

MCPB General Manager's Report

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June 2015

After a few weeks short of seven years and thirty-six of these GM reports, I am leaving my position at KZYX on July 1, 2015. This is my last GM report.

Programming:

Our newest program is The Cannabis Hour hosted by Jane Futcher. Jane explores all aspects of cannabis: including policy, politics, law, health, society, psychology and environment. The Cannabis Hour airs every other Thursday at 9 AM.

The KZYX Community News now airs every weekday morning at 7:45 and 8:45 as well as its usual place at 6 PM.

In addition, the KZYX news team continues to produce and host Mendocino Currents on Thursday mornings alternating with The Cannabis Hour. It should be noted that the news team does this gratis as volunteers just like any other KZYX programmer. This is not just exemplary team playing. The combination of daily news reports and the long-form Currents show serves as an incubator of the kind of public affairs programming that KZYX is going to need if it is to be more widely identified as the go-to place for deep and independent investigations into local news and issues.

Operations:

Since my last report in April, there is an important and positive development in the quest to solidify the STL signal between the Philo studio and the transmitter on Cold Springs Mountain.

North Coast Internet, which provides wireless service to Anderson Valley and handles our connection to the Mendocino and Willits studios, just installed much more broadband capacity at the Philo studio. This increase in bandwidth means that we can make two very important changes: 1) disconnect our expensive and slow T1 line, which supplies the office internet as well as the web stream and 2) use IP-based broadband as a backup STL up to Cold Springs. If this works, there is less urgency to raise the pole that holds the current radio-based STL antenna so the STL signal gets up above the growing trees. That link in the "radio signal chain" is the most vulnerable part of the system right now. With a solid IP-based backup we can switch over and keep the signal up.

Our big test of the strength of the IP signal was last week when we used it to live broadcast the Sierra Nevada World Music festival. The signal stayed up and steady.

This not only buys time so that any larger moves can be properly planned and funded, but it makes opening a studio in Ukiah a simpler proposition because it can be similar to the other satellite studios. Even that more simple arrangement carries monthly costs and increases the complexity of the overall system, so a careful cost/benefit analysis is necessary.

We are having a second set of older Moseley STLs rebuilt similar to the ones currently in service between Philo and Cold Springs that will become a backup set for the Cold Springs (90.7) to Laughlin (91.5) shot. When we get this all done, then our STLs will be fully redundant for the first time. This is a huge step forward in reliability.

Finances:

Fiscal year 2015 looks like it will end with a net loss. Although we raised as many, or more, funds through donations as last year (we'll know in a few weeks), we did not make up for the lowered CPB funding and the additional funds spent on building up the News Department.

I have always managed MCPB/KZYX with a minimum of risk-taking because that was most prudent under the circumstances. Then, just this fiscal year, superior news talent presented itself to us and I felt it would be crazy not to build up the news department into something better than it has ever been and take the risk that it will be paid for by the community. It was doubly tough that this happened in a year when the CPB rolled our grants back, but I stand by the decision. Now the choice is pretty stark: raise the money or dismantle it.

Note: despite allegations from some quarters that management practices had something to do with it, the CPB reduced our funds because they changed their criteria for qualifying for a minority service bonus. Many stations nationwide experienced the same reduction. Frankly, we had been lucky to get it for all those years considering how few qualifying minorities we serve. Latino populations are not considered minority for us by the CPB.

Two years ago KZYX had its highest revenue year, yielding a surplus that allowed us to retire most of our old debts. That year, fiscal year 2013, was similar to fiscal year 2010, which also yielded a surplus. Both of those years followed money losing years that required large and difficult spending cuts in order to bring the finances into balance. KZYX is again at that crossroad: earn more money very soon or cut something big.

This time though, I recommend that MCPB try everything in its collective power to earn the money instead of cutting the news department, reducing personnel, or eliminating national programming. If that doesn't materialize, then, and only then, opt for the hard decision.

My FY2016 budget is based on that recommendation: find the money to keep going without making large cuts. Cutting personnel means losing a professionally managed station (which also means losing CPB funding). Losing national programming means losing a huge chunk of our regular listeners. Slashing the local news reverses momentum in the direction the station needs to go. Better to raise the funds and go forward.

Membership:

This was our second year of a three-pledge-drive schedule. We received a total of \$200K in pledges, which we would consider an excellent total in a two-drive year. But we increased the number of fundraising days in order to do enough better that we make up for what the CPB stopped giving us, plus the extra funds spent on local news. We didn't get all the way there, so it will be necessary to make up those amounts. We couldn't realistically extend the drives until they hit the respective goals, which is what a lot of stations do, because we just don't have enough staff and volunteers to keep it up at the level of intensity required to make those extra days pay off. So there is a choice looming as to how to make enough to get everything paid for through the summer. I recommend holding a one-day drive later in the summer and position it as what it is: a plea to the listeners to "keep the show on the road."

KZYX has not lost listeners in the past several years, according to ratings, but the membership has not grown and even slipped some. The ratio of KZYX members to listeners is better than the oft-cited 10% members, 90% listeners – it's closer to 16%. But better than average but not good enough.

Everyone reading this or attending a KZYX meeting has an opinion of what KZYX needs to increase membership. It's a healthy dialogue when ideas are expressed civilly and backed up with facts. Gaining and hanging on to listeners is only going to get more challenging as the years go by.

