

“No Silver Bullet”

Expanding and adapting TOL’s revenue streams
with a special emphasis on
the experience of U.S. public broadcasters

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Organizational background: Transitions Online (TOL) is committed to strengthening the professionalism, independence, and impact of the news media in the 28 post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the former Soviet Union by working with like-minded journalists, media outlets, and other local partners. TOL acts as an incubator for up-and-coming talent by offering local journalists ongoing, intensive training. On a daily basis our experienced editors work with correspondents to improve the content, sourcing, structure, and language of their stories. TOL also encourages its correspondents to adapt the skills they have learned in our correspondent network to the work they do for their own local media. As a public-service media outlet, TOL covers themes often neglected by mainstream media—topics such as minorities, gender issues, human rights, the nongovernmental sector, and many more. These articles then reach an international audience through the TOL site and through our syndication partners, and a local audience through reprints or references in the region's media. In addition to raising the knowledge and awareness of the key issues of post-communist transition, TOL provides the region's journalists with a crucial outlet for their work on issues ignored or censored by their local media.

Before presenting some more specific ideas on how an Internet, public-service media outlet such as TOL might be able to build a sustainable model, I would like to suggest several reasons why we believe that creating such a model will hold increasing importance in the coming years:

- A growing number of people receive their news primarily from the Internet as newspaper subscriptions continue to decline;
- Quality journalism will probably always be a market failure;
- Non-profit-operated media tend to produce higher quality journalism since commercial aims and satisfying shareholders do not take overwhelming precedence;
- Few, if any, private media companies, in print or broadcast, would willingly turn their companies into non-profits;
- Quality journalism is cheaper to produce on the Internet because of the low production costs and entry costs.

Those assumptions suggest that the Internet could be one of the few potential growth areas—if not the only one—for quality, public affairs content. And since the majority of people may one day receive their news from the Internet, it is imperative that public-service oriented media—which have an overriding mission of producing top-notch journalism even on “uncommercial” themes—carve out a new media niche.

A challenge even for commercial Internet media, generating income has been a slow but steady process for TOL with revenue increasing each year. From its founding, TOL has sought to break the mold of grant dependency and, though a nongovernmental organization, has developed a business plan to diversify its income. This varied portfolio centers on boosting our revenues from subscriptions, advertising, syndication, and product sales.

The following document suggests three basic ways to expand upon these existing income streams in new directions or to make adjustments to current operations:

- Investing resources into journalism education as a basic pillar of TOL’s future success. This would include expanding our offerings in partnership with universities as well as exploring the possibility of distance education.
- Researching and then launching value-added services for the academic community, our core clientele. The success of this endeavor would depend on TOL’s ability to network a worldwide community of academics and students specializing in the region and create tools that offer on-the-ground, topical information to complement classroom lessons.
- Revamping the TOL site to bring it more in line with a public media entity and thereby increase corporate, foundation, and reader support. This would include increased promotion of TOL’s training mission; increased exposure for the possibility of underwriting TOL content; and modifying TOL’s approach to advertisers in favor of a sponsorship model.

The following sections should serve to provide general background information on these possible income streams, TOL’s past experiences (or lack of them) in the field, and possible future strategies. The future strategy sections, in particular, contain ideas offered by those interviewed for this project and represent a wide range of options, some feasible, some less so, but all provided to generate further brainstorming before concrete plans are conceived.

I. Educational offerings

Journalism courses and internships

General background: Study abroad opportunities continue to be very popular among universities and their students. Students receive exciting overseas experiences, while universities tend to charge well for these opportunities as well as build their international profiles. Study abroad programs have also become valuable instruments in recruiting students, so the more on offer in as many different locales, the better. Study abroad coordinators promote non-credit, unaffiliated courses to their students as well as university-run programs. While the simple draw of an exciting program may be enough for some students, others like to see their investment of time and money return in the form of credits that can be used toward their degrees back home. Courses need not be taught by faculty from a particular university to be accredited (a course can be taught by an “adjunct,” otherwise unaffiliated, professor), but in such cases getting the credits to count can be more difficult and complicated. To gain accreditation with a particular university, the easiest route is to jointly run a course with a faculty member (even if only on paper). When it comes to recognizing credits from a course accredited with another university, an informal “pecking order” exists, with schools down the pecking order recognizing courses offered by more prestigious schools but more difficulties vice versa.

