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Chair

The Honourable Michael Chong

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• (1530)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): Welcome to the 44th meeting of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage on Wednesday, March 2, 2011. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are proceeding with the study on the implementation of Canada's transition to digital television.

[English]

We have two witnesses appearing today: Madame Milligan, president of Media Access Canada, and Madame Edwards, spokesperson for CACTUS, the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations.

We'll begin with an opening statement from Madame Milligan.

Ms. Beverley Milligan (President, Media Access Canada): Hello, and thank you.

Before I begin my prepared statement, I'd like to apologize on behalf of Yves Séguin, who is not joining me here today. He would have presented to you the consumer side of things. Having said that, I'd like to tell you that I am a child of deaf parents, and as such, have grown up in the deaf community and am very involved in the deaf culture. I will do my very best to address any questions around the consumers, being very close to them.

My name is Beverley Milligan. I'm the executive director of Media Access Canada or MAC, a not-for-profit organization with a mandate to execute a business plan to achieve 100% accessibility by 2020.

MAC is leading the Access 2020 Coalition that is supported by every major accessibility organization in Canada, including the Canadian Hearing Society, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, and the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, to mention a few.

Access 2020 Coalition represents an ever-growing group of individuals and organizations that support Media Access Canada's mandate of achieving 100% accessible content on all distribution platforms in a decade.

The tools to achieve accessibility have existed for years. Captions write out TV's audio content while described video narrates important visual elements to answer the "What's happening now?" question that blind Canadians must otherwise ask families and friends. While the technology is available, achieving 100% accessibility will require a fundamental commitment on the part of the CRTC.

MAC and Access 2020 have been the leaders of the 1% for 100% tangible benefits campaign to fund the necessary business model for 100% accessibility. So far the funding is not being made available, but we do anxiously anticipate a CRTC decision in the coming weeks. In the recent CRTC decision concerning Shaw's acquisition of Canwest, the CRTC accepted Shaw's proposal to spend \$38 million of tangible benefits to ensure 100,000 households would not lose over-the-air analog signals in 2011. Shaw got approval to spend 21% of the tangible benefits it proposed to ensure that several hundred thousand Canadians would not lose access to Canwest stations in the analog to digital transition, but there was never any discussion of reaching the millions of Canadians for whom Canadian TV programming has never been accessible and is still not.

How could it be justified to spend \$38 million to maintain access to the broadcasting system for a few hundred thousand households and yet provide nothing for the more than 4.3 million Canadians who have never had access?

The CRTC should be clear and open about its funding priorities during the coming transition. While we do not begrudge any Canadian access to the Canadian broadcasting system, we would still like to understand the framework through which the commission and others will allocate resources to minimize disruption. It's our understanding to date that no funding has been committed, certainly none that reaches Canadians with disabilities.

The transition to digital television threatens to make the situation even worse for millions of Canadians who rely on captioning and description. As of August 31 of this year, Canadians with tube televisions will no longer be able to receive over-the-air television signals unless they purchase a new digital television set, subscribe to a BDU, or acquire an analog-to-digital box from an electronics store. I note these boxes are in short supply, a situation that could result in price hikes during the transition period.

In the United States, where the transition to digital took place in 2009, it was estimated that one-third of the households with these older televisions had at least one family member who relied on captions. The number in Canada is likely to be similar, so a substantial proportion of the households affected by the transition to digital will be those who rely on captioning or description.

Imagine a deaf senior citizen living alone on a fixed income who turns on her television September 1, only to receive no signal. She may believe the television is broken and will have to somehow discover what has actually happened. With no opportunity to plan and budget, how will this senior navigate through the very real challenges she and others with disabilities face from what to us might seem no more than a minor inconvenience?

In the United States, a coupon system was used to assist in the transition, with the cost of the digital box covered by coupons provided by the government. Further, an in-depth educational program targeting community service and consumer organizations was developed, funded, and implemented. None of this exists for the Canadian transition. Funds should be made available to help the many Canadians who will face a financial outlay as a result of the transition.

• (1535)

Some provision should be made to ease the economic impact, as disabled Canadians will now be obliged to subscribe to either cable or satellite. These subscriptions should be available free or at a heavily discounted rate for two reasons: first, all Canadians should have at least minimum access to Canadian broadcasting at no cost; and, second, given the broadcasting system is not 100% accessible, Canadians with disabilities should not have to pay the full cost of something they cannot use. For example, only four hours of a 126-hour broadcast week is described, which is equivalent to less than 3% access.

The move to digital broadcasting will also make it more complicated to activate captioning and description in the digital box hand unit itself. Even if someone has the necessary equipment, they may well find it virtually impossible to get it to work without outside assistance. It can take as many as 27 clicks to activate captioning on the digital handset.

The CRTC recognizes by the very existence of their social policies that some Canadians and certainly Canadians with disabilities require alternative ways to access content. Without captioning or description, they are among the most isolated and hardest-to-reach groups in Canada. Because the broadcasting system is not fully accessible, it will not be adequate to inform Canadians with disabilities about the transition to digital television. The broadcasting system itself will not be adequate to inform Canadians about the transition to digital television. We need to devise alternative ways of reaching out to Canadians with disabilities to ensure they are prepared for the coming changes. Without a concerted and coordinated effort in advance of the digital transition, this already marginalized group of 4.3 million Canadians will face still greater isolation.

Considering the scope of the problem and the fact that the transition has been planned for years, it is a matter of concern that no efforts have been made to prepare for this. In September 2010 a group of 40 concerned organizations, academics, and researchers, including Media Access Canada and the Access 2020 Coalition sent a letter to the Prime Minister asking for a national campaign to educate the public and, in particular, to reach out to disabled Canadians. No real response was ever received.

