

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Sixth Annual International Institute of
Communications (IIC) Canadian Chapter
Conference

*A More Relevant Public Broadcaster
Than Ever to Face the Challenges of the
21st Century*

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Dear colleagues,

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this conference. It's a real privilege to be able to talk about the role of public broadcasting with decision makers who share my commitment to the future of communications in Canada.

These days, giving a speech on the media without mentioning technology is a bit revolutionary. So I'm going to show you my rebellious side this morning by speaking to you not about technology, but about content.

The question before us today is a fascinating one: where is public television headed? Indeed, how will public broadcasters manage to stay relevant in an increasingly fragmented world?

In the 21st century, public broadcasters are more relevant than ever. Why? Because of the issues we face as a society.

The issues of the 21st century are issues of culture and democracy

The issues of the 21st century aren't technological or economic: they're issues of culture and democracy. Factors such as cultural identity, fragmentation, social cohesion or cultural coexistence influence the way citizens experience culture and democracy, and should give us pause for thought about our role as a public broadcaster in society.

Let's take the example of fragmentation. Our society is witnessing a phenomenon that could be described as "global fragmentation," which encompasses different forms of fragmentation and has a growing impact on our political, social and cultural life with each passing year.

Naturally, there's media fragmentation. Please allow me to make a small digression here and talk a bit about technology . . .

For example, think of the hundreds of television stations, dozens of satellite radio stations, and so on. Plus, if you asked me how many platforms around the world distribute CBC/Radio-Canada services — including Radio Canada International, our Television and Radio programs, our Galaxie services, etc. — I'd answer several hundred and perhaps even several thousand.

Radio Canada International alone has over 450 partners worldwide. So, we're looking at several thousand platforms. That speaks volumes about the hyper-fragmented media environment we're facing today.

This media hyper-fragmentation obviously has an impact on a lot of things, namely our Television business models. Then add all the fragmentation directly related to emerging technologies such as new cell phone applications, which intensify media fragmentation by intruding on functions that until recently were the sole preserve of traditional media.

Other fragmentations are more social in nature. For example, let me mention one of the most critical events to hit the world of radio: the transformation of the concept of proximity. At industry conferences across the US, we're told there are three things you need to know about radio: localism, localism, and localism. This shows just how important geographical proximity is to radio. In other words, because we inhabit the same territory — a town, city or region — we have common interests.

But today, thanks to new technologies, a person can experience a wide variety of localisms, if you will: we can share the same religion, the same political outlook, the same sexual orientation, or a passion for such-and-such a car or boat. We can feel a connection with someone for thousands of reasons and it's now possible to contact that person in under 15 minutes through various networks such as cell phones, messaging services or the Web, to name but a few. The concept of proximity has thus been completely transformed. This has a major impact on the traditional balance between regional, national and international perspectives. It doesn't mean regional stations are a thing of the past, but rather that today they're only one of many possible positionings.

There's also another type of fragmentation: the proliferation of information sources. These days, there are so many different news sources that credibility has become a major issue. Even cell phones have become a source of audio, photo and video information. So there is a plethora of sources — a fragmentation that creates a new dynamic to be reckoned with.

Finally, there's the phenomenon of cultural, political and religious fragmentation, resulting to some extent from the combined effects of globalization and immigration inflows. All of this produces a fairly far-reaching change in the social fabric and raises some critical questions for the media industry.

Consequently, it's safe to say that the world of media has now entered a new phase. It's interesting to recall that, just 10 years ago, our primary concern was the excessive concentration of media ownership by huge conglomerates. Today, we're worried about the excessive fragmentation of the media. We're always afraid of something in the end. It's interesting to note how we went from the dangers of over-concentration to those of over-fragmentation.

Create public spaces for the expression of culture and democracy

This hyper-fragmentation presents all sorts of challenges for our society. From a media perspective, excessive fragmentation presumes a decrease in community-building spaces where citizens can meet and interact based on a shared experience — a sort of public square.

In fact, our society has a growing need to create public spaces for the expression of culture and democracy.

The public square has always played a central role in our societies. As a place where people could communicate and socialize with one another, it first saw the light of day in the Greek agoras and Roman fora of Antiquity. For most of the Middle Ages, public markets and the large plazas in front of cathedrals were the places where people got the news, carried out justice, or where bards and other street performers entertained the crowds.

These public squares, recognized down through history as key enablers of social cohesion in their time, were not controlled by economic or commercial interests, but solely by the people themselves.

In the name of social cohesion, we have to make sure that these public spaces continue to exist as a counterweight against the over-fragmentation of our societies — a very real risk we face today.

