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Moments of danger: The struggle for community-based public radio in Baltimore

Jason Loviglio*

University of Maryland, Baltimore County, United States

Abstract

This article explores the struggle of The Center for Emerging Media, an independent community media organisation in Baltimore with roots in the radical traditions of the American left, and aspirations for leveraging new media technologies to empower a new generation of voices and stories, to find audiences at the margins of the US public radio industry in a neoliberal moment of danger. As US Public radio networks have increasingly catered to well-to-do listeners keen to hear about social difference but not from the voices of the marginalised, organisations like the CEM have become increasingly endangered, resilient and necessary. This article explores those dangers and the resilience they inspire, and considers possible futures for alternative community media.

Keywords

WYPR, Marc Steiner, Center for Emerging Media, NPR, neoliberalism, public radio, Baltimore

Introduction

The Center for Emerging Media (CEM) is a small non-profit media production company in Baltimore, Maryland, whose fortunes over the last two decades track the uncertain course of alternative community media in the US. Its 2007 Peabody-Award winning radio series, *Just Words*, told stories of Baltimore's most marginalised denizens, by letting them speak for themselves, a rarity on public airwaves at the time. The award came just ten days after the Center's primary outlet, *The Marc Steiner Show*, which aired the series, was peremptorily cancelled by Baltimore's NPR affiliate, WYPR. Steiner, who founded the Center and runs it with his wife Valerie Williams, called the show's posthumous award 'poetic justice' (Kaltenbach, 2009: C1). Steiner also co-founded WYPR, the station that sacked him. The story of Steiner and the Center for Emerging Media captures the irony of independent community radio in the US, with its vertiginous highs and lows and its seemingly permanent state of crisis.

This article explores the struggle of an independent community media organisation, with roots in the radical traditions of the American left and aspirations for leveraging new media technologies to empower a new generation of voices and stories, to find audiences at the margins of the US public radio industry in a neoliberal moment of danger. As US public radio networks have increasingly catered to well-to-do listeners keen to hear *about* social difference, but not from the voices of the marginalised, organisations like the CEM have become increasingly endangered, resilient and necessary. This article explores those dangers and the resilience they inspire, and considers possible futures for alternative community media.

Context: US Public Radio's Growth and Transformation

The idea of public radio has occupied a vexed position in the politics and culture of the US, since before the legislation that created it in the late 1960s. It was supposed to be a public service, but in a society whose conception of 'the public' was not fully coherent. Who is the public of public radio? How is a national public news and culture service to be funded? How is it supposed to represent its public? And what mechanisms are there for the public to represent itself to back to the new service? The birth of National Public Radio (NPR) in 1970 can be seen as the last gasp of progressivism – an optimistic faith in collective effort and a common good. And certainly, if we read the network's Founding Principles, we would find encouraging language. NPR would:

regard the individual differences among men with respect and joy, rather than derision and hate; ... celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied, rather than vacuous and banal; ... encourage a sense of active constructive participation, rather than apathetic helplessness. (Siemering, 2012).

However, it is also possible to see the ambitious yet chronically underfunded public broadcasting service, with its contradictory notions of who constituted its 'public', as doomed to periodic crises and to a steady movement away from the spirit of inclusivity. The federal funding, authorised by the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act (United States Congress, 1967), for a national radio service was an afterthought – the legislation was really for a public television network, The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). The words 'and radio' were literally taped into the final draft of the bill the night before the final vote in Congress (Mitchell, 2005: 34). The idea of a truly representative public audience for public radio was almost immediately abandoned in favour of reaching powerful members of a more narrowly defined community along the lines of education, culture and social class. Indeed, the influential 1967 Carnegie Commission report (Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, 1967) already identified the inevitability of an educated 'minority' audience for public broadcasting before the Public Broadcasting Act was even drafted. They also suggested that African Americans, a different sort of minority, might be better served by public broadcasting than by the existing commercial broadcasting system. And the even older experiences with programming, fundraising, and audience measurement of the handful of powerful university- or municipal-owned 'educational' stations suggest that, as early as 1952, non-commercial stations dedicated to public service 'did not attempt to serve all of the people all of the time, but rather to serve some of the people especially well all of the time' (Stavitsky, 1990: 109).

Public broadcasting, coming into nation-wide distribution fifty years into the commercial broadcasting era, could only be compensatory, alternative, a critique of the mass-mediated public constructed by the for-profit networks on radio and television. If the 'public' in 'public radio' was going to mean anything, it was going to have to be a sensibility, a structure of feeling for an imagined community of like-minded people who understood themselves to be distinct from the already-constituted commercially-based, mass-mediated public. For the Carnegie Commission, this meant catering to an educational elite and to racial minorities. This dual constituency formed the vexed and contradictory public of public media and for better or worse, has helped to shape the politics of liberalism ever since.

