Another One Bites the Dust?
The Transition from CHRY 105.5FM to VIBE105

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On April 30, 2015, senior management at CHRY Community Radio Inc., the campus/community radio station housed by York University, announced the end of CHRY 105.5FM's 28 year broadcast. Volunteer contributors – some of whom had been programmers since the station's inception – were told that none of their programming contracts would be renewed as of the start of the new fiscal year. On May 1, 2015 a new programming cycle began under the banner of "VIBE105" (VIBE, henceforth), the new broadcast division of CHRY Community Radio Inc.

Management informed staff about the impending change during a closed staff meeting one month earlier, insisting that a drastic change was necessary in order to secure the station's long-term financial sustainability in a changing media climate. They identified five interrelated objectives that, they argued, could only be achieved under a new station identification (ID): (a) an increase in the expectations held of broadcasters to improve the overall quality of delivery, in order to (b) combat the perceived inferiority of an 'amateur' campus/community (c/c) radio station (along with suspending the use of the "c/c" title in external communications, which was already underway). They hoped this would (c) increase advertising revenues and financial sponsorships, in part to (d) stop depending so greatly on the York University student levy and diminishing fundraising revenue and (e) thereby financially sustain a station that had been operating on an unsustainable budget for years. They insisted that the long-held commitment to providing non-mainstream content as well as free-of-charge media literacy and radio production training to the community-at-large would not change, despite the new "urban alternative" format.

This paper situates the closure of CHRY and its reopening as VIBE within the broader political-economic context of broadcast regulation in Canada in order to understand (a) why this drastic change was deemed necessary on the part of those who undertook it and (b) what this change means for the future of this campus/community radio station. It asks four interrelated questions. What challenges did CHRY navigate on a daily basis in order to sustain its existence in an increasingly competitive local (Toronto) and unsupportive regulatory (national, CRTC) environment? How did these challenges evolve alongside the development of the CRTC's regulation of both private (commercial) and community broadcasting, as well as the emergence of online media? What are the demonstrated and foreseeable consequences of restructuring CHRY in the form of VIBE, in terms of the community service values that were core to the former's functioning? Finally, what steps might have been taken – or may be taken elsewhere in the future – to preserve this community service sector of Canadian broadcasting?

This paper begins with a brief overview of the political-economic theoretical framework that guides this research, as well as the autoethnographic and archival research methods according to which it was conducted. This is followed by a discussion of the regulatory history of campus and community radio, with a specific focus on the CRTC's 2010 regulatory merger of the two. This includes a few words about parallel increases in the concentration of media ownership broadly and in Toronto specifically, in order to bring into view the contextual forces that gave way to the transition from CHRY to VIBE. Next, an examination of CHRY's history and evolution precedes a discussion of the resource insufficiencies that plagued the station, especially between the years 2012-

2015; namely, those needed for broadcast equipment, volunteer management, and staffing.  A critique of the changes that laid the ground work for VIBE, as well the early days thereof, suggest that a primary focus on 'professionalism' is resulting in the mimicry of corporate practices and a movement away from the hallmarks of campus/community radio, for which CHRY had been known. These include a decrease in accessibility, increase in production standards, and the mainstreaming of content. Following a summation of the findings, this paper concludes with recommendations that may prevent similar occurrences elsewhere in Canada.

## The Political Economy of Communication

In broad terms, the political economy of communication is concerned with the political and economic structures and processes that enable and/or constrain communication and media practices (Mosco, 2009). Working within this theoretical framework, this paper aims "to show how particular micro contexts are shaped by general economic dynamics and the wider structures they sustain" (Golding and Murdock, 1996, p. 18). This brings into view the pervasive logic of commodification that has permeated the broadcasting sector. Here, commodification of CHRY/VIBE – a cultural product normatively held to serve the public interest of the local campus and community to which it broadcasts – into a "good which is produced in order to be exchanged at a price" (p. 20), appears to be occurring under the guise of 'professionalization', in an attempt to achieve financial sustainability. The broad context of production is a privileged site of inquiry, though there is some discussion of the type of products produced under the newly-formed VIBE, to the extent that they demonstrate the penetration of a commercial logic into the station which remains, by regulatory designation, a campus/community station.

## Method

To operationalize the abovementioned research questions, I combine elements of autoenthnography and archival research. I was employed as the station's News and Spoken Word Coordinator for the majority of the three years preceding and for a few months following the transition to VIBE. The primary advantage of using my own experiences as the basis for this research is that the reader is provided with insight into daily occurrences that are otherwise undocumented and/or obscured behind official reports (as will be demonstrated below). To compliment my 'insider knowledge', I have also researched the available archival records from the past 29 years, including those held by the CRTC and those made available to me by the station's management.

