Debates concerning freedom of expression get more frequent as issues dealing with this right increase in politics and in the media. In this paper, I contend that freedom of expression has become such a striking symbol in liberal democracies that offensive, injurious, racist and sexist speech are easily legitimized in the name of freedom of expression. The restrictions established in the law and by the courts (limits of time and of place, limits on libellous speech, on security matters, on pedophilia, and so on) have no concrete meaning for many. Not only are boundaries of illicit speech unclear to most people, but political elites do not condemn or confront those who hide behind freedom of expression to defend their illicit speech in effect endorsing the concept that freedom of expression is an absolute defence no matter how abusive or illicit the speech may be.

This paper deals with trash radio and how the speech heard on its airwaves has been associated with freedom of expression. The case study is CHOI-FM, a radio station from Quebec City whose licence, after having been restricted to only 2-years in 2002, was not renewed in 2004 following many complaints filed at the CRTC. I contend that the very essence of liberal democracy is being used to defend trash radio and all the discursive abuse being heard on this kind of radio. I will explain how the public sphere, an essential place for debating and persuading in democracy, is implicitly referred to by proponents of trash radio who like so-called “lively discussions”. They also exploit the individualism thriving in the consumer society, making believe that all restrictive norms (political, judicial, and so on) on the media are intolerable limits to freedom of expression and must be labelled censorship. Furthermore, the “appeal to the people” frequently used in democracy can easily become a kind of populism when used on trash radio. Those three elements of liberal democracy - the public sphere, individualism and appeal to the people – discourage politicians from
condemning trash radio, as was the case during the 2002-2005 saga of CHOI in Quebec City.

Let’s begin by a short definition of trash radio and a brief overview of the main events about CHOI.

Trash radio, also called “confrontation talk radio”, or “extreme radio” is a variant of talk radio and uses vulgar speech, insults to guests and listeners, pre-recorded noises (such as farts, burps, imitation of sexual sounds and so on) as well as shocking speech. For example, Jean-François Fillion, the morning man of CHOI (in the period 1998-2005), organized a so-called competition of acts of fellatio in the studio. Trash radio thrives on confrontation and shocking speech and the hosts are known as “shock jocks”.

**Brief chronology**:

- 1996: Genex (Patrice Demers) buys CHOI.
- 1998: Jean-François Fillion becomes the morning man of CHOI.
- 1999-2001: 47 complaints filed against the morning show of CHOI at the CRTC.
- 2002: CRTC Public Hearings. License is granted for 2 years instead of 7. A Code of Ethics is adopted and CHOI becomes a member of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC).
- 2003: Fillion’ morning show the most well-liked radio show (with 22.4% of the ratings in the morning and 348 000 listeners overall).
- 2002-2004: 45 complaints filed against CHOI-FM at the CRTC.
- 2004 (Feb.) CRTC very popular colourful hearings for CHOI licence renewal.
- 2004 (April) The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council found that CHOI-FM has breached the provision of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters' *Code of Ethics* (clause 9) which prohibits unduly sexually explicit content on the radio.
- 2004 (July) CRTC refuses to renew CHOI licence. According to the CRTC, radio hosts and especially Jean-François Fillion are blamed for offending, denigrating, non respectful and despicable speech toward mentally handicapped people, for racial slurs, for harassment and ridicule of ordinary people, for violation of privacy, personal attacks, relentless denigration of people without justification and malicious and abusive actions. As for weather host S.C., the CRTC says that...
Fillion has deliberately ridiculed and insulted her, broadcasting offensive remarks on her sexual and physical attributes and suggesting that she was well-liked because of them and was otherwise lacking any talent or intelligence. These remarks were meant to denigrate and belittle S.C. in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, the remarks concerning S.C. encouraged contempt for all women on the ground of sex. Genex appeals to the Federal Appeal Court.

- 2004 (Summer): demonstration of 30,000 in Quebec City and of 3,000 in Ottawa against the CRTC decision.

- 2004 (August) Federal Appeal Court allows CHOI to remain open until the end of the proceedings.

- 2005 (March) Quebec Superior Court proceedings C. c. Fillion.

- 2005 (March 17) Jean-François Fillion is fired.

