



Avis de recherche searches for hope

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Story and photos by Steve Faguy

MONTREAL — Vincent Geracitano runs the gamut of emotions describing the future of his television channel: pride, enjoyment, worry, but mostly anger about how it's being taken away from him. More than once during an interview with Cartt.ca, he's brought to tears.

When the CRTC made its decisions on mandatory carriage public August 8, it denied most of the applications from existing or proposed channels seeking the status for the first time, and approved most of the applications for renewal. Géracitano's channel, Avis de recherche, was the only service with mandatory carriage that had its renewal denied. And he doesn't understand why.

Avis de recherche is a channel that provides public safety information in Quebec. It airs notices of missing and wanted people, and produces news shows and information capsules in cooperation with emergency services. Géracitano, whose previous job was owning a small business that produced images on metal plates, got the idea for it in 1999, when he had video of people trying to break into his office for a second time and the police told him they couldn't do anything with it because it wasn't interesting enough for the local news.

In 2002, Géracitano got a licence for a television channel devoted to broadcasting notices from police, no matter how old or unexciting. It launched on Oct. 21, 2004, and rather than seeking a subscriber fee, Géracitano paid Videotron to distribute the channel to its digital subscribers. It cost him two cents per month per subscriber, going up to five cents by 2008. Times more than 750,000 digital subscribers, that worked out to almost \$40,000 a month just for carriage on Videotron.

His business model was based on sponsorship from the business community, who he figured would want to be associated with a service that provides a public service and helps fight crime. But, as he discovered, the opposite was true. Advertisers didn't want to see their logo next to pictures of wanted criminals. On top of that, its regional nature meant national advertisers weren't interested, and its negligible ratings meant that "agencies won't propose us because they wouldn't make enough money from commissions," Géracitano said.

In July 2007, the CRTC granted ADR mandatory carriage on digital cable in Quebec. After objections from distributors, including Videotron, the government took the unusual step of asking the Commission to reconsider the decision, but in January 2008 the CRTC upheld the order. As of Jan. 24, 2008, instead of having to pay five cents a month per subscriber, ADR would receive six cents. Géracitano, who had mortgaged both his home and his parents' home to keep the channel running, spent most of the first year just paying off outstanding debt to Videotron. After that, the channel expanded from mugshot slides to original programming.

It currently employs 16 people, 10 of whom are journalists. In the office, the journalists referred to casually as "the girls" because all but one of them are young women. "Anything that has to do with public safety has its place here," Géracitano explained, stressing that it's expanded far beyond mugshots. It produces a live daily show out of a studio giving news about police activity, and other news and information programs shot by its journalists.

Because it's not an entertainment channel, ADR doesn't have high ratings. In fact, it's within BBM Canada's margin of error, which is why it doesn't subscribe to the measurement service. This was a key point against it at the CRTC hearing. Broadcasting vice-chair Tom Pentefountas, who led the Commission's questioning, asked if the channel is useful if people don't actually watch it.

Géracitano doesn't believe in that line of reasoning. He pointed to CPAC, APTN and other channels with

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mandatory carriage that also have small viewership but provide a public service. He pointed out most people pay little attention to it most of the time, except when they need it. "If it's a member of your family (that's missing), you're sure as hell glad that the service exists," he said. He said he doesn't expect people to watch his channel

for hours at a time, but maybe just a few minutes a day.



Even the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, a consumer-focused interest group that opposed most demands for mandatory carriage, [agreed](#) that ADR and its English-language version All Points Bulletin were essential services and deserved it. (APB, which is licensed but unlaunched, was denied mandatory carriage in 2007, and again this month.)

"Canadians now have access to a whole new set of broadband-based technologies that did not exist when Avis de Recherche obtained mandatory distribution in 2007," the Commission said in its decision,

reasoning that those technologies were helpful in "a more effective and efficient manner than a linear television channel." It also said the ADR couldn't demonstrate it was "unique and complementary to existing programming" or that it had "concrete success indicators such as increased security of Canadian communities."

Géracitano said it's hard to measure the channel's success because reports are not fed through ADR. Instead, the channel broadcasts contact information for police departments directly, and he doesn't often get feedback from them about where their tips come from. However, there are some cases he can point to where ADR made an impact: a car thief in Assomption and a bank robber on Montreal's south shore were caught because viewers saw their mugshots on TV; A 35-year-old missing child case reopened as a result of ADR's attention; a dead body identified after ADR broadcast a police reconstruction of his face; and a child taken to Mexico by his mother, who was allowed to see his father again after ADR publicized the case.

The biggest ace in the hole presented to the CRTC was the statistic that 34% of RCMP cases broadcast on the channel were solved because of it. The e-mail Géracitano used as evidence of this actually says that 57 of 168 tips the RCMP received from ADR since 2009 contributed significantly to investigations.

Without any reason he can understand behind the denial, Géracitano wonders if there might be some conspiracy against him. He blamed Pentefountas for obsessing over ratings. He also blamed the federal government for muzzling civil servants who wanted to support the channel, including the RCMP and Senator Pierre-Hughes Boisvenu. The period for comment about mandatory carriage came a month after Finance Minister Jim Flaherty [was criticized](#) for writing a letter to the CRTC in support of an application by Durham Radio. In 2012, opponents of the Bell-Astral acquisition complained about letters written by an RCMP detachment in Terrace, B.C., supporting the local Astral-owned television station there in the context of the proposed acquisition.

Géracitano said he understands why ministers can't support him, but said the conflict of interest rule does not apply to non-cabinet MPs, senators or public servants. He said the government should not have prevented them from writing letters of support or even just providing unbiased information on ADR's usefulness.

"If the service was useless, do you think the police would be coming here?" he asked.

With no obvious avenue of appeal at his disposal, Géracitano is going to have to make cuts. The CRTC extended ADR's mandatory carriage until Aug. 31, 2015, to "allow the licensee time to adapt its business plan in light of this change." He's not convinced that's possible, since neither the business community nor police departments nor individual subscribers are eager to spend money to keep this service

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running. And he has to start making cuts now in order to pay off debts faster.

Asked what he can do to save his channel, he shook his head, his eyes growing red and his voice getting quiet.

"What do we do now? I don't know. Fight; try to see what we can do."

Avis de Recherche president Vincent Géracitano, centre, with journalists, from left to right: Josie Simard, Kariane Bourassa, Jessica Leblanc, Nancy Bourgon, Valérie Beaudoin, Andrée-Anne Lavigne and Jessyka Dumolong, and cameraman-editor/director Michel Ciacciarelli, right.

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- CRTC

