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Radio overload in Decorah?

Six stations – three commercial and three public – compete in market

By SCOTT LEITH
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DECORAH — The airwaves are getting a little crowded in Decorah.

The latest entry in the radio-saturated market is KVIK, an FM station that began operation about a month ago.

KVIK — a largely automated station that broadcasts Fifties and Sixties music at 104.7 FM — is providing new competition for KDEC AM and FM, the two other commercial stations in town.

"I feel pretty confident this is going to succeed," said KVIK station manager Les Askelson, who used to work for KDEC.

There are also three public stations serving Decorah.

The tightening of Decorah's radio market is typical of the industry as a whole, where improvements in automation have made it easier to open new stations like KVIK.

Observers say KVIK is similar to hundreds of stations around the country that have chosen high-tech automation because it saves money while still sounding like a live broadcast.

"With the new computer technology, we can operate programming and do production from one central facility," said KVIK owner Greg Wennes, who also runs a country station in Spring Grove, Minn. That's where a computer mixes programming for the two stations, saving operating costs for both.

KVIK's programming is mostly Fifties and Sixties music beamed in from a satellite. The music is mixed with local news, weather and commercials, giving the station a local touch. But the technology is so advanced it's hard to tell KVIK isn't doing everything live in Decorah.

KVIK workers don't think listeners mind.

"We are hearing tremendous responses," said Arlene Soltow, KVIK's assistant general manager. She said the people she has talked to haven't been concerned about the lack of local announcers.

"They've just come to accept it," Soltow said. "People realize that's the way of radio."

She said the syndicated programming on KVIK provides listeners with a higher quality show than the station could afford if it had to hire its own deejays.

That's part of the appeal of using the new technology. "You have good sound, professional announcers, and you can still have the localism that people want," said John Schad, president of Smarts Broadcast System in Emmetsburg, a company that sells automation equipment to radio stations around the world.

Schad said equipment to run a station like KVIK costs between $10,000 and $30,000, plus another $500 to $2,000 a month to pay for syndicated programs.

Schad said automation is here to stay. "It's going to continue along those lines because it's getting easier and easier to do it," he said. "The realism is there, and that's what people are wanting. If they're getting their news, sports coverage, weather and music, I don't think people care where the guy's sitting."

The automated stations are especially common in small markets like Decorah because the start-up costs are low. KVIK saves money with automation — four employees handle all operations. Without the technology, Decorah might not be able to support the third station.

"From a profit standpoint, I would have to say that is pretty tight," broadcasting consultant Jay Mitchell of Fairfield said about the Decorah radio market. But since Decorah is fairly isolated, KVIK and KDEC might be able to survive together, he said.

KDEC station manager Paul Scott said he was worried about the new competition when KVIK went on the air in August. "I suppose you always fear the worst," Scott said.

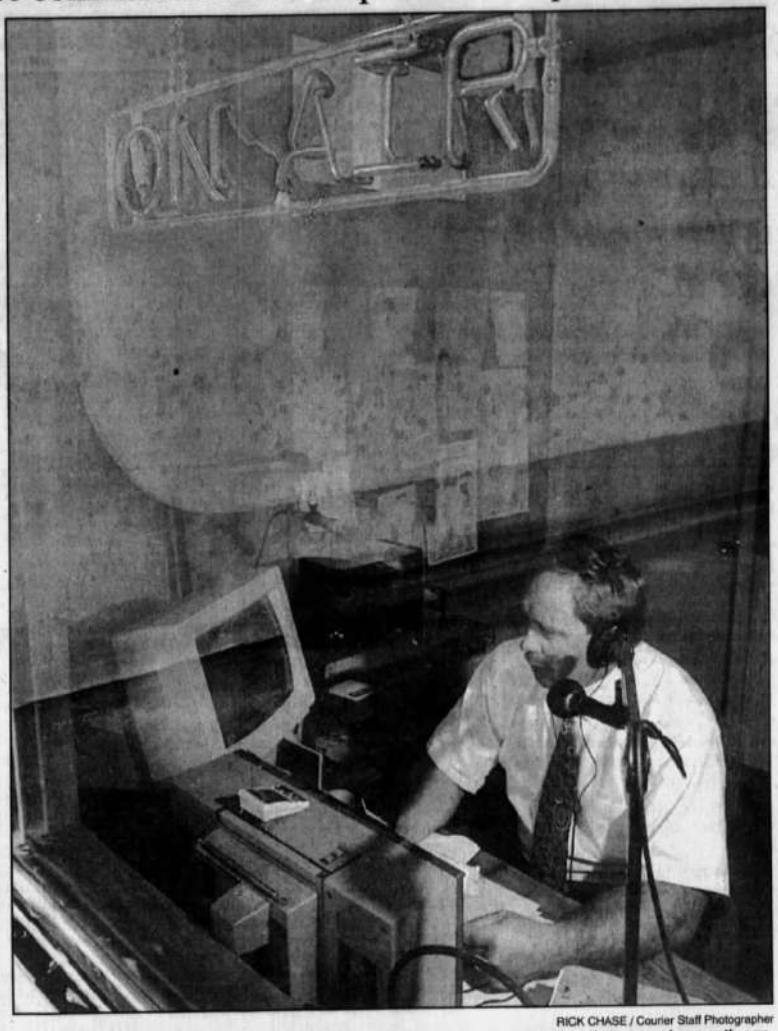
Scott thinks KDEC has more to offer than KVIK. "We're always live," he said. "People can call up and make a request and hear their songs get played."

Scott said he was expecting a drop in advertising revenues due to the competition, but that didn't happen during KVIK's first month on the air.

"We've just been trying to stress who we are and what we do," he said. "We're trying to persuade advertisers to go for the extra value."

Wennes said KVIK is not trying to put KDEC out of business.

"We hope to enhance and not detract from the services already provided by KDEC," he said. "We're not here to take anything away from anybody."



RICK CHASE / Courier Staff Photographer

Les Askelson works in the studios of KVIK-FM in Decorah, a new radio station that opened a month ago. Askelson, the station manager, does the morning announcements for KVIK, the sixth station in Decorah's tight radio market.

Funion coming to UNI Wednesday

CEDAR FALLS — The University of Northern Iowa will mark the beginning of a new academic year Wednesday with Funion '94, featuring entertainment and a student organization fair.

Regency, a five-member a cappel- will be shown in Club '91 at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., with billiards in the Game Room at 12:15 p.m.

Artist Andrew Chorkey will draw caricatures in the Ambassador Room from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and there will be a Mugwump dance in

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