Public Broadcasting in Canada: 
Time for a New Approach

Submission to the Standing Committee 
on Canadian Heritage

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Public Broadcasting in Canada: Time for a New Approach

A study into the role and mandate of CBC/Radio-Canada should begin with one question: Do Canadians still need a national public broadcaster?

CBC/Radio-Canada was created for cultural reasons. The pressures that led to its creation have not diminished; they have increased. Canadians are not suffering from a lack of content choices on television, radio, and the Internet. In fact, Canadians have arguably more options than any citizen in any other country. If this country wants a Canadian cultural presence in the media space, only CBC/Radio-Canada can play that role.

CBC/Radio-Canada is grateful for the opportunity to play a part in the review of the national public broadcaster’s mandate by the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. Believing it to be a vital process that should unfold regularly on a fixed timeline, we are determined to play an active and constructive role.

In this submission, CBC/Radio-Canada outlines why Canada needs a public broadcaster; the role and value of public broadcasting; some of the more pressing challenges that CBC/Radio-Canada faces; an overview of our services; and, we provide detailed information about CBC/Radio-Canada’s audience performance. We also make reference to an analysis by Nordicity, which is being tabled separately, that presents a comparative analysis of Government Support for Public Broadcasting and Other Culture in Canada vis-à-vis other Western nations.

It will not surprise you that we believe Canadians need a public broadcaster today more than ever. It is through public broadcasting that the Government can ensure a place for high-quality Canadian content that serves Canadian citizens in a broadcast environment overwhelmed by largely foreign choices. We are also putting forth a proposal for a new approach to the governance of public broadcasting: a contract with Canadians, which will ensure that public broadcasting provides the services Canadians want in the future.

We will be listening closely to the various issues and viewpoints that are brought before this Committee over the course of the review. And, after taking those multiple perspectives into account, we will look forward to having another opportunity to present this Committee with some closing thoughts from CBC/Radio-Canada’s perspective.

Robert Rabinovitch
President and CEO
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Neither commercial nor State-controlled, public broadcasting’s only raison d’être is public service. It is the public’s broadcasting organization; it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life. They develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others.

Public broadcasting is defined as a meeting place where all citizens are welcome and considered equals. It is an information and education tool, accessible to all and meant for all, whatever their social or economic status. Its mandate is not restricted to information and cultural development – public broadcasting must also appeal to the imagination, and entertain. But it does so with a concern for quality that distinguishes it from commercial broadcasting.

Why Canada needs a national public broadcaster

In the 1930s, US-based radio networks expanded quickly into Canada. The cultural influence of predominantly American programming became a source of apprehension for many. How could Canadians maintain an independent and distinct cultural identity if their cultural programming was American? Canadians chose public broadcasting, and the Government of Canada created CBC/Radio-Canada to ensure a Canadian space in the new broadcast age.

Today, Canadians face the same questions of culture and identity. Programming content from the world over is available to Canadians on countless platforms: a new world of choice is in their hands. At the same time, Canadians have become increasingly diverse, with diverse interests and values. The cultural challenge facing Canada is immense.

If Canada believes that it is important for its citizens to have universal access to distinctive content created by, for and about Canadians, then expectations of what public broadcasting is have to evolve. It is less about what Parliament can do for CBC/Radio-Canada than it is about what the public broadcaster, working with Parliament, can do for Canada and for the benefit of Canadians.

Indeed, some argue that the need for public broadcasting has diminished in this new digital age. Yet, significant questions and issues remain:

- How do we nurture a strong Canadian cultural identity in a sea of global content?
- How do we ensure that Canadians are not only exposed to the world and the reality of globalization, but that they also have access to a Canadian perspective on it?
- How do we sustain opportunities for national, regional and local expression?
• How do we promote social cohesion and shared values in an ever-more diverse society?

• How do we encourage engaged discussion and debate that advances common democratic principles?

• Given that storytelling, especially drama, is the single most pervasive catalyst of popular culture, how do we create a critical mass of drama that is first-rate and inimitably Canadian?
A changing cultural and industrial context

The role of public broadcasting in Western nations is generally to provide content that is universal in access; diverse in scope; independent from both political and commercial influence; and, distinctive in its offering and quality. It is to be a broadcaster that treats its audience as citizens to be served, not simply as consumers.

