

A Responsible ~~CHRW~~ Radio Western

Tuesday, January 17, 2017 • Timothy Glasgow • chrwsm@chrwradio.ca

Something that hasn't been said enough over the last decade is that the undergraduate students of Western University have a radio station. A real radio station – that anyone within an hour's drive can listen to in their car or on any old FM radio, or via a half dozen other mediums. What *has* happened is that the students have *paid for* the radio station, but by and large, most of them haven't experienced much value for their investment. In far too many cases, many of them actually didn't even know the station existed. Many of them still don't.

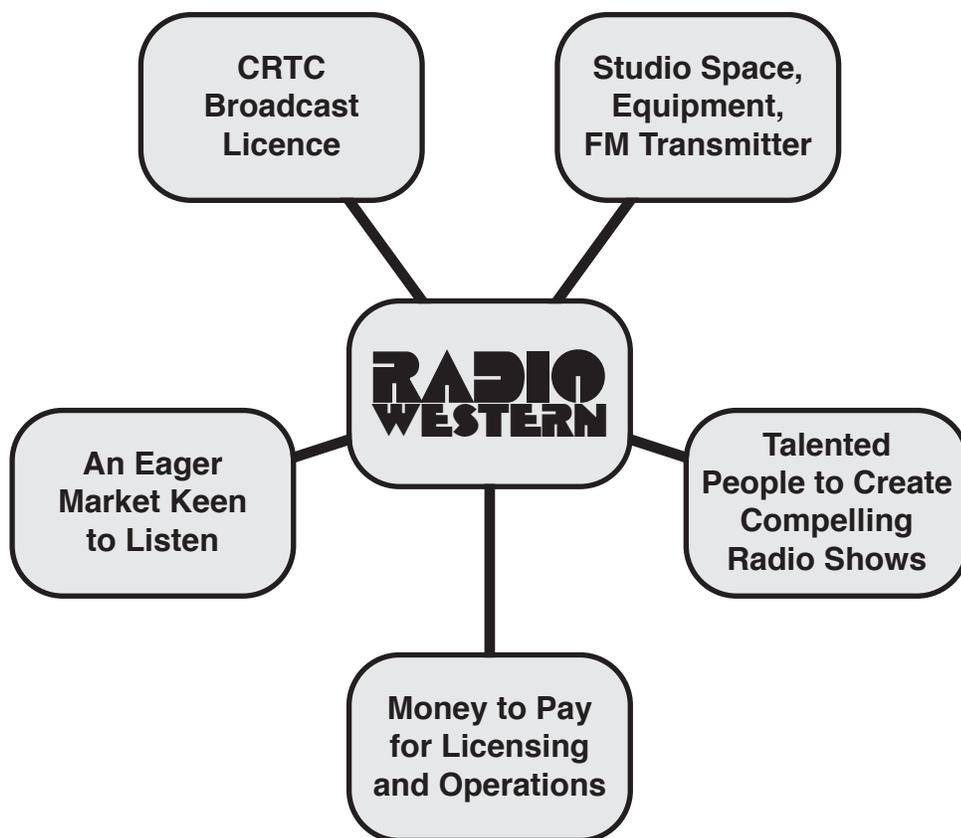
This isn't an advertising problem. This is a relevance problem. While the students have continued to pay for the station, most of the station's programming has had little or no relationship to their student experience. From a student's perspective, there are two ways to alleviate this problem: The obvious one is to cut off the broken limb - simply stop paying for it and shut it down; the other is to fix what's broken and start to finally see some dividends from these decades of accumulated investment.

The interesting thing is, fixing it may not be that hard and may not take that long – but first, let's take a moment to appreciate what we do have right now:

The Five Points:

Any radio station (or any broadcast media, for that matter) needs five things in order to be successful and sustainable. Loads of people with big ideas try to be successful in media, but they fail because they are in denial that one or two of these is missing. In actuality, it's pretty special to have all five all at once, but *our radio station does indeed have all five*. So what are they?

The **CRTC Broadcast Licence** is likely the hardest to get. All of the broadcast media stations in Canada are mostly owned by just a few huge companies (with the exception of the CBC, but its days may be numbered). These media companies like Rogers, Bell, and Corus work hard to own as many radio stations as possible, and they have the money and the lobbying power to do it. If we give up our FM radio frequency, one of these companies will take it immediately to play 25 country songs over and over and we'll never get it back.



