

Minnesota FM radio stations plan to offer investigative news reporting, editorials, live concerts, arts criticism—and no sports.

Network swings to sound of cash

By Irv Letofsky
Staff Writer

In the overpopulated spectrum of Minnesota radio, we are used to a few records, some commercials and then a COMPLETE roundup of world, national, regional, state, city and neighborhood news, weather and sports in five minutes. Less, of course, a message from our friendly financial institution down the block.

But now Minnesota Educational Radio, Inc. (MER), has a better idea.

The hitherto virtually unheard network of FM stations—KSJR in Collegeville, KSJN in St. Paul and, as of October, KCCM in Fargo-Moorhead—has plans for the most exciting radio here since WCCO discovered the weather wire.

It envisions a nine-station net that serves up 24 hours of:

- Aggressive investigative news reporting.
- Deep features on whys and wherefores.
- Live symphonies and pop concerts.
- Fresh new drama like the good old drama.
- Incisive political opinionizing.
- Criticism of the arts.
- No sports scores.

Outrageous?

But true.

It all started last week when MER president and primary instigator William Kling brought in more than \$430,000 in good-as-gold commitments, a team of new staffers and a bright new lease on life.

Correct that. Actually it started last May when MER's board of directors called a special session on what to do about its impossible debt—\$80,000 and not getting any less.

The probable decision was to sell the microphones and steal away in the night.

But the directors decided to give it the good fight.

Within a few months Kling and company had neatly interlocked guarantees from Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) and the local Bush and Hill Foundations and the Severson Trusts.

Everyone wanted to come in if the other would, which they did, with the result that the funds are restricted to special uses, such as back debt, hiring a publicity and development director, equipment needs, etc.

For example, the HEW money goes for transmitting equipment. The KSJN signal will increase from 16,000 to 100,000 watts this week or next, doubling the station's radial reach to 40 miles, with possible clear listening up to 85 miles.

There is money to help equip KSJN's new studios in Park Square Court. Through the good offices of Norman B. Mears, the former chairman of Buckbee-Mears Co. and now developer of St. Paul's old-town Lower Town area, MER has a long and low-term lease in the old B. F. Harris Building at 6th St. and Sibley Av., across from Smith Park.

The CPB grant is probably the most exciting. It involves \$117,483 this year, with CPB stating an intention to give KSJN even more money the next two years and less the following two.

This is considered seed money for the station to develop a model operation in news and public events. CPB is giving similar development money to other stations for specializing in music (Cincinnati, Ohio) and drama (Madison, Wis.).

Four reporters joined the network Monday, bolstering the two previous men that made up the "news staff." Another one will be added, plus, possibly, two part-timers.

CPB would give KSJN another investi-



Staff Photo by Earl Seubert

Members of the KSJN staff are (numbers refer to drawing at right): 1, Bob Blank, development/promotion; 2, William Kling, president; 3, Paul Gruchow, producer/reporter; 4, Bob Potter, producer/reporter; 5, Mike Shields, engineer; 6, Arlene Powell, administrative assistant; 7, Connie Goldman, producer/reporter; 8, Marvin Granger, news director; 9, Rick Mitz, producer/reporter; 10, Garrison Keillor, producer/announcer; 11, Jim McDonnell, news editor.

gative reporter next January and yet another in January 1974. By contrast, WCCO has the largest radio news staff in the region—nine.

In addition to these grandiose plans, MER, which had its start exactly five years ago this month as a tiny "fine arts"

station at St. John's University to serve central Minnesota, has bids in for more money to build its network.

From the back three stations today, Kling wants:

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PUBLIC RADIO: Stations planned

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■ A dual station at Southwestern State College in Marshall and at Worthington Junior College, which would share a transmitter at Pipestone.

■ A station in Duluth.

■ A station in Rochester joined by one at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

■ A station in Northfield at St. Olaf College. MER has discussed a merger with WCAL at St. Olaf. If negotiations are completed, the WCAL transmitter might be moved to Rochester and the Northfield studios would send signals to St. Paul via microwave.

These stations are in various stages of application and discussion.

Just how the stations will mesh is an item on a future agenda, although Kling does not expect the same programming for all. But there probably will be no lack of interesting fare.

Besides live Minnesota Orchestra concerts (seven this season), more Met Opera from New York City, full tapings of St. Paul Chamber events, etc., Kling said MER might itself sponsor events — contemporary musicians, Minnesota poets, etc. Maybe a late-night program of jazz, a rare sound on radio around here.

Kling has talked with officials at the Guthrie Theater and Walker Art Center regarding coverage of their events.

Besides original dramas coming out of WHA at the University of Wisconsin, Karl Schmidt, director of the CPB-supported "Earplay" series, hopes to be in one of KSJN's new sound studios next month to record with Twin Cities talent.

Other projects under discussion: A mail-order system sending out cassettes and books that relate to MER programs; expansion of MER's monthly "Preview" listing booklet into a full magazine with relevant articles; a "cadaver" system similar to KTCA-TV's educational project that sends programs of special interest to automatic taping devices in subscribing schools in the late-late night.

These projects would seem harmless enough, but now we come to news and public affairs and the implicit difficulties of investigative projects and reporting in depth, especially in an election year, and more especially in an operation that the public is asked to support through contributions.

News Director Marvin Grainger will meet

Monday with his four new reporters to make plans on coverage. He has three hours a day to fill — 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and 6:30 to 8 p.m. — and changes will "evolve," he said.

His basic concept seems to be "reporting on the American culture — what's going on and people's values and roots and why they feel and why they do what they do."

Specialties may "evolve" among the staff. Editorials — Grainger prefers "comment and analysis" — will evolve, too, "but how and who will be determined."

Will these be critical? "I believe in the right of a reporter to make comments if he has put his being into reporting those events: My only concern is if it is well done."

Grainger voices a constant complaint against radio: "I'm tired of being told what is important in a capsule form."

As a possible protective device, Kling has talked with "a number of people" about setting up a review board for MER's news operation. He suggested that it would look at "objectivity," then rejected the word in favor of "fairness."

Another major part of the project—despite the figures above—is fund raising, possibly auctions, marathons, pledge nights and other forms of inspiring contributions.

Kling, a St. John's economics graduate, and later assistant director of radio activities at CPB in Washington, D.C., has nursed the network since its timid infancy at Collegeville. He suffered through the debt years and could understandably be excused for breaking into conversations about the new windfalls.

He explained at one point that the on-going core operation must be supported by listeners. Regular memberships amount to an annual \$18, or \$9 for students and \$12 for retired persons.

MER counts about 2,500 members but—Kling interjects with appropriate research—national averages indicate it should be 13,000.

He attributes this indifference to "a lack of visibility and promotional activity." Which is why a young development expert named Robert Blank joined the staff Tuesday.

"You know," Kling said at another point, "we're not loaded. People will think we've got all the money we need. All this money will do is give us a second chance."