



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Official Languages

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 012

Tuesday, November 25, 2025

Chair: Yvan Baker



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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Good morning.

Welcome to meeting number 12 of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Pursuant to paragraph 108(3)(f) of the Standing Orders and the motion adopted by the committee on September 25, we are meeting today to begin our study of the quota of French-language music imposed on French-language media.

I would like to welcome the witnesses to this first hour of the meeting.

From the Alliance des radios communautaires du Canada, we have Louis Béland, executive director. From the Association des radios communautaires acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick, we have Carl Monette, president, via videoconference, and Pierre-Luc Brousseau, chief executive officer, in person.

Welcome, everyone.

Mr. Godin, you seem to want to speak.

Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. Chair.

I would like us to correct the title of the study. Currently, it is called “Quota of French-language music imposed on French-language media”. Maybe it should be called “Quota of French-language music imposed on French-language radio media in Canada”, because we are only receiving people from radio.

The motion did not specify that the quota applied to all media. It was in reference to Cogeco Media, which is a broadcaster.

I don't know if I can get unanimous consent to correct the title of the study. I repeat that we are only receiving people from radio.

The Chair: The committee appears to give its unanimous consent. We will change the title.

Each organization has five minutes to make its opening statement. We will then proceed to a question and answer period with the committee members.

Mr. Béland, you have the floor for five minutes.

Louis Béland (Executive Director, Alliance des radios communautaires du Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everyone.

Founded in 1991, the Alliance des radios communautaires du Canada promotes and defends the interests of minority French-language community radio stations. Twenty-eight of our radio stations broadcast their programs on the FM band while a twenty-ninth broadcasts its programs online while waiting to apply for a licence from the CRTC, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. This is proof that our communities still have an appetite for the radio medium.

A major player in commercial radio in Quebec recently asked the CRTC to lower the quotas for French-language music and eliminate the concept of prime time. However, the request, which aims to provide more flexibility to commercial broadcasters, is not aligned with the efforts of minority community broadcasters, who continue to constantly promote French-language music, despite all odds.

Certainly, private radio stations are facing competition from foreign digital platforms. That's undeniable. However, it must be remembered that this reality is not unique to private radio, as the entire radio sector in the country is facing pressures from foreign platforms that do not operate under the same rules as we do. If this proposal to lower the minimum threshold for French-language music is provoking such strong reactions in the music industry, among organizations defending the francophonie and among elected officials, it's because radio still plays a predominant role in the discoverability of francophone artists.

What do the Beauséjour group, originally from the Acadian Peninsula, Hubert Cormier from Anse-Bleue, New Brunswick, and the Bilingual Boys, a Franco-Ontarian musical trio formed in the suburbs of Greater Sudbury, have in common? All have appeared in our national rankings, but few, if any, have had the privilege of being in the top positions on the charts with major private broadcasters. Why? Because it's our francophone community radio stations that still play this essential role of promoting and valuing music in our language, particularly in a minority setting.

Ironically, when commercial radio stations call for a reduction in French-language music quotas, our radio stations far exceed theirs and continue to support local artists by offering a variety of music formats that reflect the diversity of the Canadian francophonie. We could provide many examples of initiatives within our movement to promote artists from the Canadian francophonie, but we'll only mention a few.

Did you know, for example, that in Ontario, in the Georgian Bay area, one of our member radio stations, CFRH, has taken the bold step of offering music programming strictly in French?

In addition, radio stations in the west and the territories recently featured a microphone for young Franco-Manitoban singer-songwriter Micah Baribeau, who hosts a show aimed at introducing French songs to children. Produced by the Association des radios communautaires de l'Ouest et des territoires, the program *Micah! Joue de la musique* is now broadcast weekly by all our stations across the country.

Finally, we can also mention the two weekly hit parade shows from the Association des radios communautaires acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick, whose representatives are here. For about two decades, one of these shows has shone a spotlight on country music artists and the other on pop-rock artists.

This is plenty of evidence to show the role of community radio in promoting artists from the Canadian francophonie.

That commercial radio stations want to be relieved of their quota of French-language music is one thing. However, if our radio stations become the only ones to promote and value francophone artists in a tangible way, it will undoubtedly be worth giving them the necessary resources to continue doing so. There is a lot of pressure on our small organizations to continue managing music catalogues, creating shows, interviewing artists and building relationships with record labels and promotion agents, despite the pressure from digital giants like Spotify, Apple Music, and others. If we lighten the quotas for French-language songs for private broadcasters, it will be up to our radio stations and them alone to take on the responsibility of promoting and valuing artists from the francophonie. They will therefore need support from the government to continue their mission.

From these observations, we note that our radio stations are pillars for the vitality of the francophone community in Canada. Both the government and the stakeholders in the radio and music industry must acknowledge this. Our radio stations actively contribute to the discoverability and promotion of francophone artists beyond regulatory quotas, in many cases. The diversity of musical formats that our stations broadcast reflects the richness of our francophonie. Our stations are not limited to the Top 40. The reduction of quotas recently requested by commercial radio stations will certainly harm the visibility and promotion of francophone music.

- (1105)

There are solutions to preserve the francophone music ecosystem. Either we refuse to ease the quotas for commercial broadcasters and maintain the current situation, or we allow the reduction of their quotas, but, in return, we improve the existing compensation mechanisms, for example by increasing contributions for the development of Canadian content, to effectively promote and enhance francophone music.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Béland.

I now give the floor to Mr. Brousseau for five minutes.

Pier-Luc Brousseau (Chief Executive Officer, Association des radios communautaires acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, good morning. My name is Pier-Luc Brousseau and I'm the chief executive officer of

the Association des radios communautaires acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick, ARCANB. We bring together ten French-speaking community radio stations from Edmundston to Moncton, including the Acadian Peninsula and Saint John. These are community stations rooted in urban, rural and sometimes remote areas. In some cases, French is a minority there, but it remains the language of daily life, culture and, of course, radio.

We're here before you today to discuss issues related to quotas and the discoverability of content, as well as other matters. It's also about knowing whether we should reduce the presence of French on the airwaves, at the very moment when Parliament says it wants to strengthen it across the country through new regulations. For us, the answer is definitely no. As you've seen, our brief presents our analysis in detail. However, during the five minutes I've been allotted, I would like to emphasize three main points.

First, French-language quotas are a minimal but essential tool for the vitality of the language and the discoverability of artists. Next, for our artists and cultural businesses, being played on the radio has very real economic benefits. Finally, our members are open to modernizing the regulatory framework, but without reducing the status of French. This is what changes the game for funders and our communities.

As you know, when living in a minority environment, every minute of French on the air counts. It's a moment when a young person hears someone singing in their language with their accent. It's a moment when a family, a small business or a community organization sees itself in what it hears and understands that its reality has a place in the media space. For us, quotas simply require radio stations to make room for French-language music. Once that place exists, it's filled by local artists, by new voices and by a diversity of accents that enriches the Canadian francophonie.

Each broadcast leads to direct benefits, such as royalties paid by the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada, neighbouring rights, invitations to shows, ticket sales, contracts to perform at festivals and other showcases. For minority francophone artists, these benefits are not just ancillary: they're often essential to the vitality of their artistic projects. Our radio stations play a strategic role for cultural businesses in minority settings. When Acadian artists get considerable airtime, particularly in Quebec, it opens doors for them to tour, perform at festivals and receive invitations to national shows. Take, for example, the group Salebarbe, who were live on *Tout le monde en parle* last Sunday to present their new album and tour. This wouldn't happen if it weren't for community radio, where things started.

There's also a very significant feedback effect for us. The more a local artist is known elsewhere, the more they're taken seriously at home, because we're proud of people when they make a name for themselves elsewhere. So, reducing the presence of French on the airwaves is not just a technical debate. It risks breaking a virtuous circle that connects radio, artists' revenues and the cultural economy.

At our 10 stations, the first broadcast of an artist is not always the result of a very sophisticated promotional plan. Often, an email is sent directly to the music director or the hosts, because they're friends or people we know. Take, for example, some artists, aside from those my colleague Mr. Béland has already mentioned, such as Joey Robin Haché, Joannie Benoit, La Patante and Les Hay Babies. These are artists from Acadia who are now making their mark in the Canadian and global francophonie, because community radio stations often play artists who do not have a record label or a distribution plan. We also produce educational content with people from the community. In short, it's truly a career pipeline. The radio plays artists, then the public discovers them and later they can be found on other platforms, venues fill up and people buy tickets. All of this creates the effect of a wheel turning to develop new projects and showcase new artists.

