

22577 We will now hear the presentation of First Mile Connectivity Consortium who is appearing by Skype.

22578 Welcome.

22579 MR. McMAHON: Yes, hello. Good afternoon. Can everyone hear me?

22580 THE SECRETARY: Yes, we can hear you clearly.

22581 Please introduce yourself and you may begin.

PRESENTATION

22582 MR. McMAHON: Okay. Great, thank you.

22583 I'm getting a little bit of echo so apologies if sometimes I have a little -- okay, it's gone now. It was just on the speaker there.

22584 So good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission. My name is Rob McMahon and I represent the First Mile Connectivity Consortium and also work as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the First Nations Innovation project at the University of New Brunswick.

22585 We do thank the Commission for the opportunity to speak today and also to appear by Skype remotely, which of course is a key concern for the members of the communities and organizations that we work with.

22586 The First Mile Connectivity Consortium is an independent not-for-profit national association. Our members are First Nation and Inuit broadband service providers and our associate members are researchers and other interested parties. Our work focuses on developing digital infrastructure and services with and in Indigenous, remote and rural communities.

22587 Our common interest is in showcasing how digital infrastructures and services, including television content, can be leveraged to support economic and community development. Along with highlighting innovations at the First Mile, we also research barriers to such work. The First Mile approach confronts the telecommunications industry's references to "last-mile" challenges to establish equitable, scalable and affordable broadband connectivity in remote communities. It is about working directly with communities to secure the resources they require to be economically and socially contributing members of society.

22588 During these hearings, the Commission raised questions regarding the production and distribution of local and Canadian content. Indigenous organizations can help address this issue. Many are already involved in producing and distributing locally, regionally, culturally and/or linguistically specific digital media. These organizations support a diversity of channels and programming. They provide residents with opportunities to be compensated for their creative work and to work as administrators and technicians of services and infrastructure.

22589 Such activities also contribute to economic development efforts to circulate revenues inside communities. The First Mile website highlights more than 80 of these projects across Canada. Today, we will provide four examples.

22590 In Atlantic Canada, the First Nations Help Desk and Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey launched The Red Road Project in 2012. The "Red Road" refers to being on the right path in life and in harmony with the Creator. This project invites First Nations youth to produce and share digital media on the dangers of substance abuse. Importantly, these videos are then distributed over local and regional digital networks operated by Indigenous service providers. The Red Road project remains vibrant today, over two years later, with new content contributed on a regular basis.

22591 In Quebec, the First Nations Education Council established Permanent Studios as a means for their 22 member communities to produce and distribute digital media. Along with creating short films, Permanent Studios provides training opportunities at studios in Wemotaci and Kitcisakik, and through mobile workshops that focus on remote communities. Permanent Studios has produced 11 films created by young filmmakers from the Atikamekw, Anicinabe and Innu nations. Teachers also use these videos as resources in their classrooms.

22592 In Nunavut, the Cannes Film Festival award-winning IsumaTV production unit established the Digital Indigenous Democracy network. This project provides low-bandwidth communities with opportunities to access high-definition digital media housed on local servers and connected to community TV and radio channels. This system also supports interaction among viewers through social media and other channels.

22593 IsumaTV's network allows people facing limited and costly satellite bandwidth to access a local library of 5,000 films and videos in more than 50 oral Indigenous languages at no added cost in terms of bandwidth.

22594 Finally, the Wawatay Native Communications Society, founded in Northwestern Ontario in 1974, has since grown to incorporate a range of media production and distribution services, including for digital content. Wawatay's print, radio, TV and digital content is presented in Ojibway, Oji-Cree, Cree and English languages. It reaches more than 30,000 Aboriginal people in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and Treaty 3 area of Ontario over terrestrial and satellite networks, including systems developed and managed by Indigenous service providers including KO-KNET.

22595 However, despite all their promise, these First Mile initiatives face substantial barriers. The first is access to stable and secure funding. So all four of these projects must cobble together funding from disparate sources, including private sector organizations, various government departments and subscriptions from users. In the words of Wawatay's acting Executive Director:

"We are one of the many small Aboriginal content producers that would not survive in a market-driven environment".

22596 That is because small, dispersed and isolated communities are not attractive markets for private sector investment and therefore public sector funding and other supports are required.

22597 In the area of digital content, distribution, infrastructure and services, this might include access to funding distributed by the Commission, such as the National Contribution Fund for the provision of telecommunications in high-cost service areas.

