

PBC21: Public Broadcasting for Canada in the 21st Century
DPC21: Diffusion publique au Canada pour le 21^{ième} siècle
Canada.pbc21@gmail.com

1 March, 2021

Claude Doucet, Secretary General
Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission
1 Promenade du Portage
Gatineau, QC J8X 4B1 e: Claude.doucet@crtc.gc.ca

Dear Mr. Doucet:

Re: CRTC Consultation 2019-379, Renewal of CBC/R-C Licences

1. When representatives of PBC21 appeared at the above-noted public hearing on 27 January, they committed to table information concerning renewal of the Corporation's Trans-Cultural Production Fund. That document, "Bridging the Bicultural Gap", is attached.
2. We have reviewed the undertakings submitted by CBC/R-C and would encourage the Commission to pursue exempting the CBC's digital services from the Digital Media Exemption order (DMEO).¹ Regulatory practice long applicable to CBC/R-C's radio and television stations and networks could be appropriately adapted to supervision of the digital services of CBC and Radio-Canada, ensuring that, as occurs with its legacy services, major alterations such as new additions, closures or substantive changes in domestic content commitments would trigger review. Moreover, inasmuch as the Corporation draws on the same public funding for its digital initiatives as it does for its legacy services, PBC21 contends that the accounting for all should be equally transparent.
3. We support the CBC's contention that it should continue to be permitted an 'original' credit for all the children's first-run programming in which it is a pre-production investor, whether broadcast in French or English.² To do otherwise would mean ignoring the realities of the global production marketplace and limiting Francophone children's access to entertainment options that have become the international norm.
4. With respect to Tandem and the deceptive practice of disguising commercial messages as editorial content, PBC21 has for the past decade advocated for the removal of

¹ As discussed in undertaking DM=3981695

² As discussed in undertaking DM= 3986662

advertising on all CBC platforms. We remain convinced that public service broadcasting is better supported by other means and that its objectives and quality are irreparably damaged by the programming and scheduling compromises driven by the commercial imperative. In its Decision 2016-353, the Commission ordered the Corporation to return Radio Two and Ici Musique to their previous non-commercial status. We are confident that the Commission has the authority similarly to preserve the CBC/R-C's journalistic integrity by ruling as inappropriate the production and carriage of branded content on any of its platforms.

5. Given the lack of evidence provided by the Corporation in support of a full 5-year renewal, we are confident that the Commission will find only a shorter renewal term – perhaps two years – supportable. This would also be consistent with the time required for amendment of the Broadcasting Act which may materially alter the expectations of Canada's national public broadcasting service. In the event that the CRTC opts not to eliminate Tandem at this time, PBC21 endorses the suggestion³ addressed in Undertaking #17 that CBC/R-C be required to report publicly on four aspects of its use of Tandem-generated material on any of its platforms; in addition, the Corporation should be required to provide annual confidential filing of the revenue generated by this initiative so that the Commission can then evaluate its continuation during a subsequent license period.
6. During the oral hearing it appeared that that the Commission's focus was largely on measurement, rather than the fundamentals of public service. In the years since its last review, CBC/R-C has swerved far from its founding principles. While current management of "the Company" may not be aware, the Corporation was founded not to wholesale domestic consumers to corporate clients but to deliver audio-visual programs of interest to all Canadians. And Parliament granted the Commission the moral and legal authority to ensure that the foundations on which the CBC was built are affirmed and renewed.
7. PBC21 remains convinced that for that to occur, CBC/R-C must be appropriately resourced to provide the unique services Parliament has assigned. Its local and regional presence and services must be restored so that Canadians everywhere can once again be confident of their nationwide reflection. The distinctive roles played by Radio-Canada and CBC North deserve acknowledgement and must continue to be safeguarded, and the Corporation must address the opportunity for cross-cultural exchange that its world-class creators (now siloed) present.
8. PBC21 proposes two conditions of licence that address this latter point:

1. That the broadcast and streaming rights for Canada: A People's History and for the over 100 hours of Cross-Cultural documentary programming be immediately renewed by CBC/R-C so that these bicultural assets can be made available to Canadians on GEM and Tou.tv. Since they were last

³ https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/transcripts/2021/tb01_15.htm. See transcript, Volume 5, line 5810 ff.

aired, millions of new arrivals have joined the Canadian family and this foundational programming must continue to be universally available.

2. That annual Trans-Cultural incentive funding be immediately restored by CBC/Radio-Canada, so that fresh streams of bilingual production can once again enrich French and English broadcast services, encourage collaboration between them and build a significant cultural bridge across the linguistic divide.

