

Who's in charge at Telefilm...?

Policy vacuum draws in broadcasters

“What's the matter with Telefilm Canada?” It's a popular question these days. It will no doubt be sorted out shortly with explanations of budget overruns, verbal commitments and fouled communications.

A more interesting question is “Why?” Why are things in such a state? Why does the agency continue to lose staff weeks after the departure of the executive director? Why can't the consultative accountants, Thorne Ernst Whinney, draft a financial statement which the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture can understand? Why is the department of Communications getting more complaints from clients of Telefilm Canada than from any other agency under its aegis?

Because no one's in charge.

The executive director was not *requiring* adequate accountability from the staff. This created tortured communications, inefficiency and ultimately led to his replacement and the startling news that the agency has overcommitted \$48 million in the current fiscal year.

The board of directors and its chairman were not adequately monitoring the executive director either, though overseeing the agency is ultimately their job.

A policy vacuum

This failure to track the activities of the agency and to monitor the consequences of its decisions created a vacuum – a power and policy vacuum. Confronted with the financial disarray and the severe morale problems, resulting in massive staff defections, the board tried to stem the damage by going public with a press conference concerning the overcommitments. It was a miscalculation.

The board created a problem the minute it decided that verbal commitments would be honoured. There is not a producer in the country who would consider he had a firm commitment from Telefilm before he had something on paper. But the chairman of the board, Jean Sirois, announced at the press conference that he would honour every commitment – of any nature – made by employees of Telefilm. Suddenly, though the books showed that only \$65 million had been “signed, deal-lettered and approved,” Sirois was creating a policy which was pushing the committed funds up to \$163 million and setting the industry into a tailspin. The sense of betrayal on the part of the staff was palpable.

Given the policy vacuum, Sirois began making it up as he went along. In meetings with producers, he has asked what they want him to do about verbal commitments. After meetings with broadcasters, he has promised to reorganize the staff and fly Bob Linnell home to Toronto.

This management approach – changing the organigram to fit the available people in the absence of any long-range plan – was the Pearson approach which caused so much trouble. The underlying problems, those defined in the Ad Hoc report and the Coopers Lybrand report, must be addressed. Consultation is appropriate to try out ideas on a constituency. It is dangerous in the absence of any viable proposals.

The purpose of Telefilm

Consultation in a vacuum is leading to a distortion of the mandate of Telefilm. The broadcasters are now maintaining that they should control the broadcast fund, that Telefilm should operate as a bank and abandon all critical

judgment concerning production for television. Even staffers at the department of Communications are beginning to talk as if the purpose of the broadcast fund is to create Canadian programming to fulfill the CRTC's Canadian content requirements.

If this is to become policy, it would seem cheaper all around for the department of Communications to give the broadcasters a subsidy and let them program as they wish in tandem with private producers.

One forgets that the real name of Telefilm Canada is still the Canadian Film Development Corporation, and it was created to foster an independent film production industry. This project stagnated because Canadians did not control film distribution, and the move to television production was essentially an end-run around the American distributors to deal in a medium where Canadians had control. So much the better if this plan dovetailed with the broadcasters' need to meet Canadian content requirements. The intent, nevertheless, was to develop an independent production industry.

The broadcasters are on the brink of usurping the producers' prerogative to create productions independently. This new pattern of power accomplishes many things. It justifies under-funding at the CBC by guaranteeing funds from Telefilm, though guaranteeing funds has never been Telefilm policy. It allows broadcasters to pay too little for the classy programs they are getting, though inadequate license fees are a constant obstacle to the proper functioning of the independent sector. It allows the regulators to presume that Canadian content requirements are realistic without measuring the cultural price of having broadcasters, not producers, piloting the ship. Obviously, if the routine needs of television programming are to drive the fund, then common denominator productions will thrive at great cost to those with higher cultural ambitions.

What such a policy does not do is fulfill the mandate of the CFDC a.k.a. Telefilm Canada.

A political problem

The problem with Telefilm is lack of leadership and vision, compounded by lack of knowledge of the film industry on the part of the board of directors. It all adds up to an irresponsible board, making policy decisions on the fly.

In this issue of *Cinema Canada*, Jean Sirois addressed the problems of Telefilm. He says of the current situation, “The industry never had it so good.” Certainly, Sirois has an inadequate idea of how the industry works, not realizing that money thrown at a problem can create as much havoc as the absence of money. The industry learned that the hard way during the financial bust of the early '80s.

At the recent hearing of the Standing Committee, the chairperson, Jim Edwards concluded by saying that the situation at Telefilm had become a “political problem.” He was referring to the paradox of going to the government for additional funding when the agency responsible could not account for itself.

As a political problem, the responsibility now lies with the minister of Communications. When the executive is not monitoring the staff and the board is not monitoring the executive, the industry needs assurances that the DOC is monitoring the situation at Telefilm and is satisfied that the board of directors has become competent to now fill the vacuum created by its own lack of knowledge, leadership and vision.