- 2005 (April): Decision of the Quebec Superior Court: 340,000$ to be granted to S.C. by Genex, Fillion and three of his co-workers for violating her rights to private life and reputation. According to Justice Yves Alain, remarks about S. C. were sexists, malicious, full of hatred, unfounded, offensive and injurious. They undermined dignity, honour and integrity of all human beings and especially of S. C. These remarks were insults and attacks without justification, they showed a lack of respect for any human being. Furthermore, it was understandable that someone hearing them would feel humiliated, lessened, destabilised, a loss of self confidence and become doubtful about their capacities. S. C. legitimately felt sullied as a woman and rightly considered this to be an attack on her physical and professional integrity as well as to her private life.

- 2005 (September) Federal Appeal Court Decision: CRTC decision maintained

- 2006 (October) Genex is sold to Radio Nord with the CRTC approval despite the fact that the licence was not renewed. A seven-year licence is granted to Radio Nord.

- 2007 (June) Supreme Court of Canada: refusal to hear the appeal.

Reactions to CHOI speech

During the summer of 2004, there was a very aggressive debate surrounding the non renewal of the CHOI licence in Quebec City. On the one hand, the very vocal and enthusiastic supporters wore CHOI pins, put bumper stickers on their cars and circulated support petitions in public places to get as many signatures as they could. On the other hand, people happy with the CRTC decision kept quiet, mainly to avoid being harassed.
Part of CHOI sociological success is explained by the support of the “angry young white men” of the lower middle class. CHOI speech is based on confrontation with the State, political parties, unions, civil servants, teachers and professors, feminists, the media, immigrants, homosexuals, Montrealers. The speech of CHOI supporters was not considered political by sociologists Marcoux and Tremblay (who interviewed 144 of them in 2004) because mimicry more than autonomy characterizes these individuals, who use the very same arguments the very same day they are heard on the airwaves, but are incapable of explaining the issues any further. What brings them together is a culture of consumerism that is very actively promoted on CHOI.

Before we study the politicians’ reactions to this affair, a brief look at overall reactions is useful. Reporters without frontiers (RSF), which has no journalist in Quebec City, has condemned the CRTC decision not to renew the CHOI licence. The Federation professionnelle des journalistes du Québec (FPJQ) has deplored the CRTC decision, without supporting the specific use of the airwaves by CHOI. Then FPJQ President, Anne-Marie Dussault, said to a Soleil journalist that she felt like a lawyer for a serial murderer. The Canadian Association of Broadcasters refused to support CHOI. The Federal Minister of Communication Liza Frulla used the arms’ length distance from the CRTC not to intervene. The Quebec Conseil de presse (Press Council) said it was sorry that the CRTC could not intervene in a different manner than the licence non-renewal. A Laval University Professor of communication and a Journal de Montréal journalist said that they wouldn’t want to live in a society where CHOI is silenced. But some other Montreal journalists applauded the CRTC decision. The Globe and Mail as well as the National Post condemned the CRTC decision.

The reactions of politicians toward the CRTC decision took place just before the by-elections were called. Jean Charest and Mario Dumont condemned the CRTC decision not to renew the CHOI licence, saying it was too radical. Charest declared himself very much attached to individual freedoms. His support for CHOI was nonetheless considered a kind of political recuperation by Mayor Jean L’Allier. The desire to protect freedom of private
enterprises is also a ground for Quebec Premier to denounce the CRTC. A liberal MNA from Quebec City, Sam Hamad, said he and Jean Charest were worried about the loss of jobs at CHOI and the unique product of the station, hard rock. It is worth remembering that both Charest and Dumont are lawyers who know that the non renewal was the only possible penalty that could be imposed on the station by the federal body. Jean Charest appealed to Liza Frulla, then Heritage Minister, to reconsider the decision, seeming to forget the CRTC arm’s length relationship from the government.  

Mario Dumont was the most vocal against the CRTC decision, saying it was a “horror”, it was “revolting” and “worrying”.

The Action démocratique du Québec has always been a CHOI favourite and the radio station openly campaigned for the ADQ candidate, Sylvain Légarè, who won the riding of Vanier. Then leader of the PQ, Bernard Landry, refused to condemn the CRTC decision without supporting CHOI either. He took a judicial stand, saying politicians ought not to decide whether CHOI should stay opened but blamed the radio station for its corrosive speech. A péquiste MNA from Quebec City, Agnès Maltais, and the PQ youth were pleased with the CRTC decision.

On the federal scene, the NDP leader Jack Layton and the Bloc whip, Michel Guimond, agreed with the CRCT about the radio speech that got out of hand but considered the CRTC decision not to renew the CHOI licence too radical.

