

Broadcasting in the information age:

The role of the public sector

The 10th annual Banff Television Festival set for itself the theme of *The TV Revolution* for good reason. There are great changes which are reshaping what television is (HDTV, satellite technology) and the environment in which television operates (deregulation, commercialization and globalization). Part of what is happening is an offshoot of a larger information revolution driven by the convergence of telecommunications, computers and broadcasting in which the economies of advanced industrial nations move to largely service-oriented industries, with value-added information as their cornerstone. One has only to think of budget leaks or insider trading to understand the crucial financial importance of information. In this environment, broadcasting increasingly is seen as having an economic importance beyond its traditional domains. Broadcasting becomes central to a nation's economic life; and central to a corporate strategy which radiates outwards from broadcasting to all forms of communications. As a result, somewhere along the way, there is a tendency to link the corporate interest with the national interest. It more and more appears to be too important to leave broadcasting in the hands of cultural bureaucrats and blinkered programme makers whose only interests seem to be audiences rather than the higher good of corporate or national economic wellbeing. In this context, it becomes important to restate the case for broadcasting as a public service, because as Michael Ignatieff points out, it is, at bottom, a case for democracy based on a true freedom of choice.

Marcel Masse, minister of communications, has long been a staunch defender of Canadian cultural life in all its spheres. His Baie Comeau publishing policy was groundbreaking endeavour to create a framework in which Canadian publishing can be truly Canadian. He is currently set to move on new broadcast and film legislation.

Bernard Ostry, chairman of TV Ontario, has over the past years been arguing vigorously for a defence of the public sector based on a distinction between values and profits.

Pierre Juneau, president of the CBC, has led Canada's public broadcaster in a dramatic move to Canadianize its schedule based on an understanding that it is as a truly Canadian broadcaster that the CBC fulfills its mandate.

Michael Ignatieff is a distinguished historian and host of one of the most exciting public affairs programmes on the BBC. As an intellectual deeply in love with television, he brings to his analysis a freshness and a perspective to complement those of the policymakers.



Marcel Masse Minister of Communications

Today, 99 per cent of Canadian households have a radio; 98 per cent a television; and more than 50 per cent a VCR. Furthermore, 6.3 million, or 66 per cent of all homes in Canada, subscribe to cable: of this number, 73 per cent also have a converter.

Each week, the average Canadian watches 24 hours of television, an amount that represents 65 per cent of time spent at work, in addition to another 18 hours spent listening to the radio. This indicates the media's tremendous power to inform, sell products and services, influence public opinion, create stars and, above all, offer a common vision of Canadians to Canadians, a vision that transcends their regional, ethnic, political, religious or linguistic diversity.

In the past, the government of Canada has been careful to ensure a strong Canadian

presence on Canadian television. Increasingly, the government is emphasizing the quality of the programs that convey our identity. This requires that the range of programming available in our country includes shows reflecting our reality and directly addressing Canadians. Our political and cultural sovereignty depends on it, if we are to prevent our culture from becoming a marginal one in Canada.

It is therefore important for our television broadcasting system to give higher priority to domestic television productions, whether information or drama. All the players involved share a common responsibility in fostering its development.

In this modern age, the television set is more than a simple receiver; it is the cement of culture, in the sociological sense of the word.

Bernard Ostry

Chairman, TV Ontario

from "The Future of Public Broadcasting: An International Perspective"

Keynote address to the American Public Television Annual Meeting (April 11, 1989)



Public broadcasting is at present under siege not only from private commercial interests but also from wisecracks and politicians who either do not understand its value or confuse value itself with price and profit. The assault... is a worldwide campaign that affects all of us.

Public broadcasting is an international issue, calling for international agreements and institutions, and that in order to survive and carry out its essential functions, public broadcasters must devise our own ways to go global as private broadcasters are finding it necessary to do.

Some predict that the industry is likely to be dominated by as few as six or eight massive conglomerates. There is, as *The Economist* pointed out, a dangerous gap between this probability and the effectiveness of existing institutions to secure national and regional interests. How will the supernovas of this expanding vacuumland behave? What will they seek? According to Jason McManus of Time-Warner Inc.: "Return on investment, potential profitability, quality, possibility of being a market leader, being a fit." Nothing, it is clear, about the public interest.

What kind of programming will such broadcasters find it necessary to develop? Their present course will continue to be resented in many countries as "Americanization". Future

programming is likely to be (1) "entertainment", (2) bland, culturally neuter. David Simon, vice-president of European programming for Walt Disney Inc., said last February, "The key to success in co-production is going to be understanding one another because we do have language barriers and we do have cultural barriers, and there's going to be a compromise made where everybody sort of moves in the mainstream together. And that mainstream is not made up of any one country or any one mind. That's really going to be the key."

