

AN INTERVIEW WITH SANDY CLOSE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PACIFIC NEWS SERVICE. by Martha Wallner.



Sandy Close
*Photo: Courtesy of
Pacific News Service*

MF: When did you get involved with Media Alliance and why did you want to be part of it?

CLOSE: Media Alliance wasn't Media Alliance yet when I first got involved. It was simply a network of freelance journalists. In those days a freelance journalist who wasn't part of a formal news organization was really an outlaw, a rogue, operating on the margin without legitimacy. So it was very tricky if you wanted access to anything in the formal public domain, a trial for example. If you weren't part of a "legitimate" mainstream organization, you were automatically labeled a political ideologue, a political fanatic, a leftist.

As freelancers we all had similar situations--no health insurance, no press passes, no recognition, unless you were writing for the bar or some of the various independent weeklies. This created a sense of isolation, of invisibility, of wanting to connect to each other. It was as much about hooking up with each other and using that collective sense to promote the importance of freelance journalists and gain access to press passes, health insurance, etc., as it was about creating an organization. That was Media Alliance in its first phase

MF: This was when?

CLOSE: It was maybe 1976. I can't really remember. The first meeting I went to was, I think, the second meeting they had. It was in the Consumer Action office. Those early meetings were very much about people discovering the sense of connection among themselves. There wasn't a strong emphasis on, "Are your political views appropriate to being a member?" The network that evolved in those early times really was about recognition and what it meant to be a freelancer.

From the first I was drawn to the people there, to their eccentricity, their independence, their orneriness, and their desire as freelancers to come together and promote the legitimation of the freelance journalist. I don't think that our desire to create a kind of manifesto of freelancers' rights vis a vis the publishing outlets ever quite worked, but it was important to underscore the fact that you have got to respect the writer. In those days, believe me, a lot of great groundbreaking stories and analyses were coming from people on the outside, not the inside. Like the famous story of the My Lai massacre coming out of Dispatch News Service.

MF: You say that was MA's first phase. How did it evolve from there?

CLOSE: When I was last involved with MA, it had become a kind of professional association of journalists. As the alternative media became more and more successful, by which I mean their issues became absorbed by the general media, it was hard to differentiate between the leading issues addressed by the *Chronicle* versus, say, the *Bay Guardian*.

As the general and alternative media came closer together, there was a professionalization, and, to its credit, Media Alliance was part of that trend, which they boosted very successfully.

But my interest in MA lessened, because I was more inclined toward the kid who didn't know he had a voice, or the immigrant from the Oaxacan Mixtec village who didn't speak Spanish, who spoke only his indigenous language.

MF: And now?

CLOSE: The more professional second phase has given way to a more activated, politically active phase, which I support. I think it's a very important role for MA to play.

MF: Tell us more about your background. You started Pacific News Service.

CLOSE: No. I took it over in 1974 when it was either shutting down or morphing into something new. It had been inspired largely by the Vietnam War, and, as the war ended, its sense of direction faltered. But I had a very clear sense of direction for it.

MF: When you took over what were your goals for PNS?

CLOSE: I wanted it to always be about the voice you wouldn't otherwise hear, the voice that was not politically defined. And I wanted it to deal with the problems of freelancers that I spoke about earlier. For example, PNS gave people those press passes it was difficult to operate without. We always gave them out without the kind of hoops and hurdles that other organizations put you through. I understood the difficulties because I had been a freelancer. I know how hard it is to command respect without the benefit of an organization behind you. I remember CBS and NBC being amazed that PNS had five credentialed journalists in Phnom Penh when it fell, but that was, of course, because we had a rather open door policy on press passes.

When I took over PNS I had been in Asia for about three years and in between had founded a newspaper in Oakland which was primarily black, because it was about the Oakland flatlands. I had been in Vietnam and didn't know what was going on on the ground here. I had come back from Asia and discovered America was a foreign country to me. I didn't know what had happened with the anti-war movement, and environmentalism was an unknown concept to me.

MF: So what kind of stories did PNS publish?

CLOSE: I was very interested in taking PNS and expanding the original driving force behind it, to give people public access to voices they wouldn't otherwise hear and to ideas they wouldn't otherwise be able to consider. And in that way creating a more inclusive public forum.