In Canada, the challenge of serving citizens is complicated by the fact that Canada has one of the most diverse populations in the world. It is an open and tolerant society that encourages the free flow of political and cultural ideas. And it inhabits the single most competitive broadcasting environment on the planet, bordering on the most powerful and successful exporter of popular culture the world has ever known. All these traits are sources of strength and potential only so long as we maintain the things that make us distinct.

Even more than in 1932, when R.B. Bennett’s Government first articulated the need for a public broadcaster, CBC/Radio-Canada is interconnected with Canada’s democratic, social and cultural needs. Public broadcasting offers a unique value proposition as an effective instrument of Canadian public policy in a mixed public and private broadcasting system.

Improving democratic and cultural life in Canada

While there is a tendency to focus on technology and consumer choice in the digital era, there is also a need to explore the bigger questions, particularly underlying issues of democracy and culture.

How people experience democracy and culture has changed a great deal in the last decade. Public broadcasting helps to give form to people’s experience of intangible concepts like informed citizenry; national identity; and the reflection of diversity in its many forms, be it geographic, ethnic, cultural, or communities of interest.
If culture matters, then broadcasting matters, since television is still the most pervasive cultural medium and radio still has the broadest reach. Moreover, with the rise of globalization and its inherent challenges, Canadians need a reliable, credible and trusted source of home-grown content that is free from commercial and political interest.

A national public broadcaster that is mandated to reflect the full spectrum of opinion and perspectives is a guarantor that various views are shared among Canadians, in turn helping them to form their self-, social and political identities.

**Diversity, fragmentation and social cohesion**

The need to create coherence in a fragmenting world is a second daunting test for policymakers around the world. When broadcasters speak of fragmentation, it is usually about audiences, diminishing advertising revenues and the resulting strain on media business models. But, culturally speaking, the concern is weightier than that.

A deeper, more meaningful social, political and religious fragmentation has come to pass around the world. It is due in part to the cumulative effects of globalization, shifting immigration patterns, and global instability and insecurity. These changes are causing a profound transformation in the political and social fabric – no less in Canada than in other countries – which poses some important questions about the role of the media in general, and public broadcasting in particular. In this context, the public broadcaster can be seen as a vehicle for cultural identity and social cohesion.

It is not easy to offset fragmentation and embrace diversity at the same time. A public broadcaster is, however, uniquely positioned to do just that. A public broadcaster can create community-building spaces that serve as a buffer against fragmentation. These same spaces can also facilitate interaction and dialogue among different communities locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.
Public broadcasting also ensures the availability of places where large numbers of Canadians can gather to share in important national moments. A healthy and relevant public broadcaster is able to foster a broad sense of belonging and national pride. It is one of the few means at our disposal to connect Canadians with each other, with this country and with the world.

Delivering on public policy objectives and priorities

Democracy and culture are important, and Canada must ensure that it has the means to deliver on its public policy goals in this area. Where the laws of the market alone will not achieve those goals, other mechanisms need to be found. In broadcasting, only a mixed system, whose success is based on striking the right balance between private and public media outlets, and having strong partnerships, can make the achievement of those goals feasible.

It is no secret that the broadcasting industry is in the midst of upheaval. Consolidation has created an industry dominated by a handful of well-funded private companies that offer a wide range of services, but a narrow spectrum of perspectives. Meanwhile, audiences are disintegrating. The visibility and usage of existing and new services lessens as a result, which dilutes the advertising value of broadcasting time. Revenues diminish as audience size shrinks, resulting in less money to fund programming. The existing threat to revenue streams for conventional broadcasters is a stark reality. The funding available for television production is no longer sufficient to sustain this most popular programming format.

As the environment in which we operate shifts and the business models upon which we depend become more and more unreliable, there is an escalating need to consider how best to bring the system back into balance. And strength of the Canadian system hinges on a robust national public broadcaster, since there are some things that private broadcasters either cannot or will not do, but that a public broadcaster can and will do.
For example, CBC/Radio-Canada provides:

- Content that is predominantly Canadian and distinctive;
- Programming that establishes and maintains connections in the North and other remote parts of the country;
- Commercial-free, safe, entertaining programming for kids;
- Original Current Affairs programming;
- A full-bodied Canadian perspective on international events;
- Comprehensive coverage of federal and provincial elections;
- Amateur sports programming;
- High-culture programming;
- Robust content created specifically for new immigrants to Canada;
- Nation-building dramatic and documentary programming;
- The ability to communicate to all Canadians in an emergency; and,
- A substantial amount of Canadian programming in prime time on television.