Such programming is not likely to meet public needs and demands within individual nations, let alone in regional or local communities.

In future, public broadcasters in every country will be competing with the transnational megacompanies now emerging, whose gigantic budgets are needed to prevent hostile takeovers and finance worldwide production and distribution. There will be fierce competition with private channels for audiences. Only an alliance among public broadcasters can begin to match that strength. Public television will have to exploit to the full its natural advantage of being able to program for audiences rather than advertisers. It is an advantage which has not been well understood by public broadcasters, who perhaps still find it hard to distinguish between markets and audiences. A market is a large group of viewers seen as potential consumers; an audience is a large group sharing some passion or dream, and everyone of them somewhere.

Most countries have tried to regulate broadcasting so as to leave room for local and community interests. Now the continued development of local and national programming will depend on international accords.

The first need is for public broadcasters to reassert the purpose and value of our enterprise, and not to let it go by default.

The market is immensely efficient in the allocation of resources and the exchange of goods and services. What it is not, what it never can be, is a system of values. There is plenty of evidence that ideas and ideals can be more powerful than material self-interest in influencing human affairs. Broadcasting, naturally, does have an economic aspect, and while it does there will be private operators. But it is also a part of culture, that is, part of a system of values.

Offering choices is still part of the function of public broadcasting, and in the meltdown of globalization the choice most essential to offer is going to be programming that reflects the pluralist culture and aspirations of one's own country.

Pierre Juneau

President, CBC

from *Television Without Frontiers?*

A speech delivered to the 10th International Festival of Film and Television in the Celtic Countries (March 15, 1989)



We represent what might be called a minority culture or what T. S. Eliot called a satellite culture. So it is interesting to think about the situation of minority cultures and the strategies that apply to them in a world in which culture has become an industry. As we know, the most influential means of cultural expression in today's world require expensive technology and rely therefore on very powerful marketing systems. Thus, from the outset, there is a contradiction between minority cultures and technological means of expression. Some modern cultural products require very large markets to amortize their costs and, by definition, minority cultures have small markets or clientele. For us and for you, this presents an enormous challenge - a cultural challenge, an industrial challenge, a challenge that threatens the very institutions we manage.

No doubt, the Canadian experience should be examined by all those interested in the probable development of broadcasting. However, the situation is not entirely negative. On the contrary, I think that all our efforts in the past 50 years have resulted in our avoiding what I would call, somewhat dramatically, "the American mistake". This is not a chauvinistic remark. I am talking about the model adopted by our American neighbour for organizing broadcasting. In my opinion, this is indeed a regrettable

cultural mistake, for which the entire world is paying the price. The mistake consists of tying radio and television completely to business, that is, to the marketing of things like chewing gum, denture aids, toothpaste, soaps of all kinds, all sorts of drinks and candies, car ties, the cars themselves or everything related to the automobile industry.

André Malraux, with remarkable intellectual arrogance, states in the very last line of *Psychologie du cinéma* that the cinema is also an industry. We all know that broadcasting is an industry as well. However, I must insist - and in this I share the opinion of the lawmakers of several countries who have so decreed for over 50 years - that it has first and foremost to be a means of culture, education and enlightenment.

We must vigorously resist the tendency to regard television and radio as nothing more than "business". The "business" of television and film often results in the creation of truly great works. However, submitting such means of expression to mere industrial and commercial imperatives would be a serious mistake. In this respect, I am delighted that the Government of Canada has retained - in recently proposed broadcasting legislation - a principle that dates back 50 years in this country that broadcasting is first and foremost a public service, and that the CBC is its focus as well as its pulse.

We can also take pleasure in the fact that the countries of Europe have long recognized this principle as well. There would be considerable cause for concern if some of the worldwide trends currently developing were to become a reality.

How ironic it would be if a small country like Canada, made up of two minorities, in a North American sea, with a rather short cultural history, were to continue to struggle to try and retain its cultural originality while the countries of Europe, more numerous and with long and very rich cultural histories, weakened before the threatening commercial audiovisual storm.

For there will be an audiovisual storm. It will be the result of the proliferation of networks, rendered possible by cable or satellite or by a combination of the two. According to Robert Stephane, in the March 1988 edition of the *EBU Review*, our role is to watch over the survival of diversity and differences.

I would like to suggest that public service agencies and their partners, the private producers, establish real international alliances inspired by their common vocation rather than by the chase after the mirage of the conquest of the American market. The conquest will come as an added bonus.

