2002). An on-air confrontation between armed guards and a talk show host, who openly defied the gag rule, broadcast the conflict to a wide audience and prompted a new round of listener protests. The Board used the display to justify shutting down all broadcasting, boarding up the KPFA studios, and suspending the staff without pay. The lockout lasted three weeks until a mass demonstration of over 10,000 forced the Board to relent (Solomon, 2002). It was the largest mass demonstration in Berkeley since the Vietnam War, and one of the first major demonstrations demanding the preservation of a free speech media outlet.

Protest and demonstrations also grew within the Pacifica network. Stringers for Pacifica News Network, another Pacifica banner public affairs program, began to boycott their own programs to protest the management-generated censorship. Taking advantage of the growing Internet revolution, they created Free Speech Radio News, an alternative news webcast that would connect a network of community radio stations to fill the "urgent, unmet demand for a wider range of alternative media choices than those offered by an increasingly bureaucratized Pacifica Foundation" (Solomon, 2002).

Other programs would follow suit. In December 2000, the Pacifica board took another round of decisive action, this time against New York's station, WBAI, in what was to become known as the Christmas Coup. Three veteran staff received word that they were fired, without cause or previous notice, including Juan Gonzalez, co-host of *Democracy Now!*, the most popular show on the Pacifica network. Feeling that

the environment at WBAI was no longer safe, Amy Goodman moved the operations off site. Though *Democracy Now!* continued producing daily shows, Pacifica no longer aired them, suspending the staff without pay (Barsamian, 2001:77-78). The loss of *Democracy Now!*, the staff purges, and listener protests proved to be the final straw, prompting affiliate community radio subscribers to break their connection and withhold subscription fees to the foundation. In April 2001, Pacifica dissenters formed *WBAI in EXILE* (WBIX.org), a web-based version of many of WBAI's most popular shows that had been removed from the airwaves (Lasar, 1999:6).

But ultimately, the intensive protest and lawsuits filed by listeners and advisory boards finally and successfully settled. In December of 2001, the Board bucked under the pressure and national focus and resigned their positions. But, the initial triumph was quickly dampened when news surfaced that Pacifica was on the brink of financial ruin (Buffa, 2002). An audit revealed that the National Board had been spending excessive amounts of money to clamp down on the network. Auditors found huge sums spent on public relations firms, security patrols, and over \$200,000 in unpaid banking fees, revealing multiple levels of fiscal mismanagement. The legal battles alone racked up fees totaling \$1.4 million. By the conclusion of the crisis, the network's debt had racked up to a total of \$5 million, networks with grassroots media were shaken, and the future of the Pacifica Foundation was uncertain (Douglas, 2002).

Having won the most pressing battles though, listeners and staff forged ahead with a renewed vigor. A new interim governing body formed which included members of the old majority, members elected through local advisory boards, and five dissidents. This interim Board immediately set to reinstate fired employees and institute new by-laws requiring listener elections of local advisory boards at all of the stations. They ordered all five stations to spend two hours per week with programs directly covering the governance and by-law changes (Save Pacifica - Savepacifica.net, 2002).

After heated negotiations, mainly focusing on costs, *Democracy Now!* eventually came back to Pacifica. The affiliate stations have also started to re-connect to the station, hopefully to begin rebuilding a more stable and widespread audience. These events have led many media activists in the United States to claim the victory at Pacifica as a victory

for a progressive media movement. But, as David Adelson, chair of KPFK's local advisory board aptly noted, "if we just treat winning Pacifica as the endpoint, it's a loss. Reclaiming Pacifica has got to be used as a driving wedge for the fight to win more democratic media" (Buffa, 2002).

The crisis has passed, but a closer inspection reveals that the root problems remain. The non-commercial broadcasting domain is full of thousands of radio programmers and community groups who urgently need more space for their visions and work. At the same time, there are thousands of commercial stations owned by just a handful of corporations. And these corporations actively work to keep community radio programs from draining their audience share and their access to potential consumers. This leaves the community stations in a race against one another, struggling to prove their relevance and to compete for a limited supply of funds. Representation and diversity is sacrificed, as the stations increasingly seem to resemble one another by buying into the same national programs in the hopes of building stable audiences. Although audience share is an important factor in determining relevance, this standard is not necessarily indicative of radio's potential reach. It is important to recognize that not all media must be large and overwhelming to provide an impact and that homogeneity does not provide appropriate space for dialogue and debate.

