



# Dialled In

*Long a hub for alternative and marginalized communities, campus radio fights for relevance in the digital age, writes Sonia Persaud.*

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**Illustrations by Sophie Casson**

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**T**he first time she visited the radio station, Parujee Akarasewi thought she was walking into a dungeon. One of the station's volunteers led her down a fluorescent-lit concrete staircase with orange paint peeling on the railing and small holes of indeterminate origin riddling the walls, to the station's windowless basement location. Akarasewi knew nothing about radio programming or how stations operated, but before long, that basement would come to feel like home.

That was 2014, and Akarasewi—who goes by Mickey—had recently moved to Ottawa from Thailand. She was studying English with the goal of eventually completing a master's program. Never one to sit still, she was looking to make friends and develop her own relationship to the city. It was chance that led her to an open house at the University of Ottawa (uOttawa) where the university's campus radio station, CHUO-FM, was running a booth. She began volunteering at the station almost immediately, managing social media and eventually hosting her own show, Asianfluence, which focuses on K-pop and other East Asian music. Akarasewi later completed a master's in communications at uOttawa, with a co-op placement at CHUO along the way. She became station manager in 2024, ten years after that first visit.

Akarasewi greets me at CHUO's offices where her journey began. Aside from its foreboding entrance—no signs guiding the way, just a lime-green doorway at the end of the hall—CHUO's space is welcoming. We walk through an anteroom filled with comfortable couches, its green walls referencing the station's branding colour and, per Akarasewi, the Franco-Ontarian flag, a nod to the station's bilingual programming. Inside one of three studios are microphones and a radio console where the station's volunteer show hosts go live on the air. Several walls in the office are lined with shelf upon shelf of CDs. Akarasewi shows off one in particular, a signed CD from Montreal artist J. P. Mortier, which rests in a place of honour above the hundreds of others the station has in its catalogue. "He just finished a tour," she says proudly. Mortier, she tells me, sent CHUO a signed copy of his album, thanking it for being one of the first stations to take a chance on his music.

Whether for newcomers—to the music scene or to the country—or for communities on the margins, Akarasewi believes radio offers a space for everyone to find their voice. CHUO is best-known for shows focusing on the Black community in the city,

Sonia Persaud is a freelance journalist based in Katarokwi (Kingston), Ontario.

particularly Ottawa's large Afro-Caribbean community. The station's Afro-Caribbean Saturday lineup includes music shows like Caribbean Flavour and the long-running talk show Black on Black. Third-language cultural shows are common on university radio waves—CHUO's lineup also features Amanecer Ranchero, a Spanish-language show, and Apnivani, broadcasting in Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi.

But the future of these shows, and Akarasewi's home away from home, is facing serious threats. In 2023, CHUO lost a student vote on the fee levy it had used for years to fund the majority of its services, putting the station's finances, and programming, into precarity. Campus radio stations have, for decades, supported these kinds of programs, broadcasting in languages beyond English and French and speaking to marginalized communities. Today, though, as radio faces challenges to its relevance, the noisy

airwaves of campus radio could give way to silence.

Over fifty radio stations broadcast from universities and colleges across Canada. Most of them are funded by student fees, small annual or semesterly levies largely in the single digits per student. These stations, regulated by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and its campus-community license, are not-for-profit and have a mandate to serve both the university and the surrounding community. A key stipulation of the CRTC's cam-

pus-community license is that at least 15 percent of stations' broadcasting must be locally-produced news or talk-show content, helping the stations become stewards of hometown scenes.

For many Canadian university students, paying the station's annual fee is their only interaction with their campus radio station. While campus stations give curious students and community members a space to learn broadcasting skills and share cultural stories and news, they can be a tough sell for some of the cash-strapped students who fund them. A 2009 CRTC report found that some campus stations experienced challenges arising from "decreased or stagnant student levies which constantly require justification to student government." In the fifty-odd years that many of these stations have been on the air, along with CHUO, at least two other stations have lost student funding: CKMS-FM at the University of Waterloo in 2008, which is now an independent

station with no campus connection, and CIMN-AM at the University of Prince Edward Island in 1996. In the documentary *Radio Waterloo*, a former radio staffer describes students' prevailing sentiment: "Am I gonna pay \$5.50 a term or not? Well, it doesn't do anything for me, I don't listen to it, so I'm not gonna pay for it."

