

A Local News Experiment In Haverhill May Fall Victim To Economic Woes



By Dan Kennedy
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At a time when local news is in danger of being snuffed out by corporate chain ownership, [WHAV Radio](#) in Haverhill has established itself as a worthy alternative. Built by a journalist and advertising executive named Tim Coco, the independent nonprofit provides news and community information over the air and online.

Now, though, the station is in crisis. Annual costs have risen to about \$300,000, considerably more than the \$200,000 Coco — who runs the station without a salary — has been able to generate in revenue. If there isn't a turnaround by Thanksgiving, he says, the station may cease operations.

“Our current membership drive isn't gaining much traction,” Coco said via email. “Some cite the lack of tax deductibility with higher allowed standard deductions. Our major sponsors are as much as four months late in fulfilling pledges, and we have lost some others as they merge with larger organizations.” ([Click here](#) for my full Q&A with Coco.)



Tim Coco of WHAV running the show in 2014. (Dan Kennedy)

WHAV [traces its Haverhill roots](#) to the years after World War II, when the station was founded by The Haverhill Gazette, then an independent daily newspaper. Coco fell in love with the station when he was a high school student and began covering news there. The morning DJ in those years was the future television personality [Tom Bergeron](#), who has come home on several occasions to help Coco with fundraising

drives.

The original WHAV went off the air in 2002, but Coco acquired the call letters and began operating it as an internet station in 2004. Ten years later he ramped up his ambitions, reorganizing it as a nonprofit and, in 2016, adding a low-power FM signal at 97.9 FM. The station features news, community call-in **CONTINUED, on back**

Save Local News with your Monthly Membership Today

If you believe an informed public makes for better neighbors, employees, volunteers, customers, leaders and voters, your monthly membership subscription is needed during WHAV's current drive.

Nonprofit 97.9 WHAV FM—on-air, online, over cable television and in social media—must have more monthly members to sustain original, local news reporting. Very few people are aware newsrooms are shrinking across the country with local news the biggest casualty. In fact, a recent survey found only 14% of adults pay for local news.

WHAV, the area's only public radio station, must raise an additional \$100,000 just

to provide the same level of local, news, emergency alerts, sports, weather, “Win for Breakfast” live morning show, Haverhill Hillies football, live broadcasts of Haverhill City Council and Haverhill School Committee and more. It can be done. but only with your help.

Start your monthly membership online at [WHAV.net](#). You may pay with credit or debit card or use the “Bill Me” option. You may also call 978-374-1900 weekdays. If you're already a current member, thank you for your support of Greater Haverhill's only public radio station.

If You Believe... Those spending your tax dollars must be held accountable,

more people should run for office and more people should vote, a watch dog on government ultimately saves you money, everyone should know what's happening locally or the death of local news reporting places us all at the mercy of backroom dealmakers, you'll want to support WHAV's extensive local news reporting.

Help WHAV keep government transparent and responsive with your monthly membership in support of local news.



shows and classic-hits music.

WHAV's expansion coincided with the shrinkage of the city's newspapers. Today The Haverhill Gazette is a weekly that is part of the daily Eagle-Tribune, headquartered in nearby North Andover. Their corporate owner is [CNHI](#), a national chain of daily and weekly newspapers based in Montgomery, Alabama. The papers no longer have an office in Haverhill.

Although you couldn't call Haverhill a "[news desert](#)," the term used to describe communities without any news coverage, there is no question that WHAV has helped fill a gap that widened as the city's newspapers reduced their presence. (In 2013 I wrote about WHAV and Haverhill's newspapers as part of an [assessment of the city's media](#). In 2014 I recorded a [video interview](#) with Coco.)

"The need for a vibrant, competitive and thorough local news source was clear," Coco said. "These have been WHAV's goals in providing expanded online coverage with text, photographs and streaming audio at WHAV.net in 2014, simultaneous postings on all major social media, cable television affiliates and the permitting and launch of 97.9 WHAV-FM in 2016. The restoration of WHAV on radio also returned local news twice-an-hour weekdays, weather, community calendar every hour around the clock, a live morning show, local talk and live broadcasts of city council and school committee meetings and all Haverhill High School

football games — home and away."

And WHAV has developed an audience. According to internal metrics that Coco shared with me, some 184,000 unique visitors accessed the station's website during the past 30 days — an impressive figure given the operation's small geographic footprint. "Local news is a web traffic driver," Coco said. "Our original reporting of breaking news, particularly a [murder Saturday at a nursing home](#), drove web numbers to a new high."

My own interest in Haverhill was originally rooted in a different local news concept — the [Banyan Project](#), an idea developed by Tom Stites, a veteran journalist who has worked as an editor at The New York Times and The Chicago Tribune. Stites hoped to begin cooperatively owned local news sites across the country, starting in Haverhill. Unfortunately, after years in the planning stages, [Haverhill Matters](#), as the site is known, has yet to make it off the launching pad. [Here](#), for instance, is a story I wrote about Banyan for Nieman Lab in 2014. Not much has happened since then.

