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## A Vision for Pacifica Radio:

### Creating a Network for the 21st Century

### Strategic Five Year Plan -- April 1997

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## Part One: PREDICAMENT

by Dick Bunce, Deputy Executive Director for Planning and Development,  
Pacifica Radio

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**Mission Statement, Pacifica Foundation, 1946:** "To promote cultural diversity and pluralistic community expression...To contribute to a lasting understanding between individuals of all nations, races, creeds and colors...To promote freedom of the press and serve as a forum for various viewpoints...To maintain an independent funding base."

### Introduction

In the half century since the Pacifica Foundation was incorporated, the varying worlds of radio, including both public and commercial broadcasting, have undergone multiple transformations. The present time and the onrushing future appear no less dynamic in opportunities and risks for Pacifica Radio. Patricia Scott, Executive Director of Pacifica, believes that we stand at an "unmarked crossroads" in the life of our network, "where a failure of the will necessary to make investments in our franchise could trigger the beginning of our demise. Imagination and a new sense of purpose in Pacifica can make us a national force, actively involved in defining the course of electronic journalism, not being passively defined by it." Challenging the network to address improved methods of impacting political discourse and culture, Scott and the other members of Pacifica's leadership in 1996 committed extensive time, energy and resources to strategic planning, seeking to take measure of Pacifica's exact circumstances, and to identify the existing options, opportunities and resources, as well as the impediments.

The resulting Plan endeavors to identify our historic role, our vision for the future, our organizational values and operating assumptions, our shared goals – and the process needed to make our intentions a reality. The Plan asserts Pacifica's claim to an important place in the future of public radio and aligned

media. A good understanding of the plan requires some preliminary consideration of the present context of Pacifica operations – a context that should make clear our urgency to develop a strategy for the future.

### The Crisis of Democratic Communications

The rise of media trusts in the past few decades has dramatically shifted the context for Pacifica Radio's broadcast operations. Media trusts are definable basically as the massive corporate concentrations, now with newly globalized holdings, that have nearly engulfed the media industry. Today there are five global, vertically integrated media empires dominating the information and entertainment economies: News Corporation, Disney, Time-Warner, Viacom and TCI. Similar firms with global ambitions include General Electric (owner of NBC), Westinghouse (owner of CBS), Sony, Seagrams (owner of MCA) and the European giants Philips, Havas and Bertelsmann.<sup>1</sup> These conglomerates' effect has been to reduce public broadcasting generally and Pacifica Radio specifically to the media equivalent of mom-and-pop corner stores in a world of Wal-Marts and Costcos, or more to the point, media "craft shop" outposts in a marketplace clotted with infotainment factories. While this isolates Pacifica institutionally, the expansion of media trusts simultaneously illuminates the distinctiveness of Pacifica's mission and programming, revealing anew the significance of Pacifica's work to an increasingly threatened democratic process. What sets Pacifica apart could – if developed effectively – increase both the audience and the demand for Pacifica's programming.

### Marginalizing Political Journalism

Financed by advertising solely for the pursuit of profit, this relatively recent concentration of ownership has fundamentally transformed US journalism, reducing it to a dreary cacophony of crime, mayhem, and sundry disaster stories mingled with pointless celebrity worship and undisguised hawking of products ranging from sneakers to congressional candidates. Journalism is being tabloidized by media trusts, because tabloid product draws a more profitable audience. As Ted Turner, founder of Cable News Network (acquired in 1996 by Time-Warner) explained, "The more complex, the more forward-looking the story...the smaller the ratings are."<sup>2</sup> "Journalism, real journalism, is not profitable" – and is not currently the object of investment by the media trusts, since the "market has little apparent interest in serious journalism."<sup>3</sup> i

The media trusts are interested in infotainment, specifically:

Hard news reporting has been eroded by the growing opinion-shaping power of the punditry. The 60-second sound bite, already a concession to corporate media imperatives, is now down to 9 seconds. Serious political information is increasingly absent from mainstream news broadcasts, which are dominated by subjects such as the O.J. trial. Opinions of wealthy celebrity employees of media companies fill slots previously devoted to hard news. Public interest journalism is being overwhelmed and marginalized by entertainment and tabloidization in the information marketplace.<sup>ii</sup>

Compounding this was the elimination in the late 1980s of the Fairness Doctrine –which required attention to diverse viewpoints on controversial issues. Erasing Fairness and the trusts' takeover of journalism has meant that tabloidization has re-cast the nature of news, information and public affairs in daily newspapers, television and radio. Consequently, the chief information fare now provided to Americans – particularly on broadcast media, the

primary "information source" of Americans -- "is a deception that distorts reality and undermines people's faith in government, their sense of community, and the notion of shared social responsibility."<sup>iii</sup>

### The Assault on the Public Sphere

By restricting the flow of information essential to political discourse and citizen participation, media trusts imperil democracy. Paradoxically, this alarming predicament is not the subject of public debate today over communication policy. Congressional concern, dominated by extremists, is "whether the only vestiges of nonprofit broadcasting should be eliminated so that we may have a thoroughly market-driven system."<sup>iv</sup>

In 1994 Republicans took over both Houses of Congress and immediately targeted Pacifica Radio as the wedge issue to undermine Congressional support for public broadcasting. In the House, Republican Members from Colorado (Joel Hefley) and Illinois (Phil Crane and John Porter) -- where Pacifica owns no radio stations -- used spurious charges of "hate broadcasting" as a tactic to cut off Corporation for Public Broadcasting Funds to Pacifica. In the Senate, South Dakota Senator Larry Pressler (also from a state without Pacifica Radio) sought to revive witch-hunting tactics against Pacifica and to drive a wedge between Pacifica and two other key institutions in public radio -- NPR and CPB. Earlier Bob Dole, as Senate Majority Leader, singled out Pacifica for criticism at the annual Public Radio Conference, admonishing CPB to clean house and reign in Pacifica's broadcasts. Dole's aide Jim Whittinghill rationalized his boss's call for CPB censorship arguing that "freedom of speech doesn't apply because we are able to put conditions on grants of federal money, the same as we do with farmers." The Republican leadership's moves in 1995 to eliminate federal funding of public broadcasting was in part a reward to Christian broadcasters <sup>v</sup>, many of whom took credit for the election of the 104th Congress.<sup>vi</sup>

Reactionaries have succeeded in framing the issue. Their effort is predicated on crushing journalistic autonomy and having a feeble journalism that kowtows to the interests not only of the media owners and advertisers, but the wealthy and powerful in general.... This explains why conservatives are so obsessed with smashing, or at least intimidating, nonprofit and noncommercial broadcasting. They realize full well that the marketplace implicitly censors journalism to keep it within a range they consider acceptable. Conservatives live in fear of a journalism not constrained by profit imperatives and commercial support.<sup>vii</sup>

The message is abundantly clear: Independent journalism is an endangered species in American media; public media -- potentially the most significant practitioner of independent journalism -- is under siege for that very independence. The corollary message should also be clear: it is unlikely that federal dollars will ever fuel Pacifica's growth -- or that of other public broadcasters -- and "we will have to work very hard if the federal appropriation is to keep pace with inflation." <sup>viii</sup> The conservative agenda calls for a disinvestment in public media and public information.

### The Commercial Imperative

If public funding is eliminated, chances are the dominant players in public radio -- NPR, PRI and their satellite-driven franchise stations -- will replace federal support with commercial support. The entire system -- except for Pacifica -- is already preparing to survive without a federal subsidy by

