

# Brief Regarding the Study of CBC/Radio-Canada's Local and Regional Radio, Television and Online Services in the Current Media Environment

Submitted by Civicplan Research Inc.

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Please accept this brief as a submission from Civicplan Research Inc. related to the Transport and Communication Standing Committee of the Senate of Canada's study of CBC/Radio-Canada's local and regional broadcasting services. This brief provides the Committee with a summary of the City of Hamilton's experience with CBC/Radio-Canada and local radio broadcasting services. The Hamilton example offers a glimpse into a Canadian city's efforts, over twenty years, to encourage CBC/Radio-Canada to better serve the city in terms of local broadcasting as well as the various missed opportunities for CBC/Radio-Canada, which demonstrate a lack of priority placed on fostering connections to Canadians.

## Hamilton Context

The Hamilton Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) is home to 785,184 people. It is the third largest CMA in Ontario (after Toronto and Ottawa), and the 10<sup>th</sup> largest city in Canada. The population is roughly on par with Winnipeg and Quebec City. Hamilton is located at the western tip of Lake Ontario, nestled in the Niagara Escarpment. Founded in 1816, Hamilton is one of Canada's older industrial powerhouses, the centre of steel production in the country. The city has a proud history and unique identity. It's nickname, The Ambitious City, reflects, in part, the numerous ways it has been at the fore of industrial, technological and economic change through the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

## Hamilton Media History

In the context of communication media generally, Hamilton's ambitions were equally grand. The city was home to the Southam family and the origins of what would become a newspaper empire that spanned the country. In television, it is home to CHCH, founded by Ken Soble in the 1950s and a leader in local and Canadian content production until the 1990s. In radio, Hamilton was home to CHML, a private local radio station that served the community in local news and programming for close to a century. Despite this proud history of local media, CBC/Radio-Canada has never had a local broadcasting presence in the city.

Beginning in the late 1990s and consistently until this year, the city's private media landscape has been beset by a series of media consolidation and ownership changes, moving the ownership of these local media assets further from the community, which has resulted in the stripping of local news and information reporting. The most recent challenge was the abrupt closure of 900 CMHL in August 2024. This closure came amidst a larger sell off of local broadcasting assets by Canadian media companies.

## Hamilton and CBC/Radio-Canada

Compounding the diminishing local news and information provided through private broadcasters through the last 20+ years of media consolidations, is the fact that Hamilton has always been unserved by local CBC radio. Where other communities of commensurate size (e.g. Quebec City or Winnipeg) could rely on their local CBC stations to provide local coverage, this has never been the case in Hamilton, thus leaving one of Canada’s top ten cities without a reasonable and fair level of service from the public broadcaster.

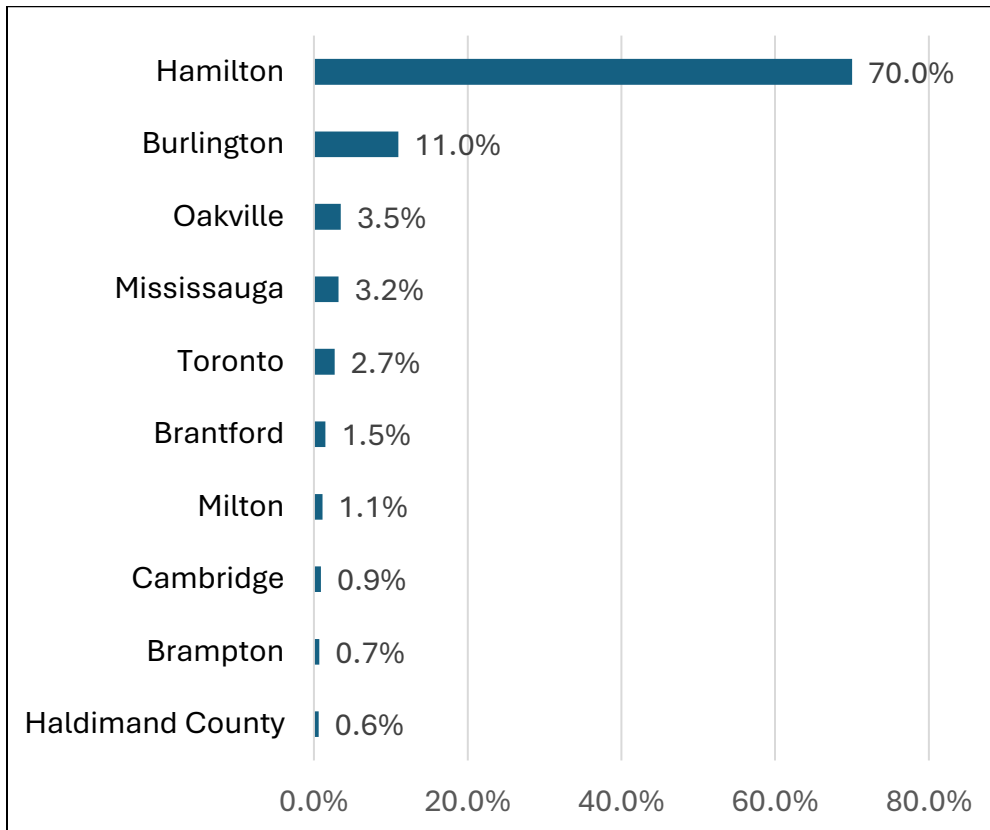
*Table 1: Local CBC Radio Stations in Canadian Cities*

