CBC RADIO AND TELEVISION'S ROLE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN QUEBEC

ABSTRACT

CBC plays a unique role in community building in Quebec. This role goes well beyond its primary role to inform, enlighten and entertain Canadians. For Quebec's English speaking population, CBC is a bridge between disparate linguistic and geographic communities, it is a mirror reflecting these communities to each other and to the rest of the country and it is the instrument that gives voice to the community's stories, concerns and creative talents. In this context, CBC's challenges are immense but it's successes in fulfilling this vital role for the community are even greater.

The CBC Radio and Television have been telling the story of the political, social, economic and cultural life of English language minorities in Quebec for close to seventy years. But the specific challenges and opportunities for the CBC have been and continue to be immense. With growing pressures and shrinking resources year after year, simply put, no other media, electronic or print, community based or privately owned, fulfills as broad and vital a role as the public broadcaster. That's because the purpose, scope and sheer geography of the CBC's mandate in Quebec is unique.

The purpose that drives our choices is complex and demanding. CBC's mandate in Quebec is to reflect English speaking Quebecers to themselves, reflect all of Quebec to the Anglophone minorities, reflect minority language Quebecers to the rest of the country, and reflect all of Quebec to a national and increasingly international audience. Such directional crisscrossing can only be achieved through the range of programs, initiatives and roles fulfilled by the CBC within the communities it serves. It is achieved also in a definition of audience based on language spoken and not language of origin.

The scope of CBC's role in Quebec rests on three pillars.

First, CBC pursues broadcast journalism at its best: comprehensive, contextual and balanced news, programming responsive to community need, meaningful debate, rich and varied perspective.

Throughout the various chapters of Quebec's political life, through elections and referenda, local, national and international crisis or celebrations, Quebecers have been able to count on the CBC to be fair, inclusive and deeply reflective of the full makeup of the community. This has not always been easy. Given our driving purpose, it has meant that editorial choices during politically charged periods of our history had to take into account, for instance, the full range of voices at the heart of the "language wars". CBC's role was critical in giving a voice to the growing anger and frustration of English speaking Quebecers struggling to maintain their rights. But it did not stop there nor act as a political advocate as many within the community wanted us to. Equally critical to our role of reflecting the perspective of angry Anglophones, was CBC's role in explaining, exposing and exploring on behalf of the English language minority, the nature of the drivers and changes within the majority French language population.

PATRICIA PLESZCZYNSKA is the Regional Director of Radio and Television for CBC in Quebec. A veteran programmer, she has led award winning teams at the CBC for over 20 years.

During the trying days of the "Ice Storm", the CBC transformed itself in part into an essential service, with an emphasis on information essential for the immediate welfare of citizens. With 24/7 broadcasting, CBC became a community information relay to isolated or worried citizens and a conveyor belt for access to essential goods such as water, generators and housing or medical supplies.

More recently, the CBC has played a critical role in the "reasonable accommodation" debate in Montreal and around the province. Having nurtured contacts in all of the various cultural communities through years of outreach in the form of regular community editorial boards and partnerships, CBC was able to provide the responsible coverage, demand the necessary accountability and create an outlet for the voicing of opposing viewpoints at an electric juncture in our development as a society. Unlike the sensational coverage in some print media which fueled the crisis, the CBC forum brought academics and regular citizens, religious, political and lay people, long established francophones, anglophones and recent immigrant to the same table. What we broadcast was a moving juxtaposition of fears, the clear articulation of terms of reference and differing definitions of freedom of expression. Nothing could be more illuminating of the entire debate than to hear a high profile francophone woman describe her visceral reaction to veiled Muslim women because she equates it with the repression she herself experienced and then rejected, growing up under the strict rule of the catholic Ursuline Nuns in the Quebec of 1950.

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The above mentioned editorial boards are in and of themselves a unique approach which has allowed diverse cultural communities such as young Asians or Black community leaders as well as communities of interest such as Muslim youth or environmental activists to convey their concerns, describe their information needs and challenge the CBC to reflect their community more accurately.

Our morning and afternoon radio shows and our two daily regional television programs have created unique editorial approaches to deepen the editorial dialogue. CBC's Montreal morning show host Mike Finnerty regularly welcomes guest editors, who are provided with the opportunity to set the editorial agenda for three of our reporters. The guest editor, a prominent member of Quebec Society asks the three questions uppermost on his/her mind and our reporters seek out the answers. Our Montreal afternoon drive host Bernard St-Laurent, invites a guest host every week to share the studio and explore his/her life experience, interwoven with the unfolding news day. Our noon program provides a daily forum for discussion available to all Quebecers from every region of the province. In this, it is the only such daily opportunity for discussion and debate in the English language in the province. Our supper hour television show has created the role of a city columnist whose "take" on the news and issues of the day spurs other Quebecers, citizens at large as well as the movers and shakers in our society to express and explain their positions.

Why do we do all this? Because our multilingual, multicultural society is complex and mutual understanding is critical and it can only be achieved through a dialogue that stands in stark contrast to much of the "talk" formats of private broadcasters, intended at provoking and entertaining rather than enlightening.

CBC Quebec also fulfills the critical role of providing the rest of the country with a window on all of Quebec, both minority and majority language. Programs such as *C'est la Vie* on CBC Radio One or *Au Courant* on CBC Newsworld exist to provide this window but the transmission line of stories and news runs throughout the day. Our radio, television and online reporters feed it constantly and diligently to ensure Quebecers are seen, heard and understood.