To the campus radio sector, this question of relevance is not new, but has become more pressing as the years go by. A 2024 CRTC report found that compared to older generations, Canadians aged thirty-five and under were less likely to cite radio as a primary source of entertainment, and more likely to refer to online video streaming services as a primary source of news and information. If radio is seen as an outdated medium, how can the stations justify their fees?

For proponents of campus radio stations, that justification lies in a different set of roles that these stations play. They don't dispute that younger Canadians' listening habits have changed—they argue instead that campus radio's value lies elsewhere. To some, it's hands-on job training for those students interested in music, journalism or audio production. For others, it's a more nebulous concept: campus radio stations provide a space for the intangible and community-based cultural activities that are part of the core purpose of higher education. As universities and students struggle to stay afloat, these activities can seem ancillary. If campus stations have to seek alternate revenue sources and chase profitability, they may not be able to offer the same opportunities for community hosts to produce shows. In that scenario, the diverse cacophony of voices that make up campus radio will vanish from the air.

**The history of campus radio stations in Canada begins** as a project of the electrical engineering department at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. In 1922, a group of engineering students and professors received an experimental radio license with the call sign 9BT in order to build an AM radio on campus (an earlier form of radio than FM, which would come later with its stronger sound quality). The station first took to the air on October 7, 1922, broadcasting a post-game summary of the football match between Queen's and the Hamilton Rowing Club. Throughout that year, the engineers continued to work on building a more powerful transmitter and eventually applied for a commercial license, which granted Queen's the call sign CFRC that the station maintains to this day. (Campus radio's original range of coverage was perhaps more limited than today: CFRC's first official broadcast on October 27, 1923, was also a football game.)

At this point, radio technology was cutting-edge. Unlike the neat set of blinking buttons and sliders of a modern radio station's digital console, CFRC's

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early apparatus consisted of inscrutable sets of coiled wires and glass tubes. To observers outside the academic sphere, radio waves represented a fantastical idea—an invisible light capable of reaching vast distances through the ether. Reports from that time in student newspaper the *Queen's Journal* reflect a sense of awe. “‘There is music in the air’ is an old saying, but to be able to pick it up out of the air and have it to dance to is something new,” wrote the *Journal* in 1923. “To hear the Radio announce that the next number is to be played by a New York Orchestra makes one feel that New York is getting closer to Kingston every day.”

The development of new campus stations stalled until 1965, when the University of Saskatchewan's CJUS-FM received a CRTC license (it would close amidst financial issues in 1985). With the stations that followed CFRC, the culture of radio broadcasting shifted. Unlike the electrical engineers at Queen's, whose interest in radio began in the technical, by the 1980s, campus broadcasters leaned decidedly more into the political and the alternative. As commercial stations, and their association with Top 40 hits, ruled the popular culture, campus radio increasingly became a space to hear new local musical talent or newsy shows with progressive political viewpoints.

This was no more apparent than in Toronto, where new immigrants from an array of backgrounds were putting down roots, bringing with them fresh ideas about music and culture. “It's an open question whether this third-floor alcove in a Victorian ex-mansion on St. George Street is closer by nature to the artist's loft or the ivory tower,” muses a 1982 *Globe and Mail* article about the stately white-brick building that would be home to the University of Toronto's campus station. That year, stations at both the University of Toronto and the Ryerson Polytechnic Institute (now Toronto Metropolitan University) applied for broadcast licenses from the CRTC. What the incipient stations of the eighties like Ryerson's CKLN-FM shared with Queen's CFRC was an ethos of passion and dedication to craft. “We're not here to make money,” CKLN's then-station manager Anton Leo told the *Globe*. “We're here to make good radio.”