As we all know, freedom of expression is a bedrock value in our liberal democracy because making public a diversity of points of views on socio political issues makes it possible for people to take a stand on these issues. Publicity in a (kantian) philosophical sense is thus essential to democracy. The vote and effective participation in social and political life of a community require that people enjoy the fundamental liberties established in the Constitutional Law of 1982: freedom of conscience and religion, freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and of other means of communication, freedom of peaceful meeting and of association.
CHOI used freedom of expression as a defence as of 2004 only\textsuperscript{xxxiv}. In its 2002 defence before the CTRC, Genex did not make any reference to freedom of expression and accepted some responsibility for speech that violate the CRTC regulations (hatred speech founded on race, sex, ethnic origin, age, handicap, violation of private life, personal attacks, use of vulgarity, and so on). Four measures were proposed by the radio station to conform to the CRTC regulation: the adoption of an ethics code, the constitution of an advisory committee of three people to evaluate complaints from listeners and giving advice for the implementation of the code of ethics; membership in the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council and daily broadcast of a message telling listeners that they have a right to respond if they feel injured. In 2004, the radio station hired Guy Bertrand, a high profile and confrontational lawyer who came up with freedom of expression as the main defence before the CRTC, the Quebec Superior Court as well as the Federal Appeal Court.

\section*{Public sphere}

Appeal to freedom of expression is a clear indication of the cherished character of freedom in democracy, which thrives in a lively and effervescent public sphere, where oppositional arguments are heard and where conflict is discussed. Journalistic organisations that deplore the non renewal of the CHOI licence see conflict in the public sphere as fundamental. Citizens are thought sufficiently rational to be able to separating the wheat from the chaff. This is why the use of freedom of expression by champions of trash radio tends to stifle argument. On the airwaves, false, fallacious or abusive speech is somehow “part of the game”, it must be accepted in a democracy. The public sphere, a concept popularised by Jürgen Habermas, is founded on the Enlightenment idea that people ought to govern themselves thanks to their autonomy, their freedom and their rationality. The public sphere (coffee house, reading salons, newspapers and so forth) referred to places of discussions where people made up their mind about social and political issues in England and Germany in the seventeen and eighteen centuries.\textsuperscript{xxxv} In this perspective, public opinion emanates from the public sphere. This concept is used to link three components: human rationality, the role of the media for searching the common good, and democracy as a political system that takes into account its citizens. According to Habermas, the public sphere is the place where
the people govern themselves, thanks to their enlightened discussions in which social or economic inequities or status differences are “suspended”.

Although the public sphere has been very much challenged because of its unrealistic rational basis as well as its historical shortcomings and its philosophical orientation, the concept is useful for setting up an ideal of discursive democracy. Habermas public sphere, characterised by transparency, access to discussions and rationality, is modern society’s ideal and although it is utopian, it still is useful for nourishing our hopes for a better society.

Shock ideas put forward on confrontational talk radio render the public sphere very effervescent, whether one agrees or not with what is being said or done. Sexist, racist and homophobic statements as well as defamatory speech do make the public sphere effervescent, and this, added to the fact that most people do not know the limits of freedom of expression, opens the doors to insulting and denigrating speech.

In 2004, after a series of complaints, warnings and, what should have been a danger signal, the issuance of a two-year instead of seven-year licence in 2002, the CHOI licence was not renewed and freedom of expression was then used as a major argument for defending the station. I contend that this argument was mainly instrumental since the more illicit speech was being heard, the more Genex made money out of it, as was recognized by Justice Yves Alain from the Quebec Superior Court.

Because defending freedom of expression looks good in a democracy, Genex lawyers used it in the media and before the courts in 2004 and 2005, but in a fallacious manner. They founded their argument on a “false dilemma”: any restriction to freedom of expression would be labelled “censorship”! Since this symbolises a highly charged anathema in democracy, it just cut short any debate on the reasonable limits to freedom of expression in a democracy, something that is being debated in the CRCT and in the courts. Most of the media, the political leaders and the enthusiastic supporters of CHOI-FM stayed within the safe and false dichotomy “freedom of expression versus censorship”. The simplicity of this perspective makes it easy to sell and it was played over and over in the media. Even Mayor
Jean-Paul L’Allier used the false dilemma in his memoir. Very few people used a right’s framing.

In the media, Genex lawyer Guy Bertrand said: « In a democracy, one can do whatever he feels like if he is ready to pay the price for it. I can set fire to your house if I am ready to go to jail. I can kill someone if I am ready to go to jail. If my speech is libellous there is recourse: radio stations, journalists or radio hosts will be able to defend themselves... The dichotomization of the issue and the use of the false dilemma are of course an oversimplification of the matter. Speech that does not admit any restriction to freedom of expression nor any limit to censorship is incorrect legally and is not very credible sociologically and philosophically. As for censorship, it means a prior restriction while the CRTC decision is a sanction after the fact.

