

Dismantling the public airwaves: Shifting Canadian public broadcasting to an online service

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the International

Communication Gazette

2016, Vol. 78(4) 349–364

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DOI: 10.1177/1748048516632169

gaz.sagepub.com



Abstract

In 2014, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation released a five-year plan entitled *A Space For Us All*. The plan outlined a bold new vision for the Canadian public broadcaster, placing digital mobile content at the forefront of the corporation's priorities. This article examines the shifting priorities of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation against established principles of public broadcasting. It also interrogates the relationship between mobile digital media and legal obligations of the public broadcaster under current Canadian broadcasting regulation. Drawing upon Canadian broadcasting history, contemporary data and recent examples from sport and politics in Canada, the article questions this new direction for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and argues that despite the significant new opportunities in mobile digital media, traditional broadcasting methods remain the dominant tool to reach mass audiences and will provide a significant forum for public information and debate for the foreseeable future.

Keywords

Canada, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, local media, post-broadcasting, public broadcasting, public service media

Introduction

In its 2014 strategic plan *A Space For Us All*, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) made it a public priority to, by 2020, transform from a television and radio broadcaster to a more rationalized organization that increasingly

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serves Canadians via digital streaming services designed for mobile devices. The plan outlines a move 'from public broadcaster to public media company' (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2014a: 16). This embrace of 'post-broadcasting' by the CBC is accompanied by a clear devaluation of traditional distribution models (cable, over the air (OTA)), a movement away from content production, as well as increased reliance upon its online presence to fulfil its mandate and create a 'public space' for Canadians (10). This emphasis upon what the CBC calls 'modern distribution methods' (2) raises questions concerning the nature of broadcasting, public accessibility and the relationship between public broadcasting and spatial connections. This direction for the CBC aligns with contemporary definitions of 'post-broadcasting' as 'the end of dominance of the broadcast model' (Merrin, 2014: 67). The increasing power of the internet as a method for reaching audiences is irrefutable; however, in Canada there remain clear signs of life in traditional broadcasting, and the online world may pose a whole new set of challenges for the CBC.

The Canadian communications system is a distinct model upon the global stage. In a pioneering study of Canadian broadcasting, Frank Peers concluded, 'A unique Canadian system of broadcasting endures. It reflects values different from those prevailing in the British or American systems. It not only mirrors the Canadian experience, but helps define it' (Peers, 1969: 3). This Canadian experience incorporates two official languages across a large geography within a broadcasting system that offers public broadcasting, required Canadian content, as well as an abundance of American programming, often via Canadian-owned private broadcasters. The Canadian public broadcaster has never enjoyed the prominence of many of its European counterparts but has always existed as 'an enclave within a broader industry' (Raboy, 1995: 105). Canada was used as an exemplar of modern broadcasting by scholars like Richard Collins (Collins, 1990) who noted Canada's unique approach to issues increasingly faced by worldwide national media regulators at the dawn of the 1990s (private/public system, multicultural/multilingual programming, domestic quotas).

I have previously argued that, despite a history of distinct methods to media governance, it has been some time since Canada developed a truly innovative approach to media policy (Taylor, 2013). Canada's position on important shifts such as digital television and changes in spectrum policy has by and large mirrored the American decisions, usually after a suitably restrained two-year delay. Since 1999, Canada's regulatory approach to online programming could best be described as 'wait and see' (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC 1999-84; 2009-329)).

The same culture of caution is not visible in *A Space For Us All*. The current CBC plan is indeed bold; I argue often unnecessarily so. Other jurisdictions are not in such a hurry to devalue the role of broadcasting. Current Ofcom data shows that, while dropping slightly, traditional TV viewing in 2014 accounted for 85% of audio-visual viewing of programmes in the UK (Ofcom, 2015: 162). In 2014, Ofcom released a discussion paper that stated 'we do not currently expect a full switch-off of DTT (Digital Terrestrial Television) until post 2030'

(Ofcom, May 2014). The CBC plan for 2020 does not call for a switch-off of conventional broadcasting, but it clearly states the intention 'is flipping content priorities from a traditional approach to mobile-first' (14). The plan is for a 'smaller' CBC (1). In many ways, *A Space For Us All* accommodates government cutbacks and limits the outreach of the national public broadcaster, all under the guise of digital progress.

