Who Controls the Future of Public Broadcasting?

BY NOREEN GOLFMAN

ABSTRACT

The intense concentration in ownership of private broadcasting and the advent of cross-media ownership make a strong public broadcaster more important than ever before. Canadians believe in the CBC, but they have concerns. So does the author.

The people of Canada control the future of public broadcasting. As Lawrence Martin wrote in *The Globe and Mail* last month: "Canadians, as opinion samplings suggest, haven't migrated rightward in big numbers, only their printing presses[1]."

At FRIENDS of Canadian Broadcasting, we have kept a close eye on public opinion about broadcasting issues, including public perceptions of the CBC, over the past decade[2]. Here, for example, is what Ipsos-Reid found on our behalf last August:

- 82% of Canadians think CBC is important as a symbol of Canadian identity and culture.
- 89% believe that CBC is one of the things that helps distinguish Canada from the US.
- 88% would like CBC strengthened in their part of the country.
- 9% of Canadians would advise their MP to vote for decreasing CBC's funding from current levels, 49% would advise maintaining it at current levels, and 41% would recommend increasing CBC's funding.
- 94% of Canadians want to see the CBC survive and prosper.
- 81% believe that CBC provides value for taxpayers' money.

CBC also scores well on qualitative measures. For example, when English-speaking viewers are asked which network has the most balanced reporting of news about Canada's federal political parties, 46% choose CBC's English Television Network, 25% choose CTV and only 20% choose Global. Not bad data for an institution that some neo-cons describe as on its death-bed. As the late Dalton Camp once said: "Love it or hate it, CBC is our only national institution that still works".

The *Broadcasting Act* makes clear that CBC "is ultimately accountable, through the (Heritage) Minister, to Parliament for the conduct of its affairs[4]". But how do we evaluate CBC as a public broadcaster? CBC Radio qualifies in spades. But CBC Television derives almost half its revenues from commercials. It shows. Some of us think of CBC Television on occasion as a wholly-owned subsidiary of the National Hockey League, or worse, Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment.

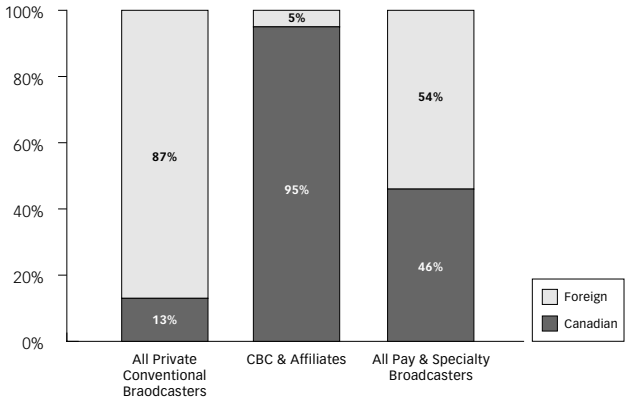
Of course, we don't really have any private television in this country either. All the so-called private broadcasters enjoy substantial direct and indirect subsidies: from Telefilm, the Canadian Television Fund, Income Tax Act incentives to advertise on Canadian channels and, of course, simultaneous substitution. All this on top of iron-clad protection from direct foreign competition.

We Canadians are very open to foreign content in our audio-visual system. On the English side, 41% of our viewing is on Canadian conventional TV stations, 26% on Canadian specialty and pay channels, 16% on US conventional border stations and 16% on US specialty/pay channels. Only 9% of our viewing is to CBC and Newsworld combined, less than for either CTV (11%) or Global (12%).

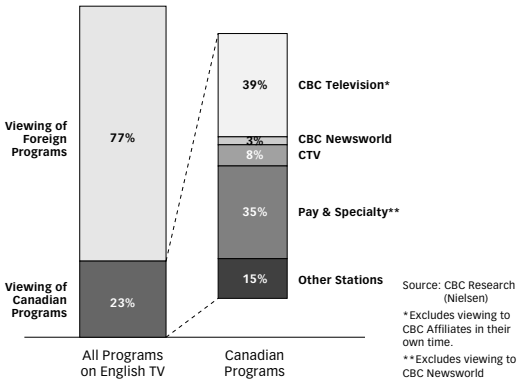
When we distinguish between the viewing of Canadian shows and US shows in the 7 to 11 pm peak-viewing period, we find that only 13% of the audience on Canadian private conventional broadcasters is watching Canadian programs, 46% of the audience on Canadian specialties is watching Canadian programs and 95% of CBC Television's audience is watching Canadian.