In its decision, the Federal Appeal Court explains that Genex presents freedom of expression as absolute while the courts have never recognized such absolutism. In the Federal Appeal Court, Justice Létourneau wrote: “I do not think I am mistaken in saying that freedom of opinion and freedom of speech do not mean freedom of defamation and freedom of opprobrium.”

**Individualism**

Individualism is the second liberal characteristic used by confrontation talk radio. Individual is thought the ultimate source of legitimacy instead of a grouping of individuals like the electorate. The individualism of the radio hosts is arrogant and founded on libertarianism. Justice Yves Alain describes Jean-François Fillon as a bully boy and uncontrollable. While talking on airwaves, Fillion lets loose and believes he can do whatever he pleases. On January 3, 2001, he said: “Every morning, when I open [the show], I tell God: “you can go back to bed, I take care of it till 9:30. At 9:30, he wakes up, he deals with everything”.

Libertarianism appears clearly when Genex’s lawyers contend that 7 000 support letters were sent during the CRTC hearings, which means that there are 7 000 diverse definitions of what is freedom of expression. This argument suggest that 7 000 free people have expressed
themselves and have fully realized themselves in the public sphere\textsuperscript{xlv}. Pascal Ory distinguishes between the liberal and the libertarian, the former being inspired by human rights while the latter define themselves through action. Libertarians think of themselves as the sole authority, against all authorities that are insupportable as being both restrictive and collective. We can’t imagine a more remote figure from a liberal man -or woman-, says Ory, than the one who challenges suffrage and social solidarities imposed from the onset and exploits the differences between individuals to make not only a right out of them but something like an obligation.\textsuperscript{xlv}

The CHOI lawyers’ argument about challenging a collective authority is founded on individual freedom and sovereignty posed as more legitimate than the CRTC legitimacy and authority. Sociologists Marcoux and Tremblay (who interviewed 144 CHOI supporters) challenge this explanation. Their study shows that there is no “freedom drive” among CHOI supporters. According to them, the support for the station is best explained by the consumer culture promoted by the radio rather than by the realisation of individual freedom or a coherent ideological orientation. In my opinion, this does not change the fact that the CHOI speech - the station itself- has a strong right wing stand (i.e. is political): sexist, homophobic, racist, against human rights, unions, and civil servants, among others.

\textbullet\textbf{Populism}

The third element of liberal democracy used by Genex is « appeal to the people » that can easily turn into populism, a form of political mobilisation based on the exploitation of the people’ desires, fears and prejudices. CHOI pretends to animate an effervescent public sphere by openly referring to the people.

The analysis of CHOI radio hosts’ arguments makes it clear that they promote a right-wing agenda.\textsuperscript{xlvi} Many remarks are made about wasted public funds, doubtful morality of political leaders, social measures that do not make people aware of their responsibilities, useless faculty, incompetent teachers, irresponsible unions, threatening strangers, and so on. \textsuperscript{xlvii}
Their favourite target is women: their bodies, their odours, what they wear or don’t wear, their success, their sexual behaviour or frigidity, anything goes for insulting and denigrating.

To render this speech effective, and also because populism requires a close contact with an audience, radio host used “proximity tools: a simple rhetoric, a certain level of language and an appeal to a particular age group, called the “X” generation. Vincent and Turbide have identified an over simplification of vocabulary. They write that the « incarnation of the ordinary » is a mirror in which listeners recognize themselves and that creates the illusion of an egalitarian relationship between listeners and radio hosts. On CHOI, speech is full of proverbs and maxims and to use them in a wise manner would take time, that neither the radio hosts neither the listeners have. This kind of argumentation, quite simple, is certainly one of the most difficult to counter. How do you explain that “It is easy to tell lies when you come from afar” (A beau mentir qui vient de loin!) is not always true or that public finances are not managed as a family budget?

Personal attacks and hatred speech of CHOI have many layers and each suits a specific sensibility. Bold and even vulgar speech serves as a protest of accepted standards of good behaviour. Irony corresponds to absurdity and ridicule. Indignation and appeal to anger (against feminists, governments, civil servants, and so on) are used to spark frustration. Each layer serves to attract a particular kind of listeners, who are encouraged to react the same way the radio hosts do.

