

## Canadian Broadcasting — The Challenge for the 80's

By PETER A. HERRNDORF

The problems facing Canadian broadcasters are as threatening today as they have been for the past fifty years. In addition, new technologies and broadcasting trends are creating new challenges to Canadian television. Here is a hard look at these challenges, and an examination of the possible action which can be taken on the part of the CBC to revive Canadian broadcasting.

In one sense, the problems and the issues and the opportunities we face in the 1980's are almost exactly the same as they were fifty years ago when Graham Spry\* began to talk about public broadcasting in Canada. He was concerned about *the need to preserve and give expression to a distinctive and diverse Canadian identity* within a broadcasting system dominated by American programming, and *the need to have a strong counterweight to the excessive commercialism of private broadcasters.*

Unfortunately, nothing much has changed in the last fifty years, and these same issues will continue to dominate Canadian broadcasting. This is part of the reason that the 1980's will be the most difficult and complex decade in broadcasting that the CBC has ever had to deal with.

This decade will be characterized by an even more inexorable Americanization of the Canadian broadcasting

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\* Major-General Graham Spry, sometimes called "the father of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation," was a founder-member of the Canadian Radio League, established in 1930 to promote a public broadcasting system in Canada; a movement which led to the creation of the CBC in 1936.

This article is taken from a speech given at the SMPTE Toronto Mini-Conference held by the Montreal/Ottawa/Quebec, Rochester, and Toronto Sections on April 24 and 25 of this year. AUTHOR: Peter Herrndorf is Vice President and General Manager of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

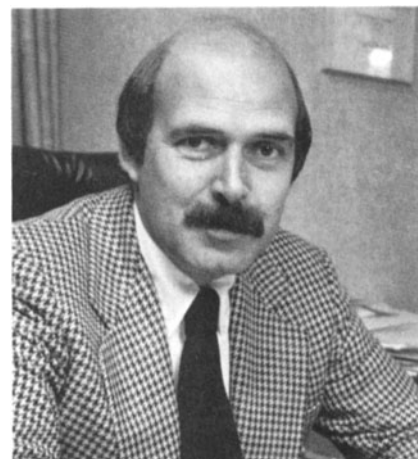
system, particularly in television; by a volatile technological environment which threatens, if anything, to accelerate that trend even more; by a political environment in which there is a profound ambivalence about decisive, and potentially unpopular initiatives to protect our cultural sovereignty; and finally, it's characterized by a strong trend toward government deregulation of private broadcasting and a de-emphasis in public funding for the arts and broadcasting.

I'd like to focus my comments around four major themes:

- a) The impact of television as a cultural conditioner;
- b) The performance of our broadcasting system in safeguarding and strengthening the cultural, political, and social fabric of Canada during the 70's;
- c) The rapidly changing television environment of the 80's;
- d) And finally, some thoughts about the kinds of action the CBC should be taking to deal with that environment.

Let me start by mentioning some facts about Canadian television and its cultural impact.

Canadians spend about half of all their leisure time watching television. That represents more than 500 million hours a week, or 23 hours per Canadian each week. All the time spent by Canadians reading, going to the movies, going to the theater, the ballet,



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or the symphony, cheering on Mike Bossy and Wayne Gretzky, is only a tiny fraction of the time they spend watching television. Canadians today get the great bulk of their information from television, far more information than they get from newspapers or magazines. By the time Canadian children reach the age of 12 they will have seen 12,000 hours of television, which constitutes about twice as much time as they will have spent in the classroom. There are currently ten million Canadian-owned television sets, and perhaps most significantly, it is now projected that the average Canadian will spend nine years of his life in front of the television set.

Given that amount of television

viewing, particularly by children, it's safe to assume that television is awesome as a cultural conditioner. It conditions, in a subtle and often insidious way, our values and our assumptions; creates many of our heroes, myths, and role models; many of our expectations about life; about what's good and what's second rate; about our attitude to our history and traditions and institutions; and our sense of self-esteem as a people.

