

COURIER WEEKEND

Friday, January 31, 2020
Volume 43, Issue 05

CHCO-TV accuses Rogers Communications of anti-competitive practices

By Andrew Sutton

SAINT ANDREWS

Charlotte County Television (CHCO-TV), which operates out of Saint Andrews, is New Brunswick's only independent television station. In 2010, the programming produced by the station was made available to those with Rogers cable subscriptions, but only for customers located in Saint Andrews. Patrick Watt, CHCO's station manager, said Rogers told them that the time it wasn't technically possible to program cable boxes in other parts of Charlotte County to carry the channel.

"So," said Watt, "we did a little experiment. We took a cable box from Saint Andrews and plugged it in to a TV in St. Stephen. It worked perfectly fine."

Watt says this implies cable boxes in Charlotte County were being programmed specifically not to give customers access to CHCO programming, a practise which Rogers would continue until 2017, when CHCO volunteers presented to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) during a Rogers licensing renewal hearing. After the hearing, CHCO was made available on channel 126 to communities across Canada.

The casus belli for the most recent complaint to the CRTC stems from two incidents which occurred in the past few months. First, Rogers moved CHCO from channel 126 without notice or explanation. Second, according to Watt, Rogers replaced CHCO-TV programming on more than one occasion.

"Specifically, our Santa's Helpers Telethon, a live TV fundraiser that supports local families in need, was in-

CHCO-TV Station Manager Patrick Watt prepares to shoot the local news update with producer and host, Vicki Hogarth. CHCO has filed a complaint against Rogers Communications with the CRTC. The regulatory body will be taking public comments on the complaint until February 3, 2020.
Andrew Sutton/Courier



terrupted for 45 minutes with another Rogers program," said Watt.

"We were getting calls from Rogers subscribers during the telethon telling us that the programming Rogers was carrying on our channel wasn't the actual telethon."

Watt sees these grievances as indications local reporting is under threat from the large media conglomerates that make-up the media landscape in Canada. Because they own the means of distribution, decisions on what programming to run rest with them, and they have an incentive to push their own assets, like CITY-TV and OMNI-TV, which compete

directly with local stations.

"We are baffled that Rogers would purposely limit distribution of an independent community station in New Brunswick, which is one of the most underserved provinces in Canada in terms of local programming and news coverage. Surely New Brunswickers all over our geographically close-knit province would find CHCO's local content reflective of their lives and informative of regional issues," CHCO wrote on their website.

Vicki Hogarth, CHCO's community producer and marketing director, said "Canada has one of the highest concen-

trations of media ownership. The big three (Bell, Telus, and Rogers) control everything from content to distribution.

Continued on page 2

CHCO-TV accuses Rogers Communications of anti-competitive practices

Continued from page 1

"Throw in the Irvings in New Brunswick and it's an even more dangerous landscape when it comes to people's access to balanced news," Hogarth added.

She's not alone in her concerns about the media landscape in New Brunswick. In the 2006 final report on the Canadian news media, the standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications wrote, "The Irvings' corporate interests form an industrial-media complex that dominates the province. According to one source it includes more than 300 companies, has an estimated net wealth of \$4 billion and employs 8 per cent of the New Brunswick labour force. To give a frame of reference, the federal government in 2004 employed 1.9 per cent of Canada's labour force. And because the Irving interests are privately owned, they do not even have to provide the level of public respon-

sibility that publicly traded corporations are required to provide. This situation is, as far as the committee could determine, unique in developed countries."

"For a democracy to work there has to be a diversity of voices in order to hold politicians and corporations accountable. There needs to be independent media in order to balance out private media and corporate agendas," Hogarth said.

She pointed out CHCO is the only independent television station in the entire province, and most of the "local" coverage produced by the big three isn't actually created here.

"When you throw in the fact that Irving owns and controls most of the papers except the Courier, and the information that New Brunswickers have access to is filtered through a corporate agenda, and doesn't truly represent what's going on in our communities and our province," she said.

Hogarth argues CHCO deserves to be aired across

the province. "My guest this week on Southwest Magazine is People's Alliance leader Kris Austin, which is relevant to the entire province."

She points out it's even more relevant considering just four years ago, CTV locked Austin and Green Party Leader David Coon out of their election debates, claiming they didn't have room.

"We can't allow big media to have that much influence over our government and that much control over who has a voice. The big three don't actually want us to exist. They don't want competition, not just from a business perspective, but from a messaging perspective."

The CRTC will be taking public comments on CHCO's complaint until February 3, 2020. CHCO is asking those who value local media to go to their website (chco.tv) and follow the link there to submit comments to the CRTC.

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