
BRIEF FROM THE CPSC-CUPE

As part of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage's Study on
the Relevance of Supporting the Organization
of a National Forum on the Media

27 February 2024

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INTRODUCTION

The Provincial Council of the Communications Sector of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CPSC-CUPE) represents some 6,900 communications workers in Quebec.

Most of CPSC-CUPE's members are employed by private traditional media that provide written and audiovisual information content (Journal de Québec, Groupe TVA, Bell Media, Cogeco Media, RNC Media, NousTV), as well as telecommunications companies that allow citizens to have access to news produced by these media outlets at all times (Videotron, Telus and Cogeco Connexion), whether online, on the television or on the radio.

CPSC-CUPE has taken note of the work of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (CHPC) on the relevance of holding estates general on the media. The Committee's mandate reads as follows:

“Whereas:

1. The news media is in crisis due to the dominance of foreign digital companies;
2. Hundreds of newsroom positions across Canada have been cut since the beginning of the year, and hundreds more are likely to be cut in the near future;
3. Hundreds of newsroom positions across Canada have been cut since the beginning of the year, and hundreds more are likely to be cut in the near future;

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Committee undertake a study to determine the appropriateness of the government providing support to the national news sector holding a national forum on the media and that the Committee invite sector experts and leaders to discuss and help determine the possible terms of reference. Provided the sector initiates a forum, that governments at the national and provincial levels be invited to contribute to this debate. [...]¹

The CPSC-CUPE believes that an important discussion concerning the news media is urgently needed in light of the major layoffs announced in recent months and the media's financial problems, which are having a very real impact on the quality and diversity of journalistic coverage in the country.

This brief outlines the parameters that should be put forward during these estates general aimed at finding solutions to the current media crisis in order to promote the sustainability of factual, reliable and diversified information essential to life in a democracy.

¹CHPC, [Minutes of the 5 December 2023 Meeting](#), when the meeting resumed on 7 December, shortly after 8:15 a.m.

NATIONAL FORUM ON THE MEDIA

A. Hold a wide-ranging consultation

A national forum on the media should bring together a wide range of stakeholders: employers, unions, media workers, journalists' associations, press councils, members of the public, citizens' groups, elected officials, relevant departments,² media or journalism specialists, and representatives of regulatory bodies such as the CRTC.³

All types of companies producing news in Canada should be represented in this work, from traditional media—most of which are also present online—to new media distributed exclusively on the Internet.

CPSC-CUPE does not share the view of some witnesses⁴ who want the web giants to have a say in such an event. Although present in the Quebec and Canadian media world, these multinationals do not produce local news. They distribute it—and rake in the bulk of Canadian⁵ advertising revenues—but it is the local and national media, both traditional and online, that hire all the staff needed to gather, research, write, present and disseminate news that is relevant to Canadians.

The estates general should therefore focus on the local and national media's difficulties and ways of turning the situation around for the benefit of Canadian society as a whole.

B. Act quickly

Time is against us collectively, however, as cuts to well-established media companies are underway.⁶

This major consultation should therefore take place as soon as possible and ideally before irreversible decisions have materialized.

Among CPSC-CUPE members, 70% to 80% of the staff of Groupe TVA (TVA) regional television stations are to be laid off in the coming months.

Bell Media (Bell), for its part, refused to fill two vacant journalist positions in the Outaouais region, preferring to entrust journalists located in Montréal with the task of producing local news for all its regional stations.

² Department of Canadian Heritage, and Ministère de la Culture et des Communications for Quebec.

³ Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.

⁴ Sue Gardner, [Committee Evidence – CHPC 110](#), at approximately 4:06 p.m. and Jen Gerson, [Committee Evidence – CHPC 110](#), at approximately 4:11 p.m.

⁵ Social media and digital platforms not affiliated with the media accounted for 73% of advertising spending in Quebec and 70% of the same spending elsewhere in Canada in 2021, in: Centre d'études sur les médias, [Publicité](#), updated April 2023, graph No. 9 [in French only].

⁶ See notes 10-14.

