

A black and white portrait of a woman with dark hair, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored collared shirt. The background is dark and textured.

Crusading reporters on JE and La Facture aim to right wrongs, while L'Épicerie adds in some food fun

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

that the producers continue to present as gospel ideas about so-called healthy foods that are now being debated (for instance, whether kids need cow's milk, and especially cheese, at all). Even a show as fun as this one should be rigorous about every statement it makes.

You know when a report is serious because ... the victim looks like you, your mother or your child.

Consumer Guidelines for the Phobic

1. It is wise to assume that any building you are planning to buy (home, cottage, outhouse) has major structural problems and will come tumbling down on your head within seconds of your taking full ownership.
2. If you are buying any kind of building and do not hire an inspector, you are a moron...

3. ... however, do not assume that the inspector you have hired has the vaguest idea of what she/he is doing.

4. All the consumer-protection laws in the world won't protect you if the seller who screwed you a) exists only on the Internet, b) has a head office in a country whose name you cannot spell, c) took your money and ran.

5. Pretty, solidly packaged product (even with a readable and unpassed expiry date) should be considered unsafe – if not in terms of bacteria levels, definitely in terms of trans fats. If a product is not packaged, someone with poor personal hygiene played with it before you bought it and fed it to your family.

6. If you make claims against an insurance company (especially one operated by the government), you will be screwed.

7. If you're old or disabled, give up.

8. If you don't read contracts – even microscopic print – you're the kind of person we laugh at and call "loser" on shows like these.

9. Don't waste your time screaming about being cheated – contact one of these shows immediately (especially if your problem is exotic). All of them broadcast their contact information.

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Annie Gagnon acts as host on JE and prepares reports as well.

I like consumer shows, but if you watch enough of them – actually, too many of them, perhaps – as I did for this article, you are going to become one paranoid customer with very set guidelines about the things on which you spend your money. (See Consumer Guidelines for the Phobic, below.)

But consumer info can be packaged in very different ways. For instance, how a show chooses its victims is crucial. If you are sitting there watching someone weep and are thinking, "What a loser!" it is often because the actual problem being probed by the consumer show is interesting but not catastrophic (the safety of online gambling casinos, for instance). But you know when a report is serious because right away the victim looks like you, your mother or your child and, most importantly, has maintained a sense of humour – albeit melancholic – about everything.

JE (TVA, Friday at 7 p.m.) can scare the bejezus out of you before the problem or victims are even aired. Music, image and editing slam into you for maximum fear factor: Victims are brilliantly chosen, and the correspondents whom host Annie Gagnon hands off to (when she is not doing a report herself) are swift and savage. (Hidden cameras galore and, in some cases, foot-in-the-door interviews.) The show has gone after businesses of all sizes, from the relatively small (Collège Platon) to the huge (Future Shop).

What works best on JE is its lack of subtlety – let's face it, I'm not much interested in fairness when it comes to seniors getting cheated. The reporters of JE are the masters in a world almost entirely populated by snake-oil salesmen and the dying who buy their wares. (In passing – and this wasn't easy to find out – JE stands for Journalisme d'enquête.)

La Facture (Radio-Canada, Tuesday at 7:30 p.m.) might be more subtle about nailing those who prey on us, but it is no less angry. Pierre Craig introduces most of the reports with a big smile, but, seconds into the story, you realize it was a smile of the you're-not-going-to-believe this variety. Reporters may be less ferocious but can do just as much damage with their choice of victims/poorly informed consumers (a gentle, smiling kid who didn't read the fine print in her modeling agency contract).

Completely different is **L'Épicerie (Radio-Canada, Thursday at 7:30)**, hosted by the utterly genial Marie-Josée Taillefer and Denis Gagné. The name says it all – The Grocery – and the concerns are food. But this show is more a party than a fright-fest.

Good food is celebrated, best buys in the chains suggested each week, and food content (vitamins, minerals, fats and bacteria levels) are discussed in terms that are mostly pleasant. I learn something each week: Why the price of butter varies so widely over brands; which fish sticks have the most breading (one brand contained 51per cent stick and 49 per cent fish); how to prepare broccoli (besides boiling it).

If I were going to quibble, it would be



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