And yet public broadcasting continued to be haunted by the more inclusive, even utopian resonances associated with the notion of *the public*. The term exerted pressure on the imagination, evoking an American community bridging social and geographic divides. Radio's evocation of Enlightenment ideals of universal educational access and uplift were revived by the promise of public radio as well. Given the political, economic, and cultural pressures that greeted the 1967 public broadcast legislation, this broader public never had a chance. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting's (CPB) budget was decided every year or two by Congress, which left NPR and PBS

in a constant state of concern about the political dangers of controversial journalism. Single-channel programming meant a zero-sum game in terms of whose stories would get told and whose would be ignored. Finally, the primacy of public broadcasting's educationally elite audience was an unspeakable but unavoidable pre-condition. Together, these forces put the emerging business model of public radio into conflict with its promise, a besetting condition of liberal bad faith. In Jack Mitchell's history-cum-memoir, *Listener Supported* (Mitchell, 2005), NPR's journey from the idealistic embrace of a truly democratic public audience to more modest ambitions for serving a highly educated subset of the public was as inevitable as the natural process of growing from youth to maturity. Public radio's early pioneers thought one signal could successfully serve 'a series of minority audiences broad-minded enough to want to hear the programming for other minority audiences with divergent views and tastes', Mitchell observed dryly (2005: 55). Instead, NPR succeeded by appealing to the liberal, educated baby-boomers, whose liberal ideals of community had been 'shattered' by the war in Vietnam and the scandals and economic reversals of the 1970s, according to Michael McCauley, another public radio producer turned historian (2005: 5).

NPR began just in time to document the unrest caused by the Vietnam war and, later, the unease caused by the Watergate scandal, the oil crisis and the recession. In other words, the network whose founding principles and federal funding were in part an expression of Great Society Liberalism, made it on the airwaves just in time to document the collapse of the liberal era and the debut of the long march of neoliberalism (Hall, 1979). In another irony, NPR has provided the soundtrack for the great moving right show, even as it has served as the very emblem of the 'liberal media' against which this rightward juggernaut has stormed. In this context, the turn to audience research came to be the most effective way to understand public radio's listeners, not as members of a democratic public, but as particular kinds of consumers. As it moved to court corporate underwriters and well-heeled 'highly educated' listeners exclusively, budget information became less transparent, earning a rebuke from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's Ombudsman in 2015 (Kaplan, 2015).

A Moment of Danger

For German critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin, attempting to understand the past was part of a struggle 'to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it'. The threat, as Benjamin saw it, hangs over 'both the content of the tradition and its receivers ... that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes'. As public radio's ideologically promiscuous traditions of experiments, alternative voices and radical commitments fade into the past, overpowered by neoliberal funding imperatives, stylistic conformity and technological revolutions, we would do well to heed Benjamin's call to 'seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger' (Benjamin, 1969: 255). The history of public media in the US has had no shortages of such moments in the half century since the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967.

One such moment of danger was in February 2008, when the *The Marc Steiner Show* was abruptly cancelled on a Friday evening and Steiner simultaneously sacked from WYPR, the Baltimore NPR affiliate he had co-founded in 2002. *The Marc Steiner Show* was a co-production of WYPR and the Center for Emerging Media, an uneasy partnership whose fault lines echo the difficulty of local independent voices partnering with mainstream outlets like NPR. This event – and its noisy aftermath – provide a striking illustration of the precarious nature of the radical tradition that Steiner and CEM embodied and the community of listeners for whom this tradition still mattered.

The sacking of Steiner, the cancellation of his show and the dissolution of the WYPR-CEM collaboration was a stark illustration of trends in public radio away from a tradition of localism and progressive voices and towards the corporatisation of business operations and programming

decisions. It provides a local case study of the challenges of sustaining the radical strains of the public media mission in a society whose understanding of 'the public interest' has often been muddled, contradictory and ambivalent (Robbins, 1993: x). As Bruce Robbins insists, for all its problems, 'public' is a word we 'cannot do without' (ibid.). In its abruptness and lack of transparency, the Friday afternoon sacking echoed the cynical and undemocratic manoeuvre of avoiding weekday news cycles common to government agencies looking to bury bad news and unpopular policies. Steiner himself was taken by surprise as the sacking came in the midst of contract negotiations in which he was considering a pay-out and departure from the station within the next year (Rosen, 2008a: C1).

The rationale provided by station management for sacking Steiner and ending his show was justified purely as a numbers game: the Arbitron ratings, which measure the audience for commercial and public broadcasting stations in the US, dropped 21% between September 2005 and September 2007 for *The Marc Steiner Show* (compared with a 17% overall drop for the station) and showed a significant drop-off from the nationally syndicated show that preceded it (Rosen, 2008a: C3) (audience drop-off from nationally-syndicated programs to local news and cultural affairs programs is common for local NPR affiliates). Program Director Andy Bienstock defended the decision in the managerial jargon of his position: Steiner's show was 'tired' and 'it was time for something new', among other predictable neoliberal shibboleths (personal communication, 2008). Barbara Bozzuto, then chairperson of the WYPR Board of Directors, articulated the pro-growth rationale for making the change. 'We've done a tremendous job in growing listeners', Bozzuto said. 'Everything's been going up. That's been our direction for the last five years. But during this [Steiner's] time slot, there's a drop-off' (Woestendiek, 2008: C1).