## Campus/Community Radio: A Tenuous Place in the Canadian Broadcasting System

When it first issued FM licences to student-run stations in 1975, the CRTC's decision reflected public service values, acknowledging that "many of the different sectors of social life cannot find a place on the national service or the private commercial outlets" (CRTC 75–247 as cited in Fauteux, 2013, p. 139). Despite resistance from private stations about the undue source of competition that community stations would pose,[1] by 1985 community radio was defined as an official Sector in the Canadian broadcasting system,

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[1] See, for example, CRTC 1985-194.

characterized by a non-profit structure and community access through "membership, management, operation, and programming primarily by members of the community at large" (CRTC 1985-194). The Commission also "recognize[d] that [broadcast] quality is necessary in radio production. All the same, production standards should not be set at a level that only professionals and the more skilled volunteers can attain".

The 1991 Broadcasting Act further entrenched community radio within the regulatory framework. Section 3(1)(b) names this sector as one of three that comprise the Canadian broadcasting system, appearing to position it on equal footing with that of its commercial and public counterparts. Interestingly, a seemingly innocuous stipulation about broadcast quality subsequently listed in Section 3(1)(g) does not delineate a separate set of quality standards for community licences; rather, it simply states that "the programming originated by broadcasting undertakings should be of high standard". This type of omission is an indication of the CRTC's primary focus on private broadcasting which tends to function as the default against which community media is measured. Nonetheless, one year later, the Commission recognized campus stations as a subsidiary of community radio (CRTC 1992-38). Since then, this sector has come to be known and valued for disseminating locally reflective perspectives, cultures, and sounds that tend to be excluded from commercial broadcasts (Hackett & Zhao, 1998).

In 2010, the CRTC grouped campus and community radio stations into a campus-community hybrid category (CRTC 2010-499).[2] For the present purposes, three determinations from the 2010 policy are particularly significant. First, the CRTC encouraged c/c stations to continue providing "third-language programming to the ethnocultural communities resident within their service areas". Second, the Commission laid out its continued expectation that, "All campus radio stations provide training to volunteers…who will work for commercial radio stations". Finally, the Commission acknowledged that new media was and would increasingly be an essential component of c/c FM broadcasts, though it remained silent on calls for funding. Indeed, it remained silent while acknowledging that "funding is the central concern" for c/c stations, as there is no "stable core funding" beyond patchwork, project-based grants delivered mainly through the Community Radio Fund of Canada (CRFC). In order to understand the implications of these three determinations for CHRY (discussed below), it is helpful to briefly consider parallel changes in the regulation and ownership of private broadcasters.

A process of 'deregulation'[3] that began in the 1980s has given way to a highly concentrated broadcast environment. According to the CRTC's 2015 Monitoring Report, over 75% of radio stations in Canada are private commercial stations, totalling just under 720, in comparison with 48 community-based stations (p. 54). Of these 720 radio stations, 282 (39%) are owned by five media conglomerates, whose revenues totalled $1.1 billion, or approximately 69% of the total $1.6 billon revenues generated by the Canadian radio

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[2] To be sure, numerous Public Notices, Decisions and Reports related to campus and community stations were issued by the CRTC in the years between 1992 and 2010; however, they tend to feature adjustments that were carried through to this 2010 document and are therefore not addressed here.
[3] Of course, in practice, "all media systems are the result of explicit government policies, subsidies, grants of rights and regulation" and 'deregulation' is a process of re-regulating markets to better serve private, rather than public, interests (McChesney, 2008, p. 416).

sector in 2014 (p. 76).[4] This reality is further pronounced in "major markets" like that of Toronto, where private revenues totalled $541 million in 2014 (p. 45).

Indeed, as of 2010, Toronto was the largest radio market in Canada, in terms of revenues (CRTC 2012-485). That year, the city's 28 commercial stations garnered revenues of $272 million. It was based on this data that the CRTC characterized the Toronto radio market as "generally healthy" and approved a new commercial licence. By this logic, non-profit community radio is of course excluded from the characterization of the financial status of the market, and thereby effectively disregarded in the Commission's determination of the impact of new licences to the geographical market. Currently, seven of the commercial FM radio stations that broadcast in Toronto are owned by four of Canada's top five media conglomerates (Rogers, BCE, Corus, and Newcap) with an additional two owned by CHIN and three by CBC. This is the market in which the transition to VIBE occurred.