Today Pacifica remains alone in a hostile and prohibitive media environment, still retaining the pressure of being one of the few wide-reaching venues for progressive and alternative voices, underserved communities, and fringe identities. Lasar rightly offers that what occurred at Pacifica cannot be dismissed as an internal squabble within the left. "The conditions that precipitate this conflict – 20 years of systematic hacking away at the public sector – have created a tense, overcrowded non-commercial domain that cannot be micro-managed without causing havoc" (Lasar, 1999:7). Unfortunately this broader connection has yet to be made by the majority of media activists, or even many programmers within the Pacifica Foundation itself.

There is still the question of Pacifica's ability to incorporate both the input of community voices and the need to restore and enhance the relevance of Pacifica's overall programming. Given the near close demise of the Network, finding the answers is an urgent necessity, especially considering that Pacifica has a potential audience share that almost matches

NPR's. The issue is not whether the Network should appeal to a wide core of listeners or continue to narrowcast programming towards a small core of supporters. The question is how to balance both agendas without losing sight of the greater need for democratic media.

### ***The Medium and the Message***

In July of 1999, Radio B92 and ANEM sent a message of solidarity to Radio KPFA in Berkeley, and WBAI in New York. It stated:

The similarity of the media situation in our two nations, which differ in many things, demonstrates that the character of media repression is virtually the same under openly totalitarian dictatorships as it is under democratic systems which are increasingly influenced by conservative structures (Free B92 and ANEM, 1999).

Despite the differences in their social and political environments the similarities between the Pacifica Foundation and Radio B92 are remarkable. Both are community radio stations dedicated to the principles of free speech and expression as essential human rights. Both understand that the protection of these rights cannot be sustained or maintained by dependence on market forces that see audiences as consumers or politicians who seek to control information to achieve certain political ends. They both sought to expand the reach of an alternative base of communication, while building networks that would transcend their own geographic locations. In doing so, both contributed to movements to democratize communication within their respective countries. Both also survived attacks from their respective governments who used legislative tools and legal means attempting to discredit their media organizations. Both were shut out of their own studios and had powerful forces trying to dictate the scope of their programming. And when attacked, both attracted huge demonstrations of support from their own communities, revealing the effectiveness of their programming and demonstrating the desire for alternative voices in the media landscape.

### ***Media and Democracy***

Even with these many similarities, the differences between the stations are still glaring. Where B92 is the ultimate tale of the underdog rising

against an uncompromising obstacle, Pacifica's story raises puzzling questions about the extent of free speech within an already democratic society. But it is precisely because the B92 case study stands as such an extraordinary counterpoint to the Pacifica story, that it is ultimately able to provide significant insight towards understanding the greater environment of the United States' media infrastructure.

Initially, pre-Milosevic leaders introduced certain progressive policies to Serbia. They instituted a self-managed media system to facilitate the country's proposed shift towards a more socialist-democratic orientation. But in Yugoslavia, in the wake of a political culture that worked to centralize control of information, this transition would have to be more than a process of changing laws. A democratic society is not established only through the adoption of certain values, but also depends on how these ideals intersect with a country's historical and cultural traditions. For a citizenry long denied the ability to speak their own views, critique the workings of their government, or live outside certain prescribed codes of accepted conduct, true democratic transformation requires a complex shift in social understanding. One must first develop openness to a wide range of political thought, and cultivate some measure of trust in the process of democratic governance.

In controlling the extent of political communication, the Yugoslavian and Serbian governments effectively denied political debate, and in suppressing a pluralism of ideas they reduced the legitimacy of the democratic model. For Milosevic to have claimed the existence of some kind of democratic structure is laughable. The events that occurred in Serbia counter every facet of democratic communication, and in doing so highlights all the more forcibly, the importance of having independent voices.

