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Presentation to the Senate Committee on Transport and Communications

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The Periodical Writers Association of Canada (PWAC) serves and represents more than 500 independent professional writers across Canada. This not-for-profit association maintains chapters in most major cities and delivers a range of services to its dispersed and diverse membership.

PWAC is an active member in the community of Canadian creators and is a leader in developing policies and services that contribute to our nation's intellectual, artistic and political life. We are founding members of the Canadian reprography licensing agency known as Access Copyright (formerly CANCOPY) and helped establish the Creators Copyright Coalition (an umbrella group of creator organizations). In 1996 PWAC was certified by the Canadian Artists and Producers Professional Relations Tribunal to represent non-francophone freelance writers in Canada. This designation under Status of the Artist legislation gives PWAC authority to negotiate on behalf of nonfiction writers in areas under federal jurisdiction.

PWAC members' works are found in nearly every Canadian newspaper and magazine. Our members write for radio (most notably the CBC), television and now websites. Many of our members' stories are found in major international publications. The simple reality is that most Canadian magazines would not exist without Canadian freelance writers. Most of the articles you read in your favorite publications are written by freelancers. Next time you pick up Canadian Geographic, Chatelaine, Canadian Living, Readers Digest, or the feature pages of the Globe & Mail, the National Post or the Ottawa Citizen take a look at the bylines and the contributors' biographies. Virtually all these people will be independent nonfiction writers -- freelancers.

The typical PWAC member holds two post-secondary degrees, is middle-aged, and has been working as a freelance writer for more than 10 years. As small business owners and professional writers our members are highly skilled and highly educated people who choose to work freelance, and to tell the Canadian story. Our members have been telling these stories for nearly 30 years. From Inuvik to Windsor, Victoria to St. John's, PWAC members, and freelance writers in general, write about what it means to be Canadian. We are the chorus of diversity that sings the Canadian song, both in this country and around the world.

Unfortunately, these Canadian stories are getting harder and harder to tell. The stories are there. The interest in them is high. Canadians want to know about themselves. The simple reality is that those who own our newspapers, our magazines and our airwaves are demanding more and more from us, the writers. And they are paying less and less.

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Large publishers such as Canwest, Transcontinental, Quebecor/Sun Media, Rogers and Thomson are demanding more work, more content and more rights. And they are paying less for it. According to our association's last comprehensive member survey, the average annual income for a working freelance writer was \$26,100. This is almost identical to average incomes in 1979. Factoring in inflation over the past 30 years means independent writers in Canada have watched their standard of living drop by more than 60%.

At the same time that rates and incomes are dropping, these same large publishers are demanding more rights from their writers. Contracts demanding a broad range of licenses for little or no additional money have replaced what used to be the norm: single-use agreements. When I first started freelancing way back in 1993 a publication, such as the Globe & Mail or Maclean's, would purchase the right to print my article once. These one-time print licenses allowed freelancers to re-sell their works to noncompeting markets, thereby allowing us to increase our income. Rates were not good, but at least we could make up the difference by recycling works.

All this came to an end in the mid-90s with the first round of media mergers. Now when I license an article to the Ottawa Citizen or Chatelaine the publisher demands the right to reuse my work throughout their corporate media empire. My article can now appear in all chain newspapers and magazines, on the company's websites and in their commercial databases. It can also be used on their radio and TV broadcasts in the case of cross-ownership. There is no room for negotiation of these contracts anymore. Local editors have been ordered to get virtually all the rights to my articles, or I don't write for them. Those who don't sign don't work. And some of our members even tell stories of being blacklisted for speaking out. So the corporations receive unfettered use of my work. In exchange I usually receive nothing, or at best a small pittance.

To put it bluntly, independent writers and producers in this country face economic starvation. An increasing number of my colleagues have stopped writing for the magazines and newspapers that Canadians read. Many are turning to corporate or government work to pay the bills. Those that stay face a diminishing standard of living.

Now I'm going to turn things over to my colleague Doreen Pendgracs. She is going to share some of the actual stories from our members.

Doreen Pendgracs, Dugald, MB

I too started freelancing in 1993 after leaving the corporate sector. Over the past few years several of my magazine and online clients have reduced their rates considerably, making it much more difficult for me to maintain the already low income I was making.