We have **Studio Space** in the UCC with *some* excellent **Equipment**, and we have a 6000 Watt **FM Transmitter** on top of One London Place, the tallest building in the city. The 6000 Watts of power means that if you drive towards Toronto on the 401, for example, you will be able to listen to Radio Western as far as about Cambridge, depending on the weather. Our signal reaches over half a million people! We also stream online in a myriad of ways, and can be tuned-in to on most typical devices.

We have **Talented People** in all areas of the station, many of whom are students themselves, and many Radio Western alumni have gone on to successful high-profile careers in radio and television, especially in news and sports. We have staff and volunteer community members with decades of media, broadcast, and technical engineering experience who train and mentor students who are curious enough to walk in our door, and incidentally, we've had more of those students walk in our door for the first time this year than we've had in *decades*. Sometimes it's a struggle to find room for all the training sessions, but that's a good problem to have.

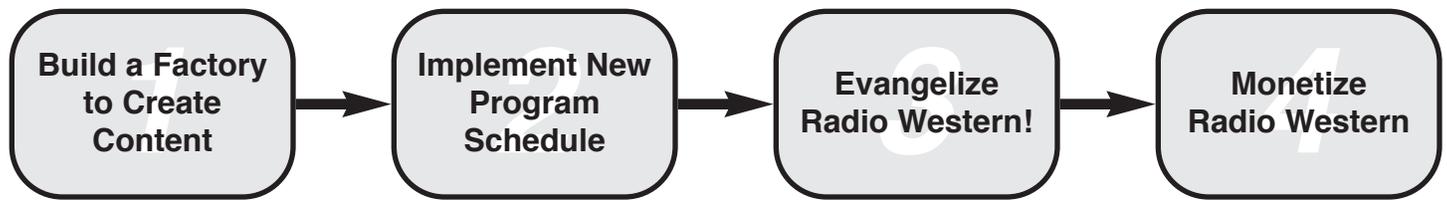
We have **Money to Pay For Licensing and Operations** thanks to the undergraduate students of Western and their continued investment over the last 35 years. At times, the station has had some success with contributing to its own funding primarily through advertising, but also with federal/provincial grants and grassroots local fundraising. We intend to fully revive these initiatives as well as to institute an annual set of user fees for anyone who volunteers at the station that is not an undergraduate student. It obviously doesn't make sense that undergraduate students should be paying for an experience that graduate students, alumni, and non-student community members get for free.

In a sense, this all couldn't be happening at a better time. After years of industry people exclaiming that, "Broadcast media is dead! The future will all be on-demand!" we're now witnessing a significant shift the other way. Most people still don't get into their cars and immediately start playing playlists from their cell phones that they prepared themselves (in fact, in a survey of almost 40,000 people taken just a few months ago, 93% still turn on the radio when they get in their car. Having to choose your own media 'on-demand' is *work* – how many of us have gone on to Netflix, spent 25 minutes trying to decide what to watch, and by the time we pick something, we don't even want to watch it anymore?). The new buzzword is *curation*, where someone (or something) else is choosing what we listen to next, and it's a key part of the business model for new companies like Spotify/Apple Music/Pandora/Tidal... But radio continues to be the original, most easily accessible and most popular curated media, and campus radio in particular, is growing in significance. We have an **Eager Market Keen To Listen**.

But Radio Western is still broken! It's too expensive and not enough people listen to it!

Those of us now involved in the day-to-day operation of Radio Western all agree with this statement. Despite pressures by the USC and many others to modernize the station and keep it relevant and valuable to the students who are paying for it, it just hasn't happened. We haven't seen results. Radio Western hasn't been alone as a campus station having to deal with a inner-station cultural status-quo that romanticizes the scrappy, us-against-them punk rock attitude that campus radio stations thrived on in the 1980s and 1990s. But we either have to evolve or die, hence, a significant management change at Radio Western this last semester – the most significant in over 10 years. We *want* to fix it! We think we know the steps we need to take to fix it, and we've already started fixing it. The way to do it, in a nutshell, is we need to become *market driven*. There are four steps, and they have to be done in order – each one is a prerequisite to the next.

