

QUENTIN DODD

1086 Ash Street, Campbell River, BC V9W 1G5

Tel: 250-923-3106 Email: dodd.quentin@gmail.com. Com

To Minister of Heritage Melanie Joly,
Houses of Parliament, Ottawa.
Ontario.
Canada

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By email.

Dear Minister Joly,

I am writing to you in order to participate in your “Canadian Content in a Digital World” consultation, to provide you with input regarding the doleful situation here in Campbell River, BC, which has been my home for the past 39 years, since December of 1977.

I have to tell you that the news gathering and dissemination which was so strong for so many years when I came to CR (Campbell River, as I refer to it hereafter, and which continue to have an enormous, highly-valued and extremely beneficial effect on this community for more than 20 years after I arrived, has now dwindled to a very poor and pale shadow of its former self.

I will give you more detail about the media activity in CR in a few moments, but I would like to start this letter by telling you that I believe very strongly that with support and attention from yourself, your senior officials and the Canadian Radiotelevision and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) – which I understand now comes under your aegis – together we could quite substantially restore the outstanding and well-earned reputation that media personnel in this area once enjoyed, for providing a full and well-balanced motherlode of information on almost every issue that was of importance to this coastal, natural-resource oriented community.

Considerable numbers of people to whom I have spoken in the past year or so since I started becoming actively involved with the CACTUS (Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Subscribers) organization have repeated to me their previously-expressed desire to see a return, as close as possible, to the former service provided here by members of the media, especially with the local cable station when it was owned and operated by the Campbell River Television Association and was known locally as CRTV.

The CRTV association, which had a board of locally-elected directors who made policy for the station and oversaw the activities of employees, had a service-maintenance wing initially under the general manager, who supervised and directed the administration side. But it also had a television study which had a programs-origination manager who recruited and trained volunteers from the community to operate the cameras and sound, and who was usually responsible for the editing of the taped programs.

When I arrived I quickly developed quite a close working relationship with the study operator of the time, and later, when that person decided to leave town and was replaced, with his successor. Over the following more than 25 years, successor Hugh Smith taught numbers of high-school students the arts and skill of television photography and sound, which in a number of instances led eventually to successful careers with other stations in that field.

And Hugh – and the right-hand assistant CRTV finally hired for him – proved to innovative and even investigative journalists who kept the town’s radio and newspaper reporters on their toes – to the additional benefit of the CR region as a whole. I can wholeheartedly attest to the fact that Riverites (as we refer to ourselves sometimes) were kept much better informed about happenings in the area than they are now.

CRTV provided me as a print-newspaper reporter with incalculable amounts of high-quality information, as it did other reporters, writers and decision-makers in the community. CR in those days had a very strong and active population of residents volunteering in a broad range of interests, projects and programs, all very much to the advantage of this rural community midway up the eastern coast of Vancouver Island.

And CRTV’s output of programs escalated wonderfully when the cable station moved into larger and better-equipped offices and facilities on

Robron Road, at the top the highest peak in the community. That operation, where Shaw Communication still now operates the facilities, included an improved studio which promptly proceeded to put out much-increased numbers of programs, still largely with the assistance of volunteers, whom Smith and aide Margery Greaves continued to help and train.

That situation continued very much until Shaw Communications decided it should take over the CRTV cable station by buying out the association members, each of whom have been required to put \$100 into the station on joining, in order to subscribe and receive the television service, the only one in town. The subscribers, also of course, paid a monthly fees for getting the various cable channels, stations and programs from out of town.

Initially those channels were very limited, so the monthly fees charged were also held back noticeably by the board of directors. And, in the end, CRTV was unable to keep up with the expanding channels and programs offered by the major national and international telecommunications providers such as Shaw, Rogers and Telus.

It was at that point that Shaw decided to buy out CRTV as the only cable station in the area, knowing that it would be able to charge vastly-increased fees for its services, which it promised would include much better pictures on the television. CRTV's pictures and variety of programs would continue to lag farther and farther behind, Shaw warned, as Shaw's would advance with improvements in its infrastructure and technology.

And when Shaw significantly increased its offer to the CRTV members and persuaded the former CRTV general manager (by then promoted to Chief Executive Officer) to support its case, Shaw managed to bring "on board" enough of the CRTV general membership, to purchase the cable station. A not-insignificant portion of the supporters for that were people who only signed up for CRTV in the final months before the vote in order to get the \$3,700 buyout in exchange for the required \$100 buy-in into CRTV.

And it needs to be pointed out that many of those who did vote in favour of the buyout were at least partially persuaded not so much by the truly-correct argument that cash-strapped CRTV would continue to slip farther and farther behind Shaw technologically in the coming years, as by

the accompanying promise from Shaw that it would continue to offer studio, camera and local-origin programming to the community.

