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AUDIENCE REACTION

Until recently the NFB has been merrily interpreting Canada to Canadians without knowing how well Canadians have been receiving the message, and since its early days the Board has seen this as a problem. It was still thinking of wartime propaganda when it first considered an audience research section back in 1945. Nothing happened then, but the idea has resurfaced in new forms every few years. Until 1972.

That year Mark Slade of distribution was asked to produce a working model for a research unit. The result is Audience Needs and Reactions, a compact group now headed by Sandy Burnett. Burnett cringes when he looks back at the post-war proposal. "It now sounds rather heavy and '1984' in orientation. This place is not made up by people who are first and foremost out to make it into a slick propaganda machine."

He and his core staff of three researchers, Bill Gallant, Bill Litwick and Claude Perin, are not about to find out what moves the masses. Instead, one aspect of their work will be the forecasting of developments in technology, social concerns, government policies and education. Audience Needs and Reactions will try to look three to five years ahead, giving the board time to respond in advance to new trends.

Burnett's group has been together since October. One of their projects, which may affect future Film Board environmental films, found that from the grass roots up, 1800 Canadians had held environmental meetings over a two year period. Audience Needs is now designing a questionnaire for more than 500 delegates who took part in the Man and Resources project of the Canadian Council of Resource and Environment Ministers. Burnett predicts NFB production and distribution will learn what audiences want from films and will thus gain an entree into an existing network of environmental groups.

Couldn't this approach lead to formula productions? Burnett recognizes that the creative aspect of filmmaking is at least as important as research findings, "But if anything, we've been short on objective data in the past and very lucky in our intuitive judgment."

The unit wants to probe the success of existing films, and filmmakers want to know how their audiences react and have been thirsty for reports. The interest follows a trial series of screenings of government sponsored films last fall. Observers at the showings outlined the types of audiences, reactions good and bad, and whether the films seemed to work. The reports were for the sponsors' benefit, but Burnett found them interesting, so he sent copies to producers and directors. Previous feedback had amounted to little more than the number of bookings or prints sold, so the reports were well received. "So well received it's been a bit of an embarrassment," comments the research unit head. "Now we've got a number of filmmakers who from time to time say, 'When are you going to do that again?'" Lest anyone get the wrong idea about such reports, Burnett stresses: "I wouldn't want us to assume the role of watchdog or auditor of performance particularly."

When Audience Needs and Reactions gets into full swing it will be an important planning guide for the NFB, and its findings will go automatically to the French and English program committees.

Already the group is involved in work which would be of major consequence to women at the board and is of direct concern to Société Nouvelle's *En tant que femme* series televis-

ed on Radio-Canada in Quebec during the winter, but the indirect effect could be more wide-spread. Société Nouvelle prepared a questionnaire and Burnett's group collaborated with them in getting it published in French language newspapers on the days of the telecasts. Viewers of the first two programs alone returned 1600 questionnaires and telephone response was so great it disrupted a Bell exchange. The results of the questionnaire are now being analysed. Burnett: "The feedback from the *En tant que femmes* telecasts will be useful to the people who are planning the community release of the *Working Mothers* series. They in turn are interested in getting feedback on the effect of what they do. You take both and out of that may well come sufficient evidence to justify an extension of films made specifically by and for women — either in the film board or more generally. One of the things that has been discussed is the possibility of establishing a women's unit. It might not only produce films by and about women, interested in learning the craft of film-making. They'd get some experience and then quite conceivably get back into the open market of the film industry — where up to this point they've faced a whole range of things from anti-feminist bias to simply lack of opportunities for experience."

Cinema Canada detected some criticism of Burnett's unit among other Film Board members, but any criticism results from a misunderstanding, insists Burnett. He denies merely collecting statistics for the government and believes the unit's findings will be useful. In two to three years when it has had time to make an impact it will be proved right. Until then there's no point worrying that it's justifying its existence. "The last thing I'm interested in is building lists of pre-digested statistics that can go into somebody's report somewhere."

At the moment it's not a very precise science we're involved in, and in a way I'd rather not have it too cut and dried. I don't think a program decision should be made solely on the basis of objective information. Similarly it shouldn't be made solely on the basis of a particular person's enthusiasm."

What of future Film Board production trends? According to Burnett we'll be seeing more educational films — most now come to us from the United States, and the *Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle* projects promise greater opportunities which Burnett hopes the Board will follow up.



Photo: Baltazar



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