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| . | **Memo**  ***From the office of the…***  **General Manager of the MSU** |
| TO: | Members of MSU and CFMU Incorporated |
| FROM: | John McGowan, General Manager |
| SUBJECT: | Long-Term Direction of Campus Media |
| DATE: | March 11, 2021 |

The purpose of this communication is to summarize campus and community trends with respect to the consumption of media, student and community involvement, fiscal realities and industry benchmarks. In addition, it outlines several ideas regarding the long-term direction of campus media and potential next steps. These, I hope, will provide a framework to revitalize the role that campus media plays at McMaster University and the broader community.

Like many in the newspaper industry, The Silhouette has faced an abundance of challenges such as changing technologies, a cyclical staff and volunteer base, decreasing advertising revenue and a reduction in the number of issues. Given these circumstances, efforts have been made to evolve the product. Examples include: reallocating some print resources to on-line content, providing more design expertise through the Digital Media Specialist role and attempting to improve staff training and volunteer engagement.

In many cases, I believe that the discussions to date have been reactionary to a fiscal challenge (loss of advertising revenue, Student Choice Initiative, COVID… you pick 😊) and not visionary. My intention is not to place blame, as I myself took part in most of these discussions. I believe that independent media has an invaluable role to play in society. Furthermore, campus media plays a vital role in the MSU in assisting the organization to meet the mission to bring students together into a true society. Don’t believe me? Check out our purpose!

My goal is to engage recipients of this memo over the next month on what campus and community media could look like in the years to come so that we can continue to be at the forefront of reimagining campus media.

**Overview of Environment**

**1. Trends**

The Silhouette has faced multiple challenges in recent years - some being unique to the campus newspaper, others impacting the sector as a whole. Over the last few years through The Silhouette Board of Publication, we have seen a reduction in both the number of issues produced and the number copies printed per issue. The rationale for this has been the volume of papers left on the newsstand weekly and the hope to reallocate some resources to digital content. This is under the backdrop of a growing campus.

In addition, there has been a large reduction in volunteer contributors. This has not only forced editors to write more, it has also resulted in the addition of reporter roles to ensure content.

While this has continued, so to has the growth of informal methods of students sharing their opinions, news and views. This can most notably be seen in MacInsiders, Spotted at Mac and more recently, Mac Confessions.

Lastly, advertising revenue has drastically dropped off. Similar to the industry as a whole, partners have reduced resources spent on ads in the physical paper and expect much lower rates to partner on digital content.

**2. Content Development**

The Silhouette’s content is created by staff writers and editors. Currently there are approximately 16 content creators and of which 4 are editors. Their specific roles can be found in The Silhouette Operating Policy here: **https://msumcmaster.ca/governance/bylaws-policies/.** The majority of the staff support the production of the physical paper with recent changes has allowed for more support for the digital platform. However the cyclical nature of many of the staff has challenged the consistency of current on-line content through mutliple platforms

Over the years, The Silhouette has tried many different initiatives to improve on-line content including several re-designs of their webpage and a focus on video content in certain years. In addition, they have allocated additional resources to digital content by way of designating part-time staff to this area and sharing the Digital Media Specialist role with CFMU.

**3. Technology/ I/T Support**

The Silhouette is currently supported by a service contract with WWorks for website and desktop technical support through the MSU Information & Technology department. In practice, I believe that both parties would agree that this has been challenging for several reasons: the lack of a relationship between WWorks and the MSU I/T department, the annual Silhouette staff turnover, The Silhouette’s desire to manage and control their own site/network, and the potential lack of expertise in the leadership team in terms of managing digital assets, network and software platforms.

From a capital perspective, the MSU has invested in over 12 Mac desktops along with a multitude of camera and video equipment. However, there is not a strong oversight to see if this technology is being utilized effectively as many team members work remotely. The assets do go underutilized during off peak production times.

**4. Structure**

Currently, The Silhouette is one of, if not the only, remaining campus media outlets which is structured as a department of a Student Union. While the MSU is the publisher of The Silhouette, editorial autonomy is provided through both policy and The Silhouette Board of Publication. The Editor-In-Chief reports to the General Manager and the MSU Vice-President (Finance) chairs The Silhouette Board of Publication.

This structure has worked relatively well over the years, however as the MSU continues to diversify, so to does the skill set and resources needed to have an industry leader media service. Media has become more complex, continuity becomes a rarity rather that the norm and revenue generation becomes more difficult. The request for additional support has been echoed by myself, along with multiple Editor-In-Chiefs.

**5. Staff and Volunteers**

Historically, staff at The Silhouette have come from the department’s volunteer pool. During a volunteer’s time with The Silhouette, they typically work their way up to a higher position **(**a leadership role in some cases at the Silhouette, during their time at McMaster.

However, in the last 4-6 years, both the amount of volunteers and number of applicants for job openings have decreased significantly. As a result, a large effort is put forth by the MSU and Silhouette Editor-In-Chief to find a strong applicant for each position – which we have been successful in doing so, given the lack of candidates.

This reality of decreased volunteerism is not unique to The Silhouette. Both on campus and at the MSU, activities have diminished, the volume of applicants has decreased, and roles have become paid positions. Feedback received and anecdotal experience provides the following insight:

* Many students have academic goals beyond their undergrad degree. Therefore, more onus is put on their academic standing that better aligns with their goals, as opposed to a part-time job or extracurricular activity.
* Financial realities are prioritized ahead of volunteering, resume building or extra-curricular activities.
* The opportunities are not relevant to the students’ interests or career path.

