

THE CANADIAN PRESS **Some fear CanWest might cut Canadian programming after Alliance deal**

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By Lee-Anne Goodman, The Canadian Press

TORONTO - CanWest Global Communications has finally succeeded in its controversial, multibillion-dollar deal to purchase Alliance Atlantis - so what's in it for viewers?

Some observers predict a noticeable decrease in the years to come in quality Canadian programming, something CanWest already does a poor job of producing.

Under terms of the deal, CanWest is committing just \$136.6 million over seven years to Canadian programming - a disturbingly paltry sum, Liss Jeffrey, director of the McLuhan Global Research Network at the University of Toronto, said Thursday.

"That is absolutely outrageous," she said, expressing dismay that the CRTC trumpeted the CanWest commitment as it approved the deal.

"We know historically that CanWest has always come in very low on money for Canadian programming. They are the worst, and this is just more of the same. And the CRTC is congratulating them for this? I just think this whole deal is bad on so many levels, including for Canadian viewers."

CanWest's Barb Williams couldn't be reached for comment on Thursday.

For \$2.3 billion, CanWest Global acquires 13 specialty channels, which include Showcase and HGTV, owned by Alliance Atlantis.

Ian Morrison of the Canadian content watchdog Friends of Canadian Broadcasting said that under the terms of CanWest's deal to purchase Alliance, the country's largest media company has four years to improve its bottom line and cut costs. In 2011, a new company will be created amalgamating Canwest and Alliance assets.

"There are only two things CanWest can control. They can be smarter in Hollywood and buy better American shows, because they've been taken to the cleaners by CTV on that front," he said.

"They can also cut spending on Canadian programming. We've seen it in the past few months on the news side, with employees being offered buyouts. We can see that kind of thing happening, shaving costs in news, shaving costs in Canadian entertainment programming . . . we fear the deal gives them an incentive to squeeze their Canadian programming."

Greg Elmer, media professor at Ryerson University, says the changes resulting from the CanWest-Alliance deal won't be obvious to viewers at first.

"They won't notice much in the next six months because it takes that long for anything to shake down, for realignments to happen and for programming decisions to change," he said.

But in the months to come, Elmer predicts, viewers can expect a litany of cross-promotion.

"The first thing they'll start to see is the need to advertise and promote to Canadians this new media entity and urging them to look at all these different things that are coming up," he said.

"They have to get the word out, but it does take time and resources away from programs and news outlets. An erosion in serious journalism in favour of promotional content is a definite possibility."

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