C. Entrusting representatives of the people with organizing the discussion

In determining its mandate, the Committee on Heritage chose to study the appropriateness of the government providing support to the media industry holding a national forum on the media.⁷

Respectfully, CPSC-CUPE believes that it would be a mistake to allow media with conflicting interests to put such a consultation in place themselves, even if it were done with government support.

From media workers' perspective, it would make more sense and be more promising for the government to coordinate this kind of national forum, as it did in organizing the [National Culture Summit](#) in May 2022 to help the arts sector ". . . recover and thrive"⁸ coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CPSC-CUPE believes that the government would be in the best position to:

- convene a variety of media outlets that is representative of the entire Canadian news industry and a wide range of stakeholders, including unions and academics specializing in media and journalism, who can contribute to collective reflection through their experience or in-depth research;
- convince governments in all provinces to address the current media crisis and participate constructively in identifying solutions; and
- establish sustainable mechanisms to support local news and Canadian democracy.

Another option would be for members of the Committee on Heritage to hold a national forum on the media to explore possible solutions for the news sector. The Committee could then make recommendations to the government after hearing from stakeholders and experts. However, CPSC-CUPE believes that this option would lead to further delays, which could potentially prevent the maintenance of certain gains.

CPSC-CUPE agrees with Sue Gardner, who spoke before the Committee on Heritage Committee, that **it is not up to the media industry to organize this discussion, but rather the representatives of the people to ensure that it is held in the public interest**⁹:

"If the industry leads, it is going to centre its own interests, and that is not what you want. What you want is to centre the public interest, so it's important that you guys keep the authority to do that. I think it's your job."

D. Centering the national forum on public interest and the diversity of voices

Regardless of whoever ultimately spearheads this national forum on the media, it is essential that journalists' mission to serve the public interest be at the centre of discussions.

⁷". . . a study to determine the appropriateness of the government providing support to the national news sector holding a national forum on the media . . ." in CHPC, [Minutes of the 5 December 2023 Meeting](#).

⁸ Government of Canada, [National Culture Summit to focus on recovery, long-term growth, and competitiveness of the arts, culture and heritage sectors](#), News release, 27 April 2022.

⁹ Sue Gardner, [Committee Evidence – CHPC 110](#), at approximately 4:06 p.m.

Significant staffing cuts announced by major media outlets over the past year (including at TVA,¹⁰ Bell,¹¹ Metro Media (Metro)¹² and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)¹³) and cuts that have gone more or less unnoticed in other media outlets¹⁴ cast doubt on Canadians' ability to stay informed about what is really happening in their communities, their regions, provinces and country. That is what needs to be addressed as a priority.

The discussions must make it possible to find, collectively, **how to ensure the maintenance of a strong local news production ecosystem, capable of hiring journalists and other information specialists to support them (graphic designers, cameramen, editors, researchers, etc.), in order to consistently produce reliable information—because it is professionally verified—to counter disinformation.**

Limiting economic pressures

The entry of Big Tech onto the Canadian advertising market has meant that Canadian media now have limited means of producing local news.¹⁵ This puts them in a situation where they are more vulnerable to all kinds of economic pressures.

These pressures have always been present,¹⁶ but newsrooms are now facing the growing phenomenon of click management.

For example, media owners determine the topics to be covered on a daily basis based on the topics that attract the most attention on the Internet. This has the effect of limiting the number of topics covered and the scope of journalistic work over time, thereby restricting public interest in the news being produced.

Focusing on public interest and the diversity of voices

Public interest, however, should not be viewed as **the public's interest**, i.e., as the amalgamation of citizens' online reading or viewing choices.

Public interest is:

[TRANSLATION] ". . . what is of interest to the public, but above all what *should* be of interest to the public because of its political, social or economic significance. In this respect, *public* interest is different from *the public's* interest: the first is what the public *needs* to know, and the second is what it *wants* to know. If the two coincide, so much the better. If not, public interest should take precedence, as it is necessary for the democratic functioning of society. . . . This assessment differs from journalist to journalist, of course, and that is precisely why media plurality is essential. Through their diversity, the media manage to compensate for each other's subjective mistakes and, in their efforts to offer the public what comes closest to its interest, they succeed in doing together what they could not achieve alone."¹⁷

¹⁰ Chloé Pouliot and Coralie Laplante, [Suppression de 547 postes chez Groupe TVA](#), Le Soleil (with the Canadian Press), 2 November 2023 [in French only].