**Conclusion**

In his 43-page decision, Justice Yves Alain quotes Justice Cory in the Hill ruling and writes that in libel matters, it is normal that twin values of reputation and freedom of expression come into conflict. He explains how freedom of expression is relative and situates this right in a social utility perspective. “False and injurious speech cannot contribute to personal realisation and we cannot say that it promotes a sound participation to collective affairs. As a matter of fact, it is a hindrance to the realisation of those values and to the interest of a free and democratic society”.
The false dilemma “freedom of expression versus censorship” became an easy and fallacious way to explain and frame the issue. The use of freedom of expression by CHOI and its supporters was purely instrumental. In reality, from 2002 to 2004, the main drive of CHOI was profit. The morning rating went from 64,000 listeners per quarter of an hour to over one hundred thousand.

Journalists who denounced the CRTC decision did not counterbalance freedom of expression with another value. Those who applauded the CRTC decision took into consideration individual rights as well as the social and political usefulness of the media. Politicians who are lawyers like Jean Charest and Mario Dumont choose not to oppose illicit speech, putting popularity and partisan interests in the ridings of Vanier and in Quebec City first. For them, other motivations may have also played against proposing reasonable limits to freedom of expression like the desire to protect freedom of private enterprises.

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Genex Communications Inc. c. Canada (Procureur général) (2005) CAF 283, 2005-09-01 :


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1 Thanks to Jeremy Tallboy for revising the paper.
The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council is an independent, non-governmental organization created by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) to administer standards established by its members, Canada's private broadcasters. The Council's membership includes more than 600 private sector radio and television stations, specialty services and networks from across Canada, programming in English, French and third languages. http://www.cbsc.ca/english/index.php.

Paragraph 42 of CRTC Decision 2004-271: Commenting on a news story about the mistreatment of a patient in a psychiatric hospital, host Fillion stated the following on CHOI-FM on 8 May 2003: 
"[translation] Why don’t they just pull the plug on him? He doesn’t deserve to live. The guy’s a freaking burden on society." A few minutes later, a worker from the treatment centre called the host and said that the wing in which the serious cases, like the one being discussed, was referred to by staff as "the zoo." After that call, Mr. Filion added, 
"[translation] What I think they should do in the zoo is fill up the rooms, and then there’d be a switch, and once every four months, they press the button and just a little bit of gas comes out, and then you go in and pick it all up and put it in bags" : During the hearings, Genex said that this was humorous.

Since this paper will be put on the www, it serves no purpose to libel her even more, hence the initials instead of her name.

Paragraph 61: The complainant is a television host on the TVA television network and the two specialty services, MétéoMédia and Canal Vie. In her complaint, she alleged that numerous personal attacks were made against her during the licensee’s morning show on 10 September 2002 and 8 October 2002. After listening to the recordings containing the remarks made by on-air personalities on 10 and 27th September and 8 October and reading the stenographic notes, the Commission identified several remarks about the complainant related to her physical attributes, and sexual attributes in particular. There are multiple references to the size of her breasts; [translation] "her incredible set of boobs" and suggested that "the size of the brain is not directly proportional to the size of the bra" and that, "in her case, it might actually be inversely proportional." The participants even wondered about the texture of the complainant’s breasts and whether anyone has asked the gropers about them, and whether they "[translation] defied gravity." The host said, 
"[translation] it’s all in the breasts" and that that pair of breasts "did the job on [a hockey player]," which is why the host said [he] chose the complainant over [another girlfriend].

Paragraph 62: The participants also referred to the complainant as "[translation] a consummate liar," "a cat in heat" and "a leech on [the hockey player]" and "an airhead; it's all well and good to have big boobs, a tiny waist and a tight ass, but it doesn’t mean a thing," "there are some seriously sick people at MétéoMédia;" "the girls that are attractive and look good, are always idiots" and "an idiot could do the weather." They also said that the complainant "[translation] had been around" and that "it happens behind the scenes" and made a number of remarks which suggested that she used personal relationships and even sex to land contracts as a television host.
For Marcoux and Tremblay, autonomy characterizes the political subject, a position that is taken from Hannah Arendt.

In Ottawa, some recalled that Charest had to resign while he was Minister of State for Youth, Physical Condition and Amateur Sport in 1990 after having called a Quebec Superior Court judge who was on the verge of writing his decision in a conflict with a trainer at the Canadian Athletes Association.

Discussions first took place in the economic realm. Jürgen Habermas, 1978.