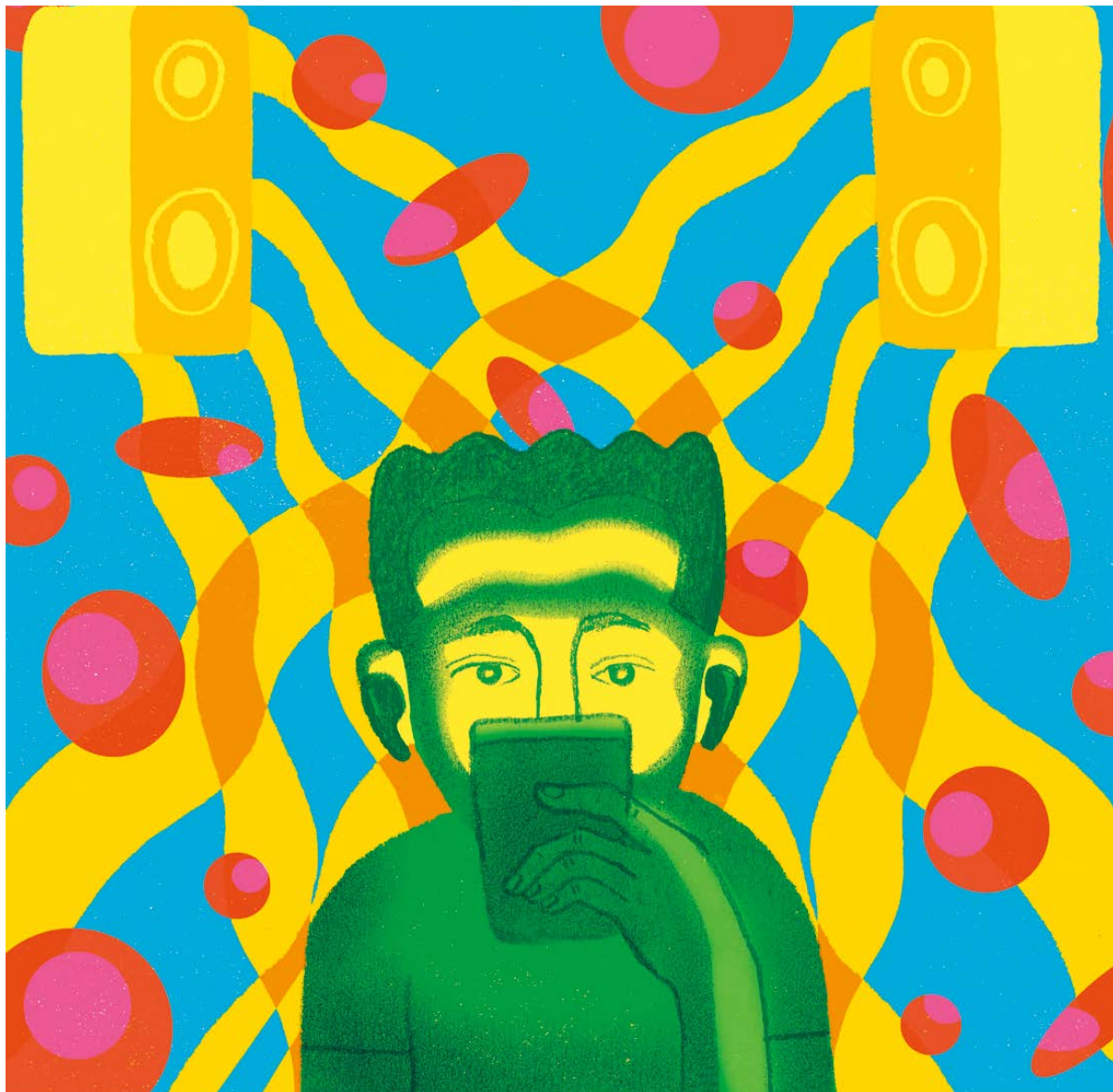
When CKLN took to the air in 1983, the station helped reshape the city's music scene. It soon became the home of Toronto's first hip hop show, *Fantastic Voyage*. “It was a Black music show,” says Mark V. Campbell, a music professor at the University of Toronto who founded Northside Hip Hop Archive. “The impact was significant because hip hop could not be found in other places. It wasn't on television, it wasn't on commercial radio, and it was still evolving.” The host of *Fantastic Voyage*, DJ Ron Nelson, used the show as a platform to help build a hip hop com-

munity in Toronto. He spotlighted up-and-coming artists across the city like Maestro Fresh Wes and Michie Mee. “Without such a show we wouldn't have such a vibrant hip hop community,” says Campbell of Toronto's music history. (CKLN lost its license in 2011; today, Toronto Metropolitan University has Met Radio broadcasting on 1280AM).

