

CUTV: Community media balancing the airwaves

Laith Marouf

Note: A version of this chapter was previously published on Laith's personal blog.

Broadcasting live and unedited from the streets during the strike, CUTV (Concordia University Television) gained iconic status as the web channel of the Québec Spring. As the strike grew so too did the popularity of and demand for CUTV's embedded coverage from within the movement, challenging the relevance and often the accuracy of mainstream news reporting about the movement. This chapter offers a first-hand reflective account about how this small campus-based community television station, mostly staffed by first generation immigrants and located in an Anglophone institution, positioned itself to become the image and the voice of the people during this historic moment in Québec history. Following an overview of the mandate and principles of the station, I reflect on my experiences reporting for CUTV and on the station's impact during the movement, particularly in relation to police behaviour. The role within and coverage of the strike by CUTV will be compared to that of the mainstream media with attention to notions of balance and objectivity, social media, citizen media, and freedom of the press.

CUTV policies and campus-community media

The CUTV concept is unique within the Canadian television sector but very familiar in the radio scape. CUTV provides its members—from both Concordia University and local Montreal communities—with access to the knowledge, equipment and space to produce video content that represents them, the communities they belong to and their interests. Our mandate also conceptually and legally positions the station in a separate broadcasting sector as defined by the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC). The CRTC categorizes radio and television stations under three separate licenses. First, public broadcasters, like CBC and Radio-Canada are taxpayer funded and represent a "mainstream bias" or respect for the status quo in their coverage. Second are private or commercial broadcasters, who form the majority of available radio and television programming. These broadcasters follow the editorial positions of their majority shareholders. For instance reports published and broadcast by Québecor owned media outlets repeatedly regurgitate the editorial opinions of CEO Pierre Karl Péladeau, highlighting the political influence of media owners. Ultimately, private broadcasters give us the opinions of financial powers in our societies.

The final category is campus/community broadcasters (C/C), designed to provide alternative programming to that of the commercial and public sectors, through the active involvement of the communities in which stations are located. This category does not exist in many countries and came to being in Canada after a long struggle and largely thanks to a long history of community radio

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broadcasting by and for First Peoples.¹ Understanding this helps explain the rationale for this sector and the significance of CUTV's mandate. Today there are hundreds of C/C stations across the country, and all of them have two objectives at the root of their work: democratization of access to the airwaves and self-representation for underrepresented or misrepresented communities. The CRTC mandates C/C broadcasters to add to the "diversity" of programming available for Canadians and to prioritize local, emerging, and underrepresented communities.

Understanding the CUTV mandate is important in assessing statements made by journalists in the mainstream media throughout the strike that called into question the "objectivity" and "balance" of CUTV and pointed to a supposed bias towards students. Many of us think that in fact CUTV fulfilled all aspects of its mandate in its programming surrounding and live coverage of the #GGI (see glossary). The station trained many student and community members to produce the programming, invested tens of thousands of dollars in equipment and staffing to sustain our coverage, and gave voice to the communities at the heart of the story -- the students and supporters of accessible education. Those who wanted to hear the opinions of government and financial powers on the issue had the chance to hear those opinions through the media produced by the other two sectors. CUTV's greatest success was in breaking the mainstream monopoly over the message, an important milestone for community organizing.

¹ Fairchild, Charles (2001). *Community Radio and Public Culture: Being an examination of media access and equity in the nations of North America*. Cresskill (New Jersey): Hampton Press.

In the beginning . . .

In February 2011, the Concordia Student Union and Graduate Student Association, held a winter general assembly (GA) outdoors, a first in recent memory. The GA, at which the proposed tuition hike was a major topic, had a massive turnout visible from CUTV's balcony and on our cameras recording that day. To CUTV's News Department, significantly increased political engagement among Anglophone students suggested that the situation in the Francophone sector must be even more radicalized. Over the next several months, student organizers and activists built a campaign against tuition hikes, preparing masses of students for a variety of pressure tactics including an unlimited strike. As momentum grew leading up to a national student strike on March 22nd 2012, CUTV saw the need to invest in technology that would help us compensate for our lack of broadcast studios and cable or satellite distribution. With an annual budget equivalent to the production cost of one NFB feature-length documentary, the station worked to maximize every dollar and help students represent their case in French and in English to the rest of society.