### CHRY-FM (1987-2015): From Campus Club to Campus/Community Radio Station

Radio York was originally founded in 1968 as a closed-circuit cable radio service that operated out of the basement of a college on the York University Keele campus in Toronto, Ontario. In 1987 the CRTC granted the station a Class B broadcasting licence on the 105.5FM MHz frequency (CRTC 87-240). With this licence the station could operate a low-power 50W (watts) transmitting antenna, reaching primarily the Jane-Finch community in Toronto. With two other student-run stations operating in Toronto at the time, the CRTC noted that it was licencing CHRY, in part, because it "would be the only station in its service area that devotes considerable amounts of its music programming to black music and folk music from different parts of the world" (CRTC 87-240). That same year, CHRY Community Radio Inc. was granted official charity status, responsible for the broadcast operations of CHRY-FM.

A description of CHRY's early operation and constituent elements were included in the station's 1994 application to renew its broadcast licence ("Application," 1994).[5] At the time, the station had a relatively large staff, consisting of three full-time and eleven part-time staff members, six commission-only Sales Representatives, and 150 unpaid volunteers. In its explanation of volunteer contributions, the application reflected the CRTC's 1985 determination that production standards should not exclude less-skilled volunteers (CRTC 1985-194): "While on-air programmers are encouraged to provide as professional a show as they are able, a volunteer's technical ability is not the only quality which makes them valuable to the station". To this end, the application also states that, "Community access is one of the most important aspects of CHRY," echoing the spirit of accessibility that has become a hallmark of c/c radio.

In relation to programming, the application suggests that a social justice-oriented approach informed the news department: "The CHRY news department is dedicated to breaking down the barriers that exist in the information world…In many cases this means looking 'behind' the news" ("Application," 1994). Distinguishing themselves from "the

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[4] In order of the largest to smallest number of broadcast undertakings, these companies are Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE), Rogers, Corus, Harold R. Steele (Newcap) and Cogeco.

[5] The station did not have a copy of the original 1987 licence application in its records at the time of this research; a request for this information was submitted to the CRTC but a response was not received in time for this submission.

mainstream media", the application describes how the department rejected dominant ideas of "objectivity" and "whiteness" by featuring people of colour with personal experiences in the given subject/issue, in order to highlight "voices of the grassroots". This is consistent with the presence of the National Campus and Community Radio Association's (NCRA) principles in the station's 1994 Code of Conduct, also included in the application: "Community broadcasting serves the needs of socially, culturally, politically, and economically disadvantaged groups in our society".

Finally, CHRY positioned their demonstrated financial sustainability as indication of their relevance to the "black community" in particular:

> Operating with a mere fifty watts, CHRY raised $15,000 more than its goal of $49,000 for a staggering total of $64,000, which is an unheard-of achievement….Programs oriented towards the Black community and Dance music programs taken together, were responsible for close to 75% of the total $64,000 raised.

Indeed, the early to mid-1990s may have been the station's financial high-point. In 1994 the station secured approximately $193,000 and $52,000 in grants and advertising revenue respectively, up from $106,000 and $13,000 in 1989. This success is not surprising given the technological context: the 1990s were also a highpoint for radio. At that time, access to and representation on the FM frequency provided new and relatively well-funded opportunities.

By the early 2000s, CHRY began to experience the financial impacts of an increasingly competitive radio market. The station applied to the CRTC to upgrade its Class B low-power unprotected licence, in large part, to increase revenues. It was hoped that a stronger, clearer signal would reach more listeners and potential advertisers, offering a more attractive platform, in terms of the quality of sound and the legitimacy such quality confers on the broadcast. As part of their application, the station had to demonstrate that it was able to successfully fundraise (as fundraising is a key measurement by which the CRTC determines whether c/c stations are locally valued) and that the upgraded licence would further sustain the station in terms of fulfilling its public service objectives. It complied, anticipating that revenues would increase from $384,000 in year one of the upgraded licence to $425,000 by 2011. In 2006 the CRTC granted CHRY a Class A community-based licence with "full protection", including an increase to its effective radiated power (ERP) from 50W to 158W with "maximum effective radiated power of 250 watts/antenna height of 63.5 metres" (CRTC 2006-196).

**Putting the Numbers into Context**

The projections included in CHRY's 2006 application to the CRTC were largely accurate: the station's gross profit increased from $399,051 in 2006 to $424,134 in 2011. However, it is essential to note that the variations in Total Expenses mirrored the Gross Profit in these and the ensuing years (See Appendix A). In other words, the revenue that was seemingly sufficient to cover annual expenses was the result of deliberate and careful planning. Here, Skinner's (2012) definition of sustainability is a useful standard against which to measure CHRY's operation: "Sustainability is about having the resources to acquire staff, technologies of production, and avenues of distribution" (p. 26). Against this definition, we find that the station operated within the required financial parameters to stay afloat but was not sustainable. What is not accounted for in the audited financial

statements are the many purchases and opportunities that were foregone and sacrifices that were made by both volunteers and staff in order to stay within budget. These realities surfaced in the station's day-to-day operations; what follows is a window into some of these operational shortcomings.