Group culture may be likened to individual

culture. It is not a mere matter of consumption. It is also expression and creation; something akin to breathing in and breathing out.

And creative expression is necessarily linked to location, environment, friends, family and experience. As my compatriot Northrop Frye has said, there is something organic about it.

Our methods of cultural expression, as we said earlier, have been rendered complex and

costly by technology and this creates difficulties for groups that do not have access to important markets.

This condition of the modern world, however, does not alter the essential nature of culture. It merely increases the scope of the challenge for groups such as ours. It also underlines the importance of working together to define and defend the values we hold dear.

Michael Ignatieff

Writer, broadcaster

Interview with Cinema Canada

I'm not a pessimist about television because I'm not a pessimist about audiences. I love television because it reaches a huge, promiscuous audience.

I get letters from coalminers, unemployed people from Newcastle, kids. A lot of what they're saying is we're fed up with being treated as fools.

The three-minute culture stuff reference to TV advertising is a risk. The risk is that the technical innovations will make its way into news, drama, etc. A new grammar of television is being

written. I like good advertising and good rock videos. I'm worried about it dominating where it is not appropriate unless someone fights back. For example, here is a news story. How long should it be? It's as long as a piece of string. But television has adopted a set of time conventions regardless of the context. That is an instrument of barbarism. Audiences will turn off. I'm worried about North America. The middleclass will get out of TV culture.

In Britain, Thatcher is smashing the duopoly (BBC and ITV). The consequence is that the best



and most demanding part of the audience may abandon television.

The audience, however, is not buying satellite

dishes. Satellite TV has not had a successful launch. It is still to be persuaded that a 40-channel future is a good thing.

The defence of the public sector has to be the defence of the freedom of choice. You have to say that the problem of a fully marketized television is a lot of choices you now have will disappear or will become available on a licence fee that you may not like. You may have to pay between \$400 and \$900 in subscription fees. What gets lost is the whole thing [variety, sports, arts, drama, ballet, etc.] on one big network. That's the choice we do risk losing. There is a finite number of programme-makers. We don't have ideas for 40 channels.

Television has lost confidence in its audience; lost its pride in itself as a distinctive medium. Film has helped to kill off TV. It is a particular medium with limitations: poor depth of field, poor visual quality. TV spends huge amounts of dollars to imitate cinema. We have to go back to the '50s and '60s, to the classic TV [to find what TV does best]. TV is a medium of talking heads, two faces in dialogue, two faces in conflict, two faces in rage. TV can do that. TV has lost confidence in its own magic. It's given up on itself. •

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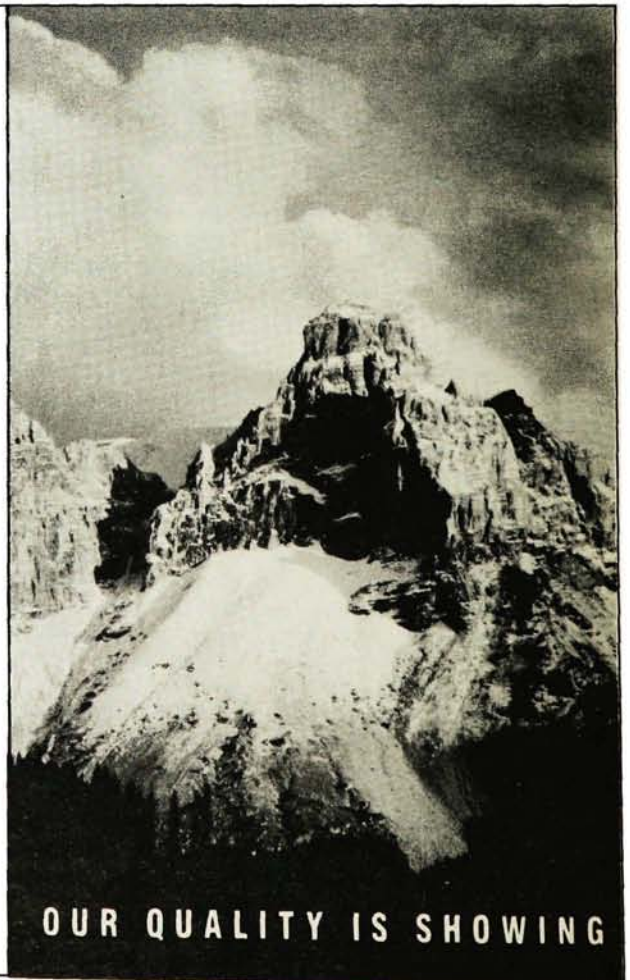
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