9. On Day Two of the January public hearing (2019-379), in response to a question from Vice-chair, Broadcasting, Caroline Simard about whether the quality of CBC News had diminished due to funding cuts and management's focus on expanding the digital news service,⁴ President Tait responded, "Absolutely no impact The proof is in the pudding and in the experience of -- in our estimation that we are delivering, we are over delivering historically on pretty well all our obligations in the area of news. We have done extraordinary expansion within -- with very, very meaningful impact." Vice President Williams added, "Without compromising the people on the ground that are actually doing the news gathering we are still doing the number of hours and we still have a high quality product." It is unlikely that the many intervenors to this hearing who expressed serious concern about deteriorations in CBC's national and local news services would agree.

10. Following are comments in response from CBC journalists across Canada.⁵ During the public hearing, they were communicated directly to Senior Management and, in the interest of ensuring balanced information and because they deal with concerns addressed in PBC21's written and oral presentations, we include them here.

☞ We are now only about quantity. We don't talk about who is the best person to get for an interview or what are the best questions to ask. Instead we talk about how fast it can be turned around and how many platforms one reporter can fill. We are also all about easy targets such as local business people who now send us press releases about everything they do because they know it guarantees province-wide coverage, instead of talking to another who is a little harder to find.

☞ We have inadequate editing and editorial support, and few are given the support to do investigative or more in-depth work. Our decisions are often based on gathering for the day as opposed to prioritizing the kind of innovative, digital storytelling we are supposedly committed to. I'm also concerned about a focus on the path of least resistance as opposed to challenging ourselves and having difficult editorial conversations.

☞ Despite the supposed commitment to "digital first" over the past few years, local TV newsrooms are still largely driven by 6 p.m. local newscast needs; story decisions often based on low-hanging fruit, what's visual, increasingly simplistic or PR-type of stories.

☞ Streamlining the assignment process (TV, radio, digital all assigned by one team) has meant story decisions go through a singular set of (largely white, middle-aged) gatekeepers, whereas the separation

⁴See lines 1832 ff, https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/transcripts/2021/tb01_12.htm

⁵ Comments have been edited only to protect the sources.

of platforms should mean a more democratic story decision process. There's merit to cross-platform coordination but this can't be at the expense of diversity in editorial and decision-making.

☞ Decreased staffing on digital in recent years means we're just covering the bare minimum, i.e., those non-negotiables like the leg, COVID, transit, etc. Original and meaningful stories outside of that become afterthoughts because there just isn't the capacity. Money largely going into staffing broadcast instead for what are often much shorter and, by extension, more simplistic treatments.

☞ No clear mandate to the "Enterprise" unit -- mandate should be to dig deeper on issues driving the news and deeper dives on stories from communities that aren't often represented. Instead, they're often are a grab-bag of bad tenant and city hall stories.

☞ Emphasis on short TV news packs means there's virtually never any longform even for stories that are investigative in nature and merit deeper treatment. Then the rest of the newscast is made up of filler. We aren't prioritizing our best coverage. When there are feature interviews, they're often devoid of accountability questions.

☞ We've moved far away from the kind of original, investigative journalism that made the CBC great. And we're doing both ourselves and readers/viewers a disservice by not taking more seriously stories about the audience we claim to serve, which in xxxx is about 51% people of colour.

☞ Lack of depth because journalists are spread across three platforms with no guidance on priority. Weekends have been abandoned meaning we start Monday behind the competition. Errors pervade digital copy; radio news writing is mediocre and there is no training; TV has been bled of dedicated reporters because it isn't a priority; Facebook and social media drive story meetings; we miss major news stories; we allocate resources to 'programming experiments' of marginal value; the public tells/asks hosts & talent about the decline in CBC news on a regular basis.

☞ The quality has declined significantly. Lack of training means poor writing, lack of research, inadequate vetting, and more errors. Staff cuts mean less investigative work, almost no local documentaries, rushed stories, and more repeated programming. Producing for more platforms leaves reporters and producers spread too thin.

☞ The quality has definitely and noticeably dropped. For our executives to say otherwise is either an outright lie or another indication they are completely out of touch.

☞ News and information programming have gone tremendously downhill, only caring about the amount of clicks. Not covering public interest stories because we give resources to PR that will do well on social. Putting resources from "content diversification" to fluff pieces and freelance food columnists while turning down enterprise pitches on under-reported areas that would require more time. So much phone journalism it's not even funny. Making reporters chase multiple stories at once and not letting them have time to flesh out important ones. Always saying "we don't have enough resources for that." Over reliance on UCG content. Unwilling or unable to send staff out to get visuals. Under-staffed.

