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Re: “Canadian Content in a Digital World” Consultation

Dear Mme. Joly:

I've spent many years as a volunteer and director with CMES Community Media Education Society, formed in 1997 following the closure of the Rogers VanEast neighbourhood TV office. In 2007 we applied to the CRTC to operate community television on the TELUS system in BC and Alberta, after TELUS said it didn't intend to offer a community channel. The CRTC gave us a hearing in Kelowna but we were ultimately turned down when TELUS reversed its position after seeing we were serious. In 2010 CMES was part of the community television policy review, CRTC 2009-661.

Community-controlled television needs to be widely available. The best way is a multi-platform approach. There are major social benefits, plus the flexibility to adapt to whatever new directions media producers and engineers can devise.

In an era of fake news the world needs stability. When people work together side by side, among strangers brought together by a shared interest in local issues, it's unlikely they will all be fooled all of the time. Producing out of a shared space is an antidote to the fantasy world of creating videos online for trolls who value shock above all else.

An independent not-for-profit community channel based on the NFB Challenge for Change model has been effective for decades. Not only does it mobilize volunteers to deliver original local stories but it creates enduring friendships. Many public libraries, and the Canadian Library Association, are willing to anchor community media centres.

This is a well-developed model. I appreciate that few businesses have seized the opportunity to promote such a participatory concept because there's not a lot in it for them; but in this case businesses are not the only, or even the primary, stakeholders.

There's a great deal of money now being spent on what are essentially BDU promotional channels. That hundred and fifty million dollars annually would develop not-for-profit community media centres in most of the cities and towns in Canada. Because of the library involvement, or other local group recognizing the responsibilities of managing public money, the initiative is focused on incentives and outcomes.

Subsidizing professional reporters is a slippery slope. There's always a perceived conflict of interest when a government body is paying reporters to investigate government actions. Removing money from the community channel and using it to hire professional reporters simply lets BDUs move money from one pocket to the other.

The CRTC made a mistake when it approved consolidation of large, integrated companies operating conventional television stations and digital media outlets. It was an understandable mistake, consistent with financial theories at that time which unfortunately created global problems, not just in media. Unlike independent community TV it did not lead to diversity of views.

If we want diverse and high-quality Canadian programming, we need to start by building the foundation. We need average people as producers, not just viewers. We need citizens, not just consumers. The best model available right now is local not-for-profit corporations in association with well-established municipal institutions.

The community-operated channel is already very well tested, both internationally and by independent groups in Canada. It's the BDU-controlled model that's unusual, and government-paid reporters are going to look odd as well outside our borders.

What I'm trying to say is that the decision to support independent media centres is likely to be a popular decision, particularly over the longer term. I'm not saying that BDUs and their news subsidiaries won't continue to campaign against it to protect salaries, but I am saying that building a media town hall will be welcome both in towns and in urban neighbourhoods.

I'm not alone in thinking progress is social rather than personal. Let me quote Alan Turing, the artificial intelligence pioneer. He's talking about how 'intelligent machinery' detects analogies: more generally, how all growth occurs:

"It may be of interest to mention two other kinds of search in this connection. There is the genetical or evolutionary search by which a combination of genes is looked for, the criterion being survival value. The remarkable success of this search confirms to some extent the idea that intellectual activity consists mainly of different kinds of search.

The remaining kind of search is what I should like to call the 'cultural search'. As I have mentioned, the isolated man does not develop any intellectual power. It is necessary for him to be immersed in an environment of other men, whose techniques he absorbs during the first twenty years of his life. He may then perhaps do a little research of his own and make a very few discoveries which are passed on to other men. From this point of view the search for new techniques must be regarded as carried out by the human community as a whole, rather than by individuals."

These words are from a man who personally transformed modern life, except that he gives the main credit to "the human community".

If in media you want not just cultural but also intellectual progress, first you encourage the beginners. We should all have the best chance to play our part in public life.

Sincerely,

Richard Ward

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