I argue Canadian public broadcasting is too far ahead of the curve in the digital environment. The CBC has taken a technology-driven plunge into digital streaming that will, at least for the foreseeable future, damage its ability to offer universal service to Canadians and to fulfil its obligations under the 1991 Broadcasting Act. The wider political project of Canada has always featured strong pull from the regions that can prove a perpetual challenge to a national vision. The online world, as championed by the current CBC administration, lacks the sense of political community that a public broadcaster is supposed to inform and engage. There is already demonstrable evidence that Canadian public broadcasting's jump to the online world is premature.

While CBC management appears to view the traditional broadcasting sector as 'old media', current Canadian audience data offer a more nuanced picture. Traditional broadcasting has proven surprisingly resilient in the face of new distribution technologies. The discussion concerning challenges of 'post-broadcasting' has been commonplace since the 1990s (Brookes, 1998; Negroponte, 1995; Miller and Allen, 1995) but at this point broadcasting has yet to cede its place of dominance in mass communications. Compared to true upheavals brought about by digitalization as seen in print and music industries, the broadcasting world has been relatively stable.

Despite my criticisms of the CBC's current approach, I want to recognize how the Canadian public broadcaster faces the future with the fiscal equivalent of one hand tied behind its back. The transition as proposed in *A Space For Us All* has obvious cost savings, triggered by significant and prolonged pattern of Canadian government austerity measures. Among 18 major Western countries in 2009, Canada had the third lowest level of public funding on a per-capita basis for its public broadcaster (Nordicity, 2011). At \$34 per citizen, Canada's level of funding was 60% less than the \$87 average across the other countries in the study. According to the CBC 2013–2014 annual report there will be a further decrease in per-capita funding from \$33 to \$29 in 2014–2015, when Federal Budget 2012 cost reduction initiatives will be fully implemented (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2014b). While my article is critical of recent CBC approaches to fulfilling its mandate, one must be cognizant of the very real financial restraints faced by Canada's public broadcaster.

Nevertheless, there are clear shortcomings in the CBC's leap into the post-broadcasting era and enthusiastic embrace of all things mobile. This is not necessarily a recent phenomenon: the CBC's move has been in development for some time. In this article, I will document how the CBC aggressively moved away from the traditional freely accessible OTA model during the decade preceding

Canada's digital television transition. I will then examine the CBC's public plan to emphasize digital streaming, and argue that Canada's public broadcaster is premature in its efforts to distance itself from the 'old media' of television, at significant cost to what is, and should be, expected of a public broadcaster. Clear examples from the 2015 federal election and a recent service offered in the city of Hamilton demonstrate the continued centrality of broadcasting at the local and national level.

Raymond Williams describes broadcasting as 'a technology of varied messages to a general public' (Williams, 1975: 13). It can't be all things to all people, but it can provide a foundation for a national discussion. This key element doesn't change under a digital paradigm. As Marc Raboy notes, the challenge for public broadcasters in this new century is how 'to invent something new, remembering that broadcasting service is first of all a public good' (Raboy, 1995: 14). The CBC plan tabled in 2014 is clearly new, but its adherence to public broadcasting principles is contentious.

The 1991 *Broadcasting Act* mandates that the programming the CBC provides should

- be predominantly and distinctively Canadian;
- reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences, while serving the special needs of those regions;
- actively contribute to the flow and exchange of cultural expression;
- be in English and in French, reflecting the different needs and circumstances of each official language community, including the particular needs and circumstances of English and French linguistic minorities;
- strive to be of equivalent quality in English and in French;
- contribute to shared national consciousness and identity;
- be made available throughout Canada by the most appropriate and efficient means and as resources become available for the purpose;
- reflect the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada (Canada, 1991: 3.1.m).