But the inevitable question remains: How could so many of these repressive constraints also occur within the Pacifica Foundation, in a country where democracy is assumed to be more than words on a document encased in glass? Why would it be so difficult to sustain a community-based media outlet in a country where free speech is protected, promoted, and celebrated? The ultimate crisis that threatened Pacifica's survival can be dismissed as an internally based problem; a division between the ideological commitments of the staff and the management of an organization. But this explanation misses a very large portion of the equation. A glimpse of the surrounding economic, political, and

social spheres emphasizes the corporate media environment and the dissolution of broadcast regulations as having a direct impact on Pacifica's trajectory.

Over the last twenty years, the U. S. government aggressively limited citizens' access to the airwaves. As Lasar argued, "The systematic assault on public and locally accessible noncommercial media in the United States has left Pacifica isolated. The network shoulders the burden of being too many things to too many people, within the context of too little space." (Lasar 2003:66-67). But instead of directing efforts to address government media policy and to invigorate and strengthen an alternative, noncommercial, broadcasting sector, "the network's leadership had clearly chosen to capitalize on its possession of the last big signal, noncommercial, independent airspace in America" (Lasar, 1999:2). The result has been a tense, heated, and overcrowded media system, where any attempts to shift programming could be construed as an ideological attack.

In some ways this situation mirrors the ethnic squabbles that erupted in Serbia. During Tito's reign, ethnic groups lived together peaceably, side by side. When filled with fear, prompted by factors such as an aggressive use of propaganda and societal cohesion manipulated by the political leadership, harmonious ties were broken. It is in this context that the internal conflicts should also be addressed. Pacifica's struggle illustrates the problems that will always exist in trying to find common ground and harmony among people with conflicting ideological commitments. What Pacifica should have done, was focus attention on problems in the overarching media environment; the containment of the airwaves, the endless pursuit and competition for an ever-larger audience. Instead, the leadership internalized the struggle and thus made no strides towards a larger project of media democratization. In the process, Pacifica lost sight of the mission that made the network of stations such an important and unique part of the media landscape.

### ***Rule by the People***

If one important difference can be highlighted between these two case studies, it is the fact that in Serbia, the people knew, and have always known that their government controls information. Milosevic's reign is less a story of a man publicly supported and advocated by the people, and more a public situation of habit and/or apathy. "Deprived of alterna-

tives, people opposed to the regime are condemned to political resignation and escape into private life, while the lack of enthusiasm of regime supporters hardly matters”(Gordy, 1999:22). Though democratization was the rallying cry of post-Communist development throughout Eastern Europe, it seemed less important to the majority of Serbians. For example it was hard to convince the population of the value and power of a citizen electorate. For most Serbians, voting did not mean choosing leadership or affecting government decisions, considering the futility of past election attempts. True societal transformation would require more than the seemingly superficial symbols of democratic governance.

An important factor in the relationship between democracy and free speech is the desire and willingness of citizens to play their role in society and not acquiesce to the interests of powerful forces. In *The Culture of Power in Serbia*, Eric Gordy found that, “those people inclined to be satisfied with the information readily available to them from regime-controlled sources do not have the motivation to seek other sources or to be bothered by questions of objectivity or balance. Such effort likely interferes with the comfort they achieve by trusting, or pretending to trust, that they are already adequately informed” (Gordy, 1999:97). This was especially true for older, rural, and less educated Serbians who formed the majority of support for Milosevic’s regime. It is not strange that under these circumstances that the force behind Radio B92 and other alternative outlets was a discontent but educated youth, not as willing to live under the same restrictions as their parents (Collin, 2001: 200). For those seeking for better information, who wanted to debate the issues to search for options, independent alternative media provided a sense of connection to a much larger community.

The regime was most successful at establishing its control in the rural areas, precisely because there it was easier to suppress alternative sources of information and prevent people from gaining an understanding of realities external to Serbia. But such intense government control only last so long. Faced with severe economic hardship, the visible effects of the war and the eventual bombing of their cities, dissent grew among the Serbian population. The more that Milosevic’s democratic promises fell flat, people who had once discounted B92 now turned to it as their trusted source of information. And ANEM’s efforts broadcast B92 to a larger constituency was an influential factor in spreading alter-

native information to areas previously only served by regime media (Gordy, 1999:206).

