

Nina Corfu
April 6, 2004

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING RADIO BROADCASTING IN CANADA
The Demise of CBC/SRC: Making Room for the Community

I watched this once-proud organization thrash its way to the edge of irrelevance
- Wayne Skene

Once upon a time there existed an independent public corporation in Canada, free from government interference and immune to the mood swings of the marketplace, whose duty it was to visit Canadians each night through their living room receivers. Canadians felt that they were treated well by this nightly visitor; they enjoyed hearing their neighbours narrating familiar stories over the airwaves. As the years past, listeners found that they were increasingly unfamiliar with the voices on the radio and the stories being told. CBC/SRC, the media body that used to negotiate so effectively between private and public interests, has since sacrificed its ability to represent the interests of Canadians in order to promote the economic and political agenda of the state. By analyzing the ways in which private interests circumvent those of the public, and by revealing the flaws inherent in a public broadcasting service that does not answer to its citizens, it becomes clear that the first step towards re-conceptualizing public radio broadcasting in Canada is through increased awareness of community media. Although public service broadcasting refers to both television and radio, this discussion will limit its scope to radio, as the history of public/private/and grassroots conflict is more extensive in this domain.

As neoliberalism garners support around the globe, the Canadian state reveals itself to be increasingly catering to those private interests who wish to have culture function as a lucrative feature of the open economy. Marc Raboy is the current director of the Communication Policy

Research Laboratory in the Department of Communication at the University of Montreal. He has worked as a researcher, scriptwriter and journalist for various media organizations, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Biography: MR). Much of Raboy's recent work assesses the impact of the open economy on the development of public policy as it relates to culture. He begins his essay: *Cultural Development and the Open Economy: a Democratic Issue and a Challenge to Public Policy*, by examining the context in which economics and culture collide. In global terms, Raboy explains, an open economy refers to the exchange of goods, services, and capital without obstacles (or trade that is governed exclusively by the forces of supply and demand). In this context, he continues, any intervention by the state that has the effect of influencing consumer choice, or limiting what private enterprise can do, is viewed as a barrier to trade (Raboy, Cultural Development). According to the logic of the global capitalist economy, cultural development is most effectively governed by commercial interests.

Raboy reveals himself to be wary of capitalist ideology that prioritizes the economic well-being of private cultural enterprise over public participation in cultural life. He clarifies this concern by asserting that privatization has the detrimental effect of commodifying, homogenizing, and censoring the creation of cultural objects. Raboy writes that merely to speak of cultural products, cultural industries, and cultural consumers, is to accept an ideology of commodification that falsely assumes that cultural objects are only valuable in the hands of the entrepreneur (Raboy, Cultural Development). On the contrary, Raboy insists that cultural objects have intrinsic value and that their worth should not be assessed in terms of market value alone. In the following passage, he warns of the dangers of treating culture exclusively as a potential source of revenue.

In short, the commodification of culture excludes and marginalizes all cultural practices that cannot be materialized in a market relationship, with the result that, for most people, cultural activity becomes a socially neutered act of consumerism (Raboy, Cultural Development).

Raboy concludes that the cultural sphere should be made immune to economic considerations or, at the very least, supplemented by non-market alternatives, so as to prevent the de-valuing of culture for cultures sake.

If one were to apply such theories to the realm of radio broadcasting, it becomes evident that the dangers of privatization go beyond the commodification of culture. In fact, it has been shown that the privatization of the Canadian radio industry has the effect of stifling potential for creativity and diversity in programming. Since the primary concern of commercial broadcasters is to produce something that sells, controversial and original ideas are often perceived as being too risky to merit commercial support in the area of broadcasting. In *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media*, David Taras confirms that the strategies of commercial broadcasters have the effect of weakening the pool of Canadian talent in the radio industry, and stifling their potential for the production of innovative programming. Taras, recent president of the Canadian Communication Association and professor at the University of Calgary, is wary of the impact of private broadcasting on the Canadian media landscape (David Taras). He writes:

The charge made against commercial broadcasters is that they are guilty of the broadcasting equivalent of clear-cutting. They strip the broadcasting system of its most lucrative elements and then fail to invest in the talent, infrastructure, and ideas needed to create a truly outstanding broadcasting industry... They produce shows that follow the most conventional formulas, take few chances, appeal to the lowest common denominators, and break no new ground (192).