At McGill's CKUT-FM, the shows Dykes on Mykes and Queercorps, on air since 1987 and 1991 respectively, started out by speaking to and providing news for the city's queer community during a time when its scene operated primarily underground. In July 1990, Montreal police raided a well-known after-hours queer party called Sex Garage and assaulted party-goers. Queercorps host Puelo Deir organized demonstrations and legal funds following the raid, as it became a watershed moment in Montreal's queer history. On the air a year later, Dykes on Mykes' hosts Deborah VanSlet and Elizabeth Littlejohn dedicated an episode to the Sex Garage raid and a kiss-in protest held to commemorate its first anniversary. During a recording from the kiss-in, the crowd chatters in English and French, making kissing noises and chanting: “We're here, we're queer, we're fabulous!” “I like to kiss my girlfriend on the road,” an attendee tells Dykes on Mykes. “I have something to tell you,” says another, laughing. “I enjoy oral sex with women outside police stations!” The episode emphasizes the solidarity between gay men and women in the face of police violence, and the need for a “rainbow coalition” showing solidarity with other groups, like Black and Indigenous communities, facing prejudice in the city.

“Having these shows back then was really important to just get that basic representation of queer people on the air and in the news,” says current Queercorps host Onyx Borysewicz. Today, amidst changing radio consumption, he finds that the show's role has shifted: his iteration of the show focuses primarily on promoting queer culture and art in Montreal. “This is no longer people's main source of community,” he says. Even so, Borysewicz still believes that the show retains some of its original purpose: giving a platform to under-represented people and creators. “It's just kind of in a bit of a different context now.”

Over forty years after *Fantastic Voyage* began broadcasting in Toronto, campus radio shows like Queercorps and Akarasewi's *Asianfluence* continue to provide community value, but students don't always reap the direct benefits. “It's fantastic to know that there's a reggae show or a classical show that's been on the air for forty years, but what do the students get out of that?” explains Barry Rooke, executive director of the National Campus and Community Radio Association (NCRA). “There's this battle between that community element and what the students are seeing.”



**Narges Ghaffari's hour-long radio show on CHUO** typically opens with the tinny sounds of an old Iranian national anthem. Ghaffari came to Canada as a refugee in 1989, after fleeing Iran. As a woman who feels her voice was silenced by Iran's government, taking to the airwaves was particularly meaningful for her. It was by chance that she and her co-founder Reza Shams stumbled across CHUO. In 1995, Radio Irava—Irava referring to the voice of the Iranian people—was born.

Radio Irava has been a mainstay of CHUO's on-air schedule for thirty years. When Radio Irava began broadcasting, primarily in Farsi, there was no other local media in the language. Canada had seen a large wave of immigration from Iran following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Today, Ottawa is home to the fourth-largest Iranian community in Canada. Ghaffari believes that radio gives power and legitimacy to communities. "When they heard that we started the radio show, they were very excited," says Ghaffari. "It was: okay, we have a voice now, we have something."

Those voices faced a reckoning in 2023. CHUO's funding was put to the test after the student union approved a referendum question against the station's fee levy to appear on a fall 2023 ballot. The station's student volunteers put up flyers, went door-knocking in Ottawa's Sandy Hill neighbourhood, where both students and families live, and created a petition to continue the station's funding. But their attempts weren't enough: the 2023 referendum vote passed, with 70 percent of votes in favour of halting the station's student levy.