**Insufficient Broadcast Resources.** To begin with, the resources required for an FM broadcast were consistently insufficient. Volunteers would scramble to borrow headphones and adapters before their broadcasts because the station could not afford to keep enough available for peak periods. In some cases, volunteers and interns, who were donating anywhere from two to twelve hours per week of their time, made the decision to purchase these items in order to fulfill their responsibilities. The same was true for portable recorders used to collect off-site audio (from musical events, street interviews, etc.); these devices are essential for a c/c station to be 'on the ground' recording audio in the communities they claim to serve. On more than one occasion these devices were unavailable for volunteers who needed them. The human and technological resources needed for live-to-air remote broadcasts were likewise in short supply; at most, the station conducted only three such broadcasts per year.

The majority of the station's desktop computers were second-hand purchases, had limited internal memory, and used out-of-date hardware and software. It was common for the computers to freeze or crash as volunteers attempted to edit or podcast large audio files. The length of time required to edit audio was thereby unnecessarily extended, further taxing volunteers.[6] The primary computer dedicated solely to continuously recording the live broadcast was also prone to technical difficulties. Some live-to-air broadcasts were never recorded and therefore unavailable for archiving or online sharing. This undercut the station's legitimacy in the eyes of interview guests who could not be given a copy of their interviews or listeners who would call requesting a copy of the audio. The same was true for the station's single production studio which had to be calibrated for all potential uses and therefore could not accommodate the specific audio needs of different kinds of recordings (e.g. phone or in-person interviews, music performances, commercials, etc.). The process of reserving the studio at a time that it was available and aligned with the schedules of volunteers and the availability of their guests was a constant source of frustration that also contributed to the station's perceived illegitimacy.

As mentioned at the outset, management hoped that transitioning to VIBE would enable the station to increase the standards of quality expected of volunteers, in order to combat the perceived inferiority of c/c radio. While more will be said on this issue below, for now it is important to note that, to a large extent, volunteers who may have produced 'subpar' content (according to industry standards) were constrained by the available resources. To dismiss such volunteers in order to alter the perception of the station, in some ways, amounts to placing blame on individuals for what are in fact the structural shortcomings of the financial marginalization of this sector. When stacked against the technological and human resources available to private stations, it is almost inevitable that sound quality would be 'sub-par'. The issue, then, is whether a c/c station can thrive under such circumstances; the case of CHRY suggests not.

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[6] The same was true for staff computers; by the final year of my employment, I opted to bring my own laptop to work each day to save on lost time.

**Volunteer Management.** At its height, CHRY boasted of working with over 300 volunteers (including unpaid interns). Training and securing a commitment from volunteers on this limited budget was exceedingly difficult. To begin with, the station could not afford to provide honoraria or stipends to volunteers or interns.[7] The station was also unable to pay for the public transportation costs of those volunteers who required it. In effect, the station was inaccessible to individuals who could not afford to incur transportation expenses and/or the lost income from donating their time to the station.

In an effort to compensate for these shortcomings, staff worked to ensure that we provided training that was, at the very least, on par with the level of training provided by college broadcast programs, free of charge. These sessions were approximately two hours each, with two to three different training sessions offered each week. The average volunteer underwent six hours of training and three to four hours of orientation to broadcasting regulation and station policies. Inevitably, some volunteers started and did not complete the training sessions or completed training but did not fulfill the responsibilities of the position for which they had signed-up. This meant that the station did not receive a return on the investment it had made in training these contributors. While it may seem crass to speak of training campus and community members in terms of investments and returns – especially in contrast with CRTC's matter-of-fact expectation that training is provided by c/c stations in exchange for their licence (CRTC 2010-499) – such were the harsh realities of operating on an inadequate budget. Moreover, training contributors for careers in broadcasting (as stipulated by the CRTC) took time and resources away from training for the purpose of media literacy. While the two are not inherently mutually exclusive, when training was streamlined, those elements geared toward critical media skills (e.g. anti-oppression and consensus-based decision making seminars, etc.) were the first to be reduced, in order to devote more time to training for 'marketable skills' and 'high-quality' broadcasting.

Contributors who completed training and assignments were often shortchanged of the feedback they sought for their own development. For example, there were approximately 50-75 volunteers and interns contributing to my department at any given time; working 24 paid hours per week simply did not allow the time to give each contributor the one-on-one attention and feedback they often sought. Of course, this was a Catch-22 situation because there was a positive correlation between hours devoted, consistency of feedback, work output, and sustained long-term commitment from volunteers. In effect, failing to provide feedback and recognition increased the likelihood of turnover and therefore the investments costs of training volunteer replacements.

