



Canadian Media Guild

La Guilde canadienne des médias
TNG Canada / CWA

A cry for help

**Canadian Media Guild submission to the Standing Committee on Canadian
Heritage on the role of CBC/Radio-Canada in the 21st Century**

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www.cmg.ca

Executive Summary

The front-line employees of CBC/Radio-Canada appeal to the Parliament of Canada to get beyond the political impasse plaguing CBC/Radio-Canada and close the chapter on a difficult period in Canada's public broadcasting history.

As a public media institution, CBC/Radio-Canada has an important role to play in the 21st century. As a series of hubs for Canadian cultural development in a variety of media – radio, TV, internet – and languages, CBC/Radio-Canada continues to represent our country's best mechanism for exchanging ideas, information and creative works, witnessing and reflecting upon national and regional events, and sharing laughs and tears.

We believe the renewal of CBC/Radio-Canada will require at least three things from Parliament:

- **A ten-year mandate that covers broad programming expectations;**
- **An increased annual base parliamentary allocation, indexed to inflation and stable through the term of the 10-year mandate;**
- **A new approach to CBC/Radio-Canada governance that ensures both independence from political interference and accountability directly to Parliament and the people of Canada.**

This is a cry for help.

The men and women who report to work at CBC/Radio-Canada across the country often have mixed feelings about the public broadcaster, much like the rest of the people of Canada. They know that, in principle, it is one of the country's most important national institutions. But employees also know, first hand, about the meanness of spirit that has infected the place over the last two decades, a meanness largely bred from the tight-fistedness and indifference of those who have held the political power, and the purse strings, in this country.

It is time to get beyond the political impasse plaguing CBC/Radio-Canada and close the chapter on this difficult period in Canada's public broadcasting history.

The Canadian Media Guild, which represents 5,500 employees at CBC/Radio-Canada outside Quebec and Moncton, is very pleased to contribute to this parliamentary process to examine the broadcaster's role in the 21st century. We would like to thank you for taking it on.

Make no mistake, CBC/Radio-Canada has as important a role in this millenium as it had in the previous one. As a series of hubs for Canadian cultural development in a variety of media – radio, TV, internet – and languages, CBC/Radio-Canada continues to represent our country's best mechanism for exchanging ideas, information and creative works, witnessing and reflecting upon national and regional events, and sharing laughs and tears.

There is no clear answer to the question of what is Canadian culture. There is no single institution, and certainly no company, that defines what it is to be Canadian in this era. However, CBC/Radio-Canada can and should provide the means by which Canadians continually define and redefine themselves – to each other and to the world.

And as a multi-party group of Parliamentarians with a keen interest in this country's democratic and cultural health, you are perhaps the best placed to lead the revitalization of what could now be called Canada's public media network.

We urge you to help us stop the narrowing role of CBC/Radio-Canada as simply another player in a de-regulating broadcast industry, as a Corporation intent on monetizing real estate assets, and as a network obsessed with measuring the relative value of eyeballs glued to a TV screen. This anemic vision for CBC/Radio-Canada is old news.

We invite you to look to a real future for CBC/Radio-Canada, and to make sure that the necessary decisions are made on Parliament Hill to make that future possible.

Here's what we think it will take:

- **A ten-year mandate from Parliament that covers broad programming expectations;**
- **An increased annual base parliamentary allocation, indexed to inflation and stable through the term of the 10-year mandate;**
- **A new approach to CBC/Radio-Canada governance that ensures both independence from political interference and accountability directly to Parliament and the people of Canada.**

The services of CBC/Radio-Canada

Since 1936, when the CBC first took on the role of connecting the country over the airwaves, it has enabled Canada's diverse cultural groups a chance to discover, acknowledge, and motivate each other, and to develop together *as* Canadians.

CBC/Radio-Canada employees have long been leaders in broadcast technologies and have responded to new technologies by creating user-friendly internet platforms that offer worldwide access to CBC and Radio-Canada's rich and reliable information, including news, programming and archives.

Recent history at CBC/Radio-Canada reveals a disjuncture between the radio and television services. After going commercial-free in the 1970s, the radio services developed a distinctive voice and role among the clutter of radio frequencies in urban Canada, while often continuing to serve as one of the only options for rural and Northern Canadians.