Bozzuto's vague claim of an upward trajectory over the last five years did not account for the recent two-year decline in audience reach mentioned above. However, there were other significant measures by which the station could point to recent progress. The 2007 fall fund drive raised a record \$373,000, up 15% over the previous year (Kaltenbach, 2007: C1). The station had also just completed a multi-year plan of signal expansion with the acquisition of stations on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Western counties, and even into the Washington DC suburbs. She may have also had in mind the addition of veteran broadcast journalist Sheilah Kast, whose morning program *Maryland Morning With Sheilah Kast* debuted in 2007 and was hailed by station insiders as the station's 'second voice', to counter Steiner's dominance. Perhaps more importantly, Bozzuto's comment reflected a widely held opinion on the board, that Steiner represented the station's past, not its future.

'Ratings go up and ratings go down, and if they are slightly down, you work to bring them back up', Steiner responded. 'After all, this is public radio, not commercial radio. At least I think we're public radio', Steiner added ruefully (Steiner, 2008). For Steiner, the firing was the culmination of a long-standing conflict in philosophy over the role of the public in public radio: 'It's a mindset', he said. 'And [my] mindset is that we, guarantors of the station, are holding this in trust for the public. Not, "We own it". Not, "It's ours". It's not theirs, it's ours – ours being the listeners and the public-radio community' (ibid.). The insistence on political and ideological conflict as a key factor in the unfolding of historical events was itself an endangered feature on the public airwaves in the 1990s and 2000s, as shows emphasising quirky interiority (think *This American Life*) replaced politics- and policy-based programming (Loviglio, 2011). Steiner's approach was rooted in what Raymond Williams might have called public radio's 'residual' commitment to political struggle of outsiders (1983: 121–127). The Center for Emerging Media, however, recalls William's 'emergent' category, an ironic juxtaposition that recalls Antonio Gramsci's motto, 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the Will' (1971: 175). CEM's story provides an occasion to speculate whether alternative, community-based public media's progressive streak is residual or emerging in the US. It is certainly not dominant.

The *dramatis personae* for this melodrama of beset public broadcasting could not have been cast any better. In one corner was Steiner, his voice a raspy tenor; his diction, undisciplined and fuzzy, with a penchant for bursts of laughter when kibitzing with on-air guests. A greying veteran of the Vietnam era anti-war and civil rights movements, Steiner's ponytail and work boots recalled a youth in which he was beaten by police and expelled from school for challenging Jim Crow. He was, in his very person and persona, a memory seized in flash of danger, a wresting back from conformity of a radical tradition in danger of being overwhelmed. 'He paints his struggles with WYPR in tones reminiscent of the 1960s', observed *The Baltimore Sun's* Jill Rosen, 'the idealist versus the corporation, the creative versus the bean counter, the open mind versus the closed' (Rosen, 2008a: C3). Steiner's career on and off the microphone has been as an advocate for racial equality and educational reform in Baltimore. In many ways, his approach to the radio epitomised for his devoted listeners the sense of 'active constructive participation' called for in NPR's founding Principles.

In the opposite corner, Anthony Brandon, WYPR president and CEO, a corporate media tycoon of American General Media, a company that owns and operates 25 commercial radio stations across the country (Dechter, 2005: 27). His voice, a stentorian baritone, his response to the crisis, opaque and coolly distant. His management style, buttoned-down and by some accounts, Nixonian in its lack of transparency and ruthlessness (Ericson, 2015: 17; Marbella, 2008: B1; Woestendiek, 2008: C1). He spoke in the corporate platitudes of growth and research metrics, which NPR had perfected over the last couple of decades. A perfect set piece for re-enacting, almost 40 years later, the political and cultural battles out of which US public radio sprang.

In retrospect, the firing of Steiner seems an unsurprising conclusion given the long-simmering tensions between him and Brandon, which according to Steiner and other sources, began almost immediately after Brandon swooped in at the last minute in 2002 with the five million US dollars necessary to guarantee that the local group of investors, headed by Steiner, could purchase WYPR from Johns Hopkins University (Jansen, 2008). Like many colleges and universities with public radio stations at the dawn of the digital broadcasting era, Hopkins decided in 2001 to sell WJHU rather than pay for expensive digital equipment upgrades. This process of institutional divestment by universities of their radio licenses over the last generation represents another way in which the institution of public radio has seen its bonds with local institutions weakened. Bidders for the station included industry behemoths Minnesota Public Radio, WGBH in Boston and WAMU in Washington DC. Steiner put together a group of local investors to buy the station, a plan which faltered before Brandon fatefully stepped in with the necessary money. Brandon, president and CEO, and Steiner, executive vice president, almost immediately clashed over the approach the station should take. Over the next six years, a grim war of position ensued as Steiner fought for journalistic independence and a firewall between programming content and the interests of corporate underwriters, while Brandon slowly pushed Steiner out of the station's governance (Ericson, 2015; Rosen 2008a; Woedenstiek, 2008: C1).