By using cutting edge technologies exemplified by the LiveU mobile broadcast unit coupled with high quality internet broadcasting on Livestream, and a very busy social networking presence, the station was able to balance the starting disadvantage it had in relation to licensed and broadcasting television stations. This however, does not fully account for the tremendous number of viewers and effect that the station ultimately had on the #GGI once hundreds of student, community and alternative me-

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dia outlets were on the frontlines and the social sphere. Ultimately it was CUTV's determination to uphold its mandate and the unprecedented amount of content and broadcast hours generated by the station over the span of the seven months that would account for its success.

CUTV timed its first live broadcast to coincide with the mass demonstration on 22nd of March 2012. After a few days of working out the technical kinks of the new LiveU systems, the investment had already started to pay off in viewer numbers by April 4th. That day marked the first time Montréal Police (SPVM) reacted inappropriately to the presence of our "live" broadcasting team. Students on strike had adopted the tactic of nonviolent economic disruption coupled with a war of attrition against policing resources through an overwhelming number of disruptive actions. The morning of April 4th saw two demonstrations happening back to back. CUTV arrived at the second, which started at 8 am. The first demo had entered a buffet at the Royal Victoria Hotel where an illegal attack by a security agent on the demonstrators led to a scuffle before the demonstrators dispersed with no arrests. Meanwhile our cameras followed the second demonstration, as it snaked through the malls and metros downtown and was surrounded by riot police on a small street in the gay village. Our team followed the arrests as they happened, bearing witness to the unnecessary use of force by the SPVM on a non-resisting group of mostly CEGEP students in their late teens.

As our team filmed, a few police officers did not like the prying eye of the media and began to try to remove us from the scene although we were not obstructing their

work and there was no imminent danger. The CUTV team was pushed, jabbed and roughed up by police officers until we were half a block away from the arrests and at the limit of the reach of our camera lens. The police claimed that our team was obstructing their work and that if we did not comply with their requests we would be arrested. Given that at no moment had our team gotten in the way of the police, as the Camera Operator on the scene I believed they were in fact obstructing my work and so I asked to speak to their superiors. I was subsequently detained for 7 hours and charged with obstructing a police officer. I was released with conditional banishment from the downtown core, except for work duties (which involved being in the downtown core more often than not). Eventually, the conditions were dropped and the charges were lessened to a municipal ticket of "loitering" or not circulating on a sidewalk.

The rest of the team had been roughed up but managed to convince the police to give them back the equipment to continue broadcasting. The SPVM then positioned city buses to block the view of all media and proceeded to search and arrest the many students they had kettled. Arriving on the scene late and kept at a distance, several reporters from mainstream media outlets justified the mass kettle by the earlier disruption at the buffet, failing to recognize that there had been two separate demonstrations involving two groups of protesters. Later female arrestees would inform CUTV journalists that they had requested to be searched by female officers and were laughed at by male officers who proceeded to "cup them" and call them "lesbians" and "bitches" in the course of their body searches. The practice of attempting to block

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the view of reporters from the use of force by the SPVM would become a daily recurrence, reaching ridiculous proportions when police officers attempted to block our view by jumping and dancing in front of our cameras during the Formula 1 demonstrations in June 2012.

Day after day our teams broadcasted images of students using non-violent tactics such as using their bodies to block access to buildings, ports, bridges, and roads. And day after day the response from police was extreme violence: batons, pepper spray, tear gas, rubber bullets, concussion grenades and assaults with SPVM bicycles and cars. The intensity of police violence and perseverance by the students in overwhelmingly nonviolent response in front of our cameras, contrasted sharply with the mainstream coverage of the strike portraying the students as hooligans, vandals and the sole source of violence. We believe this mainstream media bias allowed the SPVM to become even more violent, including with independent and even some mainstream journalists. Our teams began to be targeted directly by police use of force and weapons. On April 18th our CUTV flagpole that identifies us to the police and protesters was pulled from our hands and snapped in two by an SPVM officer. On April 20th, the first day of Salon Plan Nord and the intensive protests of it by First Nations and student activists (discussed in Joël Pedneault's chapter in this volume), our team was pepper sprayed and an SPVM officer hit our camera with his baton, breaking a part of the lens.

The first day of the Salon Plan Nord also cemented the importance of CUTV's presence on the ground, not only to the student movement and the viewers who were visi-

ting our internet channel, but for access to information in general. Mainstream television stations began stealing CUTV images with no authorization and using them without accreditation. Some broadcasted our coverage live on their stations, out of context, with pundits spewing propaganda over it. Others went ahead and sold our images on the international wires to make money, for instance Al Jazeera-English and CNN paid the Canadian Press for CUTV images of the demonstrations. This popular success meant that we also became a much-hated opponent of the establishment that now had to deal with an international audience in the midst of a spring of resistance globally. The attacks on CUTV gradually intensified, matching the increase in violence used by the police on the demonstrators.