**Staffing.** To this end, the biggest expense incurred by the station was staff salaries. Between 2006 and 2015, this ranged from $219,000 to $272,000 as total yearly expenses and paid for an average of 10 staff members, three of whom were usually employed on a full-time basis. By most standards, remuneration for all positions was markedly low. Almost all of the staff members had second (and sometimes third) jobs. For many of us, the decision to work at CHRY was based on a commitment to the station's core values of community service and cultural development. We worked well above our allotted hours in order to complete daily tasks and special projects in which we were

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[7] The one notable exception is York University students who were employed through the school's Work/Study program, whose wages were subsidized by the province's grant program.

personally invested. Over time this does, however, take its toll on employees, and may account for the high staff turnover. This, of course, is also a long-term expense, given the time and money spent on training new hires. Moreover, all staff members inevitably took on tasks and projects outside of their job descriptions and knowledge area. Most notably, in the absence of a budget for a position dedicated solely to the station's digital presence, many of us took it upon ourselves to learn about emerging technologies in an attempt to extend the station's limited digital reach, often with mixed results.

**Changing Media and Economic Realities.** In the same office in which all of these challenges took place, there was of course the proverbial elephant-in-the-room: how relevant is an FM broadcast in 2015? For financial reasons, CHRY was unable to ascertain consistent listenership ratings, though rough estimates put this figure at 40,000 listeners per hour for low periods and 120,000 at peak periods. However, as noted in the CRTC's 2015 Monitoring Report, increasing numbers of listeners are using online sources of audio rather than conventional FM radio – a change to which CHRY was not immune. It is fair to assume that the independent musicians and radical social groups for whom CHRY's FM broadcast served as an invaluable platform in the 1990s could now reach their audiences through social media sites, thereby driving listeners to online-only platforms rather than the radio station. This in turn impacts the station's ability to sell advertisements to businesses who may find online advertising to be both cheaper and more effective in terms of reaching a broad, or least more demographically defined, audience. As noted above, the CRTC did not heed calls for financial support to enable c/c stations to expand their online presence. As can be seen from the figures listed in Appendix A, its limited budget did not allow for CHRY to devote revenues to its online presence, as it struggled just to maintain its FM broadcast.

There is also the issue of the student levy. This figure has been relatively consistent since between 2006 and 2015, averaging approximately $195,000 per year. It is calculated based on a $0.15 per credit fee for each undergrad student and $1.12 to $1.50 for each fulltime graduate student, thereby increasing or decreasing in relation to enrollment. It does not adjust for inflation. For example, the equivalent purchasing power of the $187,000 CHRY received in 2006, would be approximately $219,000 in 2015. Instead, CHRY received $195,000 in 2015. Moreover, in the years during my employment (2012-2015), there was a sense that we ought not to assume that this source of revenue would always be available. There were concerns that continued questions about the relevance of an FM broadcast in the new media environment, especially for young university students, could eventually erupt into a significant reduction, if not a wholesale elimination, of the levy. Whether such concerns were exaggerated or responsible is matter of debate beyond the scope of the present analysis.

External grants and subsidies are by far the least stable source of revenue. Such funding, including that which is channelled through the CRFC, is distributed in a patchwork fashion and usually awarded for special projects. This funding did not help with long-term initiatives to improve the station's overall operations. There was also the significant time and resources required to complete an application that, if successful, was usually worth under $5,000. Applying for funding and grants was also another Catch-22 situation. CHRY worked within the constraints noted above to stay within its budget. On paper it seemed as though the station was generally healthy and received a substantial

student levy, and therefore not in need (or *as* in need) of funding as other c/c stations applying for the same funds but who may have operated at a deficit. Such determinations also do not account for the increased costs associated with maintaining the broadcast in Toronto's saturated media market.

As mandated by the CRTC, CHRY also measured its significance to the community with fundraising revenues which, although steady overall, also failed to keep-up with inflation. Indeed, annual fundraising revenue in the 2012-2013 and 2014-2015 fiscal years were roughly equal to that of the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 fiscal years. There is, of course, legitimate debate as to how accurately fundraising revenue measures community listenership and impact, given all the personal variables involved in a person's decision to donate, including the financial crises of 2001/02 and 2008/09. Moreover, there were also questions raised about the antiquated telethon-style of fundraising, especially to an audience that had been asked for donations each year for twenty-eight years. For this reason, the station prepared to eliminate annual fundraising drives from the operations of VIBE.

