



30 October 2020

Claude Doucet
Secretary General
CRTC
Ottawa, ON K1A 0N2

Via GC Key

Dear Secretary General,

Re: Broadcasting Notices of Consultation CRTC [2019-379](#) (Ottawa, 25 November 2020), [2019-379-1](#) (Ottawa, 28 January 2020), [2019-379-2](#) (Ottawa, 8 April 2020) and [2019-379-3](#) (Ottawa, 22 June 2020) – Procedural request – addition of CBC's Tandem initiative to the proceeding – request to amend procedural request by adding facts

1 On 28 October 2020 the Forum submitted a procedural request to the CRTC asking that it add consideration of the recent “Tandem” proposal by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) to the public record of the above-noted proceeding.

2 On 29 October 2020 the *Globe and Mail* published an article by Simon Houpt quoting CBC's spokesperson to the effect that while CBC has been developing the Tandem initiative for more than a year – that is, since before October 2019 – it has been publishing branded “for years – not weeks, not months – years”:

CBC spokesperson Chuck Thompson said Tandem had been in development for more than a year, with input from all “key stakeholders,” and that the corporation had been satisfied it had established standards that would allow it to proceed. “It’s everyone’s concern at CBC, not just journalists, that we ensure at every step, with every execution, that we protect the integrity of our journalism.”

He added that **CBC/Radio-Canada had been publishing branded content “for years – not weeks, not months – years”** and that it was merely Tandem’s rollout last month that raised hackles. “Everybody woke up to the fact that we’re in the branded content game.”¹

3 A copy of this article is attached, and the Forum respectfully requests that it be added to our 28 October 2020 procedural request as supplementary evidence confirming the existence of the Tandem initiative and the broadcast of branded content on CBC since before the CRTC published CBC's licensing applications.

¹ Simon Houpt, “Current, former CBC employees condemn corporation’s branded-content initiative”, *The Globe and Mail* (29 October 2020), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/article-current-former-cbc-employees-condemn-corporations-branded-content/>, [bold font added].

- 4 The Forum appreciates the CRTC's consideration of this request. Should the CRTC or its staff have any questions, we would be pleased to respond. We look forward to the Commission's response.

Sincerely yours,



Monica L. Auer, M.A., LL.M.
Executive Director
Forum for Research and Policy in Communications (FRPC)
Ottawa, Ontario

- c. Ms. Bev Kirshenblatt regulatoryaffairs@cbc.ca; bev.kirshenblatt@cbc.ca
Executive Director Corporate & Regulatory Affairs, CBC/Radio Canada

Attachment: Simon Houpt, "Current, former CBC employees condemn corporation's branded-content initiative", *The Globe and Mail* (29 October 2020),
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/article-current-former-cbc-employees-condemn-corporations-branded-content/>

Current, former CBC employees condemn corporation's branded-content initiative

SIMON HOUPT ▶

+ FOLLOW SIMON

PUBLISHED 1 HOUR AGO

4 COMMENTS ◀ SHARE – **A+** TEXT SIZE 🔖 BOOKMARK 🔊

CBC/Radio-Canada Tandem was unveiled to the advertising community last month.

GALIT RODAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Canadian Broadcasting Corp. is facing an uprising within its ranks for accepting advertising that critics say amounts to corporate-sponsored “fake news.”

Hundreds of current and former staff, including Peter Mansbridge, Linden MacIntyre, Gillian Findlay, Bob McKeown and Adrienne Clarkson, are expressing “grave concerns” over CBC/Radio-Canada Tandem, a new venture that works with marketers to create and publish what is known as branded content, or paid content: advertising that looks or sounds like regular editorial coverage.

Tandem was unveiled to the advertising community last month, with CBC/Radio-Canada's new chief revenue officer, Donald Lizotte, promising in a news release it would “leverage the credibility of our network.” The pitch proposed that Tandem content could appear on most of the broadcaster's English- and French-language platforms, including the CBC website, podcast pages and audio apps, and TV networks – among them, CBC News Network.

Branded content produced by CBC so far includes videos on Radio-Canada's website about how HSBC, a bank, is helping entrepreneurs confront the business challenges of COVID-19, a podcast series promoting Athabasca University and Olympic-themed videos sponsored by Visa. The sponsor is identified in each case through text or a logo.

The plans alarmed rank-and-file staff and some of the network's stars, as well as high-profile former on-air personalities, who have joined a group of more than 400 to press their case through town halls and a flurry of letters to the public broadcaster's management and board of directors.

"I am very disturbed by the idea that there might be a commercial intrusion into the objective news gathering and dissemination that has always been the CBC's hallmark," Ms. Clarkson, the former governor-general who worked for CBC for almost four decades, told The Globe and Mail on Thursday afternoon.

Mr. MacIntyre, the former crusading host of *The Fifth Estate*, said during an interview that, while traditional advertising on CBC "is one of the realities" that has been accepted by the public, branded content is tantamount to "deception. Why do special corporate interests, institutional interests need to disguise content as something that is objective and something that is disinterested from their mercenary point of view? Why do they have to do that, other than to create an impression that is untrue, which is that they don't have a particular stake in how people respond to this?"

Many private news organizations have developed robust branded content initiatives, including The Globe and Mail and The New York Times. But the public-service mandates of public broadcasters are sometimes seen to be at odds with such undertakings. Last year, the BBC drew scathing criticism for a video series made by its branded content division, StoryWorks, lauding the Chinese telecom giant, Huawei.

Tony Burman, who served as editor in chief of CBC News from 2000 to 2007, told The Globe that Tandem is "a terrible initiative. They're selling the journalistic reputation of the CBC to the highest bidder. That's not what a public broadcaster should be doing. In an era where the fiction of so-called fake news is undermining trust in journalism, I think this just makes it worse."

In response to the staff actions, CBC/Radio-Canada announced this month that it would "press pause" on any further Tandem contracts, and strike a working group comprising representatives of the news, sales, podcast, digital and other departments to study the concerns that had been raised.

CBC spokesperson Chuck Thompson said Tandem had been in development for more than a year, with input from all "key stakeholders," and that the corporation had been satisfied it had established standards that would allow it to proceed. "It's everyone's concern at CBC, not just journalists, that we ensure at every step, with every execution, that we protect the integrity of our journalism."

He added that CBC/Radio-Canada had been publishing branded content "for years – not weeks, not months – years" and that it was merely Tandem's rollout last month that raised hackles. "Everybody woke up to the fact that we're in the branded content game."

The broadcaster has recently become more aggressive in its desire to commercialize its content, as traditional revenue has dried up. During its annual Upfront presentation to the advertising community last year, CBC/Radio-Canada president Catherine Tait boasted they were "making a renewed commitment to growing commercial revenue."

On Thursday afternoon, a group of six journalists spearheading the staff response to Tandem, including Ms. Findlay and investigative reporter Dave Seglins, sent a note to the group of more than 400 expressing disappointment that their concerns had fallen on deaf ears, and they were calling for a town hall meeting with Ms. Tait. A copy of the note was provided to The Globe.

"We are demanding nothing short of a complete, total halt to paid content," it read.

The Globe has five brand-new arts and lifestyle newsletters: Health & Wellness, Parenting & Relationships, Sightseer, Nestruck on Theatre and What to Watch. [Sign up](#) today.

© Copyright 2020 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.
351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1
Phillip Crawley, Publisher