Taras accuses commercial broadcasters of being neither creators, nor risk-takers. Instead, he writes, their primary concern is to turn a profit and they do this by meeting the needs of

audiences as consumers rather than as citizens (173). Taras is clearly concerned about the homogenizing and censoring effects of privatization on the Canadian broadcasting network. In addition to inhibiting diversity and creativity, privatization effectively removes control from the hands of citizens and redirects it in the direction of a powerful and self-interested minority... all to the detriment of public interests. Today, there are over 500 commercial radio stations in Canada. For the Canadians who own and operate these stations, radio is proving to be a profitable business. In the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission's most recent report on private commercial radio in Canada, it was revealed that in the five years since 1999, revenues have increased by 22% and net profits by 137.3%. In 2003, revenues for private Canadian commercial radio rose by 7.8% to total almost \$1.2 billion and from 2002 to 2003, net profits grew by 31% to reach \$210.4 million. In addition to the highly profitable nature of the business itself, potential for media monopolies makes radio broadcasting that much more attractive for private entrepreneurs. A recent adjustment made by the CRTC to their policy on private ownership allows individuals to establish ownership monopolies of up to 3 or 4 stations each, depending on the services already provided in the area. The Commission justified these allowances as such:

[i]n the Commission's view, increased consolidation of ownership will enable the radio industry to strengthen its overall performance, attract new investment, and compete more effectively with other forms of media. The Commission is satisfied that the revised policy will provide for a strengthened radio industry... (Canada, Second Century).

As a direct result of this policy, private ownership monopolies are encroaching on what was once public terrain. In 2001 it was calculated that the top four Canadian radio entrepreneurs owned 38% of all the private radio stations in Canada. That same year, 77% of all radio revenues went

directly into the hands of the top 10 largest radio operators in the country (Canada, Second Century). Such figures reveal that the advent of media monopolies has resulted in the channeling of funds into the hands of the few and the potential for hegemony on the airwaves.

Finally, not only is the prioritization of commercial interests over those of the public a threat to the integrity of cultural creation and egalitarian control; but also to the preservation of democracy. Raboy explains that cultural production that is free from the influence of market forces can provide the resources that enable an individual or community to intervene in the social, economic, and political life of the nation. This is essential, he explains, in that access to culture can further the emancipation of the individual and enable the citizen within each of us to adapt to and participate in the life of the collectivities in which we function (Raboy, Cultural Development). Raboy insists that commercialization will do away with radio as a democratic forum for public debate. He describes the public sphere as a fundamental democratic institution; one which would likely not survive if commercial interests were to dominate in the realm of broadcasting (Raboy, Cultural Development). Raboy reveals that privatization threatens the success of democracy by circumventing the public's right to intervene in cultural creation and contribute to the dialogue of the nation.

In keeping with Raboy's theories, Robert W. McChesney, professor with the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, is skeptical of the capability of commercial broadcasters to uphold a democratic media system (Robert W. McChesney). In an article for *The Canadian Journal of Communication*, McChesney reveals that these concerns echo those of Canada's earliest activists for public broadcasting. He recounts that in the 1930s, the Canadian Radio League operated with a mandate to discourage commercial broadcasting in

Canada. In a speech to the House of Commons in 1932, Graham Spry, one of the principal organizers of the Canadian Radio League, spoke of democracy as that system of Government responsible and controlled by public opinion (McChesney, Graham Spry). He then appended this comment with a specific reference to the direct connection between radio broadcasting and democracy-building. Spry insisted that: radio broadcasting is palpably the most potent and significant agent for the formation of public opinion (McChesney, Graham Spry). By making reference to the connection between broadcasting and the formation of public opinion, Spry attests to the democratic potential of the radio medium.