At the time, Steiner's dismissal sent shockwaves throughout the city and public media. It seemed, almost immediately, to stand for something larger: a collapse of a previous compact between public media and their publics, and the betrayal of a community of listeners who had come to see WYPR and Steiner as inextricably linked. The response from loyal listeners of *The Marc Steiner Show* was swift and merciless. 'No Marc, No Money!' bumper stickers started appearing on early-model Japanese sedans around town. A small but dedicated group of listeners formed a picket line outside the station's studio. A petition organised by protesters collected over a thousand names, many pledging never to donate to the station again until Steiner was brought back on the air. Coming during a period in which public broadcasting had been fending off another round of Republican calls for complete zeroing out of public funding, the Steiner affair

presented itself as a local and intimate example of a national problem: a cycle of crisis and redemption, or yet another moment of danger.

The station's previously obscure Community Advisory Board peremptorily met and called for a public meeting, at which irate listeners could address their grievances to WYPR management. The gathering that ensued and which I attended, in the Meyerhoff Auditorium at the Baltimore Museum of Art, was impressive in both its size (over 350 people) and its passion. Radio's audience, always invisible, usually silent, was suddenly neither. On a snowy Wednesday evening, dozens of outraged listeners took to the open microphones to condemn the decision and to call for Steiner's reinstatement. Many of those who rose to speak drew upon memories as tools against what they perceived to be a moment of danger, not for Steiner, but for the future of public media and the democratic traditions that created and sustained it.

For many protestors that evening, the importance of public media could best be expressed in the idiom of memory. A nineteen-year-old African American woman recalled singing the civil rights protest anthem *We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest* on Steiner's show a decade earlier as a child. Seizing this memory, she reprised her performance to the appreciative crowd, as the evening took on the air of a movement rally. Woody Curry an African-American Baltimore-based writer, activist and founder of a renowned drug recovery program, The Station, couched his protest in the nested memories of his military service in Vietnam decades earlier, and in the return trip he took to Vietnam three years earlier, in 2005 with the Center for Emerging Media, as part of its documentary program *Shared Weight*. Curry seized upon one memory in particular, overcoming his fear of venturing into a long underground tunnel, dug decades before by the Viet Cong, with Steiner on that 2005 trip, to express the importance of solidarity in this moment, confronting a very different kind of threat. In an episode of *Shared Weight*, Curry described that action as a moment of reconciliation with 'the thing in the tunnel', something that he had to 'accept ... and get friendly with ... in order not to get destroyed by it' (CEM, 2005).

A white woman named Anita recalled her struggle as part of the Catholic laity in Boston who mobilised to get the Church to own up to years of clergy abuse in order to understand her relationship to the gathered WYPR faithful. She suggested a tactic borrowed from the earlier movement: an escrow fund of donations to be given to the station upon the reinstatement of Steiner. A civil rights lawyer named Irene, race undetermined, used the memory of 'getting dumped' to understand the experience. 'I know what you do when you get dumped. You hand back their crap!' she said to loud applause as she waved a handful of WYPR swag, the kind of small gifts given to donors. 'It wasn't just a show', she added, 'It was a relationship' (Rosen, 2008b: B1). Like Curry and many other speakers, Irene recalled not only the memories of listening to the show, but to participating in it as well. She had once been a guest on an episode dedicated to helping ex-felon women get back into the workforce.

Other listeners turned to history in search of apposite memories to wield, including references to Napoleon's campaign in Egypt (Marbella, 2008, B1). Many listeners were quick to clarify that 'this isn't about Marc' so much as it was about the larger principles of how public radio should operate. It became clear that the central conflict between listeners and station management was over who 'owns' public radio. Several others were quick to remind station management that WYPR's call letters stand for 'Your Public Radio' and that on-air hosts made sure to emphasize the 'Your' in frequent station identifications and pledge drives. The slogan now 'rings hollow', according to Fred Van Dyk, another unhappy listener. Even so, the promise of ownership emboldened Van Dyk, a white man, to demand racial, financial, political and geographic diversity' on the station board.

To make the case, listeners linked the concept of public ownership of the airwaves to the ritual patterns of listening that shaped their lives and their communities. Ted James, an African

American man, who described himself as 'just a bus driver', explained the importance of public ownership in personal terms.

At 5am, my dog and I listen on bus. I listen to radio on all day. I make my wife dinner at 5pm and we turn off radio and talk about what we heard. There goes the "Y" for "Your" and there goes your "P" for "Public." This is not about Marc Steiner, It's about the meaning of public radio [voice breaking]. I have struggled listening to YOUR public radio ... today I turned it off. I will not listen and I won't contribute until they fix it and then I'll be back.

