WBAI CAB REPORT-December 2015- second draft

PROGRAMMING

The WBAI CAB has examined the audience numbers for the current programming grid for many years. The overall impact of the current programming grid that embraces 168 hours of programming a week through the analog means of delivery does not capture enough of an audience to sustain the current budget projections for the station.

The weekly cume is around 100,000 to 150,000 listeners. These numbers do not mean that 100,000 people are listening per hour. Rather, it means that the total numbers of listeners for all the shows for a 7 day 24/7 period that totals 168 hours is between 100,000 to 150,000 people.

This averages out to roughly 900 to 600 listeners per hour. Some shows obviously have several times more people than that listening. Others have far less.

In the past the numbers per hour were much higher. These numbers were closer to 1200-1500 listeners per hour for much of the nineties and early 2000’s. The cumes were between 200,000 to 250,000. At one time after the Gulf War the cume was close to 500,000. This meant close to 3,000 people per hour were listening on average.

THE NUMBERS HAVE REMAINED THROUGHOUT THE NINETIES MORE OR LESS AT 200,000-250,000.THEY BEGAN TO DROP PRIOR TO 2008.

These numbers have to be put in perspective with the wider market for analog radio. The greater NYC area metro market for analog radio listeners is estimated at over 16,000,000.

The current cumes of 100,000 to 150,000 per week reveal a very sharp decline in the audience at WBAI over the past twenty years.

WBAI currently captures a very small percentage of the total metro area audience. Nine hundred to six hundred listeners per hour mean that we are only getting per hour 1/100the to 1/250th of 1% of people listening to analog radio every hour in the greater metro area.

These numbers are obviously too small to sustain a budget of nearly 2 million dollars that requires the bulk of it to be raised by on air donations.

These problems are not just WBAI’s alone. All community radio and Public radio stations have had a slow decline in audience over the past several decades. But, WBAI in particular is very steep.

This is a grim and tough reality that must be dealt with head on.

The WBAI CAB recommends open meetings of staff and listeners to discuss these issues on an ongoing basis. Simply waiting for the silver bullet of a program director is clearly insufficient.

While short term plans to enhance the fund drives can turn the situation around with better planning and fresher premiums they still hide the basic fact that the TONE and CONTENT of our current air has failed to capture the imagination of enough people to sustain the current budget.

This situation must be changed immediately.

 EXPANDING MEMBERSHIP

The WBAI CAB recommends that all measures to expand membership be implemented in an open and creative manner. This ranges from off air events every week to our reaching out to all sorts of alternative and mainstream institutions/movements for support and collaboration.

All the various sustainability plans and the many CAB meetings for years have stressed the need to have a large number of outside events on a weekly basis. This is especially enhanced by our presence at 388 Atlantic Avenue with a newly renovated performance space downstairs that is part of THE COMMONS.

It has come to the CAB’s attention the WBAI management has actively thwarted the ability of shows to perform at THE COMMONS CAFÉ in the past few months. This is completely counterproductive to any sensible efforts to rehabilitate the station in all sorts of ways. Our recommendation is that such efforts to minimize the collaboration with the Commons must cease immediately.

REDUCTION OF LISTENER MEMBERS

The current reduction of our listener sponsors from 16,000 in 2011 to slightly over 8,000 in 2015 has to be addressed and analyzed in a candid and creative manner. Why this happened needs to be soberly and openly grappled with.

A task force should be set up to immediately grapple with this issue and solve it.

The report has an attached document outlining this problem in detail.

EXPLORATION OF NEW MEDIA

For the past several decades all of analog radio has been impacted by the growth of the Internet and digital forms of communication. This includes the growth of live streaming, podcasts, blogs, Facebook, twitter and other forms of digital communication.

The need to develop new programming and the ability to deliver it through I phones, androids and I Pad like devices remains a glaring gap in all Pacifica stations and WBAI in particular.

The WBAI CAB recommended several years ago that all current programs be required to develop Facebook/blog like add-ons to their current programming strategy. Some shows have done so but the overall lack of any comprehensive effort is one of the many reasons why we are failing to reach out to a larger audience, especially a younger demographic.

The WBAI CAB recommends that this problem be dealt with immediately and practical workarounds be implemented immediately to deal with this issue in the short term.

Each show should expand the production staff by developing digital producers to engage in live chat or maintain blogs, especially when the show is in motion.

In addition, the WBAI CAB recommends that NEW programming be created through the implementation of podcasting, Internet Radio and the creative use of new media. We can develop relationships with existing alternative media organizations, journalism schools in NYC and other media outlets in a creative way.

PREMIUM FULFILLMENT

The WBAI CAB knows better than most about the difficulties of fulfilling premiums. We are well aware of how the efforts of many people have helped to reduce the amount of outstanding premiums NOT delivered.

But, the numbers remain very large and still remain in the thousands. The fiscally weak performance of the station means that there is a constant problem that persists due to lack of money.

Every drive is marked by the pressing need to pay current and past fiscal obligations. These obligations can be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. After these past debts are dealt with a scant amount is left to deal with the past and current fiscal obligations. This particularly impacts negatively on fulfillment rates since little money is available to fulfill the premiums. Instead of a reasonable AMAZON type delivery the listener is subjected to a NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET scenario. In some cases premiums remain undelivered for years.