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Proportion of Viewing to Canadian and Foreign Programming on English TV in Prime Time (7-11 pm) in 2000



Viewing of Canadian Programs on English TV (98/99) Peak Period – 7 to 11 pm



Indeed, CBC and Newsworld generate 42% of all the audience for Canadian programs in prime time, Canadian specialty and pay channels in the aggregate generate 35%, CTV only 8% and Global only 5%. That's almost half the Canadian viewing on two channels and the other half on the other sixty, with Global bringing up the rear.

This is not so surprising when you consider what the three Canadian networks are offering the public in prime-time (February 2003):

Who should NOT control the future of public broadcasting in Canada? Three groups come to mind.

When first appointed President of CBC, Robert Rabinovitch reportedly told the CRTC in a private showdown meeting before they released CBC's group licence renewal that he "had a mandate from the Prime Minister". Canadians don't want the Prime Minister – any Prime Minister – controlling the CBC.

Simulcast Schedule Templates Winter 2002

Canadian | Foreign Simulcast | Other Foreign

Network	pm	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
CBC	7	22 Mins	Life & Times	Air Farce	Country Can	Our Hero	Hockey Night In Canada	Emily Of New Moon
		It's A Living		Market Place	On The Road	Mr. Bean		
	8	Random Passage / Da Vinci's Inquest	The Nature Of Things	Witness	Opening Night	22 Mins		Random Passage / Da Vinci's Inquest
						Red Green		
	9		Disclosure	the fifth estate		Air Farce		
						Made in Can		
	10	The National					Hockey	Sun. Report
								Venture
CTV	7	Wheel Of Fortune					eTalk	Degrassi
		Jeopardy					Exhibit A	21C
	8	Who Wants Millionaire	Imagine That	'80s Show	Who's Line / CSI	Weakest Link	Mysterious Ways	Alias
			Wife & Kids	Accord Jim				
	9	Ally McBeal	Drew Carey	The West Wing	SCI: Crime Scene Inv.	The Associates	Figure Skating / Cold Squad	Specials
			Scrubs					
	10	Third Watch	The Nature Of Things	Law & Order	E. R.	Law & Order SVU		W-FIVE
Global	7	Bob & Margaret					Mysterious Ways	Blackfly
		Entertainment Tonight						King Of Hill
	8	Boston Public	'70s Show	Smallville	Survivor / Friends	Dawson's Creek	Andromeda	Simpsons
			Spin City					Malcolm
	9	Raymond	Frasier	Gilmore Girls	Will & Grace	Dark Angel	Mutant X	The X-Files
		Becker	The Job		Shoot Me			
	10	NYPD Blue	Judging Amy	Blue Murder	The Agency	20 / 20	Outer Limits	The Practice

Only tites, origin, and simulcasting of programs which most frequently occupy time periods are shown.

In a 1999 poll commissioned by FRIENDS, Compas Inc. found that 55% of Canadians believe "the Prime Minister's power to appoint the CBC President and Board of Directors gives the government too much influence over the nature and content of programs broadcast on the CBC", while only 35% believe "the CBC is independent and it doesn't matter who appoints the Board of Directors and the President". Our research indicates that every member of the present CBC Board of Directors is affiliated with the Liberal Party of Canada. Shame! CBC is our most important cultural institution and it's vitally important that only the most qualified and informed citizens serve on its Board. In the UK, a multi-partisan process ensures that talented people of all political stripes become Governors of the BBC, and a similar process applies to the appointment of the BBC's Director General. The South African Broadcasting Corporation and the US Corporation for Public Broadcasting follow a similar model.

A few years ago, a review panel chaired by Pierre Juneau recommended to the government that: "the integrity of the Board and the independence of the (Canadian Broadcasting) Corporation would be enhanced if directors with known political affiliations represented the full political spectrum, and not just the governing party. We note that this pattern has been followed by successive British governments and has, in our view, helped to preserve the BBC's independence and prestige[5]".

