



History of Community Radio

KSER is a Community radio station, licensed to the KSER Foundation and broadcasting at 90.7 on the FM dial, and streaming audio on the web at KSER.org

Like other Public radio stations, KSER is primarily listener-supported, which means it relies on donations from listeners for the majority of its operating budget. But unlike Public radio, KSER operates as a Community broadcaster, which means it uses volunteers to run most of its day-to-day operations. A small staff of paid professionals manages a large team of volunteer DJs, reporters, producers, engineers, and office staff that perform most of the on-air and many of the off-air functions of the station.

Since the beginning of radio in the 1920's, commercial broadcasters have dominated the U.S. airwaves. While radio stations in other countries were often controlled by their governments (like the BBC in Britain), broadcasting in the U.S. was largely the product of corporate sponsorship. Early radio shows—like the “Texaco Star Theater” — were little more than light entertainment, meant to cast favor on their commercial sponsors. This remained the case until after World War II, when the advent of FM radio made non-commercial broadcasting technically and economically feasible. After the war, the Federal Communications Commission decided to reserve the lower-portion of the new FM radio band—from 88.1 to 91.9—for “educational” broadcasters. The commissioners probably intended for this to be used mainly by schools, colleges, and universities, but some visionaries had other ideas.

Lewis Hill and a group of radio professionals, pacifists, and intellectuals on the West Coast pioneered “listener-sponsored” radio to free the medium from its commercial bonds. In 1946 they incorporated themselves as the Pacifica Foundation and began working to make a radio station dedicated to "...a lasting understanding between nations and between the individuals of all nations, races, creeds and colors; to gather and disseminate information on the causes of conflict between any and all of such groups; and through any and all means to promote the study of political and economic problems and of the causes of religious, philosophical and racial antagonisms.” After three years of hard work and fundraising, KPFA signed onto the air in Berkeley, California, on April 15, 1949. It is still broadcasting as the world's oldest listener-sponsored radio station.

During the fifties, FM radio was mostly ignored by broadcasters. A number of college-based stations went on the air, and some commercial broadcasters picked up FM licenses so that they could rebroadcast the signals of their AM stations. Not much happened with community radio until the end of the decade, when the Pacifica Foundation put two more stations on the air, KPFK (Los Angeles) in 1959 and WBAI (New York) in 1960.

Finally, in the sixties, things started picking up. In 1963, the first real community station, KRAB in Seattle, was founded by a committed non-conformist named Lorenzo Milam. While the early Pacifica stations would seem a bit stuffy today, KRAB established a sound and programming formula followed by dozens of community stations since then. Run mostly by volunteers, the station assumed that anyone could learn to do radio, and it

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90.7fm KSER Community Radio: a Brief History and Overview

let almost anyone have a chance behind the microphone. KRAB played almost every kind of music imaginable, and gave airtime to people with extremely diverse points of view. This philosophy still inspires KSER's programming mission.

The seventies also saw a big growth in community radio. Community stations went on the air in almost every state. The counterculture nature of these stations was shown by their often silly call letters: WAIF, WORT, KBOO, WEVL, KGNU, KUSP, KZUM, and so on. Pacifica put new stations on the air in Houston and Washington, D.C., and started its national news service. The decade also saw the beginning of the National Federation of Community Broadcasters, of which KSER is a member. The NFCB was formed to lobby the government on behalf of community radio, exchange information, distribute programming, and generally advance the cause of community radio.

In 1979 the FCC began denying licenses to low powered radio stations. However, this change of policy by the FCC excluded the general population from running a low powered station from a home, even though the equipment is easy to obtain and the airwaves technically belong to the people. In January of 2000, however, this regulation was overturned, and the FCC began licensing Low-Power FM (LP FM) stations to community groups, inaugurating a new era in Community radio.

Community Radio's growth continues. Stations spring up in small communities and rural areas. Money from the Alaska pipeline helped fund community stations in many of that state's small towns and native communities. In the 90's, new stations were established to serve Native American communities in the lower 48 states (such as Sioux Nation's KILI in South Dakota and the Ojibwe Nation's WOJB in Wisconsin) and a network of stations (Radio Bilingua) was created to serve Chicano and Latino communities in the Southwest. Here in the Northwest, KSER is collaborating with other regional Community and LP FM stations to create a Northwest Community Radio Network, dedicated to providing training and resources for community-minded broadcasters of all sizes.