Not everyone agrees that the cultivation of an active and participatory public is essential to the operation of democracy. On the contrary, certain political theorists have argued that elite domination is not only natural but *necessary* for the execution of democracy (Taras 35). Such scholars are notorious for arguing that the elite are the most important actors in society and that public debate should be dominated by those in control of the political system; namely, the wealthy and the educated (Taras 35). Journalist and author Walter Lippmann, active in the last century, went so far as to suggest that society needs a specialized class to control information and thus save democracy from the mass hysteria, prejudice, and ignorance of the uneducated masses (Taras 35). Lippmann's theories cultivated the perception that regular citizens were merely pawns, lacking in the necessary sophistication to be involved in public life. Although few today would admit to operating on such a premise, the fact remains that it is in the interests of the elite to monopolize and inhibit public participation in the cultural sphere.

In 1997, Noam Chomsky gave a talk at Z Media Institute in which he referred to the impact of Lippmann's theories on the media environment today. Chomsky explained that in his

pursuit of a properly-functioning democracy, Lippman openly proposed shaping peoples attitudes to comply with those of the elite. This was accomplished by overriding the publics right to autonomous and free decision-making; an act called manufacturing consent (Chomsky). Chomsky argued that contrary to the logic of Lippmans version of democracy, the agenda-setting media actually function anti-democratically by contradicting the publics right to active participation (Chomsky). Others have agreed with Chomskys criticism of Lippmans notion of democracy; which they argue is inherently flawed. In *Cultural Development and the Open*

Economy, Raboy quotes Alain Touraine who states that:

[t]he aim of a democratic society is to produce and to respect the greatest possible amount of diversity, with the participation of the greatest possible number in the institutions and products of the community (Raboy, Cultural Development).

In keeping with Touraines definition, it is evident that public participation is essential to democracy and that elite domination is highly problematic. Privatization is problematic in that the active involvement of the citizenry in the production of culture is integral to the democratic process.

The increasing privatization of the radio broadcasting system in Canada has had the effect of commodifying, homogenizing, and censoring the creation of cultural objects while at the same time inhibiting the functioning of a true democracy. Conceivably, then, a broadcasting system that was entirely public would sustain the integrity of cultural creation, foster creativity, make journalists immune to political and economic pressures, and lend itself to a more democratic society. To make such an argument without questioning the power of the state, however, is both naive and dangerous.

In a book entitled *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canadas Broadcasting Policy*, Raboy warns that although state-intervention is preferable to private dependency, the public model is far from ideal. He asserts that the state itself is not an impartial body. In actuality, Raboy warns, the modern state has its own particular private interest (Raboy, Missed Opportunities 336). In Canada, priorities such as stabilizing the capitalist economy, maintaining internal cohesion, protection from the dominance of the United States, and the assertion of state legitimacy, take precedence over all other interests (Raboy, Missed Opportunities 336).

Although such a mandate could not be called sinister, it is clearly hegemonic; as the interests of the public are not identical to those of the state. To summarize, the public interest could be construed as follows: stable economics but not to the detriment of social services, internal cohesion but not at the cost of homogenizing regional differences, protection from the dominance of private media interests and assertion of the right to active participation in a democracy. In keeping with what are evidently competing priorities, the underlying theme in Raboys work is the importance of distinguishing between national and public interests. He warns that:

A policy that equates the nation with the public, and that is based on activities carried out under the auspices of the state, is likely to end up conscripted to serve the narrowest interests or even the repressive apparatus of the state (Raboy, Missed Opportunities 8).

The fact that the states priorities continue to circumvent those of the people, under the guise of being for the betterment for all, is highly questionable. By confusing the public interest with that of the nation, broadcasting quickly becomes an instrument of the state and not of the people.

Canadas public broadcasting agency, known as The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation,

operates four distinct radio networks providing two services in each official language. CBC Radio One and Première chaîne are The Radio Networks (AM), which specialize in information, news, and current affairs programming. CBC Radio Two and Chaîne culturelle are The Stereo Networks (FM), which focus on arts programming such as music, drama, and comedy (Canada, Making Our Voices Heard 48). CBC/SRC broadcasts out of 698 radio outlets, including a number of affiliates and rebroadcasters.

