



## STATION BREAK

By Dan Trigoboff

### Weather wars in Oklahoma

Oklahoma's storm season has also brought an unseasonable chill among Oklahoma TV stations. Following emergency warnings and extensive coverage on KFOR-TV of a tornado that apparently disappeared quickly, KWTW(TV) chief meteorologist Gary England criticized its rival on that evening's news for what he called its "Chicken Little" approach.

Since last May's devastating storms, English said, "people are absolutely spooked. This is like yelling 'fire' in a crowded auditorium. Most tornadoes are small and don't do much damage. People were calling us, asking, 'Why aren't you on the air with this?' We didn't believe it warranted full-time coverage. That's a scare tactic, a ratings ploy." Although English did not specifically name KFOR-TV, the reference was clear. "I've gone on the air like that to criticize another station three times in my career—same television station, same conditions."

Television coverage of last May's tornadoes was credited with helping avoid even greater loss of life. Although English is generally considered the market leader for weather, KFOR scored tremendous ratings during that storm. KFOR said its report was justified by the early damage from the tornado, including some sheared telephone polls. It also said it had an experienced eyewitness nearby

whose reports suggested significant danger. General Manager Tim Morrissey said simply: "We're going to continue to provide the kind of warnings our viewers expect from us."

### You don't bring me flour anymore

Fisher Cos. plans to sell off its troubled flour-milling operations, the oldest part of its business, and concentrate on its communications properties. Fisher formed its flour business around 1910 and entered the radio business in the 1920s. "The return in broadcasting is much beyond that in food commodities," said Vice President Chris Wheeler. "Having milling operations and broadcasting is about as diverse a portfolio as one could have," Wheeler said. "But by selling, we'll do a better job focusing on broadcasting."

Only a week before, the company reported that Fisher Mills' continued losses—more than \$6 million last year—had a significant effect on consolidated earnings. Fisher purchased 11 TV stations from Retlaw Enterprises last year and may still be buying.

### WJLA-TV news director departs

The JL in WJLA-TV Washington, D.C., doesn't stand for Jim LeMay. LeMay stepped down last week after 21 months as news director at the Allbritton-owned No. 8-market ABC affiliate. Station sources said disagreements in

approach and direction prompted the split. LeMay's tenure was eventful, if brief. The station settled a longstanding labor dispute with the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians, launched the successful public affairs show *Capital Sunday*, and, most prominently, brought back former WUSA(TV)'s Maureen Bunyan as solo anchor for the late news. Efforts to grab some of the market's top-rated but entrenched talent—including WRC-TV's lead anchor Jim Vance, whose services were apparently in play during a brief contract lapse earlier this year—were less successful. The station just won two Edward R. Murrow awards from the Radio and Television News Directors Association. The station remained in third place in the ratings but gained in some newscasts and improved demographics.

### Station fined over face-off breach

Grupo Televisa station XETV San Diego was fined \$1,000 last week, and its cameras were thrown out of court for violating a court order and showing the face of a homicide defendant. Trial Judge Christine Goldsmith had ordered the several TV stations and two newspapers covering the January arraignment of accused wife-killer Jody Cole to "tile out" Cole's face. The station, which had launched its newscast just that month, erred, it said, when a producer hit the wrong button

and showed Cole for an estimated 16 seconds. "Mistakes happen," said News Director Albert Pando. "We apologized, but the judge wanted to make a point." Although its cameras will be barred from future Cole trial proceedings, its reporters are not, and the station says it is permitted to hire another camera to shoot for it. "We've had a very successful launch, and we have a state-of-the-art shop," said Pando. "This is just a bump in the road."

### Giles honored

Imagine the tenure of the average news director if you take Lee Giles out of the mix. Giles, who was in Washington last week to accept the 2000 First Amendment Service Award from the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, has been with WISH-TV Indianapolis for 37 years, news director for 33. He attributes his longevity there to "some breaks" and his affection for Indianapolis. Because his station is typically at or near the top, there have been opportunities to move to bigger markets, "but, if you want to do TV news, this is one of the best places in the country. We're a state capitol, centrally located ... we've got every professional sport except Major League Baseball. And people here are very responsive to TV news." He also credits a relatively stable staff. Notable among the departures, though is NBC's Jane Pauley, who has long talked of Giles' mentoring and made the presentation last week.

*All news is local.*

Contact Dan Trigoboff at (301) 260-0923, e-mail [dtrig@erols.com](mailto:dtrig@erols.com), or fax (202) 463-3742.