

# ENGLISH-LANGUAGE **ARTS** NETWORK

## **April 30 - ELAN speech to CRTC for Community TV channel hearing PN 2009-661**

Chairman von Finckenstein and members of the Commission, we wish to thank you for this opportunity to raise our concerns at this hearing. My name is Guy Rodgers, and I am Executive Director of the English-language Arts Network of Quebec. ELAN represents the 8,500 English-speaking artists of Quebec. Beside me is Hugh Maynard, President of Qu'anglo Communications & Consulting, who works in the area of information and communications technologies for community and rural development.

We are here because the official-language minority in Quebec sees very little reflection of itself – its arts, its culture, its community, its individual members - on television. Of course, we can hear and see a great deal of English on television, but very little of it is about our community of nearly one million people. May we note, as demonstration of this, our beloved CBC chose not to carry the Montreal *Canadiens* play-off games UNTIL they beat the first place team. Anglos are Habs fans too, you know, but you wouldn't know it by the decisions of our OL institutions.

Therefore, we have several problems. Network programming has largely disappeared to Toronto as CBC and CTV save money by centralizing production. We do not have a regional television channel, nor a minority-language educational channel such as TFO in Ontario. Finally, we do not have a hybrid local channel like Videotron's VOX, nor even a public access channel. In other words, we have surprisingly little local reflection on television.

There is very little reliable financial information about the community channels, so we are very happy that you have asked the cable companies to provide more detailed financial information on their community channel operations by May 7<sup>th</sup>, which may allow additional responses from interveners by May 17<sup>th</sup>. The lack of financial transparency about this sector is a major problem for all of us, and we look forward to a new approach from your Commission to this challenge.

We see that the CRTC has identified CF Cable as having eight community channels in Quebec on the list of 139 community channels operating in 2008. CRTC lists two community channels operating in Montreal - one by CF Cable and one by Videotron. However, CF Cable was bought by Videotron over ten years ago. Videotron tells us they have one community channel in Montreal, and it broadcasts exclusively in French.

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\$48 million appears to have been spent on community programming in Quebec. Yet, with the couple of exceptions mentioned in our brief, none of this money was spent on English-language community programming for the 700,000 English-speakers in Montreal, and the 200,000 English-speakers in the outlying regions of Quebec.

As you and the Commissioner of Official Languages have said in your recent reports on official-language minority broadcasting, there is very little “regional reflection” of the linguistic minority in Quebec. We can find little beyond local TV news and sports in Montreal and, with the exception of National Assembly reports, nothing outside Montreal.

Community television is no longer simply public access TV. Since 2002, at least, it is a hybrid system trying to meet different- perhaps conflicting- objectives.

The cable companies claim that their control of these channels works well. The existing system certainly hasn’t worked well for the English-speaking community in Quebec, nor for many others as we can see from other interventions for this hearing.

The satellite companies would like to have their own channels too, and spend money they now send to the Canada Media Fund to support their own idea of “national” community channels. If the Commission accepts their position, that will mean less funding for mainstream Canadian television programming through the Canada Media Fund. And certainly less prospect for local channels.

We would like to emphasize that no money should be diverted from the Canada Media Fund or other independent program production funds to support community television.

If the current funding levels that Broadcasting Distribution Undertakings (BDUs) pay for the community channel are not increased, that raises the question: where will we find other funding for the community channel? We recall that the cable companies once had to spend 10% of their revenues on community channels. Over time, the CRTC has let that decrease to 2%, and now these companies want to find other funding sources to support the community channels.

We have stated in our brief that we don’t believe advertising revenue is a solution. As for the Local Programming Improvement Fund (LPIF), we suggest it should remain at 1.5% and be directed to support local program production, based on changing needs, changing media, and not remain tied to local off-air TV news. As we have pointed out on various occasions, we believe that English-Quebec should be eligible for LPIF.

That said, there does seem to be enough money in the cable system to provide at least \$1 million for each existing community channel. According to CRTC data, in 2009 the broadcast distribution services spent \$136 million on community programming and distributed 139 community channels. However, CACTUS estimates that only 19 of these channels in English-Canada have distinctive programming, and the rest are variations of these 19.

Of this \$136 million, about \$48 million was spent in Quebec. We do not know who spent this \$48 million, or what it was actually spent on. We are not even sure the CRTC knows how this money is spent.

Transparency in community channel finances is essential. The cable channels need to become more responsive to the needs of their communities, beginning with active consultation programs and, finally, the establishment of advisory boards with some clout.

We believe it is time that the Commission fulfills its mandate under the *Broadcasting Act* and the *Official Languages Act* to provide us, nearly one million minority-language Quebecers, with the regional reflection we need, and which is so noticeably absent from our television screens. That reflection should start now, by addressing two distinct challenges: production and distribution.

Quebec's English-speaking community produces a great deal of content that is waiting to be recorded: arts and culture events that take place in all regions of Quebec, from music concerts to theatre productions. We have three universities, five CEGEPs, numerous high schools and a new network of 27 video-conference equipped Community Learning Centres to provide educational and community content, not to mention under-reported news, particularly outside Montreal. The decline of commercial media, including our budget reductions at our national broadcaster, has created a vacuum that community TV can help fill.

As we have seen in other areas, product comes first. This is where resources and expertise are required. In the changing media environment, content is king, and content requires money, even on community TV. Once content is available, distribution will follow, but not without some preparations and concerted action.

Virtually all households in Quebec have access to television, although regions outside Montreal do not necessarily have access to cable technology, and given the challenges that the lack of information and communications infrastructure and services poses in rural areas, it is an area that requires some further assessment as an essential part of the planning process. Collaboration with satellite distributors may be a winning strategy to reach isolated communities, but a budget will have to be allocated to create a viable distribution network. In addition, public access content can be distributed via the network of community videoconference centres that now exists. It is even possible to distribute content via DVD to remote regions.

These are all possibilities, none are 'silver bullet' solutions by themselves. Social media on the Internet are, at best, complementary distribution mechanisms, particularly in light of the fact that many rural areas lack adequate broadband connections. Even distribution agreements with existing TV channels will require some concerted actions to avoid content from Quebec's English language minority being labeled as the 'graveyard shift' – with available slots only being offered at 2:30 am on Monday nights.

To ensure success, the first step must consist of assessment and planning actions so that once the resources allocated to production begin to bear fruit that there will be a commensurate ability to carry out effective distribution.

Resources are required to create content that will reflect the identity and activities of our community. Once a supply of stimulating content is made available, distribution will follow, using a mix of traditional technologies and new solutions. The key point is we need the money to create the content, it doesn't just happen, and we need a wide variety of content, not only public access programs.

Thank you.

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