It's vital that the government take a leading role in the effort to inform and educate Canadians, especially disabled Canadians, about the coming transition. To leave the job to individual broadcasters largely owned by BDUs makes no sense, as their commercial interests would lead them to maximize subscriptions without regard for the financial situation of the individual concerned. A publicly funded educational program should be initiated as soon as possible and should operate in cooperation with community groups, senior centres, and disability organizations. We need a community-based education strategy to inform and prepare—but it won't be easy. In addition to the limited access in broadcasting, Canadians with disabilities also have limited access to the Internet. This means a broadcaster or BDU that is relying on their website to inform people and organizations about the transition will have little or no impact on Canadians with disabilities.

MAC works closely with disability organizations across Canada who are well positioned to help in the design and implementation of a strategy to reach disabled Canadians and support them in the planned transition, but we cannot ask yet again for the not-for-profit and charitable organizations to volunteer their services or finance a communication plan that is squarely the responsibility of Heritage Canada and the CRTC.

While we look forward to being part of the solution, we look to the government for leadership and financial commitment to this important issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this process. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Milligan.

Go ahead, Madame Edwards.

Ms. Catherine Edwards (Spokesperson, Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS)): Before I start my comments, I want to warn you that my comments, as prepared, run to about 12 minutes. We made a point of listening to your transcript from Monday and wanted to give you a slightly different take from the CRTC on some of those questions, in addition to our comments.

We also note that about 20 different organizations helped us prepare our comments. Since you're only hearing from two public interest groups, I hope you'll give me a bit of latitude.

• (1540)

The Chair: Well, I'd ask you to keep your comments to 10 minutes, because we want to get as many members in as possible to ask questions and make comments. You'll have an opportunity during that time to reinforce other messages you may not have had time for in your 10 minutes.

Ms. Catherine Edwards: My name is Cathy Edwards. I'm the spokesperson for the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations. CACTUS represents the views of Canadians who believe that participation in the broadcasting system by ordinary Canadians is fundamental to our democracy.

CACTUS and approximately 20 other organizations wrote to the Prime Minister in September asking for a coordinated government education campaign in advance of the digital transition. Signatories include Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, the Canadian Conference of the Arts, the Council of Canadians, the Canadian Media Guild, OpenMedia, the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, the Documentary Organization of Canada, and academics from York, Ryerson, McMaster, and Concordia. Today's presentation has been informed by these and other groups.

I listened to Monday's meeting and congratulate you on the pertinent questions you all raised. Most concerned the number of Canadians who will be affected by the digital transition either because they may have to invest in new TVs or converters, in areas where signals are being upgraded to digital, or they may lose free OTA service altogether. A few queried the nature of the public education campaign to inform Canadians about the changes.

The first part of my presentation addresses these topics, since our take on some of them is different from what you heard from the CRTC. Second, while continuity of service is a major issue because so many Canadians rely on TV for information and entertainment, the CRTC presentation touched on other issues that we believe will actually have more impact on Canadian communications and media diversity in the long term.

Regarding the number of Canadians who may be affected by changes in TV service on August 31, Madame Lavallée touched on the key issue when she cited research by the Canadian Media Research Consortium. The majority of those who rely on free OTA service—and as a single mother, I'm one—are those who cannot afford cable or satellite and are least able to afford new TVs and digital converters. These include the elderly, immigrants, the handicapped, and Canadians in rural areas with fewer economic opportunities. For example, 90% of the residents of some first nations communities rely on free OTA TV.

Many such rural areas also lack broadband Internet, and many of these groups—the elderly, the handicapped, and immigrants—are less likely to obtain information from other sources like the Internet, as Bev mentioned. While it is true that Shaw has been asked to provide free satellite equipment and a selection of local channels to its direct-to-home customers as a result of its purchase of Canwest, free access lasts only until the end of Shaw's next DTH licence term. Within its service area in western Canada, when Shaw renews its DTH licence, it can charge whatever it sees fit. We therefore view this arrangement as a gateway to move low-income Canadians who previously relied on free OTA TV onto paid services. We note that

while a similar satellite solution was offered in Bell's initial tangible benefits package for its purchase of CTV, that offer has since been taken off the table, as has Bell's offer to upgrade CTV transmitters to digital outside the mandatory markets.

We also note that the numbers cited by the CRTC of Canadians who will lose free OTA service on August 31 include only those who will lose service initially. As Mr. Angus noted on Monday, analog broadcasting is unlikely to continue forever. The CBC has said that within three years, the satellite network that supplies its analog transmitters will be decommissioned. The CBC will be unavailable over the air outside the 31 mandatory markets. For example, by 2013 there will be no Radio-Canada available over the air east of Rimouski and no CBC in Newfoundland outside St. John's.

We suspect that similar decommissioning will be pursued by other broadcasters, so free OTA TV in rural areas is likely to suffer a slow death over many years, affecting many more Canadians than current figures suggest. As Mr. Angus also said on Monday, even in areas where residents continue to have some OTA TV there will, indeed, be a hodgepodge.

In Mr. Del Mastro's riding of Peterborough, CTV will be available on digital while the CBC will continue in analog. To switch between them, residents will have to first turn off their digital converters, using its remote control, and then use the TV remote to tune in the CBC. If you buy a digital converter with no pass-through function, it'll be even more cumbersome. You'll have to unplug your antennae from the back of the converter and then plug it into your TV each time, but how will residents of Peterborough know this with no coordination among the education campaigns of individual broadcasters?

Appendix C summarizes how each of your ridings will be affected. The clerk has assured me you'll get copies of those appendices afterwards.

