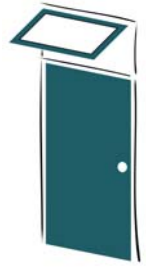


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Parachute Radio *“My Singapore Sling”*



By Christopher Lydon

Singapore is the meeting place of many races. The Malays, though natives of the soil, dwell uneasily in towns, and are few; and it is the Chinese, supple, alert and industrious, who throng the streets; the dark-skinned Tamils walk on their silent, naked feet, as though they were but brief sojourners in a strange land, but the Bengalis, sleek and prosperous, are easy in their surroundings, and self-assured; the sly and obsequious Japanese seem busy with pressing and secret affairs; and the English in their topees and white ducks, speeding past in motor-cars or at leisure in their rickshaws, wear a nonchalant and careless air. The rulers of these teeming peoples take their authority with a smiling unconcern.

Singapore in the 1920s, observed in W. Somerset Maugham’s story “P. & O.”

*Singapore stop yelling and calling me names.
How dare you call me a chauvinist, an opposition party, a liar,
a traitor, a mendicant professor, a Marxist homosexual communist pornography
banned literature chewing gum liberty smuggler?
How can you say I do not believe in the Free Press autopsies flogging mudslinging
bankruptcy which are the five pillars of Justice?
And how can you call yourself a country, you terrible hallucination
of highways and cranes and condominiums ten minutes’ drive from the MRT?*

**From “Singapore You Are Not My Country,”
by the Malay-Singaporean medical student and acclaimed poet Alfian Sa’at**

A talk show in Singapore is a bit of a contradiction in terms—a clash of cultures, as I was accurately forewarned. Yet two weeks of “Wide World” conversations into the Singapore night became in fact a total engagement, inside a whole next of paradoxes. Whiffs of totalitarianism blew lightly past the sweet blossoming of expressive democracy. Often I felt I had stumbled into a family fight, or at other moments into a philosophy workshop. I suppose I had expected to be playing with Singaporeans’ heads, but they were also playing with mine, from the first hello at my host station, the state-controlled Mediacorp’s NewsRadio 938.

“Do you understand about the OB markers?” inquired the program director.

“The OB what?” I asked. I was thinking: Obi-wan Kenobi?

“The out-of-bounds markers,” she said, meaning the things we don’t talk about.

“And just where are they,” I asked. She said she couldn’t say, because nobody knew precisely. But we’d all find out afterward if I hit one, or shot beyond them. “You’ll be gone, but we will have to live with the consequences.” The short form was: “You can’t have the opposition on the air, and you can’t talk politics.” The rest was for me to discover.

Singapore may be the richest, mightiest little city state since Imperial Rome, or more precisely since 15th Century Venice. An island about two-and-a-half times the size of Martha’s Vineyard,

Singapore at the tip of Malaya was a strategic port of Imperial Britain for nearly 150 years. Since 1965 when it was cast out of Malaysia into independent statehood, it has been a miracle of post-colonial discipline and development, the “air-conditioned nation” in equatorial Southeast Asia, also liberally mocked as a perfumed cage, “Chinese Disneyland, with the death penalty.” Ian Buruma pegs Singapore as “a theme-park version of Chinese authoritarianism” in a scathing attack I was surprised to find on sale in every one of Singapore’s superb bookstores.

A shopper’s dream and a paradise for connoisseurs of Malay, Chinese, Indian and European cooking, Singapore is fabulous and unfree. Not talk-show territory at all, I was often reminded. “We find it easier to interview people overseas,” said the NewsRadio 938 program director, Gerardine Tan. “You go through so much red tape before anybody here talks.”

Routinely now in my travels I ask people: if a Martian landed and said: “take me to your interesting talkers,” who would you give him? At NewsRadio 938 a young on-air host blinked back what looked like rage: “I’d send the Martian on, up north somewhere,” she said.

At the National University of Singapore, one of the faculty stars turned down my talk-show invitation flat. “I might inadvertently say something that might be offensive,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to rock the boat.”

An eminent architect said he couldn’t talk because “I’m approaching media burnout.” What he meant was that he’d had a letter in the newspaper recently. “They’d start asking what I’m up to,” he demurred.

