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CBC: Is There Future?

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Since public broadcasting hit the airwaves The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has been there. Whether it was programming through antique radio sets or one of the three channels broadcast on the first televisions, the CBC has been a main source of entertainment for millions of Canadian families. It is known that the CBC has had a profound past and has contributed greatly to the Canadian broadcasting system. With the proliferation of communications technology, and what some claim to be an ever-expanding choice in media products, is there a continued and defined future for the CBC and public broadcasting? Many Canadians believe the CBC is part of their heritage, but it is these same people that flip past the CBC network interested in watching other, mostly American, broadcasted programs.

Thesis statement: Through the examination of television, and radio content in Canada, growing Canadian preferences, and the CBC Corporation, this essay will explain, with evidence, that unfortunately the future for the CBC is bleak and it is only a matter of time before the famous broadcaster takes its final bow.

The following sections will illustrate that CBC plays an important role in the Canadian media and journalism fields. Yet, a number of economical, political, and social constraints place a huge question mark on the future of this national broadcasting giant. One should note that the CBC has long been seen as the central nervous system of Canadian journalism. It is the largest news-gathering organization in the country and fulfills a number of functions that are seen as critical to national unity and national integration. In a country that spans a quarter of the world's time zones, has to contend against the spreading wave of American popular culture, and has deep linguistic and regional divisions, private broadcasters could simply not be trusted to perform many of the essential tasks of political and cultural preservation (Skene 1999). Private stations would only broadcast programs that would make a

profit. The heavy lifting of public affairs reporting and of reflecting the country to itself was left to the CBC. The point was established clearly in the Broadcasting Act of 1968: “When any conflict arises between the objectives of the National Broadcasting Service (the CBC) and the interests of the private element of the Canadian Broadcasting system ... paramount consideration shall be given to the objectives of the national broadcasting service” (Qtd in Nash 2003, p. 45).

This is a far different conception than the one that seems to guide the American idea of public broadcasting. As producer Mark Starowicz (2000, p. 2) has described the public broadcasting model,

the American system sees public broadcasting as a vitamin supplement for a nutrient deficient diet. If the commercial system is not producing enough concerts, or importing enough British dramas, or under-representing Hispanics, then a public place is reserved where people can raise money to give voice to minority constituencies. This is akin to a United Appeal approach, where good citizens try to provide some safety net for those who are in need

The CBC consists of a number of networks and services. It has two main channels that broadcast in English and French; two twenty-four-hour, all-news channels, Newsworld and the Réseau de L’information; four radio networks; a northern service that airs programs in dozens of aboriginal languages; and Radio Canada International, a radio service that broadcasts to more than ninety countries. Approximately two-thirds of its funding comes from an annual grant from Parliament. The rest is drawn from advertising revenue (Skene 1999).

It has been noted that while the CBC does the big stories well—national unity, Supreme Court decisions, the future of Medicare, trade disputes—private broadcasters such as CTV and Global do well on the smaller stories, such as human

interest or crime stories. CBC news reports tend to be considerably longer and much harder-hitting and more disturbing than those that appear on private stations (Nash 2003).

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More important perhaps is that the CBC now faces increased competition for an audience that has become increasingly fragmented. Where the public broadcaster once had the field to itself on programming directed at women, Aboriginals, children, seniors, ethnic minorities, and hockey fans, it now has to compete against a myriad of channels targeted at each of these constituencies. With most Canadians now having access to close to one hundred channels on cable or satellite, the CBC has seen its audience numbers fall dramatically. According to Nielsen ratings, the audience share (among those who receive cable) devoted to specialty channels grew sharply from 29 percent in 1997 to 38 percent in 2000. The viewing of conventional Canadian TV fell from 52 percent in 1997 to 46 percent in 2000 (Television 2001, p. 3)

Elihu Katz, an Israeli scholar who has given a great deal of thought to the effects that media have had on nation-building, believes that the dividing the audience into smaller and smaller groups can be destructive to nation-states. Katz asks:

Why are governments contributing to the erosion of nation-states and national cultures? Why don't they see that more leads to less to insignificance... to end- less distraction, to the atomization and evacuation of public space? Why

don't they see that national identity and citizen participation are compromised? Why don't they realize that they're contributing directly to the erosion of the enormous potential which television has to enlighten and unite populations into the fold of national cultures? (Qtd in Starowitz 1996, pp. 239-240)

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Overall, it is clear that CBC is losing in its numerous battles against the federal government, private broadcasters, and sweeping American culture. Too many dilemmas, both financial and political, make the operations of this national broadcaster difficult. One does not doubt the importance of the CBC or the company's role in the Canadian journalism. What is questioned, however, is the ability of the CBC to survive and continue functioning in the future.

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