In *Missed Opportunities*, Raboy points to CBC/SRC as a model of administrative broadcasting or broadcasting that functions in the interest of the state. Raboy accuses the public corporation of becoming an instrument of national policy and building its programs in its own image of the public interest (Raboy, Missed Opportunities 10). This is evident in the ways in which the national corporation is altering its operations to mimic those of transnational corporations, in the influence of political coercion on the content of CBC/SRCs broadcasts, and in the existence of an internal bureaucracy. In the words of McChesney:

[e]ven the best-intentioned and best-established public broadcasting system finds navigating the waters of a class society a tricky proposition, especially as the political system that formally controls them is unduly influenced by a wealthy ruling class in a capitalist society (McChesney, Graham Spry).

Thus, while it would not be fair to suggest that Canadas public service broadcaster intentionally prioritizes the interests of the state over those of the citizenry, a thorough analysis reveals that this is the ultimate outcome of CBC/SRC operations.

In keeping with a willingness to conform to state-endorsed neoliberal imperatives, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation long ago began to mimic the strategies of transnational corporations. Their first move was to prioritize economics by culling budgets, seeking

economies of scale, and lobbying for protectionist measures and less constraining regulatory requirements. Although advocates for the CBC might argue that such efficiencies are necessary in the face of limited budgets and constant downsizing, others, like Raboy, have insisted that these measures were taken to enhance the corporations competitiveness in an international setting; to the detriment of national services (Raboy, Cultural Development). Furthermore, the CBC/SRC has implemented a top-down approach to management that is contributing to the insularity of those in charge. In *Cultural Development and the Open Economy*, Raboy reveals his frustration with the fact that the divisions in the realm of public broadcasting have grown so wide that those in control of the creation of cultural artifacts no longer share any material, social or political context with their consumers (Raboy, Cultural Development). Raboy argues that the elite management at the CBC/SRC is losing touch with its audience. Finally, in keeping with transnational strategies, the CBC/SRC has embraced centralization. Unfortunately, by concentrating creative control and production in metropolitan areas, the public service broadcaster was forced to sacrifice regional representation; a move that clearly contradicts the objectives of the public service broadcaster. In *Fade to Black: A Requiem for the CBC*, Wayne Skene, who spent 14 years with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a journalist, producer and senior manager, asserts that Canadian public broadcasting, at its inception, was not meant to be an institution run or controlled from a place like Toronto or Ottawa (Skene 8). On the contrary, the original intent of CBC/SRC was to function as a delegate for Canadians; most of whom identify strongly with their local communities and in fact, the CBC/SRCs annual report for 2002-2003 confirms that regional representation is still a priority for the corporation today (CBC Annual Report 2002-2003). In their efforts to appease the state and ease economic

pressures, the CBC/SRC culled services, intensified the bureaucracy, and sacrificed regional representation.

Fortunately for Canadians and their public service broadcaster, prioritizing economics, implementing a top-down approach to management, and centralizing services is not the only option. In his epilogue, Skene provides some suggestions for ways in which the CBC/SRC ought to modify its operations. One of his major suggestions includes dismantling the traditional networks and restoring control of program design, production, and dissemination to the regions. Included in this vision is the stipulation that regional administrators be guided in their selection of programs by regional advisory councils, whose public members would be nominated and elected from the communities (Skene 267, 268). Such an alteration would, in Skenes eyes, go a long way toward alleviating administrative costs and repatriating public broadcasting for Canadians (Skene 268). Such a solution has yet to be taken seriously.

Unfortunately, in addition to economic constraints, the CBC/SRC must contend with intense political pressure as a result of its position of subservience to the state. National priorities such as domestic stability, patriotism, and the assertion of state legitimacy shape the content of CBC/SRC productions. Subsequently, the corporation has been accused of being too susceptible to political coercion, prone to self-censorship, and inclined to reporting from a federalist position. In *Power and Betrayal*, Taras describes various attempts made by political leaders to use the public broadcaster for their own purposes. He explains that Canadian leaders often use their influence to silence media criticism and to suppress public inquiry and debate.