Experience to date: For the first time this past summer, TOL presented a journalism training course that was open to paying individuals not from our coverage area. Participants spent two weeks learning how to be foreign correspondents from people who work as foreign correspondents for major U.S. and European media; the course, which included going “on assignment” in Prague to write a story, was designed to prepare university-level students for careers in international journalism. While TOL obtained scholarships for seven students from the Balkans and Central Asia (and offered three half-scholarships to others from the region), 16 students from Western Europe and the United States paid tuition, leading to a decent profit for TOL. In 2004, TOL participated in a joint reporting project with the school of journalism at the University of California-Berkeley. At Berkeley, 10 graduate students, in consultation with their professor and TOL editors/correspondents, chose stories to pursue in Central and Eastern Europe. The Berkeley students then traveled to Prague for a two-day editorial session where they met their TOL partners, before all the participants fanned out into the region to report their stories together. The double-bylined stories were produced for print, Internet, and broadcast outlets in both the U.S. and Europe, including the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. TOL rolled out all the articles throughout the summer and fall of 2004. Over the years, TOL has hosted many interns, both graduate and undergraduate, with perhaps the most successful cooperation with the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.

Strategy going forward: With few direct contacts at journalism schools and no experience in offering courses to paying participants, TOL relied on mass e-mail campaigns and its own site to recruit students. In the end, a late rush of applicants made the course feasible and profitable, but we will need to adopt different strategies to relieve the stress of recruiting and to make the courses a dependable source of income.

Key to these efforts will be to establish stronger relationships with journalism schools, particularly in the United States and Europe (though eventually in Asia, as well). Discussions with journalism professors and study abroad/career services officials in the United States have confirmed earlier assumptions about the unique opportunities offered by our courses, in particular:

- The chance to hear from working professionals, both those who hold choice foreign postings for big media, but also those who work as stringers, piecing together an existence through a variety of journalistic and non-journalistic gigs. The courses thus offer a realistic view of a career in international journalism, rather than glamorizing the profession.
- The opportunity to write stories that are then critiqued by these working professionals. Normally, feedback from journalists who work for media such as the *Boston Globe* or *Economist* would be almost impossible.
- The opportunity to then venture out into the region and work on real stories with TOL correspondents.
- The ability to study with a very international group (this summer’s course included participants from over a dozen countries).

Relationships with the journalism schools could take several forms:

- Informal. Career services and study abroad personnel promote courses among their students as a quality experience. This would aid the recruitment process immensely as the likelihood would increase that such schools would regularly funnel several students a year to TOL courses. The more that happens, the greater the credibility and popularity of the courses, as they would become ingrained within the schools as a regular, valuable opportunity for their students.
- “Commissioned” courses. TOL presents a course for a particular school. This could take the format of the summer course, but only for students from the same school; perhaps that school’s faculty would also participate as instructors/coordinators, increasing greatly the likelihood the course would be accredited. This would remove the onus on TOL to do its own recruiting for every course.
- “Add-ons”. There may be cases where TOL could offer a week-long course (or of another length) as an add-on to summer schools already taking place. That would again remove the strain of recruiting. We should also do a thorough study of courses already taking place in Prague and Central Europe as a whole.
- Joint, cooperative projects, probably with courses in international reporting. These would likely take the form of the Berkeley project mentioned above.
- Credit-based internships for graduate journalism students. Students in some graduate programs are required to do internships. To receive credit, the student’s overseas experience must be substantial, often running 8-10 weeks. Attendance in the summer school course probably would not be enough, but additional time spent in Prague, plus an assignment in the region, could pass muster. While these internships would not generate money other than paid participation in the summer course, they would allow TOL to recruit experienced graduate students to work on projects that are currently understaffed, as well as help solidify TOL’s reputation with journalism schools.