In closing, I want to say that we're open to modernizing the regulatory framework. We're open to having some flexibility in the evening or in relation to specialized formats, especially for our volunteer shows. We're open to smarter discoverability indicators that take into account the number of artists, the place of emerging artists and regional diversity. We're open to a formal recognition of community radio stations as partners in language and cultural policy. However, as I said at the start, reducing the role of French would not work for us. The Acadian radio stations in New Brunswick have already made their choice. These are places where French is the majority language, vibrant and creative, and where speaking and creating in French is seen as a natural, normal and valued path.

• (1110)

Thank you for your attention.

We will be very happy to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brousseau.

We'll now move on to questions from committee members.

Colleagues, we have 45 minutes left for this part of the meeting. If we stick to the speaking times, we'll be able to have two full rounds of questions. I will therefore monitor the time quite strictly.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Brousseau and Mr. Béland, thank you for participating in the exercise. I think it's important for you to be able to participate in this study, which follows a request made by private radio stations to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.

I understand that your mandate is completely different from that of private stations, as you represent community radio stations. What is your financial arrangement? How do you manage to survive financially?

• (1115)

Pier-Luc Brousseau: Our financial setup is similar to that of all community organizations, in the sense that many projects are funded through programs. These projects allow us to have employees who are never permanent, because their position always depends on whether or not the programs are renewed.

I'll talk about our situation. Most of the time, in Acadia, and in a part of New Brunswick supported by the Alliance des radios communautaires du Canada, we have a journalist position funded as part of the Local Journalism Initiative...

Joël Godin: Is this a program from the Department of Canadian Heritage?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: That's correct.

There is therefore a journalist position assigned to the news.

Other positions may be funded under the Radiomètres program administered by the Community Radio Fund of Canada. These are one-time projects, once again, that allow for the creation of content and shows and fund to some extent positions aimed at creating on-line content, in addition to music.

Of course, we also rely on advertising revenue. However, in the community sector, this type of revenue brings in much less than in a commercial station. Although it is essential, it does not cover all our expenses.

It also allows us to say that the only positions that cannot be subsidized, and which often count for a lot, are management positions, like that of my president, Mr. Monette, who is participating in this meeting remotely and is also the general manager of a radio station. His position cannot be subsidized because there is no program that allows it. That's not the reason we're participating in today's meeting either.

Joël Godin: Do you have the means to grow your community radio stations or are you in survival mode?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: We are in growth mode in New Brunswick because there's investment—

Joël Godin: Are you in growth mode financially or in terms of ratings?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: We are on both fronts.

As the francophone population decreases, the advocacy organizations in our community network have decided to join forces to defend our French language.

Joël Godin: Okay.

You say you're growing. Do you have any data on your ratings?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: Yes.

Joël Godin: Can you tell us about the evolution of the ratings over the past five years?

Mr. Béland, I will get back to you shortly.

Pier-Luc Brousseau: Over the past five years, it's been observed that, on average, 75% of the francophone population of New Brunswick listened to francophone stations, including Mr. Monette's, every day.

Joël Godin: For me, "75% of the population" is a decline.

Pier-Luc Brousseau: Yes, but we are reaching these people.

You asked me what the ratings were for the last few years. We have experienced lean years. We are no different from others. However, if we look at the situation of each station, from our smallest to our largest, we realize that, thanks to the structure we've put in place and the general managers who are in position, we're making progress.

On average, we indeed reach 75% of the population. In a small area like Kedgwick and Saint-Quentin, where our stations reached 5,000 to 6,000 people five years ago, they now reach nearly 8,000, and it's still a small area.

In our major centres, there's CJSA-FM, one of the largest stations in the country, or even CKRO, and we reach 40,000, 50,000, 60,000 listeners, and even more. We can see a progression in terms of music listening, but also in terms of broadcast content.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Brousseau.

Mr. Béland, with respect to the financial setup of your association, there's the standard model, but I understand that you have several models. However, there must be some renewal of funding.

Louis Béland: I'll continue on my colleague Pier-Luc Brousseau's comments, but my analysis will be a bit different.

My mind may be a bit more pessimistic, but I don't think we are in growth mode nationally. Our stations are having a lot of difficulty surviving, particularly in the smaller minority language communities. There are funding and revenue generation mechanisms. We rely heavily on the Department of Canadian Heritage, for which I am extremely grateful.

However, as my colleague mentioned, the majority of our funding is project-based, not for everyday activities. So, it's very difficult for small organizations to navigate all this.

Joël Godin: I understand the situation, and I share your opinion. I understand that you don't bite the hand that feeds you. Indeed, Canadian Heritage plays a very important role. I understand that.

That said, in terms of musical content, if we changed the rules of the game for private radio, what would be the consequences for your organization? I'm not talking about public radio, like Radio-Canada, or community radio, like your organization, which seems to have a good *modus operandi*. The government could increase your financial assistance instead of giving \$150 million to CBC/Radio-Canada, as proposed in the latest budget, which was unnecessary. We could have supported our official language minority communities.

How do you envision the future with this model with respect to private radio, public radio and community radio? What could we do, what recommendations could we make to help you right now?

• (1120)

The Chair: Please provide a very short answer, as there are only 10 seconds left.

Louis Béland: In my opinion, it's simply about recognizing everyone's role in this model. The francophonie is the pure and clear identity of our community radio stations. We reach these communities; we talk to them. In my opinion, it's just about recognizing everyone's role.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

I now give the floor to Ms. Mingarelli for six minutes.

Giovanna Mingarelli (Prescott—Russell—Cumberland, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I welcome the witnesses and thank them for being here.

Mr. Béland, I'm proud to say that you're a resident of my constituency, Prescott—Russell—Cumberland. I'm glad to see you again.

Minority community radio stations often have limited resources. What are the main operational constraints today that prevent your members from meeting the current quotas? How would your proposals help maintain service quality while reducing the regulatory burden?

Louis Béland: That's an excellent question. Thank you.

Basically, it's really about the number of hours worked. The regulations, the quotas, all the necessary reports impose a fairly high administrative burden on our radio stations. They do not have an associated budget to manage these hours and support this work.

I could provide several examples of initiatives, including updates to emergency systems, codecs, and so on. They were imposed by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and they represent hours of work. There are no mechanisms to fund this, other than the self-generated revenues of our radio stations, which are often limited depending on the region.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you.

As you know, community radio stations play a key role in the vitality of minority francophone communities. How would the measures you propose not only lighten their obligations but also strengthen that vitality?

Louis Béland: I have a feeling it will be the same answer.

I'm going back to something really simple. It's about recognizing the role that everyone plays in the ecosystem in terms of the francophonie. Once that recognition is in place, we can implement the tools to properly structure and support those roles. As non-profit organizations, community radio stations play a key role in advocating for the francophonie and democracy, and they are essential in allowing all stakeholders to connect with communities in a very direct way. Community radio is often the direct link for communication between the public and its own community.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you.

You propose to redefine the concept of local oral creations, and even to expand it to Canadian or sectoral creations. Can you specify what type of content should be included in this new definition, in your opinion, and what consequences that would have on the daily obligations of small community stations?

Louis Béland: I can give a very concrete example: a hunting and fishing show produced by one of our radio stations in Northern Ontario is very relevant content for our station in Penetanguishene. However, the current rules do not allow that content to be recognized as local content. If I were to extend that to a definition of Canadian content, it would allow for a concrete exchange of content between our radio stations, which can reach the relevant communities. Through that sharing, we would concretely reduce the administrative burden, production costs and all costs related to the creation and production of a show.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Thank you very much, Mr. Béland.

Mr. Brousseau, thank you for being with us today.

You mention that your goal is to produce unique programming for communities whose voices are under-represented. What are the main obstacles today that prevent your stations from fully fulfilling that mission?

• (1125)

Pier-Luc Brousseau: It goes back somewhat to what I was saying at the start: it's often a question of human resources, but also of limits imposed on the type of content recognized during our listening hours and when we have to report to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. We must therefore ensure that we comply with the various quotas for music or spoken content. We also cannot share certain shows created in Saint John, Moncton or in Edmundston at Mr. Monette's station, for example, on the network. We still can't do it, even though it includes news content.

It's a hindrance because, at a small station with three employees, one person will often handle general management, coordination, accounting and morning hosting. In addition, that person will probably take on the musical direction, because there's no one else. Another person, probably part-time, will host the drive-home show, or something in the evening or on the weekend.

As you can see, we're running out of possibilities to be able to have hosting in the morning, at noon, later in the day or even on weekends, and this is the case at most of our stations.

