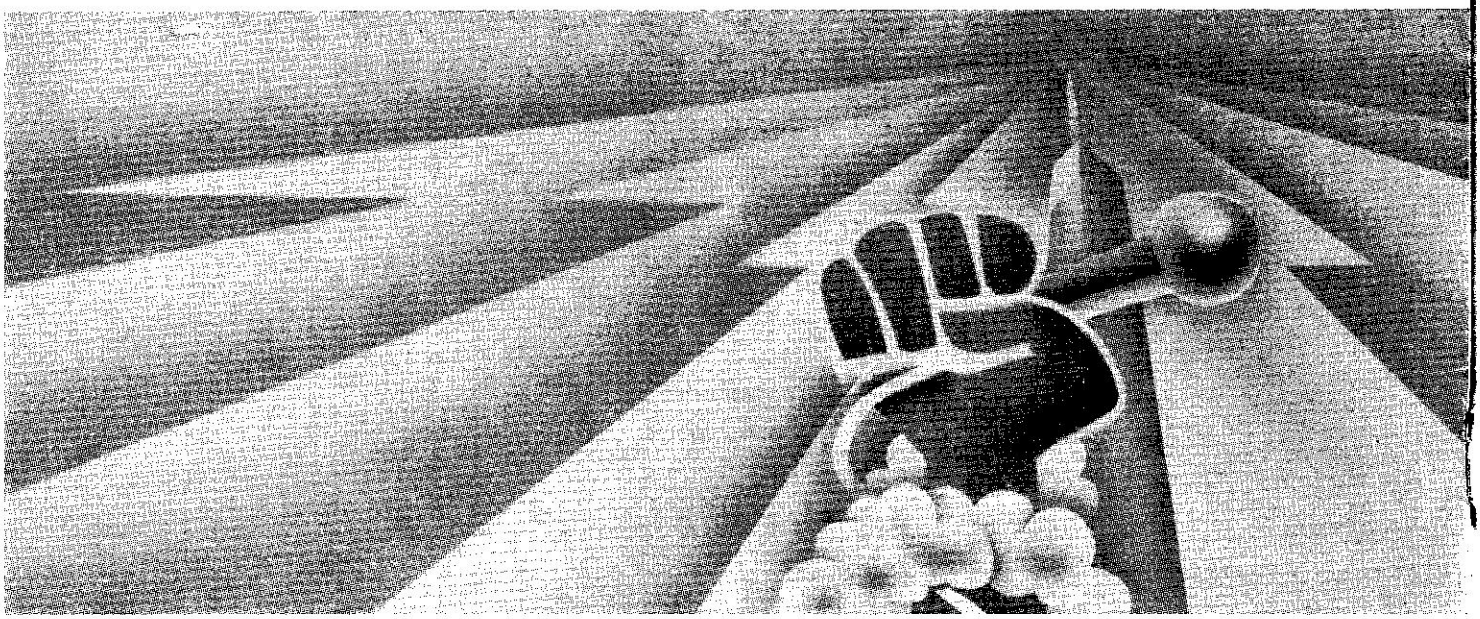


Phillip Castle

K.P.F.A. THE PARTICIPATION STATION

John Whiting

It's difficult these days to get very excited about radio. In the developing countries where it has arrived late, you can still feel the "tribal" tension it was once able to engender, even among the over-civilized. But in England, unless local radio performs an unlikely miracle, the experimental days are over. Such excitement as the Corporation allows is reserved for television, while radio servives as a holding operation, with not much to hold except classical music, a diminishing dramatic output, and the Third's occasional exploration of some foreign controversy. The extent of radio's emasculation was indicated not so long ago by the fanatical interest in the ravings of a handful of hacks temporarily barricaded in crumbling offshore fortifications, whose only merit was that they were not subject to Auntie's editorial scrutiny.

America's "free enterprise" radio industry, which the pirates attempted to emulate, is hardly preferable. In the typical large American city you have the freedom to choose among thirty or more stations, all exactly alike. One or two FM stations may offer a recurring cycle of the standard classics, but the rest outdo each other in catering to an assumed preference for pop music (from which the most interesting groups are usually excluded), weary telephone conversations with lonely crackpots, and yards of semi-classical wallpaper, punctuated at hourly intervals by two minutes of instant world crisis. And, of course, the commercials.

But the laissez-faire policies of the Federal Communications Commission have allowed the occasional local emergence of non-commercial alternatives. The most durably successful of these ventures is Pacifica Radio, in continuous existence for over twenty years and now broadcasting in Berkeley, Los Angeles, and New York City. KPFA, Pacifica's first station, went on the air in Berkeley in 1949 with a broadcast policy which differed radically from the accepted norms and which has scarcely departed from its original intentions.

