

# The Langara Journalism Review

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**The Langara Journalism Review** is a print magazine written, edited and produced by journalism students at Langara College in Vancouver, British Columbia. The **LJR** focuses on the issues and trends shaping the practice of journalism in Western Canada.

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# Culture on Air



By **SABRINA ABDUL**

**T**here are 14 minutes before América Latina Al Dia, a Spanish and English public affairs radio show, goes on the air. Crowded around a long, narrow, grey table receiving their scripts for today's show are Rosamelia Andrade, Luis Gea, Jay Hartling and Mark Wilson.

Hartling is the producer of América Latina Al Dia this week on 102.7 FM CFRO, Vancouver's oldest co-operative radio station. The show, which launched in 1976 and airs Saturday afternoons, is one of 93 programs offered on Co-op Radio, and is run by volunteers.

Andrade is reading her script, moving her feet side to side, wrapping her jacket tighter around her, and comments about the cold temperature inside the CFRO building at 360 Columbia St., in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

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Her thoughts are interrupted by Hartling's worried voice. "Luis, do you have a pen? Rosamelia? Anyone? Who has a pen?" Hartling has found a mistake on a segment of the script someone had forgotten to print out earlier and rushes to correct it. Wilson, the only member of the show who speaks minimal Spanish, finds three pens and rushes them over to Hartling, before returning to the narrow hallway to the right of the table.

He paces back and forth reading his script for the English portion of the newscast. His words are mumbled at times while he practices all the Spanish names, making sure his pronunciation is just right as he periodically looks up to check the time.

Vancouver Co-op Radio was founded in October 1973 and evolved from the creative thinking of two community groups: the Muckrakers, a group of Simon Fraser University communications students, who objected to much of the content on local radio stations, and Neighbourhood Radio, a group of activists who organized an experimental broadcast group, which recorded alternative radio shows.

The two groups joined forces in the winter of 1974 to draw up an application form with the hope of establishing a co-op radio station in Vancouver. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) motivated the groups to pursue the idea of having an alternative radio station, and in March 1974 they submitted their application.

After two months of hearings the CRTC granted Vancouver Co-op Radio a license, and CFRO 102.7 was officially designated to the FM radio dial.

It is one minute before 12:00 noon as Hartling and Andrade scramble into the studio to put on their headphones and set up their microphones. With five seconds to spare, Gea signals to the studio technician, Alex Quijada, as he throws to the introduction. The loud sounds of drums and horns fill the studio.

"Good afternoon and welcome to América Latina Al Dia!" Andrade watches Hartling intently, sneaking quick glances at her script.

She rubs her hands back and fourth on her jeans, with a nervous but eager look, even though she's been co-hosting the show for seven months and has worked in radio before.

CFRO's very first broadcast was April 14, 1975, almost a year overdue from its licensing date. Before regular broadcasts could start though, money had to be raised for equipment and a location had to be found. The station started on the top two floors of the old Mercantile Bank of Canada, nestled in an area now known as Pigeon Park at 337 Carrall St. CFRO would stay in that building for 26 years before moving to its new location at Columbia Street, in 2001. But before airing its first show, Co-op Radio had many obstacles to overcome.

The station initially planned to air in September of 1974, but the arrival of necessary equipment was two months late. A transmitter ordered in August didn't arrive until October and other equipment arrived with broken pieces that needed to be sent back and fixed. Also, BCTV, a national news network in the province, promised Co-op Radio the use of its transmitter on Simon Fraser University land, but SFU officials had concerns because they said CFRO radio transmissions could potentially interfere with university experiments.

However, after much negotiation, the university and CFRO signed a lease allowing use of the transmitter, but the lease included a clause allowing the university to order the station off-air if it decided experiments were receiving interference.

After 30 years of survival, volunteers credit many different things for the station's survival. "Commitment," says Angélica Gutierrez, referring to why she thinks América Latina Al Dia has survived for three decades. Gutierrez is a volunteer and a member of the station's board of directors. She's been with the station for six years and attributes determination of volunteers as the key to Co-op Radio's survival.