These were the typical Singaporean first responses to the very idea of a wide-ranging live and uncensored radio conversation. But they weren’t the end of the story.

Singapore was the third drop for Parachute Radio, as we call it—two weeks of our “Wide World” local-global call-in talk show, for radio broadcast and Internet transmission into cyberspace.

Overdeveloped Singapore book-ended developing Jamaica around underdeveloped Ghana. Each of our sites was 40 years, give or take, out of British colonialism, all English speaking. Jamaica is one of the most deeply indebted nations in the world. Ghana is officially HIPC—a highly indebted poor country, on the World Bank sick list, poorer today than when Kwame Nkrumah celebrated independence in 1957. Singapore is debt free, with per capita income approaching \$30,000 a year and more BMWs and more Armani outlets than you’ll find in New York.

Jamaica and Singapore at the poles made a neat pair: island nations, still curiously, at least superficially British. One bursts with music, one bursts with money. Each covertly admires and maybe envies the other. Singaporeans worry that with all that stifling order they’re facing a creativity crisis. Jamaicans with all that macho vitality worry that the Kingston murder rate has dimensions of a civil war.

Singaporeans are “educated, myopic, practical,” a business whiz told me. Everybody in Singapore proffers a business card. Everybody is wired to the Web. Nobody’s poor, and nobody voices contentment. The talk of Singapore, as it turned out, was a shock. Had I stumbled into Singapore at a moment of spiritual earthquake? Or is Singapore’s identity crisis a chronic condition?

In essence you’re seeing the transformation of Sparta into Athens. I think of myself as part of a lucky transitional generation. I was born in ’61, the third-world Singapore. I remember the day—I was about 8 years old--I came home from school and for the first time we were linked to the national electricity grid. My mom had switched on the lights, the fans, the iron, just to show me what electricity felt like at 2 o’clock in the afternoon... We have done what took Europe 180 years... In one generation we had transformed our society economically, physically, beyond recognition...

Jeyathurai A., Historian, The Changi Museum

Talking about the complexities of Singapore in America, you hit a wall... I was a young boy, when Singapore became independent in 1965. Our per capita income was the same as Ghana’s. Today it’s probably higher than our former colonial master, United Kingdom. To the best of my knowledge, this kind of historical feat has not been accomplished by any other society in the history of man, and that’s what makes the Singapore experience so unique. If you wanted to find a place in the world where the best practices of the West work with the best practices of the East, Singapore is a good laboratory.

**Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore’s ambassador to the United Nations
and author of “Can Asians Think?”**

The problem is: we’ve been for too long stuck in a box. For too long we’ve not been able to develop a degree of mental exploration. We’ve been very formulaic in our approach to success, both as individuals and as a nation; and I think we’ve got to break out of all this, and think wildly...

**Dr. Tan Chi Chiu, who runs the official diaspora network
through the Singapore International Foundation**

“Remaking Singapore” is what this near-perfect town kept wanting to talk about. A very strange and marvelous preoccupation, it struck me as brave, intelligent, obsessive, inspiring, perhaps neurotic. Every corner of the planet is entering a new technological era, a new global culture, a new millennium. But Canada is not “Remaking Canada.” Parisians are not “Remaking Paris.” Nobody is “Remaking Chad.” Singapore, in sight of a resurgent China, which can obliterate its low-cost high-tech economy, has taken the cue to think hard about reinvention. On air it came clear that I had stumbled into an agonizing economic reappraisal but also into what felt like a very anxious family fight between over-achieving adolescents and over-controlling parents. Together they were jump-starting a semblance of cultural democracy. Is there space in

Singapore for freedom? Grant the government a row of Olympic 10s for nigh-on perfect public services in transportation, housing, education, harmonious racial integration, harbor management, clean-and-green environmental planning... The list goes on, and also the questions. Is Singapore stuck unto eternity with one-party rule, media censorship, and arbitrary detentions under a 50-year-old Internal Security Act? Can Singapore grow a civil society, a “people sector” outside the government? Does Singapore have a “creativity crisis” in entrepreneurship and the high arts? Does Singapore have a future? In an information age, doesn’t Singapore require other than engineers, techies, toadies and drones? From callers and guests these were the themes in our “Wide World” on Singapore radio. Jack Neo was the man with persuasive answers.