With respect to the attributes to which a public broadcaster’s content should aspire, no single program or piece of content can be all things to all people on all platforms. But, individual programs and content should speak to one or more of the eight following descriptors, recognizing that few would realistically speak to all:

- Canadian: it should contribute to shared national consciousness and identity by serving cultural and societal needs, diversity of audience and perspective;
- Distinctive: it should stand out from what is provided by the private sector;
- Intelligent/Challenging: it should make audiences think and it should stimulate debate;
• Entertaining: it should aspire to be engaging, fascinating, even funny;

• Inspiring Trust: it should inspire confidence in the integrity of the source;

• Rassembleur (a place of shared experience): it should provide a focal point for large numbers of Canadians to share common experiences;

• Reflecting our Communities: it should reflect Canada and its regions and reflect the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada; and,

• Innovative: it should present new ideas and invent exciting approaches.

Relative value of public broadcasting

The question of why Canada needs a public broadcaster warrants an analysis of the relative value of public broadcasting in Canada compared to other Western nations. In late 2005, Nordicity Group Ltd. was commissioned by CBC/Radio-Canada to analyze the financial resources provided by governments to public broadcasters in Western countries, including Canada; and, to assess the relative value of public broadcasting in Canada vis-à-vis other Western nations.

This comparative analysis called for a broad, methodical review of the social, political and cultural environments, as well as the structures of the media industry in each country. It focused on four criteria: promotion of culture and common values; relative size of domestic language market; proximity to a larger country with the same language; and audience appeal of indigenous programming.

Among the 18 countries included in the analysis, Canada stands to benefit the most of all from public broadcasting. Canada’s need is the greatest. At the same time, the per-capita comparison demonstrates that at just over $30, Canada had the third-lowest level of public funding for its national public broadcaster in 2004 among 18 major Western countries and was less than one half of the $80 average.
Value for money of public broadcasting

Finally, the value for money invested in public broadcasting also figures prominently in any discussion of public broadcasting. Justifiably, no taxpayer would choose to invest in institutions, however important they might be, that do not spend their money responsibly. Public broadcasters around the world have recognized this fact in the face of financial constraints, an economically strained conventional business model, and mounting inflationary pressures. All have consequently taken strides to operate more efficiently – none more so than CBC/Radio-Canada.

For just over $30 each per year, Canadians enjoy a unique, distinctive and comprehensive offering from their public broadcaster. With 28 services offered on Radio, Television, the Internet, satellite radio, digital audio, as well as through its record and music distribution service and wireless WAP and SMS messaging services, CBC/Radio-Canada is available how, where and when Canadians want it.

Through this array of activities, CBC/Radio-Canada brings diverse regional and cultural perspectives into the daily lives of Canadians in English, French and eight Aboriginal languages, in nine languages on its international Radio service, RCI, and in eight languages on its Web-based Radio service, RCI viva, designed for recent and aspiring immigrants to Canada.
A new contract

So, if it is clear why Canadians need a public broadcaster, then the next step is to ensure that the public broadcaster provides the service Canadians need. For over a decade, CBC/Radio-Canada has tried to do this while hampered by: a lack of consensus on its role in a rapidly changing environment; a lack of stability in the resources required to fill that role; and, a lack of opportunity for Canadians to clearly state what they expect from their public broadcaster.

A new context, both cultural and industrial, calls for a new contract. We believe that the challenges of the future demand a new approach: a contract between the national public broadcaster and the citizens it serves. Other countries have followed a similar path. Following mandate reviews that involved widespread consultation, similar agreements have been put in place with public broadcasters in Ireland, Hong Kong and South Africa. And in Britain, the Government has just concluded a new Royal Charter, which spells out the expectations of the BBC and the resources it will receive, for the next ten years.

In Canada, a new contract would provide clear expectations of what Canadians could expect from their national public broadcaster in return for the public funding they provide.

There are many questions about the kind of public broadcaster Canadians need for the future, and this Committee’s current review of the mandate of CBC/Radio-Canada is an important first step in finding the answers. We would suggest, however, that there are some fundamental principles which must be maintained in order to ensure its continued success. Most of these are common to public broadcasters around the world.