Giovanna Mingarelli: Your 10 stations reach 75% of Acadian Canadian listeners in the province. What specific needs of these audiences are not met by mainstream media? How do your radio stations respond in a distinctive way?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: We don't hear enough about Ms. Tremblay's stories and the very important matters for her or her family that happen at home. We tell them more and more, but we cannot report these little stories that our major networks will never cover, because they're not of national importance.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is directed at both organizations. How do you explain that Cogeco or private stations are asking for a reduction in the quotas for French-language music?

Louis Béland: In my opinion, it's a matter of repatriating resources and reducing expenses as much as possible. If the quotas are reduced, stations can play what attracts the most listeners and the most advertising revenue.

There is really a direct link between—

Mario Beaulieu: It may reflect the decline of French in Quebec. It's a vicious cycle. The less we hear French music, the less we get used to it, the less we want it.

Louis Béland: There are also digital services that stream only music.

Mario Beaulieu: I think the digital giants are the source of the problem because of their broadcasting and the fact that they don't pay taxes and we don't derive any revenue from them. The solution probably lies there. If we lower French-language quotas, we get into a vicious cycle. As you said, it would certainly have repercussions on your community radio stations.

Have you heard that outside Quebec? Are there many private commercial French-language radio stations outside Quebec?

Louis Béland: There aren't many. We're also having these discussions right now. There are a few, but being French-language radio stations in a minority setting, they have that community connotation. They play a role that they take seriously. I tip my hat to private minority French-language stations. I think they play an important role.

It comes down to recognizing everyone's role, as I mentioned earlier, and supporting it.

Mario Beaulieu: Earlier, you mentioned that you were considering two solutions. One was to maintain French-language quotas. You had started talking about the other one, but you ran out of time. Can you tell us a little more about that?

Louis Béland: The creation of Canadian content is already an established mechanism. The Radiometre projects that Mr. Brousseau mentioned are funded by that envelope. They are more or less taxed funds from the big players to support the small players, but it's not enough to ensure the sustainability of media.

Right now, we're facing challenges. There is certainly some money coming in, but it's project-based, which doesn't address operational needs or support the structure.

Mario Beaulieu: In your opinion, do digital giants such as Spotify and others cause you significant harm?

• (1130)

Pier-Luc Brousseau: They exist, so it's a necessary evil, as some youth consult the news and use the services of those companies.

So we started using them as distribution platforms. If a podcast is recorded, produced and broadcast at the station, it's then available on the platforms. In our ecosystem, it's not the number one tool we rely on, but thanks to the various management and broadcasting systems, it allows us to know that a show is interesting, like our news show today.

So we use it as a distribution platform because we need to track the ratings. We need to know if the public has discovered us through these platforms, and if they tune into our signal when they go to the office, to work, to school or anywhere else. We will have at least done our promotional part by using the major platforms.

Mario Beaulieu: The French-language music quotas do not affect you. You go beyond that because your mission is to promote. You may be playing a bit of music in English, but you mostly play music in French.

Earlier, we talked about the financial set-up and your sources of funding. They are mainly public, but do you have the right to have advertising revenue? About what proportion of your income comes from private advertising?

Louis Béland: We have a lot of grants. Our stations sell advertising locally.

On the other hand, one of our demands that I will mention is federal advertising, which has declined incredibly. There was talk of an average of \$100,000 to \$120,000 in federal advertising per station, with independent and unrestricted revenues. Now, the average is about \$1,000 per year, so it's almost nothing.

Federal advertisements have gone to the digital giants and other platforms, which is normal, since we spend where we think people see the ads. However, the effect on our stations has been incredible. To support the structure and ecosystem, we advocate simply redistributing purchases. We're not talking about an increase in the budget from the federal government, but just a directive that will allocate a certain volume of purchases to community media. It could practically resolve the situation overnight.

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, excuse me, but your time is up. Thank you.

We will now move on to the second round.

Mr. Dalton, you have the floor for five minutes.

Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Witnesses, I thank you very much for your comments and your efforts to support the French language in Acadia. You also represent radio stations from all over Canada, which are really important for cities like Vancouver, where the francophone community is not as visible as other communities, particularly the Chinese community. We are there, but we're a bit scattered. Being able to listen to music in French is really important for the vitality of the language. It's important not only for francophones, but also for francophiles and for many immersion students. Thank you for that.

You have already talked a bit about the internet. I have an app here that shows all the radio stations in the world, even those from New Brunswick or Nova Scotia. I can press a button to listen to your stations from anywhere in the world. In my opinion, it's posi-

tive and it can also be competitive. Is that true? Can you talk a little more about that?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: It's something we've already explored and presented in different models.

What has held us back in the past has always been the cost of development and maintenance. We talked about it in response to other questions earlier. If we have a one-time project to create these applications, it works very well for the year, the 18 months or the 24 months that the project lasts. However, after that, it's not that it gets lost, but on the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, we need to ensure maintenance and continue to provide the content. It's not just a matter of putting our streams online so people can listen to our radio from just about anywhere. It's already possible through our various partners, and also via the website *nosradios.ca*. It is indeed possible to listen to our stations if the effort is put in.

This type of app exists in France. A developer friend of ours created it. All stations, not just community ones, are available on the same app. A person who wants to listen to the station from their area can go directly to the app. On the other hand, when we get into the details of what it required from a technical standpoint for maintenance and management, among other things, that's where our community stations can no longer be competitive.

• (1135)

Marc Dalton: Are you struggling a bit to attract listeners, because they can go anywhere? Do you see that in terms of your clients?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: A great battle is being fought to gain the public's attention in response to social media. Radio is no different from television or even newspapers and competes to attract people's attention. It's an old joke, but we listen to everything in 140 characters today. You know it better than all of us: We are in the era of catchy sound bites and everything relies on that.

The current challenge is to keep shows on air that, especially in Acadia, have made their mark and remain daily appointments. We have one of the only radio stations that still does a talk show every day. People—whether they're MPs or community members—go to the studio to participate in the show *Parle Parle Jase Jase* at CJSE, and answer questions from the public. It's a call-in forum of which there aren't many left, because people don't do that anymore and don't listen to that anymore. However, there are still some here and there. It's a matter of attention, but it's mainly about saying that our content is worth listening to and attracts an audience.

For the rest, the model must continue to be replicated everywhere and those small audiences interested in the content need to be found.

Marc Dalton: How many employees do you have among the different radio stations?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: Our largest station has 12 employees. As I mentioned earlier in response to a question, our smallest stations have only 3 employees. So, it varies between 3 and 12 people. If I do a quick calculation for you, given the little time we have left, that comes to about 100 employees for the entire network of stations in the Association des radios communautaires acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds left.

Marc Dalton: When I was between 14 and 15 years old, I was a host at a radio station in Chibougamau. I wasn't paid much. I could buy records—not compact discs—for about \$3 back then.

The Chair: That's very impressive. I'm glad you had another 20 seconds to recount that.

I now give the floor to Ms. Chenette for five minutes.

Madeleine Chenette (Thérèse-De Blainville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Witnesses, thank you for being here. As another anecdote, I also did community radio back when I was in college with a group that included Michel Jean, who later became one of our big stars. So it's also a new generation being created thanks to community radio. I didn't decide to be a star, for my part.

I'll continue with what you said about the evolution of the audience. Some people believe that it's better to listen to what's done elsewhere because it's better than what we do here. Others listen to people who call themselves broadcasters and who put themselves in the spotlight on social media. So it's direct competition that didn't exist for community radio stations.

Mr. Brousseau, I congratulate you on the success stories you share with us and for your growth. Based on your experience, what else should be done to engage the audience? Is there not currently a momentum related to our pride in being Canadians and francophones and the fact that our two official languages are essential to our economy and growth? What should we emphasize to take advantage of this swing back?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: We can already see it in competitions like *Accros de la chanson* in New Brunswick, which is taking a break this year. It's organized by the Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick, a long-standing partner of community radio stations and ARCANB. Every year, high school music groups participate in this competition and, in the end, record an album. I'm not just talking about the winners, but about all the participants. These records are then played by community radio stations, and it helps nurture the next generation.

In my remarks, I mentioned the group *Écarlate*, which is currently touring Canada, particularly as part of the Réseau atlantique de diffusion des arts de la scène tours. That group was born from the *Accros de la chanson* competition, like others that have gone through it. These are the kinds of things that help rejuvenate and expand our audiences.