A lot of people say Singapore is such a boring place. But among ourselves we crack a lot of funny, funny things. We all know, but we just don't say openly. So I say: why not? Everybody is enjoying this kind of jokes. Why can't we say openly? So I try. And, uh, I think people like it....

I am a Singaporean. I was born 1960. I know exactly what is happening in Singapore. I saw our country from a village kampong area, until now, when we have become a big city. I've witnessed a lot of changes, from Chinese side. I love this country. I love my neighbor. But I know this people got some problem. As you know, Singaporeans sometimes are very shy. They don't complain. When you say that you want to tell the authority, they say: no, no, no, no, it's okay, it's all right. But who is going to help them solve the problem? I think as a Singaporean, it is my duty to tell the authorities the kind of problem we face. Like the educational system here.

Jack Neo, writer-actor-director of “Money No Enough” and “I Not Stupid”

Selena's mother talking to the daughter is like the government talking to the people. All these lines are familiar—from my own parents. Most parents talk like that: “It's for your own good! I'm doing all this for you! I want you to grow! I know you want freedom—slowly, step by step.” This is all familiar, not from the papers or from the authority. From our own parents this is what we hear, and now I'm telling my own children the same thing, you know?

Film maker Jack Neo, on his satirical hit movie, “I Not Stupid”

When I first saw “Money No Enough,” and I saw it three times, it was a big moment for me because I realized: wait a minute: this is not TV. In movies, you can get away with something. And Jack did. He showed the real Singapore for once, instead of this odd parallel universe where everybody speaks perfectly and everybody's good at heart. I think we all owe a big debt to Jack.

Colin Goh, satirist and film-maker, director of “Talking Cock, the Movie”

The hottest ticket in Singapore, laughing at the center of all the ferment, is a onetime slapstick and drag comedian famous for his Chinese version of Aunt Blabby, a disarmingly generous and

available superstar named Jack Neo. He's the critic that the government decided not to silence, perhaps because his popular following on Chinese television made him untouchable, perhaps because he's funny, perhaps because he's right. "I Not Stupid" is his movie about three good schoolboys on the B3 dummy track. The film is funny and free and touching about everything that's miserable in the pressure-cooker of Singapore schools. In the pivotal scene, the shrieking mother of one of the kids, wearing the trademark white of Singapore's ruling People's Action Party, berates her teenage daughter: "We work so hard to give you everything: food, toys, clothes, money... What more do you want?"

"Freedom!" the girl pipes up.

For the moment at least, Jack Neo and "I Not Stupid" have turned movies into the place where Singaporeans do the impossible, which is: talk back to their nanny state and make fun of themselves. Callers to "Wide World" stood by all night to thank Jack Neo for what he's done, and will do again. "I also want to congratulate the Singapore government for its good sense of humor," said "Harvey," a caller. "In my early days I would not have dreamt of such things going across, you see?"

Jack Neo has driven "I Not Stupid" into the movie markets of Malaysia, Hong Kong and Taiwan, but he has still larger ambitions. "I don't like slapstick anymore," he said. "Most people say you're just a clown. People say: Seeow! Crazy people! You have no status at all. I am quite sick of this. So I want to change. In all my movie I want you to laugh, and after you are laughing I want you to think of the message behind the jokes."

He will get away with it because he is transparently an orthodox Singaporean patriot. When I observed on the air about "I Not Stupid" that "there's too much school in the life of these boys," Jack Neo hesitated.

"Yes and no," he said. "We know if we don't train our people right way, we cannot catch up."

"What do you mean, catch up?" I said. "You're already way ahead."

"No, no," Jack jumped back in. We are going to compete with a lot of people, like China. "They have full of talents over there. Singapore is such a small country. If we don't have talents, that means we are gone. We got nothing. We don't have natural resources. We got nothing, you know. So education is the biggest problem we are facing."