• (1545)

Ms. Crombie is correct that the CRTC has reversed its original recommendation that the government undertake a coordinated national consumer education and awareness program. We have backed the CRTC's original recommendation at every opportunity.

Recently, as an intervenor to the Bell-CTV ownership transfer, we and several other public interest groups recommended that \$10 million of the roughly \$200 million that will be spent on tangible public benefits be directed toward a national education campaign to fund a national call centre, an expanded and more user-friendly heritage website, and neutral PSAs to air on TV to drive viewers to the website and call centre.

The problem with an industry-led approach, as Bev mentioned, is that while independently owned broadcasters would have a vested interest in their viewers finding their signal post-transition, the BDUs that own Canada's private broadcasters have the reverse interest: to push Canadians onto cable, satellite, and telco services.

A colleague recently received a call from a near neighbour of Ms. Crombie and Mr. Chong, in Oakville, who was dissatisfied with how much he pays for Cogeco. When he phoned to cancel his subscription, he was told that after August 31 he would no longer be able to receive OTA TV. My colleague was able to tell him that thanks to the digital transition and his proximity to the U.S., he would receive more and better-quality signals free over the air than ever before, so he bought an antenna.

With regard to Mr. Armstrong's query about how vertical integration affects the digital transition, vertical integration is one of the main reasons a neutral, government-led information campaign is crucial.

Appendix D is a screen capture for the website of the independent authority that is overseeing France's transition. You can enter your postal code and find out exactly what is happening in your neighbourhood. All of this information is known in Canada and could be made available equally simply.

On the underfunded heritage website that we have, Canadians are advised to call their local broadcasters. In my case, there were 15 separate links. There's also nothing to warn you that outside the mandatory markets, you will almost certainly find yourself in a complicated hodgepodge. Compared with France's, our hybrid analog-digital solution and our enormous geography will generate much more confusion.

Our first recommendation is to renew our call that a coordinated national education campaign be undertaken as soon as possible under the leadership of the CRTC and by a working group that includes a range of industry and civil stakeholders.

I'd like to turn now to the more fundamental issue: that we as a country may fail to leverage the full digital dividend.

We've recommended that complete and user-friendly information be made available to individual Canadians as viewers, but it is perhaps even more important that comprehensive information be made available to civil planning authorities.

More than 100 remote communities that have never had CBC, Global, or CTV repeaters offer residents over-the-air rebroadcasting services for as little as \$40 per household per year. These municipalities negotiate their own deals with satellite providers to bring in remote channels, they raise their own transmission towers, and they then can offer whatever other local services they wish, such as a community channel, free wireless Internet, cellphone service,

mobile TV, and other new applications yet to be imagined—and all for less than a tenth of the price of satellite service.

The advantage of digital transmitters is their capacity for signal compression. In the old days, communities had to buy one box for each channel. Today they can buy just one for a fraction of the cost and can multiplex TV and other services together, so our second recommendation is that any national education campaign about the digital transition must inform remote and rural planning authorities about their options—about the new horizons that should be opening up to them, rather than closing. We urge each of you to demand this information for your ridings.

We fear that as broadcasters quietly decommission analog transmitters and towers over the coming years, this infrastructure will be lost to rural communities forever. Conversely, informed communities that step up to the plate to maintain their transmission infrastructures will have a stake in the new digital economy.

As well, it's not just rural Canadians who are losing out. While the digital dividend in other countries will result in more over-the-air TV channels and competition, here in Canada the transition is poised to do the reverse. The CRTC on Monday said that many digital channels can fit into the spectrum formerly occupied by one analog channel. While that is true in theory, Industry Canada has allotted each existing Canadian broadcaster a full six megahertz digital channel. This is the same bandwidth each used to have for analog TV—a “whole channel”, as we understand it on the dial—and it's in order to broadcast in high definition.

HD doesn't require the full six megahertz. Appendix F in the document you'll get is Canwest's presentation from Spectrum 20/20 in Ottawa last year, which shows that it intends to use only two-thirds of its six megahertz allotment for HD.

● (1550)

In effect broadcasters, who are collectively owned by fewer and fewer BDUs, are being given scarce real estate to squat on, rather than offering it for competition and new service by under-represented sectors such as our own. Add to this the fact that channels 52 to 69, once available for TV, are being slated for a spectrum auction, and it may soon be even more difficult for new broadcasters to get on air, especially in major population centres near the U.S. border.

Other countries have not pursued this approach. Appendix G presents a recent TV guide from L.A., in which as many as a dozen standard definition channels are multiplexed together, enabling all kinds of new content. Appendix H is a reprint of an article about the digital transition in Kenya, where many more free OTA services will soon be available, with more space for local and regional production in standard definition. In Canada, therefore, the emphasis on HD appears to be crowding out diversity.

Third, we recommend to the CRTC that all OTA services share their six-megahertz digital channel allotments in tight urban markets or with other services belonging to the same owner.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Edwards. If you have further opening remarks, you can add them during your answers to questions from members. Also, we'll receive your brief and have it translated and distributed to committee members so that they will be able to review it.

Ms. Catherine Edwards: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you for those opening statements.

We'll begin with Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windor, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and my thanks to our guests. Once again it's good to see you, as we've become familiar with one other on many subjects.

When it comes to the vertical integration—and we're not dealing with as many players—I have grave concerns about the public knowledge of what is going to happen with the OTA services. I fear that they will just disappear. When we had Hurricane Igor over the east coast of Newfoundland, there was a demand for milk, basic food supplies, and medical supplies, but the most requested thing was information. Nobody had information. They didn't know when the supply ship was coming, so the emergency broadcast system became a big topic.