One of the best things we managed to do, not only during the pandemic but afterward, is to establish various agreements with schools across all our regions. Our hosts went to the region and, while meeting with students, they asked them to share their

favourite Acadian song. Many chose songs by P'tit Belliveau or the group 1755, proof that parents seemed to listen to a bit of everything. Later on, parents and grandparents started calling the radio stations to ask when Louis's song, for example, would play because they wanted to hear it. It created a kind of renewal in the content. It was no longer just about the music; they wanted to hear each other and hear the people from their own community. These are things that may seem very small, but when multiplied, they can have large-scale effects.

To answer your question, it's about finding ways to keep our audiences engaged in our communities while raising their awareness that we need them to participate in our various activities and consume our different content, because ultimately, we exist for them. That's the difference.

• (1140)

Madeleine Chenette: Mr. Béland, I will continue along the same lines.

The current strategy is to invest in CBC/Radio-Canada to ensure a critical mass of proud francophones in Canada, but communities also have a role to play. They must mobilize the private sector so as to create demand on both sides, in order to maintain the supply of French-language content.

In this context, the francophonie is important, but there's a difference between the Canadian francophonie and francophonie in general. When it comes to Canadian content, should we stop being interested in the francophonie in the broadest sense of the term, and should we strengthen the Canadian francophonie and Canadian content, just like Canadian content on the English side? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

Louis Béland: That's a big question.

The role of community radio stations is different, as I mentioned earlier. They have very close ties to the community. By definition, the content created and promoted by community radio stations reflects 100% of the Canadian francophonie. When it can be amplified, it has enormous power. I would like to see tools to amplify that francophonie, which is 100% local.

The Chair: Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Thank you, Ms. Chenette.

I now give the floor to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

Mario Beaulieu: It's said that the tax on digital giants would have brought in about \$1.2 billion per year. Would it have helped to fund community media as well?

Louis Béland: Yes.

Mario Beaulieu: So, the decision not to implement that tax has had repercussions for you, and for all private and community media, hasn't it?

Louis Béland: Yes, but it's just one tool among many others.

I can also mention the agreement reached with Google to compensate the loss of advertising revenue related to journalistic articles for five years. It's another mechanism that, despite the challenges, helps our stations. I don't think there's a magic tool in all of this. It's a combination of these different tools that can support the media.

Mario Beaulieu: When Mr. Carney decided not to impose this tax to please Mr. Trump, it had no effect and the tariffs were increased even more. Has he taken steps to compensate you?

Louis Béland: No, but according to my understanding, that program was not particularly developed. We didn't really know how the revenue from that tax would actually reach our stations. So, its elimination potentially meant less for us.

• (1145)

Mario Beaulieu: In short, what's the main challenge for you? You say your survival is threatened. What could help you the most to grow? Would it be more funding?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: We don't need additional funding as much as a more flexible framework to access existing funding to meet needs other than those tied to liquidity or journalists, for example to fill a management position.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Bélanger, you have the floor for five minutes.

Jim Bélanger (Sudbury East—Manitoulin—Nickel Belt, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses.

Mr. Béland, Mr. Brousseau tells us that, in New Brunswick, there is growth in the audience of French-language community radio stations. The greater Sudbury area has a fairly significant francophone population as well. Can you tell us what's happening in our part of the country? Is there growth or decline?

Louis Béland: Yes, thank you.

Radio stations in New Brunswick, Acadia and the east are doing very well. I attribute this success to the music being played, namely to the programming, and to the connection with the communities. It's a very strong community that stands together. It's magical.

Elsewhere in the country, we see the same thing happening to varying degrees. We have two stations in northern Ontario, in Hearst and Kapuskasing, which are predominantly French-speaking communities, and they're very popular radio stations. We also have a radio station in Penetanguishene, which is a bit more challenging and works very hard to reach francophones in the area. I must admit that they all do very good work, but there are only so many hours in a day and people do what they can. We need more tools and resources to reach these communities.

Jim Bélanger: Thank you.

You mentioned that you would say yes to modernizing the rules, but without losing any French-language content. What specific changes would you recommend to the regulatory framework of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission,

or CRTC, to better support community radio in minority francophone regions?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: Our stations are already reaching the quota of 65% French-language content, and several of them have even decided to reach 100% French-language content, to provide even more community content and play things that would not be broadcast otherwise.

However, more specifically, as we mentioned at the start, this is about broadening the definition of oral content to give us greater flexibility, particularly with respect to the sharing of broadcasts. It would help us because, when it comes to musical content, we're already exceeding the CRTC's requirements. Some of our stations offer 100% French-language content between 6:00 AM and 6:00 PM, and there are others whose programming goes even further.

For me, it's not just a matter of music, it's also about spoken language. If we could make these adjustments to the framework while maintaining the French presence in music, we would already be doing well. Furthermore, as you know, community radio shows are hosted by volunteers. This would also allow us to give them a bit more flexibility in terms of what they play during the hours they're on air.

Jim Bélanger: Thank you. I give the rest of my speaking time to Mr. Godin.

Joël Godin: How much time is left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: There is a minute and a half left.

Joël Godin: Thank you.

Mr. Brousseau, from what you say, community radio stations are not concerned about the quota for French-language content. There is no connection to your activities.

Earlier, you mentioned that you have created a new generation of talent. You mentioned a group that appeared on the show *Tout le monde en parle* over the weekend, but I forgot their name.

Pier-Luc Brousseau: It was the Salebarbes band.

Joël Godin: What I want to demonstrate is that you do your job in the field with rubber bands and tape, but not much money. As you promote artists and emerging talent and make all the efforts in your region, who benefits? Public television stations do, as they receive astronomical amounts to broadcast and, on top of that, they have advertising revenue. Shouldn't it be the other way around? If we are supposedly interested in having French thrive everywhere in Canada, shouldn't you be supported instead?

Earlier, you mentioned that there seemed to be a willingness in the House of Commons, and that official languages regulations were moving in that direction. That said, the regulations have not yet been tabled in the House. I don't know where you got that information, but you may have information that I don't. You may have special connections with people here around the table.

Do you think it's normal to be subsidized for one-time, non-recurring projects while the beast—I'll call it that—the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, has abundant subsidies and access to the advertising market, and is competing with you? Would it be preferable for you to receive better financial assistance on a sustainable basis?

• (1150)

The Chair: Mr. Godin, I am sorry. Your time is up. I gave you a few extra seconds, but we will have to wait for the answer to your question during another speaking turn, unfortunately.

Mr. Deschênes-Thériault, you have the floor for five minutes.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I was looking forward to hearing the witnesses scheduled for today, particularly since my riding, Madawaska—Restigouche, is home to three of the ten members of the Association des radios communautaires acadiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick, or ARCANB, in addition to a private French-language station.

Mr. Brousseau, according to your brief, the mandate of ARCANB is to “strengthen [the capacity of its members] to effectively contribute to the development and vitality of the Acadian and francophone community of New Brunswick”.

Your remarks are clear. You are opposed to a reduction in French-language music quotas, and I completely agree with you. I would like to know more about the importance of having such quotas to fulfill your mission. How do these quotas support the key role of community radio in promoting the vitality of our francophone and Acadian communities?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: It's essential. We talked about it earlier; it's what sets us apart. As we know, certain areas of the province are predominantly English-speaking. That's why we talk about minority radio stations. Such a station is the only place where French can be heard. We don't play francophone music out of obligation, we do it out of passion. We also do it because it's part of the development of francophone culture.

As I said earlier, if we want to hear from younger people on the air, if we want to hear something different, we don't have as many restrictions as public broadcasters. Our mission is to truly create this in our broadcasting territories and to support the francophone fact. In my opinion, we really need to develop this francophone culture, this new generation of francophones. As Mr. Godin mentioned, we also need to involve the Salebarbes and create these large groups in Acadia.

Another perfect example of this, which resonates with another generation, is Cayouche, who travelled across the country and around the world. In my family, there are people from northern Quebec who used to go see Cayouche. Until the artist's death last year, it was a full house to see Cayouche. At home, we saw Cayouche every two weeks. A big part of that is in the community network.

What's nice, too, is that our three community radio stations can be picked up from one end of your riding to the other. This local fact cannot be ignored.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Indeed, while going from one end of my riding to the other, I often listen to your stations.

For the record, I also had the pleasure of doing community radio as a commentator at one of your member stations. Several years ago, during the summer, I also worked in the community radio sector in Edmonton, Alberta. Radio Cité was in its final stages before its creation.

At the time, I understood that one of the major challenges was to ensure that the francophone population of Edmonton had access to programming that was truly representative of their cultural identity. We know that artists are a fundamental pillar of our cultural identity.