We have to totally rethink the strategy to take vis-à-vis China and our opportunities in the world. For the last 20 years not only Singapore but the rest of Southeast Asia had as a basis of their economic development strategy the idea of being the lowest-cost, highest-efficiency, export-oriented production platform for multinationals around the world. So whether it was in garments manufacturing, assembly of television plants, or even in higher-end electronics like disc drives, the model did not change. We were the lowest-cost mass volume producer for the rest of the world.

China now has devastated that model, because China is going to be the lowest-cost highest-efficiency producer not only of low-technology products but even middle to high-technology products. So that model is not going to be applicable for us. And those of our companies in Asia who haven't seen that are going to have a very tough time. At Banyan Tree [a worldwide necklace of luxury resort hotels] we decided from the beginning we would have to establish our brand. That is the source of our competitive advantage. We have a brand that's built on emotional values that resonate with our guests, and which people can't take away simply because they're going to be cheaper.

Ho Kwon Ping, chief executive of the Banyan Tree hotel chain

The world has changed. Formerly the factors of production are land, labor and capital. But this time we have got knowledge as one of the factors of production. And this is where the Remaking of Singapore comes in.

Chiam See Tong, opposition Member of Parliament



Christopher Lydon and Bharati Jagdish, a producer with Radio Singapore International

The zealous chatter about Remaking Singapore can't be taken quite straight, if only because it is by now a habitual exercise, sequel to a "Next Lap" inquiry a decade ago, then "Renaissance City" and "Singapore 21" committees. The spur behind Remaking Singapore is said to be the threat from China. Four million clever, hardworking, high-tech Singaporeans foresee 1400 million clever, hardworking, high-tech Chinese coming on-line in world trade—a prospect that

concentrates the mind! One argument in Singapore is that the little city-state must leap free, from robotic efficiency to defiantly outside-the-box creativity, requiring a full new rulebook for the information age. But that dream of self-liberation never gets clear of Singaporeans' dependence on their micro-managing state. Remaking Singapore is a project dominated not by civil society or a free press but by the government, as if an entrenched power network could free itself from itself.

In material terms we have left behind our Third World problems of poverty. However, it will take another generation before our arts, culture and social standards can match the First World infrastructure we have installed.

**Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew,
in *From Third World to First, The Singapore Story*.**

I suspect even if we do find this Singaporean voice we wouldn't want to recognize it unless someone from the US or the West would give us a prize for it...

Now, everything in Singapore is about fabrication. It's an air-conditioned nation. It's comfortable, it's safe. Everything that we need could be easily imported. So why struggle with a local culture? Why struggle with a local voice? Why struggle with anything that's indigenous because you can always import a ready product from abroad. The whole idea of Singapore being a port has run insidiously into the psyche of the Singaporean. We don't value what we have. We are a throwaway culture. In a sense we're spoiled. We have everything in the world we could possibly have but nothing that we can claim really truly belongs to us. That so far has been the struggle and the metaphor. Kuo Pao Kun described it clearly and eloquently in a play he wrote a few years back, called: "Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral." We are all emasculated in that sense.

Chong Tse Chien, playwright

I resigned as a teacher in the premier school in Singapore, the Raffles Institution, because they made literature optional.. It's easier to score distinctions in subjects like mathematics and science. And if the overall grade is low for literature, it will bring down the ranking of the school.. It's a very pragmatic society here. So if it doesn't translate to good marks or a good ranking for the school, it's a liability.

Alvin Tan, artistic director, *The Necessary Stage*

We are still grappling in the 36th year of our independence with the whole question of our identity. Ever so often we have Singaporeans asking each other: what is Singaporean-ness? What do you mean by Singaporean identity? And the very fact that we ask this means it's probably non-existent.. Literature is a part of it. I've said elsewhere that for something to develop the vibrancy of Caribbean culture and music and so on, you need something spontaneous, it's got to come out of the soil. We are so used to a setting that derives its character from some external imposition. We can never have culture by dictat. But I suspect that this is probably what is happening in Singapore. We get a whole lot of impositions to say: this is the direction that

literature should take. We don't have that sort of spontaneous soil which gives rise to culture which is organic. It must have natural life of its own. And just cannot be manufactured.

