



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 5

How KPFA Found a New Home

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Located in Berkeley, California, KPFA is the grandparent of community radio in the United States. The station was founded by a group of pacifists just after World War II – they called themselves the Pacifica Foundation. Disgusted by the way radio had been used to stir up the passions of war, they were excited by the idea of using the medium to promote peace and community development. KPFA’s beginnings as a commercial station were not very successful. Although pacifism was popular with Americans fed up with war, it was not on the agenda of the government or corporate advertisers. Looking for alternatives, the founders decided to ask listeners to “subscribe” to the station, in the same way they would subscribe to a magazine or newspaper. The plan worked. Today the station gets most of its income from listener donations. Most of these are made during on-air “marathons” when programmers put on their best programming and invite listeners to subscribe and support the station.

As well as being the first community station in the United States, KPFA is also one of the largest. It accepts no advertising, not even limited underwriting, but its listener donations and a few other sources give it an annual budget of over a million dollars a year.

There are a lot of stories to be told about KPFA. The station has had many colourful characters, and produced many extraordinary broadcasts. There have been exciting moments of contact with the community and conflict with authority. The Federal Communications Commission and other government agencies have, at various times, tried to revoke the station’s broadcast license. But perhaps a pertinent story to tell,

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because it reflects present issues in community radio in the United States, is the one about how KPFA got a new home.

Over the years, community radio based on the listener-sponsorship model has become known as raggedy radio-on-a-shoestring, where volunteer programmers work from ramshackle studios with equipment held together by alligator clips and threats from the engineer. Some great programmes have been produced under these circumstances, but the stations have always been financially on the edge. To many, being on the edge has become something of a badge of honour, since it proves that you haven't sold out to the American dream of material success.

A visit to KPFA was enough to convince even the most sceptical that material success was not KPFA's objective. Threadbare carpet, dark creaky hallways, offices filled with beat-up furniture, a newsroom sporting antique tape recorders, and heating, cooling and plumbing systems that barely functioned... This was the "nature" of KPFA, and of all community radio in the USA. At a conference of the National Federation of Community Broadcasters in 1985, for example, participants in one workshop debated whether replacing an old, broken sofa (as one station had recently done) destroyed the appropriate community radio atmosphere.

Given this context, it was a shock for many people when KPFA moved into a new building, designed and built especially for them, with new furniture (much of it custom-built) and new fully equipped studios. Was this still a community radio station? And how could a station that always seemed to be struggling to keep going afford this radio palace?

The story begins with a woman who had been a KPFA listener for many years. Like many other listeners, she regularly made small donations. One day she died. Normally, her death would have been noticed by only a few people at the station. Her monthly programme guide would have been returned by the post office, and after some time, when she failed to make any more donations, her name would have been dropped from the membership list. Many of KPFA's original supporters have been getting old, and it's no surprise that some are dying. However, her story was a little different. In her will she left her home to the station. Most listeners don't do that.

The house, although modest, was valuable because it was in the San Francisco Bay Area, where housing is in high demand. In other times, the money from its sale might have gone into the station's operating budget. But when the bequest was made KPFA was very concerned about finding a new home of its own.

Another longtime supporter of the station had died – KPFA's landlord. For years, he had allowed the station to pay a very low rent. The new owners, however, raised the rate mercilessly. The space had never been ideal for a radio station, but at least until that time it had been a bargain. Moving out started to look attractive, but good space at a low price is hard to come by in Berkeley. So the money from the sale of the deceased supporter's house came to represent a special opportunity – the chance to start a new building fund for KPFA.

A little figuring showed that a new home would be an ambitious project. It would take a couple of million dollars, maybe three, to get a new space for the station. To most

KPFA people that seemed completely impossible – especially since the money had to be raised from the same group of people, in addition to ongoing operating costs.

They asked a sympathetic research firm to find out for them if it was feasible to try and raise the additional money. The answer that came back was a surprising “yes.” The researchers found that there were a number of people who were prepared to donate to a campaign for a KPFA building, and some were willing to make very big donations. They would have been willing to make such donations before, they said, but no one had asked them. “Thousands of dollars?,” asked the researchers. “For KPFA” came the response, “sure.”