Their arsenal of weapons is extensive:

[t]hey have resorted to threats and fear tactics... public denunciation, phone calls to CBC presidents, appointments to the

CBC board, the spectacle of parliamentary inquiries, the canceling of programs, and threats of budget cuts... (Taras 169).

McChesney confirms Taras observations with regards to the susceptibility of the public service broadcaster to manipulation from exterior forces.

Indeed, openly antagonizing the powers-that-be often produces swift and severe retribution. Hence, many public broadcasting systems either become extremely careful about upsetting those in economic and political power, or else keep criticism within relatively narrow boundaries. Sometimes this de facto self-censorship becomes so pervasive that the broadcasting system virtually abandons its commitment to a democratic system. Sometimes it actually becomes anti-democratic (McChesney, Graham Spry).

The problem is not that CBC/SRCs employees are unwilling to be critical; they simply do not have the freedom to contradict state objectives. Taras employs the example of the 1995 Quebec referendum to illustrate his contention that CBC/SRC is obstructed from aggressively reporting national issues (Taras 144). Veteran journalist, Jeffrey Dvorkin, who was managing editor of CBC Radio News in the mid-90s, describes his perception at the time: ...there was the impression that the CBC as a crown corporation had a duty to support the federal system at all levels (Taras 155). An independent study conducted by Mark Simpson for inclusion in *Power and Betrayal*, suggests that others shared Dvorkin's sentiments. The study indicated that, overall, CBC audiences heard more about the case for federalism than they did about the arguments for Quebec's independence (Taras 156). Quebec sovereigntists were deeply concerned by this. Jacques Parizeau and Lucien Bouchard accused Radio-Canada of taking its orders straight from the federal government and accused CBC reporters of reacting to separatist views with extreme hostility (Taras 157). An analysis of the type of coverage provided by CBC/SRC during the

Quebec referendum reveals that politics clearly influence the nature and content of broadcasts made by the public service broadcaster.

Not only are external political pressures problematic for CBC/SRC, but a quick investigation of the composition of the corporation's Board of Directors reveals that political bias is woven directly into the managerial fabric of the corporation itself. In *Fade to Black*, Skene warns of the dangers of partisan appointments within a public institution that, by its very nature, ought to be devoted to impartiality. Skene explains that the CBC/SRCs Board of Directors consists of 13 members, a president and a chairman, who report to Parliament through the Minister of Communications. Positions are paid and can be held for up to 5 years, with the possibility of being re-appointed. The only stipulations for involvement demand that members be Canadian citizens and that they not be profiting from a broadcasting operation while serving on the board. Other than that, it is who you are and who you know, Skene explains, as appointments typically come from within the highest levels of government (either from senior cabinet ministers or from the Prime Minister him/herself) (Skene 208). Thus, the very structure of the CBC/SRCs Board of Directors threatens the integrity of the public service broadcaster and places the political interests of the state before the diversity of public interests. As a result of the appointment strategy, board members typically have little or no experience in broadcasting and minimal knowledge of the history of the corporation; much less a comprehensive understanding of public needs. Skene describes the directors with the CBC/SRC as professional amateurs in public broadcasting (Skene 208). Considering that these are the ultimate decision-makers, possessing the power to veto or approve creative decisions at any level, such a lack of expertise and sympathy is disturbing. In the words of Skene:

[t]he majority of the appointments - for all their professional qualifications, social standing and political influence- are about as appropriate for the protection of the interests of public broadcasting as putting a finishing carpenter on the Atomic Energy Control Board (Skene 207).

Lacking in any concrete understanding of the reality of broadcasting or the priorities of the public, the management and board of directors at CBC/SRC ineffectively address the needs of the citizenry.