Mr. Béland, Mr. Brousseau spoke about the importance of community radio in Acadia. Can you talk to us, in terms of the Canadian francophonie, about the role that community radio plays in promoting our local artists, especially emerging francophone artists?

Louis Béland: Yes, absolutely. Thank you.

I really like the example of Radio Cité in Edmonton, which also broadcasts a bit in other languages to reflect its community. It's so critical. I believe the station broadcasts in Punjabi a few hours a week and in one or two other languages. That's the flexibility our radios need.

I also want to refer to the previous question. The relief we seek is also related to relationships. The different categories of music are very specific. We need to go get that. We need to have the necessary flexibility to broadcast what's important for the communities.

• (1155)

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you.

Earlier, you said that the federal government could, without additional budgets, better support our local media by purchasing advertising that would be broadcast on the radio. Can you provide more details on that?

Louis Béland: Basically, a simple procurement directive could work. For example, if 30% of federal advertising purchases were reserved for community media—I'm talking about radio, but also written media, among others—it would represent revenue of \$50,000 to \$60,000 per media outlet.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Do you also share this opinion, Mr. Brousseau?

Pier-Luc Brousseau: Yes, absolutely.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you very much.

The Chair: This concludes the part of the meeting dedicated to the first group of witnesses, whom I would like to thank on behalf of the committee.

Mr. Brousseau, Mr. Béland, and Mr. Monette, thank you for being with us. We have learned a lot. I even learned that there is a lot of talent among the members of the committee.

I will suspend the meeting for a few minutes to give the next group of witnesses time to settle in.

• (1155) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1205)

The Chair: We are resuming the meeting.

I welcome you again to meeting number 12 of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. We are continuing our study on the quota for French-language music; I know we have changed the name, but I am reading my notes and I ask for your forgiveness.

I would now like to welcome Sylvain Chamberland, president and chief executive officer of Arsenal Media.

Mr. Chamberland, you have five minutes to make your opening statement. We will then move on to a question and answer period with the committee members.

I yield the floor to you.

Sylvain Chamberland (President and Chief Executive Officer, Arsenal Media): Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, I would like to thank you for inviting me to participate in this study. Please know that it is a privilege for us to contribute to your various efforts related to the protection and vitality of our francophone communities.

Arsenal Media is the largest broadcaster in Quebec. It is an independent broadcaster currently operating 25 French-language commercial radio stations in Quebec, and soon 30, when the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, the CRTC, gives its approval to various pending transactions.

Our stations play an essential role: informing, entertaining and reflecting our communities, and promoting our local culture. Our contribution has a direct impact on the vitality of Quebec's predominantly French-speaking regions.

I will first talk about the context in which we operate.

Digital audio has profoundly transformed our industry. Foreign platforms dominate listening, capturing the majority of advertising revenue—nearly \$10 billion annually—and are not subject to any of the obligations imposed on Canadian broadcasters.

Meanwhile, commercial radio revenues are declining year after year and are expected to fall below one billion dollars by 2030, representing a 50% decrease over the last 10 years.

We are facing unfair competition in a regulatory framework designed for another century. It's in this context that our proposals were recently submitted to the CRTC, with the aim of modernizing this framework and restoring a certain equity to allow French-language radio to remain a cultural and informational pillar.

The 65% quota for French vocal music is no longer aligned with listening realities at all. On digital platforms, Quebec artists singing in French represent only 5% of total consumption, and I would say that last week, that proportion was 4%.

Listening to music radio is decreasing every year because the product we offer no longer meets the expectations of our listeners. I would add that commercial radio should not bear the entire burden of protecting French culture and language. A quota of 40%, which

would still be among the highest in the world, would allow us to better meet the public's expectations while continuing to promote French-language music. Arsenal Media has therefore proposed a 36-month trial period for this quota to the CRTC in order to measure its results.

Are there other solutions? In my opinion, a viable option could help address the challenges currently threatening the Canadian media ecosystem. That option, although underutilized, is that CBC/Radio-Canada must be part of the solution. The public broadcaster benefits from a network of 88 stations, 700 transmitters and a budget of \$2 billion, of which \$1.5 billion comes from public funds. Its mandate is clear: to reflect the diversity of Canada, support francophone culture and take into account the needs of indigenous peoples.

In a landscape where discoverability is dominated by foreign platforms, CBC/Radio-Canada is the only national player capable of providing a real counterbalance. This situation calls for special involvement. We therefore believe that CBC/Radio-Canada should be given explicit obligations to ensure the discoverability and dissemination of indigenous and French-language content on its platforms, both traditional and digital. In addition, CBC/Radio-Canada markets publicly funded content online, thereby competing directly with commercial radio stations, which must survive in an extremely fragile advertising market. This issue of competition really deserves to be examined.

In our opinion, the other key player is community radio stations, which provide an important space for local expression in the unique francophone media landscape. It should be noted that these stations operate under a completely different model, which relies heavily on public funding and on their own support programs. They therefore operate in a protected environment, unlike commercial radio stations, which rely almost exclusively on the advertising market and face the dominance of digital giants on their own.

It is therefore crucial to recognize this distinction as we reflect on the overall sustainability of the system and the fairness among its various stakeholders.

• (1210)

Finally, there are three other essential measures—

The Chair: Mr. Chamberland, your time is up. Could you wrap it up quickly?

Sylvain Chamberland: Yes, okay. I have almost finished my remarks.

First, foreign audio platforms must be required to make Canadian content discoverable and promote it, and the results must be measurable.

Next, it is essential that the Income Tax Act be modernized by eliminating the tax advantage associated with advertising purchased on foreign platforms. This measure has been in place for a very long time and is no longer relevant.

Finally, radio stations must be included in the Canadian journalism labour tax credit, recognizing that they often remain the only source of daily local information in the regions.

In conclusion, you will agree with us that we are at a decisive moment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chamberland.

We will now move on to the questions from members.

Mr. Godin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chamberland, thank you for being here.

I think the exercise we are doing is important. It's important to understand one thing: the study we're conducting does not seek to diminish the effectiveness or profitability of private radio stations.

Here, we're at the Standing Committee on Official Languages. This committee is mandated to find solutions in relation to both official languages, English and French. I'm pointing this out because some parties do not understand bilingualism in Canada. For proof, they appointed a Governor General who does not speak French. For my part, I want to make sure that it's understood that there are two official languages in Canada: English and French.

As a private company, you must be viable. You have given us some solutions. Witnesses representing community radio stations appeared during the first hour of the meeting. You also talked to us about the major stakeholder that is CBC/Radio-Canada. How can you live sandwiched between these two types of broadcasters?

Sylvain Chamberland: In fact, the Canadian system was built on three pillars, for all sorts of reasons: the community, CBC/Radio-Canada, and the private sector. It's a system that, to this day, works pretty well.

That said, for our part we are certainly caught in the middle. If there's a quick solution I can discuss with you, it's that of the client government. We mentioned it during the hearings on the future of news media at the National Assembly of Quebec. What we said was that the government isn't even a client. The government does not invest in local media; it invests instead in foreign platforms.

Is anyone going to stand up and say that enough is enough, that we need to invest in local media, invest in local information and invest in local staff?

When I say we need to invest in advertising, I mean we need to buy advertising as a user, as a customer. The government has the obligation to inform the population equally across Canada, in every little corner of the country. To do this, you just need to buy advertising in local media, whether it's radio, television, weekly publications or any local community media. It will generate additional revenue.

Personally, I find that it's an easy solution to implement. We don't need to create 25 committees. Someone just needs to wake up. In Quebec, someone woke up and the province did it.

Joël Godin: Mr. Chamberland, I come from that world and I can tell you that you are absolutely right.

However, the advertising buyer wants results and wants to reach the largest number of people. The analysis likely being done by the federal government is that, since Canada's network is not good, they need to buy advertising on foreign platforms. The first goal is to reach as many people as possible, and maybe it's been achieved.

However, we must not forget that this involves public funds. Should we support our Canadian businesses and participate in the model that exists here? That's the question. Beyond the primary goal of reaching as many people as possible, how can we do that?

• (1215)

Sylvain Chamberland: You're right.

I'm not demonizing the platforms of the giants. Regardless, they're here to stay. What I'm saying is that there's definitely a middle ground. Instead of investing the majority of its money in foreign platforms, the government could invest a portion locally. We're not talking about a budget increase, but a budget reallocation. For me, it's a fundamental element.

Joël Godin: I think we need to find a balance.

Sylvain Chamberland: Absolutely.

Joël Godin: This is where I wanted to lead you. Foreign platforms also have a role to play when it comes to French-language content.