¹¹ Radio-Canada, [Le conglomérat BCE abolit 4 800 postes, soit presque 10 % de sa main-d'œuvre](#), 8 February 2024 [in French only].

¹² Radio-Canada, [La faillite de Métro Média officialisée](#), 17 September 2023 [in French only].

¹³ Cédric Bélanger, [800 postes abolis à CBC/Radio-Canada : « Jour sombre pour Radio-Canada »](#), Journal de Montréal, 4 December 2023 [in French only].

¹⁴ Geneviève Rossier, [Les Coops de l'info : autre réalité, même combat](#), Open letter, 17 November 2023 [in French only].

¹⁵ Centre d'études sur les médias, [Publicité](#), updated April 2023, Figures 2, 7 and 9 [in French only].

¹⁶ Pressures from advertising sales teams, in particular.

¹⁷ Simon Tremblay-Pepin, *Illusions – Petit manuel pour une critique des médias*, Lux, 2013, p. 22 [in French only].

The proposed national forum on the media therefore needs to address the conditions that need to be put in place to guarantee Canadians reliable, diversified information that is in the public interest.

Journalists play a crucial role in any society that claims to be democratic by exposing the successes and shortcomings of governments as well as those responsible for public offices or state-funded organizations.

Major journalistic investigations carried out over the past year have notably made it possible to expose:

- **questionable expenses at the Office de consultation publique de Montréal**¹⁸;
- **compensation paid by Hockey Canada to a victim allegedly sexually assaulted by players on the 2018**¹⁹ Canadian junior hockey team; and
- **the scandal involving Chinese nationals' and elected officials' spying on Canadian soil.**²⁰

All these news stories have led the governments or institutions concerned to take various measures,²¹ including legislative measures.²² Resignations have been submitted,²³ money has been reimbursed,²⁴ and charges have been laid.²⁵

Moreover, without the outreach work done by journalists from Quebec and Canadian media, extensive reports—presented by auditors general, privacy or official languages commissioners, the ombudsman or coroners—would largely fly under the radar and risk remaining a non-issue.

These few examples illustrate that journalistic work is essential to the accountability of those who occupy positions of responsibility in Canadian society.

E. Emphasizing the importance of fact-based journalism in all regions

Nowadays, anyone with access to a computer can make their opinion known publicly on social media or the Internet. The presence of diverse opinions in Canadian society is therefore not an issue.

It is more local information, factual and verified by professional journalistic teams, that is at risk. It is this type of news—essential to our democracy—that the solutions found at the end of these estates general should seek to protect, in addition to the public interest and media diversity.

¹⁸ Dominique Cambron-Goulet and Anabelle Blais, [Les dirigeants de l'Office de consultation publique de Montréal ont multiplié les dépenses douteuses aux quatre coins du monde](#), Journal de Montréal, 6 November 2023 [in French only].

¹⁹ Rick Westhead, [Hockey Canada, CHL settle lawsuit over alleged sexual assault involving World Junior players](#), TSN, 26 May 2022.

²⁰ Robert Fife and Steven Chase, [China views Canada as a 'high priority' for interference: CSIS report](#), The Globe and Mail, 1 May 2023.

²¹ Mélanie Marquis, [Le fédéral gèle le financement de Hockey Canada](#), La Presse, 22 June 2022 [in French only]; Dominique Cambron-Goulet and Anabelle Blais, [Guy Grenier a été congédié de l'OCPM](#), Journal de Montréal, 7 February 2024 [in French only].

²² Dominique Cambron-Goulet and Anabelle Blais, [Scandale de dépenses à l'OCPM : Québec modifie la loi après notre enquête](#), Journal de Montréal, 8 December 2023 [in French only].