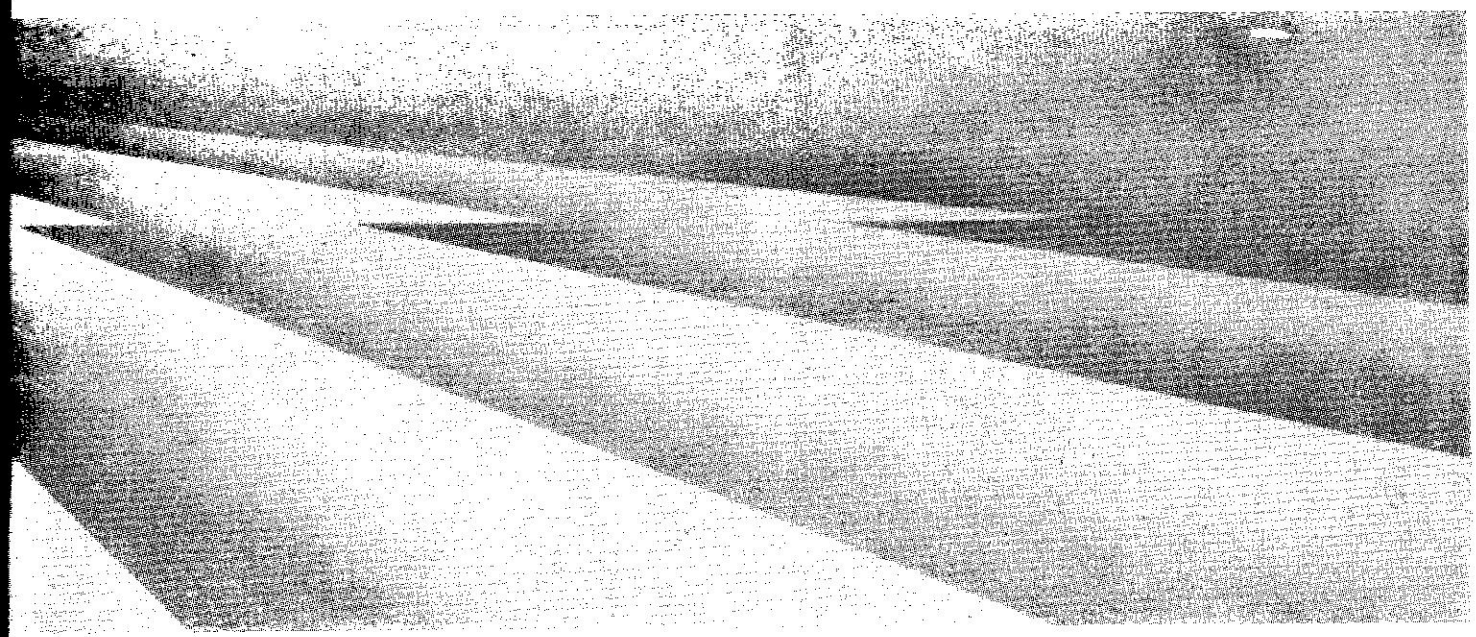
What were they? In 1951 Louis Hill, the station's prime mover and first manager, discussed the theory of listener-supported radio in a broadcast talk. It rested, he said, upon two assumptions: "First, that radio can and should be used for significant communication and art; and second, that since broadcasting is an act of communication, it ought to be subject to the same aesthetic and ethical principles as we apply to any communicative act, including the most personal."

Hill was aware, from long professional experience, that within the context of commercial radio such assumptions are utopian: "The purpose of commercial radio is to induce mass sales. For mass sales there must be a mass norm, and the activity must be conducted as nearly as possible without risk of departure from the norm. . . . By suppressing the individual, the unique, the industry reduces the risk of failure (abnormality) and assures itself a standard product for mass consumption. . . . This is the first problem that listener sponsorship sets out to solve—to give the genuine artist and thinker a possible, even a desirable, place to work in radio."

So far, Hill might have been talking about the B.B.C. But he and his fellow-founders set out to establish a degree of freedom which would have been impossible in a quasi-official institution: "The people who actually do the broadcasting should also be responsible for what and why they broadcast. In short, they must control the policy which determines their actions. (For reasons too complicated to explain here, the three stations are now responsible to a board of directors; but the tradition of staff autonomy has, on the whole, survived.) . . . Whatever else may happen, we thus assign to the participating individual the responsibility, artistic integrity, freedom of expression, and the like, which in conventional radio are normally denied him. KPFA is operated literally on this principle."

Listener subscription is more than just a means of meeting expenses. Unlike the B.B.C., subscription to Pacifica stations is voluntary. Anyone can listen for nothing; it is up to the staff to persuade the listeners to contribute. Subscribers receive the **Folio,** a monthly publication which lists and describes the current programmes. But more than this, they become part of an intellectual community. "Actually sending in the subscription, which one does not have to send in unless one particularly wants to, implies the kind of cultural engagement, as some French philosophers call it, that is surely indispensable for the sake of the whole culture."