**Novelist Catherine Lim, author most recently of
“Following the Wrong God Home”**

Part of what is missing in our casual impression of Singapore from afar is that the law-and-order caning capital of the world is also the most successful socialist state on earth. No city government in America, including the People's Republic of Cambridge, Massachusetts, is left enough to police racial integration as relentlessly as Singapore does, for example, or to charge automobile drivers by electronic monitoring of every mile they drive on asphalt. Public housing is the achievement that towers above all in Singapore: roughly a million units on the world's most densely settled island nation. Almost everyone in Singapore has lived at some point in an “HDB flat,” and they're still being built, more stylish and secure than ever, by the Housing Development Board. The fresh-painted housing blocks are spruce, safe, sociable, mostly tenant-owned and, on a 5-to-1 ratio among our callers, beloved. “I'm living in a condominium now,” said a caller, Mr. Sim, “and longing to stay in an HDB flat again.”

“Have a nice day, Mr. Chris,” said a caller, Mr. Wee. HDB is a wonderful place to stay. A heaven in Singapore.”

The magic of Singapore is that when you come to Singapore you see the whole of Singapore as one piece of artwork. In fact some time ago a university student asked Norman Foster what is the most important building in Singapore. He said: why do you need important buildings or monuments. He said: when I get off at the airport, the drive from the airport downtown is your monument.

**Architect Liu Tai Ker, former chief planner,
now chairman Singapore Arts Council**

Tell that to the pawns of the Upgrading Empire who penetrate their phalluses into heartlands to plant Lego cineplexes Tupperware playgrounds suicidal balconies carnal parks of cardboard and condoms and before we know it we are a colony once again.

From “Singapore You Are Not My Country,” by the poet Alfian Sa'at

Public design is one of the great arguments Singapore has not had with itself, a subject still too delicate and too political for open airing.

The depth of Liu Tai Ker's history as a planner, housing official, juror, maker and breaker of projects and careers and all-around arbiter of the design scene in Singapore makes him, in effect, the Lee Kuan Yew of architecture, with the full mixture of respect and fear that is implied.

Three of the most daunting intellects I spoke with in Singapore were well-established local architects who would not think of engaging with Mr. Liu on the radio. Had they been paired with him, the only question was who would have bolted from the studio first.

The lost conversation on architecture was my biggest regret, because the opportunity was so great. Singapore shows forth, as Rem Koolhaas as said, “the ecology of the contemporary.” Oddly enough, the iconic Singapore building is still Raffles Hotel, from 1887. But Singapore’s shining new towers are the hard evidence of the post-colonial miracle. Its built environment in general is a casebook of architectural modernism, with significant entries from international stars like I. M. Pei, Richard Meier, John Portman, Paul Rudolph and a score more. And lurking in the spectacle are uncomfortable questions that I felt churlish about pressing: Why did so much of new Singapore have to look so untropical, so unAsian, almost laughably slick, rich and anonymous, like Gucci loafers and Rolex watches of architecture? Can Singapore be comfortable with its endless enclosed seven-story grande luxe shopping malls as its modern signature?

I did my best, and the courtly Liu Tai Ker did his. But the most memorable lines on the subject were all off-the-record. “Kitsch is very big in Asia,” said a dissenting architect in a private chat. “The architecture of Disneyland. It works as a narcotic—it dulls the senses in a pleasurable way. It’s an anesthetic, in that it prevents you from knowing what is going on, and so it has political value.”

He said: “People mix up the words modernity, modernization and modernism. They’re three different things. We have had modernization, but not modernity. Being modern is about autonomy. We don’t have it.”

And this was the killer line as he drove me around the shining streets of Singapore. “We know now from a lot of history that the human spirit is invincible in the face of adversity. But I’ve decided that the human spirit is defenseless in the grip of wealth.”

Everything this man said was compelling, but none of it was for air. “This is the most advanced totalitarian state in the world,” he said. “I see it as a cartoon of a man in a cage with the key around his neck. But he will not use it.

“The project in Asia is dismantling the authoritarian state!

“Your program was an earth-shattering event,” he said. “A live radio program they could not censor. They do not allow this sort of thing! And yet nobody wanted to call in and challenge Liu Tai Ker. It did not get out of hand. So maybe they won.”