Your request is to reduce the quota for French music. To be honest, I don't necessarily share the same opinion. If I were told that without it, we would go bankrupt, then I would be open. However, before we get there—

Sylvain Chamberland: It must be said that 50% of radio stations are no longer making money in Canada. That's 50%.

Joël Godin: It's the danger that hangs over our heads.

How can we reconcile the mandate to promote both official languages, with French being the most vulnerable language, and the vitality of private broadcasting companies?

Sylvain Chamberland: I think we don't calculate and we don't take into account the contribution of all radio stations to francophone life beyond the music quota. For example, repeatedly throughout the day, we conduct interviews, meet with artists and so on. I'm the first to say that I support emerging music. I hope that new artists become known, and all that—

Joël Godin: Excuse me for interrupting you, Mr. Chamberland, but my speaking time is very limited.

When you present a new francophone artist, couldn't you give them five points instead of just one at that stage?

Sylvain Chamberland: Certainly; exactly.

Joël Godin: We were just talking about how community radio pours its heart out daily to help artists grow, and then we see them on *Tout le monde en parle*, as was the case this weekend. Who makes money from that?

Sylvain Chamberland: That is where the system is broken. You are absolutely right; you did your homework.

Indeed, it's not complicated. There should be a scoring system that rewards radio stations, for example, when they play music from emerging artists.

We have journalists everywhere. We just hired one in Drummondville. Imagine, there weren't any in Drummondville. We're going to launch an information platform to try to spread local news, which costs money. We even hired journalists in Amqui, in small little towns. That costs us money. We send our journalists, they cover the news, they process it and we release it. However, some people then take that news and they are the ones who make money from the broadcasting. That's where the problem lies.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but time is up. Thank you, Mr. Godin.

I now give the floor to Mr. Deschênes-Thériault for six minutes.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chamberland, thank you very much for your testimony.

Canada operates within a context of using two official languages. Through the Official Languages Act, the government is committed to supporting the vitality of our two official language communities, English and French. Furthermore, the preamble of the modernized law states that we also have a commitment to protect and promote French in particular, given its minority status in North America. This also concerns Quebec.

In this context, during a consultation with the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and in your testimony, you stated that commercial radio should not bear the burden of promoting the French language on its own. I completely agree. This is a collective responsibility that involves a variety of sectors, including radio. However, while not being the sole contributors to the vitality of French, commercial radio stations still play an important role in promoting francophone artists, in the presence of French on the airwaves and in the discoverability of French-language content.

I'd like to hear your comments on the importance of the role that commercial radio stations, including those in Quebec, play in supporting the vitality of French.

Sylvain Chamberland: Obviously, their role is important. In any case, we are applying a quota. As I said, we do not count the total contribution of each of our radio stations to the French-speaking world throughout the day. In my opinion, that is not the question and I would like to highlight two things.

First, if there are no more radio stations to defend the French language, the quota will be a theoretical discourse. There will still be CBC/Radio-Canada and community radio stations. Ultimately, the important thing is that we can at least keep the radio stations alive.

Second, everyone is avoiding the issue of the current quota of 65% French-language content, but French-language music is not being consumed at the moment. It's only consumed at a rate of 4%. Someone should therefore ask if there's a gap between 4% and 65%. It's like walking into a candy store: everyone wants to buy Rockets, but the store only offers gummies, which nobody

wants. We should therefore offer a few less gummies and a few more Rockets.

• (1220)

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: On the other hand, in previous testimony, we heard that community radio stations exceeded the 65% quota. For example, in New Brunswick, there has been an increase in the number of listeners where the content is predominantly French-language.

When I talk to you about vitality, you immediately mentioned that, indeed, the quotas are applied. If I understand your comments correctly, however, you are suggesting a certain form of disengagement from commercial radio by reducing the quota for French-language music.

Sylvain Chamberland: Yes, but we're talking about 40%, which remains one of the highest quotas in the world. As for me, I'm in.

Community radio stations receive grants for everything. They have access to all kinds of programs and have new equipment. In addition, the bingos bring them revenue. Community stations have become huge in Quebec and are wealthier than commercial stations. The latter cannot seriously be compared to community stations, given the completely protected system in which community stations operate, while commercial stations are left to fend for themselves.

Furthermore, I repeat, commercial stations face competition from CBC/Radio-Canada, which funds its online content. No one is opposed to CBC/Radio-Canada selling advertising, even though it's not allowed to do so, but it does it indirectly. No one is denouncing this practice to put an end to it. The government should invest before asking commercial stations to maintain the quota at 65%. We cannot rely solely on theoretical speeches.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: However, you say that the quota imposed in Canada to protect the language is one of the highest in the world. In itself, this can be explained because we must support the vitality of our two official languages. It is therefore normal for that to be reflected in our public policies and the regulations we adopt.

Let's talk about francophone artists. How could we ensure their discoverability if one of the main distribution channels reduces its commitment to them by lowering its quota? What impact do you think that reduction in quotas will have on emerging francophone artists?

Sylvain Chamberland: We focus on francophone artists, but we don't look at the situation as a whole.

I will repeat that we're in favour of promoting emerging artists. We're in very small areas, in tiny little towns, where people want to play their music, and we're happy to do it. I support emerging music, and even with a 40% quota, we could play a lot of it.

Our main argument is not just to request a reduction in the quota for French-language music. What broadcasters are throwing you as a lifeline is to look at the facts. I'm telling you, if you think we have a democracy problem right now, there will be a big one in 10 to 15 years, because there won't be any journalists left—

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Excuse me—

Sylvain Chamberland: —and there will be no more radio stations to promote francophone music. At that point, there will be no more watchdogs anywhere in the small communities across Canada. The point I want to make is that we need to look at the situation as a whole.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Excuse me, but we only have 15 seconds left.

The vitality of a language also depends on its presence in the public space, and radio is a fundamental player in the public space. Do you agree with me that hearing French music on the radio contributes to the vitality of French in public spaces?

Sylvain Chamberland: Absolutely.

Guillaume Deschênes-Thériault: Thank you.

The Chair: I now give the floor to Mr. Beaulieu for six minutes.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chamberland, everything you are experiencing right now is not proof of the decline of French. For years, I have been taking the test. I'm in my car and I'm going through the radio stations to find some music in French. Often, I can't find any.

It's certain that the more we hear music in French, the more we like it. I come from an English-speaking background. At first, I didn't listen to Quebec music, but I started to listen to it and I got used to it. Now, I only listen to that.

We're really seeing a decline in French. In my opinion, lowering the quotas is equivalent to introducing a vicious circle. If there's even less French, there will be even less—

• (1225)

Sylvain Chamberland: You're right about that.

Mario Beaulieu: I understand what you're going through, but you mentioned solutions. As you said, the fact that digital giants do not pay taxes creates a fundamental injustice. I hope you're denouncing it on your radio shows.

Furthermore, the government was supposed to impose a tax, but it decided not to do so to please Mr. Trump. This didn't yield any results, and you're the one paying the price.

Sylvain Chamberland: It would be so simple, for example, to grant a tax credit to businesses that purchase advertising in local media. It seems to me like a measure that isn't complicated.

I know, I'm not in your shoes and I imagine there are billions of complications. However, if we grant a tax credit to the digital giants, why wouldn't we do the same for the local media in the country? This goes back to what was said earlier. The government must have the willingness to say, as a client, that it invests in the country's media first and foremost.

Mario Beaulieu: In my opinion, there is really a lack of political will in relation to French as a whole.

In this case, on one hand, the tax on digital giants would have provided \$1.2 billion per year to support the sector. On the other hand, does the federal government behave the same way with the community sector, meaning that it buys less advertising than before?

Sylvain Chamberland: Yes, it's minimal.

We have done a lot of representations in Quebec and, for the past four or five years, we really sense an understanding there. There was a directive: The provincial government asked its agencies to prioritize placing their advertisements throughout the regions, not just in Montreal and Quebec City. No matter the reasons that justified it, this is how it is now. We serve parapublic companies. We feel an effort from the government's advertisements; it wants to ensure that its message gets across everywhere. As a client, it invests money in us.

Federally, on the other hand, there's nothing. Anemic budgets are invested in local media. I speak for the radio stations, but I imagine it's the same for local weeklies or local television.

Mario Beaulieu: Overall, it's worse with respect to the Official Languages Act, under which all the money goes only to English, but that's another issue.

Shouldn't we increase the French-language music quotas at CBC/Radio-Canada?