Artists and journalists took to social media to decry the loss of CHUO's student levy. Many spoke about how CHUO marked the beginning of their careers in the industry—including former CBC News anchor and Carleton University journalism professor Adrian Harewood, Polaris Prize-nominated musician Alanna Stuart and actor and comedian Tom Green. CHUO brought forward a complaint as to how the referendum question was worded, which the station argued did not reflect their fee. The referendum results wer-

en't ratified, but the defunding vote was successfully repeated the following semester, with CHUO officially losing its student levy in 2024.

There's differing views at uOttawa on exactly what led to the station's referendum loss. CHUO program director Luigi Fidelia points to the COVID-19 pandemic as a driver of student disinterest in the station. Fidelia says the online years posed a challenge for the station and its ability to connect with students. "We've lost the connection to those that were here because of the pandemic, and we didn't get a chance to really build that connection with the new students that came in," he says. Akarasewi agrees, though she feels it wasn't just COVID, but also the station not making attempts to engage with the student body. "The year before [the first referendum], we didn't really do anything with the students," she says, attributing this to a rough transition between station managers.

James Adair, a uOttawa student who served on the student union Board of Directors during both CHUO referendums, voted in favour of continuing CHUO's student levy. But he says he understands the perspective of students who feel the station was not worth some of the limited dollars in their bank accounts. "It's a hard case to make to a student who's paying \$1,000 a month in rent, struggling to buy groceries and struggling to pay their tuition and all this other stuff, that also you need to subsidize this radio station because people off campus really like it," explains Adair. "Because then their thought is, why don't the people off campus pay for it?"

uOttawa student Arya Gunde, who has been volunteering at CHUO since 2023, believes CHUO's defunding is, at least in part, symptomatic of a general apathy on campus. In the referendum that finally defunded CHUO, voter turnout was just 6.74 percent. With the university in the heart of a busy city, students are often focused on life off campus. Adair adds that uOttawa students, at least the ones who vote, aren't generally in favour of adding on new student fees. The same election where students initially voted to defund CHUO also saw them approve a reduction in their overall student union fee.

Akarasewi and Fidelia have been involved in navigating the station through its loss of funding. Around 80 percent of CHUO's funding used to come from student fees, with the balance coming from advertising revenue, events and partnerships. CHUO operated on a surplus during the pandemic lockdown, so Akarasewi says they have been able to continue operations as usual for the past year, while trying to diversify their revenue streams.

But time is running out. Sometime in 2026, the station will be out of surplus funds. Akarasewi is

trying to initiate a new referendum question for the uOttawa student union's 2026 winter election that would ask students to re-initiate a levy for the station.

Akarasewi emphasizes that to her, the station's community is like a family. She says this without a trace of the faux-sincerity that the term is used with in the corporate world; she truly believes it. To her, leading a primarily volunteer-run station, family is about showing up for each other. "When we need help, they help us. When they need help, we help them," Akarasewi says.

**Though CHUO's case is the extreme, other stations** around the country are also facing increased scrutiny about how they spend their money and whether, for students, it's worth it.

In London, Ontario at CHRW-FM, Western University's Radio Western, the station's fee and any increase are approved annually by the university's student council, rather than a broader student vote. But in 2018, a heated student council discussion about the station fee—which had spanned three school years of council meetings, blog posts and opinion pieces in the student newspaper—spilled over into a campus-wide referendum. Students voted to reduce Radio Western's fee—then \$12.47, a number on the higher end of campus station student levies—to \$10.50 over the following five years (an outcome higher than other options on the ballot, and that Radio Western was happy with). Though some student councillors at the time defended the station for providing skills training and creative opportunities for students, others expressed mistrust in the station's management and questioned whether radio was worth student dollars. In 2016, as the debate was heating up, then-student council member Mark Farfan wrote a letter to the editor of the Gazette student newspaper: "The fact of the matter is campus radio no longer plays a significant role in the lives of the vast majority of undergraduate students," he argued. "Should we continue to pay nearly \$400,000 every year to fund a radio station that arguably benefits so few of us?"