Finally, as CHRY struggled to navigate old challenges in a new media environment, the CRTC approved the existence of a new licence class: Specialty FM licences based on ethnic programming. In Toronto, the Intercity Broadcasting Network was licenced in 2011 to serve the local Caribbean and African communities under the name "G98.7" (CRTC 2011-369). In their ruling, the CRTC noted that, "The proposed service will add cultural and racial diversity and will benefit the Caribbean and African communities of Toronto with its spoken word programming and musical format" without mention of CHRY's similar objectives.[8] Furthermore, G98.7 was granted "an average effective radiated power (ERP) of 446 watts (maximum ERP of 1,000 watts with an effective height of antenna above average terrain of 276.8 metres)", roughly three times the signal strength as was held by CHRY. This is not altogether surprising. As noted in the Commission's 2010 Report (above), the CRTC makes its determinations about the potential impact of a new licence to a given market based on the 'financial health' of private broadcasters. As a non-profit broadcaster, the impact to CHRY was effectively disregarded in this determination.[9] Indeed, CHRY's management attributed the marked decrease in advertising revenue in 2013 to the competition created by G 98.7FM.

### Something in the Air: Leading Up To and The Early Days of VIBE105

As indicated in the communications issued in the days following the launch of VIBE, primary emphasis is on 'professionalizing' the broadcast to better align with 'Industry standards', in order to achieve financial sustainability:

> The identified management team will work in line with the existing
> governance of CHRY Community Radio Inc. to apply a more streamlined
> and professionally guided approach to broadcast. ("Email to Programmers,"
> 2015)
> This opportunity is recognition [sic] that some of the practices used while
> the frequency was guided under previous structures did not effectively

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[8] To be sure, CFXJ-FM (Flow 93.5), owned by Newcap, was also already licenced to operate an "urban contemporary" in the Toronto region at 1,430 watts (CRTC 2002-201).

[9] Curiously, there are no submissions from CHRY included in the Commission's publicized deliberations over G98.7's licence.

translate to the expectation of current day broadcasting and media
consumption. ("Response Protocol," 2015)

The question, then, for those committed to the values of community radio that CHRY had strived – however imperfectly – to uphold for 28 years, is how the re-branded 'professionalism' of VIBE will uphold these values. Although it is still in its infancy, in what follows I describe some of the events that took place in the years leading up to and the early months of VIBE.[10] I highlight three changes that suggest that the hallmarks of campus/community radio may be, to some degree, jeopardized by the transition to VIBE and the underlying logic to emulate commercial practices in order to secure financial sustainability.

**Decreased Accessibility**

To begin with, broadcast opportunities were increasingly framed as a privilege for the skilled, rather than a right of community members. In 2012 I was introduced to an environment that historically had a 'come one, come all' approach to incoming volunteers. While they were expected to undergo orientation and training, there were very few exclusionary mechanisms in place.[11] Over the next three years, a new process took shape. After attending a general orientation to the station, volunteers were subject to an interview that was essentially a screening process. To my knowledge, there were no specific guidelines governing their admission, though in general volunteers were valued for possessing pre-existing skills or knowledge that could easily translate into a broadcast or non-broadcast role.[12] These contributors also needed to demonstrate a certain degree of social competency. These standards of admission were tempered by the pool of available applicants as each of the station's programs and departments required a critical mass of individuals to sustain operations; availability notwithstanding, however, the aim to attract skilled volunteers is significant. There is a risk that this form of gatekeeping distances the station from the commitments to community service and accessibility that are core to community broadcasting. While the barriers to access are certainly not as high as those of private broadcasters, the tendency to mimic these standards is a movement toward commercial-style meritocracy. This process may also reinforce larger social structures that privilege certain populations over others, to the extent that individuals who occupy positions of privilege (class, education level, ethnicity, etc.) may be more likely to possess the prerequisite skills; for example, privileged groups are more like to have already completed college broadcasting programs, had access to production equipment, etc.

**Increased Production Standards**

Along similar lines, production standards were heightened. It is worth reiterating that in the 1990s, CHRY prided itself on working with all volunteers regardless of technical competency ("Application," 1994). The mantra following the 2015 transition, however, was

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[10] Staff were told that CHRY would become VIBE one month before its occurrence; however, in hindsight, there is indication that this transition was anticipated, if not fully intended, by senior management in the years preceding.

[11] If volunteers were excluded it was usually on the basis of inappropriate conduct contrary to the station's values (after receiving numerous citations).

[12] In general, I was not responsible for volunteer intake and am therefore writing from observation, rather than direct experience.

that only high-quality content would be broadcast. Of course, this too was subject to the availability of content since, at the end the day, something needed to broadcast.[13] Nonetheless, VIBE volunteers were told that there was no guarantee that their content would broadcast or that they could remain in a broadcast role. Some contributors thrived in this environment, but others expressed frustration at not meeting expectations.