George Kynman, St. Andrews, MB

I'm a freelance writer and cartoonist. I began my career 15 years ago with small independent newspapers. Today, those independent newspapers have disappeared. The newspapers still exist, but their content is now supplied from central clearing houses, reflecting the corporate rather than the local perspective. Media concentration has resulted in an increasingly difficult, and corporately controlled marketplace. Corporations use their concentrated buying powers to force freelance rates lower, and often mistreat freelancers further through restrictive and abusive copyright agreements.

Allison Finnamore, Moncton, NB

In late February, I received a “non-negotiable” contract from Transcontinental Specialty Publications. For 12 cents a word, they want exclusive first publication rights for 30 days, electronic rights and the right to re-publish my work without further payment. I’m not signing this contract. I’m walking away with my head held high, but I seriously wonder how I will make up the lost income and indeed, how I will pay for childcare next month.

Gil Parker, Victoria, BC

Over the last five years, I have noticed a degradation of rates of payment for freelance articles in newspapers and magazines. I attribute this to increasing centralization of the publishing industry and the competition from all forms of media. Many of my fellow writers are abandoning traditional markets in public media, relying on commercial work for corporations and government. Canada is poorer for their loss.

Alison Hughes, Chamcook, NB

Eight years ago, I began freelancing for the Telegraph Journal in New Brunswick. At that time I received ... about \$500-\$600 per story. Now NB Publishing, which is part of the Irving Group of papers, pays \$125 for a freelance article, and they also demand the rights to reuse the story and photos in any electronic medium in perpetuity. I used to sell stories to the Ottawa Citizen or the Vancouver Sun, but now they access them without my knowledge or approval.

Marvin Ross, Dundas, ON

The amount of payment for a long newspaper feature today is the same or less than I received in the late 1980s. Not only have many papers and magazines not increased their rates in a number of years (or reduced them as one editor told me she was ordered to do) but contracts are much more demanding. Most publications want E-rights without wishing to pay for them.

Dave Preston, Victoria, BC

After almost 20 years as a professional freelance writer/editor I’m all but finished with the periodical industry. I haven’t seen a rates increase in about a decade and the treatment of writers has slowly but surely worsened. The real loser in all this is the Canadian reading public who are being fed more and more wire copy and syndicated pieces written by people who know little or nothing about Canada, let alone its regional cultures, politics and heritage.

Tracey Arial, Verdun, QC

In the late nineties all the major newspapers started distributing draconian contracts. Instead of selling an article to the Montreal Gazette and then receiving the same rate of pay for the same article at the Toronto Star and then perhaps trying to sell it out west, I could now sell it once to the Montreal Gazette and receive a measly 5% or 10% payment for any other publication choosing to use it. Freelancers who didn’t agree to such terms were blacklisted.

Bob Bott, Calgary, AB

During my first decade of freelance writing, 1977-1987, magazines and newspapers accounted for more than 90 per cent of my income. The national magazines then paid \$1 a word, and other markets generally paid at least 35 cents per word. It was a good living, especially in the early years, and very satisfying. However, inflation whittled away at my purchasing power. I can no longer afford to write for Canadian magazines. Other writing and editing has filled the economic void for me, but I am concerned about the future of the Canadian periodical industry.

Nora Abercrombie, Edmonton, AB

I was a literary critic who used to publish reviews related to feminism, Canadian literature and culture criticism until I sued Southam (now Canwest) for copyright infringement in the late 1990s. Needless to say, I cannot work for Southam (Canwest) any more. The problem is that there are no other companies to write for in any Canadian city. These publishers have a near-monopoly, they can set the business environment unilaterally. So the Canadian dialogue is limited ... and I am shut down.

Suzanne Boles, London, ON

Rates offered by publications to freelance writers are going down. The London Free Press, now part of Quebecor/Sun Media, used to pay \$500 for a Business Section cover story. They now pay \$200. Columns that once fetched \$200 are now \$100 or less.

Rachel Goldsworthy, Victoria, BC

If I want to sell a travel piece to the Victoria Times Colonist they will pay me what amounts to less than minimum wage. Then they will make my article available to all Canwest papers and I may or may not receive any additional compensation. I can't afford to write for them. And there are a lot of people like me whose expertise and opinions are unread because publishers print what they can get cheap.

Anne Marie Aikins, Toronto, ON

I have been working as a freelancer since the mid-90's and have found that my rates are now completely controlled by the publishers in spite of my successes. I have written for most major dailies and national magazines, and my rates are less than half of what I made five years ago. But the worse thing that has happened to the industry is the loss of diversity amongst the voices heard. It's a huge loss to democracy when freedom of expression is stifled by the media.