**Areas to Explore**

**1. Support**

*Staff & Volunteers:*Re-iterating the need for added support, a solution would be to have full-time staff provide continuous leadership and support at both The Silhouette and CFMU. The pillars needing this support would include content development, technology, business operations/administration.

*I/T:*An opportunity that should be explored is to have I/T, network and equipment shared between The Silhouette and CFMU. Assets such as computers, cameras and video equipment should be used as effectively as possible for content creation. In addition, support for these assets should be centralized

*Structure:* My suggestion is to look at a structure that provides more industry expertise and continuity to operations. There should be added full-time support and leadership in terms of fulfilling the mandate of The Silhouette as it has become very challenging for someone in a Student Opportunity Position to fulfill it with the limited support currently provided.

I believe the concept of aligning The Silhouette as a division of CFMU Inc. should be seriously considered. The thought is for, the MSU to no longer be the publisher of The Silhouette and transfer this oversight to CFMU Inc. The purpose for this is three-fold. Firstly, it would provide a clearer separation in editorial autonomy from the MSU. Secondly, it would provide a structure to evolve with other media platforms. Lastly, it would create an environment of greater support and would, as a result, avoid relying on cyclical relationships to foster joint initiatives.

**2. Consolidate Content Development**

As highlighted previously, The Silhouette’s leadership team consist of the Editor-in-Chief, Production Editor, Online Editor and Managing Editor. Under this lead exists a team of section editors who support arts & culture, news, opinions, and sports. Lastly, reporter(s) and content creators are hired for each section. The output is historically 22-28 papers and periodic on-line updates. The number of papers has been declining in recent years due to budget concerns and of course COVID this year.

Under the leadership of the full-time CFMU Program Director and Administrative Director, is the Community Outreach Coordinator (SOP), along with several part-time roles: Sports Director, Promotions Coordinator, Spoken Word Coordinator, Music Director, Production Coordinator and Production Assistant. Aside from these roles, campus and community volunteers are relied on for content creation. CFMU’s output consists of 24/7 radio content, periodic videos and regular podcasts. The Silhouette and CFMU share the role of Digital Media Specialist.

Cross-over of coverage can be seen on stories such as Welcome Week, sports, local arts and events, and community politics. I am sure there is more which team members can elaborate on. I believe it is worthwhile to discuss how to better align student resources (financial and human resources) in order to avoid potential redundancies. The goal is to produce additional quality content that covers a broader spectrum of campus and community news and events. In addition, under an amalgamated service operations model, I believe there would be more support for new staff from experienced team members and would assist the Silhouette in transition, training and producing content in a more timely, easier fashion.

**Considerations**

**1. Regulations**

As a reminder, CFMU Inc. is a separately incorporated entity. As a result, there are parameters that which must be adhered to ensure CRTC compliance. While I am not aware of restrictions on broadening the activities of CFMU Inc., nothing can be done to jeopardize their standing as a campus-community radio station.

We have spoken to our legal counsel and review applicable CRTC regulations. We did not find anything that would pose challenges to the CRTC license as long as the composition of the CFMU Board of Directors remain the same.

**2. Phased Approach**

Many different issues and ideas are raised. If there is a consensus on any of them, a manageable plan must be created and committed to moving forward. I would suggest a phased approach which allow to integrate the goal of the change the opportunity to succeed. Periodically when changes are made, the impact does take time to be realized. I would suggest looking at a 3 year time horizon to evaluate the impact of the changes

The initiative could be broken into 3 manageable phases while supporting the day to day activities

Phase 1 April 2021 – Structure Alignment – this is the motions we bring forward now.

Phase 2 May - December – Content Collaboration and Personnel Alignment. This would be a project for the Silhouette, CFMU and MSU to continue to work through and recommend further changes to relevant approval bodies

Phase 3 January 2022– March 2022 – Evaluation of changes and projected I/T and infrastructure investment. This would occur at the SRA, CFMU Inc, CFMU Board of Directors and Silhouette Board of Publications, commencing in January 2022,

Phase 4 – March 2023 – CFMU Inc and MSU evaluate media service offerings to the campus and community

The MSU would need to provide transitional funding to ensure the success of this endeavour. In my opinion the term of this funding should 3years, declining by 1/3rd a year.

Over the last three years the MSU has subsidized the Silhouette by $230,500 in 2019, $192,500 in 2020 and we are projecting a subsidy of $188,000. The MSU should provide the following subsidy to CFMU to assist in transitional funding;

2021/22 - $ 190,000

2022/23 - $ 127,000

2023/24 - $ 64,500

The subsidy would conclude for the 2024/25 year.

**3. Student Opportunities**

I believe we need to be mindful of creating relevant opportunities for MSU members to get involved in - opportunities that align with their interests and prepare them for their next stage of their career. It is important for any operational or structural changes to take into consideration not only the result, but also the opportunities and benefits for MSU members.

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As always, I am open to feedback, amendments, and suggestions. I look forward to discussing this in further detail.

Sincerely,

John McGowan   
General Manager

**Resources & Interesting Reads**  

<https://www.bcg.com/en-ca/publications/2017/media-entertainment-digital-organization-companies-go-digital-who-is-charge>

<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/opinion/2017/12/11/discourse-debate-whats-the-role-of-campus-media/>

[The new media partners » Media in Canada](https://mediaincanada.com/2014/06/27/the-new-media-partners/)

<https://www.levellingthedigitalplayingfield.ca/>