The radio services of CBC and Radio-Canada have indeed become synonymous with public broadcasting in this country, creating a fine balance between national and local content. But the country has outgrown the existing radio network: CBC/Radio-Canada has pointed out that it is not able to adequately serve growing urban regions with a truly local service, a reality that unfortunately makes public radio less relevant in key parts of the country, including Kamloops, Red Deer and Kitchener.

CBC/Radio-Canada should be required to present a plan to augment local and regional programming, including enhanced Northern services, on all platforms and receive dedicated parliamentary funding for that plan. La Chaîne culturelle and CBC Radio 2 should continue as commercial-free national radio networks devoted to arts and cultural programming.

Meanwhile, the television services of CBC/Radio-Canada have increasingly turned to commercial revenues to survive a lack of public funding. In fact, senior CBC

management have recently referred to the commercialized Channel 4 in the UK, and not the BBC, as the model for CBC-TV. Together with the ever-growing fragmentation of TV viewership, the ratings-driven strategies of CBC-TV and Radio-Canada have relegated them to the status of more, or less (in the case of the English main service), successful niche commercial stations. In both cases, however, leading-edge news and current affairs programming continues to allow public television to stand out in that area. **CBC/Radio-Canada should maintain and continue to enhance its local, national and international news and current affairs programming; the mandate for TV programming should centre on incubating and supporting Canadian creativity and amateur sport that cannot, or will not, be supported by private-sector broadcasters.**

For their part, the pioneering Internet services are now caught in a never-never land of contradictions: they are neither fully commercial, nor commercial-free. In the early 1990s, when CBC/Radio-Canada's mandate was last defined in legislation, internet services were not yet a consideration in their own right. That means that CBC/Radio-Canada has never been funded specifically to provide Internet services. **It is time to define CBC/Radio-Canada's internet services as public portals for news, analysis, exchange, historical and cultural archives, as well as cultural and entertainment programming, and to provide a specific public funding stream. Wherever possible, the information and programming should be available to Canadians without cost and without commercials.**

Some people have suggested that it is time to commercialize CBC-TV for having lost its distinctiveness, or for being somehow unnecessary, in the multi-channel universe. We could not disagree more. Television continues to be the most powerful cultural medium in Canada. It is where people turn for news in a crisis and diversion when they get home from work. For good or ill, it is where children spend much of their free time. The commercial fare cluttering up the multi-channel universe does not eliminate the need for television that is in the public interest, for example: trustworthy news, cutting-edge current affairs, political satire, innovative arts programming and commercial-free children's shows.

Innovative and unique content developed for CBC/Radio-Canada platforms that can't be found anywhere else can be made available for license to other broadcasters in Canada and around the world. We propose that other public broadcasters pay less to use the material than private-sector broadcasters and content distributors. License income could be used to create an incentive fund to produce more original content and for training of CBC/Radio-Canada's artisans.

On all of its media platforms, CBC/Radio-Canada should remain the most important and accessible distributor of Canadian productions and content.

Public media infrastructure

One of the most tragic consequences of the decline in public funding for CBC/Radio-Canada is the dismantling of the very infrastructure and knowledge base that has been developed over decades.

For example, there has been a steady elimination of technical expertise in radio, leading to an audible deterioration in broadcast quality across the English- and French-language networks.

The English services, and particularly TV, are the hardest hit by the latest corporate initiatives that are ostensibly about “saving money.” The following have been, or are in the process of being, dismantled:

- The **communications and public relations functions were contracted out in 2005**, resulting in the loss of decades in combined experience, and a wealth of knowledge about the history and workings of the CBC, among the 34 employees who were terminated. Journalists who cover CBC have told CMG that the quality of media relations has suffered terribly under the new regime, which has had a negative impact on the media coverage of CBC programming.
- The **design department for CBC-TV**, located in Toronto, is **slated to close on May 31** of this year. The department has been creating CBC-TV’s look for the past 54 years, providing set design, carpentry, painting, special effects, wardrobe, props and make-up to CBC and independent productions. The closure will reduce CBC’s ability to make its own television programs and cut the heart out of the state-of-the-art, full-service public broadcasting centre that opened in Toronto only 14 years ago.
- **CBC/Radio-Canada is proposing to eliminate free TV by mothballing its national network of over-the-air transmitters by 2012**, forcing Canadians who live outside the country’s 36 major centres to buy cable or satellite service to access public television. The broadcaster cannot afford to upgrade the existing network to the latest digital technology, which could, with multiplexing, actually permit enhanced broadcasting services for Canadians who live in rural and remote areas of the country. See Appendix A, an article on the future of free TV.

