

## **CABLE PROBLEMS: what individual recourse is there for Canadian consumers?**

*Executive summary*  
June 2015

Despite the rise of over-the-top television services, the cable and satellite television (hereinafter “cable”) industry is flourishing and far from disappearing in the short term in Canada, one of 10 countries where the percentage of pay television subscriptions is the highest in the world. Television plays an essential role for millions of Canadians (information, entertainment, promotion of national culture, openness to the world, etc.) – even more so for individuals who rarely if ever access the Internet. Inevitably, problems may arise; thus it is important that consumers have access to complaint-resolution services, that those services be accessible and effective, and that they be known to consumers.

The purpose of our study is to analyse complaint-handling services in the cable sector, to determine where consumers can turn if they experience a problem. What problems do consumers experience with cable services? What organizations do they approach, and are they satisfied with how their complaints are handled?

After a general description of the cable market in Canada (definitions, service penetration, popular types of offers, etc.), and then of consumer complaints about those services, our report details the various available services for handling consumer complaints about their cable services.

We examine the internal recourses offered by cable companies, and then those offered by federal organizations likely to receive complaints about the services provided. We also present an overview of recourses available to consumers under provincial laws, as well as an overview of various recourses available abroad, i.e., in the United States, France, Belgium, Australia and the United Kingdom, with regard to those services.

In addition, we discuss the results of consultations with cable companies and with federal and provincial organizations that receive complaints about that sector, along with the results of a telephone survey of 1,500 Canadians.

Lastly, we examine solutions to ensure that complaint-resolution services offered to consumers with regard to their cable services are accessible and effective.

Our study demonstrates that the recourses available in this sector are inferior to those offered in telecommunications. This is despite a higher penetration rate than that of the Internet and wireless telephones, and equal to that of landline telephones. 24% of respondents to our survey reported having encountered a problem, of whatever nature, with their cable service.

Currently, there is no federal recourse for consumers dissatisfied with the remedies provided by their cable company. Recourses exist of course under provincial laws with respect to contracts

*La force d'un réseau*

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or consumer protection; but this type of recourse generally implies that the consumer goes to court. On the other hand, users of telecommunications services, who have access to the same provincial recourses, also have access to the Commissioner for Complaints for Telecommunications Services (CCTS).

This situation is not unique to Canada. Our comparative study of the situation in various other countries (United States, United Kingdom, Australia, France and Belgium) demonstrates that recourses with regard to cable and telecommunications are generally not centralized within a single organization, and that recourses regarding cable are generally less widespread. Belgium and the United Kingdom are exceptions: in those two countries, consumers can address themselves to a single organization for all complaints about their communications services, which greatly simplifies things and likely makes it easier to publicize available recourses. This approach appears all the more justified given the increasing convergence of communications services, and given the frequent similarities between problems experienced with telecommunications and cable services.

Our analysis of recourses available within companies, both federally and provincially, and of consumer needs has revealed the necessity of establishing a central organization for handling complaints in the cable sector. Questioned on this subject, some companies and the majority of provinces surveyed expressed approval of the idea of adding complaint handling in this sector to the CCTS's mandate.

Based on this research, Union des consommateurs recommends the following most particularly:

- That the federal government regulate the complaint-handling process of cable companies and that the process be uniform, complete, and made known to consumers;
- That the CRTC mandate an independent organization to receive and handle complaints in that sector;
- That the CRTC examine the possibility of entrusting the CCTS with the mandate of handling those complaints.

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French version available.

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