

CTV's survival threatened by staff cuts, expert says

BY JOHN HASLETT CUFF
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“THE VERY survival of Canada's only private national television news service” is being threatened by recent budget cuts and layoffs at the CTV network, said Peter Desbarats, one of the contributors to the Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force report on broadcasting. “From my knowledge of CTV I know that it is a bare-bones kind of news operation, there is no fat. It's a national scandal that they have so few foreign bureaus, and (if they close more) you're looking at something that is starting to rapidly lose credibility as a news service,” said Desbarats, who is head of the school of journalism at the University of Western Ontario and a veteran of both CBC and Global television.

Last Friday CTV reportedly laid off a number of senior news staff, including Ottawa correspondent Bob Evans, Canada AM's Wally Macht, W5 co-host Helen Hutchinson and international assignment editor Barry Barnett. A number of other employees have been given their notice or re-assigned and more cuts are expected, according to several sources at the network who said it was a “fireable offence” to talk to the media.

Sources also say the network plans to close its bureaus in Beijing and Quebec City and is considering closing bureaus in Winnipeg and Jerusalem.

“The largest private news service in the country is in danger of becoming weak and insignificant. Our daily news service is going to become overly dependent on American feeds. Soon we'll be taking all our foreign news from American sources,” lamented one producer at the network.

None of the employees who were notified last Friday seem certain of

their status. “I knew the minute I got the call what it was about, but technically we're all still on salary. Everybody involved has a lawyer,” said one source. “The pattern that seems to be emerging is that they're aiming at the older reporters; most of them are at a pensionable age,” the source added.

“It's all being done in a quick, panicky way, because of the imminent CRTC decision (on the network's licence renewal) on CTV,” theorized another source in the network. “Maybe that's why the axe fell as quickly and bloodily as it did ... (but) they are not telling these people whether they are fired, or laid off or retired early — or what the terms of the settlement are. They are leaving people with long years of service to the network, twisting in the wind.”

A senior executive at the network, who asked that his name not be used, denied that any cuts had been made. “The bottom line is that it has been grossly overstated. No decisions have been made and we're approaching the (reportedly \$10-million) deficit as best we can. Something may develop and if it does I assure you it won't be anything like what is being reported.”

Doreen Kays, CTV's former Montreal bureau chief who quit the network in January, said she was dismayed by the current cuts but



Peter Desbarats

not surprised. “It's a second-rate network from beginning to end. Even when I was there, morale was low. The network wasn't committed and there was no resources. The bodies were spread thin ... I think it's tragic.”