A May full of May Days

On May 1st, CUTV broadcasted from five separate actions throughout the day, as striking students joined masses of anti-capitalist protesters for the annual May Day demonstrations. It was the first night SPVM officers called our team members by their names and indeed, we too had started to recognize officers by face after two months of demonstrations. This fact is important to note as the month saw increasing police violence against the protesters, civilians and CUTV, and any claim by the SPVM to not recognize the CUTV crew as media was clearly propaganda. Following the mayhem of Salon Plan Nord and May Day, the Québec Liberal Party decided to move its May 4th convention from its planned location in Montréal, to the small town of Victoriaville. Protesting students and a host of other dissatisfied Québeckers followed and so did CUTV.

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From its onset, the Victoriaville demonstration was escorted by a large helicopter flying at a height no more than 20 meters; a tactic that could only be explained as intimidation.. As protesters breached the police barrier outside of the convention centre and the "battle of Victoriaville" unfolded, CUTV reporters witnessed a man collapse after being shot in the back of the head with a rubber bullet by police. Some demonstrators guided our live team to the scene where medics had requested an ambulance that was being blocked by the Sûreté du Québec (SQ). The SQ refused to allow the ambulance through, although the crowds had cleared a space for the vehicle. Instead, the provincial police continued to rain tear gas around the unconscious man and the medics for 20 minutes before finally allowing the ambulance to evacuate the injured young man. The night ended with several protesters seriously injured. For the second time, a student protester lost an eye as a result of police violence (the first having been earlier in the spring in Montréal), and dozens of protesters were arrested in their busses returning to Montréal.

Many night demonstrations in Montreal later, on May 16th Premier Jean Charest proposed Bill 78, a Special Law, that would limit the right to demonstrate and financially penalize anyone, including labour unions, who supported non-sanctioned demonstrations. That night, tens of thousands of protesters filled Place Émilie Gamelin, forever remembered as the starting location of the "Manif chaque soir, jusqu'à la victoire!" (a demonstration every night until victory). As the nightly demonstrations gained momentum, the police repeatedly launched battles against protesters downtown, frequently attacking CUTV teams including three pepper-spray assaults in one night.

Despite the public outcry against it Bill 78 was voted in as Law 12 on May 18th. Masses of people defiantly took to the streets and the police violence continued. In a night demo on the 19th, our team filmed police as they attacked a non-violent female demonstrator and threatened another demonstrator in a wheelchair. Police retaliated by throwing our broadcast technician to the ground and disconnecting our cables. Later that night, the battle on a busy downtown street lasted for hours during which police entered bars looking for protesters and indiscriminately pepper sprayed and tear gassed patrons, and a bonfire was started at an intersection by some of the demonstrators. When Montréal fire fighters arrived at the scene to put out the fire demonstrators cleared way for them, but the SPVM requested that the trucks leave and then informed the media that the fire fighters had left because projectiles had been thrown at them. This false report was repeated without question by mainstream media outlets, even though the fire fighters refused to confirm the SPVM story and our broadcast showed demonstrators helping the fire fighters do their job.

The following night, the SPVM declared the night demonstration illegal even before it started, and for the first time SPVM officers verbally threatened the CUTV team that we would be treated as demonstrators if we did not stop our work. In the next several minutes, SPVM officers almost drove over our team with a patrol car and then attacked us and our camera with their batons and shields. The camera lens was broken but the broadcast was not interrupted. Minutes later in another confrontation in a back alley two blocks away from demonstrators SPVM officers attacked our team, damaging our sound transmit-

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ters and causing our journalists to be separated from the camera operator. In the confusion of trying to regroup, we spotted the SPVM Commander of Operations standing alone at his pickup truck. Live on our broadcast, I asked him if he had given the order to attack our teams four times, he said "No." When I asked who gave the order and if he would order his troops to leave us alone, he replied by threatening to charge me with inciting a riot if I did not move along! I continued moving and found the rest of the team. We were attacked one more time by the SPVM before the end of the night. I woke up the next morning with pain and swelling in my ribs. The doctors confirmed I had suffered two fractured ribs in the police attacks the night before.

Casseroles demonstrations began on May 18th following the passing of Law 12 but really became the next tactic of the movement after the kettling and mass arrest of over 400 non-violent demonstrators live on CUTV on May 23rd. That night as the demonstration reached an intersection, protestors were met by two lines of SPVM officers, one blocking the direction south, another blocking west. We approached a police line to get a better shot, separating our crew from the demonstrators so we could be easily identified as media. A group of five riot police from the line blocking the west rushed our team from behind, running between our members while pepper spraying and smashing our equipment and bodies with their batons. This was directly followed by another attack from officers blocking the south direction, using their batons and shields as weapons. We were effectively pushed east where yet another line of SQ officers had formed and were closing the kettle on the demonstrators.