Principles

*Mixed public/private system*

Since the outset, the Canadian broadcasting system has recognized the unique strengths of both public and private components. Together they provide Canadians with a range of
services they could not get without this partnership. The industry includes an extensive range of players – broadcasters, independent producers, distributors, etc. – each of which makes a central contribution to the system’s success and vitality.

*Programming independence*

Crucial to the very definition of a public broadcaster is its independence. History is full of examples of state broadcasters whose content is controlled by government – who serve government and not its citizens. Public broadcasting is a cornerstone of freedom of expression – a space where ideas are expressed freely, and where information and opinions circulate unencumbered. An arm’s length relationship between the state and the public broadcaster is deeply rooted and is essential to the broadcaster’s survival and its ability to serve its citizens.

*Distinctiveness*

Public broadcasting’s content must offer a quality and character that sets it apart from other providers. Distinctiveness not only includes services, content, and both audiences and subjects neglected by others; it also means doing things differently. A broad definition of distinctiveness ensures that public broadcasting is inclusive and innovative, and that it sets high standards in content quality. CBC/Radio-Canada’s programming should be overwhelmingly Canadian.

*Accessibility and ability to serve all Canadians*

If a public broadcaster is to serve its citizens, it must be able to reach them, where, when and how the audience chooses. It is no longer sufficient to be only a television and radio company. Canadians will choose their programming on television, radio, the Internet, on satellite radio, on mobile devices, as well as via new technologies just being developed. Public broadcasting is the content; the platform is only the means of ensuring that Canadians have access to it. These platforms not only ensure that content reaches new generations of Canadians, but that the diverse stories, perspectives and voices from Canada’s regions and communities have a place where they can be seen and heard.
Resources to meet requirements

A fundamental principle that underpins any contract is that it sets out the explicit obligations of each party subject to it. In this case, CBC/Radio-Canada would be provided with resources and would, in turn, undertake to provide specific services. The noblest goals for public broadcasting mean nothing without the resources necessary to fulfill them. A broadcaster stretched too thinly serves no one well. We believe a new contract must build a consensus with Canadians, not only on the expectations for the public broadcaster, but also on sufficient resources to fulfill those expectations. In short, it must be a contract.
Other issues that warrant due consideration

Before defining the role of the public broadcaster, there are two fundamental questions that we, as a country, need to answer.

*Does Canada want/need quality Canadian programming in prime time – programming intended, not just to entertain but to reflect our reality back to us?*

*Does Canada want/need quality Canadian news, information and current affairs programming in prime time – programming that builds civil society and the democratic fibre of the country?*

If the answer is yes to either of these questions, then we must ask ourselves who will provide this programming and how. And, inevitably, as a result of the economics of private broadcasting, this leads to a discussion of the role of the public broadcaster.

Beyond the broad issues and questions that demand treatment in exploring why Canada needs a national public broadcaster, there are also other related questions that call for attention and discussion.

*Should CBC/Radio-Canada have a role in advancing or communicating Canadian values abroad and, in turn, bringing the world home to Canadians through a Canadian prism?*

*What level of regional reflection and service to local/minority communities is desirable and proper for CBC/Radio-Canada to deliver?*

*Is it acceptable that eight million Canadians do not receive relevant local radio programming today?*

*With private television indicating its intention to gradually withdraw from local news delivery, who should ensure that citizens have the means to inform themselves about what is going on in their communities?*
Must CBC Television take the leading role in addressing the English-language television crisis in Canada? What is the role of Radio-Canada in ensuring that “séries lourdes”, those important culture-builders, remain a sustainable part of the television landscape?

Should CBC/Radio-Canada’s television services become commercial-free, as its radio services already are?

Where does the notion of “entertainment” figure into public broadcasting?

Is the replacement of Canada’s nearobsolete distribution infrastructure the right thing to do for television? For radio? How much priority should be placed on keeping pace with high-definition technologies versus other priorities?

Can a country like Canada realistically afford to function without a robust emergency communications infrastructure, and what role does CBC/Radio-Canada have to play in this regard?

Other relevant issues and questions will surely be raised over the course of this Committee’s review, and a number of different viewpoints will be certainly be brought forward. For its part, CBC/Radio-Canada looks forward to having the opportunity to convey its thinking on these significant issues, as well as an occasion to present this Committee with some closing thoughts prior to the conclusion of this valuable review.