

The Facts of Television in the Seventies

by A.W. Johnson

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What are the facts of television in the 1970s? The most impelling one is that only 1/3 of the TV viewing time of English Canadians is spent watching Canadian programmes. And much of that viewing time falls into the two categories of sports and information programming. The rest of the time English Canadians spend in front of their sets – and this is how they spend 50 percent of their leisure time – is largely spent watching U.S. situation comedies, police dramas, variety shows, family dramas, movies, and the rest.

Two thirds of the viewing time of English Canadians watching American programmes! Think of it! Think of the impact on Canadian minds – particularly the younger and more impressionable ones – of all these perceptions and perspectives and attitudes flooding in on them from the United States!

The story in French Canada is different, of course, by reason of the language barrier. But even here, one finds that an average of 18 percent of the programming on all French-language television is American in origin (dubbed) and that the average is considerably higher than this on many non-CBC French-language stations. Indeed, according to a recent Gallup poll, 46 percent of Quebecers – of whom four to one are French-speaking – believe that the Americans make the best programmes.

This is the situation facing Canadian television today. And it is not in any way alleviated by the fact that Canadian programme producers are able to spend less than one third of the money American TV producers spend to produce one hour of television. Talk about competition!

The “So What” School of Thought

What are we to do about it – about this immersion of Canadians in U.S. television programmes? There are some of course – the “so what” school of thought – who respond by saying: “Look, we might as well face facts. The truth is that we – Canadians – are a part of North American society, and we are coming, and will inevitably come to share a common set of values and

attitudes and perceptions with the Americans. Over time, indeed even our traditions and institutions and history will tend to become homogenized with American traditions and institutions and history.” Like a jar of peanut butter!

Some say this with resignation, some with regret – some, I am afraid, with indifference. But it matters not by what route one reaches this school of thought: it means, in the final analysis, giving up on Canada. Such is the power of communications to shape our minds.

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The Broadcasting Industry

Look at the industry. Two national networks serving 16 million English-speaking Canadians, and two serving six million French-speaking Canadians – directly and/or through privately-owned affiliated stations. One other privately owned network serving a large part of Ontario’s seven or eight million people – half of Canada’s English-speaking Canadians. Five privately-owned metropolitan stations independent of the networks. Two provincial broadcasting systems owned by provincial governments, and the possibility of more wanting to enter the field. And we – 23 million people – think we can afford all of this, compared with the four American networks in a country of 214 million people?

But that’s not all. We now are in direct competition with these four American networks. Fifty percent of all Canadians are now able to receive directly, by way of licensed cable companies, anywhere from two to four of the U.S. networks. And the number is growing year by year. On top of this pay-TV is seeking to make inroads into our major cities, and the technological developments of the future promise to make the situation more, not less difficult.

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The goal I would advance is this – and it applies to television only: **that we as an industry should so improve Canadian programmes, should make them so worthy of being scheduled in prime time, that at least 50 percent of the viewing time of English Canadians would come to be spent watching Canadian programmes.** French Canadians, I need hardly say, have already exceeded that target.

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But the real problem is to be found in the system as a whole: if it is excessively fragmented or compartmentalized then we can be sure that there will be a greater drain from programme production than any individual broadcaster could possibly be guilty of.

Take the cable part of the broadcasting industry, for example. It collects a significant part of the revenues which accrue from television broadcasting, largely in the form of cable fees. But what part of these revenues flows back to the producers of Canadian programmes? It is all very well to argue about the U.S.-Canadian cable war – and we can't today because the issue is before the courts – but surely there is a general principle to be considered. It is this: what part of the revenues of an industry which generally distributes but does not produce television programmes should be allocated to the producers of Canadian programmes?

If cable television is a part of the broadcasting system, as surely it is, then surely the system as a whole should be as concerned about the allocation of cable revenues to the production of Canadian programmes just as it is about the allocation of commercial revenues to this purpose?

The same question will surely arise if Pay-TV is extended in our metropolitan centres. Are we going to pretend, as we have tended to do with cable, that this is not a part of the broadcasting industry, and that it ought not, therefore, be expected to contribute to Canadian programming? Surely not.

Surely we will listen to the common sense of the common Canadian and say "I know television when I see it: it is what's on my television screen." And if it's there, and if it's being paid for – in one way or another – then the revenues should be allocated so far as it is possible to do so to Canadian programme production. That is, if we want to remain Canadians.

