January 23, 2015

John Traversy
Secretary General
CRTC
Ottawa ON K1A 0N2

Dear Mr. Secretary General,

Re: Local programming changes and job cuts at City Winnipeg

As the union representing workers at CHMI TV (City) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and on behalf of the members of Unifor Local 826M, I would like to provide the Commission with additional background information following the announced layoffs and programming changes at City Winnipeg.

On January 6, 2015 Rogers announced that it would be cutting City Winnipeg’s Breakfast Television morning show from its weekday broadcast schedule. This decision, which also eliminates 17 jobs, has obvious implications for station workers and their families. But the decision also raises important questions on matters of local programming - an issue the Commission has considered among the most pertinent in its recent Let’s Talk TV consultations. Questions around local programming will undoubtedly be raised during Rogers’ group-based license renewal scheduled for 2016.

For many years, Unifor (along with its predecessor union, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada) has expressed concern over the Commission’s rather loose definition of local programming. In Broadcast Regulatory Policy 2009-406, the Commission articulated this definition (“programming produced by local stations with local personnel or programming produced by locally-based independent producers that reflects the particular needs and interest of the market’s residents”) and also prescribed mandatory local programming hours for stations operating in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan markets.

In past interventions, Unifor has called on the Commission to amend its definition of local programming, to capture “original” programming hours – eliminating a station’s ability to run repeat programming to cover their license obligations – as well as to delineate between “in-house” productions and those delivered by locally-based independent producers, among other elements.
Local Canadian television faces significant economic challenges, there is no doubt. This claim is not in need of empirical defence, and it’s not my intent to summarize Unifor’s position on this matter in this letter. The Commission has explicitly acknowledged the long-term pressure Canada’s local television industry faces, as a result of the changing structure of advertising as well as “audience fragmentation, decreases in advertising revenue and competition.”¹ How the broadcast industry and its regulatory body could “foster local programming” was viewed as a key consideration in the Commission’s Let’s Talk TV hearings.

The situation unfolding at City Winnipeg is a salient example of the underlying challenges local stations face, and one that should force the Commissioners to exercise a greater level of diligence when assessing local programming requirements in the renewing of station licenses. The City example highlights the inadequacy of the Commission’s definition and the need for re-evaluation in the lead-up to the 2016 group-based license renewals.

City Winnipeg: an overview

For licensing purposes, City Winnipeg operates in a “non-metropolitan” market. Therefore, it is required to broadcast no less than 7 hours of local programming each week.

City Winnipeg has changed ownership hands many times in recent decades and has seen its local workforce decline from a recent peak of 82 workers (in the Local 826M bargaining unit) to a low of 12, following the cuts announced by Rogers earlier this year.

The station had once served the Winnipeg community with a 30-minute evening and 60-minute nightly news broadcast each weekday (along with two 30-minute daily weekend news broadcasts). Those broadcasts ended in 2006 following the CTV purchase of CHUM assets – assets that were subsequently acquired by Rogers, in 2008. These news programming cuts effectively eliminated 9.5 programming hours and 29 bargaining unit jobs. More importantly, it closed an important window for Winnipeggers into their community.

The station’s morning show (most recently known as Breakfast Television) survived these program cuts and continued to broadcast despite industry upheaval following the 2009 recession. In fact, City Winnipeg was the only Rogers-owned City station that received financial support through the Local Programming Improvement Fund. BT aired for three hours each weekday and focused programming on local community and ethno-cultural events, the promotion of local businesses, artists and amateur athletes, among other interest stories. Three-to-five minute local news, sports and weather segments would appear on the top and bottom of each hour.

On January 6, Rogers announced that BT programming would be cut. In its place will appear a morning radio-television show hybrid that will be simulcast on CITI-FM and CHMI, both Rogers-owned stations.

As a result of this decision to consolidate broadcasts, 17 jobs will be cut at CHMI. Despite City Winnipeg’s ability to claim no net loss in local programming hours (as per the Commission’s definition and conditions of license requirement) local interest news segments will be

¹ CRTC Broadcasting Notice of Consultation 2014-190
significantly reduced, as a result of staffing cuts. The local community stories that had historically made up the lion’s share of BT’s programming schedule are expected to be reduced to approximately one-hour, per day (instead of three). On-air local expression and local presence will suffer, yet nothing currently obligates station owners to consider these matters when fulfilling their license requirements.

In 2007, when the Commission approved the transfer of control to Rogers of the various City stations, the broadcaster’s commitment to retain “localness” was identified as a “defining element” of City programming. Paragraphs 22 and 23 of Broadcasting Decision 2007-360 highlight this point:

22. Rogers Media stated that, under its ownership, the identity of the Citytv stations would be defined by their “localness”, urban reflection and reflection of the diversity of the communities served. Rogers Media further advanced that Citytv’s extensive morning news programming adds to the diversity of voices in its markets and provides in-depth coverage that none of its competitors provide. Rogers Media made a commitment to the maintenance of the independent management of its news departments and separate presentation structures for Citytv and OMNI.

23. In light of Rogers Media’s statement that it will make “localness” a defining element of the programming offered by the Citytv stations, the Commission directs the applicant, at license renewal, to review its strategy for local news on the Citytv stations in western Canada.

In light of the January 6 announcement, it is difficult to see how the company is considering “localness” – a stated objective that contributed to the decision granting Rogers ownership of the television station. It also reinforces the recommendation to maintain the Local Programming Improvement Fund – or a similar mechanism geared to support important local broadcasts – made by Unifor as part of the Let’s Talk TV consultation.

Unifor believes these recent changes are of concern to the Commission, just as they are of concern to our members and the people of Winnipeg who tune in to watch each day.

I would also ask the Commission, as they prepare for the 2016 group-based license renewal and as they continue to deliberate on how best to foster local programming, to consider this information that we have shared. A simple count of scheduled hours is an imperfect way to determine how well a community’s interests are being served through local programming. The question is as much about substance and quality as it is about quantity.

The current definition of local programming is ambiguous. It provides station operators too much flexibility to meet license requirements while cutting content and redirecting resources away from in-house production. The definition – and therefore the Commission’s ability to enforce its own licensing rules – does little to promote investment in quality programming that Canadians say they cherish and support.

It is not a stretch to assume that an overly-flexible definition for local programming is a contributing factor to the current, and seemingly untenable, crisis we face in local conventional TV – where savvy consumers will gravitate toward well-resourced, informative and high quality television, regardless of the platform it can be viewed on.
Unifor, our national Media Council and the thousands of members working in the television sector await the Commission’s final report of its conventional television review. We also look forward to sharing our views during the 2016 group-based license renewal.

Yours truly,

Howard Law
Media Director, Unifor
HL:amcope343

CC: Scott Doherty, Assistant to the Unifor National President (via email)
    Randy Kitt, Chairperson, Unifor Local 79M & Unifor Media Council Chairperson (via email)
    Michael Draven, President, Unifor Local 826M (via email)
    Susan Wheeler, Vice President Regulatory Affairs, Rogers Communications Inc. (via email)
    Pierre Nantal, Official Opposition Critic for Canadian Heritage (via email)
    Stephane Dion, Liberal Party Critic for Canadian Heritage (via email)
    Brian Bowman, Mayor, City of Winnipeg (via regular mail)
    Ron Lemieux, Provincial Minister, Manitoba Tourism, Culture, Heritage, Sport and Consumer Protection (via email)