

Presentation of the Provincial Council of the Communications Sector (PCCS) of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)

Hearing on the diversity of voices

CRTC 2007-5

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Introduction

1. The Provincial Council of the Communications Sector (PCCS) is the most important group of workers in the communications sector in Québec. It is affiliated to the Canadian Union of Public Employees. The PCCS represents over 7000 workers in all sectors of communications in Québec: television (Radio-Canada, TVA, Radio-Nord, Global, TQS), radio (CHRC, CHLN), cinema (ONF, Technicolor, Covitec), cable distribution (Vidéotron and Cogeco) and telephone (Telus).
2. The PCCS has submitted briefs to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission for fifteen years, during which time it has presented more than seventy documents. We are happy to participate in the public hearing on the diversity of voices and the concentration of ownership within the broadcasting industry. In the area of news is where this diversity is especially at risk.

How do we compare

3. It is essential that we seriously address the issue of diversity of voices, since the level of media concentration in Canada is one of the highest in the industrialized countries.

4. This situation was highlighted by the Senate Standing Committee on Transport and Communications in June 2006 in its *Final Report on the Canadian News media*. It explains that in comparison to other countries Canada has done very little to prevent too much concentration.
5. « The Canadian situation with respect to media mergers or media concentration is atypical among large democracies. French law, for example, restricts the ownership and control of private sector broadcasters. The United Kingdom limits ownership of national newspapers and certain types of broadcast licences. Australia restricts foreign investment, concentration and cross ownership of broadcasting. The United States restricts the number of broadcast stations (radio or television) that a single person or entity can own in a given geographical area. The United States also restricts cross-ownership of multiple media outlets. So does Germany... »¹
6. It would be in the interest of Canadian citizens to follow these restrictions, since excessive concentration of the media in the hand of a few conglomerates, deprives citizens of their rights to a diversity of news, which is the base of a healthy democratic society.

Diversity of Information = Civic Involvement

7. A recent Statistics Canada report confirms the importance of diversity of information by showing how our civic life benefits from having access to multiple sources.
8. « Canadians who follow the news daily or several times a week tend to get their information from more than one media source. Only 17 % of those who followed the news frequently used a single source (usually television). The vast majority (72%) consumed from two to four

¹ Senate Standing Committee on Transport and Communications, *Final Report on the Canadian News media*, June 2006

sources of news. About 10% used all five types of media to get their news. On average, frequent news users consulted 2.7 media sources to meet their news requirements. »²

9. The same report underlines that the people following the news closely are more inclined to participate in political activities other than voting, such as attending public meetings, conducting research on political issues, volunteering for political parties, expressing their opinion through the newspapers or to a politician, signing a petition or participating in a march or demonstration.

10. The results of this report highlight the close link between a strong democracy and a diversity of voices. They emphasize the importance of this public hearing, particularly when we recognize the tendency of businesses with cross-media ownership to count on shared news content.

Less workforce, less quality

11. In fact, cross-media ownership and the centralization of the media in the hands of a few private businesses infringes on diversity, since these businesses have plans to speed up newsroom convergence.

12. There are plenty of examples of this situation. In May 2007, Leonard Asper, President of CanWest Global Communications Corp., addressed the Canadian Newspaper Association and explained what he envisions for the future of news:

13. “Our journalists are performing several functions all in one day. For example, a reporter may be writing the story, capturing video and taking photographs all for one assignment. I said this would happen 6 years ago, when we acquired the newspapers... it’s the ability to perform all of these functions that’s essential to staying on top in today’s media landscape. Journalism schools are teaching this, and many journalists want to embrace this.”

² Leslie-Anne Keown, Canadian Social Trends : Keeping up with the times: Canadians and their news media diet, *Statistics Canada*, 2007

14. At Québecor the same speech can be heard. These issues are at the heart of the labour conflict at the *Journal de Québec*, where 200 employees have been locked-out since April 22, 2007. The wording of the employer's proposal for the renewal of the collective agreement clearly threatens the diversity of voice, since it advocates the shared gathering of news for various media.
15. "In the course of his mandate, described in paragraph a) the journalist can be requested by the employer: 1. To use all technical means made available by the employer. 2. To process news stories in various formats or media necessary to ensure broadcasting according to his mandate within the different media of Quebecor, giving the credit to the *Journal de Québec*."³
16. A journalist covering an event for many media platforms is clearly harmful to the diversity of information. The citizen that reads the morning paper and watches television at night is not well served when both have the same point of view.
17. In such a situation other problems arise, as a matter of fact; news quality suffers as well.
18. In its review *Le Trente* of June 2007 The Fédération professionnelle des journalistes published an interview with a new kind of journalist nicknamed "Mojo"; "mobile and autonomous journalists". These Mojoes do the work of at least 4 employees by first interviewing, working the camera, editing and writing for various media.
19. What stands out in this article is that even with their abilities to multitask, these new journalists are aware of their limits. "I can't really do the job of 4 people, explains Simon-Pierre Goulet. The quality is inevitably altered. Not to mention with the speed at which it is done, I cannot dig deeply into a subject or uncover scoops. »"⁴