Distance learning

General background: Distance education continues to grow in leaps and bounds as students value the flexibility of studying according to their schedules. Schools that run programs use sophisticated interfaces (a popular one is called Blackboard); often require students to meet face-to-face at the beginning and end of programs; and encourage a high level of interactivity (required daily postings, etc.). Some universities are now starting to roll out online learning even for undergrads who live on campus because some of their students say this type of learning fits closer to their lifestyle. Semester-long online courses are usually taught by a member of the university’s faculty, although some are taught by adjunct (outside) instructors. The schools that offer these courses recognize the credits earned online and an increasing amount of schools are starting to do the same for credits earned through other schools’ programs. (The prevalence of lower-quality, for-profit institutions offering online learning had slowed down this process).

Experience so far: TOL’s work in online education has been almost exclusively informal. Since the organization’s founding, hundreds of journalists, especially younger reporters from our coverage region, have benefited from mentoring from TOL editors during the writing and editing process. In many instances, the approach has taken the form of “learning by doing,” with young writers—some with little journalistic experience—contributing stories and then exchanging multiple versions with TOL editors until publication. In the coming year, TOL will begin running its first, formalized course (for Russian journalism students) in cooperation with the BBC World Trust. The course will be modeled on this same mentoring, “learning by doing” approach. Via online communication with editor-instructors—either in-house or hired by TOL—students will receive personal feedback, encouragement, and editing. The BBC material will serve as the more formal lesson plan, while TOL will focus on providing assignments where students actually report and write articles on events and news in their own cities. These assignments—particularly on underreported themes such as minorities, gender and social issues, human rights, the nongovernmental sector, and related topics—will then be published on TOL.

Future strategy: TOL should actively continue exploring the online market and discussing partnerships with institutions such as the BBC World Trust and universities that already offer online journalism offerings (such as the University of North Carolina). If the current project with the BBC is successful and others follow, TOL might then consider offering courses also to paying students, as well as non-students who want to try journalism. A practical writing experience could help distinguish the course, with successful articles published. A big draw could be the ability to study with a diverse, international group (we could hand out scholarships liberally since costs will be low) and instructors from big-name media. Just as we were able to attract such instructors for the summer school, we should be able to do the same to help run online courses: Journalists based in the region are often looking for other, part-time gigs to earn extra money since working for the BBC or *Boston Globe* in Prague does not provide full-time work.

Some options to consider:

- “Virtual workshops.” These could be as short as a few days, up to perhaps two weeks, with a lesson plan and writing exercise similar to the summer school. The courses would be promoted as continuing education, and graduates would obtain a certificate.
- Semester-long courses for credit, in cooperation with an established university. Such a course might have to be taught in tandem with a university professor, and some sort of university committee would have to “vet” the course before it would receive accreditation. In all likelihood, TOL would first have to prove itself with a physical course before even discussing accreditation for an online course.
- “Team teaching” with a professor at a university. A professor in international reporting could offer his or her students the ability to take several lessons online or perhaps a “virtual workshop” as part of a semester-long course.
- Courses related to the region rather than strictly journalistic. It may be worth exploring the market for ongoing education courses on Central and Eastern

Europe (i.e. an introduction to Russia,” taught by a prominent academic). One professor mentioned a dream course that he had always wanted to teach, but could never convince the university because of the large investment in time and money needed to initiate and promote a new course offering without a guaranteed enrollment among a limited student body. With distance education, the entry costs and risk are lower, and some professors might jump at the opportunity to teach their dream courses online, to an international audience. Such courses could be marketed through TOL-affiliated academic associations, as well as the normal routes.

II. Catering to the academic community

Background: Academics benefit from a variety of resources on the Internet, some free and some through membership dues paid to a Slavic studies association. Members of the American Association of Slavic Studies (AAASS) receive, for example, the journal *Slavic Review*, a membership directory, a quarterly newsletter, as well “information of importance that helps them find employment; support their research, teaching, and study; network with other scholars; and present and publish their research.” This includes listings of current employment and volunteer opportunities for Slavic scholars; listings of current funding for research and study for Slavic scholars; listings of current calls for papers and articles for Slavic Scholars; and listings of current prizes for Slavic scholars.

Experience to date: TOL does not offer any value-added services targeted at academics, though reader surveys and anecdotal evidence indicate this is our biggest clientele. Upon a one-time request from a professor, TOL constructed an online reader for her undergraduate course, compiling a list of articles corresponding to the weekly lectures in her syllabus. In return, she required that her students subscribe to TOL. TOL is now an affiliate of AAASS, the largest Slavic studies organization in the world, meaning AAASS members are offered TOL subscriptions at discounted rates.