The Singaporean journalist Cherian George joined our last program by phone from California, where he is pursuing a graduate degree at Stanford in communications. He said provocatively that I must have been vetted, all my past work reviewed by authorities in Singapore, to assure them that I was “generally respectful.” My own line about “parachute radio,” he said, betrayed disadvantages. “Precisely because you do not come with detailed experience of the country, there’s bound to be a certain—to be blunt—a certain lack of depth and cutting edge to your questions.” Grant also that my guests, even the oppositionists and dissenters among them, were

all known entities in Singapore. Yet our “Wide World” experiment did not feel like a charade to me, or an entirely fixed game. Caller after caller said, as “Vivian” did, “I wish you would come back and give us more sessions like what we’re doing now.”

A fan call to NewsRadio 938 vouched that the program had been “riveting... even though it might be a bit high-brow. I would liken it to eating dark chocolates after drinking clear soup,” she said, asking for repeats.



Ghana had been compelling because it has such heavy stuff to talk about. Singapore, in the end, was compelling because it is just now teaching itself to speak up.

Singapore has lived most of its modern life in the shadow of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor. In the fable at the core of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Jesus Christ reappears in Seville to be tried, convicted and executed by the Spanish Inquisition. The charge against him is that he left too much room for human freedom. By refusing the devil’s invitation to fly, or to turn stones into bread, Jesus had criminally neglected the opportunity to bind men’s hearts and minds. He was rejecting, of course, the three powers that Dostoevsky detested as the enemies of moral freedom: miracle, mystery and authority. By the lights of the Inquisition, Jesus must be put to death once more. The Inquisitor’s boast for himself and the Spanish church was that they had “finally overcome freedom, and have done so in order to make people happy.” As he told the defendant: “these people are more certain than ever that they are completely free, and at the same time they themselves have brought us their freedom and obediently laid it at our feet.”

The miracle of Singapore’s growth, the mystery of Lee Kuan Yew’s genius, and the authority of his state are all firmly in place in Singapore. But so now are the claimants to a much freer, more expressive future.

Of many marvelous Singaporeans who befriended “Wide World,” I admired particularly a brilliant young novelist (who’s also a lawyer) Philip Jeyaretnam. His father J. B. Jeyaretnam is a former Member of Parliament, driven out of politics into bankruptcy and exile for principled disagreements with Lee Kuan Yew. Philip Jeyaretnam’s masterpiece, *Abraham’s Choice*, is a parable of his father’s downfall. The story is told as the memoir of a teacher who’s been fired and broken by the hardball politics of Singapore—for speaking out, for defending a teacher in the teachers’ union, for writing a letter to the newspaper during the early days of Singapore’s independence. The offending letter to the editor began: “Dear Sir: If the maxim of imperial control is to divide and rule, that of self-government must be: unify and consult.” The novel becomes a lament for democracy, an observation of a dictatorship under construction. I hadn’t known that such a book could be written, much less published in Singapore. But there *Abraham’s Choice* stands, in the bookstores and on the O-level reading list for Singaporean high-school students.

So I happily give the last cheerful word about Singapore to Philip Jeyaretnam, as spoken in conversation on Wide World:

The underlying philosophy, or psyche, has been one of survival. A sense that somehow there is no margin for error—that no matter how much concrete you pour on this island, it still might go back to jungle if things go wrong.. I suppose we have to ask ourselves: do we have the fundamental underpinnings as a nation so that we can start agreeing to disagree? My guess is we do.

Novelist Philip Jeyaretnam

About Transom

What We're Trying To Do

Here's the short form: Transom.org is an experiment in channeling new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and for discussing that work, and encouraging more. We've designed Transom.org as a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to create a worthy Internet site and make public radio better.



Submissions can be stories, essays, home recordings, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere -- by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We contract with Special Guests to come write about work here. We like this idea, because it 1) keeps the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) lets us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) fosters a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing.

Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over. Occasionally, we award a Transom.org t-shirt to especially helpful users, and/or invite them to become Special Guests.

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Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM is also the founding group for *WCAI & WNAN*, a new public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket under the management of *WGBH-Boston*.

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