This process also coincided with a directive from management in 2014 that programmers should refrain from identifying CHRY as a "campus" station during broadcasts, opting instead for just "community" or avoidance of this kind of label altogether. Sales staff believed that the perceived inferiority of a 'campus/community' broadcast was negatively impacting their ability to attract new clients. Some volunteers were unfazed by or welcomed this change. For others, especially those working on the social justice/activist-oriented programming, losing the "campus" part of the label threatened to undercut the legitimacy this label holds with activist groups who prefer to be interviewed by campus/community stations because of the commitment to progressive politics that this label tends to confer.

By the time the transition to VIBE took place, use of both labels was effectively discontinued. Indeed, the press release issued days after the transition distanced the station's image from that of a campus station, aligning it instead with a commercial broadcast:

> IS THIS A SWITCH TO COMMERCIAL PRACTICE?
> In limited terms **YES**. The frequency will be guided using several commercially viable practices and professional equipment/software suites common in today's cutting edge broadcasts. ("Response Protocol," 2015)

It would seem, then, that losing the campus and campus/community labels was more than just a matter of perception or semantics; it reflected a broadcast environment that was being prepared to internally and externally adopt commercial practices.

**The Mainstreaming of Content**

Programming changes became evident primarily after the transition to VIBE. With the end of CHRY, all of its programs were discontinued. Repopulating the broadcast grid will take time and, as of the time my employment ended, only a few spoken word programs had been launched. The first of these was a news product called VIBE News Hits (Hits, henceforth). These are three minute and thirty second news headlines that broadcast intermittently throughout the day with musical beds designed to create a fast-paced, largely upbeat rhythm. This product was created for two reasons. First, to provide new contributors the opportunity to create shorter products, thereby developing their skillsets without the pressure of a longer broadcast (as means to achieve the above-discussed increased broadcast standards). Second, these products lend themselves to commercial sponsorships: it was hoped that advertisers would be inclined to sponsor this commodified version of news, thereby opening up a new revenue stream. In execution, the Hits tend to mimic the 'sound-bites' that are characteristic of commercial news broadcasts. For purposes of efficiency on the part of contributors striving to satisfy high quality standards, the topics are often ripped from commercial news headlines and the discussion of the topic is limited to what can be fit into a 60 second clip. Even the most

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[13] Although 'high-quality' sound is difficult to define, it generally includes clarity, consistency, and enhancement through sound design. For interviews, polished interview etiquette is also included.

skilled of contributors would struggle to contextualize news headlines in the ways that anti-oppression or critical news programming often strives.[14] While space may be still be available for community activists to develop full-length programs that support in-depth, critical analysis of issues, the emergence of this new product signals a shift to commercial-style broadcast that is cause for concern.

Another point of contention that emerged following the transition to VIBE was what the new "urban alternative" format would mean for the station's music programming. To be sure, I had only a cursory involvement with the Music Departments of both CHRY and VIBE. However, I can offer one key insight based on my discussions with management. In practice, "urban alternative" is a commodified form of urban or black culture. Management lamented the loss of audiences who valued CHRY for its broadcast of 'authentic' music and culture from Afro-Caribbean communities, which included music that had not yet, and might have never, achieved commercial success. They acknowledged these audiences would be lost but proceeded with the new format hoping it would increase advertising and show sponsorships. To this end, the process of accepting music submissions from new artists was altered. From management's point of view, functioning primarily to showcase new and emerging artists with unpolished sounds had proven financially unstainable. Under VIBE it is expected that emerging artists will use platforms like YouTube to develop their fan-base and sound quality, before they receive airtime. This is in keeping with 'professional' standards which value a refined sound quality and a certain degree of established success.  While a certain degree of audibility was always expected, the new standards are a stark departure from CHRY's original broadcasts, which included "a weekly demo feature…from bands in the Toronto area….paving the way for their successful music careers" ("Application," 1994).

### Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Taken together, consistent financial challenges and resource insufficiencies, coupled with a changing media climate and the emergence of speciality licences, presented a dilemma that required some form of response in order sustain the 105.5FM broadcast. To ignore or deny these changing realities may have resulted in the closure of the broadcast altogether. Proactively closing CHRY and reopening as VIBE was intended to position the latter to achieve financial sustainability where the former could not. For community radio advocates the question is, at what cost?