'Our funds pay one-third of WYPR's budget', observed an African American woman named Helen, 'so we should have one-third representation on the board'. A white listener, named Dana, insisted that she was 'an owner' of the station. 'I'm the "public" in public radio', added Ruth, another white woman. This ability to bring together a community, Colbert insisted, is 'what makes Marc such a dangerous subversive'. The referent for 'Your' and the meaning of 'Public' were generally in dispute for the rest of the meeting (Marbella, 2008: B1). Hard by the exit, Tony Brandon, flanked by aides, sat silently in the auditorium, looking at his BlackBerry and waiting it out. A few hundred angry listeners out of 160,000, Brandon told reporters at the end of the event, 'is not a forum that gives us usable research' (ibid.).

Brandon had a point, as subsequent Arbitron reports would bear out. His dismissal of the protest, while perhaps politically tone-deaf, echoed the larger turn towards audience research that had increasingly come to dominate programming and fundraising decisions at NPR and other public radio networks. Just two years later, in 2010, NPR commissioned SmithGeiger, a market research firm, to generate a psychographic profile for their different kinds of listeners. The report identified the most coveted types of listeners are 'Voracious Voyagers', 'Team Captains', and 'Dutiful Aggregators', categories that aligned listeners with purchase behaviour, income levels, and attitudes about education (SmithGeiger, 2010). Intensive and expensive, audience research hoped to identify listeners as specific types of consumers, not as members of a listening public with collective memories of public service and shared demands for representation.

In any case, the crowd that rose up in protest of Steiner's firing represented something larger than a single radio host or a single radio station. The visibility and audibility of radio listeners, brought together in one place to talk about the importance of public radio, struck some as a kind of a revelation. Doug Colbert, a white law school professor and occasional guest on Steiner's show, drew an explicit connection between the listener uprising and his own evolving consciousness. 'I knew there was a community I belonged to, but now I finally see what it is'. 'WYPR's management', he continued, is 'private ownership. We are public ownership' (Marbella, 2008: B1). The appearance in an auditorium of a public radio audience – or at least an angry subset of one – opened up a conversation about the meaning of public in public media. 'We need more, not less independent voices', concluded Colbert (ibid.).

Fearing an even bigger backlash and reduced revenues, WYPR wisely cancelled its spring fund drive that year. Wary of further public reproach, some remaining station hosts stopped putting as much emphasis on the word 'Your' in 'Your Public Radio Station' during station IDs and fund drives (Kast, 2008). Its Community Advisory Board (CAB) called for more diversity on the station's board of directors, more transparency in station governance and more public input through the CAB. A Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) inspector general's report the following year seemed to bolster these calls for reform, finding that WYPR 'did not maintain a functioning community advisory board, nor did it comply with open records requirements for financial records or EEO statistics' (Everhart, 2009).

Brandon and the WYPR board responded to the calls to reinstate Steiner, or at least to justify his firing, in subsequent public statements with a list of talking points. Along with sagging ratings, the station management suggested that Steiner's Baltimore-centric focus ran counter to the

station's mission to cover the entire state of Maryland. Finally, Board president Barbara Bozzuto conceded, Steiner and the Board simply had different visions for the future of the station (Woestendiek, 2008: C1).

This last explanation was the least controversial. Steiner's focus on not just the problems of people on the social margins but on their perspectives represented a counter current in the public radio mainstream. Jack Mitchell identified this key distinction in *Listener Supported*, his 2005 history of NPR: public radio was a service that was 'focused on the societally conscious, not a service that was societally conscious' (Mitchell, 2005: 184). Steiner, by contrast, did not just bring advocates for the city's homeless into the studio, he brought the homeless in to speak for themselves.

In another victory for Brandon, WYPR reported an increase in total listeners who contributed in the year following the sacking of Steiner. They saw a slight dip in the total listener contributions, likely attributable to the recession, which hit other markets similarly. Public radio in the US is funded by a combination of listeners members' contributions; corporate underwriting – which is essentially genteel advertising spots; grants from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the federal entity created by Congress in 1967; a smattering of state and local grants; and the occasional major donor gift. The portion of total revenue that each NPR affiliate station gets from listener member contributions varies widely, but WYPR's rate of 30% in 2009 was on the low side compared to other major cities in the Northeast. 'The fundamentals of the business are operating beautifully', Brandon boasted, when interviewed on the occasion of the one-year anniversary of the Steiner affair (Kaltenbach, 2009: C1).

Local Public Radio as Community Organising

The Marc Steiner Show debuted in 1993, well into the era of neoliberal retrenchment, on WJHU, an NPR affiliate owned by Johns Hopkins University. The public affairs show focused on Baltimore, its problems, its resources and its people. Steiner told me he saw the show as 'an extension of community organising'. Public radio was, in those days, 'one of the most segregated institutions in the US', and early on Steiner aimed to 'bridge racial gaps' in the city and in public media. Steiner told me back in 2012 that from the start he tried to 'mix it up by consciously bringing radical voices to traditional democratic conversations' (Steiner, 2012). This attempt, to bridge the competing constituencies of public broadcasting's original mission, marked the CEM as an outlier on the airwaves through much of the early 21st century, as public radio revenues soared and the networks like NPR doubled down on the 'highly educated' demographic in its fundraising and programming strategies. Steiner joined WYPR journalists in holding that underwriters should not influence programming, a principle that many felt was under attack under Brandon's leadership (Ericson, 2015).

