

PBC21: Public Broadcasting for Canada in the 21st Century

DPC21: Diffusion publique au Canada pour le 21^è siècle

Canada.pbc21@gmail

Saving the CBC by Standing it on its Head!

Only a more locally anchored CBC can restore public broadcasting in Canada.

1. By law, our national public broadcasting service, CBC/Radio-Canada, is required to inform, enlighten and entertain with programming that is distinctive and predominantly Canadian.
2. As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, Canadians are bombarded with a host of digitally-based international programming options: Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, Google and Facebook, to which we can now add recent offerings from Amazon, Apple and Disney, with Peacock, ABC and Asian streamers soon to follow. They pool subscription and advertising revenue to generate production budgets far beyond those available to Canadian media.
3. While the principles suggested below apply equally to CBC and Radio-Canada, the specific recommendations are addressed to the English-language services of our national public broadcaster.
4. To retain the interest of Canadian audiences, our national public media must do what our commercial broadcasters cannot: develop unique programming that serves the needs of our domestic population for the information, reflection and perspectives that enable and encourage their effective participation in the democratic process and in the cultural life we share across the northern half of North America.
5. But this is unlikely to occur unless we move quickly to decentralize programming responsibility and restore resources for the provision of strong local and regional news and information. CBC President Tait has recently emphasized the importance of every Canadian identifying the CBC/R-C as their broadcaster. Such identification starts in the communities they call 'home', be they rural, remote or in bustling urban centres.
6. Audiences are drawn to programs – to content – and while digital media are the latest platforms to deliver content, they are unlikely to completely displace conventional electronic media (i.e., radio and television) in the short-to-medium term – if ever. Canada should use this transitional period to recast its national public media service by revitalizing the local and regional services at its core, and linking them to a spine of distinctive programming shared with the national

audience on all its platforms, programming for, by and about Canadians – presented commercial-free.

7. On our public service, we don't need more 'versioning', Canadian derivatives of commercially successful 'hits' from elsewhere. For those audiences who are really keen, the originals are accessible elsewhere. Our scarce resources should be reserved for production and distribution of original and distinctive programming that addresses the local, regional and national needs and interests of Canadian audiences.
8. After World War One, an Italian philosopher observed that "The old world is dying. The new world does not yet know how to be born. In between, some curious deformations occur." That sums up the present state of CBC-TV with its most recent introduction of a Canadian knock-off of American commercial television. As digital culture pushes media into increasingly fragmented trivialities and irrelevance, it's surely time for a new approach if our national public media service is to do better than *Family Feud Canada*.
9. Other public broadcasters are realizing that their appeal lies in not being directly competitive with commercial broadcasters. Rather they have to provide an alternative – one strongly reflective of their service area while sustaining a strong core of shared and universally available national programming.
10. At PBC21 we think it's time to turn CBC's English radio and TV services on their heads, allowing the strength and appeal of local programming, content and knowledge to thrive. If that means at the expense of a centralized vision from Toronto, it remains worth considering because, at least in television, the old 'Mother Corp' approach has failed.
11. Not everything from Toronto is tepid, of course. There are bright lights, especially in Current Affairs and at CBC Radio. But overall, the inability (or unwillingness) to tap into the talent that exists inside the CBC and especially at the station level is pushing English Canada's public television service into dangerous irrelevance.
12. In Greece and Israel, public broadcasters found they suffered similar difficulties. Their solution was to shut down and return in a year, retooled, refocused and renewed. We are not proposing such a 'nuclear' option – but a radical rethinking is now clearly required.
13. In media terms, surveys have shown that loyalty to a local presence is more powerful and appealing than adhesion to a distant and unresponsive voice. We propose that the necessary funds be restored to local stations so they can again produce programming that addresses the information needs of their listeners,

viewers and online readers – with special emphasis initially on information: news and current affairs programming. Identified below are a few ideas that could revitalize national public media in Canada.

14. All the services provided by CBC – radio, television and online – should become commercial-free, a timely move when private media are experiencing financial stress. History has amply demonstrated that, despite good intentions, relying on commercial revenues inevitably places the public broadcaster in competition with the private sector—not just for income from advertisers, but for the audiences that attract those advertisers. That, in turn, forces the public broadcaster to program in accordance with commercial interests, rather than in the public interest.
15. English Television: CBC News Network (formerly Newsworld) should be closed. CBC-TV will become universally available, over the air, by BDUs and streamed on CBC Gem. It must however, reconfigure its ‘all things to all people’ programming focus to concentrate on news, information, current affairs, documentary and coverage of significant national events, with regional segments integrated into the daily schedule at regular intervals.
16. English Radio: Radio One will continue to provide a range of network programming with enhanced budgets supporting up to 16 additional hours of strong locally-produced programming each week. Radio Two will continue to provide some national content but, with the extensive Radio Music service now offering 168 playlists or more, the broadcast service has the opportunity to begin providing important exposure for regional artists of all kinds. Some of these programs could also be woven into the national program grid as part of a regional exchange process.
17. Strengthened regional production resources would also provide fresh opportunities to improve the reflection of the interests of official language communities throughout the country.
18. Of course, budgets would have to be realigned to give stations the resources to create more effective and distinctive programs. In so doing, CBC's corporate leadership would be forced to make some hard choices about its contemporary role and priorities.
19. CBC.ca remains a powerful presence in Canada, especially in news. CBC should make all its online news (which is, after all, publicly funded) available, *gratis*, to all other media organizations in Canada with appropriate credit. In this way, CBC would play a more collaborative role in sustaining civic news and information in our digital age.

20. Change can be unsettling. We are, however, convinced that that status quo is no longer an option if a national English-language public media service is to survive north of the 49th parallel.

21. It is our intention to address a number of the questions identified by the Commission in its Notice of Public Consultation 2019-379 in Part 2 of this submission. We are concerned, however, that the applicant has failed to provide in its supplementary brief sufficient information on significant elements of its past performance and, more importantly, on its strategic plan for the next licence period (“Your Stories, Taken to Heart”) for which only a two-page summary is accessible. As the Commission is well aware, the future of the Corporation’s revenue stream is uncertain at present and we are concerned that this degree of opacity is inconsistent with effective regulation and oversight of this national public service.

Respectfully submitted by PBC21, among whose members are,



Bruce Steele
Regina, SK



Alain Pineau
Ottawa, ON



Paul Gaffney
Ottawa, ON



Jeffrey Dvorkin
Toronto, ON



Frank Koller
Ottawa, ON



Bernie Lucht
Toronto, ON



Wade Rowland
Port Hope, ON



David Schatzky
Toronto, ON



Kealy Wilkinson
Toronto, ON