Sylvain Chamberland: Clearly. As I mentioned in the beginning, I think it starts with CBC/Radio-Canada and heavily subsidized community radio stations. This is what should be requested in exchange for a grant. Government cannot grant funding just because they are non-profit organizations. No, the quid pro quo should be exactly that. The government can give \$1.5 billion in public money, but in exchange, it should ask, first, that 80% of the content be in French, and second, that no advertising be sold indirectly.

Then things would start to improve. It would take the pressure off commercial radio stations. That way, we might not come here saying that the quotas for French-language music must be lowered, otherwise we're going to go under.

Mario Beaulieu: In fact, it's quite the opposite. On CBC/Radio-Canada, we're hearing more and more music in English. Even on television and in all the series, there's music in English and more and more English expressions. On the news, we're seeing more and more interviews in English with subtitles. If you don't speak English, you need to be very quick and have good eyesight.

So, it's the opposite, to a degree. Basically, CBC/Radio-Canada has government funding and advertising, while private media are dying. It almost seems as if we're moving towards authoritarianism with state radio.

Sylvain Chamberland: Exactly. It's as if the government is saying it will put state radio everywhere. It's an almost indirect way of exercising a form of control.

My point is that the three-pillar system works in Canada precisely because it allows for a fair distribution. The effectiveness of the system has been proven and demonstrated for a long time.

• (1230)

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you very much for your observation. I think we should instead tax the digital giants and change the way CBC/Radio-Canada operates. We have the tools at hand, so we need to take action.

Sylvain Chamberland: Absolutely.

The Chair: Mr. Godin, you have the floor for five minutes.

Joël Godin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chamberland, I listened to you, and I find it interesting that you're bringing up potential solutions. You did not come here to ask for government grants as a private entrepreneur. That's to your credit.

I have identified six points that you suggest.

First, a tax credit for radio stations needs to be included; it's an important element.

Second, the calculation formula needs to change from 65% to 40%, but with additional points given when radio stations promote emerging talent or conduct interviews with artists, as this promotes French. If people go on Spotify to listen to an artist they discovered on your French radio station, you're contributing to the promotion of francophones. We need to promote francophone content at local stations. I come from this field, so I know that promotion is an important element. There is also talk of other discoverability measures; for example, an amateur contest in the Amos area would provide a showcase for artists to get known. I think that's also an element.

Can you, your experts, or the association of private radio stations—I don't know if that exists—suggest a calculation formula? Help us help you. I would like this to be included in the report we're going to submit.

Third, is your statement about the modernization of the Income Tax Act the same as the one regarding the radio tax credit?

Sylvain Chamberland: Yes.

Joël Godin: All right, so we're going to eliminate it.

Fourth, you talked about the advertisements placed by the federal government during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was financial support in a context where everyone was having a bit of trouble overcoming the situation.

Sylvain Chamberland: It was necessary.

Joël Godin: I think that's been demonstrated. I don't believe the government has gone bankrupt or, at least, not yet. Maybe it will go bankrupt in the coming years, but not for now.

Fifth, you were talking about financial assistance. Could financial assistance be provided to private radio stations for specific projects?

Sylvain Chamberland: Yes, certainly. That would be particularly the case for journalists.

Joël Godin: It could also help newsrooms. If I may use the expression, you're being robbed of the news you cover on the ground by digital platforms and the likes of CBC/Radio-Canada—

Sylvain Chamberland: They broadcast it and make money with that news.

Joël Godin:—who transfer it to a platform and sell access to it, even though they're subsidized.

Sylvain Chamberland: In fact, that's why Google, for example, has reinvested \$100 million into the system. It's not a lot, but at least it's something.

Joël Godin: Did private radio stations receive nothing from the \$100 million from Google?

Sylvain Chamberland: We received a small amount.

Joël Godin: Sixth, you recommend that the mandate of French-language broadcaster be primarily reserved for the Crown corporation and community radio stations.

Sylvain Chamberland: Absolutely.

Joël Godin: However, you're still required to promote the francophonie because you use public airwaves.

Does this summarize all the points to address in order to respect private companies and give them the oxygen they need to survive and be profitable? They need to survive, but they also need to be profitable. If we want our regions to be vibrant, we need businesses like yours that can be active and pay salaries to the people who stay in the area.

Sylvain Chamberland: We're talking about around 150 jobs in our areas. That's 150 jobs throughout the regions, and we're not done yet. We continue to support the weaker areas, and we try to strengthen them a bit, while trying to maintain a balance between local, regional and national. It's not easy.

Joël Godin: I find it interesting that an entrepreneur is coming to address the Standing Committee on Official Languages to provide them with possible solutions. You didn't come here to beg. I think we can move things forward.

Do you have other ideas in mind, based on your daily experiences, to further promote the francophonie and increase the profitability of businesses?

• (1235)

Sylvain Chamberland: I'll come back to advertising.

If I'm not mistaken, last year the government spent \$76 million on advertising, but only \$2 million on radio.

Joël Godin: This is how we respect the media and radio in the regions.

Sylvain Chamberland: That gives you some idea. Radio is a medium that's not subsidized, does not receive any funding, and on top of that, has no advertising.

Joël Godin: What makes radio special is the fact that it's the medium closest to the consumer's life.

Sylvain Chamberland: Of course.

Joël Godin: I think it's a tool, and maybe your sales agents should make their recommendations to the government, because the government is not able to find any on its own.

Thank you, Mr. Chamberland.

Sylvain Chamberland: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Villeneuve, I give you the floor for five minutes.

Louis Villeneuve (Brome—Missisquoi, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Mr. Chamberland. I've been listening and taking notes for a while now. As my colleague Mr. Godin said, we're here to protect our official languages.

Previously, you said something that resonates with me because it echoes the work we're currently doing within the rural caucus. There's a lot of talk about local media all over Canada in the rural caucus. In your opinion, how could the government implement a purchasing policy for local media? How do you see that?

Sylvain Chamberland: I think there's a requirement in Quebec to purchase 4% from community radio stations. I'm not saying it should be mandatory, but as Mr. Godin said, we should aim for a 50-50 split and at least start a transformation to invest in local media. I would even add that we should take pride in it. All the media in the country remain relevant, and it's important that they stay strong. Even the smallest media outlet in the tiniest town in the country should stay alive.

For me, a policy to force investments in local media is a transfer of money. I stress this point because a lot of money is given to CBC/Radio-Canada, which is a city within a city, but little money is given to community radio stations and no money is given to commercial radio stations. There might be a way to rebalance everything without increasing the budget. I emphasize that this is not about increasing the budget, but about redistributing financial resources.

Louis Villeneuve: Thank you very much,

What you're saying is that you're looking for solutions. The goal is to help. We're talking about radio, but more broadly, do you think this is a policy that can apply to all media, whether written or spoken?

Sylvain Chamberland: Certainly. I support the defence of local media, regardless of their form, whether it's local TV or something else. As you can imagine, there aren't many local television stations that survive today. I think it's important to defend them. The small local weeklies that still hire young journalists here and there, like our organization, are part of a coherent ecosystem that needs to be defended, in my opinion. I would even say that the online weeklies that exist all over Canada and employ journalists should also be supported. When it's Canadian-owned, locally owned, in Quebec or Canada, and the money stays in place, why not do it? Absolutely.

Louis Villeneuve: We talked earlier about percentages. How will reducing the quota of French music to 40% better protect the French language?

Sylvain Chamberland: I'm not saying that it will better protect French. What we're saying is that it would be important to see

what's happening all over, as half of the radio stations in the country are not making money. Some big players are even going bankrupt. Bell is divesting from radio. In my opinion, it's a wake-up call, where everyone should realize that there is indeed a problem.

Let's take the example of Stingray, which acquired TuneIn, a digital music content distribution company. The two companies worked on this agreement behind the scenes, and it's brilliant. The point I want to raise is that if I were a parliamentarian, all the orange lights would be on in the building, because there will eventually be a problem.

Is it better to have a quota of 65%? The answer is yes. However, if there are no more radio stations to promote that 65% quota, we won't be any further ahead in the end. We proposed a trial period during which a quota of 40% would be applied, to see if it enhances vitality. As we mentioned earlier, we could simultaneously implement a scoring system that emphasizes discoverability and the development of musical talent. I would be on board, no problem. Let's try to be creative and push the boundaries a bit to see how, in three years, for example, radio stations will fare. We prepare annual reports—

● (1240)

Louis Villeneuve: I think our time is up. I see the chair gesturing at me.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chamberland.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chamberland, for my part, I would surely never agree to a reduction in the quotas for French-language music, because I believe it would fuel the decline that we're already seeing. Many studies show that there is less consumption of cultural goods in French. These are the consequences of all kinds of global measures, whether in schools or even in the teaching of Quebec culture and music, and so on.

