

# Community Radio Our Best Hope for Community- Based Media and Democracy. Can We Keep It Vibrant and Strong?

By Marty Durlin

Community radio grew out of Pacifica Radio's KPFA, founded in 1949 by pacifist Lew Hill. Hill's lofty mission of eclectic, intelligent, listener-sponsored programming — with music, the arts, philosophy and politics center stage — became the template for community radio stations that proliferated during the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Spearheading that movement was Lorenzo Milam, author of *Sex and Broadcasting*, a handbook for how to start and run a community station. Milam inspired a flock of new stations in the western United States with whimsical call letters such as KRAB, KBOO and KAOS.

The nonprofit Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) was created in 1967, as a funder of both radio and TV. Congress appropriates these funds in a two-year advance cycle intended to keep Washington politics out of the mix. Alas, politics intervenes often — mostly in the form of Republican lawmakers trying to “de-fund” CPB, in punishment for news choices made by public broadcasters.

Despite being targeted from the very beginning by such critics as Richard Nixon, CPB's federal funding has survived for more than half a century. There were heady days in the 1970s when the landmark children's TV program *Sesame Street* became the poster child for congressional support and all of public broadcasting benefited.

But community radio stations — considered the stepchild of public radio because unpaid local producers rather than professionals create the programming — have continued to struggle. Stations in wealthier urban communities often qualify for CPB support. But the smaller rural stations are unable to access CPB funding. Even though these stations — perhaps even more than their wealthier counterparts — are vital news outlets and serve as incubators, conveners, connectors, havens for independent musicians, and lifelines during emergencies, they fail to meet the financial threshold deemed necessary for CPB funding.

These smaller stations are “where the rubber meets the road.” Their missions — mirroring KPFA's with aspirations of harmony, collaboration and civil discourse — are confronted daily with reality. The dream of tolerance and cooperation is challenged by passionate disagreement over the definition of “good programming.” Fairness and equity go nose to nose with scarcity of resources.

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graphic: Radio Boise

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) noncommercial restrictions and the stations' internal values don't necessarily line up. Traditional hierarchy derails consensus. Sometimes the stations are brought to a standstill by internal squabbling.

Nevertheless, many have survived decades of underfunding and conflict, all the while depending on volunteer hosts who are entrusted with the stations' precious FCC licenses. So far, enough people value these hyper-local outlets to support this miracle. But as competition for audience attention increases, as delivery systems change and car radios are no longer installed in new vehicles, the audience is dwindling. Can community radio be nimble and creative enough to move into the future?

Certainly the first requisite is sustainability and funding. A change of policy at CPB, giving smaller stations preference in the division of federal funds, would be a good first step. On a station level, we must convince philanthropists that we deserve large gifts, not just \$50 donations. We must foster more community partnerships and wider outreach — not only helping ourselves, but also other crucial nonprofits in our communities. Younger hosts, as well as people of color and other marginalized communities, must be recruited to create programming that speaks to the evolving opportunities and crises of our rapidly changing world.

But some things never change. In the end, community radio stations rely on trust and good will, and that quality permeates the information they convey and nurtures the desire to make the world a better place.

*Hyperlinks for this article at <https://bit.ly/47cSMAO>*

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