On the Radio
Eclectic Variety and Free-Spirited Announcers—It Must Be College Radio

Mike Saffran

Typically found in college radio is an eclectic variety of music, talk, and sports, often in “block” programming-making college radio appealing to some, but often precluding large audiences.

Brockport State’s WBSU airs music, news, and sports, and also streams programming 24 hours a day on its Web site. General Manager Warren Kozireski, a communication instructor, oversees a staff of 70, most of them broadcasting majors.

Geneseo State’s WGSU has been on the air since 1965, giving it the distinction of being the area’s oldest FM college station. Managed by mostly non-commercial, WGSU airs specialty music shows, and it Web streams news and sports programming.

The most popular programming on RIT’s WITR, which touts “modern music and more,” is play-by-play of men’s hockey games. Randy Bloechl and Ed Trefzger have called Tigers games as volunteers for more than 20 seasons—longer than the announcers for many professional teams. WITR Web streams all programming 24 hours a day.

Is there life (and a job) after college radio? Those who work—usually for free—in college radio and their reasons for doing so are as varied as the stations. Some plan to pursue broadcasting careers, but for others radio is only a hobby.

Managers of college stations must maintain a staff of mostly unpaid volunteers that completely turns over every few years, enforce the few format rules that exist, discourage the use of on-air profanity (even more important since the FCC’s recent crackdown on indecency), and contend with DJs who miss shifts and meetings since their hobby may be a low priority when balanced with full-time studies and paying jobs.

WBSU’s Kozireski, who has been with the station for 15 years, says he tries to determine volunteers’ expectations and make “all the pieces fit into a station that a listener can and will want to listen to.”

For those interested in radio careers—fewer than in the past at some stations—college radio is the first rung in the minor leagues. But with far less radio jobs overall today due to ownership consolidation, and with fewer college students planning radio careers as a result, some small-market stations struggle to fill positions.

Describing the irony, Lloyd Lane, president and general manager of WCJW-AM (1140) in Warsaw, Wyoming County, says, “It’s hard to hire people now because colleges are steering them out of the business because it’s so hard to find jobs.”

Lane cites Rochester as an example. “Now that there are three owners in the market, there are no jobs because they are using what would’ve staffed six stations to run 20 stations,” he says.

As for college radio, Lane suggests it should be no more than a training ground—an unpopular view with some, he admits.

Citing WBSU as an exceptionally well run college station, he adds, “College frequencies [use] frequencies that could be for legitimate commercial use. If a college wants an educational station truly as a training ground, if it can cover the campus that’s enough. College stations don’t need to be more than 100 watts.”

Though he agrees some college stations don’t fulfill their potential, WB SU’s Kozireski, past chair of Collegiate Broadcasters, a national organization of college electronic media outlets, adds: “In our case, the wattage we have allows students to get real experience learning to serve many different communities. The more real the experience we provide in a learning environment, the better prepared our students will be when they enter the job force.”

Such varying views on college radio’s purpose add to the vibrancy found at the “left end of the dial.”

Some college stations, both AM and FM, transmit only to their campuses via carrier-current or closed-circuit feeds. College stations can also be cable or Internet-only stations.

It was once called the “left end of the dial,” but in today’s digital age where people rarely scan the dial by actually turning a radio knob, perhaps it’s better described as the low end of the FM band—the non-commercial portion of the spectrum from 88.1 MHz through 91.9 MHz where most college radio stations are located.

Typically not found there are the repetitive, sound-alike, “safe” formats common to commercial radio. Instead, there’s an eclectic variety of music, talk, and sports, often in “block” programming—literally, time blocks devoted to specialty shows—making college radio appealing to some, but often precluding large audiences.

Some college stations, both AM and FM, transmit only to their campuses via carrier-current or closed-circuit feeds. College stations can also be cable or Internet-only stations. Many, though, are bona fide, FCC-licensed broadcast stations serving larger communities—although typically at lower power than commercial outlets (some FM stations are as weak as 100 watts).

There are 2,471 licensed FM educational stations nationwide. In the Rochester area, they include the University of Rochester’s WRUR-FM (88.5), SUNY Brockport’s WBSU-FM (89.1), SUNY Geneseo’s WGSU-FM (89.3), and Rochester Institute of Technology’s WITR-FM (89.7).

Unique to WRUR is the station’s partnership with public station WXXI-AM (1370). The agreement to simulcast select National Public Radio programming, begun last year, was lauded by managers of both stations for increasing the audiences of each while filling some of WRUR’s otherwise off-air time. Others lamented a possible loss of original programming on WRUR and cautioned the station against ceding control to WXXI. In May, WRUR management implemented a unique policy requiring that all programming be prerecorded.

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