In all, it would seem pretty important that we make sure a medium as influential and pervasive as television be predominantly Canadian in character, fulfilling that now famous role of "safeguarding, enriching and strengthening the Canadian fabric." That would be a reasonable assumption in Britain or France or Japan, but it hasn't been the case here. In the pursuit of far greater program choice, we've allowed our broadcasting system to become predominantly foreign in character:

- a) In Canada two out of every three programs piped through our very sophisticated and expensive distribution system (transmitters, satellites, and cable) are American;
- b) Canadians spend three out of every four hours watching American programs;
- c) English-speaking kids between the ages of 2 and 11 spend 83 percent of their time watching American programs, and even French-speaking children spend more than 50 percent of their time watching American shows;
- d) Private Canadian stations and networks, reflecting commercial imperatives, fill their prime time schedules with U.S. programs, and Canadian systems thrive by relaying American stations and networks into Canada.

Our kids are almost literally being weaned and raised on commercial television, learning far more about "video America" than about their own country. At first glance, you might very well say, "So what? Television isn't really that important." But, when you discover that our kids grow up knowing more about American history and values and folk heroes than they do about their own cultural heritage; more about the American legal system than our own; more about American institutions than about their own, then I think we have to worry that it might matter a great deal.

Despite all of the similarities between Canada and the U.S., I don't have to remind you that there are very real differences in our history, in our pluralism and diversity, in our institutions and our values, that should be reflected in the Canadian broadcasting system.

Unfortunately, the situation could get even worse in the 1980's as a new technological and program revolution sweeps over North America. I'm sure all of you have read, and in some cases written, articles in the past year about all the changes that are going to take place, articles that sometimes sound a little farfetched. Let me spend a moment giving you my sense of what's likely to happen. The changes can be characterized under five headings:

*A Volatile Technology.* The emergence of cable television, satellites, earth receive stations, pay television, and videocassettes have changed the face of the television industry. These innovations represent, as Les Brown of *The New York Times* said, "nothing less than the re-invention of television, 30 years after its introduction."

Some recent examples of the nature and rapidity of these changes include:

- FCC approval of 20 new satellites and 160 new transponders in December.
- The CRTC decision to license satellite-based services to the north.
- The BBC's decision last December to abandon free television in the United States and offer their programming to the new cable/pay television company formed by Arthur Taylor and the Rockefellers.
- The spread of hundreds of illegal earth receiving stations that have been built all over the country to pick up satellite program delivery.
- The November announcement of the creation of CBS-2 (CBS Cable) and ABC-2.

*A Huge Increase in Viewer Choice.* Individual viewers will have from 70 to 80 channels to choose from by the late 1980's. For example, new Houston and Cincinnati franchises have been awarded to companies which plan to offer more than 60 different channels almost immediately.

*A Move Toward "User Pay" and Convenience Television.* There is a discernible movement away from conventional or free television services. The trend seems to be toward television services which are more convenient for the viewer and involve direct payment. Pay television and the

emergence of videocassettes are good illustrations of the trend.

*More Specialized Programming.* There has been a steady growth in the number of specialty programs and channels. For example, there is now a 24-hour news channel, an all-sports channel, religious channels such as PTL and the 700 Club, children's channels such as Nickelodeon, multi-cultural or ethnic channels, super stations, specialized arts channels such as ABC-2 and CBS-2, and hundreds of new low-powered community TV stations now being licensed by the FCC.

*An Increase in the Americanization of Canadian Television.* This continued Americanization of Canadian broadcasting is expected to grow more profound as we move into the 80's, particularly since most new program services will originate in the United States.

Let me review all of that — an explosion in "distance spanning" technology, delivering programs over vast distances inexpensively; an almost unlimited channel capacity; a move toward user pay and convenience television; an increase in specialized programming (narrowcasting); more Americanization of our broadcasting system; extraordinary fragmentation leading almost inevitably to a substantial drop in the volume and viewing of Canadian programs, and a private broadcasting system in Canada that will find it harder to stay afloat financially.

Is there anything that we as Canadians can do about all of this? That the CBC can do about this? My answer is a resounding "Yes," but we'll have to move quickly, and dramatically.

We can start by giving Canadian viewers a *real* choice, a choice of quality Canadian programs that compete for the attention of our viewers — programming that touches and engages Canadians, that reflects a quite unique and diverse Canadian heritage, and in many cases a quite different Canadian experience.

