

Radio *Activity*

Technological advances and creative thinking break sound barriers to bring an arts and news resource to a wider audience



In planning a new Saturday morning news program, Gayane Torosyan (background, left), a producer for the University's Broadcasting Services, confers with (clockwise) film studies senior Benjamin Schmidt, graduate journalism student Mervat Youssef, and journalism senior Will Brown.

When the bombing of Baghdad began in March 2003, radio broadcaster Nancy Hagen was on the air, but not with coverage of the war. She was discussing the finer points of a symphonic movement with the conductor of the Cedar Rapids Symphony.

Hagen, a veteran broadcaster of about 15 years, wasn't shirking her journalistic responsibilities. She works for The University of Iowa's public radio stations—KSUI (91.7FM) and WSUI (910AM)—where, for decades, broadcasters have been covering both news and art for a large community of listeners.

The two signals—AM and FM—make up a two-pronged approach, according to KSUI program director Joan Kjaer Kirkman. During the first days of the Iraqi war, for instance, KSUI kept classical music on the air, interrupting programs only for short updates on the events, while WSUI provided continuous coverage of the conflict.

"Most radio broadcasters have to work to smoosh in a little news here or a little music there," Kjaer Kirkman says. "We have the advantage of running two 24-hour public radio stations."

She and her colleagues also enjoy the advantage of stations that always have kept up with cutting-edge technology. Many decades ago, WSUI helped make history when it provided the signal for the audio portion of an experimental broadcast of television station W9XK, the first educational television station in the nation. In early 1980, WSUI and more than 200 other public stations were linked by the first full-time satellite interconnection for radio in the country.

Three years ago, more than 80 years after broadcasts began in the basement of the Physics Building, the University's public radio stations entered another new age of broadcasting. They moved out of the engineering building—their home since 1922—into Iowa City's old A&P grocery store, where new facilities were designed especially for the stations. The move coincided with efforts to expand the listener base—once limited to eastern

Iowa—worldwide. The stations now deliver programming to anyone who has a computer and wants to receive it, through digital technology called audio streaming. As well, the stations relocated a transmission tower to boost the AM signal. These days, callers in Chicago and in southern Ontario, Canada, respond to talk show topics, as do audio stream listeners who weigh in by e-mail from as far away as Brazil and Finland.

PROGRAMMED FOR SUCCESS

With the technological moves to audio streaming and a more powerful tower, station executives looked at broadening the already popular programming that made WSUI and KSUI two of the most popular public radio stations in eastern Iowa. In collaboration with the School of Journalism and Mass Communication in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, they developed an internship opportunity to give student broadcasters practical experience and to help produce more local news coverage.

“We’re lucky to have an eclectic pool of experts in residence to draw from,” WSUI program director Dennis Reese says. “Our guests include faculty, staff, and students from many areas—political science, medicine, the arts, you name it. Therefore, we can offer an oasis of smart programming. We hope our listeners think of us as *The New York Times* of the eastern Iowa airwaves.”

On the air live from a downtown Iowa City coffee shop on Friday mornings, *Talk of Iowa* showcases experts on almost any subject imaginable—from finance to folklore to flowers—as well as performances by local musicians.

Another new program, *Know the Score LIVE*, broadcasts from the UI Museum of Art’s central court, and plays host to guests as diverse in appeal as Iowa congressman James Leach and musicians from Hancher Auditorium’s performance calendar.

Station executives also have launched a regional news program offered by the Iowa Reading Information Service for the Blind and Print Handicapped. To assist eastern Iowans who are blind, visually impaired, or physically challenged, volunteers go into the WSUI/KSUI studios each morning to read articles from area newspapers. The service provides local news and features on a subcarrier of KSUI. Print-handicapped listeners hear the broadcasts by means of special receivers distributed to them at no charge.

The stations still run the radio shows that have stood listeners in good stead for years. The focus at WSUI remains, as it has for decades, on news and talk. National Public Radio contributes syndicated series, such as *Car Talk*, *Morning Edition with Bob Edwards*, and *All Things Considered*, while Public Radio International provides *The World Today* from the BBC and *As It Happens* from the Canadian

Broadcasting Company. And readers can count on WSUI for Live from *Prairie Lights* broadcasts of writers reading from their work at the downtown Iowa City bookstore.

Music lovers still rely on KSUI as a mainstay of classical music and a wellspring of jazz programming that offers the classics of Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong, Latin sounds, and today’s avant-garde.

Altogether, the programming efforts seem to be paying off. Cash donations from listeners and businesses now make up about 34 percent of the KSUI/WSUI annual budget, up from two percent 10 years ago, according to John Monick, director emeritus of Broadcasting Services. But making money isn’t the primary goal.

“Scientists on this campus are working on the human genome and trying to cure cancer and disease,” Monick says. “We want to make this research known beyond the reach of a scientific journal.”

Senior producer Ben Kieffer, who helped Monick bring ideas like *Talk of Iowa* and the reading service to Iowa’s airwaves, believes the momentum the stations are experiencing comes from programming that makes WSUI/KSUI even more of a resource for the community.

“I feel like a gold prospector,” Kieffer says. “I continually find many rich veins of talent to tap on campus and many opportunities to offer listeners everywhere.”

by Sara Langenberg

Having started at WSUI/KSUI as a student in 1995, Gayane Torosyan became a full-time producer for WSUI in 2000. She helps UI students interested in broadcasting gain hands-on experience at the soundboards of live radio broadcasts.