This effort requires a constant flow of voluntary labor to address the myriad problems that flow from these structural flaws. We annually go through a large number of people who pledge to WBAI. Many become alienated by the constant inability of the station due to minimal fiscal resources to deliver premiums to them in a timely manner if at all.

This repetitive cycle has to be addressed and dealt with a lot of energy and creativity to turn it around. There exists only four paid staff to deal with these issues at the present. THEY ALL ASSUME MUTLIPLE HATS.

But what is deleterious is to encounter from some in management a controlling and haughty manner that basically turns people off who are willing to help. After all, why should somebody donate their free time, which helps a paid staff member get their salary and receive poor treatment in return?

THW WBAI CAB recommends that management take action to address this issue for the general well being of the station.

SUSTAINABILITY PLANS

All the sustainability plans offered by all the various people over the past several years have merit.

ALL the measures that are suggested should be practically implemented and some already have. But their needs to be a constant and practical effort of implementation, not nay saying finger pointing in this regard.

The WBAI suggest that all the measures be adopted and practically modified as circumstances merit.

TRANSMITTER ISSUES

WBAI currently has a contract with the Empire State Building that will rise to 75K annually by 2020.

We are currently paying 12K of a monthly bill of 55K to ESB right now. This means we are building an ever-increasing debt that may simply explode in the short term.

The WBAI CAB recommends that efforts be made to get a TRUE picture of what the situation is and explore other possibilities. It is important the local and national management be candid about what is going on and that the audience be given sober and realistic assessments of what is happening. The impression is left to many that we are assuming an ever-mounting debt that will explode in our faces in the near future.

REPORTS TO THE LISTENER

The WBAI CAB recommends that monthly reports to the listener be scheduled in a predictable and timely fashion. This also includes the monthly reports to the LSB. Simply having sporadic and politically opportune reports defeat the entire purpose of openness and transparency.

Currently, reports to the listener are done sporadically and with little warning. This must be done with regularity and predictability...at least an hour per report should be allocated to taking audience questions and comments.

ELECTRONIC TRANSFERS

The WBAI CAB recommends that as many fiscal transactions are done with an attention to reducing costs to WBAI as possible.

This means trying to get as many pledges done through EFT means as possible to reduce financial service costs that credit cards entail

ENLARGEMENT OF THE BUDDY SYSTEM

The WBAI Buddy system supplies a reliable and steady amount of revenue monthly to WBAI. The CAB recommends that further ideas and creativity from all be directed to efforts to enhance the number of people pledging as buddies to WBAI.

SURVEY INFORMATION

The WBAI CAB recommends that online and paper surveys be constantly revised and sent to our listeners. We simply need to enhance the feedback we are getting in order to see what our audience feels is happening and what they see their needs are.

THE WBAI CAB recommends that several online surveys be placed on the website. These should be supplemented by paper surveys included in all premium mailings.

Pacifica needs to allocate money nationally to periodically assess the metrics of our audience. The WBAI is CAB is well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of these methods but we also believe that, as many hard facts as possible are needed to help inform policy making.

FALL FUND DRIVE

The last fund drive in the fall was only able to realize about 50% of its fiscal goals. The amount raised on a daily basis was roughly 8K. If this amount is divided into an estimated annual budget of 1.9 million it means that roughly 240 days a year need to be devoted to fund raising on air to reach these goals. The attached table spells out the daily results.

Obviously, fundraising most of the year is an impossible situation since the practical impact of this is that ultimately it drives people away. When one couples this with the current failure of the analog grid to attract a large number of listeners plus the constant impact this has on fulfillment rates we are left with a dismal scenario of failure.

We are attaching also the current budget projections for 2015.

A tremendous amount of energy has to be devoted to altering this. Ideas being offered by Ken Freedman’s AUDIENCE ENGINE offer a glimmer of hope for the future. This will be the subject of the next report by the CAB.

RECEPTION OF VOLUNTEERS

The WBAI CAB is well aware that there is a critically small amount of paid staff to deal with the myriad of problems to be worked on. The WBAI CAB is opposed to any climate and tenor of management that thwarts and impedes the necessary involvement of many volunteers to help on the immense tasks that are needed to be addressed. Currently, we have some staff that actually works to demobilize such efforts.

Such staff either have to have their attitudes revised or simply be fired so that more enlightened staff can work with a vast pool of labor that currently is sabotaged in its efforts to help.

PUBLICITY

Because of the lack of fiscal resources there is a systemic inability of WBAI and Pacifica management to devote resources to advertising or publicity.

The WBAI CAB recommends that practical measures be developed and implemented to address this problem.

As simple first start is to simply have available for distribution thousands of catch and creative palm cards. The need for PALM CARDS has been a constant refrain of all the CAB meetings for many years.

A contest for a new design could be placed in the VILLAGE VOICE with the resulting winner getting a cash award .

The reason this is suggested is that we never know what new and better branding tools are out there and a new visual image that has power would be useful to adopt.