Regional/Local News

☞ I'd argue that the quality of journalism in xxxx has generally improved, despite ongoing challenges. It's important to remember that TV was scaled back after xxxx lost a third of its budget and the remaining resources were redirected to digital; local TV news was a Magid-driven concept. So TV news

had little depth or context. No story could be more than 1:45 and many were even shorter. Although the supper show was 90 minutes, each half hour contained the same stories, just packaged differently.

☪ In preparation for being knocked down to a 30 minutes show, we began to run the same 30 minutes, 3 times. It had no impact on our ratings - in fact, they even bumped up a little. The transition to more digital storytelling created an opportunity to dig much deeper into issues as a complement to radio current affairs. I'd suggest we may have more stories being told and more breadth and depth than we've ever had. Keep in mind that web writers are gathering in addition to the field reporters. Field reporters file for web, web writers file for radio and do TV debriefs. Our television news is more Current Affairs now, so fewer stories and few pictures/video, but more in depth. The supper show often makes news that also contributes to radio and web. A much more cohesive news/current affairs ecosystem.

☪ TV, despite its small audience, has more impact now, as other platforms utilize their content. I wish we had more reporters and more capability to gather video. Our numbers are too small for the size of our market. When xxx took a big budget cut about 5 years ago, we lost a lot of our news gathering capacity and so we have fewer resources to get into the community. We are also not able to contribute as we once did for our National colleagues which continues to be a challenge. However, we have created several pop-ups – (for) rural, indigenous, and several nearby cities as a way to serve underrepresented communities with MOJOs. More Facebook live townhall type initiatives have also been done. Xxx is an important market for CBC and for the country and of course I'd argue that our footprint should reflect that more appropriately and be larger, but I think the quality of our journalism and programming is better than ever.

☪ I've only been in the xxx shop for a few years, but I've seen us go from a newsroom that prizes original enterprise reporting to one that is only able to cover the absolute must-do stories. Excellent tips just aren't looked into because there is no one to look into them.

☪ We used to have an investigative team; now we have an "Impact Unit" that is expected to produce stories for three platforms every single weekday. There is no place in a unit like this for actual investigative work.

☪ Yes, we're producing some amazing, original work, but at a huge cost to the rest of the team. Reporters are given a few weeks to work on exceptional pieces, while the small remaining reporters are pumping out daily news at an exhausting rate. I have to file radio, tv, online and produce something for current affairs every day. That means we frequently have to go for the low hanging story just to fill the gaps. More needs to be done to acknowledge the workload others have to take on in order to backfill and buy time. In my worst example, one day I filed two voicers, four radio clips, two web stories and did a talk tape. That pace is unsustainable.

☪ The quality has decreased dramatically. There is no longer the ability — or the interest from senior managers — to do the level of accountability journalism the public deserves and expects from us. Legitimate political accountability stories are quashed by managers who refuse to explain why these are somehow not stories. They do not respect our mandate, this kind of journalism, or the journalists who still strive to produce work in the public interest.

☪ Understaffing is so critical and chronic in the broadcast news service, I think Canadians would be shocked to know how our daily story selection depends primarily on whether we actually have a

reporter available to cover something important happening in our own country. Canada's public broadcaster does not even have senior/national reporters located in all of the provinces (New Brunswick, PEI), any of the territories, or even in Victoria, the capital of British Columbia.

☞ We no longer have the staff to cover all the stories we should be covering. We cover stories gauged on how many online hits they might get, rather than by their importance to Canadians. We no longer cover city hall. We don't cover local meetings. We rely on local newspapers to do the grunt work. Also, the quality of the material we get from the Toronto national newsroom is much lower -- rife with mistakes and sloppiness.

☞ I've been producing the XXXXX afternoon radio CA program for 10 years now. When I started, I had one more staff person (an AP), more contributions from syndication, and less time to fill. Over the past few years there have been cuts, so I lost one AP, and syndication has had cuts as well. Not only that, but the World this Hour was cut back, which means I had to fill the extra time. The result? I'm constantly being asked to do more with less. It's just NOT POSSIBLE to keep being asked to pivot and produce more, while seeing zero impact on quality. I rely more on "quick books", guests and stories that I can guarantee we'll book quickly to fill time on the show, rather than high-quality pieces that take a few days to produce and put together. My APs never get to go out and gather a story because they're stuck on the phone, just filling airtime with whatever guests they can get. I couldn't live without syndication but also resent how much I have to rely on what scraps they give us -- the national guests/treatments they provide on stories do not even fit our local mandate. I would give my left arm for another AP to just be able to BREATHE for and take more time to THINK about what we have on the show and what would make the most impact. SO burned out.