The evidence shows that although public service broadcasting was designed to be the alternative to commercial media, there are constraints beyond which the CBC/SRC cannot go. Fortunately, a medium exists in Canada that is representative of the diversity of public interests and truly a product of the citizenry. Today, there are 216 low-power non-profit community radio stations in Canada, operating in each province and territory of the country (NCRA Directory). The CRTC is concise in defining the objectives for community radio. Their Community Radio Policy stipulates that the primary function of the medium is to provide community access to the airwaves. This goal is easily attained. The fact that community stations are almost entirely dependent upon volunteer contributions means that stations pro-actively solicit the active participation of as many members of their communities as they can. Community stations are also required to reflect the needs and interests of the communities they are licensed to serve. By abiding by this regulation, community stations ensure the egalitarian representation of minority language and cultural groups. Furthermore, in order to enforce the stipulation that community stations offer diversified programming, a quota system is employed to regulate the structure of a weekly broadcast. Community stations are also audited to ensure that they air a certain amount of music by new and local talent, music not generally broadcast on commercial stations, and

local information (CRTC Community Radio Policy). The fact that community radio is dependent upon community participation, dedicated to representing the local populace's needs and interests and committed to diversified programming, certainly sets the medium apart from public service or private broadcasters in Canada.

In *Missed Opportunities*, Raboy laments the fact that community stations have experienced difficulties surviving in the context of the Canadian broadcasting system. The first attempt to create a truly public alternative to national radio occurred in Alberta over 50 years ago. The project was motivated by the CBC/SRC's request in 1946 that CFCN, Calgary's independent community station, abandon their frequency of 25 years so that the CBC/SRC could incorporate it into their national network. CFCN refused and began to formulate the blueprint for a public, non-national radio model. Organized on the principle of representative democracy, it was decided that the station would conceptually divide the province up into 50 areas. Once a year, shareholders in those areas would select a representative to attend a meeting and choose a board of directors. In this way, feedback and freedom of expression were guaranteed as every shareholder had direct access to the delegate who was to represent them. The plan was to form a corporation which would have multiple shareholders (between ten and fifteen thousand), none of whom would be allowed to own more than a limited number of shares. It was hoped that ownership would be organized much in the same way that farm organizations were being run in the prairies at that time; on the premise of cooperation and egalitarian representation (Raboy, *Missed Opportunities* 85). Although CFCN lost their battle with the CBC, their model of direct community involvement has inspired independent community stations to this day.

While many are hesitant to give up on the national broadcaster, more Canadians than ever

are turning towards independent radio stations for genuine popular representation on the airwaves. In *Missed Opportunities*, Raboy celebrates the emergence of a new space for public discourse existing outside of the traditional zone occupied by the state and private forces (Raboy, Missed Opportunities 343). He draws on the work of cultural studies guru Raymond Williams, who recognized and celebrated the development of what he termed oppositional cultural forms which exist in contrast to dominant cultural forms (Raboy, Missed Opportunities 343). Community radio, as an oppositional cultural form, succeeds where mainstream media forces fail and provide a forum for Canadians to speak on their own behalf.

In an attempt to encourage Canadians to consider the possibilities and advantages inherent in an alternative system, Raboy cites Graham Murdock, professor in the department of social sciences at an English university who asks:

[can alternative media be] strengthened and linked together to create a genuinely popular public sphere that would break with the populism of the market and the paternalism of the existing public institutions, to develop a new kind of communications system? (Raboy, Missed Opportunities 344)

Raboy, like many others, is optimistic about the ability of an independent radio network to link Canadian communities outside of the confines of traditional public service and private institutions (Raboy, Cultural Development). Evidently, it would be counter-productive to suggest that such a system replace the current public service broadcasting service. A healthier broadcasting system requires more diversity, not less. It is important however, that more Canadians are introduced to the benefits of community radio and that independent voices be welcomed in the broadcasting environment.

As time passes, Canadas public service broadcaster and commercial broadcasters grow

increasingly alike. As CBC/SRC falls prey to capitalist ideology and the coercive tendencies of the state, it moves further away from its intended function. Which is, put simply, to provide an avenue for communication between Canadians. Community radio is the only form of broadcasting that has proven to be truly local, truly representative, and truly open to public participation. Thus, if Canadians wish to salvage the airwaves from the grip of private and state interests, they must recognize that the onus is on them to seek out alternatives. Only then will it be safe to say, ...and they lived happily ever after.

ENDNOTES: