

It's the Media's 'Mean-Too' Moment. Stop Yelling and Go to Human Resources.

In public radio, there is either an epidemic of bullying or an epidemic of whining, depending on whom you ask.

By Ben Smith

May 23, 2021

For 20 years, the WNYC radio show “On The Media” has been the sort of place where the hosts’ on-air repartee makes it a fun listen, while their off-air screaming matches send producers diving for cover.

But times are changing.

During a meeting last June, a producer suggested that the show, which was hosted by Brooke Gladstone and Bob Garfield, do a segment on whether the media’s coverage of climate change had overlooked minorities. After an extended back and forth, Mr. Garfield got sick of his staff pushing back, dismissed the story with a barnyard epithet, and eventually yelled that he was “tired of being accused of not being woke enough,” two people in the meeting recalled.

Someone complained to human resources about that incident and two others during which Mr. Garfield screamed at producers. Mr. Garfield was told by management that if it happened again, he could be fired.

Then this spring, Mr. Garfield suffered a shoulder injury. During a virtual meeting with his colleagues, he said he needed surgery sooner than planned. He said he then faced 15 minutes of what he viewed as “bullying” from Ms. Gladstone and their executive producer, and which they viewed as him bullying them, according to a spokeswoman.

Eventually, Ms. Gladstone accused Mr. Garfield of “bathing in self-pity,” he recalled. He swore at her and slammed his computer shut, he said, calling the incident “an appalling abuse of an employee’s health prerogatives.” WNYC fired him for violating its anti-bullying policy, and he is starting a newsletter on Substack on Monday.

When I started trying to figure out what was going on inside America’s biggest and angstiest public radio station for this week’s column, I thought it would be a straightforward story about changing newsroom norms, where nobody — not even on-air talent — is allowed to yell. This is media’s “mean-too” moment, as one skeptical tabloid hack put it to me, embodied by the exposés of the producer Scott Rudin.

That is, in fact, part of the story. WNYC’s human resources department seems to have its hands full with complaints and counter-complaints of bullying, including those against two prominent women who joined WNYC from sharp-elbowed commercial newsrooms. On Sunday, the company’s labor union filed a formal complaint against the station’s editor in chief, Audrey Cooper, with the National Labor Relations Board, for reportedly waging a “coordinated and aggressive campaign” against her internal critics. Meanwhile, H.R. is conducting an investigation of one of WNYC’s biggest stars, “The Takeaway” host Tanzina Vega, over complaints from her producers.



Audrey Cooper, who is now WNYC's editor in chief, in 2016. The company's labor union filed a complaint against her on Sunday with the National Labor Relations Board. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Depending on whom you ask, WNYC is experiencing either an epidemic of bullying or an epidemic of whining.

WNYC has been turned inward at least since December 2017, when the #MeToo movement flushed out accusations of inappropriate conduct against three prominent male hosts, which led to the exit of top leaders at the station who were criticized for mishandling the accusations. When the new chief executive, Goli Sheikholeslami, arrived in 2019, she said, she did a listening tour and all anyone wanted to talk about was the internal culture.

“When you're a mission-based organization, the people that choose to work here are incredibly passionate and committed to the work that we do,” she said in an interview on Friday.

Even by the standards of our fraught media moment, public radio — and the parts of the podcast industry that emerged from it — has been beset by seemingly constant clashes that can be difficult for outsiders to make sense of.

The reasons are partly structural. Audio production makes literal many of the inequalities that journalists complain about: Increasingly diverse teams of young producers labor anonymously in soundproof rooms to make a single host, traditionally a white guy, though that is changing, look good. (It's sort of like TV, but with less camera-ready people and without a fat salary to make up for the indignities.) And radio stations filled with idealists who view themselves as working for the public good are often led by people whose greatest skill is raising millions of dollars from affluent donors.

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At WNYC, they refer to the period that began in 2017 as The Troubles. The place came apart again last summer after Ms. Sheikholeslami asked staff members what they wanted in a leader, and they asked for a person of color with roots in New York and a connection to public media. Instead, she and the station's chief content officer, Andrew Golis, hired Ms. Cooper, the white editor of The San Francisco Chronicle. Ms. Cooper was welcomed to New York with the headline "WNYC Employees Demanded Diversity. They Got Another White Boss."

Ms. Sheikholeslami became chief executive of WNYC in 2019.
Chicago Public Media

After that Bronx cheer, Ms. Cooper sought to reassure the staff that she would make diversity a priority. She boasted at a large, early meeting of her record of firing white men at The Chronicle, three people who Zoomed into the virtual gathering said. That wasn't quite what the staff had wanted, either, though, and they were "horrified" at the remark, a cultural critic at the time, Rebecca Carroll, said this week.