This is a difficult mandate for any broadcaster and the ability of the CBC to deliver on these requirements in the post-broadcasting world it has enthusiastically embraced is, at the very least, questionable.

Public broadcasting in Canada

Indeed, one can argue that the founding of the CBC was one of the great nation-building exercises in Canadian history, comparable in scale only to John A. Macdonald's National Policy of 1891, the building of the social welfare state after World War II, and the creation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1981. (Taras, 2015: 228)

The CBC, and the French service Radio Canada, have always been imbued with a stronger sense of purpose than simply providing Canadian programming. Geography determines that American broadcasting signals have always been accessible in the populous southern areas of Canada; economies of scale mean that it has always been cheaper to air popular American programmes on Canadian broadcasters than to produce domestic content. This was the reality of Canada long before the rest of the world encountered the 'globalized' media. The expansive geography of Canada also provides the substantial obstacle of a vast hinterland that is often disconnected from the political and economic centres, yet citizens there pay into national public broadcasting system via taxes. With the notable exception of French Canada (which has always supported domestic content) Canadian broadcasting is a construction of evolving policies and regulations designed to support and protect a Canadian media industry and provide a platform for Canadian voices.

The CBC is not only charged with telling Canadian stories, but doing so in such a way as to create a sense of community in the face of strong media ties to the south that have never waned in 100 years of broadcasting. A large part of Canada's historic search for identity is built upon distancing itself from the United States. In the area of mass media, where the U.S. quickly established itself as the undisputed global leader, this separation has proven a formidable challenge. After public broadcasting was established in Canada in 1932, Prime Minister William Bennett (a Conservative) reportedly said to public broadcasting advocate Graham Spry: 'It may well be Graham, that you have saved Canada for the British Commonwealth' (Nash, 1994: 87). While the cultural ties to the UK may have waned over the last century, there is still a strong sense that the media, in particular the CBC, is a key part of the national social and cultural fabric.

Despite the centrality of the CBC to Canadian cultural life, Canada has never been 'all in' for public broadcasting. The CBC operates on a hybrid approach of government funding coupled with advertising revenue. Even CBC radio, which has been advertising free since the 1970s, recently saw advertising introduced to CBC Radio 2. Of the \$1.3 billion in CBC revenues in 2014, 55% was derived from Parliamentary appropriations (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 2015: 77). Government funding for the CBC comes via an annual parliamentary stipend, making long-term planning a challenge. There is no 10-year Royal Charter such as the BBC. There have been high profile challenges to this piecemeal funding model, including a prominent 2003 study of Canadian broadcasting entitled *Our Cultural Sovereignty*: 'The Committee recommends that Parliament provide the CBC with increased and stable multi-year funding (3 to 5 years) so that it may adequately fulfill its mandate as expressed in the *Broadcasting Act*' (Canada Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, 2003: Recommendation 6.1). No action was taken on this recommendation. Successive governments of the last 13 years have demonstrated little political appetite to consider the Committee's recommendation and alter the current funding dynamic for the national public broadcaster.

Public sources of income for the CBC have dropped sharply in recent years. In 2008 the CBC received \$1.2 billion in annual revenue from the government; in 2014 that number was \$715 million (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 2015: 77; Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, 2011). Private ownership has always been part of the wider Canadian mass media environment. However, talk of market forces within Canadian broadcasting must always be taken with a substantial grain of salt. Domestic ownership laws shield this market from much of the wider global economic forces in media, and benefits such as much-carry regulations for distribution undertakings and local advertising rights promote and protect local private broadcasters.

