



CBC/Radio-Canada: an essential public service

Robert Rabinovitch, President and Chief Executive Officer, CBC/Radio-Canada



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What is the role of CBC/ Radio-Canada as a public broadcaster?

Public broadcasters throughout the world are being seen in a new light. More than ever before, their *raison d'être* – namely the preservation of a public space to support their country's distinctive culture – is considered to be vital.

The mission of CBC/Radio-Canada is to deliver high-quality, distinctive programming that brings together all citizens of this country and that reflects their interests and concerns. Our challenge: to carry out our mission within the framework of good management by reducing costs, and finding new sources of revenues.

Nearly two-thirds of our financing comes from public funds, namely C\$916m for 2002–2003. For this reason, we must optimize our operations and investments.

The question is: how do we carry out our mission through programming that reaches all our audiences effectively?

Competition

Competition has quadrupled over the past decade, with specialized channels such as Historia and Canal D taking a share of our traditional clientele.

This has had an impact on our ratings, bit by bit. The overall rating of Radio-Canada, including RDI, has dropped, both in daytime and prime time.

Is this dramatic? Not really, since public broadcasting is not defined solely by ratings.

The reach of our programming, that is, the number of people who turn to one or more of our services every day, is much more important.

When ratings become the only thing that matters, as is the case with private broadcasters, programming choices are made largely on this basis.

Airing commercial-free programming blocks for children or cultural

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programmes such as *Les Beaux Dimanches* is then out of the question. And no investment is made in international news or public affairs either.

These types of programming do not generate high ratings, and no significant advertising revenue. But they are at the core of a public broadcaster's mandate.

A new positioning

Last year, as part of our efforts to meet the challenges of a new media environment, we proceeded with an in-depth analysis and review of the role of Radio-Canada Television.

The new positioning is the culmination of intensive research and analysis of the media environment, of our niche market and of what makes us unique.

We sought to understand what our strengths were, and to determine what makes Radio-Canada unique and distinctive.

Radio-Canada Radio is a good case in point. Its unique character is key to its success and audience loyalty. Within seconds of tuning in, we immediately recognize Radio-Canada.

Can a lesson be learned from this and adapted to the television environment?

We believe so. And consequently, we've decided – as all leaders must – to take a risk. We've decided not to position ourselves to win the ratings race but rather to focus on serving people.

And, as a result, we've concluded that what truly matters is to ensure that our audiences remain loyal to us, and that we continue to offer them a true alternative to the mainstream networks.

But, what makes our television unique?

First and foremost, Radio-Canada is a public service. Radio-Canada dares to produce the type of programming that its competitors would never even consider doing. This is true of programmes typical of Radio-Canada, such as *Le Dernier Chapitre* and *Trudeau*, jointly produced by our English and French networks, and the broadcast of the Olympic Games.

This is also true of a number of programmes, including *La Petite Vie*, *Un gars, une fille* and *La Vie, la vie*. We dared to invest in these productions, even though at the

onset, when they were first created, there was absolutely no guarantee that any takers would be found.

Radio-Canada is also a formidable breeding ground for ideas and images, where risk is possible. But let's face it: risk-taking also implies that there can be errors, and on this point we must be clear. We must come to terms with these failures.

The new positioning of Radio-Canada Television is based on the values that make it so distinctive and that stem from its mandate: a public television service for audiences made up of citizens rather than consumers; a window that showcases our artists and culture; and a source of in-depth information that fosters exchanges of opinions and sharing of thoughts. In short, a type of programming that is unique and daring, and that also reflects who we are while bringing us together.

It is this formula that in fact summarizes the philosophy behind the choices we continue to make for all our platforms.

Programming

CBC/Radio-Canada reaches audiences through its national television and radio networks, speciality

services, Internet sites, youth web services and, of course, Galaxie and Radio Canada International.

Let's also not forget that we offer all of these services in both French and English. In Canada's north, we even broadcast in eight aboriginal languages. CBC/Radio-Canada stands as the number one conglomerate in the Canadian communications sector.

We are also a driving force behind the country's cultural industry. In Montreal alone, we have over 3,800 employees dedicated to the in-house production of thousands of hours of television, radio and Internet programming.

We are also a major player in the independent production sector. In 2002–2003, we invested over C\$24.6m in the region, with significant economic windfalls for the industry.