Steiner is 'an odd duck' in the contemporary public radio world, according to Mark Gunnery, former producer at CEM, who is now a producer for the nationally-syndicated *The Kojo Nnaamdi Show* on WAMU (Gunnery, 2017). The work of the Center represents a 'counter current' in the public media world, added Stefanie Mavronis, another former producer (Mavronis, 2017). Steiner himself identifies himself as part of a tradition stretching back to I. F. Stone's *Weekly* and the oral histories of Studs Terkel. He also traced his political lineage back through the civil rights and anti-war movements of his youth and to the tradition of social justice in Judaism. Steiner grew up white and Jewish in black Baltimore, the son of parents who embraced the ideal of integration in a very segregated city. At 11 years old, Steiner integrated his otherwise all-black Boy Scout Troop. A one-time 'teenage Trotskyist', an anti-war and civil rights activist, he was arrested and kicked out of school for his civil rights activism and beaten by police for protesting the war as part of Students for a Democratic Society.

As a young man, Steiner became a youth counsellor and educator who taught theatre in prisons. He later taught at the renowned Baltimore School for the Arts and served as principal of the Baltimore Experimental School. He tried his hand at marketing research and running political campaigns for local Democrats before coming to radio rather late in his career. Steiner started the Center for Emerging Media in 2000, as a way to leverage grants and other funds for more ambitious and independent projects. As he saw his role at WYPR diminish, CEM increasingly became the repository for seizing hold of the radical traditions that shaped Steiner. CEM turned to the power of memory as a form of personal and national healing in its first major project *Shared Weight*, an audio documentary featuring the voices and stories of US veterans, protesters and Vietnamese survivors of the war in Vietnam. In 2005, Steiner brought a small group of veterans, including Curry, and former war resisters to Vietnam to reckon with the past and with the families of the Vietnamese soldiers they had fought.

One episode is organised around the memory of a veteran named Homer Steedly of the moment he shot and killed a young Viet Cong soldier along the Ho Chi Minh trail in 1965. This memory and the image of the haunted wandering souls of both men form the framework for a meditation on forgiveness and grace and the transformative power of rituals of memory and grief. The CEM group find the family of this dead Vietnamese soldier and mourn with them. It is a riveting hour of audio storytelling, in which the memory of a single dead Vietnamese man becomes the means for understanding and re-building the fraught relationship between two families, separated by decades, oceans, and a terrible war that neither side can defend (CEM, 2005).

Its second major project, the Peabody-award winning *Just Words*, featured the voices of the homeless and the poor of Baltimore struggling for survival and dignity. In one compelling moment, Jacquetta Lyles, a day labourer, describes the difficulty of getting paid to clean up the Baltimore Orioles' Camden Yards ballpark after games. She also describes the challenges of being paid in cash cards from which a \$1.50 deduction is taken every time they are used, resulting in yet another poor tax. A co-worker of hers with just \$20 on his cash card couldn't get the minimum \$20 out of an ATM because, minus the \$1.50 fee, he no longer had sufficient funds to make the withdrawal. Steiner and his producer Jessica Phillips, provided important context, identifying three separate middlemen, including a for-profit temporary employment agency, that each take a cut out of the value of the labour provided by Lyles and others. In another episode, Lucille Robinson, a grandmother of six, describes the challenges of caring for her extended family on just \$700 a month in Social Security payments. Lyles and Robinson's stories provide a stark expose of the feminisation of poverty, and the tremendous amount of work required to survive below the poverty line (CEM, 2007).

Interspersed throughout the stories, short bits of blues, Motown and folk songs with lyrical connections to the dignity of labour and the challenges of poverty and isolation connect the stories to multiple overlapping traditions in working class American culture. Nina Simone's 'Oh Baltimore, ain't it hard just to live' provides an on-the-nose caption for Lyles's description of maintaining a family of four on minimum wage and her role in the fledgling United Workers' Association, a union working for higher wages for day labourers in the downtown stadiums. The Peabody Awards committee, in honouring *Just Words*, observed that 'the stories told linger in the memory and accumulate poignancy and power' (Peabody Awards, 2008). Part of their power derives from a larger collective memory, of the kind that George Lipsitz (1990) has argued enlivens the narratives of popular culture, especially music, of racial minorities and the poor. In these ways, Steiner and his collaborators re-defined 'emerging media' so that 'emerging' described not the media apparatus, but the social formations that were 'making do' with the media technology available to them (De Certeau, 1984: 29).