City (CMA)	Population (2021)	Local CBC Radio One Station
Toronto	6,202,225	✓
Montreal	4,291,732	✓
Vancouver	2,642,825	✓
Ottawa – Gatineau	1,488,307	✓
Calgary	1,481,806	✓
Edmonton	1,418,118	✓
Québec	839,311	✓
Winnipeg	834,678	✓
Hamilton	785,184	X
Kitchener – Waterloo	575,847	✓
London	543,551	✓
Halifax	465,703	✓
Windsor	422,630	✓
Victoria	397,237	✓
Saskatoon	317,480	✓
Regina	249,217	✓
Kelowna	222,162	✓
St. John’s	212,579	✓

Source: Statistics Canada, cbc.ca

In the context of local public radio, Hamilton has long been the largest city in the country without local CBC radio (see Table 1). Two factors have informed this situation. First, historically, Hamilton is located in a very congested broadcast media landscape with a scarcity of new frequencies. Second, Hamilton is on the periphery of the broadcast service area for the local CBC Toronto (99.1FM) radio station and thus it is assumed that Hamilton is adequately served by programming from CBC Toronto. It is important to emphasize that this assumption is ill-informed, and CBC’s Toronto content is of limited relevance to the Hamilton region due to the low level of integration between the two cities. Hamilton is not part of Toronto’s CMA (the GTA) and the 2021 Census commuting statistics (see Table 2) demonstrate that less than 3% of Hamiltonians commute to Toronto for work. The vast majority (70%) of residents live and work here in Hamilton.

*Table 2: Hamilton Commuting Patterns*



Source: Statistics Canada

## Hamilton Advocacy

As the private media landscape was shifting over the last 20 years, Hamilton residents, City Council<sup>1</sup> and other political representatives<sup>2</sup> have fought for diversity in the local media environment, through regulatory channels, such as at the CRTC, when various local broadcasting licences were shifting hands. This included outreach to the CBC to make the case for the national broadcaster to finally serve the city through a local radio station, beginning in 2004 up until this year. The leadership at the national broadcaster has been aware of this gap in service and communicated that the main reason for the lack of service was that there were no “appropriate” local frequencies available.

In a response to local pressure, CBC launched a “digital” service in 2012 as an interim measure. This digital service amounts to a webpage off the main CBC news site. It contains some local Hamilton reporting presented as text articles, but no podcasts, or local news streams or other audio content. In terms of staff and capital, CBC invests in a small team and rents a location in downtown Hamilton.