And what about the off-air broadcasters, and their use of commercial revenues to produce Canadian programmes? They are the broadcasters who are doing this – are using a significant part of their revenues to produce Canadian programmes. But every time their revenues are fragmented by the licensing of a new network, or a new independent station, their revenue capacity is affected. And in a country our size that capacity is not that great. I am driven to ask whether we haven't reached the point now where there are enough commercial stations to take care of the demand for commercial time? The principle, in any event, is clear: we haven't enough money now to produce programmes which will compete adequately with the American ones, and if we try to spread it around any more we will fare even worse.

But I mustn't transgress on the authority of others – though how anything I might say could come as a surprise to CRTC Chairman Harry Boyle, I do not know. As a public servant emeritus, however, I well understand the cardinal rule of government bureaucracy: never stray into another man's pasture – or onto his turf, or whatever figure of speech you want to use. So I must stop.

Are the rules of bureaucracy as bad in broadcasting, by the way? If they are, I am surely already in deep, deep trouble.

That being the case – if it is – I may as well advance my fourth proposition as to how we might in the future work towards the goal of more Canadian viewing of Canadian programming.

It is this: let us recognize in our scheduling of Canadian and American programmes the objective of maximizing Canadian viewing of Canadian programmes.

Now I know – at least I think I know – how tough this is. The brutal and paradoxical fact is that, outside

of Parliamentary appropriations, the CBC and private broadcasters alike use the commercial revenues they get from showing U.S. programmes to pay for the production of Canadian ones. We show U.S. programmes to pay for Canadian programmes. And if we want to maximize this income we show the U.S. programmes in the prime time of prime time – when most Canadians will watch them, and commercial revenues will be the highest!

How in the face of this conundrum – this vicious circle – are we to achieve the goal of 50% Canadian viewing of Canadian programmes? If we show Canadian programmes when more Canadians will watch them, because of the time they're shown, our commercial revenues will decline (it being more lucrative to sell commercials for the widely watched U.S. programmes). This means less money to produce the higher-quality Canadian programmes needed to draw larger audiences.

Obviously the only way out of this vicious circle is enough money outside of commercial revenues to produce Canadian programmes that are so good that they will attract as many Canadian viewers, and then as much commercial revenue, as the American programmes.

But short of this millenium – the millenium of bountiful resources – what are we to do? There are some directions we can pursue obviously. We can all of us try to schedule more Canadian programmes in the prime time of prime time, knowing that if we both do this the losses in commercials will be less than would otherwise be the case. But losses there would be, there is no doubt of that. We can all of us insist that the commercial revenues we earn from the U.S. programmes we do buy and show, should not be diminished by cable companies being able to show the same programmes at other times. We should try to avoid the worst excesses of scheduling the biggest-drawing U.S. programmes against good Canadian ones. We should continue to avoid scheduling "like against like" in our Canadian programming – showing, for example, Fifth Estate at the same time as W-5, or the Watson Report at the same time as Maclear.

Above all we – as Canadians – should avoid further increases in the number of U.S. programmes on Canadian screens – either avoid it altogether, or, as in the case of Pay-TV, do so only at a price, and in a way, which will greatly increase funds available for producing Canadian programmes. To accomplish this will require great ingenuity and great dedication – but surely we have no choice?

Let me conclude by observing that it is all too easy to sound chauvinistic, even parochial, when talking about Canadian broadcasting. But what else is Canadian broadcasting all about? We could easily fill our air waves entirely with American programmes, except for Canadian news, and with French-language programmes from abroad, except for the Canadian programming required to fill the scheduled TV time.

But we consciously chose not to do that a long time ago. We consciously decided that we wanted Canadian radio and we wanted Canadian television, because we knew we wanted to remain Canadian, and we knew the power of these two media. Yet somehow, in the jungle of technology and step by step changes and imperfectly perceived trends, we seem to have lost our way.

The only way we can find it again, at least so it seems to me, is by setting ourselves the grand goal we set in 1936. It may seem impossibly idealistic, incapable of achievement, but it is better surely than a series of small and halting steps towards some unknown – and uninspired – goal. □

Excerpts of a speech to the Canadian Association of Broadcasters in Ottawa, April 26, 1976.