

Rivals of telecom and media giant BCE have launched a public campaign to stop its takeover of Astral Media, saying it would lead to "unprecedented concentration of media ownership" in Canada.

BCE, owner of Bell Canada, announced the \$US3.38 billion (\$A3.21 billion) takeover of Astral in March, but it still requires regulatory approval.

If the deal is approved, Bell would control 79 television channels, 107 radio stations, and more than 100 websites, which is twice as big as its nearest competitor.

In a joint statement, rivals Quebecor, Eastlink and Cogeco Cable said Bell would also control all of the most popular television content in Canada, allowing Bell "to charge consumers any price they want to watch it".

Consumers could also face pressure to pay for other Bell Canada channels that they are not interested in watching, and to buy other Bell Canada phone, wireless, internet and TV services, the trio said. "Bell Canada's proposed merger with Astral Media Inc poses a serious threat to the health of the Canadian broadcasting industry," said Quebecor president Pierre Karl Peladeau.

"Competition will be severely reduced and the broadcast market as we know it in Canada will be handcuffed." Eastlink chief executive Lee Bragg added: "Few of the world's major economies permit a single private broadcaster to acquire such a dominant share of TV viewing".