The second pillar defines the scope of our role as cultural agent. The CBC is the initiator, producer, commissioner and broadcaster of culture. During any given season, our programmers and managers will provide the support, the means and the outlet for English language creators. The *CBC-McGill Concert Series*, the oldest collaboration between the CBC and any faculty of Music in the country, our *Songwriter Sessions* and the emerging popular talent showcase *Routes Montreal*, engage and connect the extraordinary talent of Quebec's musicians to a local and a national audience.

Comedy troupes such as the Vestibules, got their start through the CBC; Many Quebec writers get their first commission broadcast through the CBC Quebec short story competition and have their work celebrated at the Blue Metropolis International Literary festival; Quebec's young as well as established independent documentary and film makers receive mentoring, funding support and a broadcast outlet for their work through programs such as *DocShop*, *Shadow reports*, or Living *Montreal*.

And finally, not least among the three pillars, the CBC, particularly through the Quebec Community Network has, since the 1970's, been the glue that binds all of the English language communities across the province. It is difficult to capture the vital nature of the relationship between the public broadcaster and the minority communities scattered all across the province of Quebec. It is best described through stories such as these two, described by Jacquie Czernin, the host of the Quebec Community Network afternoon program Breakaway:

Inverness

The village of Inverness in the Appalachian Mountains is remarkable not only for its rolling landscapes and roads that wind through valleys and around green hills... It is remarkable because of its rich cultural history.

In 1850, twelve immigrant families from Scotland settled in the area, in "Inverness Corner". They brought with them their institutions – their school and church, and cemetery... a cemetery that up until our broadcast, sat abandoned and broken.

We had heard that a Toronto folksinger by the name of Bobby Watt – who also happened to be a stone mason – was coming into the village to clean up the headstones of some of his distant ancestors.

We asked if we could join him.

In telling Bobby's story on the QCN a few weeks prior to our special broadcast from the town, we received calls from listeners who asked if they could join us in the clean-up.

Jane Gaudi drove in from Valcartier, armed with steel brushes and buckets. Pam Dillon came in from Stanbridge East. And she brought poetry with her – poems she had written after visiting other cemeteries around the world... including one in Paisley, the very place in Scotland from which some of Inverness' original immigrants hailed.

The story of the clean-up was recorded and told in the first hour of a special broadcast from the town. The second half was taped in the village hall. By then, word had spread, and half the village was there, crowded into the Oddfellows Hall (formerly a chicken coop). Women shared oatcake recipes and men lead us in songs from the old country.

When we left Inverness late that evening, it was as if the old sod had come alive again. The cemetery shone, the village glowed, and we felt honored for the role we could play.

M/V Nordik Express.

Two two-hour shows told the story of a seven-day (breathtaking) voyage along Quebec's Lower North Shore. Our arrival into each community was an eagerly and warmly welcomed event, with listeners waiting dockside. Remarkably, we had called ahead to only a few. Most villagers greeted us because they had heard from friends and relatives in the community downstream that we were coming. We were offered many cups of tea and slices of bake-appleberry/cloudberry pie, and we spent hours recording stories of old, and listening to concerns of today.

Neglected politically, most people say the residents of the LNS have to 'go it on their own'. They are, in part, a product of a once-vibrant fishery and a road-less, waterways geography.

Topics ranged from isolation issues (high costs of living with minimal employment, youth under-education, lack of roads and infrastructure – eg. poor drinking water) to history, where descendants of some of

the Burseys, Rowsells, Maurices, Lavallees, Jones, Buckles, Fequets are still trying to maintain a livelihood from fishing – the catch having changed from cod to snow crab, and more recently, aquaculture, such as sea scallops. Interviews included the Robertson family former seal-fishing foundry in Tabatcher, an elderly whale blubber renderer in Middle Bay, the Evans family lighthouse keeper on Harrington Harbour on storms and shipwrecks, elderly mail carrier in St-Augustine who delivered by dogsled and remembers the day electricity came to Old Fort Bay. (Several of these interviews are now part of the Quebec Labrador Foundation archives. Several other history-related interviews are also with National Archives in Ottawa).

The host of the Quebec Community Network morning show, Tim Belford, summarizes his view of the role the QCN plays:

> The Quebec Community Network isn't just a slogan. It's the living, breathing, working, playing collection of English-speaking Quebecers scattered throughout the regions of Canada's biggest province.
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> I know. I've met a lot of them.
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> Over the past seventeen years it has been my job and my joy to broadcast to English-speaking Quebecers who find themselves in communities, large and small, from Salluit to Stanstead and from Rouyn-Noranda to the Magdellan Islands.
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> As diverse an area as this is and as different as the people are from region to region, it has always been the similarities that have astounded me. Apart from the obvious – the shared language – the same concerns crop up again and again for this minority within a minority: maintaining schools with a small population, rejuvenating the community when so many young people are drawn to the cities, obtaining adequate health care.
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> Although it may sound sometimes that what holds us together are our common worries, it is far from the truth. The shared joy of everything from agricultural fairs to regional music ties us together culturally in a distinct way.
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> As I said earlier, The Quebec Community Network is more than a slogan.

The CBC's reach is as large and complex as the geography and the demographic makeup of the province. Whether English is the first, second or third language of use in the home, Quebecers are served by CBC radio, television or CBC.ca through a network of 45 transmitters across the province, satellite and cable and multiple online services.

They are served by new technology which is making contact easier and faster, by programs and content as rich and deep as the province's own story.

But mainly they are served by the spirit which moves our reporters and hosts, our producers and technical crews. These are the people who speak more of a labor of love than of mandate and policies. They know that people get inspired, informed and entertained by the work they do. They know they help create links between people in all parts of the province. And they know they strengthen the fabric of Quebec society by bridging the gaps between linguistic and cultural communities.