In the last little while we've heard from Pelmorex, or The Weather Network, but in spite of their plans and noble aspirations, there are still a small number of people who do not get cable. That puts us in a situation. I'm glad you used the example of France, because I've seen that postal code idea before. Outside of St. John's, it's going to be trouble; in other areas of the northern west, it'll be more trouble.

As to the vertical integration, there are not that many players. Are you saying that we have to come up with a huge campaign, even more so now in light of the few players involved and the interests they represent?

Ms. Catherine Edwards: Is that addressed to me?

Mr. Scott Simms: Ms. Edwards, I'll start with you. Essentially, I want to know how large an endeavour this is going to be for us to go from here to there in a short time.

Ms. Catherine Edwards: One thing to understand is that we think analog transmitters are going to be slowly decommissioned over a period of years, so it's never too late. It doesn't have to be that large. Heritage Canada has started on a website. I notice they have a 1-866 number. I haven't tested what information they actually give on it yet, and this may be the beginning of a call centre.

The PSAs need to be neutral so that everybody is driven to those centres and so that BDUs aren't pushing lower-income Canadians onto pay platforms that are not necessary.

What's significantly missing—and there is nothing attacking this yet—is information packages for municipal planning authorities in rural areas to tell them how to fill the gaps being left by retreating broadcasters. Lots of rural communities have already been offering rebroadcasting solutions for upwards of 20 years, but most rural areas don't know about that. There are a few that have figured it out, but most don't know, and all that's missing is the information.

It doesn't need to be big. One of our appendices gives a breakdown. We think that about \$10 million is needed. Those 20 groups I mentioned put together an estimate of \$10 million, and that's a tiny amount. In the Bell-CTV transaction, which we suggested could finance it, that's 5% of the total public benefits. If you think of what's going to be made from the spectrum auction driving this transition, if they make \$5 billion, then \$10 million is nothing, just a fraction of a percentage.

I don't think it needs to be massive; it just has to be concerted and targeted.

• (1555)

Mr. Scott Simms: Just to throw in what you brought up earlier, it's not just about geographical boundaries or barriers; income barriers are also involved. I think that's the one aspect that people don't realize, as in “I just put on the rabbit ears and away I go”. Well, it's not that simple any more. It's more complex than that, given the digital world.

Ms. Milligan, you write about the transition that took place in the United States. Are there lessons to be learned from that?

Ms. Beverley Milligan: I think the key lesson and the one that's most in our face is that there was a comprehensive campaign and outreach, and there was recognition that there was economic disparity and that something needed to be done about that. It needed to be addressed and then communicated.

I agree with Cathy that it's about information first and foremost, so that someone on a fixed income can at least plan for it. It's also important to recognize that traditional forms of communication are not necessarily accessible for people with disabilities, so that there really does need to be an outreach to community-based organizations, to disability organizations, and so on and so forth. A PSA doesn't have to be captioned, so if that's what we're depending on—

Mr. Scott Simms: In the case of the BDUs, where are they in this situation? Are they carrying the load as well, similar to other jurisdictions, or are they falling behind on this?

Ms. Catherine Edwards: Are you talking about captioning?

The Chair: Go ahead, Madame Edwards.

Ms. Catherine Edwards: Are BDUs carrying the load on letting the public know what's coming? No, BDUs aren't involved at all. It's being left up to the over-the-air broadcasters, but most of them are now owned by BDUs. If they really were independent broadcasters, you would think that they would be highly motivated to let you know where to find their channel after the transition and to make sure they're on air; that doesn't apply anymore, because the BDUs own them.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Go ahead, Madame Lavallée.

[Translation]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Thank you very much. Welcome, ladies, and thank you for being here today.

Your presentations were extremely interesting. But, in listening to them and reading the documents that you gave to us, we have the impression that the Conservative government is trying to sidestep all its responsibilities, particularly when it comes to coordination. When we look at what is being done elsewhere in the world, there is an immensely interesting example in France. Not only have they adopted a digital transition strategy, but they have also developed a communications plan that covers at least two years to ensure that everyone is reached. The United States had its coupon system, and they still had a lot of problem cases during the transition. Italy, Great Britain and a lot of countries have made this transition. It has more or less gone smoothly for them, but they had already accepted their responsibilities and had already planned a coordination where the government had not only assumed leadership, but it had also provided financial assistance to the more disadvantaged people and planned a multimedia information campaign that was not limited to radio broadcasters, with three pages of information on how to make an announcement. That is what they did.

My first question is for each of you. Does it seem to you that the Conservative government is shirking all its responsibilities?

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: I agree with your assessment of the situation. One thing comes back time and again: the Conservatives imagine that if we are well-positioned within the market and there are a lot of players, all the problems will resolve themselves. But the fact is that we don't really have a free and open market. There are too few players, which is why we need other ways to get the information out.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Ms. Milligan, what do you think?

[English]

Ms. Beverley Milligan: I think it's also important to recognize that in a market-driven framework there are always going to be those areas that are not going to be driven by the market. The government needs to step up and accept that and address that aspect in a very proactive way, certainly in this circumstance.

[Translation]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Do you have a fairly accurate picture of the situation? At the start of the week, we tried to get a picture of the situation from the CRTC, but we didn't. They started with 900,000 people and, in the end, they fell to 31,500. Also, during the discussion, we learned that there were still cities where people

had to pay \$30 for a converter. They said that it's \$30. There was no place in their plan for all the exceptions that are going to rain down on our heads and the exceptions that we cannot think of today.

Do you have a picture of all the people who are going to be affected and how their problem will be resolved? Do you have numbers for this?