Five large vertically integrated companies (BCE, Cogeco, Quebecor, Rogers and Shaw) accounted for over 87% of total Canadian broadcasting revenues in 2014 (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 2015: 37). The most profitable area of the broadcasting sector is distribution, a sector largely controlled by these same five large companies. In 2014, distribution accounted for 53% for broadcasting revenues, television 38% and radio 9%. Canadian television advertising revenues dropped in recent years, but the sky is hardly falling: television advertising revenue dropped 0.8% in 2014 (Powell, 2015). There are clearly ominous signs on the horizon as digital advertising in Canada surpassed print, TV and radio for the first time in 2014 (Ostrikoff, 2014). The advertising market has proven very fickle in recent years and the CBC does not have the revenue generated from distribution to offer long-term stability. Following a drop in advertising revenue in 2013, the CBC saw its advertising revenue jump almost 19% in 2014, largely due to coverage of the Winter Olympic games (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2014b: 9).

Though I take issue with the planned rapid leap to digital mobility, in many ways it is amazing the CBC is able to provide the services it does to Canadians. CBC/Radio Canada offers television, radio and online services, in both official languages, as well as First Nation's languages in the far north. Despite showing the bruises of the last decades, the CBC by and large remains, as observed by UK scholar Richard Collins in 1990, 'the flagship of Canada's communication and cultural policy' (Collins, 1990: 6).

The digital television transition: Falling short

At the 2015 World Radiocommunications Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, European broadcasters scored a major victory when they maintained control of the lower UHF frequency band (470–694 MHz), despite efforts of mobile carriers to have the frequencies allocated for wireless broadband (Briel, 2015). This decision will not be revisited until 2023, three years after CBC plans to make mobile their top priority. Europe clearly sees a future for OTA broadcasting. Given Canada's prominent cable and satellite distribution, there was much less demand to protect these television frequencies from the switch to mobile broadband access. Broadcasting in Canada has largely lost out to interests of mobile service providers. Recent Canadian

history demonstrates that the CBC has for some time been moving away from providing the accessibility provided by traditional broadcasting.

The digital television transition was a watershed moment for public service broadcasting in Canada. The CBC fought a sustained battle against Canada's media regulator, the CRTC, who mandated a national transition from analogue to digital broadcasting for September 2011. Despite its years of participation in the digital transition, the CBC struggled to switch its television transmitters across the country from analogue to digital (Taylor, 2013). In the end, the CBC had to concede defeat and was unable to complete the mandated transition in many regions of Canada. This was the product of years of trying various avenues to avoid the costs of switching to digital broadcasting at the levels of coverage to which Canadians had grown accustomed.

In 2002, the CBC proposed to the CRTC that a 'realistic approach' to ensuring its television network services remained available in small and remote communities would be to only use OTA digital transmission to serve residents of the 10 largest markets, representing 70% of Canada's population. It would serve the remaining 30% by satellite (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 2002-31). The CBC abandoned this proposal, but it demonstrates that for more than a decade the CBC has been exploring ways to move away from the legacy network that provided near universal access for Canadians.

The CBC's proposals on the digital transition became increasingly bold and further removed from traditional public service obligations. In 2007, the CBC proposed to the CRTC that an OTA television subscriber fee be created to ensure it would be able to continue to fulfil its regulatory obligation of accessibility to Canadians (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 2007-53). The proposed fee would in essence be an extra tax on top of annual government funding. The proposal was a thinly veiled effort by the public broadcaster to access another revenue stream and the CRTC denied the proposal. It clearly showed a pattern of a Canadian public broadcaster looking for new, less expensive, ways to fulfil its mandate.

In August 2011, less than 1 month before the scheduled digital OTA transition, the CBC received permission from the CRTC to maintain analogue broadcasting transmissions in 22 markets. This was a clear concession by the national media regulator that the national public broadcaster could not complete the required digital switch. Private broadcasters Bell and Global were able to complete the transition. This reprieve proved insufficient and the CBC sought a further extension almost immediately. Then, faced with 10% budget cuts in 2012, CBC president Hubert T. Lacroix announced the CBC would not upgrade the 600 transmitters in these remaining regions, saving the CBC \$10 million (Lacroix, 2012).