Future strategy: TOL should actively research this niche and consider the possibility of adding a full range of low-cost, but high-impact services that would increase the subscription rate, the level of traffic, and further establish TOL’s reputation as both a content provider and educator. In all likelihood, the greatest value in these services could be connecting the varied Slavic studies communities around the world with TOL acting as a networker, providing services that would be appealing to the members of all these aggregated communities. The general aim should be to create an online, active, international community of scholars working in the field with these valued-added services working toward that goal. Concrete, possible steps in that direction:

- Recruit a committee of prominent academics from the various associations and ask them for their thoughts on needed services.
- Overhaul the current homepage and design a site map for the various educational/training opportunities. Along these lines, separate pages should be created for: journalism instructors; regional academics; potential students/participants in TOL courses. Each section should detail TOL’s

background and experience and include current offerings/services, such as the TOL reader.

- Brainstorm about competitions for students of Slavic studies that would generate more traffic and potentially more content. TOL could encourage students to turn their papers into articles and then present awards for best article on a given topic or region. Articles would be published and the winners receive prizes (these could range from donated books from sponsors to an internship in Prague with TOL covering housing for a month).
- Explore the market for academic blogs or discussion boards/groups on highly specific topics that would seek to connect those working in these (sometimes obscure) fields around the world. Scholarly blogs, in which academics have taken to the format to provide daily musings and observations, have become more popular, but remain relatively unexplored. Blogs would provide academics with an immediate, accessible, and informal method to discuss their research and other academic issues. They could experiment in opinion-writing for a more general audience; post their writings; receive constructive criticism from similarly interested peers; and use a format appealing to many students. Listserves could also be an option. Whatever the format, moderating or running these forums could be particularly attractive for younger scholars who have not published much yet, are not on the lecture circuit, are technically savvy, and have more time than their older colleagues. One academic also mentioned the need for news and commentary on topical issues that would include contributions from both foreign and local experts in English. That niche could be nicely filled with event-specific blogs, with TOL asking a relevant academic or journalist to host the blog and make reference to the many sources on the topic while generating an international discussion.
- Explore the idea of a special section acting as a repository for conference papers, dissertations, and student essays on the post-communist region. This could be attractive, in particular, to young scholars. Ideally, a technical solution could be achieved that would allow self-posting and could perhaps even include a Wikipedia format that would allow other readers to insert comments and debate the merits of the papers.
- Explore ways to run more English-language translations of the local press (one academic mentioned a need for this). Perhaps TOL could make a deal with BBC Monitoring, which already does this, to run a certain number of articles per week in exchange for promotion to our audience (i.e. This is a sample of the type of content produced by BBC Monitoring. For information about subscribing to the BBC's full service, [click here](#).)
- Explore TOL providing classes on real-time current events or briefs tailored to specific classes/courses (essentially providing a guest speaker over the Internet, as one professor put it). Along these lines of supplying local voices to the classroom, language instructors might be interested in podcasting of native speakers from the countries of the region speaking on the topical issues of the day.

III. Recasting TOL as a public media site

Underwriting content production

General background: Underwriting of programming has been a common practice at U.S. public media for years, both by foundations and corporate entities. Foundation support for certain types of coverage (such as grants to allow journalists to research health-related topics) has increased greatly over the past decade. In the United States, some media experts have thrown up red flags over foundation support for such coverage, believing such funding violates the media's independence and distorts editorial decisions. Others believe such money compensates for a market failure: Producing "hard" news on important topics is expensive and usually not commercially viable, so media managers won't allocate sufficient funding.

TOL experience to date: Over the years, TOL has received grants for both special series of articles (on topics such as mental health) and a particular section on the website (education). Other grants have funded training, but these projects have often included content production on specific topics covered by the training. One current grant supports a distance learning component that will lead to more general content production (on underreported topics such as minorities and NGOs). In TOL's experience, no donor has ever attempted to interfere in the editorial process or the independence of the publication. However, the underwriting of certain types of content production (whether topic- or region-centric) undoubtedly distorts the editorial agenda; TOL runs, for example, more articles about education and the Balkans than we would normally run, to the detriment of other, unfunded areas. Despite its success at attracting such grants, TOL has neither promoted the option of underwriting content on its website nor actively targeted corporations or many foundations for this type of support.