Our response as a public broadcaster

How can public broadcasters like CBC/Radio-Canada respond to these phenomena? We define ourselves primarily as a vehicle for culture and democracy, and only secondarily as an industry, media organization or institution. We have to start by asking ourselves what has changed in the way democratic and cultural life is experienced. This in turn will lead us to wonder what needs to be done so that in 10 or 15 years, we are still important to citizens as promoters of both social cohesion and cultural harmony.

Our response works on three levels. First, we must offer clear, distinctive and nation-building programming. Programming that reflects new social realities, cultural diversity, as well as the full spectrum of opinions and viewpoints. Programming that clearly subscribes to a distinctive set of public service values.

Second, we have to pool our efforts. We have to work together to create a solid brand that citizens will latch onto — a credible, reliable brand that conveys a strong identity. All of this is important in the environment I described above, because in a 500- or 1,000-channel universe, public broadcasters need to stand out as purveyors of credibility and reliability. This point is absolutely critical.

Third, we must have the public support required to ensure the long-term survival of public broadcasting. Public support to us is what profits are to private enterprise. When citizens believe in their public broadcaster, everything's okay. When they don't believe in it, we've got a problem. Public support is what will allow the broadcaster to fulfil its mission and remain relevant to citizens.

To get there, we have to mobilize all stakeholders in our society, our employees of course, but also the broadcast artists, actors, musicians, creators, and producers, as well as all those who forge public policies, so that we can successfully achieve this grand undertaking known as public broadcasting.

Creating coherence in a fragmented world

When you get right down to it, the real issue for public broadcasters is the need to create coherence in a fragmented world. In a mixed broadcasting system, whose success is based on the balance between private and public media outlets, the latter are definitely better positioned to achieve this. As public broadcasters, we are not captive to the latest fads and trends. Public broadcasters have this unique capacity to work on the long term given that they don't need to report their financial results every three months. It's a competitive advantage that we must build on as public broadcasters.

How will this help us stay relevant? By allowing us to create community-building spaces for the 21st century — civic spaces that will act as a bulwark against the fragmentation of society.

The challenges of creating these public spaces

What challenges will have to be overcome to create these public spaces? First up is the major one of credibility. Faced with the proliferation of information sources I mentioned earlier, and given the ever-expanding variety of television and radio programs, images, music, and text that citizens are exposed to every day, public broadcasters must present a strong brand that conveys the values inherent to a public service — values that instill confidence in people, an “island of credibility” in a sea of content, if you will.

Another challenge is the community-building role of public broadcasters. Despite the growing availability of so-called personalized content, reflecting the shift to an increasingly individualized society, citizens will continue to have a very human need for community-building experiences.

A third challenge is the public broadcaster’s ability to look beyond the short term and focus on what’s essential. Insulated from the economic issues that are an ongoing concern for private companies, public broadcasters can afford to experiment and invest in innovative, forward-looking initiatives. Public broadcasters work on the supply side, responding to citizen’s needs.

Finally, broadcasters must tackle the formidable challenge of coexistence and act as catalysts for new cultural identities. Immigration continues to grow, creating an increasingly diverse population, with values, as well as cultural and historical references, that are as varied as the origins of new citizens themselves. The public broadcaster must convey these new identities and reflect this emerging range of ideas and opinions.

An advantage for Canada

All of this is especially true for a country like ours. Indeed, Canada’s geographic and sociodemographic situation poses a number of challenges for social cohesion and cultural identity.

With its immense land mass, its population concentrated near the US border, its demographic makeup deeply influenced by ever-rising immigration, and its two official languages, Canada truly stands to gain from a public broadcaster that conveys a common culture and set of values.

There are other well-known, but perhaps slightly forgotten, arguments in favour of public broadcasting. For example, it’s no secret that covering a territory as large as ours requires an extensive, costly infrastructure. Only a public broadcaster like CBC/Radio-Canada can fulfil this crucial mission of having a presence from coast to coast. This gives us the unique ability to speak with a single — Canadian — voice to all citizens.

We’re also familiar with the economic realities of the broadcast industry, which make Canadian programming more costly and less profitable to produce than acquiring shows from an imposing and prolific neighbour, who also happens to speak the same language as a vast majority of Canadians.

Although Francophones don’t have to face the same type of competition, they do have to rise to the challenge of preserving a cultural space of their own.

For all these reasons, Canadians decided 70 years ago to found a public broadcaster. Today, more than ever, Canada has everything to gain from a public service like CBC/Radio-Canada, which acts as a purveyor of cultural identity and social cohesion.

Conclusion

So you see, our society is facing major cultural and democratic issues — issues that are too important to be left solely to commercial interests. We need to create strong, community-building public spaces, and pubcasters are the ones best equipped to do so.

That's how we'll remain more relevant than ever. But to succeed, we have to be more public than ever, more distinctive than ever, and more nation-building than ever.

Thank you.

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