☞ Broadcast quality has plummeted and going into the field is just for a few select people. The great majority of news gathering happens from the desk, through email and phone calls. TV is mostly interviews/hits, not stories. Radio settles for mostly all phone tape as if that's good enough. The number of "people" in our coverage continues to be noticeably reduced for press releases and spokespeople. This is NOT COVID related. We have a five-year gap in field news gathering and that trickles down to national news gathering to try to do stories from start to finish with little and often no material ever gathered on very important stories. It results in many national stories being impossible to do same-day as new developments emerge. We end up doing stories late/dated or not at all. It's not acceptable. To hear senior leadership say quality is high is beyond the pale. It's simply false.

☞ Less video quality, less time to focus on visual storytelling; every year we're told to simplify our product so it takes less staff to do it, so we tell fewer stories and repeat visuals ad nauseam

☞ It's not possible to maintain quality when reporters must file to three/four different platforms on one story in a short amount of time. I now file to online, radio, radio current affairs and TV for almost every story I produce. Reporters are stretched very thin, work long hours to meet tight, unrealistic deadlines that too often don't allow us to produce the same depth of journalism we would have in the past, especially at the local level. Too often I've seen reporters forced to produce stories on such tight deadlines to multiple platforms only to make serious errors -- mistakes that frankly no one has time to correct or sometimes even notice. It's very disheartening.

☞ Quality has gone down, especially at the local level. Reporters lost producers years ago and it puts a HUGE amount of stress on them. They now have to file for radio, tv, sometimes digital. It's outrageous.

As an editor in tv news, I'm handed a script, MIGHT have a discussion with the reporter and access to them while I cut alone, often with less than an hour! I become a video producer, but don't get paid any kind of upgrade. I hate cutting corners (no pun intended), but recently I've had to put less production work into the poor quality video we're getting in; this is mostly because of COVID due to virtual interviews, but it COULD be improved---just that nobody CARES!

☞ It's not just local. Recently an editor had to cut an item for The National with ONLY the reporter, no producer. That is not normal or usual. The item ended up having to be moved to the end of the show because it couldn't make its slot. No surprise there. This speaks to an issue with staffing. Cut after cut with NO care for the output, no care for the fewer and fewer people doing more and more work; and, often, doing work they're not really supposed to do.

☞ Then there is the mere acceptance of poor quality work on all levels. I am a stickler for grammar and am forever hearing bad grammar on radio and tv and reading it online. I once complained to Esther Enkin (so this goes way back) and she excused "live tv" and reporters ad-libbing. I'm sorry, if I was in a room socializing with a bunch of people, I might not care too much about poor language use, but I'd note it. I'm shocked that we allow people to be the voice of the CBC without making sure they can speak off the cuff intelligently, using correct language. The main reason is that people are moving up through the "ranks" too quickly and don't have enough experience. AND, vetters are either not catching things or are doing so much that stuff airs before it's had a chance to be vetted.

☞ Recently I worked with a producer whom I recognized (from her photo as this was all over Gchat) as an EA. I could be wrong. She had no really good grasp of what her job was other than to be constantly on my case about making my slot. Fairly unhelpful. A reporter told me she told her she could produce the piece herself. Why are we putting people into jobs without proper training? How to look for viz, how to read time code, how to indicate instructions clearly on a script.

☞ There is no accountability. Anything goes. It's only television, after all. Tomorrow's another day. I'm not perfect, I have my bad days, but some mistakes just don't need to be repeated.

☞ The CBC news shows have incrementally lost viewers and listeners because management is chasing after what advertisers (Tait's argument for Tandem) and a sector of the market (younger is their target) supposedly want, forgetting that baby boomers are going to live for a long time. My baby boomer friends are in disbelief of what the CBC has turned into and have stopped watching nightly newscasts, for instance, and I can no longer listen to the radio all afternoon.

☞ Our turn towards including digital should be commended — but we need enough journalists to actually manage all these platforms. In-depth stories that would have been reported and produced thoroughly by three or more people (journalist, researcher, fact checker, engineer, etc.) are now often done by ONE person, who is also responsible for a multi-platform digital iteration (or at least overseeing one). Things are falling through the cracks.