Radical Voices, Smaller Audiences

The program that replaced the *Marc Steiner Show* on WYPR, *Midday with Dan Rodricks*, featured a lot more of the kind of anodyne lifestyle topics typical of commercial broadcasting. Rodricks, a popular columnist and reporter with the *Baltimore Sun*, sounded many of the same themes as Steiner in his column. However, as a former talk show host on a local commercial station, he was also more inclined to cooperate with the station management's desire for more upscale programming fare. Gone were the homeless people advocating for themselves in the studio. In their place, restaurateurs and home gardeners. This shift coincided with other changes in programming, like the addition of short sponsored spots including *Radio Kitchen*, *Backstage at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra*, and *Cellar Notes*, a show about wine – 'shows that sound more like genteel infomercials than public-affairs programs', according to activist Max Obuszewski, one of the more vocal protesters of Steiner's sacking. Brandon says the shorter shows are now common on public radio stations, and that they serve a triple purpose of helping businesses, helping the station and providing top quality content for listeners (Ericson, 2008).

Steiner and the CEM landed a new gig across town at WEAA, the much smaller and less well-heeled public radio station housed at Morgan University, a Historically Black College/University (HCBU). Changes in institutional resources have also wrought changes in programming. Steiner's audience was considerably smaller on WEAA than it had been at WYPR. In general, WEAA draws about half the audience of WYPR. The audience is less affluent as well, which meant less money for programming. The new contract with WEAA provided CEM with \$100,000 per annum, only one quarter of the funds needed to run a daily two-hour public affairs and call-in program (Kaltenbach, 2009: C1). CEM would have to raise the rest. But it provided space and time on the airwaves and an opportunity to double-down on CEM's race-conscious human rights mission. Freed from much of the corporate expectations of growth and the not-so-subtle pressures to harmonise programming with the interests of underwriters, the new iteration of the Marc Steiner show became more radical.

Some comparisons between the two midday public affairs shows might help to clarify the different versions of public they are speaking to. In 2009, Rodricks devoted 13 programs to 'food-cuisine' compared to zero for Steiner during that same period. Steiner had 11 programs dedicated to civil rights and racial issues, compared with only three for Rodricks. Steiner dedicated 15 programs to military issues like Iraq, Afghanistan, military policy and strategy, and veterans' affairs, while Rodricks had only eight. Rodricks had twice as many programs on military history, 6-3, compared to Steiner. Steiner had 12 programs on the Middle East conflict, compared to Rodrick's zero. Rodricks had 14 programs on sports compared to Steiner's eight; and nine episodes dedicated to trends in television, to Steiner's two.¹

Fighting to bridge the racial divide in public radio, in Baltimore, and in the US more broadly, was in some ways harder to do from a smaller station anchored at a historically black institution. Mavronis, the former CEM producer, told me that she routinely encountered white Baltimoreans who had no idea Steiner was still on the air after his departure from WYPR – a sad echo of Steiner's early observation about the racial segregation of the airwaves. Still, the WEAA era provided the CEM with a primarily African American audience with a strong connection to a university and the guests, callers and staff reflected a coming-together of the highly educated and a racial minority, fulfilling the formula of public broadcasting's founding mission. WEAA's slogan, 'The Voice of the Community', avoided the vexed terms 'public' and 'your', so contentious over at WYPR, in favour of the language of community, a word that in this context implied both a sense of common purpose and a legacy of the written and unwritten social boundaries shaped by racism. While Steiner struggled with a smaller audience, less revenue and a more marginal perch for CEM within its new public radio home, Brandon was fending off unionisation efforts at WYPR and battling criticism that the station was not honouring the Public Media Code of Integrity (Editorial Integrity

for Public Media, 2013), which appears on their website, to set 'careful boundaries between contributors and content creators' (Ericson, 2014). Eric Ericson of the *Baltimore City Paper* charged in 2015 that

The station's management makes no distinction between programming that is written and produced in house by its professional, paid staff or syndicated through National Public Radio, and that which is, directly or not, underwritten by the corporate host. (Ericson, 2015).

In 2016, the axe fell again on Steiner and the CEM. DeWayne Wickham, Dean of Morgan State's School of Global Journalism and Communication, was the hatchet man this time. The ostensible reason was that the move was part of a broader revamping of the station schedule to provide more opportunities for Morgan State students to use the station to report, produce, and deliver news programming. Steiner's public statement about leaving WEAA was cordial, even warm, referring to WEAA as 'like family'.² But in an interview a week after the announcement, Steiner described the parting as 'bittersweet' (Steiner, 2017).

Former *Steiner Show* producers were keen to point out the low cost to the university of most of the current schedule and the many opportunities for internships and employment the program offered current students and recent graduates. 'We always find something for Morgan students', insists Mavronis. 'Our board operator is a Morgan grad. Most of the staff is former students. So many of the hosts of the other regular programs are produced and hosted by unpaid volunteers who have been showing undergrads the ropes for years', she continued (Mavronis, 2017).