We called our lawyers and informed them that we were being arrested with the demonstrators and they contacted the SPVM. The on-site commander of operations that night received a call from his superiors to release us. First he extracted our Station Manager, Laura Kneale, from the kettle, and told her that she would be released but could face charges later. The commander then called to me, and live on our broadcast asked that I turn off the microphones and camera if I wanted to be released or that I would be charged as a demonstrator. At that point I lost my temper and told him that I would not comply and demanded he let me walk out of the kettle and do my job of filming the scene. He walked away and ordered the officers processing Laura to arrest her. A few seconds later his superiors, watching our live feed on their large screen at headquarters, called the commander on his cell phone. I would love to have heard that conversation, and I imagine it must have gone something like this: "You have made the SPVM look like tyrants that attack the media! Release them before you cause any more harm!" The commander returned and told the two police officers arresting Laura: "Release this piece of shit, she is a journalist." He then motioned to his riot squad to release the rest of our team.

The next night (May 24th), casseroles demonstrations erupted throughout the city. It could be argued that this marked the actual defeat of the PLQ and of the use of police force and violence to attempt to control the population. SPVM spokespersons declared they were unable to deal with the overwhelming number of protests across the island. The month of May can thus be understood as the most crucial time in the struggle to defeat then-PLQ leader Jean Charest and his austerity measures. The fact

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the students intensified their actions and increased their numbers as a response to the escalation of State repression ultimately inspired the broader Québec population. The number of CUTV viewers during the month reached upwards of 10,000 simultaneous viewers and 100,000 unique visitors over the course of one day. Sometimes the station was out broadcasting for eight hours consecutively, contributing to over 90 hours of live broadcast of the Québec Spring in May alone. This translated into unprecedented access to the voice of the people, with thousands of interviews conducted by, for and about the community. The bond between the station and its communities was solidified with people seeing themselves and their struggles represented on our screens. When the station started reaching its financial limits and made an on-air call for donations the response was overwhelming: within a span of five weeks with no promotion campaign, viewers raised \$70,000 for CUTV, covering all costs of the #GGI broadcasts for the whole six months.

The extraordinary attention CUTV was receiving led to a clear echo effect for the coverage, as viewers reacted to and interacted with the scenes on our feed. Protestors started telling us "I wanted to know where the demo was so I checked your channel", or "I saw police hitting you and I had to come to help." Labour unions also began donating money to CUTV, and professionals in the field of media and technologies started contacting CUTV to volunteer their help. Professional camera operators from the major Québec networks volunteered with us, despite some being threatened by their employers in attempts to force them to stop. Help and collaboration on technology and internet operations flourished; Québec based web de-

velopment collective Koumbit offered immediate help in the months of March and April when two upgrades to our servers were required to keep up with the traffic to our site. Later in May, Koumbit's servers crashed because of the unprecedented numbers of hits to our site reaching thousands a minute, prompting the collective to request special permission for unlimited traffic to our site from their own larger provider. Many other collaborations happened, but none was as impressive as with <http://manifencours.diametrick.com>, a site that tracked demonstrations in real time superimposed on a map of downtown Montréal that included a tracking location for CUTV's live camera.

The long stretch to victory

The passing of Law 12 was intended, among other things, to stop the demonstrations before the beginning of the Montreal festival season, marked by the flow of tourists arriving to watch the Formula 1 Grand Prix race on the first weekend of June. Instead, persistent protestors, the closure of several downtown streets for the event, and thousands of tourists exposed the "special law" and its enforcement through police brutality. With our cameras rolling, the government's strategy backfired under the scrutiny of international audiences. On June 7th, our team filmed an aggressive police intervention against the protestors attempting to disrupt a Grand Prix fundraiser lunch featuring \$1000 plates in the historically working class neighbourhood of Little Burgundy. Again our team was threatened with arrest if they did not stop filming, but it was later that day when CUTV was faced with the most shocking situations that our station had to deal with in the six months of the #GGI.