A 2014 survey of Hamilton residents found that a majority of respondents were CBC listeners and that they were aware of the digital service, but 70% indicated that the local Hamilton digital service was not meeting their expectations of the national broadcaster. Additionally, 91% of respondents wanted to see local audio programming on par with other communities, such as Toronto or Kitchener/Waterloo. Finally, close to 90% of respondents also indicated they were eager to see alternative methods of delivering local audio service, including live streamed daily programming.<sup>3</sup>

## Missed Opportunities

The CBC Hamilton digital service was only ever meant as a stop gap measure until a signal became available. Yet, between 2012 and today, a number of local frequencies have come on the market, and changed hands, providing an opportunity for CBC to fulfil this obligation.<sup>4</sup> The most recent examples of this are BCE announcing the sale of its local Hamilton frequency, 102.9 FM, along with three others in the Niagara region, as well as Global announcing the closure of 900 CHML, Hamilton’s venerated longstanding private local radio station. Due to the changing media environment, and the collapse of the private local radio media model, the opportunities for CBC to step into the gap is clear.

While a local CBC radio station has always been the goal, there have been multiple opportunities for CBC to capitalize on its local Hamilton digital service over the last twelve years. Yet nothing has materialized. In the last two months alone (October and November 2024), CBC has made announcements of increased local digital service in a number of ways, including 14 local CBC Radio One audio streams, 4 additional daily local podcasts to accompany another 7 weekly podcasts in communities across the country.<sup>5</sup> While this is all positive news for these various communities across Canada, the question stands out, what about Hamilton, the “inaugural” digital service? When asked if Hamilton would be included in this expansion of local digital service, CBC’s Senior Managing Director, CBC Ontario Region noted that “there are no plans to move forward with a radio program or station in Hamilton.”<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

The Hamilton experience provides a stark example of missed opportunities on the part of CBC/Radio-Canada to serve Canadians and build support and relevance in a major city.

Three key missed opportunities from this example are as follows:

- 1. Opportunity for the Local Public Model** - Hamilton is a community where the private media model has failed, leaving multiple opportunities for CBC/Radio Canada to acquire a local radio frequency and provide local public broadcasting to the 10<sup>th</sup> largest city in the country.
- 2. Capitalizing on Public Support in Underserved Markets** - For twenty years, Hamilton residents and elected representatives at the municipal and federal levels have advocated through regulatory and official channels to have CBC deliver service commensurate to other communities across the country, to no avail.
- 3. Innovation through Digital Service** - CBC's 2012 introduction of a "digital service" in Hamilton, including staff and an office in the city, presented an opportunity to innovate around new ways to deliver local programming. Despite this, CBC consistently ignores this opportunity and leaves Hamilton underserved as compared to communities across the country.

For CBC/Radio-Canada to forge a path forward, the broadcaster needs to better serve Canadian communities. It needs to focus its priorities by investing at the local and regional level where it is better able to connect directly to Canadians, to better reflect these communities both to themselves and to the rest of the country. CBC/Radio-Canada's long-term sustainability is only feasible through building its support and relevance across the country.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton City Council passed motions in 2004 and 2006 in support of local media diversity and encouraging a CBC presence in the City. Additionally, Council made written and in person interventions to the CRTC on a number of occasions including in 2006, 2009, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Hamilton area NDP Members of Parliament sent a letter to CBC President Hubert Lacroix in December 2013 calling on the national broadcaster to provide commensurate local service to Hamilton, as it does elsewhere in the country, including via a radio station and through digital media options.

<sup>3</sup> The Your CBC Hamilton survey was conducted by the Centre for Community Study in 2014. It was part a community driven effort to improve CBC service to Hamilton.

<sup>4</sup> Examples include the BCE/Astral deal in 2013, where BCE was to divest of radio stations (97.3 and 93.5 FM) in the region. See Greg O'Brien's CARTT article from Aug 16, 2013, <https://cartt.ca/cbc-says-it-cant-purchase-a-toronto-radio-station-to-serve-hamilton/>.

<sup>5</sup> CBC expands local and regional news coverage across Canada. November 12, 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/cbc-expands-local-and-regional-news-coverage-across-canada-1.7381119>

<sup>6</sup> Email correspondence with CBC's Senior Managing Director, CBC Ontario Region, dated May 28, 2024.