



## PRESIDENT'S AWARD

*for Impact on Media*

# AN UNLIKELY PUBLIC Radio POWERHOUSE

BY ALEX BEN BLOCK

Jarl Mohn was a surprise choice in 2014 to lead National Public Radio. After all, this was the man who had helmed E! Entertainment Television and was known partly for his work at MTV.

Then there was the inner turmoil. Mohn was the eighth CEO in eight years at NPR. Competition for listeners was intense, affiliated stations often were at odds with headquarters in Washington, D.C., and the last philanthropic mega-gift had come a decade earlier. The year before, NPR had cut 10% of its workforce and was facing a \$6 million annual deficit.

"I saw the turnover and was very concerned about it," Mohn recalled. "I knew the journalism was solid; they were doing great reporting and great work. But they needed to have an organization in place to manage the business better."

It was clear the turnaround would be neither quick nor easy, so Mohn made a five-year commitment to NPR. He began by visiting local stations across the country to learn what they needed to succeed.

Eighteen months into the Mohn era, things are looking up. Changes have been made, and today there's a new sense of stability.

"It's too early to declare victory," said Bill Davis, president of Southern California Public Radio and KPCC, "but I would say Jarl has put a steady hand on the tiller for NPR and has also brought in people with similar steady hands to run the organization in terms of its content, its strategy and fundraising. He's done a really nice job setting a clear and stable course for the organization."

In 2015, for the first time in years, NPR broke even. In 2016, it may move into the black.

That is among the reasons the Los Angeles

JARL MOHN'S  
LEADERSHIP  
OF NPR IS JUST  
PART OF WHAT  
HAS EARNED  
HIM THE  
PRESS CLUB'S  
PRESIDENT'S  
AWARD

Press Club is honoring Mohn tonight with its 2016 President's Award for Impact on Media. Previous winners include Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, Anderson Cooper and Steve Lopez.

Mohn is rarely in one place for long, as he divides his time between Los Angeles, New York, visits to local stations and Washington, D.C., where he can often be found on Capitol Hill explaining the importance of NPR. His pitch, he said, boils down to: With the loss of so many newspapers, public radio is a primary source of local news for many people.

Why has he reached so many politicians on both sides of the aisle?

"Maybe they see his interest and vision for it," suggested Pamela, his wife of 33 years. "He just



Stephen Voss

really believes in what he's doing, the importance of NPR and having fact-based radio rather than opinion."

### **Personal Connection**

Mohn's connection to radio is unusually personal. It goes back to when he was growing up in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, 27 miles north of Philadelphia.

When he was 11, Mohn and two sisters were placed in a government-run home for several years. His father, a college literature professor, had been jailed for not making support payments and his mother was institutionalized with mental illness.

"I really hadn't experienced radio until then,"

recalled Mohn, "but they had it on in the dormitory... and that became my escape because I didn't like being in this children's home. So my entire career has been a form of escapism."

He got his first job at a local radio station at age 15, though there was one problem: He had, he recalls, "a terrible radio name. It's not easily remembered or said."

Jarl is Norwegian and Mohn is German. To connect better with audiences, he adopted the nom de radio Lee Masters. He worked the overnight shift at a station in Philadelphia while attending Temple University on a scholarship, but as the job became more demanding he dropped out of college.

In 1986, Mohn moved to New York City as a DJ

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on radio powerhouse WNBC. He later left to help create and program MTV and VH-1. He was general manager of the youth-oriented networks and brought major change, significantly expanding the audiences.

In 1992, Mohn moved his wife and two daughters west to take command of the fledgling Movietime channel. He renamed it E! Entertainment Television and created a mix of celebrity news and reality

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shows that became cultural touchstones and was a precursor of much of today's celebrity-obsessed entertainment media.

He was wooed away during the late 1990s Internet frenzy. He ran Liberty Digital, which invested in startups and interactive TV. After the dot-com bust, he became a venture capitalist. He also took back his real name, Jarl Mohn.

He joined several corporate boards, became a noted art collector and served as chairman of the ACLU and the board of the USC Annenberg School of Journalism.

Around 2002, Mohn met Bill Davis, then in his first year running KPCC-FM in Los Angeles. Davis wanted to focus his station on news. Mohn joined the KPCC board and a few years later became chairman. He led a fundraising drive for a new broadcast facility and ended up making the biggest gift, an estimated \$6 million. Since 2010, it has been known as the Mohn Broadcast Center.

Mohn wasn't looking for a job in 2014 when Davis mentioned he had begun a search for a new NPR president. A day later, Mohn called to say he was interested. Davis and the broadcast world were stunned: After all, this was public radio.

"A lot of people were absolutely shocked," recalled Davis, "that NPR hired somebody with a deep commercial background, who wasn't a journalist or from public media."

The turnaround since then proves that thinking out of the box may be the best path to future success. Mohn knows that the challenges are many, but he recognizes that much depends on having top-notch reporting.

"My goal is to make sure this great group of journalists I get to work with every day have the tools they need to do the kind of work they do best," said Mohn, "and to encourage them, motivate them and inspire them to continue doing great work." 🍷

***Way to go, Jarl Mohn!***  
***Congratulations on receiving the  
President's Award for Impact on Media.***

Thank you for your continued leadership and support!