Looking ahead:

In my last report I described several aspects of today's media landscape. I talked about:

- the increasing amounts most people pay for Internet connectivity, and how that impacts one's discretionary spending
- that car radios will soon be versatile data devices similar to smartphones
- more people listen to the music or podcasts they want, when they want them, on the device of their choice, at home, in the car or out and about either with headphones or speakers
- the advantages of a radio dial, with its finite set of choices, is rapidly giving way to the unlimited variety of the internet

This is already happening and it cannot be stopped. I call it “the climate change of media.”

KZYX already has a live stream, a website with programmer blogs, a program archive, the Jukebox with its versatile on-demand convenience, a Facebook page that allows public comments and discussion, and a nice iOS app that will be made public very soon. We’re keeping up, and that keeps us in the game.

But, as has been said so often, even by those who disagree about almost everything else, the quality of the locally produced content is what will be the difference between success and being a “late great.”

One emerging problem is our relationship to national programming. It has always been expensive and in my opinion it has always been worth the money. But up until pretty recently, you had to go to an NPR or a PRI affiliate and listen there if you wanted to hear the content. That is no longer true.

You can go to npr.org and listen to any of the programs either that same day (Morning Edition, All Things Considered, NPR News) or one day later (Fresh Air, TED, Wait Wait) and you don’t have to listen to any local pledge drives, promos or local underwriting. Same with PRI’s The Takeaway. It looks pretty likely to me that it won’t be too many years before NPR doesn’t need its affiliate stations and will instead become our competitors. I sense a sort of brinksmanship coming with them as to who lets go of whom first – NPR or the affiliate stations.

I like NPR, have been a fan for years. And I know there are plenty of people in this area who want KZYX to get rid of NPR. Some have expressed surprise when I suggest that the day may come when we part ways. But my reasons are not because I don’t like it. It’s because it might not make good business sense for us to carry it because already it is just a matter of convenience between getting it from us or getting it directly from them. My job was always looking after what’s best for KZYX. If NPR helps that, then I am for it. Otherwise no. I have written to the NPR management asking them how it makes good business sense for them to offer free to anyone what they make us pay tens of thousands of dollars to carry. They have not yet answered, saying they will get back to me soon.

But because anyone can get NPR and other high quality national programming on demand from the same device you use to get KZYX, the burden on KZYX is to produce content of very high quality. Music programming will have to be superbly curated and presented in a way that makes someone want to listen instead of a gazillion other choices at their fingertips, such as Spotify or the new Apple streaming music service tailored to your tastes like your own personal DJ. There is no room for “just good enough” or amateur hour. In order to be that

good, money not spent on national programming ought to be spent on training and refining those DJs and hosts with the highest potential.

Luckily, KZYX already has some programmers who are at that standard or close to it. And I still say that the KZYX programmer culture needs to develop a stronger sense of peerage that demands excellence (the “excellence bandwagon” as Todd Telfer used to call it). This is standard practice among local theater groups, symphonies, choirs and sports teams. KZYX needs that, and needs it soon.

Still, radio is not going away. It’s too important, especially during emergencies. Indeed, this is a big reason – perhaps the main reason – that the Federal Government continues to subsidize it. Too often the internet and cell networks go down but radio studios and towers, powered by generators remain operating in the worst conditions. When Hurricane Sandy took out the entire grid of the northeast, the radios kept broadcasting.

So we have to do both: provide strong reliable radio service as well as modern, agile Internet-cell-based service tailored to modern listening habits. There is no cheap way to get there.

A bright spot is the increased participation of people under 40 yrs old in programming, volunteering and staffing. They bring much needed energy and ideas to the organization and give me hope for the future of local public media.

I want to address something that bothers me above all else in the noisy letters to the editor and some of the list serves. If one didn’t know better, reading some of those diatribes could give you the impression that KZYX is a contentious and dysfunctional culture with studios rife with bad vibes. That is not even close to true. KZYX is held together by a large group of skilled and committed team players who know how to work well together. There have always been tussles about how the station should manage itself. But if it was anywhere close to the way some like to describe it, the whole thing would have gone off the rails years ago.

In the end, whenever I wanted guidance for how to proceed, I looked to the MCPB mission statement. Long and clumsy in its wording, it still focuses on inclusion, mentioning it four times (“open to all” – “reflects the rich diversity of the county” – “foster increased communication among all groups” – “makes access available to all points of view”).

Charlie Hochberg told me in my first month here that when the station started the founders sought advice on the feasibility of the project. They were told that the only chance was to make it as broadly appealing as possible. That doesn’t mean be all things to all people. It means finding the common threads that bind the community even while focusing on the rich diversity.

I see Mendocino County (and beyond) as a kind of social ecology where all the groups have a place in the whole. KZYX itself should take no position but rather be open to all in a way that makes that all feel truly welcome. I know that many in the business community and other centrist or right-leaning people do not feel that welcome. Until they do, we are not living out the meaning of the mission.

As I end my tenure here at Executive Director and General Manager, my deepest thanks go to so many of you who made it possible for me to persevere as long as I did. I know the work is unfinished. I wish we had more money. I would like to see more people interested in the backend infrastructure and technology so there are more of us able to tend it. I would love the main studio to be in a better facility. But I have to leave these things – and others - for you to complete.

Thank you for a great and memorable seven years.