Perhaps even worse, Ms. Cooper remarked early on that she'd never heard of Brian Lehrer, the beloved WNYC morning host whose gently probing, public-spirited interviews embody the station's appeal, and that she didn't "get" why he was popular. She has since come to the view that "Brian is the soul of the station and, in many ways, the city itself," a WNYC spokeswoman, Jennifer Houlihan Roussel, said in an email.

In fact, Ms. Cooper's mission was to jump-start the station's lagging digital transformation, something she had done with unusual success in San Francisco and that requires a willingness to make enemies. She has ambitious plans to hire 15 to 20 more reporters — but first she had the near-impossible assignment of bringing together a group of traditional radio journalists, used to working for days and occasionally weeks on colorful local features, with the reporters at Gothamist, the scrappy local blog that WNYC bailed out in 2018. Ms. Cooper sought to professionalize Gothamist away from its bloggy and irreverent roots, telling reporters to be less openly hostile to the New York Police Department in their reporting, two reporters said. Ms. Roussel suggested that Ms. Cooper was trying to rein in Gothamist's habit of adding "an element of editorializing to its coverage that can be interpreted as bias."

And Ms. Cooper started pushing the radio journalists to pick up their pace and to file stories for the web. That seemed like a reasonable request, but it led to another stumble in early February, when an 18-year veteran of the radio side, Fred Mogul, filed a story with one paragraph printed in a different font. The editor realized it was Associated Press copy; Ms. Cooper promptly fired Mr. Mogul for plagiarism without a review of whether he'd ever done it before.

Ms. Cooper declined to speak to me about Mr. Mogul's termination. But one thing I learned this week about public radio is that no matter what is happening, someone is always recording it. And that was true when Ms. Cooper called a virtual meeting Feb. 5 over Zoom to inform the full newsroom of her decision to fire Mr. Mogul. According to a copy of the recording provided to me by an attendee, Ms. Cooper told the staffers, "It's totally OK to be sad." But then several stunned radio reporters questioned the move, explaining that they regularly incorporated A.P. copy into stories on air and had imported the practice to WNYC's little-read website, crediting The A.P. at the bottom of the story.

"Go through every single one of our articles and fire all of us, because that is exactly what we have all done," one host, Rebeca Ibarra, told her.

After this article was published online, Mr. Mogul's lawyer, Cynthia Rollings, said in an email that he disputed the accusation that he had misused A.P. copy and said that his draft had included attribution to The A.P. She said Mr. Mogul "has commenced legal action against Audrey Cooper and New York Public Radio for wrongful termination and defamation." (His response to an earlier email seeking comment went to my spam folder.)

On Feb. 10, more than 60 employees — including Mr. Lehrer — signed a letter asking Ms. Cooper to reconsider and calling the firing a "troubling precedent."

Brian Lehrer at the WNYC studios in 2019. His gently probing, public-spirited interviews embody the station's appeal. Brittainy Newman/The New York Times

Things did not calm down after that. In April, WNYC laid off 14 people as it wrestled with a looming multimillion deficit. Among those let go was another internal critic and union shop steward, Christopher Robbins, and Richard Yeh, a radio veteran who had been quoted in The New York Times as criticizing the selection of Ms. Cooper. That prompted the union's formal charge of retaliation against Ms. Cooper. Ms. Sheikholeslami said the layoffs were simply part of a revamping to move WNYC toward a newsroom in which audio and digital are truly integrated.

Ms. Cooper has told the staff she wants to turn WNYC into the city's news source "of record."

And that may be the biggest challenge of all — not just for WNYC but for all local media in a changing country.

Journalists last week, for instance, faced direct challenges to their legitimacy in two of the country's biggest cities, as politicians sense the political weakness that comes with the lack of racial and ethnic representation in newsrooms. Mayor Lori Lightfoot of Chicago provoked a confrontation by offering interviews only to nonwhite reporters. And a leading candidate for New York mayor, Eric Adams, responded to The Times's investigation of alleged cronyism by suggesting that the media's focus on him was racially motivated.

But it's hard to look outward when you're at war with yourself.

WNYC's other big bet is its podcast studio, whose biggest show is Radiolab, and which, after an auspicious start with shows like 2 Dope Queens and Freakonomics Radio, has struggled for a breakout hit.

There, too, stress levels are high and accusations of bullying are flying in all directions. Ms. Vega, who has been recording from a closet while raising a small child alone through the pandemic, got into a dispute with her producer just before "The Takeaway" was to air on April 22. The tape was, of course, running, and the recording was sent to human resources, which is now investigating, according to two WNYC journalists.

After the blowup, Ms. Vega went right on the air for an interview with an expert that hinted, perhaps, at some of what ails media right now. It went online under the headline "Journalists Are Burning Out."