We also actively support the Canadian feature film industry: since 1999, we have invested C\$20m in the development, production and promotion of Canadian films.

Changes

To take risks, while continuing to provide the public with services it has come to expect from us, we need to manage our organization as efficiently as possible. Therefore, our corporate strategy is based on the need to inject as much money as possible into the production of high-quality programming, across all our platforms. Furthermore, these funds can only originate from new and more efficient operations, since we cannot depend on receiving a sizeable injection of new public funds.

In light of all this, we've reviewed all our non-core activities, such as the management of our buildings, with an emphasis on freeing up

additional resources that can be channelled into programming. So far, this strategy has proved effective. One example: we have generated an additional C\$5m per year from the sale or lease of unused space in our Toronto and Regina facilities.

In Ottawa, Edmonton and Quebec City, we will be grouping all of our services under one roof. This initiative will enable us to produce better-quality programmes, through increased collaboration between our teams, with space optimization and technological investments.

New technologies

Our Centre de l'information in Montreal is an excellent example of how we can take advantage of new technology and innovative work methods. By combining and digitizing resources for the gathering and production of news for our main network and RDI, we can leverage maximum value from shared resources and produce higher-quality programming.

We plan to continue our efforts to generate more revenue from our operations, in order to be able to better focus on our *raison d'être* – programming.

Strategic alliances

Another important element of our strategy is our openness to strategic partnerships and alliances. ARTV, The Documentary Channel and Country Canada, our three new speciality services launched in autumn 2001, are all examples of partnerships with the private sector.

In Quebec, we have a new agreement with Cogeco that has resulted in the creation of our own newsrooms in Trois-Rivières, Sherbrooke and in the Saguenay region, as well as the broadcast on these stations of all of our programmes.

We also have a number of agreements with independent producers to produce programmes for us, using our personnel and our facilities.

In conjunction with *La Presse*, we publish the TV guide *Voilà!*, 650,000 copies of which are printed each week.

Partnerships

These are only a few examples of how strategic alliances and partnerships can help us reach new markets, gain access to new networks and maximize our use of public funds.

Internally, we favour another type of partnership, one aiming to better manage our resources and increase the synergy between radio, television and the web. Let's consider foreign correspondents. Today, several of them work with both radio and television, in French and English. In fact, 8 out of 10 of our correspond-

ents now report in both languages or work for more than one service.

This obviously enables us to achieve significant savings. But more importantly, it also allows us to increase and improve our news coverage, by being present in a greater number of troubled spots around the world.

Given the current international situation, I'd like to take a few moments to discuss our coverage of the Iraqi conflict. We have nearly 40 people throughout the region, responsible for covering events from all perspectives, for all our services. Our news personnel was evacuated from Baghdad, but we still have teams in Amman, Kuwait City, Qatar, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, northern Iraq, Turkey, Cairo, and of course, London, Washington and Paris.

What other Canadian broadcaster can offer such complete coverage, on television, on radio and on the web? What broadcaster is ready to invest in the necessary resources? In view of the high costs, only CBC/Radio-Canada is ready to invest the funds required to offer Canadians a complete coverage from a Canadian perspective. This initiative, which

illustrates our approach in terms of coverage, enables us to use the full potential of our news force.

It is clear why a large number of Canadians turn to CBC/Radio-Canada in times of crisis. During the terrorist attacks in New York, for example, our main network and RDI together reached 75% of francophones from coast to coast.

On 11 September 2001, the Radio-Canada Television signal was broadcast on TV5 Monde, while Radio France aired our radio signal. This week, RSR (Swiss-French radio) is directing its audience to our website for a francophone, North-American viewpoint on the Iraqi conflict. We're proud of the performance of our reporters, and of CBC/Radio-Canada's international reputation.

Where are we heading?

Our commitment to maintaining a public space and a distinctive Canadian voice in a world dominated by foreign programming is unwavering. We will continue to strengthen our operating and financial positions, so that we can respond better to rapidly changing market conditions and audience needs.

Given the competition, convergence and spread of speciality services, one thing is certain: the broadcasting world will continue to change, and the public service must also be ready to adapt. We will continue to evolve and find new ways of reaching our objectives. Clearly, all of our efforts must be focused on programming. It must be designed, developed and produced with all Canadians in mind.

It must reflect our own image at the regional, national and international levels. In today's environment, such a public service is even more essential than ever.

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