In the United States, although the media system has been steadily reduced to a shadow of a democratic one, most Americans would believe their media is free and that their First Amendment freedoms are strong and protected. It may be easy to say the American public is naïve, but such a simplistic answer ignores a complex set of contributing factors, for instance, the weakening of journalistic integrity in US media. News and public affairs programming has declined only to be replaced by an influx of sensationalistic news and entertainment-based fare. The absence of public interest requirements has left little space or incentive for diverse programming. News stations are increasingly reliant on government sources for news with reporting taking place more in press pools or with 'embedded journalists' than in actual on the spot reporting (Darnofsky, 1995:228). The civic project of journalism is losing ground. Powerful forces—both political and economic—are increasingly controlling information, as strongly as any propaganda issued out of Serbia. It is perhaps ironic, that considering the history of the media structure within Yugoslavia, and Serbia in particular, that the current broadcasting legislation adopted post-Milosevic, contains more safeguards and protections of free speech, expression, and diversity than the American system, at least rhetorically.

In addition to the shortcomings of the media industry are the systematic ways that civic engagement in politics and participation in public dialogue have become relegated to the sidelines. Avenues for citizen input have eroded, and people tend to feel resigned to the culture at hand, comfortable enough in America's high standard of living to not readily oppose fundamental flaws in the way society has come to be run. Dismal voting rates within the United States speak to a high degree of citizen apathy. People are consumed with the burdens and struggles of daily life, which can seem far removed from the larger ideological principles of media consolidation. Robert Hackett finds, "given marketing and cultural pressures towards social fragmentation, many consumers want fewer voices and less complexity in their daily media fare, not more. Many consumers also identify with the branded images, products, programs, and celebrities that constitute the corporate mediascape" (Hackett, 2001). Given the popularity of mainstream media and the amount of channels and choices that now exist, it becomes difficult to

convince someone to question the familiarity and viability of NBC or CNN.

But studies show that as citizens become more aware of these issues they overwhelmingly tend to disagree with media consolidation and view it in a negative light. The Telecom Act and the more recent 2003 FCC regulation reviews occurred with few if any kind of public forums or debates of the issues, with little word from Congress, and understandably even less coverage in the news media. In February 2003, the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that 72% of Americans had heard absolutely nothing about the FCC's plans to further deregulate already controversial media ownership rules (Schmeizer, 2003). But by July of 2003, a Pew Research Center for People and the Press report found that nearly half the American public knew about the issue, and of that number, a marked 70% had a negative opinion of the proposed changes (Pew Research Center, 2003).

This increase in public awareness can be attributed to the education efforts of a variety of organizations. Now back on the Pacifica airwaves, Amy Goodman, has been consistently providing strong political commentary on the dangers of consolidation in her *Democracy Now!* program. Organizations like *MoveOn.org*, a community of activists who work to energize democratic participation by collectively determining their issue priorities, have placed media reform at the top of their agenda. To many people's surprise, even historically conservative groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA), have become media activists. Both MoveOn and the NRA collected hundreds of thousands of signatures on petitions demanding that the FCC keep the ownership rules intact. Another public-interest group, Common Cause, launched a \$250,000 advertising campaign against the FCC's proposed changes, placing ads in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* to raise public awareness (Ahrens, 2003, A01). These efforts helped contribute to the unprecedented Congressional rejection of the proposed changes, which was followed by rejections in the Senate and a US Appeals Court in June of 2004 (Squeo and Flint, 2004, A3). But the fight is not yet over as the FCC is working to redraft a new version of the legislation and will continue pushing for their proposed changes.

These examples illustrate that the commitment to the principles of free speech does in fact exist. But it is important to realize that it is mainly during strained and oppressive times that rights and freedoms

take on their greatest significance. Robert Hackett aptly notes “demands for participatory communication are historically more frequent in times of revolutionary upheaval when people’s stories, actions, and protests are prominent in public communication” (Hackett, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that both Pacifica and B92 could design their most robust ideological commitments in the face of repressive forces. Likewise the recent surge of interest in media reform is closely connected to the local and global turmoil since the attack of September 11, 2001, the ongoing war the US has waged against Iraq, and the dampening of domestic civil rights under the guise of security concerns.