Future strategy: TOL should actively promote the possibility of underwriting or "sponsoring" content, just as public media do in the United States. This should also be an integral part of our corporate sponsorship strategy. Concrete steps should include:

- Creating a page on the website on underwriting content. The page could be closely modeled on this example provided by NPR:

Foundation Support

NPR is deeply grateful to the generous commitment of the philanthropic community, which has enabled NPR to provide balanced and in-depth coverage of domestic and international news and a diverse stream of cultural programming for more than 30 years. Foundation support can generally be designated to NPR's news, information and cultural programming. In some cases, support may be given to specific programs or themes of coverage that are identified as NPR priorities.

For more information, contact Erica Johnson at ejohnson@npr.org, telephone (202) 513-2081, or write to: NPR, 635 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20001.

Examples of areas of designated support include:

Domestic News Coverage

Grant support for NPR's domestic news coverage helps make possible NPR's reporting on the

many major "content areas" of contemporary American life including politics and public affairs, economics, education, science and arts and culture. Dedicated reporting beats also follow specialized topic areas such as religion, technology, health, the environment, legal issues and civil liberties, as well as homeland security.

Foreign News Coverage

With foundation support, NPR strives to keep our listeners abreast of developments around the globe including events in the world's most volatile regions. Reporting explores issues such as terrorism and international security, nuclear proliferation, arms control, diplomacy, international trade and financial flows, the global environment, political movements, international development, and global public health. Coverage also offers in-depth explorations of countries and cultures that may be unfamiliar to many American listeners.

Arts, Music, and Entertainment

NPR's arts, music, and entertainment programming conveys to our listeners the many voices and dialects of the human experience. In a range of fare from classical, ethnic, jazz and operatic music to drama, spoken literature, comedy, and emerging art forms, foundation support enables NPR to inform and celebrate America's heritage, providing a national stage, as well as a forum for arts, culture, and entertainment news.

Other NPR Projects

Foundations also support NPR's efforts to introduce new and diverse voices to the public radio audience. Grants are directed to a variety of NPR projects such as NPR West, a major new production center in the Los Angeles area, internships and reporter training, and new programs, such as [Day to Day](#), NPR's newest newsmagazine, which provides "news with a twist" for midday listeners.

NPR is pleased to recognize the generosity of our funders with on-air mentions on our award-winning programming. These messages can be used to highlight the foundation's mission, or to create awareness about its activities and grantees.

Available at: <http://www.npr.org/about/place/corpsupport/foundationssupport.html>

- Highlighting better the underwriting support that we already receive. Each of these references should essentially serve as an advertisement for this type of sponsorship.
- Including the option of underwriting content in the TOL media kit.
- Compiling a database of specific "topic-based" foundations that correspond to TOL's editorial priorities. For example, the Kaiser Foundation, a very media conscious health foundation that has a program in Russia/Ukraine, should be contacted to explore the possibilities of supporting TOL's health coverage.

Underwriting for advertisers

General background: The NPR online business team is putting great stock in what it calls "underwriting," a term now used interchangeable with "advertising" or "sponsorship". The feeling is that "underwriting" or "sponsorship" sounds more lofty and presents the advertiser in a better light, as doing a good deed by sponsoring NPR and not simply paying for advertising to reach the NPR audience. Advertisers are clearly labeled as sponsors in the following fashion:

Support for NPR is provided by:



[Become an NPR Sponsor](#)

Clicking on the link gets this:

Corporate Sponsorship

Contact [John King](#) at (202) 513-2093.

NPR sponsors receive on-air acknowledgement for their financial support via ten second announcements that are broadcast during NPR programs. Online sponsorship is also available. Sponsorship packages and commitment levels vary, and they can be customized. Learn how NPR can help your company effectively communicate its brand message to an audience of hard-to-reach influentials and business decision-makers while generating community goodwill.

Experience to date: Advertising on the TOL side has the appearance of advertising on any commercial site with advertisers not presented as “sponsors”.

