

# TORONTO STAR

## What's so 'Special' about Specialty Channels?

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When the CRTC licenses “Specialty Services,” its intention is to ensure that the channel will run specialized programming. Seems simple enough, but most of the current flock of “specialties” appear to be having problems.

Except for all the old female-dominated reruns on the Women's Television Network, it is nearly impossible to tell WTN's plethora of home, gardening and lifestyle programming apart from the Life Network's. Ditto for science and nature programming on the Discovery Channel and The Learning Channel. No specialization there.

Nearly all of the “specialty” channels also share programming with other stations. TVO is particularly fond of “specialty sharing,” farming out Dudley The Dragon to Showcase and YTV, Pumped to TSN, Imprint to CBC Newsworld, and recently picking up Girl Talk from WTN. CBC Newsworld runs CBC network programming such as Undercurrents, Venture, Street Cents, Newlink and the CBC Morning News. CBC's Man Alive is on the Life Network, and Maclean's TV, hosted by Pamela Wallin, is on both CBC Newsworld and WTN. Another WTN show, Linehan, comes from Hamilton's CHCH. Acorn: The Nature Nut runs on CTV and the Discovery Channel concurrently. The Red Green Show, the multi-channel king, is shown on no fewer than five channels, two of them “specialties.” Originally on CHCH (now ONtv), it currently runs in various incarnations on CKVR (The New VR), Global, PBS and “specialties” YTV and Showcase.

As for the CHUM Group, it has set up its own little private club of program-sharing convenience. CityTV, MuchMusic and Bravo!, the latter two being “specialty” channels, are all housed in the same building and even have the same on-air people, staff and telephone number, which is answered confusingly as “Citytvmuchmusicbravo!” This will undoubtedly become a longer tongue twister as any or all of CHUM's new specialty channel licences come into existence. Rumor has it they are planning to take over another building in the same block, but will they spring for a new phone line and

another receptionist? At least they won't have far to walk for access to the shared program, video and movie libraries.

According to the CRTC, only five specialty channels made any money last year (before tax): MuchMusic, YTV, Bravo!, WTN and The Weather Network. All but the last one share programming with other channels, which might enhance their profit margin but not their status as a “specialty” channel.

Marshall McLuhan said “the medium is the message.” Has that message degraded into one of boring, uninspired repetition and repackaging? What exactly are we, the cable-buying public, getting for all the money we spend? What's next . . . “The Deja Vu Channel?” “You've Seen it Before, Now See it Again . . . and Again . . . and Again . . .”

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