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WE SHOULD RESERVE ELECTRONIC GREEN SPACE FOR PUBLIC-SERVICE BROADCASTERS

Bill Roberts

Public-service broadcasters like APTN and VisionTV are like public broadcasters in that they provide a trusted public space for information, ideas and values-driven entertainment, and support the process of nation-building by connecting citizens with their society. They are unlike public broadcasters in that they are not government-funded. As we enter the digital broadcast era, Canadian law-makers need to ensure that there is "electronic green space" for public-service broadcasters. One way of doing so is to put them in a "foundation tier" that would be an all-Canadian, must-buy package of services offered by every "broadcast distribution undertaking."

Les diffuseurs de service public comme APTN et Vision TV sont semblables aux diffuseurs publics en ce qu'ils offrent une tribune de confiance pour transmettre informations, idées et divertissement de qualité et renforcent les assises du pays en rapprochant les citoyens de leur société. Alors que s'amorce une ère de diffusion numérique, les législateurs canadiens doivent assurer l'« espace vert électronique » dont ces diffuseurs ont besoin. Pour ce faire, on pourrait notamment les intégrer dans un plan de base à achat obligatoire comprenant un ensemble de services entièrement canadien qu'offrirait chaque entreprise de distribution de radiodiffusion.

What does it mean, exactly, to be "Canadian"? Defining the term is a Sisyphean task, to say the least. After 134 years of trying, we're no closer to success than we ever were. But there's every reason to continue the effort—particularly today, as we struggle to retain a sense of distinct national identity in an increasingly global culture.

Right now, an important exercise in Canadian self-definition is taking place in Ottawa. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage has undertaken a review of the Canadian broadcasting system to gauge its success at meeting the objectives of the *Broadcasting Act* of 1991 and to determine what changes may be necessary to make the legislation more relevant to the current communications environment. This is unquestionably the right time for Canadians to take a hard look at their broadcasting system. It may also be the only opportunity we have left to enshrine a new element of that system into law: the *public-service broadcaster*.

Canada's existing regulatory framework has created a unique blend of public and private broadcasting services—in both official languages—that is the envy of many other countries. This system, which also has a multilingual component, has flourished in spite of the relatively small size of the marketplace, not to mention its geographic proximity to the largest entertainment-producing engine in the world.

One of the great hallmarks of the Canadian system is the number and variety of domestic broadcasters that exist to serve public needs, rather than purely market-driven goals. In addition to a strong national public broadcaster, we have an array of provincial educational and legislature services, as well as some innovative independent services—such as VisionTV (of which I am president and CEO) and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, or APTN—that are unique not only in this country, but in the world. Broadcasters like these play a critical role in ensuring the intellectual richness and cultural diversity of the system. But their ability to continue doing so may be severely compromised by some of the powerful forces now reshaping the television industry.

The advent of digital technology, for one, promises to bring an unprecedented proliferation of new channels, creating an environment in which alternative Canadian stories may prove increasingly difficult for viewers to find. In addi-

tion, multilateral trade agreements are requiring us to re-think many of our traditional regulatory protections for Canadian broadcasting. And then there is the growing vertical and horizontal integration within the media industry, which threatens to put smaller services that are not owned by massive corporate groups at a profound competitive disadvantage.

How, then, do we safeguard the future of those broadcasters that serve genuine public needs—and do so without interfering in the development of new technologies or forgoing the opportunities brought by globalization and integration? While the Heritage Committee's review of the broadcasting system could venture in many possible directions, there is one road, in particular, that I believe *must* be travelled: recognition of an entirely new category within the system, the *public service broadcaster*. We need policies aimed at ensuring there is room enough in the market-driven environment for such channels to thrive.

The concept of public service broadcasting is one that has only recently gained prominence internationally. The key to understanding this notion is to make the distinction between a *public broadcaster*, which is directly funded by tax dollars, and a *public-service broadcaster*. The latter is defined, not by its source of funding, but rather by the nature of its programming, which makes a unique public and civic contribution to the broadcasting system. Most public broadcasters are also public-service broadcasters. But one can be a public-service broadcaster without receiving government dollars.

A public-service broadcaster provides programming to meet a public policy goal. It is typically guided by a mandate to address the public interest, rather than by the need to deliver a return on shareholder investment. So the yardsticks by which one measures the success of commercial broadcasters—namely, large audiences and advertising revenues—are not the most relevant benchmarks for public service stations.

Consider the example of APTN, which broadcasts in 16 languages to an audience consisting primarily of First Nations viewers. Consider also my own organization, the multi-faith and multicultural network VisionTV, which serves more than 20 different religious denominations, and draws a sizeable portion of its viewership from Canadians over the age of 50—a demographic that holds limited appeal for advertisers, despite its rapidly growing size. Channels like these exist not to generate blockbuster ratings but to offer their viewers content that other services simply do not air. They provide a trusted public space for information, ideas and values-driven entertainment, and support the process of nation-building by connecting citizens with their society.