In the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>, we witnessed broadcast and cable news audiences jump to record highs not seen since the first Gulf War (Kovach, 2002). We saw audiences reach out for Pacifica, NPR, and other public radio outlets in search of accurate and reliable information. During this crisis, and in response to tangible threats from both terrorists *and* the State, the need for journalists to resume their role as purveyors of news and the public interest became stronger than it had been in decades. But we also witnessed the government openly telling journalists not to ask certain questions, not to challenge government policy, and to follow the government’s lead in deciding when and where to broadcast certain information. We saw the Patriot Act pass through Congressional review with little debate, even though the legislation blatantly attacks basic civil rights. We have seen incredible censorship aimed mainly against people critiquing the government’s reaction to the campaign against Afghanistan, and later Iraq. In this charged climate, dissent and critique have been punished rather than protected, precisely at a time when we need to truly question the motives and judgments of our leaders.

In this repressive environment, Pacifica and other alternative media organizations have stepped up to the challenge of maintaining a space for dissent, allowing the disagreements, debates, and the claims of the anti-war movement to break through to the mainstream in a more substantial way. These media groups have analyzed the actions of our leadership and asked the critical questions while the mainstream media acquiesced to the government line. And as the war progressed without an end in sight and the death toll of Iraqi civilians and US soldiers climbed, these media groups helped to give voice to the dissent and disapproval that was increasingly expanding beyond traditional activist circles. They

helped fuel the growing discontent with the mainstream media coverage of the issues.

### ***Lessons Learned***

That alternative media exist to provide this service is an essential factor and warrants preserving independent voices in the media landscape. An important lesson from Pacifica's history though, is that efforts to preserve space for these independent media outlets cannot remain too narrow in focus or we risk losing the momentum that could bring a larger media reform struggle to the next level. In the case of KPFA, though protestors came out to support the station, in numbers not amassed since the demonstrations against the Vietnam War, the root of the problem was not being addressed. Listeners spent endless effort and energy to protect a somewhat fringe alternative media outlet, while corporate consolidation continued its profound altering of the media landscape.

Today, the growing attention and frustration over the shortcomings of the media industry could set the perfect stage upon which to really build a large-scale media reform movement in the US. The recent triumph in the battle against the FCC, and the variety of organizations stepping into the fight are important components. They are joining long-running media watchdog organizations like FAIR and the Institute for Public Accuracy, and advocacy groups like the Center for Digital Democracy and the Media Alliance Project, to name a few, who have been out at the forefront of media activism. But the real obstacle to building this movement is that there is not enough substantial coordination and collaboration between these groups to make media reform a national agenda priority. These groups need to abandon diverse agendas and competition over funding and join together in the struggle for a common goal that can reach American citizens everywhere. And the way to do that is to present the issue in a way that everyday people can understand and relate to it. Robert McChesney and John Nichols believe a real movement can only form if media activists, "reach out to and involve organized groups that currently are not very active in media reform, but are seriously hampered by the current media system...organized labor, teachers, librarians, civil libertarians, artists, religious dominations, and civil rights groups" (McChesney and Nichols, 2002:2). The movement needs to connect with people to the extent that they can understand how media reform affects their daily lives, on par with other civil rights and free-

doms such as voting. At least for the time being, there is ample upheaval in America's political system to direct people's attention towards these important issues. Whether a movement will be able to grow and sustain itself beyond the country's current state of instability, remains to be seen. The challenge is for a media reform movement to translate that growing awareness and discontent into positive momentum for change.