At the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, student fees for campus station CJUM-FM, better known as UMFM, had been stagnant since its inception in the nineties. By the early 2010s, staff were struggling to cover operations amidst rising inflation. In 2016, UMFM initiated a referendum to have its fee increased. The station lost, but later won an internal vote from the student union's executive to have their fee pegged to inflation, easing pressure on its operating budget. The situation is similar at CKDU-FM, the campus station at Halifax's Dalhousie University, where staff say they have attempted to bring forward referenda to have their funding increased since their

first broadcast in 1985. Each time, they've been stymied, either by not having enough signatures to put a question on the ballot, a "no" result, or low voter turnout making the results invalid. CKDU's levy has remained at \$4.50/year per student, but inflation means it doesn't stretch as far. Operations director Megan McCracken says this has led to a budget shortfall they've had to try to make up through grants and fundraising. "If my music director didn't quit this year, I would have had to fire him next year," McCracken says grimly. These stations maintain a levy and have continued their on-campus operations. But their student election results indicate possible trouble ahead.

Even while campus radio stations work to justify their student fees, they face threats outside of student apathy. In Ontario, the recently passed Supporting

Children and Students Act gives the provincial government the power to dictate which ancillary fees can and cannot be charged to students. Campus radios, which often provide alternative, progressive viewpoints, may find their funding threatened. The legislation has been met with backlash from the post-secondary sector, including the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) and numerous student unions. The section of the Act that pertains to post-secondary education "risks undermining institutional autonomy" reads the COU's response. The provincial government has claimed this legislation will ensure students

know where their fees are going. Elsewhere, budget constraints at post-secondary institutions have led to station cuts, like at London's Fanshawe College. The school announced in fall 2025 that it is cancelling its radio program and seeking outside entities to take over the long-standing campus station CIXX-FM.

While some campus radio stations face threats to their longevity, others flourish, defying doom-and-gloom prophecies and the notion that radio is the sound of the past. Perhaps counter-intuitively, a 2025 NCRA-commissioned survey showed the campus and community sector is growing with 18-to-29-year-old listeners. Director Rooke points to a rebound in student engagement post-COVID, distrust in commercial media and online algorithms, and interest from international students—who may hear themselves represented in many third-language shows—as part of the explanation for this rise.

McGill's CKUT is one station that is, by many indicators, thriving. The station has maintained student support, and in fact won a 2024 student referendum

to increase its annual levy. Volunteer Coordinator Michelle Wang credits the station's student volunteers with the referendum's success. Like CHUO's volunteers, CKUT volunteers did everything they could to spread the word—tabling on campus, handing out flyers, putting up posters. At CKUT, size may be making the difference: the station has over 300 active volunteers including students and off-campus members, compared to CHUO's approximately fifty. CHUO's uOttawa has more students than McGill, but Montreal is a larger city, known for its arts and activist cultures, which can make it easier to drum up engagement. McGill, too, has a reputation as an elite institution attracting students from wealthier families, who may have more leeway when it comes to student fees. But still, those volunteers are ready and willing to support their station, which can be credited at least in part to CKUT's dizzying schedule of student engagement throughout the school year. Its recent event lineup, for example, includes dance parties (aptly titled Radio's Not Dead), open houses, casual hangouts and workshops on topics ranging from fact-checking to beat production.

CKUT is certainly not the only campus station in Canada to attempt to build a close-knit student community around its campus station, but it has arguably been one of the most successful. Organizing face-painting at the station's office for St. Patrick's Day does little to directly improve the quality of the station's broadcasts. Instead, events like these make the station a convergence point for a disparate group of students variously passionate about music, music production, journalism or engaging with the wider city. "An exchange of ideas and exchange of friendship keeps everyone connected to the space," says Wang. The station maintains a robust in-person engagement with students, giving it a strong base to work from when referendum votes roll around. Stations like CJSR-FM at the University of Alberta and CFRC at Queen's are also seeing success in student support. At both schools, the stations' student levies are subject to periodic votes (every three years at Queen's, every five at University of Alberta). Both have maintained, or even increased, their funding in recent votes.

Relevance, then, is not necessarily a losing battle. Even as streaming companies like Spotify, with their multi-billion dollar revenues, would seem to pose a dire threat to radio, there is also growing resistance to their dominance. Criticisms of the companies include their small revenue payouts, investments in military technology and bland, data-driven curation. Streaming platforms are propelled by ever-shifting algorithms designed to capture engagement. But California-based tech companies don't care about the hyper-local milieu in which campus radio operates.