Coco was originally a member of the steering committee for Haverhill Matters but left in frustration. "I hoped Haverhill Matters and WHAV could launch together — you know, strength in numbers," he said. "That group got lost in analysis paralysis and never published a single news story. In the end, Haverhill Matters tied up many donors with the promise of an imminent launch. Some are still waiting even though WHAV sure could

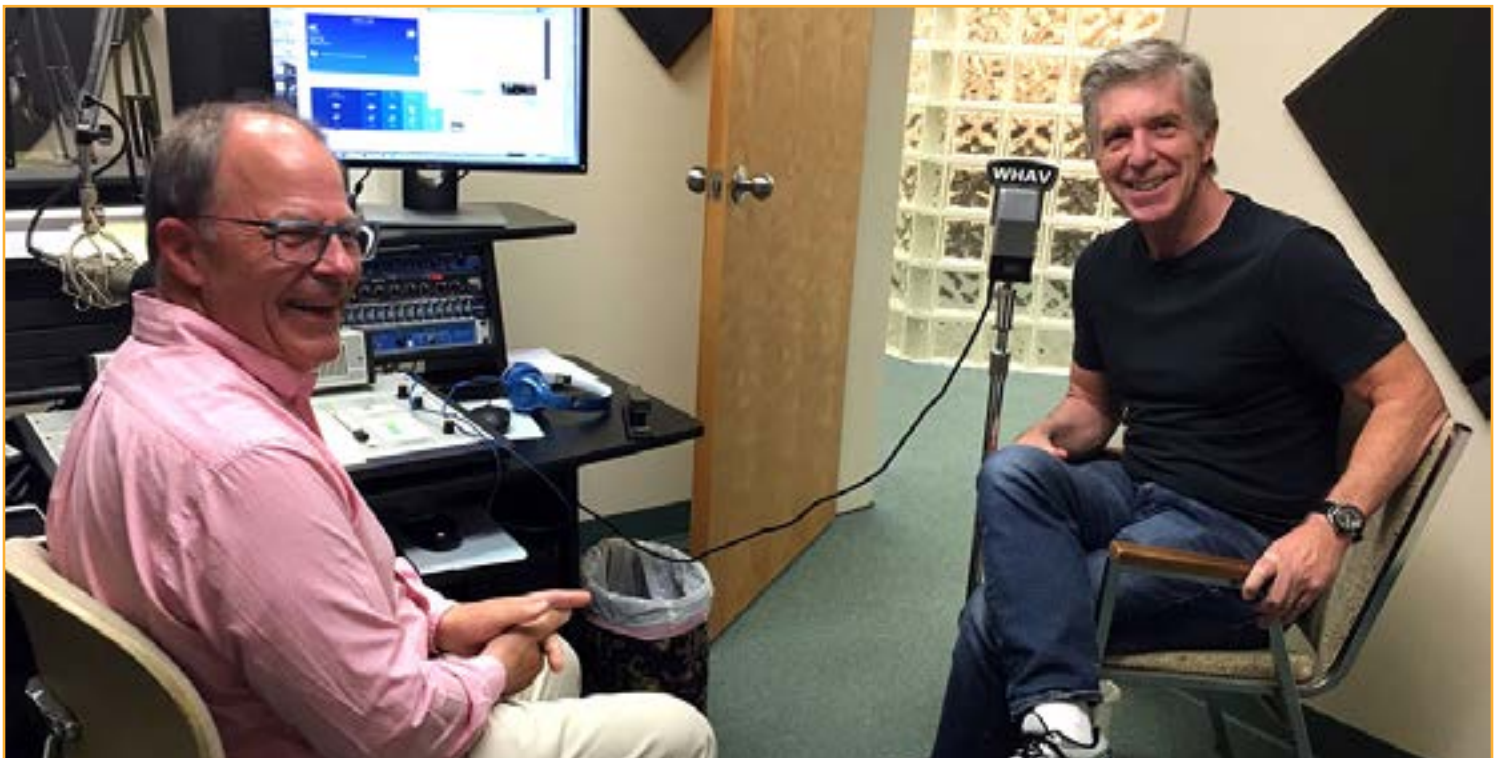
use their support."

But the notion that Banyan somehow steered revenues away from WHAV is disputed by John Cuneo, who serves as president of the Haverhill Matters board. "I do not believe we are a threat to WHAV.net," Cuneo told me, adding that, if anything, WHAV's presence made it more difficult for Haverhill Matters to raise money. "I wish Tim all success," Cuneo said. "He's been very dedicated for many years in successfully bringing local news to Haverhillians."

Stites, despite multiple setbacks over the years, still remains hopeful that grant money will materialize that would enable the Haverhill co-op to begin covering news. "A new Banyan suitor has appeared," Stites said. "What was looking like the end of the road might not be the end." The idea of a news co-op run in a way similar to that of a food co-op or a credit union remains intriguing, and I hope Stites and the Haverhill Matters folks finally get to try it out. But it has been an awfully long time.

As for WHAV, Coco hopes that going public might shake loose some money and allow him to keep covering the news. "The people at the foundations need to give nonprofit, local news radio another look, especially those stations like WHAV that have committed to multimedia approaches and in poorer and, if I may be so bold, undereducated communities," he said. "It took 20 years to restore WHAV, so it may take time."

WGBH News contributor Dan Kennedy's blog, Media Nation, is online at [dankennedy.net](#).



Tom Bergeron, right, host of "Dancing with the Stars," began his career at WHAV in 1972. He visited with WHAV morning show host Win Damon recently to help drum up support for the radio station.