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Progressive Connecticut Radio Show Marks 25 Years on the Air

It was early 1991 and Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had just sent his tanks across the desert to conquer the oil-rich kingdom of Kuwait.

U.S. President George H.W. Bush was talking ominously about the possible need to use military force to punish Iraq for breaking international law and charges were flying in the media that Iraqi soldiers were committing acts of savagery against Kuwaitis. War fever was rising.

Scott Harris and Denise Manzari, two producers at WPKN in Bridgeport, didn't like what they were hearing. Mainstream media coverage appeared superficial and wasn't delving into all the factors behind the Iraqi attack and whether or not the U.S. wasn't partly to blame for the crisis.

"You had this huge war about to take place and there wasn't a real exploration of the issues," said Harris.

So he and Manzari and others decided to launch a weekly show – Between the Lines – to counterbalance the one-sided narrative put out by government officials. During the weeks prior to the Persian Gulf War and in the weeks that followed they interviewed journalists, anti-war activists, historians and former government officials, to provide a wide range of different perspectives.

"The response was good," Harris said. "People felt it filled a gap."

After the Gulf War was over, Manzari said, both she and Harris agreed to keep the show going, but this time to cover a broad range of issues. The quality of mainstream media reporting was deteriorating and just like with



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Between The Lines Radio Newsmagazine |

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the war, there was a need to have a regular show of news analysis that would give a platform to a range of voices not usually heard in the corporate media.

Harris said they wanted to produce a show that would provide a progressive news alternative to a corporate media obsessed with violent crime, celebrities and “infotainment.”

Some 25 years have now gone by since *Between the Lines* first got its start, and clearly the show has fulfilled its mission. Every week, the half-hour newsmagazine provides a summary of under-reported news, gleaned from alternative press and other sources, and three interview segments on important local, domestic or international issues.

Between The Lines – which will celebrate its 25th anniversary with a fundraiser and keynote address by investigative journalist and Oscar-nominated documentary filmmaker Jeremy Scahill on Saturday, Oct. 8 in New Haven – has provided in-depth analysis on some of the most vital issues facing people in the U.S. and around the world. The topics covered have included: the history and consequences of two U.S. wars with Iraq; reporting on social justice movements and the rebellions against the corporate-driven policies of the WTO and IMF; the challenges to free trade agreements like NAFTA and TPP; the post-911 erosion of civil liberties; the economic blockade of Cuba and grassroots efforts to break it; the deeply flawed for-profit U.S. health-care system; the fight against climate change; growing income inequality and the battle against corporate power.

All of this has been accomplished through the efforts of a small, dedicated staff operating with what Harris calls a “bare-bones budget.” The BTL budget includes only modest sums raised through fund-raising and the occasional small grant. Of course, there’s no advertising.

The *Between The Lines* staff is all volunteer. “Nobody gets paid,” said Harris.

Despite the financial constraints, *Between the Lines* has produced an uninterrupted series of shows that have won journalism prizes and prompted some 60 radio stations around the country to broadcast the program.

Looking back, Harris is proud of a lot of the reporting the team has done, breaking ground on many issues far in advance of when they became hot topics in the mainstream media or in the political world.

One of those areas was civil liberties and the emergence of the surveillance state. “We were covering surveillance issues well before Edward Snowden came along,” said Harris.

Income inequality is another subject the show has been exploring for years, long before the term became a frequent topic in the Bernie Sanders campaign or before that, in the Occupy Wall Street protests.

“We’ve been following that story – the gap between the rich and poor and the concentration of wealth at the top – for probably 15-20 years,” Harris said.

Many people at other stations see the Between the Lines show as a key part of their programming.

“I’ve always seen that show as having a tremendous amount of integrity and a really great show for looking at the deeper meaning of what’s happening here and around the world,” said Ursula Ruedenberg, station manager at KHOI-FM in Ames, Iowa.

Ruedenberg, who is also the Pacifica affiliate network manager for Pacifica Radio Network – which owns five radio stations, and provides programming to an estimated 200 community radio stations nationally – said Between the Lines is highly respected among its peers. “I’ve always seen the show as a major building block in the network,” she said.

Stan Robinson, a producer with the Truth and Justice Radio program at WZBC in Newton, Massachusetts, said Between the Lines has become a “staple we’re committed to.”

BTL, he said, “brings an awareness of real justice issues which I think is absolutely essential.”

Many people, such as Ruedenberg, are amazed at how Harris and his staff have been able to produce the Between the Lines show at such a consistently high level of quality for so many years, with limited financial resources.

Manzari knows why.

“It’s run by passion – of the people and what they believe in,” she said, adding, “and sometimes that’s a bigger motivator than anything monetary.”

Still, Harris hopes the program can raise funds at the upcoming fund-raiser and via future donations to reach a younger audience and expand operations – including developing a mobile-friendly website and "app" to keep up with changing technological times.

“As we take stock of 25 years, those are some of the goals we would like to move toward,” he said.

Between the Lines Radio Newsmagazine, BTLonline.org, will celebrate 25 years on air with a fundraiser and speech by author and investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill on Saturday, Oct. 8 at 2-4 p.m. at the United Church on the Green, 270 Temple St., New Haven, CT. Suggested contribution: \$10 advance, \$15 at the door. For information, call 203-268-8446, email info@squeakywheel.net or visit SqueakyWheel.net.