Former CEM producers pointed to the cosy relationship between Wickham and Baltimore's Mayor, Catherine Pugh, as a contributing factor to the decision. Steiner had been shut down the previous year when trying to schedule an on-air mayoral candidate debate between Pugh, the favourite, and several of her challengers. Pugh balked; Steiner didn't cancel the debate until he was forced to by station management. When asked if his being a high-profile white host on an otherwise predominantly black station staff housed in a HBCU contributed to his troubles at the station, Steiner demurred, saying only that it could be tricky sometimes (Steiner, 2017). Steiner's sacking was followed by a string of changes in the programming, including the departure of several other high-profile hosts, including Sean Yoes, editor of *The Baltimore Afro American* newspaper, who resigned in protest of 'profound differences with the direction of WEAA right now'. A handful of volunteers 'who hosted specialty shows in genres like blues and jazz once a week resigned or were dropped in the revamped lineup' (Zurawik, 2017). Such spasms of conflict and broken relationships within the Voice of the Community reminds us of Raymond Williams's trenchant observation that 'community' is a 'warmly persuasive word', almost never used pejoratively, that tends to obscure exclusions, hierarchies and other structural problems (Williams, 1985: 76).

In any case, it was clear that CEM and Steiner had again foundered on the fault lines of public radio, its limited funding and its complicated mandate to serve a public that never quite comes into focus. The economic and political challenges of keeping CEM's work going takes a toll, Steiner admitted: 'after a while, you lose your creative edge' (2017). The Baltimore alternative media landscape suffered another blow in the summer of 2017 with the loss of *The Baltimore City Paper*, a venerable free weekly whose arts and culture coverage was bolstered with occasional investigative journalism. Editors and reporters from *City Paper* appeared monthly on *The Marc Steiner Show* to discuss local politics and culture, a kind of alternative media synergy that will be difficult to replace in the new media landscape. In the void, it is difficult to imagine any scrutiny of the mainstream press that remains in Baltimore. *The City Paper* had, for instance, great coverage of WYPR, its struggle against unionisation in 2015 and its questionable practices regarding underwriters mentioned above. *The Baltimore Beat* sprang up in its place in the summer of 2017 with great promise. Edited by Lisa Snowden-McCray, an African American veteran *Baltimore Sun*

journalist, and featuring a diverse and energetic staff, *The Beat* engaged the city in ways reminiscent of the *Steiner Show* and the *City Paper*. It shut down abruptly in March 2018, another blow to alternative media in Baltimore.

Conclusion

Since August 2017, Steiner has been running operations entirely out of the cramped offices and studio of the Center for Emerging Media, with Valerie Williams, the Center's Executive Director and his wife, and his small staff of producers. They are making the best of their newfound institutional freedom to pursue multimedia projects that look beyond Baltimore but that hew closely to critical social justice themes. One, tentatively titled *The Alabama Chronicles*, features interviews with Martin Luther King Jr.'s barber. Another project, in collaboration with African American public radio and TV host Tavis Smiley, will focus on the work of political theorist Benjamin Barber. The Center will also support the media productions of young people and 'new voices' in Baltimore who need access to production space and expertise (Steiner, 2017).

The Center for Emerging Media is embracing new platforms, like podcasting, and new funding models, like Indiegogo, and considering new distribution schemes, which may include yet another radio venture. Steiner's affection for the medium that has defined his career for the last 24 years is apparent. Terrestrial radio, he tells me, 'isn't going anywhere' (Steiner, 2017). Neither, apparently, is the Center for Emerging Media. However, as it approaches its 20th year of existence, it has seen its distribution platforms shrink again and again. During that same period, the fortunes of mainstream public radio and its podcast spinoffs, commercially funded and non-profit alike, have soared to new heights of audience, revenue and influence (NPR, 2018). From *Planet Money* to *Serial* to *This American Life* to *Radio Lab* to *Invisibilia*, these successful ventures sometimes traffic in stories about the marginalised and voiceless, but from the familiar and reassuring perspectives of the highly educated and socially powerful.

In the larger national context of increasingly partisan division, voices of dissent and grievance are multiplying. But as a significant swath of mainstream media outlets oriented around a centrist, neoliberal perspective put pressure on the nativism and ethno-nationalism of which Donald Trump is the latest avatar, space for radical voices of dissent are not guaranteed, and may be pushed further off the mainstream channels. Likewise, the Cambrian explosion in audio platforms and programming means more competition for listeners' ears. For media outlets like CEM moments of danger come in flashes like Friday night sackings, but also as part of waves and currents – equally unpredictable, but slower and harder to fathom. In the face of all these dangers, seizing the power of memory to wrest back a radical tradition will require more voices, more stories, and audiences that manifest visibly and audibly as publics and communities. These are fraught and unstable categories, but in battles to reclaim radical traditions and build progressive futures, they are words we cannot do without.

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Notes

- 1 The author would like to acknowledge the hard work of Mr. Andrew Devos in helping to create this comparative content analysis, and the sharp eyes and thoughtful suggestions of the two anonymous reviewers.
- 2 Available at: <http://www.bizjournals.com/baltimore/news/2017/05/10/radio-talk-show-host-marc-steiner-leaving-weaa.html>.