OTA CBC is currently only available in large urban centres in Canada. The patchwork digital television transition served notice that the CBC was changing distribution strategies and foreshadowed an embracing of the post-broadcasting era.

The digital future: A space for whom?

The continuing ability of the CBC to deliver on its mandate to contribute to national consciousness and identity suffered a strong blow in November of 2013 when it lost the rights to broadcast professional hockey games in Canada. Over decades, the CBC had built Hockey Night in Canada into a national institution. After more than 60 years of broadcasting professional hockey, many Canadians viewed hockey and the CBC as synonymous. However, the CBC could not compete against the \$5.2 billion bid by Rogers for all broadcast rights for 12 years. In the ensuing negotiations between Rogers and the CBC, Rogers worked a deal to broadcast some games on the CBC extensive broadcast network, with Rogers taking all advertising revenue. Despite talk of streaming and multiple platforms, it was for the CBC's legacy broadcasting network that Rogers wanted to access.

The studio for Rogers' new Hockey Night in Canada was constructed within space rented at the CBC headquarters office in downtown Toronto. The new host for Rogers Hockey Night was poached from the CBC.

After this major setback, both financially and in morale, the CBC responded with a dramatic reshaping of how it approaches its mandate. In July 2014, CBC introduced its new five-year plan, *A Space For Us All*, outlining a radical overhaul of the public broadcaster by 2020.

Here is how the CBC describes the central pillars of its future direction:

Broad to focused: narrowing the focus and making choices about the services and content that will drive intense engagement with consciously targeted audience segments

Conventional to digital: a digital transition strategy, in line with audience behaviour and technology advances; protecting current revenue and share, while anticipating migration;

Producer to multiplatform broadcaster: shifting energy and resources from production, to being a modern broadcaster;

Fixed to flexible: letting go of the infrastructure, systems and processes that are less necessary in today's world, and embracing flexibility, scalability, agility, simplicity, and partnership; and,

Cost-cutting to financial sustainability: moving away from the mindset of "cost-cutting to survive," and setting a course for long-term financial viability that allows investments in a strong CBC/Radio-Canada for future generations. (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2014a: 9)

The announcement of the plan was accompanied by much talk of a 'new' CBC/Radio Canada, and forward-looking statements that this approach would allow the

public broadcaster to ‘seize new opportunities’ (cbc.ca, 2014). It is fair to ask if this truly places the CBC at the vanguard of public service media, or if *A Space For Us All* merely offers cost-cutting strategies hiding behind a façade of modern digital communications? There are certainly questions to be raised by each of the key points.

1. *Broad to focused* essentially runs contradictory to the one-to-many nature of broadcasting. This serves neither Williams’ idea of a ‘general public’ nor the Broadcasting Act’s mandate for a ‘shared’ national experience. It clearly is contrary to the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, a forum where citizens engage as a singular ‘public’ with common issues of national significance (Habermas, 1991).
2. *Conventional to digital* may sound forward thinking but other Canadian broadcasters have not been as eager to leave conventional broadcasting. In Rogers’ June 2014 press release for its newly acquired 2014–2015 NHL hockey schedule, the first sentence promoted ‘double the number of games on free over-the-air TV’ (Sportsnet, 2014). The wider CBC plan for ‘anticipating migration’ to digital is a dangerous game, since many new platforms are in their relative infancy.
3. *Producer to multiplatform broadcaster* seems to imply that the modern broadcaster has no original content. This is misleading since the CBC already sought independent production for much of its programming for more than 10 years (Canadian Media Guild, 2006).
4. *Fixed to flexible* makes some enormous, presently unfounded, assumptions about the nature of media by 2020. Conventional television is clearly no longer the only source of programming, but it remains a formidable force for the foreseeable future. Once the infrastructure is let go, there is little budget or political will to bring it back. The savings gained by shutting down OTA television transmitters in 2011 worked out to roughly 30 cents per Canadian.
5. *Cost cutting to financial stability* is of course music to the ears of a series of Canadian governments, both Liberal and Conservative, that have steadily chipped away at the financial foundation of the CBC. The problem remains that true financial stability is largely out of the hands of the CBC until there is a change in the government funding structure. No amount of cost cuts can change that.