What's more, public service broadcasters make a significant economic contribution to one of our major industries: the independent film and television production sector. Programming that fits the unique mandate of a service like VisionTV or APTN is seldom readily available for purchase off the shelf. As a result, these channels must produce or commission much of what they put on the air. From 1994 to 2000, for example, VisionTV invested approximately 55 per cent of its overall revenues in Canadian programming. That's a significantly higher percentage than is spent by the major commercial networks CTV and Global. Nearly a third of that spending—approximately $20 million—was in the independent production sector. And much of it went to support ambitious, risk-taking projects that simply would not have been made without VisionTV's commitment.

So who belongs in the "public service" category? If we base our criteria on those major issues to which the *Broadcasting Act* speaks, then the roster would include any channel that delivers a high volume of uniquely Canadian content and addresses a clearly defined public interest. It would also encompass relevant local and regional broadcasters, as well as those services paid for through our tax dollars, whether directly or (in the case of charitable status corporations) indirectly.

While this definition still needs to be refined, it's a place to start. CBC and Radio-Canada would clearly qualify, along with Newsworld and RDI. So would the provincial educational and legislature channels, and a number of independent services, including VisionTV, CPAC, Access/CLT and APTN.

While formal recognition of public-service broadcasters is an important first step, it is not sufficient in itself. There is also need for measures to ensure the survival of these channels in the ever-expanding television universe. For some time, I have advocated the creation of a "foundation tier," or "green space," within the system for both English and French public-service broadcasters. This low-cost, all-Canadian package of services would be the basic, "must-buy" offering from every "broadcast distribution undertaking." Once digital distribution is widely

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deployed, this package would replace the existing basic service now offered by cable, wireless cable and DTH operators.

The exclusion of foreign services, licence-exempt services and distant Canadian channels would allow broadcast distributors to provide the foundation tier at an affordable price. Since all subscribers would pay for these services, the tier would have an exceptionally high penetration rate. As a result, the per-channel fee could be kept at a reasonable level, while the subscriber revenue base would be large enough to ensure a high quality of programming. Establishing this foundation tier as the "lifeline" package for distributors would make it affordable and easy for citizens to access programming that enriches their experience as Canadians. Viewers need not subscribe to an extended range of services they may not wish to have.

By their very nature, public-service broadcasters respond to viewers as *citizens,* rather than as consumers. Taking steps to ensure their continued viability will thus help to preserve one of the important pillars of democratic public life in our society.

Some argue that there is no need for such a foundation tier. After all, a significant share of the tax dollar already goes toward "green space," in the form of funding for the CBC. The CBC, however, cannot fill the public-service role alone—not with increasingly limited resources in an environment crowded with hundreds of channels. In fact, the very existence of other not-for-profit public-service broadcasters demonstrates that the efforts of the CBC need to be supplemented.

It has also been suggested that the foundation tier concept is simply a grab on the part of smaller services for a life preserver that will keep them afloat in the rapidly conglomerating broadcast world. In part, this is true. But I for one am not convinced that Canadians are willing to let public-service broadcasters drown. Canadians have often demonstrated the collective will to support and protect those things that reflect our shared values. We may never need open-heart surgery, but we don't object to putting our tax dollars into the health-care system, to provide for those who do. We may never personally visit Quttinirpaaq National Park on Ellesmere Island, but we recognize the importance of establishing such distant natural preserves. I would submit that the "life-preserving" effect of creating electronic green space is similarly good public policy.

In the most recent issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Catherine Murray of Simon Fraser University describes culture as a mechanism whereby "rules of social engagement, commitment to inclusiveness, and the basic means of civic participation are disseminated." Our television system represents one of those cultural venues in which Canadians can share common experiences and amass the understanding required to make responsible political, economic and social decisions. Private, for-profit broadcasters do make a valuable contribution in this regard. But the pivotal role belongs to public-service broadcasters. By their very nature, they respond to viewers as *citizens*, rather than as consumers. Taking steps to ensure their continued viability will thus help to preserve one of the important pillars of democratic public life in our society.

It may be worth noting that this concept of special recognition for public-service broadcasters has gained currency in the United States. In a recent speech, Federal Communications Commissioner Gloria Tristiani spoke of the special contribution made by the "PEG" (public, educational and governmental) class of broadcasters, and their increasing importance in an era of large-scale media consolidation:

> *At its most basic, PEG access empowers individuals and groups to use the media to educate and enrich their communities. It is television by the people and for the people … [T]he more consolidation that occurs, the greater the value of PEG access programming. PEG access is an antidote to the dangers of cable industry consolidation. It is a powerful idea that part of the media should exist directly in the hands of the public, rather than large corporations.*

The two small fixes proposed in this paper—recognition of the "public-service broadcaster" category in the *Broadcasting Act*, and the provision of "green space" for these channels within the cable, wireless and DTH distribution systems—do not carry substantial costs, and will not be difficult to accomplish.

In 1961, the Royal Commission on Publications wrote that "It may be claimed—claimed without much challenge—that the communications of a nation are as vital to its life as its defences, and should receive at least as great a measure of national protection." That is as true today as it ever was. I hope that we've grown in wisdom over the past 40 years, and are prepared to respond to this challenge with imagination and strength of purpose. If we fail to act, we risk sacrificing all that makes our Canadian broadcast system distinct.

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