The ability to create, publicize and distribute programming directly to Canadians continues to be fundamental to the role of CBC/Radio-Canada in the 21st century.

CBC/Radio-Canada requires adequate public funding to maintain a production capacity in English Canada, similar to the successful production

centre that Radio-Canada has built and nurtured in Montreal. In addition, the Government of Canada should earmark specific infrastructure money to upgrade CBC/Radio-Canada's over-the-air transmission network over time.

As the union representing front-line employees at CBC/Radio-Canada, we would be remiss if we didn't also point out the tragic human costs of trying to maintain high quality programming with inadequate resources. Our members are committed to the public service they provide and, because there are often too few people to get the job done, they put in far more than regular hours ... and often with no additional compensation. Survey after survey of CBC/Radio-Canada employees over the last decade have pointed to the same problem: job-related stress that has a real impact on peoples' health.

A survey involving more than half of all CBC/Radio-Canada employees taken in 2005 by Professor Jean-Pierre Brun of Laval University revealed that 44% have high levels of psychological distress – a key factor in depression and burnout. Two of the main reasons for the distress were overwork and lack of career or job security.

CBC/Radio-Canada's role in the country's economic development

Although CBC/Radio-Canada is a national institution, it is a vital local force in the economy of every city with a station. Not only is CBC/Radio-Canada an important employer, it also serves as a local hub of activity, expertise and resources for the key arts and cultural sector. Unfortunately, that role has been diminished in many communities across the country due to station closures and cutbacks. For example, as noted above, the closure of the TV design department in Toronto represents a blow to that city's cultural activities and employment base and a missed opportunity to help create stability in a cyclical industry where production is extremely mobile.

The federal government should recognize and support the important function that the public broadcaster plays in Canadian cities by providing adequate, stable funding for CBC/Radio-Canada.

Mandate and funding

CBC/Radio-Canada is not able to carry out its mandate with the parliamentary funding it currently receives. In constant dollars, the public broadcaster gets approximately one-third less from Parliament than it did in 1990. In that same period, it has launched Internet, digital and satellite services in order to be available where Canadians are looking for news, entertainment and cultural programming.

Because of limited funding, adding new services has turned into a zero-sum game where one important service is cut to allow for the introduction of a new one. For example, in 1999/2000, CBC/Radio-Canada cut back local supper-hour TV newscasts from one hour to 30 minutes to cope with budget shortfalls. The communication department and TV design cuts discussed above were made in order to boost CBC-TV's purchase of drama programming for prime time.

We note that, seven years later, CBC/Radio-Canada is re-launching full-hour, local supertime newscasts in recognition of the importance of the service. However, no new funding has been made available for this important initiative. That means the new programs will continue to run on a shoe-string, and quality and employee health and morale will suffer further, or something else will have to be cut to fund them.

The Government of Canada must begin to increase the base parliamentary allocation for CBC/Radio-Canada, bringing it more in line with what other industrialized countries spend on public broadcasting. The Government of Canada currently spends about \$33 per Canadian per year; the average spending in industrialized countries, including the US, is \$80 per capita. Even phasing up to \$45 per Canadian over the next 10-year mandate would help reverse the damage done by previous allocation cuts. The annual allocation should be based on a ten-year mandate and, once the target is reached, indexed to inflation thereafter.

Governing a renewed Canadian public media institution

CBC/Radio-Canada is a public institution, and not a state broadcaster. That means independence from political interference is crucial. But it also means that accountability to the Parliament, and ultimately the people, of Canada is equally important.

The current funding regime risks reducing CBC/Radio-Canada's independence because it is a year-to-year allocation, opening the possibility for governments to exert influence over the broadcaster by threatening to reduce, or withhold, parliamentary funding. That is one of the reasons we have recommended a ten-year, funded mandate (above).

At the same time, the current governance regime at CBC/Radio-Canada impedes public accountability and denies the institution a fully functional stewardship body that can help shape public priorities from month to month, and year to year, between mandate reviews.