• (1600)

[English]

Ms. Catherine Edwards: I think the group that's done the most accurate research is the one you mentioned on Monday, the Canadian Media Research Consortium. I don't know where those numbers came from on Monday. I've seen some of them before, but if roughly 10% of Canadians, on average, don't have cable or pay television service, that amounts to about three million Canadians. I've never understood where the 900,000 came from.

The Chair: They were speaking about 900,000 households.

Ms. Catherine Edwards: Oh, it is households.

The 31,000 households, as I mentioned, may be the number that lose service right on August 31. They will be where we know analog transmitters are going to be decommissioned and not replaced. Our belief is that they're going to be decommissioned gradually over a period of years. The CBC has already said that this is the case. After 2013 there will just be no over-the-air Radio-Canada or CBC outside the mandatory markets. That's it.

Ms. Beverley Milligan: Your question speaks to a very important point, and that is the lack of research. I think that's consistent with many other activities that affect people with disabilities in communication. Again, there needs to be ongoing research in this and many other areas.

We communicate regularly with people and organizations across Canada. We are united on this issue through the Access 20/20 coalition, but we're prepared to assist and to work within the framework of a plan.

[Translation]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Do you find that the government is trivializing the fact that, from now on, Canadians will have to pay for television? It's still going to cost them \$30 for a converter. We know how difficult it could be for a person with low income to find this \$30. I find that some people are being arrogant and saying that it's only \$30 and that people are going to get it together. Actually, \$30 is a lot of money for someone who has difficulty paying their rent or who must live on social assistance and has 80% of their income going toward their rent. Don't you find that the government is trivializing the fact that people with low income don't have a way to buy these converters and even, possibly, to replace them?

[English]

Ms. Beverley Milligan: The first real issue, realistically, is whether it is \$30 we're talking about. This is a situation of supply and demand. If nobody knows about it in the first place, on September 1 you're going to have lineups at electronics stores. They're not going to be \$30—not at all. They're already in short supply.

[Translation]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: I believe that the price in the United States doubled during the transition, didn't it?

[English]

The Chair: *Merci*, Madame Lavallée.

Go ahead, Madam Edwards.

Ms. Catherine Edwards: I just wanted to reiterate that I think there's a lot of focus on the fact that the digital transition may bring in a loss of service for some Canadians, and that's true. I think it's such a pity that we're not focusing on how to make sure that Canada as a country gets the most out of the digital transition in terms of new services.

All that transmission infrastructure is in rural areas. There's no reason any of those communities should lose service. The communities have what they need to step up to the plate. They should not just maintain existing service; they can use those towers to get new services, such as wireless broadband and all these other things rural communities don't have.

Simultaneously, in urban areas all the new space that was supposed to be opened up during the digital transition for new, free TV services is being hogged by all the same broadcasters. We're not going to see any of those new services unless we modify the direction we're going. Other countries just aren't going in those directions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame Edwards.

We'll go to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you both for excellent presentations.

Madam Edwards, you're here so often that it's almost as if you're an honorary member of our committee.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Charlie Angus: I wanted to compliment you, because there were a lot of really thought-provoking elements in this. We had an excellent presentation from the CRTC. The overall message was “don't worry, be happy”, and I left whistling the tune. The more I walked away, the more disturbed I got. I think that sometimes happens.

What disturbed me was the sense that there will be a hodgepodge. We're going to have Shaw doing this and CBC doing that. My concern, from a practical point of view, is that if you suddenly don't have your television, how do you call CTV? You don't. Who do you call? You call us. Beyond a national education campaign, I think we need a member of Parliament education campaign, because people are going to be calling, and they're going to be mad as hell. This happens to me every time our CBC signal goes out and people don't get the Montreal Canadiens. They call me.

They can't call CBC. They can't call Shaw. They're going to call us and ask what's going on, and we're going to have no idea. We're going to say that they told us that there was a box plan, and then there was another plan. Why is it that we don't have a coherent

explanation and a national strategy for the hodgepodge that's going to be out there, so that people are at least aware of what's coming?

• (1605)

Ms. Catherine Edwards: That's the main reason that we think information needs to be prepared at the municipal and riding level. It needs to be specific and tell municipalities and counties and so on what their other options are. They don't have to just sit back and suffer loss of service.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I wanted to follow up on this issue of sitting on the six megahertz band. I think one of the ideological differences we New Democrats and the Conservatives have about the market is that although we also believe in the market, we just don't believe that the market exists because industry wants it to exist. To have competition, you have to sometimes lay down some rules. I've never met a single company, ever, that wanted competition; they want the market to themselves.

We don't have a marketplace in Canada. We have a family compact, and that family compact has grown bigger and bigger. They control more and more of the market, and we're being sold here, continually, the benefits of scarcity in an age of absolute abundance. My concern with the spectrum sell-off and the digital transition is that you have a couple of very large companies whose interest is to squat on as much of that spectrum as possible, even if they don't know what it's used for. This happens in mining all the time. Big companies always squat on the ground because they don't want small guys out in the field. They might not think to develop it, but they just don't want the competition.

What is the role of the CRTC in representing the public interest and saying that there are public possibilities and a lot of things that could be done with this? How do we ensure that the public is part of this?

Ms. Catherine Edwards: As I mentioned, the squatting is happening on two levels. It's happening on the TV channels that we have left, channels 2 to 51, which will still be used for TV service. I mentioned that all the existing broadcasters still get to sit on a whole one of those channels for HD, and they don't even need it all for HD, so that's a problem.

Second—and this is the part of my presentation I didn't get to—the upcoming spectrum auction of channels 52 through 69, the so-called digital dividend that this is all about, is going to be finite, no matter what. We already know that what is driving the demand for more bandwidth is rich applications, and in particular video applications that Canadians will be able to consume with their cellphones on the move.