It is very challenging to see true public broadcasting vision in the CBC’s plan for 2020. It remains largely a document trumpeting digital growth and the ensuing cost savings. The national public broadcaster is enthusiastically embracing a post-broadcasting era when there is ample evidence that broadcasting is alive and well.

The stubborn resilience of broadcasting

By the 1980s Canada was ‘one of the most extensively cabled societies among Western countries’ (Doern, 1999: 521). The impetus for cable in Canada was

access to American channels. English Canada has always had a seemingly insatiable appetite for American programming. What started as a pirate industry, cable (and satellite) distribution, has been taken into the broadcasting regulatory fold and now forms the most profitable part of the broadcasting system (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 2015). Canadian media productions largely rely upon a tax on distribution companies that is distributed via the Canadian Media Fund.

Canada was the first country outside the United States to offer Netflix and many traditional television providers have seen this extremely popular service as a sign of their immanent collapse. Netflix launched in Canada in September 2010 and by April, 2011 broadcasters were petitioning the CRTC to tax the service in an attempt to limit its explosive growth (Krashinsky, 2011). Canadian broadcasters are seeking regulatory assistance in the face of yet another threat from south of the border (Bradshaw, 2014).

Not only do I disagree with the doomsayer's forecasts, I argue they are reaching precisely the wrong conclusion from the current environment. Available data demonstrate the stubborn resiliency of the so-called traditional media, even in the face of a strong Netflix presence in Canada.

In January 2013, the Television Bureau of Canada released a report entitled 'Television Truths' which dispelled myths around TV viewing habits – myths upon which the CBC is staking much of its future. It found that 94% of Canada's population is still connected to television through a broadcast distributor or by OTA signals, and the number is increasing (Television Bureau of Canada, 2013).

Duncan Stewart, previous director of research Deloitte Canada (now at Rogers) and author of a 2013 report on the future of television, noted that the number of people who pay for television in the U.S. and Canada is not down 10 or 5%, it was actually up about 264,000 people in 2013 (Hoffman, 2013). More recent 2014 CRTC data demonstrate a 1.0% drop in television distribution subscriptions in 2013–2014, while revenues somehow still increased 2.9% (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 2014: 119). Television distributors still manage to increase prices and overwhelmingly keep their subscriber base despite competition from over-the-top services.

Canadian broadcasting is a healthy industry. 1% is hardly a cause for alarm for a distribution sector that had reached near saturation with over 90% of Canadians as customers. Compare this with the print newspaper industry that has seen an almost 60% drop in subscription rates since 2006 according to the PEW Research Centre. The same study showed only 5% of Americans receive their newspaper in a mobile only format (Mitchell, 2015). The CBC seems quite eager to abandon a broadcasting model that is relatively robust in the wider media world.

The mobile sector, while increasingly significant, simply does not yet engage citizens at anywhere near the numbers of conventional broadcasting. The Stanley Cup hockey playoffs are a rite of spring in Canada. The 2015 ratings data from this sporting and cultural event dear to Canadian viewers further demonstrate the continued prominence of traditional broadcasting.

The final series between two non-Canadian teams drew an average per game audience of 2.39 million viewers over six games. Under its agreement with Rogers, the CBC was allowed to stream the games on its website, which drew an average of 19,000 viewers or .01% of the overall viewership. Over the entire final round of six games Rogers had 504,000 views of its mobile content (not full games) on its website (Vlessing, 2015). These numbers indicate growth in the digital mobile market but, if hockey in Canada is any indication, it is certainly premature to say we are on the cusp of the post-broadcasting era.