Occasionally, the precarious balance between income and



expenses tips alarmingly into the red and a panic fund drive ensues. In the summer of 1966, for example, when KPFA's debts had mounted to an unmanageable sum, all scheduled programming was scrapped and the station began a round-the-clock money-raising marathon. Local celebrities joined the staff at the microphones, a spontaneous talk-in evolved, and within a few days the station had been promised more than $50,000. What began as an act of desperation has now become an annual institution bringing in an extra $100,000 a year.

Pacifica subscribers have a tenacious loyalty which must be experienced to be believed. Support is given with time as well as money. From the beginning, all three stations have depended heavily on volunteer labour. Programme participants are never paid, with the exception of professional musicians, who are allowed by the union to accept token fees. Such generosity makes it possible for each station to stay on the air seven days a week from seven in the morning until after midnight, originating most of the programmes with a total staff of about fifteen.

Admittedly, volunteers are a mixed blessing: staff must regularly cope with their proprietary interest in running the station. The lack of a rigid hierarchical structure also lets both staff and volunteers stray outside their areas of competence, sometimes to the stations' embarrassment. People wander in off the streets with ideas which, if realized, would put the stations off the air and the staff in gaol. And it is sometimes difficult to discourage the hard-working envelope-stuffer who wants to tell the world about Scientology. But this vulnerability also keeps Pacifica from becoming a self-perpetuating elite, convinced that it already possesses all the truth it needs. In retrospect, some of the more stimulating programmes have come about because someone with infallible judgment and impeccable taste wasn't there to say no.

What kind of programmes emerge from this unorthodox structure? About half the time is devoted to music, much of it live or recorded especially for Pacifica broadcast by their own sound engineers. Special prominence is given to local composers and performers and to analytical programmes by critics and musicologists. Literature and drama feature contemporary or little-known writers. (One of KPFA's most unpredictably popular programmes, which has since become an annual Christmas tradition, was a two-hour dramatic adaptation of **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,** in Middle English.) And the daily hour of children's programmes is notably free from gunshots and death agonies.

But perhaps the most remarkable feature of Pacifica's broadcasting is its public affairs programming. It is in the areas of controversy that the stations are unique among America's surviving broadcasters. The original staff and their successors, though differing in their political convictions, are united in their allegiance to the First Amendment to the American Constitution, which guarantees the right to free speech. All shades of the political spectrum have been represented, from avowed Communists to members of the American Nazi Party. Nor are they limited to brief token appearances; most interviews and discussions are scheduled flexibly for a full hour, in which the participants are allowed to convince their audience or hang themselves at will. Pacifica's objectivity does not consist in organizing each programme so that someone says "yes" every time someone else says "no" (as Elsa Knight Thompson, KPFA's indomitable Public Affairs Director, succinctly puts it). It lies rather in the balance which emerges from the programming as a whole.

But there is another aspect of balanced programming which was decribed by Hallock Hoffman, former President of Pacifica Foundation, during the station's investigation by the Senate Internal Security Sub-Committee in 1963 "In my opinion, Pacifica should lean towards programmes that present either opinions or information not available elsewhere. . . . [It] should regard its audience as composed of mature, intelligent, and responsible adults, who can be trusted to make up their own minds when they have the materials to judge. I do not believe Pacifica should tell its audience what to think about the content of its programmes."

The daily news bulletins are governed by the same criteria. They are half-an-hour in length and are drawn from the Associated Press wire service, supplemented by regular reading of an enormous range of international newspapers and periodicals. The emotive language common to most news media is meticulously avoided. Of course, these bulletins cannot compete with the major networks in speedy on-the-spot coverage, but they are closely followed by those listeners who want their information documented as to source and are interested in the news which is frequently relegated to a subordinate position by timid or "managed" editors.

But sometimes Pacifica can surpass the big networks even in up-to-the-minute news. Because of the station's consistent interest in the Civil Rights Movement, Dale Minor was in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, when forty days of protest led by Martin Luther King culminated in racist riots and the arrest of more than 3,000 demonstrators. The resulting programme, **Freedom Now,** was American radio's documentary entry that year for the Prix Italia. Two years later, when rioting broke out in Watts, California, Negro interviewers went into the thick of it and came out with recordings such as the mass media couldn't get, since their reporting staff was still overwhelmingly white. Now, of course, "Black is Beautiful", even to the advertisers, but at Pacifica it was never a question of fashion or expediency.

Pacifica's coverage of the student revolt has been encyclopaedic. In 1960, KPFA recorded the San Francisco hearings of the House Un-American Affairs Committee and was able to