In our view, it's just a move from the unregulated broadcasting spectrum that you watch in your home on TV, and now we have less space for that and fewer channels available for new entrants. We're giving it all to people who are going to offer us more mobile TV so that we can watch all over the place. It's mostly going to be light entertainment, foreign fare, with no regulation whatsoever. At the moment, there's no move to regulate any of that.

We're asking—that was our fourth and last recommendation, which you can see when you get our presentation—that a percentage of that spectrum auction be held back for public use and public planning.

Ms. Beverley Milligan: I'll add the important point that if you want to use any of that spectrum they're squatting on, you have to partner with them. You're just not going to get that access, so how can anybody ever break into anything? How is there innovation, when you have to partner, inevitably, with the broadcaster? They virtually get to dictate what innovation is going to happen in the future.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Ms. Milligan, I want to just switch—

Ms. Catherine Edwards: Sorry; can I add one other thing?

It's just that you wouldn't know how many people don't intervene in these kinds of processes or in CRTC or Industry Canada hearings because they're afraid to alienate big broadcasters, and they're afraid because they have no choices out there. You're hearing a tiny number of the voices out there that have these kinds of concerns.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Yes, we've heard that.

Ms. Milligan, I just want to switch gears somewhat, in terms of issue of accessibility. I've raised it before and I know the issue of television and the need for captioning, but do you track Canadian movies?

This is a concern in our household. We never watch a film that's not closed-captioned. Our kids grew up on American movies and Quebec films, because they always close-caption them to try and get an English market, but great English movies and documentaries were never closed-captioned, even though they were paid for by taxpayers' dollars and through all Telefilm Canada and everything else. Has that been addressed? Do you know if that's still a...?

• (1610)

Ms. Beverley Milligan: Well—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

Go ahead, Madame Milligan.

Ms. Beverley Milligan: What's really sad about that is if there's any Telefilm or CMF money involved, they'll actually pay for the captioning and description if it's in the budget, so it's kind of sad you're saying that and experiencing that.

The only research that's been done recently—the beginning of it is just being published at the end of this month—is tracking, right down to time code, over 1,800 hours of content, both Canadian acquired, first window, and so on and so forth, for accessibility. We're going to see, for the first time in about 19 years, some really relevant statistics to provide both as evidence and to help with policy decisions going forward.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame Milligan.

Mr. Del Mastro is next.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming today.

Over the past I think I have demonstrated that I don't always agree with the CRTC. In fact, especially if we go back to the issue of fee for carriage or value for signal, I made it pretty clear that I was very disappointed with the position they were taking. I thought it would lead to gouging of Canadians.

We saw a court decision earlier in the week, which I think potentially opens the door to that and which I'd be very disappointed to see. I think Canadians are, frankly, tired of being nicked and dined, and a decision in that regard to go in that direction would provoke the type of furor that Canadians have responded with on a number of fronts, so I hope we don't go there.

However, on this decision, I actually think the CRTC is doing a pretty good job. They do have breakdowns by regions, by ridings, of the number of homes they believe could potentially be affected and of which broadcasters and which towers are currently broadcasting in any given area. They do have pretty good data on that. I thought they had broken some new ground with Shaw on the purchase of Global, and I would expect we will see a similar deal made with the Bell purchase of CTV.

Of course I understand you said it's time-limited, and nothing says they will renew this deal, but I would expect that the CRTC, which held them to this standard in the first place, is likely to continue to hold them to this standard when they come for licensing renewal. I don't think too many BDUs will tell you that the CRTC is their buddy. They might not dislike the CRTC, but they are very concerned when they go before the CRTC that the regulator certainly does tend to come down on them.

I'm just curious. If we look at what Shaw did when it purchased Global, which was to extend free satellite dishes and signal and installation to anyone who could have their signal disrupted, and we anticipate that a similar deal is most likely to occur with Bell—which came before the committee and extended the offer of a program they call “freesat” a couple years ago—and if that is extended and continually re-extended, where is the problem?

Ms. Catherine Edwards: Go for it.

Ms. Beverley Milligan: Let's look at what was committed to by Shaw. It was \$38 million for this to reach 200,000 households; what does \$38 million do if you have a strategic, comprehensive framework through which you are trying reach every Canadian by applying it more strategically than just throwing it to 200,000 households and assigning a timeframe to it and a rollout and all of these things?

All we are asking for is that somebody make sense of this. That's it. When the framework makes sense, let's do the proper and necessary outreach.

I agree with you. I think the CRTC is trying very much to do the right thing; it just takes more leadership than that of the CRTC to do this.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: You said it was only 200,000 homes, but really what we're talking about is the homes that cannot receive a digital signal for whatever reason. They're in an area the CRTC has looked at and where the CRTC has said, “We're not going to make you install this digital transmitter in this region, which means you will not receive digital signal”. In those areas they have indicated they won't see you left without service. Our concern is with those who would be impacted, i.e., they would no longer have any signal. In think that is why they've gone with a very targeted approach.

If you look at it and say they are ensuring through this very targeted approach that the people who are impacted directly are going to be looked after, if we went with a pan-Canadian view on this and said we were just going to throw it out right across Canada, invariably we'd be taking in well in excess of 90% of households that watch television that aren't looking for a program, that aren't going to be impacted by the transition at all. I'm just curious as to what is wrong with the targeted approach to this when it seems that a targeted approach is, in fact, what's needed?

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Del Mastro.

Madame Edwards, go ahead.

Ms. Catherine Edwards: I'm not sure I agree that just because the CRTC expected it from Shaw this time around, they will next time. In our experience as community broadcasters over the years, there used to be very high expectations of cable companies on the delivery of community television service, and over the years it's simply eroded. As well, if it's not a political priority at the time, nothing happens, so I don't agree with you there with Bell and CTV, whereas Shaw....