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Our team was at the Formula-1 celebrations on Crescent Street when demonstrators showed up to make their cause known to visitors. On site was our newly hired News Director Aaron Lakoff and veteran CUTV reporter Sabine Friesinger. First, Aaron received his "baptism by fire" live on CUTV when police officers grabbed him from the crowds of F-1 revellers without cause or warning and slammed him to the ground, detaining him for several minutes before letting him go. Later on, Sabine noticed a man attempting to put something in our broadcast technician's backpack and tried to stop him. When she confronted him, the man responded by screaming: "She has a rock!" He began to grab her, and then ran behind a line of SPVM officers who stopped our team from pursuing him. The man escaped and officers on the scene refused to investigate the incident. CUTV believes that the man was an undercover agent tasked with planting the rock in our equipment in an attempt to delegitimize CUTV journalists as provocateurs.

In the months of June and July, CUTV's coverage diversified along with the array of tactics used by the movement. In addition to nightly demos that continued until the last days of the Charest government, CUTV broadcast from Nude demos (see glossary), symphony concerts for the #GGI, a Ninjas vs. Pirates masquerade demo, a Tattoo-a-thon, and a Parents' manifestation. We broadcast from a demonstration in Vermont that followed Charest to the New England and Eastern Canada Governors and Premiers Summit and, through the use of Skype-enabled reporting, from the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development where Charest was followed by Québec protestors who were joined by the Brazilian

students in a demonstration. The station's territory of operations spanned not only across all of Québec but for the first time crossed international borders. On June 22nd, the station organized a three-location broadcast from studio and the streets of both Montréal and Québec City.

In August, CUTV filmed the forced return to school under Law 12 from multiple locations, beginning in the early morning hours. The number of actions planned at various CEGEP and University campuses surpassed the capacity of our equipment and crews to cover. At this time, the station also began getting more involved in the debates around the provincial elections that had been called for September 4th. In collaboration with the Fédération des Femmes du Québec (Québec Women's Federation), the station aired the first national debate on women and gender issues in full broadcast quality. That was followed by CUTV's broadcast of the only English language debate between candidates in the most contentious election since the 1996 referendum (see glossary). Finally, CUTV marked election day with coverage from a benefit night titled "the Red Show" featuring all of the mascots of the #GGI: Anarchopanda, Bananarchy, the Rabbit Crew, and others. During this time, the station also launched and maintained a live weekly news show to answer to growing need for more in-depth analysis.

A fitting ending

Election night 2012 saw two firsts: the first woman elected Premier of Québec and an assassination attempt during the Premier-elect's acceptance speech. The perpetrator was allegedly motivated by Anglophone Canadian

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nationalism, and watching the mainstream media coverage of the incident served to highlight the very conditions that can cultivate such hatred. It is here that comparing perspectives presented by the mainstream media and by CUTV during the movement really underscores the power and responsibility that comes with mass media. In the late spring as the #GGI and its vision of social justice became an unavoidable point of national discussion, Canadian and Québécois media outlets began framing the core issue as a dichotomy between Québec separatism and Québec exceptionalism. This attempt to whip up nationalist fervour in both the Anglophone and Francophone communities was designed to discredit and distract from the alternatives presented in the social justice model of the #GGI.

Watching CUTV's coverage of the movement must have been frightening to the Québec and Canadian elite not only because of the quality of the coverage, but because CUTV covered and was part of a movement that was giving people hope for a better world based on social justice. A station staffed by many people of colour, based at an Anglophone university had become the voice of the Québécois peoples' movement. Everyday on our screens the monolith of Québec identity politics carefully constructed over centuries by elites was being shattered. On a daily basis you could see Québécois carrying the patriot flag shouting "Thank you CUTV" in English, while Anglo-Montréalais identified as Québécois and visitors from Alberta apologized for not speaking French. Voices of Indigenous people were amplified along with those of immigrants and racialized communities, and common struggles brought a diverse range of people to better understandings of one another and of the province and country that we live in.

CUTV's embedded coverage of the Québec movement continued officially until the September 22nd national demonstration, marking 6 months of almost daily broadcasts. The phenomenal success of CUTV and its coverage must first and foremost be attributed to the perseverance of the movement and people — including staff and volunteers of CUTV — who made resisting oppression the top story everyday. Beyond that, the station succeeded in utilizing the best technologies in the field while upholding a community media mandate that enticed viewers to identify with the message without compromising for production quality. In the age of social media and masses of people uprising against neoliberalism, the station managed to wield the power of both. The station produced an unbelievable amount of material on the #GGI, with over 500 hours of content that documented the opinions of tens of thousands of people on one issue, amounting to the most complete anthropological video archive of any modern movement. CUTV's original programming on the #GGI, competing with the combined output of mainstream television channels on the issue, was arguably the most crucial reason that the government lost control of the message and the movement succeeded in becoming popular.