Have you ever thought about a solution to reverse the trend of the declining consumption of cultural goods, music, and information in French?

Sylvain Chamberland: As long as digital giants do whatever they want and there's no control, the consumption of French-language music content will continue to decline. It's not complicated. We see the curve of online consumption of French-language music going down. We generally see it through content consumption on the radio. Talk radio is on the rise, but unfortunately, music radio is declining because people are turning to digital platforms.

I don't see how we can reverse this trend, unless we impose incredible obligations. A digital content distribution company may well offer 100 million French-language playlists, but if no one listens to them, there won't be any more listeners. It's clear that radio has a role to play, and I'm very aware of that. I didn't come here to testify thinking that people would applaud because we're asking to lower the quotas. On the other hand, we're sounding the alarm to say that, if it's not done, at some point, there will be a problem one way or another. I repeat: It is essential, first and foremost, to realize the importance of the role of CBC/Radio-Canada.

Mario Beaulieu: Political will is needed. We see it in all sorts of areas from the federal government and Quebec. Quebec taxes digital giants, I think. Could they tax more?

Sylvain Chamberland: In any case, an exercise is needed, it must be said.

Mario Beaulieu: Yes.

Basically, as you said, we need to look at the digital giants and CBC/Radio-Canada.

The government of Quebec could also contribute. When we go to the Festival d'été de Québec and there are bands—

Sylvain Chamberland: Honestly, the Quebec government has nonetheless improved in recent years. They have made a commendable effort. I'm telling you, there has really been a change in tone.

If that change were to take place at the federal level, perhaps we wouldn't have the same debates either, and we wouldn't be required to come and testify before the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Mario Beaulieu: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

I now give the floor to Mr. Dalton for five minutes.

Marc Dalton: Mr. Chamberland, thank you very much for your testimony. It's clear that you're struggling for the survival of your businesses, and we're grateful for that.

We, the Conservatives, want you to succeed. That said, as members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, we also want to protect the French language. This is part of our mandate, and it's really important. However, as you said, it is difficult to maintain a balance.

For over two years, the Liberals have taken control of the Internet by passing the Online Streaming Act in April 2023. They claimed to need these powers to help Canadian content creators. Can you tell us if such strict government control has helped popularize French-language music? Do you see a difference?

• (1245)

Sylvain Chamberland: I think the numbers speak for themselves. As Mr. Beaulieu just mentioned, the decline of French is still very noticeable in terms of online consumption. I would even say that it has worsened over the past three years or so, with a really sharp decline in the consumption of French-language music online.

Marc Dalton: I see.

Do you believe that the music clips used in short videos on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube can help popularize French songs among young Quebecers? These platforms use short online videos, but without copyright, and they are not businesses.

Sylvain Chamberland: Obviously, there's the issue of copyright and the duration of the music clip. If it's a certain length, it's fine. I think it can help popularize French content to some extent, especially if they are influencers. That said, we agree that it's a passing trend; it might influence someone for five minutes, but I don't think it will have a long-term impact on the consumption of Quebec music.

Marc Dalton: In your opinion, are we in a situation where we have to force children to consume French content just like we force them to eat vegetables? There's real tension. What can we do to encourage young people to love vegetables and French-speaking music more? My definition of young people is those under 40 or 50 years old.

I really love French-language music, but what can we do about this?

Sylvain Chamberland: I strongly believe in people's abilities.

I think I belong to your age group, and I can tell you that I've seen enough to say that when you think you've seen the end of something, you sometimes witness a rebirth. I fundamentally believe in that.

Traditional media that fact-check and do all those things will bounce back, but in a different way. We've come a long way, but I believe we're going to return to traditional media. I also believe that traditional radio could make a comeback. Do you know what? Francophone music may come back to the forefront, but we will need to think and do things differently.

I'd like to get back to the issue of diversity, because I've often discussed it with the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, the CRTC. I want to highlight an important point: The regulations are very strict. They force broadcasters to constantly play, roughly speaking, mainstream music. It's always the same songs, the same stuff that gets played, because they're required to play 65% French-language music. If we wanted to create a hip-hop music station, for example, we couldn't do it because there isn't 65% hip-hop. There's some, but at 65%, we would always be playing the same artists.

The regulations are so strict that we don't open the door to other music styles. It's extremely difficult. In Quebec, we have a country network that really works because it's in style right now. All the new songs coming out are country. There's a lot of new francophone country music. Suddenly, it's not hard to quench your thirst because you have resources. If I think about rock, on the other hand, almost nothing new is ever offered. There are hardly any new rock songs in French anymore.

In my opinion, that's also part of the equation. When we say that we need to loosen the system to give more leeway to entrepreneurs in the media sector, it reaches a point where we could really propose discoverability. On the other hand, by imposing a quota of 65% French-language music in a given style, it's impossible to do better.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chamberland.

Mr. Dalton, thank you.

Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

The Chair: I now give the floor to Ms. Chenette for five minutes.

Madeleine Chenette: Thank you very much, Mr. Chamberland.

I want to congratulate you on the success you have had as an entrepreneur so far, and for being a visionary when you embarked on this beautiful project.

We are currently in a media crisis that needs entrepreneurship to reinvent the system. You're approaching the issue from the perspective of the francophone fact, but the problem—and I agree with Mr. Godin on this point—is not that of the francophonie, but that of the industry. I'm not sure that focusing the debate on the francophonie helps us. There are still 321 million French-speakers on the planet, French is the fifth most spoken language in the world, the fourth on the Internet, and from 2018 to 2022, the number of French speakers increased by 7%.

It's clear that the entire planet has experienced the American cultural invasion. The current situation puts us at a turning point. There are indeed opportunities to reinvent ourselves, but the francophonie must remain strong, because there needs to be a multitude of francophone artists from all musical styles and from all over the planet. On the other hand, the industry needs solutions. I'm also grateful to you for all the ones you've proposed, which are very interesting. We all took notes.

Another phenomenon in the radio and media sector is misinformation and disinformation. Journalistic rigour has always been essential, but now the competitors are not just the platforms, but also the average man or woman who decides to create their own music or share their own information. We can no longer go back. As you said, it will be important to think differently, but we need to completely rethink the business model, because competition is no longer limited to platforms.

Another phenomenon to consider is the democratic engagement you highlighted: for local radio, the closeness of the private sector matters.

In this context, what is the right platform to discuss all of this? The CRTC has a role to play, but is this the right platform? The problem concerns the entire sector.

• (1250)

Sylvain Chamberland: During the last hearings, we proposed to the CRTC that a committee be created. There should be a standing committee without any additional paperwork. We should always be in discussion during this important period. We can't come here and discuss this, then not see each other again for 15 years to implement the next phase; we would be completely disconnected. There would be a decline, and in the meantime, we wouldn't be talking.

I believe that the entire community—francophones, Indigenous people, community radio, CBC/Radio-Canada, and others—must be able to engage in discussions with decision-makers, parliamentarians, the CRTC, lawmakers and those who set the rules, while looking them straight in the eye. Everyone should be gathered around a table, and we would move forward. We should hold committee meetings regularly to move toward solutions that will help the entire community.

You're right to say that we are at a crossroads. However, as I told you, I strongly believe in the return of traditional journalism, that is to say, factual journalism. We've fallen into opinion journalism, and there's obviously a lot of future for opinions, but I think that, as you said, everyone is giving their opinion now. Everyone can consider themselves an independent media outlet, a newspaper or a radio station.

I'm therefore convinced that we'll return to a form of factual media where we'll verify the facts to ensure that what is said is true.

Madeleine Chenette: That's an important point. In that context, it's clear that what's true and genuine in the francophonie and in our Canadian strength is there and must remain. Reducing the amount of French in our forums may not be the right approach.

I hear all the arguments, but we need to focus on how we keep French alive together. In doing so, it's clear that the debate must continue. That's why our government has invested a historic amount of \$770 million in culture in this year's budget.

I'll finish on that note. I hope you agree on this investment.

• (1255)

Sylvain Chamberland: Absolutely.

The Chair: We will conclude with that answer. This is a good time to do so.

Mr. Chamberland, on behalf of the committee, I thank you for being with us and for sharing your ideas, suggestions and comments.

Colleagues, before we finish, I have a small administrative matter to settle with you. Last week, you should have received a copy of the proposed budgets for the study on the quota of French-language music imposed on French-language media and for the study on the use of French in government communications and federal institutions.

Does the committee agree to adopt these budgets?

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Thank you very much.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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