22598 The second barrier is technical. Without affordable and accessible links to transport networks, these organizations cannot develop and deliver local content. As the Commission recognizes, Canadians are increasingly using platforms like Internet-based video and mobile services to access broadcast content. We are concerned that limited and expensive infrastructure and services restrict the ability of Indigenous peoples to produce and access broadcast programming.

22599 We have already pointed out the need for reliable and affordable bandwidth in our interventions in CRTC 2012-669, the Northwest Modernization Plan, and CRTC 2014-44, the Satellite Inquiry, and we note that this access is also critical in this proceeding. This issue will only become more important as producers and distributors increasingly rely on emerging applications like streaming video, cloud computing and support for mobile devices.

22600 The third barrier and final barrier we will talk about today is the lack of participation in digital policy and regulation. We do thank the Commission for the opportunity to present in these and other hearings, but we do emphasize that the process of digital regulation can and should engage affected communities.

22601 As the examples above demonstrate, community organizations are capable of local innovation and can work with regional organizations to partner with public and private sector groups. However, they require voice in decisions regarding the funding programs that shape their activities and it is our opinion that Indigenous and northern communities are best positioned to articulate how public sector funding is used to support their development needs and therefore should be provided substantial opportunities to do so.

22602 We also note that we received several expressions of support for our intervention beyond the four organizations highlighted today. For example, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network told us that our proposal is very compelling for its constituent communities and noted that it seeks to start filling a gap identified by Aboriginal Peoples, communities and APTN in the past.

22603 In conclusion, as we have shown today residents of Indigenous, remote and rural communities are limited in their ability to produce and access digital broadcast programming. The production and distribution of digital media can be led by community-based organizations in partnership with the private and public sector, but provided the appropriate supports are in place.

22604 We believe this process can contribute to a Canadian broadcast system that reflects the special place of Aboriginal peoples in society. We thank the Commission for the opportunity to present today and are pleased to answer any questions you may have.

22605 Thank you.

22606 THE CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much for that presentation.

22607 Commission Simpson will start us off. Thanks.

22608 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: Thank you very much.

22609 I guess I would like to start with asking you for more information regarding section 5 of your oral presentation.

22610 You said that:

"During these hearings, the Commission raised questions regarding the production and distribution of local and Canadian content. Indigenous organizations can help address this issue."

22611 Now, you went on to cite several examples of what is being done, but in a more global context what did you mean by that: Indigenous organizations can help us address this issue of producing Canadian content?

22612 MR. McMAHON: Well, I think as well -- sorry, I'm getting a little bit of feedback -- producing and distributing, so in that sense that in a lot of these remote northern communities there in fact isn't robust infrastructure available right now. So I was trying to draw that link that in an area of convergence, at a time of convergence in the sense of distribution and content, that these types of organizations often may begin in one area and then filter into the other.

22613 For example, IsumaTV began as a content producer, now it has generated its own locally based distribution method.

22614 Or in a case like Permanent Studios with the First Nations Education Council, it began on the distribution side and then started producing.

22615 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: So taking the two categories apart, production and distribution, my limited knowledge of what has been happening in rural communities has been the creation of Aboriginally controlled, for the sake of argument, infrastructure, the broadband infrastructure that will take something off of the satellite for example and distribute it throughout the community using a variety of means, including line of sight and fibre and the like. So that is the distribution side that you are referencing, that type of model?

22616 MR. McMAHON: Yes, in the sense of so you would have a point of presence in a community, so some kind of bulk bandwidth, whether terrestrial or satellite, would enter into a point at the community and then get redistributed locally, similar to a community radio station or television station.

22617 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: Yes. So given that this kind of concept is happening, and it's good because it's self-actualized, you know, the communities are taking their limitations -- it's almost like living under a very large power line and being able to figure out how you can tap into it and get it into your community.

22618 But given that this is happening already, as part of your presentation are you saying that more funding is needed for that or are you keeping your funding requests and observations strictly designated to the production side? I wasn't quite clear.

22619 MR. McMAHON: No. Sure, yes.

22620 Well, we highlighted -- okay. So in terms of the funding what we saw was -- even looking at these four examples, right now for the production side it's a very disparate, so these community-based organizations are applying to things like the Canadian Media Fund, but also to places like Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Canadian Heritage, so it is very -- I would say that is a barrier in the sense of it's hard to map that landscape, but where these kind of funding opportunities for producers are available.

22621 We see similar things on the distribution side, of course that will be an issue that we may raise at a different hearing more focused on the broadband distribution telecommunications side.