Patricia Scott, KPFA’s manager, was key to moving the whole process forward. One observer of the situation claims that this is in part because she is an African-American:

A lot of those white progressives at KPFA are stuck in the idea that the station isn’t authentic or real unless the chair has broken springs and the tension arm on the tape deck is held up by a rubber band. Pat doesn’t see why the community shouldn’t have as good a facility as they can get – the multinational corporations shouldn’t be the only ones with decent equipment.

Others say it has nothing to do with the fact that she is Black – “she’s just a very strong leader who wants to move the station forward.”

Strong leader or not, the fundraising campaign was intimidating for her as well. At the opening of the new building, she said, “On the morning I had to go for the first time to ask someone for \$40,000, I had to practice for hours in front of the mirror. When they said yes, I nearly fell off my chair.” By the time the building was opened, they had raised \$2,272,015, most of it from individuals. Half a million dollars came from non-profit foundations, and about \$95,000 from a government programme.

At the opening of the new building, KPFA staff were proud to show visitors the beautiful tables with inlaid wood, custom-made desks, stained glass lampshades, and wrought-iron work – all created with labour donated by local craftspeople. The opening broadcast featured a special piece called *Homage to Pacifica*, written by major American composer Lou Harrison. A computer system links the whole building, and the architects (KPFA fans, accepting a fee much smaller than their work deserved) designed the inner space to facilitate interaction among workers and to express an openness to visitors. There has been a major improvement in the quality of all the studios and their equipment, which now includes an amazing computerised player piano, a Yamaha “Disk-Klavier.”

KPFA is not the first community radio station in the U.S. to raise money to move into better quarters. But because of its high profile, the very large amount of money raised, and the striking contrast between the old and new quarters, the move has sparked debate about the definition of community radio and its position in the community.

Many people, among them listeners, volunteers and paid staff, note that KPFA has not compromised any of its principles. The station still strictly refuses to accept any donations from for-profit corporations, it still stands for free speech and political discussion, programmers still play music ignored by the commercial stations, and KPFA still has the most accessible airwaves in town. The new building shows, they say, that if

you stick to your principles and really serve your community, you eventually get rewarded. The way in which people, from well-known progressives to everyday working people, aided the campaign, and donated the labour for the many special touches in the building is evidence of this. They argue that KPFA has proven that it is a community institution that people truly care about, and it is being supported as a community radio station should.

Then there are the dissenters. They wonder if KPFA, which has often claimed to be a voice for the poor and humble, is now alienating itself from them. Will people coming to the station feel like they're entering the headquarters of a big corporation? Will they feel uncomfortable, will they speak differently on the air?

The arguments do go deeper than a concern about the quality of facilities. Part of the reason KPFA's move to a new building is a symbolic event for U.S. community radio is that it comes at a time when there is considerable debate amongst community radio practitioners about the direction of their stations. Discussion has focused on audience research, fundraising techniques, and the important area of programming.

Some people argue that not all community radio's traditional approaches are working very well. They hold that if community radio is to fulfil its mission and have a significant impact in the community, these approaches must change. The airwaves may be accessible to community groups, but the air "sound" is not accessible to listeners. Programmes that have good political or cultural concepts may need to be restructured if they are not reaching people. The common "patchwork quilt" programming schedule, with many specialised programmes each aimed at a different audience, is hard for listeners to follow. Stations need to pay much more attention to the quality of program production, or they will drive the audience away. The programming equivalents of cluttered offices and old sofas don't encourage the community to use the station. The listener may be better served by participating in national programmes with better sound quality, rather than producing everything locally. And finally, stations should take full advantage of the data now available from professional audience survey companies (previously restricted to commercial stations) in order to evaluate how they're doing.

Another side of the debate might be represented by the headline of an article in *Current*, which wonders if community radio is "losing its soul" by "going for the numbers." This approach argues that professional audience surveys have a commercial bias and are therefore inappropriate for community radio. Current programme schedules may seem a jumble, but they represent the diversity and richness of the community. In this view, the new tactics that are being proposed are abandoning community radio ideals for bigger audiences and more income.

It's not hard to see why a beautiful, well-appointed new building would crystallise this debate. But, whatever it represents, the station has taken the plunge – they've built and moved. They're also doing audience research and proceeding with a major revision of their programme schedule. Time will tell how these changes will affect the station and its listeners.

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