

Can St. Louis Public Radio fix problems and regain its footing?

The broad outlines of a possible way forward for the troubled newsroom at St. Louis Public Radio are starting to become clear, as interim General Manager Tom Livingston takes stock of the organization and engages staff members in a new effort to tackle diversity concerns.

Livingston, [who took over](#) on Sept. 22, told Gateway Journalism Review he intends to create an internal working group focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. The intent is to form a group with the teeth necessary to address issues raised by more than two dozen staff members in a July 1 letter to former General Manager Tim Eby and Executive Editor Shula Neuman. The letter focused on what the signers called the station's legacy of structural racism.

Under intense pressure, Eby resigned as GM in September, although he continues to work as a consultant until early April. Neuman remains in her role.



(Photo by Jack Grone)

“My job at this point is to listen, and I’ve done a lot of that,” Livingston told GJR during an Oct. 13 phone interview. “In the first meeting I had with the news staff, there were quite a few comments saying ‘we can’t just keep talking about this; we have to do something.’”

Regarding the working group, Livingston said: “We want to invite a broad cross-section of the staff to participate.” He added that he’s working closely with University of Missouri-St. Louis Vice Chancellor Tanisha Stevens, who oversees diversity and inclusion efforts at UMSL, as well as with the university’s human resources office.

“For my purposes, the power of a group like this is in its agency,” said Livingston, who made it clear he expects the station’s staff to have concrete input into matters including the hiring of Eby’s permanent successor. “We need to work together.”

The interim GM conceded that the mood at the station remains tense, with some newsroom staffers still highly skeptical that UMSL is committed to addressing their demands for more diversity and better opportunities for journalists of color.

But if Livingston can convince enough staffers to buy into his efforts, it could mark the beginning of a less contentious phase at STLPR. Since early August, when the accusations of racism [went public](#), several journalists have pointedly criticized the station’s managers for what they say is a lack of concrete action. The staffers also [made it clear](#) they have no confidence in an investigation UMSL launched in early August. That investigation is expected to release a report soon on the station’s track record in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion.

GJR contacted four staff members at the station to ask for their views on the current situation, including three journalists who signed the July 1 letter. None of them responded before press time.

A period of relative stability could also reassure STLPR’s individual donors and corporate sponsors. In 2019 they provided over \$7 million to support the public-service journalism of the station, which boasts

one the biggest newsrooms in the St. Louis area.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic sank the economy, though, STLPR was operating at a loss. In April the station laid off three full-time and two part-time staff members; a few weeks later, UMSL announced pay cuts on a sliding scale of up to 10% to cope with the pandemic.

Livingston told GJR that corporate sponsorships are down by about 30% during the current year, in line with a broader trend across public media. For STLPR, that implies lost revenue of roughly \$600,000.

Individual donations have remained relatively stable, he added.

In the July 1 letter to Eby and Neuman, the signers identified 20 main action points to be addressed. Their points included job specs for senior roles, recruitment techniques to identify more Black job candidates, more rigorous training programs, rating managers' job performance based on how well they train and mentor employees of color, and ending requirements for Black staff to attend donor galas.

Since then several reporters and editors, often appealing to their significant numbers of followers on Twitter and other platforms, have racked up at least three significant victories (See timeline).

In July they succeeded in forcing the resignation of programming director Robert Peterson. In August, after the journalists went public, Eby admitted to systemic racism at the station, and UMSL launched its

investigation. In September came Eby's own resignation.

In the meantime, while other supervisors' heads have rolled, managers like Neuman have tried to keep things on track in the newsroom and on the programming team. The station continues to crank out spot news stories and longform features on the election, COVID-19 and other topics, as well as podcasts such as "We Live Here," which focuses on issues related to race and class.

In an earlier interview with GJR Neuman described the staff as "exhausted," which she attributed to a variety of factors: the pandemic, the stresses of working remotely, and the political uncertainty in the runup to the November elections. Also taking a toll, she said, is a hiring freeze that means the station cannot fill several positions.

STLPR currently has 29 reporters, editors and producers on the news team that Neuman oversees, including the team that produces the station's midday talk show, "St. Louis On the Air." Beyond this there are four vacant reporting positions: science & environment, politics, data reporting and a photojournalist. Neuman said other open roles at STLPR are a senior producer position for podcasts as well as the programming director position that Peterson formerly held.

Livingston has not ruled out further layoffs. "My immediate next priority is to get my arms around the budget," he said. "It's

too soon to tell any additional steps that need to be taken.”

It’s a sobering time for a journalistic enterprise that had grown in recent years to become the area’s second-biggest newsroom after the St. Louis Post-Dispatch where coverage areas like politics, public affairs, education, environment, the arts and race issues are concerned.

Much of this growth was the result of STLPR’s merger with the St. Louis Beacon, an online publication dominated by journalists who had worked previously at the Post-Dispatch. After the merger took effect in late 2013, it was [hailed as a model](#) for combining nonprofit, public-service media organizations.

“It was a categorical leap forward in terms of size for both organizations,” said Margaret Wolf Freivogel, the editor of the Beacon who became editor of the combined newsroom. “It enabled people to pursue beats in more depth. Equally important, it enabled the organization to have not only a radio presence, but a really vigorous online presence.”

An early challenge for the merged newsroom was the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson and the protests that followed; Freivogel recalls the station throwing all the resources it had at the story.

Yet even as the station’s ambitions grew, Freivogel, who retired at the end of 2015, said its goal was never to become the media outlet of record for St. Louis.