³ Employer's proposals, presented to the journalist's local at the *Journal de Québec*, 2007

⁴ Patrick Bellerose, Journaliste à tout faire, *Le Trente*, juin 2006, p. 22-23

20. The quality of news available is affected and the staff size is reduced. The trend of using the same journalist for different media is one of the reasons that explain the decrease of journalists in the newsrooms. “According to a report of the *Project for excellence in journalism*⁵, the American newsrooms have eliminated 3,000 jobs since the year 2000. The organization is expecting another 1,000 job losses this year.”⁶

Internet expansion

21. The expansion of the Internet is another factor behind the decrease in the number of journalists. The Web caused the revenue of traditional media publications to drop (print media, radio, television), and businesses tried to protect their profit margins by slowly reducing their journalistic staff.

22. It is also true that more and more Canadians get their information on the Internet, in particular younger people. What we have to keep in mind is that Internet users looking for news more often than not actually go to traditional media web sites.

23. Of course, independent media publishing on the Internet and blogs commenting on the news are attracting a lot of attention from web users. However, the impact of these new media is still limited. The first source of information for a great majority of Canadians, on Internet or elsewhere, is still the traditional media.

24. Communications or public relations experts confirm this situation. They speak of being solicited for interviews or for information by journalists, who most of the time, work for the traditional media.

What about local news?

⁵ Project for Excellence in Journalism is a research organization that specializes in using empirical methods to evaluate and study the performance of the press. It is non partisan, non ideological and non political.

⁶ Patrick Bellerose, *Journaliste à tout faire*, *Le Trente*, juin 2006, p. 22-23

25. The employers focus on common content for all their broadcast platforms. One of the consequences of this practice is a decrease of local media coverage. This is why the CRTC must make news content the primary objective of the broadcasting industry.
26. “It is often the case that structural changes in the industry and shareholder pressures lead to cost-cutting measures, including reductions in the number of journalists. Taken one step further, fewer journalists could mean less or no coverage of a particular topic.⁷”
27. The whole media system might face the same fate as private radio, where the capital consolidation in the sector has drastically reduced the broadcasting of local news.

Radio’s bad example

28. The news content available on radio is a good example of the degradation of the quality of information. This situation was caused by the dispersal of people, leaving everyone unable to decently cover events and regional issues on their own.
29. For example the CRTC allowed the transaction transferring Radiomedia to Corus, with the subsequent change of mandate of CKAC, the oldest Francophone radio station in North America. Now there is only one newsroom left worthy of this title in Montreal, the public sector radio of Radio-Canada. Is it normal for a city the size of Montreal to be serviced this way?
30. Twenty years ago in Montreal, just as in the region of Québec, each private radio station had a newsroom with at least a dozen journalists. In the regions further from the major centres, stations had fewer staff, but the population could count on a few good journalists that would gather the news and deliver it to the community.

⁷ Senate Standing Committee on Transport and Communications, *Final Report on the Canadian News media*, June 2006

31. Private radio stations eliminated the regional communications tools that were able to produce desirable quality and quantity of local news. It is our opinion that the airwaves are public property, and the stations using them should first and foremost serve the regions that allow them to earn a living.

32. The sale of Radiomedia to Corus created an acute reaction in a large number of communities throughout the province. The population protested and requested a stop to the “Montrealization” of the airwaves.

33. The CRTC decision 2005-15 relating to the exchange of radio assets, in Québec, between Astral Media Radio Inc. and Corus Entertainment Inc. mentions that: “the Commission shares the concerns raised by certain interveners as to whether the news staff planned for the regional stations is sufficient to provide local information of quality. The interveners emphasized that quality local information requires a sufficient number of local journalists to gather, process and broadcast the news. Otherwise, the role of the on-air journalist could be limited to reading information from various external sources, thereby accentuating the homogenization of newscasts as well as of news voices in the regions.” Unfortunately, this is exactly what has happened.

34. During the public hearing that led to the Decision CRTC 2005-15, the Commission requested and obtained a plan outlining the number of journalistic staff each network had to have once the transaction was completed, a plan that satisfied the Commission. It is a fact today, that there are more anchors reading the news than journalists serving our communities. Nobody collects the information, no one is processing it and in general, the radio stations all broadcast the same thing.