The CEO is appointed by the Prime Minister's Office. The members of the CBC/Radio-Canada board are also appointed by the government of the day. The process politicizes the role of CEO and denies the Board the ability to exert any

direct authority over senior management. It also denies Parliament a direct oversight role.

This situation has contributed to a distancing between the Canadian public and their broadcaster, and also to a sense of despair among the people who work for CBC/Radio-Canada. Front-line employees feel direct accountability every day to their audiences and Internet visitors; however, their senior managers don't appear to be governed by a similar sense of direct accountability. That creates situations, such as the lockout in 2005, where the Corporation is not operating in the interests of the public.

We therefore recommend three changes to CBC/Radio-Canada's governance:

- **First, the Board of Directors be appointed by an all-party parliamentary committee, based on an approved set of qualifications related to arts, culture, journalism and broadcasting.**
- **Second, the Board to include an employee representative, to make sure that employee concerns and ideas are shared effectively and quickly with the institution's ultimate decision-makers.**
- **Third, give the Board the authority to hire/fire and oversee the President and CEO.**

Conclusion

The Canadian Media Guild and its members at CBC/Radio-Canada, who demonstrate their commitment to providing public media services to Canadians every day, often under difficult circumstances, urge you to do whatever you can to revitalize this important national institution. You can count on us to do our part.

We would be pleased to provide you with any supplementary information, or specific details, where possible. We are also looking forward to the opportunity to meet with the Committee directly.

Appendix A

Is it really time to pull the plug on free local TV?

[Text of an article that appeared in the Canadian Media Guild's electronic newsletter in December 2006].

Let them buy cable. So say Canada's major broadcasters when asked if they should be required to continue sending out their signals over the air to rabbit ears across the country.

The CRTC, the body that sets the rules on TV in Canada, had wondered if the money that might be used to upgrade the equipment that sends TV signals out over the public airwaves might better spent on programming.

It was a fair question. But then the biggest over-the-air broadcasters – you know the ones: CBC, Radio-Canada, CTV, CHUM, Global, TVA, TQS – seized the opportunity to write the eulogy for free access to TV over the airwaves. Most people already subscribe to cable or satellite, they argue. Why shouldn't everyone be forced to sign up?

HDTV as excuse

The pretext for the CRTC's question, and the broadcasters' answer, is the move to high-definition TV. HDTV not only requires new production equipment and new TV sets. To send an HD signal out over the air, you need a digital transmission system. Broadcasters in Canada still rely almost entirely on analogue transmission. By contrast, broadcasters in most of the world's industrialized countries are well on their way to upgrading their over-the-air transmission systems from analogue to digital.

And even in Germany, where only about 5% of the population picks up TV signals over the air, the public broadcasters were required to fully replace analogue transmission with digital without losing a viewer. It was a matter of public policy.

"We don't have the funds, nor do we think it is necessarily the appropriate public policy to go back to the model that was put in in the seventies of having transmitters in all communities of 500 or more," CBC president Robert Rabinovitch told the CRTC on November 27.

That may sound reasonable, if we were actually talking about communities of 500 people.

In fact, the CBC is proposing to upgrade only 44 TV transmitters across the country for both the English- and French-language services. They would be in “major markets” where the CBC now has a local station. The remaining 618 transmission sites – the repeaters – would be mothballed. It is being called the hybrid plan.

As it turns out, the CBC is already beginning to implement a hybrid plan with a nod from the CRTC. Earlier this year, the CBC affiliate in Kamloops (population 82,000) ended its relationship with the public broadcaster to take up with CanWest global. Arguing that it did not have the money to put up its own transmitter in Kamloops, and that only a small minority rely on over-the-air reception anyway, the CBC was allowed to stay off the air in Kamloops.

“As the highest quality source of programming in Canada, paid for by Canadian tax dollars, it is downright appalling that it is not longer available for everyone,” wrote Kamloops resident Pam Astbury in a testimonial for the CRTC. “We appreciate that media technology is changing and funds are limited, but the CBC must not drop its loyal communities in short-sighted decisions.”

Astbury is part of a group called Save our CBC Kamloops that has gathered more than 2,000 signatures on a petition to restore the CBC to the public airwaves. The group is rallying students and seniors, as well as people who can’t afford, or choose not, to sign on to the 200-channel universe. So far, their pleas have fallen on deaf ears at the CBC.