The CBC's English Network has been moving in that direction for the past few years. We've been providing much more Canadian programming, and much more attractive Canadian programming, with some very noticeable results. Last season, there were 15 Canadian network series with average audiences of more than a million viewers, despite the tremendous competition.

Canadian producers, directors, writers, performers, and production

talent have proven over the past several years that they can do world-class work, and find large and enthusiastic audiences. The last two years have been, in my opinion, one of the best periods the CBC has had since it began over 29 years ago. The highlights of this period includes winning a number of prestigious awards -- four international Emmies in a row ("Henry Ford's America," "Four Women," "A Christmas Carol," and "Fighting Back"), two Golden Roses of Montreux awards ("A Christmas Carol" and "Dreamweaver"), six Actra awards, and other honors.

These award-winning programs indicate what our Canadian creative people can do if given the opportunity, the funding, the scheduling, and proper promotion. But, we face a terrible paradox. At the very moment that we're doing some of our best programming ever in television we face the onslaught of more and more American commercial television, and we at the CBC aren't perceived by our audience as being a particularly *distinctive* or essential television service.

Our choice is a straightforward one. We feel that it will become even more necessary for the CBC's television service to be, and to be seen as, a *distinctive* one, a television service that is a *clear and dynamic alternative* — as much of an alternative as *CBC Radio is to commercial radio*.

We've been working on the elements of such a *transformation* for the past

two years, and it involves the following goals over the next five years:

1) Increasing our Canadian content to at least 80 percent, thereby opening up a great many opportunities for Canadian writers, performers, directors, and producers from all over the country;

2) Introducing a second television network that provides a more specialized service to Canadians. It would be a noncommercial, evening service, delivered on cable, featuring original production aimed at specialized audiences that aren't well served at the moment. We would do programming in the area of international affairs, business, labor, science, music and theater, film and books, and combine that with repeats of our best current programs, and the best programming from around the world;

3) Increasing the volume of Canadian drama and quality Canadian entertainment programs;

4) Scheduling the main television service in a more innovative and more flexible manner, making it more immediate and topical, e.g., the earlier national and a daily national affairs show are examples of this change in direction. (The national affairs show, incidentally, would be satellite-based and live, and could become as important to our television schedule as "As It Happens" and "Sunday Morning" have been for the radio schedule. It would include backgrounders, specials, mini-documentaries, profiles, live reports, conversation, interviews, and

columns on business, sports, and the arts.)


5) Increasing our regionally produced programming, and programming that reflects the country's cultural and geographical diversity;

6) Increasing the use of independent production and Canadian feature films (Second City, Ten Thousand Day War, Nelvana, Citics, and movies like *Tribute*, *The Changeling*, *Silent Partner*, *Le Bons Deharras*.)

7) And increasing our activities in new "revenue generating" ventures, such as pay TV, export sales, books, records, merchandising, videodisks and even possibly a "CBC in America" channel on U.S. cable.

It's an ambitious and high-risk strategy, and it involves some short term financial sacrifices. But I'm really convinced that the environment of the 80's calls for that kind of risk-taking, that kind of *highly visible* approach to changing the CBC and making the CBC more distinctive and more essential to most Canadians.

The alternative is the status quo — hoping for the best, and seeing our financial resources and our audiences whittled away year by year. To me, that alternative is simply a non-starter.

With the support of the Canadian production industry, I'm confident we can achieve these quite ambitious goals, and by building on our current program success, we can be an even more vital and exciting broadcast force in the 1980's. 

## The SMPTE, 1916-1981

The SMPTE completed its 65th year in July 1981 — 65 years of continuous opportunity for motion-picture, television, and allied photographic engineers to exchange ideas and information and stimulate the technical progress that has kept engineering several paces ahead of all other developments in both the motion-picture and television industries. The scope of the Society has been expanded from motion pictures to television and photo-instrumentation and other areas of photographic science and engineering.

During these 65 years the Society's objectives have remained

- Advancement in the theory and practice of engineering in motion pictures, television, and allied arts and sciences;
- Establishment of standards and practices employed therein;
- Maintenance of high professional standing among its members;
- Guidance of students and the attainment of high standards of education; and
- Dissemination of scientific knowledge by publication.

Information about membership in the Society, a list of its publications, an index to motion-picture and television standards, and a catalog of test films are available from Society headquarters.