We don't think these suggestions for public tangible benefits come from nowhere. We believe they come out of informal conversations between the CRTC and these companies. When Shaw put forward their public benefits package, at that time there did seem to be a strong CRTC direction to encourage multiplexing, the kind of thing I'm talking about with community broadcasters so that local communities could share channels in a tight spectrum. That was in the Shaw deal, as well as this satellite arrangement. Bell and CTV initially had offered the same things, but they have taken it off the table, so I'm not sure there is the same direction this time around; in the same way, last summer the CRTC was advocating for a government-led education campaign, and now they're not.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Madame Edwards.

Madame Crombie is next.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you to our witnesses again.

Ms. Edwards, I'm really concerned about the inadequate performance of the Prime Minister's communications teams in responding to inquiries. It has taken six months for you to get a response to your letter on coordinating a national education campaign in advance. Have you heard anything from anyone? Did the minister respond?

Ms. Catherine Edwards: Yes, and we did copy all of you on this letter, by the way, so I hope you've heard of it. We did get a letter just saying that it was going to be led by industry.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Nice.

Ms. Edwards, you also made a comment that you can't afford the conversion. It's going to affect many single mothers, elderly, handicapped, disabled people, and aboriginals. What is your estimation of the costs, and did you agree with the CRTC's estimates? You've obviously been through the transcripts. You know they were estimating \$30 for a digital converter and \$300 in remote communities for a satellite dish. We had been told that the aggregate costs were about \$64 million, but who knows? They could be much

higher. What are your estimates, and do you both agree with those estimates? How punitive is it?

Ms. Beverley Milligan: If you take what we found in the U.S., which is that one-third of all households will have someone with a disability, then we're looking at, according to the CRTC estimates, 300,000 households having someone with a disability or being run by someone with a disability. That's a big number. It's going to affect people with disabilities quite significantly.

Ms. Catherine Edwards: As for my own decision not to have cable or satellite, it's partly income-driven. I'm actually here today as a volunteer. As we all do, we have money for certain things and we figure out our priorities. In my case, there's a whole range of structural problems with the Canadian broadcast system, which means to me that there isn't much on cable or satellite. They're all repurposing programming because we've taken away genre specificity. We've taken away sources of funding support for local programming so there's very little of that. There's a whole other range of reasons that I'm satisfied with the free channels that I get. Ottawa is served by about 15 free French and English language over-the-air television channels, so we're in a unique position here because of that.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I had asked this on Monday. I'll ask you as well about what you think the fairness is of the government earning over \$4 billion in the spectrum sale and yet not offering Canadian consumers a subsidy to offset the purchase of these digital converter boxes or satellite dishes. What's your opinion on that? Do you think the government should be offering a subsidy as well?

Ms. Catherine Edwards: I definitely think that with the amount of money the government stands to make in the auction, they could be doing a better national education campaign that could offer free equipment. That would be a logical part of it. I agree that it's a huge amount of money.

• (1620)

Ms. Beverley Milligan: What we've actually filed is that there should be a buyer's premium put on top of that \$400 million, and that represents 10%. It's consistent with how auctions occur all over the world, and that kind of fund could begin to address these types of issues.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I was interested in whether the digital signal will include captioning and what the cost would be to provide the captioning.

Ms. Beverley Milligan: The digital signal will include captioning. Industry Canada takes care of those types of standards, the technical standards. The pass-through will be digital. There's still some lag and other issues associated with it, but for the most part, the distribution of the content will arrive safely.

The question is whether it is even captioned or described in the first place.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: I'm concerned as well for rural Canadians. Currently they have access to the over-the-air rebroadcasting services at about \$40 per household per year. Obviously I think they'll be one of the groups that are most severely penalized. It'll be the most punitive, with the lowest access at the highest cost.

Are there other options available to them? What are your comments about the cost they'll now need to incur?

Ms. Catherine Edwards: That particular number you were just quoting was taken from my talk. It was the fact that since the seventies and eighties, before satellite was available and when there wasn't cable in rural areas, a lot of rural communities had the gumption to stick up their own transmission towers and negotiate with signal providers from big cities to bring channels into their own communities. For example, in Valemount, B.C., where there's actually a community channel as well, one of our members brings in three remote radio channels and six remote TV channels. They rebroadcast it from a tower over the air and they charge people out of the tax base. It comes out to about \$40 a year. That includes paying a coordinator to offer a community channel. A community of 1,500 has community TV. This is something that can also be used for offering wireless broadband in rural communities that are also likely to be left behind by the commercial system.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: Yes.

The Chair: You may have one last question, Madame Crombie.

Mrs. Bonnie Crombie: You recommend that 10% of the spectrum freed up by digital transmission be reserved from the auction for public use and innovation. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

Ms. Catherine Edwards: This is what's going on now: Industry Canada is asking how that auction should proceed, and there's a whole series of public users that at the moment are having to buy back spectrum from the private sector. I'll give you one example from Mr. Angus' riding in Timmins. A lot of remote areas around Timmins, including parts of Timmins, don't have broadband Internet. Some of them don't have cellphone access on remote highways as well, which is dangerous. Public entities and municipalities are getting together and are having to put out RFPs to private vendors to ask how much it would cost to put in hot spots and cellphone services to these areas. They'll come back and say that the business case means they need as least this much, so the municipalities are making up the difference. What they are having to do is effectively buy back spectrum from the private sector that has been previously auctioned.