The local programming challenge

Aside from the loss of free access to the public broadcaster, reliance on cable and satellite brings another headache for TV viewers who live in smaller Canadian centres: how do you get programs from and about your region? And for the local stations themselves, how do you deal with a total loss of control over how and when viewers receive your programming?

In New Brunswick, for example, ExpressVu subscribers have to wait until 6:30pm to view their “CBC News at Six.” And they fare better than StarChoice subscribers, who don’t get the CBC regional news program at all.

A Salmon Arm B.C. (population: 15,210) resident described to the Guild her experiences with TV.

“We are unable to get CBC TV without cable, and are unable to get CBC Newsworld WITH cable,” wrote a frustrated Maggie Cameron. “For four or five years, we were able to get CHBC (now a Global channel), Family Channel, CNN and Knowledge Network on cable for about \$10 per month. We now must pay \$30 per month for the above, plus a lot of U.S. junk that we do not want. We have cancelled cable and lost everything on TV, plus CBC Radio 2.”

Another unanswered question is how residents in Canada's North would get affordable local aboriginal TV programming and life-and-death weather information. Even the Aboriginal Peoples' Television Network is proposing to abandon over-the-air transmission in the North and it is not yet clear what the CBC, which now broadcasts to remote northern communities in eight aboriginal languages, plans to do.

And what about access to French-language programming outside of Quebec?

CBC and the other conventional stations say that cable and satellite companies should be required to carry all local stations and provide them to local customers. Those companies aren't exactly complaining, although they are warning that they would need to expand their own infrastructure to handle all of the new signals, especially once most programming is in bandwidth-inhaling HD.

A study submitted to the CRTC at the start of the hearing concludes that StarChoice and ExpressVu will each have to put two new satellites in space by 2020 to accommodate both HD and carriage of all local stations. The report doesn't focus on cable companies, but obviously they will need to increase their bandwidth as well. The report suggests that "incentives or subsidies" will be put in place to get cable and satellite companies to carry the local stations. But it is silent how much this massive infrastructure upgrade and subsidy/incentive system will cost and who will pay for it.

More clarity needed on costs

In the end, it may make more sense to simply subsidize the upgrade of the over-the-air system, which will likely provide more local and regional broadcasting flexibility, particularly in the event of a localized disaster. At the very least, it would be a good idea for the CRTC and the federal government to examine all of the various costs before simply allowing broadcasters to abandon the airwaves in places they find inconvenient or unprofitable, and before shutting down the public infrastructure built by CBC/Radio-Canada over decades.

So far, we know that CBC/Radio-Canada estimates its digital upgrade would cost \$278 million. It's not small change, but it could be supported by a special grant from the federal government and amortized over a number of years. As well, perhaps the costs could be shared with others, including provincial, community and non-profit broadcasters.

As it turns out, aside from HD, another feature of a digital, over-the-air transmission system is the capacity to broadcast more than one station using a single frequency. That means that in smaller communities, a single transmitter could provide service for as many as six over-the-air stations at standard definition. The folks in Kamloops and Salmon Arm would likely be interested in that possibility.

In the U.K. and Germany, broadcasters have gotten together to provide multiple stations over the air using a single frequency. In some areas, viewers in those countries can get up to 30 channels for free at standard definition. Sounds like a formula to give cable and satellite companies a run for their money. Is that why it's never been considered very seriously in Canada?

Instead of thinking about hybrid delivery, as the CBC has proposed, how about considering hybrid reception? It is not uncommon in North American homes that are hooked up to satellites to have a second or third TV set connected to an antenna precisely to access local TV.

“Conventional broadcasters have turned a tidy profit using the public airwaves,” Barbara Byers of the Canadian Labour Congress pointed out to the CRTC on December 1, where she spoke on behalf of more than three million workers and their families.

“The Broadcasting Act says they continue to have an obligation to serve the public interest,” Byers said. “We need to be asking why they should be suddenly let off the hook when it comes to maintaining their transmission infrastructure. Now, there may be good reasons and a new approach may be a good idea, but we don't think that the issue has been fully explored.”

The Guild urged the CRTC to hold a broader public debate on the issue before simply allowing broadcasters, one by one, to turn off their transmitters.