Future strategy: In light of NPR and PBS’s experience, TOL may want to strongly consider shifting over to the public broadcasting model, labeling advertisers as sponsors and providing sponsors with a full range of sponsoring opportunities. However, we should think carefully about activities that we do or would like to be doing and then find sponsors rather than venturing out into entirely new activities just to hook a particular sponsor. If we decide to promote “underwriting” for sponsors/advertisers, we should:

- Create a laundry list of possibilities (sponsoring a TOL section or special series, funding a training topic, online discussions, etc.) that may be more appealing than straight banner ads or buttons.
- Consider current activities and whether any would be attractive to sponsors. An NPR affiliate in California, for example, offers podcasting (downloading the feed of subscription-based audio or video files) for free in exchange for the downloader viewing an ad. The sponsor reportedly paid \$1 million.

Fundraising among TOL’s readership

General background: Public media in the US still subsist substantially (especially local NPR and PBS affiliates) from membership dues from their audiences. An entire science exists around pledge drives and this type of fundraising; public media fundraisers also

participate in a yearly conference that analyses trends and discusses strategies. As with other charities, membership benefits vary according to amount pledged and according to the individual strategies of stations. These could range from a mug that would be appreciated by a lower-end contributor to station tours and meals with the station manager for big spenders. The pitch to listeners/viewers invariably centers on the content and the role public broadcasting plays in local community life (“When you tune to KBXC and hear radio that matters, you will know that you are a big part of making it possible, that you help keep in-depth news coverage and engaging classical music on the air,” “Yes, KBXC is a part of life here in Iowa...a part of your life.”)

Experience to date: TOL promotions and advertising concentrate almost solely on the content, with little to no mention of the training and related good deeds the organization does. In other words, potential customers are treated as consumers of commercial media and told how subscribing to TOL can help them at work or at school, or in general to learn more about the region. There is no sense of donating to a worthy cause or even a NPR/PBS-style appeal to support quality coverage in a time of declining journalistic standards and infotainment. Earlier in the year, TOL attempted to fundraise among its subscribers, with a letter pointing out the training the organization does, but these efforts produced almost no results. Otherwise, no attempts have been made to segment off readers that might consider a larger donation than their subscription fee.

Future strategy: As with the notion of “sponsoring” versus “advertising,” we should think hard about launching a strategy for fundraising among our readers closer to that of public media. However, we will need to be careful about sending mixed, muddled messages since a large group of readers will only care about the quality of content on offer rather than any do-good, NGO activities the organization runs. The challenge will be to segment off different groups and adjust the message accordingly. Some steps in that direction:

- The main pitch to readers should stay essentially the same with some additional language added pointing up the public-service value of the content TOL provides. For example, a sentence or two could be added underlying the need for quality reporting on the region in the face of declining international coverage, the closure of foreign bureaus, shifting priorities, etc.
- We should devise methods for identifying those who might find TOL’s mission worthy of support. One public radio station manager suggested including a box that could be ticked on the payment form (i.e. “check this box to receive more information about TOL’s training of the region’s next generation of journalists”). Those people would then be channeled into a separate database and would receive an appeal that mentioned individual success stories on the training side (so-and-so went on to become bureau chief for Reuters or to receive a scholarship to the University of Kansas) and content side (so-and-so wrote an article that he could never have published in his local newspaper or TOL ran a series of articles on war crimes issues in the Balkans or youth groups in Belarus).
- Hand-in-hand with the creation of such appeals should go a revamping of TOL’s training section that better highlights past successes and current programs.

- The appeal to readers should include benefits for various levels of donations (TOL t-shirts/mugs to possibly access to TOL editors and correspondents). Perhaps it is also time to consider staging an event that readers could attend who have donated certain amounts, i.e. a conference with top analysts on a newsworthy topic (“Dayton After 10 Years”). This would be similar to the concept of a fundraising dinner, but could also be expanded to include non-TOL-reader attendees. Several professors suggested that the TOL brand might now be at a stage where we could consider throwing for-pay conferences that could headline some of our talented analysts and journalists and offer “insider” or “behind-the-scenes” knowledge of the transition. Such events (“summer courses for adults” to use the term of one professor) would serve the equally beneficial function of networking, especially if we could guarantee a diverse list of participants and attendees.