"Passion for community radio," Andrade says. Her prior involvement with Co-op Radio in South America made her want to be a part of CFRO.

Jane Williams is one of the hosts of Redeye, a public affairs show at the station. She also sits on the board of directors. As a CFRO volunteer for 20 years, Williams says there's a need for Co-op Radio.

“Co-op Radio wouldn't have just survived through the few people who are down there and do it because they think it's important,” she says. “Co-op Radio is obviously filling a need in the community, in the city, in the province, basically.” Williams clarifies, “You can have the dedication of the people who put Co-op Radio out, but if there's no one actually listening then you can't fund it.”

Williams recalls a situation in 1996 when the station was at risk of going bankrupt. Although there was a risk of the station going off-air, all the members worked together to overcome it. It was an example of the volunteers' commitment and dedication, she says. “Staff at that time took a cutback in the number of hours they were working and there was a huge effort among the volunteers to kind of come forward and brainstorm about how to get through this crisis.”

Since the station started in 1975, it has been holding fundraising marathons to attract more members. Currently, there are two every year, each running for 17 days; One in the spring, where the goal is to raise \$40,000 and one in the fall, with a goal of \$50,000.

Williams says sometimes people who are part of the board of directors see the station as a business, when really it does not fit a business model. There are also people who value Co-op Radio's role, and take responsibility, in terms of figuring out a way to keep the station going, she said.

Williams became involved with Co-op Radio after someone who volunteered at the station moved into her house and told her about the Redeye program. While doing pottery, she listened to a lot of radio and found what she heard on some stations made her extremely frustrated.

“Instead of being a passive sort of recipient of all this media barrage, I actually went out and did something,” she says, referring to why she started volunteering at Co-op Radio.

Successful fundraising is another main reason for the station's survival. CFRO depends on listener donations for 75 per cent of its annual budget, because the station does not take corporate advertising.

Any type of donation is accepted, but there are also specific memberships a listener can apply for. Memberships vary from \$25 per month to \$500 for a lifetime membership and CFRO currently has 1,600 members. Each member becomes a part owner of the station.

Three hundred volunteers and four part-time, paid employees run Co-op Radio; the financial administrator, membership co-ordinator, program co-ordinator and studio technician. All CFRO volunteers complete a mandatory two-hour workshop, informing them of their rights and responsibilities as volunteers. Volunteers must also become members before actively working there.

CFRO broadcasts seven days a week, 24 hours a day and offers public affairs, arts, music, and non-English programming. It has a variety of shows that reach out to all members of the community. There is a show for senior citizens called 411 Seniors, a show for the gay and lesbian community called Fruit Salad, and a show dedicated to women called Wings.

“The interesting thing about Co-op Radio is that it's not a monolith,” Williams says. “You have each show programmed by a different group of people; they all have their own goal. People are producing programming that's important to them and to listeners, who value that program.”

When CFRO first went on air, it had an annual budget of \$20,000 that came from government grants and membership dues. Today, the station's budget is \$188,000, of which \$9,000 comes from the City of Vancouver's Office of Cultural Affairs and \$18,000 from the gaming branch of the provincial government. However, even with these numbers, the four paid employees often don't get their cheques on time.

When we talk about money at the station it seems like we are money hungry, but we are just trying to survive, Gutierrez says. But the station is working on half the budget of a radio

station like CKNW, and the station needs money to do simple things like pay rent, pay the staff on time and buy a decent supply of toilet paper for the bathrooms.

When it comes to raising funds, pitching is a very important tool. Fluorescent green and orange 8"x11" signs plaster the walls of the studios, with the words "pitch, pitch, pitch" highlighted in bold, black letters and beside them a book with pitching information. The pitches are normally read throughout a live broadcast during fundraising marathons.

They tell listeners about the importance of donation, and how they can donate. While the station celebrates its 30th birthday, what does the future hold for Co-op Radio?

"I think Co-op Radio is on solid ground right now," Williams says. "It's got a good physical space. It has excellent staff, and we're just at the point that we'll be streaming online. So, I think we're in a better position than we've ever been in many, many years."

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