THE END OF CBC?


Review by Daniel Bernhard


Yet public opinion polls consistently find that the CBC is Canada’s most trusted cultural institution, especially when it comes to news.

Canadians love their CBC. CBC radio is No.1 or No. 2 in every major market. In Quebec, Tout le monde en parle attracts a live audience of over 1.1 million people on any given Sunday evening—a staggering 15% of the province’s francophone population.

Still, it’s hard to shake the feeling that something is deeply wrong with the CBC. Its flagship television newscasts are no longer essential viewing. CBC commands a measly 3% of English TV audience share. As David Taras and Christopher Waddell remind us in The End of the CBC?, the CBC’s foreign reporting capabilities are withering. That the CBC could not get a reporter or even a freelancer to Kabul to cover the recent Taliban takeover and the botched evacuation that ensued shows just how badly its once-mighty journalistic operation has atrophied. For all its efforts to build valuable digital services—something Taras and Waddell explore in detail—the CBC’s free (and excellent) on-demand audio services attract a fraction of the audience of paid services like Spotify or Apple Music. And though the CBC’s $34 per-capita annual budget is already among the lowest in the developed world, the threat of major funding cuts seems omnipresent. Both Liberal and Conservative governments have taken the axe to the CBC budget since 1985, and since 2020, the Conservative Party’s official policy
is to privatize and/or dismantle most of the CBC if elected.

It is in this context of fragility and uncertainty that Taras and Waddell launched *The End of The CBC?*, a timely, constructive book that boasts a precisely rare combination of impeccable research and straightforward, jargon-free writing.

This volume is of major national importance. Taras and Waddell clearly understand Canadians’ intimate, personal relationship to the CBC and they address their argument accordingly.

As the title lets on, Taras and Waddell are not bullish about the CBC’s future. They don’t even wait to get through the preface before declaring that the CBC must “be reimaged and reinvented or die a slow death on the outskirts of the media world.” Given their extensive journalistic and scholarly expertise and the CBC’s vital role in Canadian life, this prediction alone is cause for widespread concern.

The authors view the CBC as a storied institution that tries and fails to be all things to all people. Their basic prescription is to pare back the CBC to information only, jettisoning most everything else. They don’t take this suggestion lightly, but they argue with firm conviction that the only alternative to cutting is across the board mediocrity, begetting irrelevance and then death.

Taras and Waddell wisely situate their analysis within the greater context of the global audiovisual industry. They understand that the two main forces reshaping digital media—streaming services like Netflix on one hand and microtargeted ‘information’ services like Facebook on the other—have very different impacts on the media ecosystem and on society. Netflix displacing TV will not eliminate drama production, for example. Quite the contrary: the number of titles at our fingertips has never been greater. What’s more, Netflix can outspend the CBC (or any other player with non-global scale) on scripted programming by at least an order of magnitude, making it difficult to compete on quality. A top-flight CBC scripted program costs about $US 2 million per hour. Netflix is now closing in on $20 million per episode for top productions.

The news situation is exactly opposite. Whereas Netflix converts subscription revenues into an infinite stream of content, Facebook and Google steal advertising share away from TV and newspapers without converting a penny into journalism, unless regulation compels them to do so, as in Australia and France. The market for digital advertising recently eclipsed ads in traditional media, and this dastardly duopoly controls about 80% of it. This shift in the ad market has cratered the journalism industry. Since Facebook became available to the general public in 2006, Canada has lost an estimated 20,000 journalism jobs. Hundreds of print and broadcast outlets have closed and the smart money says that the situation will only get worse.

So when Taras and Waddell argue that the CBC should pour all its efforts into news, their concern is for democracy itself. If the market cannot direct sufficient capital to the production of the vital democratic product that is journalism, the public must step in.

In this respect, Taras and Waddell may be more right than they realize. The devastating social and political impacts of turning over the information system to a company like Facebook—#StopTheSteal, Plandemic, QAnon, etc.—are not contingent symptoms of poor corporate behaviour, but inevitable consequences of how information is monetized on the internet today. If the business model is the problem, non-commercial sources of information have never been more necessary.

But to argue that the CBC must choose between offering several mediocre genres or an excellent newsroom is to be resigned to the inevitability of CBC’s meagre funding. The authors’ position makes sense only if scarcity is a given. But, in reality, it is a contingent political choice. In response to the authors’ apparent acceptance of a diminished pie, I say, let’s find the money for the CBC to do more than one thing well.

Entertainment programming, a.k.a. Canadian content, remains a vital national service that has clear impacts on Canada’s culture of decency, democracy, and mutual respect. And just as the authors plead for a CBC that can provide the quality journalism nobody else can or will, we can also say that Canadian culture cannot survive without high-quality Canadian content that only the CBC can produce.

Call me naive if you must. *The End of the CBC?* contains a lengthy analysis of the CBC’s stagnant Parliamentary appropriation and the complex politics that reproduce it no matter the colour of
government. If the myriad reports and campaigns and committee resolutions floated in the last 30 years haven’t moved the dial, why should we expect a different result now?

Because the current situation is historically unprecedented. Netflix, Google and Facebook are qualitatively different from the private Canadian or American outlets against which the CBC has historically been juxtaposed. CTV News may be less thorough than CBC News but it’s still Canadian news. The New York Times may not be Canadian news but it’s still credible, professional journalism. Facebook, by contrast, has no saving graces as a substitute for the credible media it displaced.

Canada’s private broadcasters were always compelled to spend a certain amount of their revenue on original Canadian programming, while foreign broadcasters made indirect contributions to Cancon through cable companies. Netflix and co. are free of such encumbrances. Ceteris paribus, the current technological switch will not merely affect the level of Cancon available or the mechanism by which it is financed but obliterate the very idea of Cancon as an immutable pillar of cultural life.

Canadians see the general direction things are heading and don’t approve, blowing open the Overton window for Canadian media policy. When The End of the CBC? was published in early 2020, the idea of forcing Google and Facebook to pay for journalism was not on the radar. Today, it is the official policy of all five parties in Parliament. Likewise Prime Minister Trudeau decried the so-called “Netflix Tax” and promised as recently as 2018 never to apply sales taxes to foreign digital services. Today, that tax has been enacted and enjoys all-party support, as does legislation to compel foreign internet broadcasters like Netflix to invest in original Canadian content.

If ever there was a moment to propose a new vision for a new CBC that is both modernized and expanded, surely this is it. In Australia, the public broadcaster is included in the News Media Bargaining Code. Canada could supplement the CBC’s funding in the same way. Likewise, we could enact a levy on microtargeted, surveillance-based advertising and send the funds to the CBC. Think of it like a carbon tax for democracy: companies that pollute it must pay to clean it up.

We could also have Netflix et al. devote some of their (soon to be) obligatory Cancon spending to co-productions with the CBC. Perhaps each dollar spent this way could count for double towards the overall requirement, rewarding foreign streamers for funding public broadcasting. This measure alone could direct hundreds of millions of new dollars into the CBC’s entertainment efforts each year.

The main reason why this book should be shared with all Canadians, not just media scholars, is because citizens understand what specialists may not: that we don’t have to settle for making do in the present circumstances. We have the power to change those circumstances if we so choose.

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