

CRTC CBC renewal hearings 2021

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Good afternoon.

Although I have had experience working in the film and television sector, today I speak as a member of the general public.

For almost four decades I have enjoyed CBC television, radio and more recently, Gem. Indeed, I believe passionately in the role of a national broadcaster. However, I have three areas of concern; these include accessibility, content and advertising, particularly in CBC English television.

As we know, Canada is a large and diverse country with a comparatively small population. These facts inform not only the mandate of the CBC but also the tools at its disposal. As our national broadcaster, its core responsibility is to serve the people. In so doing, it must ask: who are we as Canadians? How can every region and citizen be served?

The CBC mandate states that its programming should “be predominantly and distinctively Canadian, reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences, while serving the special needs of those regions.” This statement speaks to two of my points.

All communities depend on the bedrock of local programming. Over the past number of years the decline in local news has increased exponentially; small newspapers have been absorbed into large conglomerates and radio and television stations have disappeared. In a country as expansive and diverse as Canada, universality and accessibility are vitally important. It is imperative that people stay informed not only on national affairs but on community issues as well. Local concerns require access to local news. The CBC must be held to their mandate.

Second: content. We live next door to a large and very loud producer of commercial entertainment that has spread its cultural tentacles across the world. In response, Canada developed a quota system of “Canadian content” or Cancon for short. Unfortunately Cancon does not address actual content but instead protects jobs – if key personnel are Canadian, Cancon requirements are fulfilled – no matter if the location, story, issue, history or community originate entirely from another country. How can this be? Does Canada not have a rich history? Do we not have stories of our own?

As a result, Canadian television is awash in American content – either directly (rebroadcast US shows) or indirectly (format replication). Although less guilty of the former offense than CTV or Global, CBC has championed cloned versions of American game shows, British baking challenges and US-style law and order police dramas. How are these Canadian stories? A programme can only be “distinctly Canadian” if in fact Canada is at its core. A foreign template cannot suddenly become Canadian simply by inserting a few Canadian contestants or including a quick reference to a Canadian locale. I would argue that there is a serious disconnect between Cancon and the CBC mandate. In order to represent the soul of Canada, there must be evidence of actual Canadian content.

Finally: commercials. I understand that good programming requires significant financial outlay. And, at a mere \$34 per capita in public funding, the CBC is far behind public broadcasters in the UK, Europe and Scandinavia. However, are commercials the only way to rectify this shortfall? Each commercial break in CBC primetime now consists of eleven to fifteen ads – this equals a shocking average of 55 commercials in a one-hour presentation – a full fifteen minutes or 25% of a 60-minute slot! Indeed, this advertising avalanche only drives viewers towards commercial-free streaming platforms, which in turn further reduces revenue and ultimately portends the premature demise of CBC television. I would urge the CBC to fulfil its role as our public broadcaster and follow the lead of other countries that have made their national television services ad-free.

In addition, I am aghast at CBC’s plan to allow “Tandem” ads on its digital news platforms. This “paid content” blurs the line between genuine news and commercial interests to such an extent that the viewer no longer knows what is real. This is deception, pure and simple. We have only to look to our neighbours to the South to see where this road leads. Do we want a similar crisis in Canada? Is the CBC prepared to risk its reputation as a national broadcaster and destroy the public’s faith in independent journalism? I fail to see how any good can come of this scheme.

I believe that a national broadcaster is imperative to a strong Canadian identity and is essential to our democracy. At its best, the CBC has the ability to connect every part of our country. It can tell our stories and reveal our history. It can educate, spark discussion and keep us abreast of local and national news. The CBC must be a passionate advocate for all Canadians. This is the CBC we need.

Thank you.