Zachary Houle, Ottawa, ON

As a (former) freelance journalist, I've seen the Canwests and Transcontinentals trample my rights vis-a-vis reprint payments. As far as I'm concerned, media convergence has had a real effect on me as a journalist. There are not enough independent newspapers anymore to pitch my wares to.

Don Procter, Toronto, ON

After writing steadily for a homes magazine for more than five years, I walked away from the work because the publisher decided to stop paying money for stories. The company moved to a "barter arrangement" in which writers are given a "money credit" to purchase goods and services from the publication's advertisers. That's fine if you want roof shingles, a hot tub or a new stereo, but the barter arrangement doesn't extend to practical items such as food, gasoline and other necessities.

Alex Roslin, Montreal, QC

I've been freelancing for 10 years and would say that freelancing opportunities have increased due to a rise in the number of small periodicals, but any gains in income have been more than wiped out by media consolidation and the erosion of electronic rights. The tougher competitive climate for freelancers is reflected in the fact that freelance rates have stayed flat for the entire period. The flat rates mean a decrease in real income, after inflation and rising expenses.

Holly Quan, Turner Valley, AB

I have been a full-time freelance writer since 1998. I have found it necessary to turn away from magazine articles in favour of corporate work. Magazine contracts are very restrictive, as a result I rarely re-sell an article. In addition, pay rates are poor. It's even worse with newspapers which I don't even bother with any more -- too much work for not enough money.

Christine Fischer Guy, Toronto, ON

For some time now, the dumbing-down of Canadian media has troubled me. There's no room for divergent voices in a cookie-cutter environment. One might argue that mainstream media was never the place for divergent voices, but it's even less so as mergers and acquisitions stretch corporate umbrellas even further.

Barbara Florio Graham, Gatineau, QC

I wrote regularly for Canadian newspapers for 20 years, from 1975-1995. I stopped when Southam instituted its practice of sharing freelance articles throughout their chain of papers. Other papers in the chain were able to reprint my story for an additional payment of only \$5. At the same time, Southam reduced compensation to freelancers so that an article that used to pay \$100-\$150 plus \$25 per photo, now paid \$75, with photos included!

Ross Mavis, Saint John, NB

The biggest concern I have is that whenever you are successful in selling an article or column to one member of a 'media chain' you must sign off all rights to the article for every member of the chain.

Kira Vermond, Toronto, ON

I'm appalled that what publications pay today is the same as when I was a toddler.

Pauline Clift, Montreal, QC

I left freelancing because of the changes. It's simply impossible to make a living under these circumstances.

Marie Mendenhall, Regina, SK

A lot has changed since I started freelancing in 1989. I make about 1/2 to 3/4 what I made in the mid 1990s from article sales.

Alison Appelbe, Vancouver, BC

I've been freelancing for three years. I earn one-third of what I earned as a full-time reporter — not enough to live on. My articles go onto publisher's websites, with no additional remuneration to the creator. And then, in the case of Canwest, onto several public sites for sale to the general consumer.

John Symon, Montreal, QC

I have only been freelancing since 2000, but it is definitely tougher now. The Montreal Gazette's freelance budget has gone down and it is impossible to raise rates with existing customers. I am under pressure to drop them.

Lanny Boutin, Gibbons, AB

In the last six plus years that I have been freelancing things have been getting significantly harder. Most of the Canadian magazines I work for pay exactly the same amount as they did six years ago.

Jan Melnyk, Edmonton, AB

I have been freelancing for five years. In that time none of my markets have raised their rates.

Doreen Kerby, Saskatoon, SK

I am finding it harder to sell my articles. I used to be able to count on the Vancouver Courier and the Langley Times. That is no longer the case.

As you have heard, media concentration is having a direct and measurable impact on Canada's independent writers. We are being strangled out of the business. Some would say this is all just simple market economics at work -- let the market decide. But this assumes we are dealing with a freely operating market. This is not the case. With each merger, with each buy-out, with each step along the path of media concentration, these massive corporate publishers and broadcasters are able to distort the market more and more to their own benefit. From where I sit, this is a monopoly.

Our voices are being silenced. And with them goes the diversity of views and perspectives that is such a part of being Canadian. I and my members do not want this to happen, but it seems that we have little choice.

Thank you for your time.