Dishing out the video revolution
The impact of DBS on Canadian film

by Desmond Smith

Cinema is an old technology that is about to get a new face. The culture shock will kill off great many veterans, and make multi-millionaires of an elite. For everyone else who is currently "getting by" in today's feast-or-famine industry, the changes now underway have the potential to bring unprecedented stability to their working lives.

The unlikely revolutionary is minister of Communications Francis Fox, whose newly hatched DBS package will follow that of pocket calculators. As accounting experts believe that, given the kind of government licence fee anticipated, the price curve will follow that of pocket calculators. As most people may recall, the cheapest hand-held calculator cost around $50 in the early 1960's. Today, there are frequent giveaway as a sales incentive, and $20 will get you the top-of-the-line.

So potent is direct broadcasting's potential to revolutionize all current distribution systems that in the United States the major TV networks, cable conglomerates, independent TV stations, and film distributors are all voicing alarm, all before a firestorm of objections from the Federal Communications Commission hoping to block its introduction. They have so far been unsuccessful, and at least eight new firms are preparing to jump into this brand-new business. The first off the mark is likely to be United Satellite Communications Inc.

organized by Francesco Galesi, a New York real-estate developer who recently told The New York Times that "satellites are just real-estate in the sky." the new venture has partner in the Prudential Life Insurance Company of America, which agreed to invest $45 million, and General Instrument which will make the satellite dish receive programming chosen by the viewers. The programme would be sent in a "burst" via satellite and stored in the memory of the TV set until the viewer chooses to access it.

While the "memory bank" TV set is some time in the future, Canada is one of the few countries in the world where the government would permit it-

DBS programming could begin tomorrow. Ironically, direct-to-home satellite broadcasting will begin in the United States this Fall from a Canadian satellite. That satellite is Anik C, the world's most powerful communications satellite with a transmitting power of 900-watt - much more powerful than the 180-watt satellite that was launched in the Beaufort Sea.

In contrast to the present generation of medium-powered U.S. satellites - the ones that currently carry such pay-TV movie channels as Home Box Office and Showtime, Anik C needs no $4,000 dish to bring down its signal. A dish the size of a rooftop antenna which would receive programming chosen by the viewer from a national or regional storage bank. The programming would be sent in a "burst" via satellite and stored in the memory of the TV set until the viewer chooses to access it.

The first revolution was sparked by the arrival of the "talkies" in the late 1920's, and with the talking picture came the movie palaces which in stark contrast to the nickelodeons and penny arcades of a generation earlier - provided a clean, wholesome atmosphere where the entire family could enjoy an outing.

Traditionally, movie-makers have been frustrated by the distribution side of the business, and for solid reasons: they didn't own it, they didn't control it, and they didn't understand it. Even when television came a long in the late 1940's with all its promise for the motion picture industry's creative community, there turned out to be little difference.

In spite of its obvious "mass" nature, TV in both the United States and Canada...
entire five-year period, government expenditures through the fund should amount to $336 million.

As you plan your strategies, we are not taking a protectionist approach to our domestic program production industry. Instead, we are acting to foster the development of satellite viewing and to support our program production industry as it matures and goes out on an equal footing with the world.

The categories of programming which would be eligible for assistance are those in which the Canadian broadcasting industry does not provide a significant amount of Canadian programming — the drama, variety and children’s programming categories. We anticipate that, with this significant injection of additional funding, Canadians will soon be able to receive a solid core of attractive Canadian programming in every program category and in both official languages.

Given the skill and creative ingenuity of our production industry, we have a program production industry capable of producing programs on very slender resources. We are confident that, with this assistance, we will be able to win a significant share of the Canadian viewing audience. We believe that Canadian programming will win a rising share of the market for television programming. Proof of the international feasibility of Canadian programming is provided by the recent success of Canadian feature films, which has increased in North America in 1983.

The new international environment

These three major elements of our broadcasting strategy for Canada are linked. As we increase the presence of Canadians, freeing up satellite dishes and strengthening the Canadian broadcast and program production industries, it will enable us to maintain a vital Canada and a viable broadcasting system — a system that is both distinctive and unique.

Most countries around the world will be undertaking an exercise similar to ours. By the same token, we believe that the future of cinema - whatever its form — in Canada, and open to the world.

In closing, I should like to remind you that Canada and the United States have long been recognized as having the longest undefended border in the world. A Canadian writer once commented that the reason the border was undefended was quite simple: it was essentially undefendable. I prefer the more obvious explanation — that the world’s people have a long and proud history of mutual trust, shared perceptions and a willingness to co-operate.

However, we should not forget that, in the new broadcasting environment, our common boundaries, as well as the frontiers of every country in the world, have become undefendable. Only a shared recognition of our common vulnerability, a mutual respect for the distinctiveness of our paths to cultural development, and a strong commitment to reciprocity, will carry us through the next few years. I am confident that we will succeed.

Freedom to see

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With user-to-user access, real joy, sorrow, birth, death, murder, true love, and reality — all available to those who wish to "wander" through the personal broadcast and test patterns of Toronto, St. Louis, Montreal, Medicine Hat, New York. It is an unsettling idea to the sure — technological developments that expose more of the reality of the earth and its inhabitants always are. But if we do not face our future, not far into the future, the strange miracle of Zwer- niker's ray will enable us to experience a visual freedom that no other people in history have ever known.

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