☞ Service is decidedly worse and less in all categories - parliamentary - domestically - locally - and internationally. investigative hit hard. Documentary production has almost disappeared. Resources are slim or none. Many shows that used to have production and research are now just talk shows.

☞ Fewer reporters filing reports that provide context and information. Instead, it's rants from reporters based on web stories. Many times I look at CTV and Global and think they're doing a better job than CBC on the TV side and wonder why we're still doing it.

☞ We no longer cover city council on a weekly basis but there are TONS of single-source stories. Major reliance on press release journalism and on the same sources repeatedly. Little to no coverage of news from sources that lack a profile or PR presence even though their stories might have greater news value. Stories that are of genuine service to our audience are constantly competing with the need to get the "low hanging fruit" to fill newscasts and shows before deadlines. Poor representation of marginalized groups, not because we don't want to do better but because we have so little time to prepare programs and stories that we go to the same, easy-to-get sources over and over and use the same well-worn angles without taking the time to question our POV. Over-reliance on cop/fire stories. No time to provide important context for stories if it's going to require some digging.

☞ The country has never been more in need of a robust national broadcaster to closely monitor our leaders' actions and hold them to account. Instead, we're doing endless stories about how everyone and their dog - business, teachers, parents, you name it - are being impacted by COVID-19 restrictions (because I guess it's not obvious enough?).

☞ Local current affairs and arts programs indeed have minimal resources. For example, there is one producer responsible for putting together 6 hours of radio on the weekend in xxxx. I can't speak to the quality because I haven't worked in a region for 5 years.

The National and CBC-NN

☞ At CBCNN, many writers now CUT on Media Central which is a useless bit of technology. Writers cut and often ask editors to "look it over" or finesse it. I often recut. They're not editors! And cutting takes time away from writing. And it's taking work away from editors... so you know where that's going to end up! A lose-lose proposition: laid off workers (some recent retirements have NOT been replaced), and writers working double hard without appropriate remuneration.

☞ As to the quality of the content.... CBCNN: talking heads, endless repetition. Why are we not using more stories from around the country, local stories so one coast knows what's happening on the other side of the country, etc.?

☞ At The (new) National: with the disastrous revamp, a bunch of people with NO previous experience on the show came on board. Whereas Stephanie Jenzer or Jennifer Harwood would sit in an edit suite to cut a vo and we'd get it JUST right back in "the old days", now writers only call you and give you an overview of what they want, leaving the rest up to the instructions they put in the script. This wastes time with back and forth when things don't look just as they want. And timing is a crapshoot. In the old days, writers knew the rhythm of the anchor (now it's one of 3) and we always got everything spot on.

☞ As for my fellow editors, there are so many new, young editors doing shifts with hardly any experience. When I started 25 years ago, you worked your way up. You didn't cut a piece for the National until you'd been around for while. Now, they're being called upon to cut what goes into our "flagship" nightly newscast (that hardly anyone watches any more). I'm not saying their work is bad, just that there is a benefit to the feedback you can give to a producer and a reporter when you've been around longer. I think it shows because stuff just gets slapped together.

☯ There are so many ways...but the key is there are too few people actually "on the ground" chasing stories compared to the past few years. That has led to programs like W6 and The National sounding eerily similar to each other.

☯ Often our reporters here in Canada cannot even go out to cover events in our backyard because they have to file for both the World at Six as well as The National. So they sit at their desks and write to material brought in by producers or from local reporters. One National reporter got so fed up with it she left.

☯ Less travel has meant less vital international, and even national, reporting. So much comes through the lens of Toronto or Montreal. National reporters and producers need more freedom and support to travel to report on Canada as a unit, and internationally to report on Canada in the context of the world rather than as a silo. We've become increasingly insular and backwatered.

☯ Sometimes we now cover the world from our desks instead of actually going out to where the news happens. I often hear/see CBC reporters file stories covering Africa or Latin America from their desks in Toronto. This is not the reporters' fault. How can we cover stories if we are not actually there to witness the events? Instead we just lift video and clips from Reuters and file reports from here. I know because I have had to do it too.

☯ The National... what is there to say? Flash and sets over quality and interesting stories. It's hard to judge at this time, because of COVID. Nonetheless, all day and all night U.S. election... we've got money for that! But we don't have money for other more important things like paying for the people we need to do professional jobs.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of PBC21 as a final reply in the process of CRTC Broadcasting Consultation 2019-379.



Kealy Wilkinson

cc: regulatoryaffairs@cbc.ca