Those of us who live outside the Montreal–Ottawa–Toronto triangle are in a good position to judge the central-Canadian bias of the CBC. And no informed observer can dispute that the burden of the staffing cuts which followed the Chrétien government's decision to break its Red Book promise and gut $400 million from CBC's allocation fell predominantly outside Toronto and Montreal. More and more of us believe that CBC is becoming a Toronto Broadcasting Corporation. We do not want Toronto controlling the future of public broadcasting in Canada.

In the part of the country where I live, much of the information and most of the entertainment we watch and listen to comes from elsewhere, from Toronto, for example, or from Detroit. There's nothing wrong with distant information and entertainment – as long as we balance it with at least a modest share generated from "here". And that's what's largely missing in Newfoundland today. I could say the same thing if I lived in Saskatchewan, in Alberta, in New Brunswick, or in northern Ontario, for that matter. Our private radio and television stations are less-and-less involved with local information, music, and entertainment. When we turn on our television sets in St. John's, we learn much more about life in Los Angeles or Boston than we do about life in Edmonton, Montreal, or Moncton. In peak-viewing periods, there is nothing from our province available on CBC Television.

The third group we don't want controlling the future of public broadcasting is the private broadcasters. Heritage Minister Sheila Copps was recently quoted as saying that a ban on corporate donations is needed because "obviously there is a link between corporate donations and government policy[6]".

Private broadcasters have contributed substantial sums to the Liberal Party in recent years, and to Minister Copps. In the year 2000, the five top broadcasting contributors to the Liberal Party of Canada were BCE, $125,134; Rogers, $76,626; CanWest, $62,878; Craig, $36,784; and Shaw, $35,512.

Altogether, broadcasters gave $2,018,011 to the Liberals from 1993 to 2000. During the 2000 general election, Minister Copps received $3,000 from CanWest, $2,000 from BCE and $750 from Craig. In all, broadcasters contributed $66,876 to members of Jean Chrétien's cabinet during the 2000 election campaign[7].

In 1996, Sheila Copps presided over a $100 million cut in CBC's parliamentary allocation and a corresponding $100 million new allocation to the Canadian Television Fund, which, in turn, gave at least $50 million of that money to private broadcasters in the ensuing year. FRIENDS calculates this as a 10,000% return on the private broadcasters' investment in that year alone. The benefit, however, carried forward on a multi-year basis.

The intense concentration in ownership of private broadcasting and the advent of cross-media ownership make a strong public broadcaster more important than ever before. When Ipsos-Reid asked a representative sample of 1,100 Canadians what the federal government should do about media concentration:

- 9% responded that the government should do nothing,
- 22% suggested that the government should strengthen the CBC as a counter-balance,
- 28% favoured holding a public inquiry, and
- 32% thought the government should ask the CRTC to review and act on the situation.

So, Canadians want a strong CBC, capable of doing its job, as outlined by Parliament in the *Broadcasting Act*. Now, whether the CBC is doing its job well, that's another question.

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[1] January 23rd, 2003

[2] http://friendscb.ca/polls.htm

[3] On the French-speaking side, SRC-TV barely outscores TVA: 35% to 32%.

[4] Section 40. Section 46. (5) states: "The Corporation (CBC) shall, in the pursuit of its objects and in the exercise of its powers, enjoy freedom of expression and journalistic, creative and programming independence." Section 71. (1) states: "The Corporation shall, as soon as possible after, but in any case within three months after, the end of each financial year, submit an annual report on the operations of the Corporation in that year concurrently to the Minister and to the President of the Treasury Board, and the Minister shall cause a copy of the report to be laid before each House of Parliament on any of the first fifteen days on which that House is sitting after the Minister receives it."

[5] Mandate Review Committee, *Canadian Broadcasting and Film for the 21st Century*, Department of Canadian Heritage, 1996, page 117.

[6] National Post, January 25th, 2003, "Liberals accuse Copps of hypocricy: Minister accepted corporate donations, now criticizing them".

[7] FRIENDS of Canadian Broadcasting, *Follow the Money, Part II, Federal Political Contributions by Canada's Broadcasting Industry*, 1993-2000, February 4th, 2002,
http://friendscb.ca/publications.htm