Permission, approval and go-ahead for the final takeover deal passed by the CRTV members were given by the CRTC to Shaw in no small way based on that promise by Shaw to continue the local-programs service.

Speaking personally but in full knowledge about a similar reaction from a good many of my friends, acquaintances and colleagues over the years, I can attest that I received that promise with a good deal of skepticism, with the strongest-possible conviction that it would be more honored in the breach than in the keeping.

And that is precisely what happened, with cutbacks and deterioration beginning within a matter of months, Hugh Smith pushed into forced retirement after about a year of Shaw taking over. Greaves was kept on and continues there to this day, but television coverage of events - which included full coverage of the entire takeover -vote meeting - has sunk well below anything which is seen as adequate or acceptable by me and many of my cohorts who remember the “olden days” in this community.

Most tragically, I have to tell you that after I left the now-defunct Campbell River Courier-Islander newspaper in staffing cutbacks and restructuring in 1998, both the C-I and the CR Mirror newspaper grew thinner and thinner. Eventually the C-I, which was “the paper of record in CR,” was in such weak shape financially that it was bought out by the Black company that owns and runs the Mirror; and was then quickly shut down as being superfluous to town’s needs.

That leaves CR solely in the hands of the Mirror as the one and only local newspaper, and that has only quite limited staffing and pages to provide local readers with the latest news and information on some quite contentious issues and concerns.

In the meantime, I have continued working here in Campbell River – out of my home – as a freelance writer-reporter, up to and including today, but there is nowhere for me to take many of the highly newsworthy items I still regularly come across in the community.

It's a complaint I encounter frequently from many of my contacts and acquaintances, who share my absolute conviction that CR would be an excellent place to provide more Canadian content for our cable-service providers both nationally and locally.

I repeat to you, as I have done many many times to the CRTC, my complaint that especially in CR Shaw and Telus are not providing the local-origin and local content program that CRTC standards require them to provide here. That has been found to be the case with Shaw, Rogers, Telus and other major cable-television and telecommunications in many many communities right across Canada .

In the meantime they continue to scoop millions and millions of dollars out of those communities and put it directly into their own pockets rather than into the fund that was set up through the CRTC to fund programming in smaller, financially-stretched outlying parts of our vast country. They have been getting away with that almost with immunity and impunity, under the CRTC, for well over 20 years and it should be made to stop. It does nothing for the furtherance of democracy in such a widely-scattered nation.

Madam Minister, I have to tell you that in those 20 years, especially under the Conservatives under former PM Harper, CR has been allowed to quietly wither on the vine. We have lost huge amounts of our local natural-resource industries that were so important to us, and that has happened to no small degree without much attention from television and professional media.

I am informed that Shaw may be about to call on people within CR to put together volunteer teams of in-front-of-camera presenters and behind-camera report/statement recorders to make programs which could be recorded in the Shaw studio or out "in the field". Those would/could then be used to supplement the diet of three-10 minute squibs which the station here has been putting out in the past seven or eight years, which are completely inadequate to give proper coverage to some complex issues that have arisen in that time.

I strongly believe that this is nothing more than "window-dressing" by Shaw to cover over the fact of the company's offensively insufficient local programming in CR since Hugh Smith left the company here.

And if it ever does come to pass - which I firmly suspect will never really be the case – these will be volunteers who will have to be trained for their tasks, and who will not receive one red cent of the company’s profits for their work.

Nevertheless, for the sake of Campbell River, as a long-term resident of what was once a much more vibrant and actively-involved community I ask you to please use your best offices and efforts to restore the media-information network here to some of its past strength and vitality.

And that small seed from Shaw and Telus here in CR could also be portrayed as good Canadian content to other parts of Canada, used as an exemplar to other Canadian communities whose voice has also been dimmed by the country’s mass-media in the past 15 years and more.

That could lead to a massive increase in Canadian content in many forms of digital communication - and especially the news networks – spanning all of Canada, to the betterment of residents, visitors and would-be visitors alike.

I close by advising that if you wish to get a small idea of the support I know I have and can find in Campbell River for this, I refer you to the small file of submission and letters I sent to the CRTC some months ago when CACTUS launched its campaign to try and get the CRTC to order Shaw, Telus, Rogers and others to improve their local-origin and -participation content in the areas where they had taken over local cable stations.

If I can be of any further assistance in this quest, please don’t hesitate to contact me. As a British-trained journalist harkening back to the truly-Golden Age of mass-media coverage, I can assure I can tell you how a good news team or crew can really “milk” a community for good local news!

I remain,

Yours sincerely,

Quentin Dodd