Outside of the hockey rink, the Canadian political arena in 2015 provided another clear example of the continued relevance of traditional broadcasting. This case also provides a 21st-century example of the sustained role of broadcasting within a democracy. Unlike other recent elections, the series of leaders debates in the 2015 Canadian federal election were not carried by the traditional broadcasting consortium, which includes the CBC and the major conventional television channels. Instead they were carried by smaller channels such as the Cable Public Affairs Channel and were available for streaming online on Facebook and YouTube. The result, according to the *Globe* and *Mail* (the national newspaper that hosted one such leaders debate in partnership with Google Canada) television critic John Doyle, was 'a national disgrace' (Doyle, 2015). The paltry viewership of these important democratic events speaks to the continued relevance of broadcasting, despite the prevalence of online options.

The 2011 election debates, which were carried by major television broadcasters, drew over 10 million viewers; whereas the most watched debate of 2015 drew roughly 3.8 million viewers via smaller Rogers television properties such as Omni and City TV (Haupt, 2015). Rogers Media, who hosted one debate via its magazine Maclean's, noted that the online video of its debate had been started 278,000 times on YouTube, Facebook, Macleans.ca and OMNI.ca (Haupt, 2015). In its magazine, Maclean's tried to spin this viewership as 'huge numbers' (Hutchins, 2015). However, these small broadcaster and online numbers clearly pale in comparison to the power of broadcasting to amass a large audience. The French language debates, carried by a consortium of French language broadcasters, received stronger viewership. The overwhelming majority of English Canadians never saw a leader's debate in the 2015 election, though the debates were accessible to everyone online.

There is clear and present data to support the idea that broadcasting still has a great deal of life left in it. In the hockey arena and the political ring audience numbers demonstrate that the online world, while clearly growing, does not have nearly the social impact of broadcasting.

The Hamilton experiment

A Space For Us All reaffirms the importance of a regional presence across the country and commits to being even more local than today, but at less cost (CBC, 2014).

Canadian public broadcasting already has a fully digital local experiment in progress, and the early results are not promising. If this is the future, as foreseen by *A Space For Us All*, the results may leave even the most enthusiastic CBC supporters questioning if a mobile public broadcaster can have the same attachment to a local community.

The city of Hamilton is approximately one hour west of Toronto and offers a controlled experiment in the strengths and shortcomings of a post-broadcasting, fully digital public broadcaster. Hamilton CBC, an online service, was announced in 2011 as part of what CBC dubbed their local expansion plan. Until this point Hamilton, with a population of over half a million citizens, was Canada's largest city without a local CBC radio affiliate. However, due to a lack of available radio frequencies, CBC was unable to offer a radio station and instead launched a digital only service in May 2012. This was the public broadcaster's brave new entry into the world of a fully digital public service media service.

Thus, we have a contemporary example of what the future of the streamlined, online CBC envisioned by *A Space For Us All* might resemble. The first two years of the service demonstrate how the digital platform has improved local media for Hamilton but remains a poor substitute for actual broadcasting.

Over the summer of 2014, a local Hamilton organization, Civicplan, conducted a survey of resident knowledge and use of the two-year-old CBC Hamilton digital service. There were 217 responses to the survey from across the city. There were clearly some positive results: 83% indicated that they are aware of the CBC Hamilton digital service; 74% use it on a daily or weekly basis; and respondents indicated that CBC Hamilton is an important alternative to local commercial media.

However, other results of the survey should serve as a warning for the mass appeal of the digital platform.

- Close to 70% indicated that the local digital service was not meeting their expectations of the national public broadcaster in their city;
- 91% wanted to see local audio programming on par with other communities, such as Toronto or Kitchener/Waterloo.

Close to 90% of respondents indicated they would like a traditional local CBC radio station. If that wasn't possible the respondents suggested CBC Hamilton form partnerships with other radio stations to broadcast CBC Hamilton content (CivicPlan, 2014).

Simply put, Hamiltonians surveyed were happy to have increased local coverage, but they wanted a broadcaster.