35. The stations get the information where they can, in press releases, on the news wires, Internet (often based and centred in Montreal). Fact checking is almost non-existent and the level of relevance for the citizens in the regions is dangerously reduced.

36. The economic impact is not to be neglected, since concentration of media leads to job loss. An example is the newsroom of CHRC (or Info-800) in Quebec. It had a staff of 20 journalists at the beginning of the 1990's, and only 5 are left today!

Print Media

37. Concentration of media ownership also decreased the local information broadcast in print media. In 2002, *Le Soleil* slipped into the hands of the Gesca Group that established the free circulation of texts between newspapers. The dailies that belong to the Gesca Group are: *Le Soleil*, *La Presse*, *Le Nouvelliste*, *La Tribune*, *Le Quotidien* and *Le Droit*.

38. "A recent statement of the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec mentions that from May 2004 until April 30, 2005, *Le Soleil* published 1551 texts coming from *La Presse*, an average of 5 a day. As for *La Presse*, it published 575 texts coming from the newsroom on Charest Boulevard."⁸

39. The same phenomenon happened to the *Journal de Québec*, the only other daily in the provincial capital and the property of Québecor. According to a content analysis excluding non-editorial space conducted by the Centre d'étude sur les médias de l'Université Laval of Québec⁹, the *Journal de Québec* is increasingly using news coming from another Québecor group newspaper, namely the *Journal de Montreal*.

40. The data collected on the editorial content of the *Journal de Québec* between 1994/1995 and 1997, and then from 1997 to 2006, is telling.

⁸ Damien Rousseau, Médias et Montréalisation : Québec assume son leadership, *Charlebourg Express*, 3 mars 2007, p. 6

⁹ The Study was commissioned by the journalists' Union of the *Journal de Québec*

41. “The space used for editorial content (texts, photographs, etc.) coming from the *Journal de Montreal* increased by 6 % (16.3% to 17.3%) between 1994/1995 and 1997, and by 10% (17.3% to 19%) between 1997 and 2006.”¹⁰
42. The same study shows that at the other end of the spectrum, in the *Journal de Montreal*, the space for the editorial content (texts, photographs, etc.) from the *Journal de Québec* has decreased by 14 % (35 % to 30.2 %) between 1994/1995 and 1997, and by 23 % (30.2 % to 23.3 %) between 1997 and 2006.
43. As if this convergence of news sources isn’t enough, Quebecor wants to go even further. In the employers’ demands (2007) to the journalists of the *Journal de Québec* during collective agreement negotiations, Quebecor mentions wanting to: “allow reuse of complete pages coming from one or the other Quebecor Media newspapers.”¹¹
44. We would like to remind the Commission that the staff of the *Journal de Québec* was locked out during these negotiations. The employees launched a free daily with a circulation of 40 000 copies a day, published by the union, as a mean to put pressure on the employer. The success of the newspaper, *Média Matin Québec*, is undeniable. The copies are all gone before 10 o’clock a.m. The citizens of Quebec City say, to whoever wants to hear, how they like having a newspaper made for them, by them, that reflects the characteristics of their city.
45. It gets even worse since content convergence is not limited to print media. Québecor, which also owns the TVA network, is trying more and more to make newsroom staff at TVA provide content to its dailies.
46. A code of ethics has been set in place to prevent such practices, but seems inadequate. The journalists of the *Journal de Montreal* and at the *Journal de Québec* have already filed grievances about this situation and this is only the beginning.

¹⁰ It is a relative presentation of the proportions; it is not in absolute numbers. We measured the absolute variance between the two values (1994/1995 – 1997 and 1997 - 2006) before transforming them into relative values. This is why an absolute raise of 1 % can represent a relative raise of 6 %. The relative values are better indicators of the trend studied between the time periods.

¹¹ Cahier de demandes patronales présenté à la section locale des journalistes du *Journal de Québec*, 2007

47. For example, a cameraman took photographs appearing in the *Journal de Québec* from TVA. The use of these shots is an obvious violation of the promises made to the Commission by the managers of Québec Media. The publication of these photographs is a privileged exchange of information according to the code, and it is forbidden,
48. The Oversight Committee of Québec Média inc. in the notice 2007-1 indicates: “In fact, the committee understands that each media cannot share its personnel for the coverage of an event, even if they each process the information differently.” However, such practices continue and more grievances are filed.
49. The *Code of ethics and conduct* was first established by the CRTC to help prevent such practices when the transfer of control from TVA to Québec Média inc. became effective (Decision CRTC 2001-384). The requirements were conditions to be met at the licence renewal of the TVA network (Decision CRTC 2001-385).
50. The adoption of the Code was made to assure the public and the CRTC of the protection of diversity of voices and of a variety of news sources. In fact, it was preserving the editorial independence of the newsroom, even under common ownership.
51. The concerns that led to the development of the code were legitimate. It is now up to you to ensure that Québec Média respects the code, enabling the public to access multiple news sources.
52. It is hard to be reassured when we see, during the public hearing of the CRTC on the regulation of live television, Québec’s managers claiming that the code was obsolete and that they were considering asking for its removal during TVA’s licence renewal.