“I don’t think the goal was ever to replace the Post-Dispatch,” she said. “It’s to be the outlet that really focuses on depth and context, and breaking stories that might not come to light if they weren’t being done there.”

Linda Lockhart, former outreach specialist and copy editor at STLPR, said the station faces the same challenge as organizations like the Saint Louis Art Museum and the St. Louis Symphony: finding ways to engage new audiences as the ranks of their traditional, largely white audiences continue to shrink.

“We have to break out of this mold, and restore honesty and rebuild trust with the audiences: with the readers, the listeners and the donors,” said Lockhart, former national secretary for the National Association of Black Journalists and a founding member of the organization’s St. Louis chapter. Like Freivogel, Lockhart is a Post-Dispatch veteran who joined STLPR as part of the Beacon merger.

“How much has been lost these past six months? I don’t know how much goodwill has been lost, but I would expect it’s significant,” Lockhart said.

Looking forward, Livingston has to begin sketching out a road map for an organization that until 2012 had an all-white newsroom. Even today, only one out of five journalists at STLPR is a person of color,

according to the Journalists of Color group. The national average for online newsrooms is about 30 percent, a News Leader Association [survey](#) found last year. Most recent Corporation for Public Broadcasting [data](#) put the percentage of journalists of color in newsrooms at 23 percent.

Livingston notes the importance of the arguments the journalists laid out in their July 1 letter.

“Their sense of the situation at the station that led to that memo is critical. The framework they laid out is a very detailed agenda, but the overarching part of it all looks right to me, so that’s a starting point for me,” Livingston said.

One area that has caused angst in the newsroom is the nature of the station’s continuing relationship with UMSL. The Board of Curators of the University of Missouri holds the station’s broadcasting licenses.

In a Sept. 25 [press release](#), UMSL Chancellor Kristin Sobolik said the university wants to “best align the work of the station with the needs of our community as well as the academic, research, service and outreach mission of the university.”

Some reporters expressed alarm, questioning what Sobolik meant by “align.” But Livingston, who reports directly to the chancellor, told GJR that Sobolik understands the importance of the station’s editorial independence. As an example of

alignment, he said the station's director of finance and administration, Maureen Hughes, now has a dual reporting line: to both Livingston and UMSL Vice Chancellor Tanika Busch, who serves as the university's chief financial officer.

The search for a permanent GM will begin in earnest after a job description is created, Livingston said. As an executive recruiter specializing in public media, he has conducted approximately 350 job searches, including about 100 for a GM role. His work at STLPR is the 13th time he has served in an interim role.

"Having the most diverse candidate pools starts with being clear about what you really need," Livingston said.

How likely is it that the new permanent GM will be a person of color? According to Livingston there are no guarantees, but he made it clear that he expects to station staff to have real input into the process. In past searches involving university-licensed stations, he said staff members have been especially involved in two areas: helping to design the GM position description, and during interviews with finalists for the role.

"Who comes in as the next general manager is critical," said Lockhart. "I can't say absolutely that it has to be a person of color, because there just aren't enough people to pick from. But it has to be somebody who 'gets it' – somebody who is 'woke' to a degree.

It's going to be difficult. There's not a lot of trust in the newsroom right now. You don't want to lose your staff."

Freivogel said that even though STLPR doesn't know exactly where it will land following the upheavals of 2020, she continues to believe public radio can be the framework for rebuilding in-depth, local news coverage.

"I would hope in the long term that it would enhance the ambitions of the organization," Freivogel said. "Working through these things is a necessary phase, and hopefully it will lead to a greater degree of trust, and increased capacity in the future."

St. Louis Public Radio In 2020 – A Timeline

July 1: Twenty-six STLPR journalists send a letter to General Manager Tim Eby and Executive Editor Shula Neuman outlining concerns over diversity at the station. They demand the departure of Robert Peterson from his role as director of radio programming and operations. They call for concrete efforts to hire, train and retain more reporters and editors of color (particularly Black journalists). They also ask for better transparency about STLPR's finances, following layoffs and pay cuts earlier in the year.

Late July: Eby announces the retirement of Peterson, who staffers accused of denying professional opportunities to women of color. Under pressure, station managers cancel a planned farewell celebration.

Aug. 7: Staff at the station go public with their complaints. A group calling itself STLPR Reporters & Producers of Color publishes an open letter on Medium calling on Eby and others to take responsibility for “cultivating a culture that perpetuates racism.” Simultaneously, the station’s only newscaster of color, Marissanne Lewis-Thompson, publishes her own Medium essay detailing specific instances of racism since her arrival in October 2017.

Aug. 10: In a post on the station’s blog, Eby admits that systemic racism exists at the station. UMSL launches an investigation led by Vice Chancellor Tanisha Stevens and an external law firm into the station’s practices involving diversity, equity and inclusion.

Sept. 5: The Reporters & Producers of Color group expresses concern in a Medium post about the goals and scope of UMSL’s investigation, saying they fear staff members who speak up about racism could face retaliation. In a follow-up post on Sept. 17 they say 21 staffers have no confidence in the investigation.

Sept. 24: UMSL administrators announce to staff that Tim Eby is no longer general manager, and that public media consultant Tom Livingston will be managing the station on an interim basis.

Sept. 25-26: Several journalists react angrily on social media after UMSL discloses in a news release that Eby will continue at the station for six months in a “consultancy role.” Reporter Brian Munoz, brought on by STLPR to provide

independent coverage of the station's woes, later reports Eby will keep earning the same salary, meaning he'll be paid about \$70,000 in total through early April 2021.

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