The CivicPlan research was not alone in its findings. Another study based out of McMaster University in 2014 saw similar shortcomings for the CBC Hamilton service. The study, led by Dr Philip Savage, used focus groups and surveys to measure local satisfaction with the CBC online initiative. Focus group results 6 months after the CBC Hamilton launch found the common refrain was that the

service was ‘considered sub par’ with a ‘shallow embrace of social media integration’ (Savage, 2014: 16).

The study recognized that 6 months is a limited time frame in which for a new service to gain audience traction, so a similar approach of surveys and focus groups was employed in April 2014, two years after the CBC Hamilton launch. While there was some growth in satisfaction, overall the results were not impressive for the new CBC online initiative. Of CBC Hamilton users polled, 58% used it for less than 10 min a day (Savage, 2014: 20). The McMaster study findings reinforce the continued significance of media beyond the internet. The majority of respondents claimed they do not get most of their news online and only one-fifth strongly agreed that online news is their preference (Savage, 2014: 21).

Clearly in this significant test case, digital CBC service is seen as a distant second to traditional broadcasting. In a 2015 speech, CRTC Chair Jean-Pierre Blais noted that ‘over 40% of viewing between 7 and 11 p.m. in the English-language market and over 50% in the French-language market is to local television stations. What’s more, news programming aired by local stations boasts a 40% viewing share’ (Blais, 2015). Local broadcasting still matters to Canadians. An online, mobile presence is a poor substitute.

In the vital area of news, the local broadcaster is still essential.

Conclusion

Technological upheaval is not new to Canadian broadcasting: video recorders, cable distribution and direct-to-home satellite were all examples of change that challenged public and private foundations of the system. As noted in an exhaustive 2008 study of Canadian broadcasting regulation ‘Although today’s new technologies may pose almost insurmountable challenges to broadcasting regulation, they are not the first to do so’ (Salter and Odartey-Wellington, 2008: 573). Though this book predates the explosion of smart phones and the growth of tablet computers, the point that Canadian broadcasting must not surrender its normative foundation in the face of technological change remains valid.

There is little doubt that mobile, digital media is experiencing explosive growth and must be part of the service provided by a modern public broadcaster. However, there is evidence that the CBC might be too eager to move away from broadcasting in order to reap the financial savings of mobile digital service.

In her book on public broadcasting online, Benedetta Brevini cites four key principles to maintain the democratic and cultural potential of public service broadcasting in an online world: citizenship, universality, quality and trust (Brevini, 2013).

The CBC has thus far managed to maintain Canada’s trust. In a 2014 survey by Canadian marketing company IPSOS, the CBC ranked 13th in the top 100 brands in Canada and ranks highest among media companies (cbc.ca, 2015).

The citizens of Hamilton are concerned that the CBC service they are provided with online is not nearly as high quality as their neighbouring cities with more

traditional public broadcasters. Quality of CBC programming faces pressures from a decreasing budget and loss of revenue from popular shows such as hockey broadcasts.

The universality of the television system was compromised by an incomplete OTA transition, leaving many Canadians to rely on privately owned distribution companies to access the public broadcaster. Digital platforms are increasingly universally accessible in Canada. According to recent CRTC data, all Canadian homes in urban centres can access broadband internet and 84% of households in rural communities (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 2014: 171). However, the numbers for online viewing demonstrate that the mobile realm has far to go before it has nearly the societal impact of broadcasting.

The impact of this fragmentation via digital on Canadian citizenship has yet to be determined. This is one of the great challenges for the CBC as it embraces the post-broadcasting era. How do you reconcile the divergent directions of reflecting the country, as mandated in the 1991 Broadcasting Act, with the 2020 plan to focus on narrower audience groups? *A Space For Us All* makes the bold claim that it will accomplish both, but the early signs are not encouraging.

Canada still requires informed and politically engaged citizens. It is the role of the public broadcaster to act as a facilitator in the national political discussion. Mobile digital platforms may indeed eventually offer that bridge between citizens but there is clearly still a strong role for traditional broadcasting for the foreseeable future.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Funding for this article is from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Grant.

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