22622 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: Yes. Well, it's just that -- I'm no expert on the funding side of things, but that whole area lies well outside of the scope of this hearing and possibly even well outside of our reach in trying to influence or suggest or create conditions for building more of these type of systems. I'm glad that you realized that there are other telecom processes upcoming that can better address that.

22623 So let's just stick with the production side, if you don't mind.

22624 MR. McMAHON: Sure. Could I just add one point to that, though, because I just wanted to raise that if we look to the history of the APTN, Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, in the 1980s and '90s, the CRTC and government did have a strong role there in articulating a northern broadcasting strategy, a policy statement as well as the northern native broadcast access program. So actually APTN, Wawatay, a lot of these native communication societies and then leading right up to the national aboriginal broadcaster had their kind of basis in similar questions around production and distribution.

22625 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: Yes. But I was just trying to make an observation that from the pure money side there are other agencies CanNor through other northern programs and, as you correctly identified, Heritage, and so on, that better address the actual sources of money for that kind of initiative.

22626 But on the production side, first off I'm pleased that you are acknowledging that APTN is making strides in this area. That has been, at least my impression, that they are working harder to reach deeper into the smaller communities and more specific areas of need and interest in program production, but of course, you know, they can't do it all.

22627 So I'm curious as to in section 11 where you are saying that one of the prime areas of concern -- and we are not surprised, we hear this all the time -- is access to secure funding.

22628 Where is the funding for the kind of projects you have referenced in your presentation today coming from now? Where is it coming from now?

22629 MR. McMAHON: Yes. So now it is from very disparate sources. So you get Canadian Heritage, you get the Canadian Media Fund. So from the production side it would be from those areas.

22630 Similar kind of multi-sources from the distribution side or the broadband infrastructure side.

22631 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: Well, you are confusing me here, because first you are saying that they are coming from the predictable sources of the Canadian Media Fund and Heritage, but then you swing over to a telecom example. Sorry, we live in compartments.

22632 MR. McMAHON: I'm sorry.

22633 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: We live in compartments in this world here.

22634 MR. McMAHON: Yes.

22635 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: But I'm trying to identify where the existing sources of money are coming from now that helps me better understand the rationale for your argument that there is either not enough money in those funds by apportionment or whether because of that new funds are required.

22636 That's again outside of the scope of what we are doing here at the hearing, but you are bringing the issue to the fore and that's important.

22637 So talk to me about existing funding sources, deficiencies and whether or not you are looking for a new fund or funding, which are quite different.

22638 MR. McMAHON: Okay, I see what you're saying.

22639 So right now in terms of existing funding, like as well as sort of those sources you had talked about --

22640 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: For production, yes.

22641 MR. McMAHON: For production, yes, Canadian Heritage, these sort of things, and as well Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. I think it's very much -- like it's --

22642 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: It's all over the place.

22643 MR. McMAHON: Yes. That's kind of the point I think I was stressing. I'm more involved on the distribution side so I would have to do more -- I would be happy to do more directed research on that type of --

22644 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: Well, yes. Because as our Chair is fond of saying, this is an evidenced-based hearing and when you come forward with a suggestion, what we operate on is -- the grist for our mill is the data that we can churn and see hard evidence that allows us to make recommendations.

22645 So let me move to the third part, which is the third barrier, because the second is technical and I told you that's out of scope.

22646 The third barrier is the lack of participation in digital policy and regulation.

22647 Now, you are saying -- I can see you saying a lack of policy with respect to aboriginal content or aboriginal productions, but when you say lack of participation in digital policy and regulation, would you unpack that for me, please?

22648 MR. McMAHON: Yes, sure. And I think things are getting better in this sense. Like for example the CRTC, in instating a technical means to participate, for example using things like Skype or videoconferencing and that sort of thing, but I think historically there have been some challenges there that are linked into that lack of availability of the infrastructures.

22649 COMMISSIONER SIMPSON: And what you are really asking for is, you're saying that your constituency would like to come to the table during the decision-making process to be able to better lay out the need and the value that would be given.

22650 But again, this is not a funding exercise that we're doing here in the hearing, what we are trying to do is look at the existing distribution system.

22651 So I guess with that I'm finished my questions.

22652 Thank you.

22653 MR. McMAHON: Thanks.

22654 THE CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much, Commissioner Simpson.

22655 So thank you for participating in our hearing through Skype, a very informative presentation. Thank you very much.

22656 MR. McMAHON: Okay. Thank you.

22657 LA PRÉSIDENT : Madame la Secrétaire...?

22658 LA SECRÉTAIRE : Merci. I will now ask, Mr. John Roman to come to the presentation table.

--- Pause