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For Generations Z and Alpha, radio, and especially campus radio, may be one of the few places left to escape the reach of algorithms that otherwise dominate their media consumption. “[Community radio] is the place where the least amount of power is exercised on the user, the listeners,” says Campbell. It’s one of the most democratized, egalitarian platforms for media consumption, which is critical for local community-building, Campbell argues. “It’s great to be outside of the reach of the kinds of algorithmic power that operates unfettered in our world.” That same lack of reliance on streaming numbers and profitability has allowed campus radio to continuously provide a platform for marginalized voices, giving it a unique position that is not in direct competition with the major streamers, but rather offers something else entirely.

That’s not to suggest, too, that these stations are ignoring the digital age. Campus stations are typically available to stream online, with many also adding podcasting programs and experimenting with other new models. Success may require a combination of strategies, from allowing for asynchronous access through podcasts, to hosting in-person events for their communities and offering material resources like access to recording equipment.

In the last year, CHUO has done all three. Akarasewi rattles off a list of on-campus events the station has been involved with: talent show *uoTalent*, the university’s Pride breakfast, a hip hop event run by the faculty of education. Zilla ManiKongo, who hosts a francophone music show on CHUO called *Solola Bien* and was an emcee for *uoTalent*, tells me the event was one of his favourite moments of the past year. “The show we delivered from CHUO to the students was amazing,” he says. A crowd of over a hundred gathered in the student centre as students rapped, sang, and played instruments in front of vibrant stage lighting. Performer Mélia Martin won for a flute performance, layered over a video of herself singing “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

Akarasewi is also planning for the station to provide DJ and marketing services to earn additional revenue. There’s a risk, though, that the time spent procuring funding to keep the station afloat might mean less focus on programming. “I think we’ve been kind of forced to go from radio to a media-slash-content-creation platform,” says Fidelia. “I think that’s the only way that independent radio in Canada is going to survive.”

The cost of survival may be the very programming that makes these stations unique. Many of those I spoke to believe campus radio is emblematic of a role they feel universities should play in society: serving a greater, non-commercial good and pro-

viding a service for their communities that can’t be numerically quantified. “If the frame of reference is only a transactional and financial relationship to the university, then students won’t benefit from their time at university,” says Campbell.

Throughout the twenty-first century, decreased government funding for universities across Canada has led to many operating more like businesses in order to keep the lights on. Brian Fauteux, a professor of popular music and media studies at the University of Alberta, says this means universities now evaluate what happens on campus and attempt to quantify the value each service brings. When universities operate like businesses, students become more like customers—an understandable response to an increasingly unaffordable world. And customers expect value for their money. The funding woes of many campus radio stations, then, might reflect a broader sea change in the imagined purpose of higher education. Even when campus stations are not serving students, they embody the once-accepted ideals of higher education in a democratic society: creating space for sustained educational engagement with culture, the arts and politics through a framework where all voices, as many station managers stressed to me, are welcome.

**More than a century after that first** university football game was recapped on the air, radio stations maintain a near ubiquitous presence on campuses. Students who tune in can hear sports play-by-plays or a host interviewing a professor about their research. A few hours later, a community member can hear their mother tongue broadcast live from a station close to their Canadian home. Campus radio’s true nature may be less of a question of the ivory tower versus the artist loft, and more about radio’s ability to seamlessly blend these locales, connecting campus and community. If universities don’t house these stations and their programming, it’s not clear where they will go. “That ends up really harming the more interesting and creative and valuable things that happen on a university campus, that can’t always be measured and given a neat little return or monetary value,” says Fauteux.

At CHUO, the blending of campus and community is more than figurative. In the basement of the university’s student centre, a speaker is tuned to CHUO at all hours of the day, playing it out loud for campus-goers to hear. That doesn’t guarantee that, over the chatter of students discussing homework or the drone of a fan, anyone is paying attention. But since the very first radio broadcasts, the idea has always been simple: one voice, crackling out into the ether, and the possibility of someone on the other end listening. ✨