²³ Hugo Prévost, [Dominique Ollivier démissionne du comité exécutif de Montréal](#), Radio-Canada, 13 November 2023 [in French only].

²⁴ Dominique Cambron-Goulet and Anabelle Blais, [Régime à sec à la Ville de Montréal dans la foulée du scandale des dépenses de l'OCPM](#), Journal de Montréal, 6 February 2024 [in French only].

²⁵ Robyn Doolittle, Rachel Brady and Grant Robertson, [Five members of 2018 Canadian junior hockey team to face sexual assault charges](#), Globe and Mail, 24 January 2024.

In recent months, however, major conglomerates have explained that their media properties are in financial difficulty and have announced reorganizations.²⁶ In the case of TVA, the production of local newscasts will be centralized in Québec City, leaving only a small number of journalists in other regions.²⁷ Bell already produces local news for its regional radio stations out of Montréal.²⁸

In short, if nothing is done, large-scale regional coverage is likely to be reserved for sensational news stories: forest fires or other natural disasters, serious accidents, fatal shootings, major disruptions to public services, and so on.²⁹

These centralization strategies, aimed at addressing profitability issues, do not bode well, as they directly undermine the ability of the fourth estate to consistently play its role of democratic watchdog in the other regions. This must be one of the topics discussed at any media national forum, as well as financial support for the media.

F. Review financial support for the media

Given that Bill C-18 has not delivered the expected results and that the results expected by C-11 are still pending, a national forum on the media should look at the financial support needed to produce news of public interest across the country.

The *Online News Act* was supposed to lead to the sharing with Canadian media of a portion of the advertising revenues that web giants derive from the publication of Canadian journalistic content. However, as Meta chose to block news from Canadian media companies on its platforms (Facebook and Instagram) last summer, Google was the only company to strike a deal with the federal government for \$100 million a year.³⁰ This is much less than the \$200 million to \$300 million expected annually when the bill was studied.³¹

As for the *Broadcasting Act*, modernized by Bill C-11 to include foreign online businesses in Canadian regulations, it has yet to yield concrete results in terms of funding. The CRTC's consultations on the initial base contributions that online broadcasters such as Netflix and Disney+ may have to make have only just concluded.³²

Most foreign companies objected to these contributions or attempted to defer them, while Canadian broadcasters argued that the situation was urgent.³³ A CRTC decision is expected in the coming months, but there is no guarantee that these contributions will see the light of day or that they will be allocated to Canadian media producing local news.

In view of this situation, governments should reassess their tax support for the media, at least temporarily. **This funding should only be used to support the production of factual news of public interest in all regions of the country.**

²⁶ Op. cit., notes 10-14.

²⁷ Émilie Bilodeau, [Les régions, c'est comme si on était des gens de seconde classe.](#), La Presse, 4 November 2023 [in French only].

²⁸ This is the case in Gatineau, where the two vacant journalist positions were filled by journalists who produce the news from Montréal.

²⁹ CRTC 2023-138, [Transcript – 21 November 2023](#) hearing, Volume 2 of 15, see BCE Inc., at para. 1089 to 1091.

³⁰ Mylène Crête, [Ottawa et Google ont trouvé un terrain d'entente](#), La Presse, 29 November 2023 [in French only].

³¹ Pierre St-Arnaud, [Le Directeur parlementaire du budget croit que les médias pourront récolter 330 millions](#), The Canadian Press published by La Presse, 8 October 2022 [in French only].

³² Parties were to file their final replies as part of CRTC 2023-138 process on 15 February 2024.

³³ [CRTC 2023-138 public record](#).

CONCLUSION

The CPSC-CUPE would like to thank the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage for giving us the opportunity to present our positions on the parameters of a possible national forum on the media.

This major reflection organized by the government should take place quickly, bring together a wide range of stakeholders and focus on the conditions required to ensure that news of public interest is produced in all regions of the country, by diverse media.

The event is expected to provide an opportunity to reassess how to financially support media companies producing local news given that the media crisis continues and Bills C-18 and C-11 have not yet delivered the desired results.

CUPE-CSPC representatives remain available to answer any questions committee members may have.