

IGNITING DEBATE

COUNCIL JOINS THE CAMPAIGN FOR MEDIA DEMOCRACY

by Meera Karunanathan

Walking through the markets of Old Quito, Ecuador last summer, my partner and I often found ourselves in the midst of heated public debates.

One night we even witnessed a local Member of Parliament share a proposal for parliamentary reform with a very animated crowd in the middle of a town square. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas often speaks of “the public sphere,” where opinions are formed through open debates and public discussions. This sentiment was certainly alive and well in Quito.

In Canada, our vast landscape and cold climate often leave people feeling disconnected. And in an increasingly commercialized society, there are fewer community spaces in which people can gather to engage in public discussions. This makes the role of the media all the more important, as it is one of the few venues where people can become exposed to diverse perspectives and informed about the issues that affect their day-to-day lives.

Unfortunately, private media ownership in Canada is now more highly concentrated than almost anywhere else in the industrialized world. As governments and policy makers promote the unfettered expansion of commercial media to the detriment of public broadcasting and community media, Canadians are losing crucial access to a wide range of information and analysis about our communities, our country and the world.

MEDIA DEMOCRACY

Without adequate funding and regulatory support, both our public broadcasting and our community media sectors are struggling to survive and maintain quality programming.



Christina Riley

Meera Karunanathan, being interviewed by the media during a street protest in Montebello, August 2007.

That’s why the Council of Canadians has joined the newly-formed Campaign for Democratic Media (CDM), comprised of 45 organizations, including unions, alternative media outlets and NGOs.

Within its first few months of existence, the network led a country-wide campaign encouraging people to write the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) in advance of the hearings on media diversity in September 2007. Despite the short notice, over 1,900 Canadians swamped the CRTC with letters demanding a less concentrated, more representative media.

MESSAGE DELIVERED

While the CRTC’s final decision ultimately favoured the private sector and showed little willingness to effectively address the problem of media concentration in Canada, the regulatory body could not ignore the hundreds of letters it had received from the general public. Collectively, we sent a strong message that Canadians are concerned about media reform.

In November 2007, the Council of Canadians joined other CDM members at a protest urging the CRTC to reject the application by CanWest MediaWorks to acquire Alliance Atlantis

Communications in partnership with an affiliate of the U.S. investment banking giant Goldman Sachs and Company.

At the hearings, Council of Canadians Executive Director John Urquhart and board member Garry Neil told the CRTC that if the deal went through, it would effectively allow a U.S. corporation to own and control two of Canada’s largest media companies.

The Council argued that if foreign corporations were allowed to take control of Canadian broadcasters, cable companies and other firms involved in the Canadian broadcasting system, they would eventually be able to challenge government policies that affect their rights as investors through the North American Free Trade Agreement’s chapter 11.

Unfortunately, the CRTC once again ended up siding with the corporations and allowed the deal to go through.

But as our collective voice for media reform is steadily getting stronger, changing the media landscape through the CRTC is only one of our targets. Over the next few months the Campaign for Democratic Media is raising funds to launch a number of important projects, including a campaign to ensure open, interconnected, non-discriminatory and affordable access to the Internet for everyone.

TIPPING THE BALANCE

Social justice activists often complain that the media distorts their viewpoints and represents issues only from the perspective of the corporate elite. Through our involvement in this important new network, the Council of Canadians and a growing number of our allies are taking action to correct the imbalance and ensure that a diversity of voices and opinions get a chance to be heard.

Meera Karunanathan is the Council of Canadians’ Media Officer.