If we really want to talk about the relationship between free speech and democracy, perhaps apathy is the biggest threat; a significant component being the failure of citizens to truly understand and appreciate the underlying principles of free speech as essential human rights. If media outlets are to promote democratic communication, it cannot be only in times of turmoil. It is in the quiet moments, when people are less apt to pay attention and question the workings of powerful groups, that these rights must also be fought for. The cases of B92 and Pacifica provide important lessons for ensuring a strong press able to preserve and support the public interest. B92 reveals that the government cannot be too involved with the media industry, especially in terms of guiding and influencing political content. The potentials for abuse are many. As in Serbia, if journalists are prevented from carrying out their watchdog duties, they are rendered incapable of contributing to the formation or legitimacy of a democratic culture. Broadcasters cannot serve the public interest if they are utterly dependent on the government to guide their path and provide the parameters for what is suitable for discussion. American news media, on the other hand, are clearly dominated more by what sells than what is in the interest of the public. Too much substance is sacrificed to appeal to corporate interests, and then citizens are rendered unable to make truly informed decisions. The need for public interest programming is vital enough to require that the government not step too far away from regulating and controlling media. But the most fundamental lesson from both cases is that democratic media requires decisive controls that cannot be left to the devices of political and economic elites to protect its functioning in moments of political quiet.

In order to guarantee a powerful and functioning democratic media system it is vital to reinvigorate the concepts of public interest and public service by bringing back useful measurements like those found in the Fairness Doctrine. It is necessary to create concrete policy to guard against media monopolization while creating higher standards for public accountability of media organizations. Attention must be focused on bal-

ancing the financial sustainability of non-commercial media enterprises with the need to maintain a level of diversity and competition in a market environment. Media organizations need to operate according to practices that are fair, non-discriminatory, transparent, and open to public input and consultation. And democratic media requires a critical journalistic body to examine, analyze, and question the policies of the government, to guard against the dangerous effects of rumor, gossip, and propaganda, and to not sacrifice this duty for fear of being labeled unpatriotic.

At the same time, it is too easy to lay the burden of responsibility on mass media for the democratic well being of a nation's citizens. Ultimately it was through the sustained protest of Pacifica's listeners—through the people themselves standing up and demanding rights and responsibilities—that a true representation of dissent could be demonstrated and lead to change. An essential component of democracy is an active citizenship. This requires that people be continually reminded of what the principles of free speech really entail, not the expression of coinciding opinions, but the protection of even the most minority viewpoint. Citizens need to understand that critique and debate enhance our understanding of issues rather than hinder or manipulate public opinion. We must maintain the right to petition our own government when we disagree with its policies. We must re-exert our position and power as citizens, because democracy is ultimately rule by the people for the people. We must acknowledge that Pacifica and B92 and other alternative and noncommercial stations are vital to maintaining a space for dissent, a place for community input, and a forum for dialogue. But we must also recognize that the battles for these stations are only the first steps. The task of building a viable reform movement still lies ahead. If these stories teach us anything it is that this movement is critical to ensure the continued presence of democracy and to sustain people's access to their share of rights and privileges.

## *Notes*

1. McQuail, (1987), Chomsky and Hermann (1988), McChesney (1993, 1998, 2003), Atkinson (1997), Curran and Gureritch (1996) are a few notable scholars in the field of media studies.

2. James Curran's "watchdog" function of media forms the "key element of the ideology that legitimates the printed press" in both the US and the U.K. By exposing wrongs, analyzing actions, and questioning policies, journalists apply pressure and provide information to ensure the exercise of justice and to prevent the misuse and imbalance of power whether political or economic (Curran, 1996).

3. According to Wilbur Schramm's Communist Press Theory, Communist mass media functions specifically to mobilize, proselytize, indoctrinate, and persuade the public toward the purposes of the government (Schramm, 1956).

4. Robert McChesney notes, "it was only in the late 1920s that capitalists began to sense that through network operation and commercial advertising, radio broadcasting could generate substantial profits"(McChesney, 1997).

5. McChesney found that an astounding 90% of campaign contributions toward elections are made by the wealthiest 1% of Americans (McChesney, 2003).

6. In a famous speech, FCC Commissioner Michael Powell noted his own confusion with the concept when he "waited for a visit from the angel of the public interest" which never appeared. He likened the concept to modern art in that its meaning rests on the eye of the beholder, which he claimed was not a sound foundation for determining a legal standard (Powell, 1998).

7. In Velimir Curgus Kazimir's documentation of the citizen resistance in Serbia, he notes that media forms promoting democratic concepts of rights and information equality would lay the groundwork for introducing a new reality. (2001).

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