History of KSER

KSER began regular broadcasting on February 9th, 1991 at 1000 watts with the studio and transmitter located in Lynnwood, Washington. KSER came on the air licensed to the non-profit Jack Straw Foundation based in Seattle. The station claimed, at 90.7 FM, the last broadcast frequency available in the Puget Sound region.

The Jack Straw Foundation has a long history with community radio, having started KRAB in Seattle nearly 40 years ago. KRAB, established in 1963 by Public Radio Pioneer Lorenzo Milam (see the Bibliography), was the second non-commercial, community-supported radio station on the air in the United States. It operated in the commercial band at 107.7 FM for nearly 20 years, broadcasting from such diverse 'homes' as an old donut shop and an old firehouse on Capital Hill. KRAB went off the air in the early 1980's and its frequency was sold to a company interested in operating a commercial radio station. Eventually, the money from the sale of KRAB was used to establish and operate both the non-profit Jack Straw Production facility in Seattle, and KSER-FM.

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KSER was operated by the Jack Straw Foundation until 1994. In 1994, the Jack Straw Foundation decided to divest itself of KSER. The Jack Straw Foundation invited a group of listeners to take over the radio station operations. In late 1994, this group created the non-profit KSER Foundation to operate the station. The Foundation accepted the property and assets of KSER from the Jack Straw Foundation. The Federal Communications Commission gave final approval for the transfer of the broadcast license in early 1995.

When the station signed on in 1991 it was understood that its power of 1000 watts was not sufficient to adequately serve the people of Snohomish County. In fact, the location of the transmitter, coupled with the terrain and the low power effectively kept the signal from being heard in Everett, the station's city of license. A translator at the frequency of 90.5 FM was briefly used to serve Everett. In late 1996 efforts began to secure funding for and permission to move the transmitter to a location north east of Everett and to raise the power. In mid-1997 authorization from the Federal Communications Commission was secured to raise KSER's power to 5800 watts and move the transmitter to a site near Lake Stevens on Soper Hill. This change allowed KSER to be heard clearly for the first time in Everett and regions north. On April 19, 1998, KSER began broadcasting from its new location, at its new power and started a new chapter in its history. Funding for the new transmitter and relocation was made possible by a federal Public Telecommunications Facilities Program grant, and generous support of the Seiko Corporation and Motorola Antenna Site Services Company.

KSER is the only independent community radio station in Western Washington and one of only three such stations in the entire state. As an independent radio station, the license and assets are held by the KSER Foundation. As a non-commercial radio station, KSER relies on its listeners and the communities it serves for support. This support comes from memberships, underwriting for the programming, and off-air fund-raising benefits. KSER also receives rent from commercial paging and cell phone companies who rent space on KSER's former broadcast tower.

Operation of KSER is made possible by the dedication and efforts of over 100 volunteers who provide the programming, do the filing and bookkeeping, handle the cleaning, and perform all the other support needed to keep a radio station on the air. KSER's volunteers contribute over 25,000 hours annually to make their communities a better place to live and work.

KSER's programming is unique. Our focus is on serving Everett and the other communities of Snohomish, and North Puget Sound counties. Our news, public affairs programming and public service announcements emphasize the North Puget Sound region. Our use of volunteers to create the programming, results in a radio station that is both fascinating and challenging for a casual listener. KSER's music emphasizes world and traditional sounds that are unique for this area. We are different and adventurous, by design.

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Over 60 years since the founding of the original listener-supported radio station, KSER continues to carry on the tradition, broadcasting a world of music and ideas, including Pacifica's Democracy Now, News from the BBC and the CBC, and KSER's own volunteer-produced news and public affairs programs.

Getting involved at KSER is as simple as showing up. As a volunteer-powered, community radio station, there are a variety of ways you can contribute to the station and learn the art of radio. One important warning, though: community radio, like many small-budget non-profit organizations, laborers under the burden of doing a lot with very little. A lot of things that big companies can do without blinking an eye, like providing an endless stream of copier paper and office supplies, are beyond the resources of community radio. Expect that not everything will be set up to make volunteering simple and easy. Think of community radio as a potluck. Be prepared to roll up your sleeves, work with others to plan the menu and help prepare the meal together—there won't be a Chef or clean-up crew to do everything for you. Like all community endeavors, Community Radio takes patience, engagement, determination and an investment of your energy. When you see a need to be filled, offer your help to fill it. When you see staff struggling to get everything done, find a way to become part of the solution. That's what true community is all about.

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