It was originally a public resource. What we're saying is that in this upcoming spectrum auction, some of the spectrum should be kept back for public administration. It will probably happen on a local basis so that these public user groups can make sure that there is fair and equitable service for Canadians. In this way broadband could be another use of that rural transmission infrastructure.

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you, Madame Edwards.

Mme Lavallée ou M. Pomerleau.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Pomerleau (Drummond, BQ): My question is first for Mrs. Edwards, and then Ms. Milligan.

I just heard my friend, Mr. Angus, tell us that some people are going to have their television cut off in August. I hadn't thought about it, but the telephone is going to ring, not at the CRTC office, but at my office.

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: That's right.

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: I would have a serious problem with that.

Seriously, I am thinking of warning the people in my riding ahead of time. Mrs. Edwards, I would like to know what you will write in a message sent to my constituents. Might this be, for example, the first principles, places they can call, web pages they can consult, and so on?

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: A short, two-page document has already been prepared to provide Canadians with the basic information. We have also spoken with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the CRTC and other agencies about it. We are encouraging the idea of producing a brochure saying what the municipalities can do if there is a service interruption.

One of the first things this brochure could say is what will happen to the television stations in their area. Are they going to be broadcast in digital, in analog, and what equipment will they need to buy? Then, if the people are no longer receiving service, the brochure could indicate what the municipality or township can do to fill the holes in the commercial system. This is what we want to offer. The brochure would include 15 or 20 pages of information and would let people know where to go to learn more.

• (1625)

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: You are meeting with the municipalities or the Union des municipalités du Québec.

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: The problem is the lack of funds. One of our members, Valemount Community Television in British Columbia, already offers this type of service. It is possible to collect all this information from members of our organization. But I am a volunteer, and it would take time and effort.

Then, we need to find a way to distribute them. I mentioned the Fédération québécoise des municipalités. There is another association of municipalities in Quebec. Someone told me that, if I prepare the information, people would be willing to work with us to distribute it. But there is little time left to be able to offer another service through a transmission tower.

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: That's right.

[English]

Ms. Beverley Milligan: It's also important to recognize that you're going to have to go into the people's homes. They're not going to be able to do it all the time on their own. There needs to be that part of it that is very grassroots and community-based aspect.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: It's a big job.

[English]

Ms. Beverley Milligan: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: That was my question.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Madame Lavallée.

[Translation]

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Something my colleague Roger suggested bothers me a little. Indeed, MPs are going to do the work of the Conservative government. It's up to the government to coordinate the transition, to pay for it and for the brochures, as it has been done in all the other countries around the world. I am a little troubled that, as an MP, I must invest my time, my money and my energy to do the work that the government isn't doing. This was just a little comment. From time to time, it does me good to air my opinion.

Mrs. Edwards, you said earlier that, as of September 1st, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation will no longer transmit a signal east of Rimouski. Can you confirm that? What are you basing this on?

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: Yes, I can confirm it. CBC indicated that, after 2013, its satellite network transmitting the signal to all its transmission towers will probably no longer be in service. CBC or Radio-Canada will no longer transmit outside the 31 main and mandatory markets. People from the Canadian Media Guild and the CBC union told me about it.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: That surprises me a bit because, as you know, CBC...

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: Yes, it is required to.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: ...is in the process of installing a completely digital and high-tech site in Rimouski. CBC is investing a lot of time, energy and resources into this new station, which should be located in Rimouski. I cannot believe that this station is going to be put in and that, then, people will never be able to tune in to it.

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: The irony for Quebec is that Télé-Québec, your provincial broadcaster, is going to put...

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): You can use the word "national".

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Actually, it is our national broadcaster. There is our national assembly and our national broadcaster.

Mr. Royal Galipeau: The national glass of water. It's all national!

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: I'm sorry. My mistake. I know that, but I forgot.

A voice: Quebec is my country.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Quebec is my country. Bravo, you're starting to understand. That's good.

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: Télé-Québec promised to modify all their transmission towers so that they can support digital broadcasting. It is ironic that CBC does not intend to do so. It's a problem of financial resources. CBC hopes that the government will provide the funds.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Lavallée. Thank you, Mrs. Edwards and Ms. Milligan.

[English]

I think that's the end of the questions and comments.

[Translation]

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: Can I add something important?

[English]

The Chair: Please be brief.

[Translation]

Mrs. Catherine Edwards: Mrs. Lavallée, if Télé-Québec, for example, modifies its digital transmitter, it would be possible to transmit the signals of different broadcasters. If Télé-Québec wanted to cooperate with CBC, it could offer its services in all these communities. It is our community option.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci.*

Go ahead, Madame Milligan.

Ms. Beverley Milligan: Your point about the service being downloaded to you and your budget is very consistent with people with disabilities and organizations for the disabled, whose budgets are being cut back. They're volunteer, not-for-profit, and charitable organizations, and they just can't do it, so there are going to be tough times.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I have two quick points of information because I want to make sure we don't create misinformation out there. Any tube TV purchased in the last number of years will automatically handle the digital conversion. There's no need to purchase a conversion box, because they have the digital over-the-air converter built in. Any flat-screen TV has the digital converter built in. In fact, newer flat-screen TVs often don't receive analog signals anymore. You have to check whether or not the flat-screen TV you purchased will receive the existing analog signal, because a lot of them won't. That's the first point of information.

For members of the committee, the committee has received, pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the main estimates for the Department of Canadian Heritage. They should be reported back to the House no later than May 31 of this year. If the committee wishes to study that issue, please let the chair know so that we can set some time aside between now and the end of May.

I want to thank our witnesses for their testimony. We have one more hearing on this issue on Monday with the department. At that point we'll wrap up these hearings.

With no further ado, the meeting is adjourned.

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