For example, we did one of the first stories ever put out on what it felt like to grow up white as a minority, or what it felt like if you were a white male to see white women dating Asians, or vice versa. Now those are tricky, unsafe stories. But I looked for people who wanted to write about unsafe stuff, unsafe from the standpoint that I didn't even know how to think about them. I think people are very hungry for new ways of understanding that cut through this enormous amount of information out there, and they are hungry for genuine ways to connect to one another. They want stuff that stirs the soul. They want literary journalism, which is why we see so much emphasis on the first person essay. But they don't want just venting. They want writing that draws you in. They want poetry, so poetry is booming, and started booming first with kids, because it's a language of seduction. They want to draw you in. They want to create relationships.

This made me less interested in those more formal issues that were being covered well, or not so well, but at least were being covered. I am definitely interested in what I am not going to hear about on NPR, which is, as its name implies, National Public Radio. It's about the national public life, or should be. But my background had been in the inner city. That's where I found my source of inspiration, the people in the inner city and the people in prison. You were not going to hear much about that on NPR.

MF: How did these ideas impact your work at PNS?

CLOSE: My notion was that there were many voices that could expand our way of looking at the world. It was very clear early on that young people were completely off the radar screen. Nobody had the foggiest idea, really, until the crime rate began to zoom up, where and what young people were thinking and doing. And as late as 1980, if you can imagine, the real terra incognita was immigration. The special economic report to Congress did not have the word "immigrant" in it, yet there was still the sense that the Kerner Commission understood America.

If you stood out on Second and Mission Streets where our office was, you could see the impact of immigration. What you really saw was a world shifting from the '60s, where the great behemoths were the public institutions, the State, people with the magic wand of State power. They were the ones most people were either for or against, that was the dynamic. But by the mid to late '70s, California was already becoming a majority minority state, though nobody was talking about it.

Of course that change was not because of any public policy. It was because of people on their own two feet, changing things, crossing borders, all kinds of borders. You began to see religious conversions, the beginnings of a real religious revival. You began to see the growth of the underground economy, as places where I had lived and worked in Oakland were being decimated by the urban crisis and industrialization. And you began to see the micro-chip, which we brought John Markoff in to write about.

We covered all those changes, changes you couldn't see if your eyes are glued on the wrong-doers or right-doers in the world of public policy. So I would say we were always anthropological; we were always about making the public forum more inclusionary. We were always about bringing access to the voice you didn't otherwise hear, be that the kid who is 15 and

just got sentenced to life, or be it the man who killed the abortion doctor, who many Americans view as a genuine John Brown, a martyr.

I was very interested in bringing those voices to bear through journalism. First through spotting trends and second, as the media began doing more of that, through voices like Richard Rodriguez or Andrew Lamb or Hugh Peterson, for that matter. And Huey Newton. I was glad an African-American man finally wrote a book on women.

Over the years PNS has changed the emphasis of how to do what we want to do, but the point of what we're doing never changed. We work always to create a much more inclusive public forum where the immigrant from Oaxaca, the kid riding his skateboard in your face on Market Street, the beggar, the methamphetamine-addicted homeless person, whoever it is, somehow has to be understood as part of the common culture.

MF: What are your criticisms, concerns, and observations regarding mainstream media in the Bay Area?

CLOSE: The general market media confronts a dilemma: How do you perform the functions of a mainstream newspaper if there is no mainstream? It's a very challenging question. Especially how you do it when you have these great corporate mergers up at the top and enormous social fragmentation down below. How do you do it when you are told over and over again that all people want is infotainment? Where does that leave you?

The general market media faces an enormous identity crisis. There is no longer a mainstream. At the same time, I have discovered through working with kids that communication does not have to be just about gathering and disseminating information. It can also be about creating venues where people genuinely communicate with each other. We have so very little real communication. We call it the Information Era, and that's not an accident, because there is very little communication of the intimate kind.

You see this working with young people. They are hungry for intimacy, which is very hard to get if you grow up in empty houses and you never have access to the vocabulary of Jane Austen, for example. Young people are intrigued by the creation of new forms of media, new forms of communication to fill that void.

So writing, in a way, is communicating as a means to an end--which is not winding up alone in a highly individuated culture. Media Alliance has always served that purpose that networks are meant to serve, which is proximity, a sense of "other" connecting to you.

It is very exciting to see Media Alliance, in its latest phase, doing so much with young people. The young want to develop the communication skills MA teaches. They eat it up.

Martha Wallner is a media activist and former Media Alliance Board Member. Rich Yurman provided editorial assistance and Carol Harvey transcribed this interview.