In 1997, Fairchild asserted that campus/community radio stations were better positioned to reflect social values because of their oppositional stance toward mainstream practices, in contrast to public media who had chosen "to compete with the commercial industry rather than challenge it" (p. 10). The transition from CHRY to VIBE, unfortunately, suggests that the latter process is taking root at this campus/community station. Increased standards for volunteer admission and broadcast quality together with the mainstreaming of news and music programming suggest that corporate practices have infiltrated this c/c station under the guise of 'professionalism'. Also writing in the late 1990s, Monk argued that "FM radio has become to a large extent, commercial radio with a space at the end of the dial for community and public channels" (1997, p. 57). The

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[14] Contextualizing news and current affairs coverage – in other words, identifying the root causes of and potential solutions to *social* problems, in contrast with the individualizing tendencies of commercial news coverage – was a focus of spoken word training under CHRY.

findings of this analysis suggest that space alone is no longer sufficient to ensure that community-oriented content can survive as such in an increasingly privatized market.

This analysis is not intended to focus blame on the individuals undertaking these transition to VIBE. Rather, a political-economic framework directs us to consider the broader environment in which these changes were deemed necessary – those contextual forces that enable and constrain decisions and actions. Nearly twenty years ago Fairchild also made the case that "using limited local advertising for community-focused businesses, limited public financing which provides the money to maintain operations, and individual donations from listeners and supporters" would be sufficient to sustain a c/c station (1997, p. 384). This no longer appears to be the case, at least in Toronto's market which has become particularly saturated because of the CRTC's relaxation of content regulation and ownership restrictions. Still, it is worth considering alternative steps that may have been taken at CHRY – or steps that may be taken by other campus/community stations facing a similar situation.

Looking to alternative and independent media in the U.S., Skinner (2012) delineates three interrelated approaches to sustainability that may have proved beneficial: education, organization, and public policy. For example, rather than bypassing the NCRA, the station may have opted to work more closely with the Association and other campus/community stations to educate community members about the increasing challenges it and other c/c stations are facing, and provide them with a better understanding of the value and role of community media, especially in a context of concentration, convergence, and deregulation. These efforts may serve to generate the kind of public pressure necessary to lobby the CRTC for improvements to c/c funding and regulatory changes. While I can attest to the challenges this would have posed, in terms of adding another initiative to an already strained environment, such changes, at some point, may be the only option if community media are to affect positive reforms to the regulatory environment, rather securing survival by means of accommodation to the very principles and modes of broadcast they originally existed to challenge.

From a regulatory perspective, France's Support Fund for Local Radio (FSER), as outlined in UNESCO's (2011) publication "Community Media: A Good Practice Handbook", is particularly instructive: "Commercial radio and television stations pay a levy on their commercial revenue into the [FSER]" and "community radio stations are eligible for support from the fund, amounting to some 50 per cent of their revenue" (p. 20). In 2007 this this amounted to a total revenue of $36.6 million USD, 80% of which was given to 588 community radio services (averaging approximately $50,000 USD each) (p. 21). If adopted in Canada, such funding could be used to improve the quality of broadcasting equipment, increase staffing and their salaries, and provide contributors with honoraria and stipends to open the station for broad-based access, while offering civic media training alongside that which is aimed at professional development.

The CRTC's practice of evaluating the financial health of only private stations before introducing a new licence into the market (including Speciality licences) must also be changed. If community media is genuinely on equally footing with that of private and public broadcasters, as the 1991 Broadcasting Act suggests, these stations must be factored into decision-making. To this end, the Commission ought to provide funding for representatives from community stations to partake in their deliberations, such that they can assert their needs into public discourse.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The aim of this paper has been to put the transition from CHRY to VIBE into the broader context of neoliberal broadcast (de)regulation. If we return to the research questions posed at the outset we find that CHRY was unsustainable and forced to navigate insufficient resources on daily basis, shortchanging volunteers and listeners, and over-extending staff. If we consider the expectations laid out in the CRTC's 2010 merger of campus and community radio (ethnocultural programming, training geared toward employment, and the expansion to new media (CRTC 2010-499)), a paradox comes into clear view: campus/community radio is expected to exceed the outputs of private broadcasters while being denied the stable funding and regulatory support necessary to do so.

It is too soon to evaluate the results of the transition to VIBE as the station is still implementing the operational changes that it hopes will increase revenue. Among these is a replacement of CHRY Community Radio Inc., the non-profit that currently controls the VIBE broadcast, with that of VX3 Exchange. Rhetorically, the soon-to-be renamed non-profit reflects values that may provide some reassurance to community radio advocates: a Voice can inspire; a Village united can empower; and a Vehicle is an agent of action ("VX3 Exchange," 2015). However, in practice, VIBE is being positioned to achieve sustainability by mimicking corporate practices under the guise of a 'professionalization'. While it remains a campus/community broadcast by designation, it remains to be seen (or heard) whether VIBE upholds the values of access, community involvement, and alternative content for which c/c radio is known. The early days of its operation are cause for concern.

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Appendix A



CHRY's Gross Profits and Total Expenses from 2006 to 2015