Television

53. We have reviewed how the phenomenon of information centralization is experienced in print media and radio. Let us now closely examine the centralization's impact on television news.
54. Television remains the information source that the majority of Canadians turn to for news. The consolidation of ownership in this sector brought a decrease of local airtime and the absence of newscasts in many regions.
55. For example, in 2006 CHUM cancelled four of City TV's news programs in four cities (Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver), the same day the sale of CHUM to CTV was announced.
56. In another example six months after buying CTV; BCE replaced four of the regional newscasts with one program, covering all of Northern Ontario.
57. The 1999 Television Policy specifies that the CRTC: “ *will not require applicants to make quantitative commitments with respect to local news programs.*” The Commission then gave up forcing the stations to produce a minimum of minutes of local programming. The CRTC should seriously consider a return to minimum levels for television as well as for radio.
58. The minimum levels are necessary, when we know that conglomerates like CanWest have already expressed to the CRTC their wish not to be forced to produce anything local when stations are not profitable. The CanWest representative was pointing out Québec and Saskatchewan in particular, when making her comments to the CRTC. In Quebec, the only programs Global produces are the newscasts.

Outrageous convergence

59. By their practices, some giants like Québecor overuse their power. They do so by using censorship against some commentators. This is why Vincent Marissal, Yves Boisvert and Claude Picher of *La Presse* have been banned from discussions in TVA broadcasts, since Québecor assumed ownership. Michel Auger, a political commentator, who left the *Journal de Montreal* (Québecor) for the Gesca group, has had his show withdrawn from TVA.

60. Moreover, we have seen cases of headlines abused to promote programs on the TVA network. In The participants of Star Académie, a program of the TVA network, have had disproportional coverage in Quebecor publications when compared to other programs of the same nature.
61. Also, last winter Cheila Borneau a participant, on a TVA network show, *Le Banquier*, was invited to the late evening news (Téléjournal). The newsroom staff was outraged by her presence in a news program. Through their union, they denounced the editorial choice, since it is not a news editorial. They criticized the use of a newscast as a promotional tool, since this kind of practice taints their credibility as a journalistic organisation.

What to do?

62. The diversity of news information is essentially based on resources to gather news. The CRTC has promoted the idea of a code for journalistic independence managed by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council. It foresees procedures that will focus on guaranteeing that broadcasters maintain management structures and news presentations, which are distinct from their affiliated newspapers.
63. This code, in its present form, would be inefficient for many reasons. Mainly because it does not take into consideration the central importance of the original news gathering, when compared to its simple rebroadcast or publication on various platforms. When fewer journalists are on the road to ask questions, the public is poorly served and democratic life suffers.
64. Moreover, a private organization such as CBSC, which does not report to anyone else, should not have the responsibility of ensuring the diversity of voices in broadcasting. It is a legal requirement that should be set by the government.
65. The *Broadcasting Act* should be modified to set a clear priority for news and information programs. Article 3 outlines the Canadian broadcasting system's objectives as a whole. It is

advisable to modify the wording to enable it to reflect the importance of such programs. This is a recommendation that we also submitted to Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.

66. It is hard to imagine a situation where the merger of the media businesses could be undone. The situation is serious; it is now up to the CRTC to impose minimal levels in information as licensing conditions. The CRTC will have to pay special attention to the fact that information gathering, analysis, broadcasting and management is done by distinct newsrooms. The CRTC must be able to apply financial sanctions, to enforce these licence conditions.
67. Finally a system must be put in place that when evaluating mergers considers the public interest.

Conclusion

68. Businesses, that first have to account to investors, cannot fulfill without regulations and restrictions, the task to “serve to safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of Canada” (*Broadcast Act*, article 3.1.d). The unfortunate but undeniable race to profits has reduced the quality of local information programming.
69. Many people and groups that have studied the question have stressed this last point. The Senate Standing Committee on Transport and Communications, in its *Final Report on the Canadian News media*, took three years to study the state of the media. It came to the same conclusion: Media concentration is too great in Canada and the present regulations are insufficient to protect the diversity of news sources.
70. It is unfortunate the government ignored the conclusions and recommendations of this report. We hope that the CRTC will be listening to the citizens. Democracy’s well-being depends on it.