The Plan:



The first thing we need to do is create a facility that enables and inspires people to create higher-quality media content. The old broadcast model of having someone in the broadcast booth 24/7 playing whatever compact discs they feel like playing at the moment is antiquated, doesn't represent at all how the professional industry works, and is just no longer good enough. Contributors need to be able to write, curate, assemble, edit and *perfect* their radio programs ahead of time, and we need a functional scheduling system that will play it over the air at the best times to appeal to the particular market segment for that show. Again, commercial stations have worked this way for 20 years or more. We need to catch up. The good news is that we're most of the way there already. We have computers we can record and edit on; we just need to be able to plug microphones, speakers, and headphones into more of them. We have rooms we can record in; we just need to fix the acoustics in those rooms so the radio shows aren't filled with echoes, computer fan and air conditioner noise. We have an industry-standard scheduling system; we just need to fix our network so it will work properly. At this point, it will just take a bit of time to **Build a Factory to Create Content**. Most of this stuff isn't particularly expensive; it just requires the authority, technical initiative and know-how to make it work, and Radio Western now has this in a way that it did not have even just a few months ago. Also, most of this is a one-time investment. Once it's built and working properly, it should only require maintenance and the occasional upgrade to keep it going.

Once we can start making high-quality programs efficiently, the next step is to **Implement a New Program Schedule**. We need to start playing what people want to hear, when they want to hear it. We need to play more popular music across the board, and we desperately need consistency. If you turn on Radio Western at 5pm on a weekday and like what you hear, you should be able to put it on the next weekday and expect to hear more of it. If you love a particular specialty show on say, Folk music that airs on Tuesday evenings, it should be fair to expect that it'll be on again next week. Certain parts of the day are better suited to spoken-word programming and other parts music, and we must have a schedule that reflects that. We need to look at students' class schedules, exam times, and special events and program around that, and we need to seek out every opportunity possible to go to where the action is and broadcast live from there, involving students as much as possible. Arts, research, culture, innovation... *There is so much cool stuff happening at Western University!* The students, *and especially the city at-large*, needs to know about it.

At this point, the changes at Radio Western will become more obvious to the casual listener, so now it's time to **Evangelize!** Spread the Gospel of Radio Western! We need to be sure every single student knows who we are and where they can find us, both on the FM dial or in their network gadgets, and physically in the UCC where they can feel welcome to get involved. The old CHRW will be dead, and the new Radio Western has replaced it. Both traditional promotion and social media are key, and we need to involve as many people as possible. There are loads of fun and rewarding opportunities here that can involve people who aren't specifically technical or editorial. The end result is that we bring in more listeners, and from that we attract higher-quality volunteers to make even better programming which brings in more listeners... and that will allow us to...

...**Monetize**. Here's where it starts to get really good. With an increase in brand-awareness, listenership, and mindshare, advertisers will start coming to us. Mainstream commercial radio is in a bit of a lull right now as 'alternative' stations like Indie88 and CFNY in Toronto are thriving, and the only station in London with a CRTC licence that allows it to play a lot of that stuff is us. Young, intelligent high school and post-secondary students are tired of the same music that pop radio has been feeding them for the past 15 years, and they are listening to something new. Along with vinyl records and vintage, well... everything, radio is kind of hip, and advertisers know it. Government grant organizations are more willing to pitch in on initiatives that have promise and momentum, and grassroots fundraising can be far more successful when people on the street are excited. Right now, Radio Western costs each student about the price of a good pizza, or maybe three beers – but with successful fundraising and advertising revenue, we can continue to provide awesome programming without cutting into our ability to provide a valuable and rewarding experience for our student volunteers, and significantly reduce the burden of cost on the undergraduate students at the same time.

So realistically, when can we do this, and how much will it cost? All of our planning to date has been using the existing budget levels for Radio Western, and at this point we see no need for any increase. Could we do it for less? Maybe, but not without cutting some volunteer services and a reduction in program quality, which kind of shoots us in the foot. Timelines are always difficult to estimate when doing something new, but we feel that we can complete the first step, building the content factory, by March or April, have the second step programming changes sorted out by mid-summer, and be full-on into evangelizing before September, with monetizing beginning around the same time.

These days, people keep telling us we're on the right track; we just need to make sure there's enough track to get there.

Radio Western is located in Room 250 of the UCC, and we are usually in the office during weekdays. We encourage anyone at all with any questions, concerns, or just plain curiosity to drop by at any time to see what we're up to. The main office phone number is (519) 661-3601, and i personally can be emailed at chrwsm@chrwradio.ca

You can listen to us by tuning any FM radio to **94.9**, changing your Rogers digital cable channel to **943** or by streaming via our web site, currently at <http://www.chrwradio.ca>. We're also on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube.