**Does canada still need the cbc?; NO, a flagship public broadcaster is no longer relevant in the digital age, writes Andrew Coyne**

Andrew Coyne ; Ottawa Citizen
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Thursday night at the Canadian War Museum, in a debate hosted by the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, sponsored by the Ottawa Citizen and moderated by Michael Bliss, Post-media columnist Andrew Coyne and CBC documentary programming director Mark Starowicz debated the resolution, 'Canada no longer needs the CBC.' The opening statements are printed here.

This is not an argument about the quality of the CBC. It's not very good, but not much television is. It is an argument about its necessity: whether, in the 21st century, we still need a publicly funded national television network.
The question of necessity is an important one. If we use up scarce tax dollars on things that could be funded in other ways, we leave less room for the things that can only be funded through taxes.

There was a time when the CBC was necessary.

Television's first decades were characterized by two things: one, with broadcast spectrum in short supply, there were very few channels; and two, there was no way to charge viewers a price for the signal they received, and to exclude those who did not pay from receiving it.

Broadcasters coped with the second constraint by selling advertising on their networks. But this had an unfortunate consequence. It biased programming decisions in favour of the largest audience - as if we'd held a vote on what to watch.

Because there was no price attached to television signals, there was no way for viewers to indicate the intensity of their preferences: whether they were very keen to watch one show and only sort of interested in another. All that advertisers knew or cared about was which show they were watching.

The result was drearily familiar: a lot of programs that all looked the same, all aimed at the lowest common denominator. You didn't like that kind of programming? Tough. You took what the majority wanted. Critics wrongly assumed that was just how things worked, the inevitable consequence of entrusting culture to "the market."

But this is not how most markets work, nor is there such a thing as "the market." For any given good, there are many markets, for many different tastes. If I want a suit, I can buy the mass market one, or a more expensive one, or if my tastes are really rarefied, I can have one handmade. I don't have to have what the majority wants. I can have what I want.

Hence the case for public funding - not to dictate people's viewing choices, but precisely to mimic the diversity of choices on display in a well functioning market.

But now? Today, spectrum scarcity is no longer an issue: there are literally hundreds of channels. And not only can you pay for each channel, but in many cases you can pay for each program. The case for public broadcasting has collapsed.

You can see this in the kinds of programming on offer. The traditional, "free" networks are as bad as ever - worse, in fact.

But on the pay channels, you can find programming to suit every taste, high or low, broad or narrow. It's not true any longer, if it ever was, that the best programming is on public television. HBO, in particular, produces some of the finest shows in the world. It turns out a demanding, discerning audience - a paying audience - can be at least as good a partner in the artistic process as any granting agency.

At a bare minimum, then, I would put the CBC on pay. It could still be a public broadcaster, but one funded by its audience rather than the taxpayers. If its viewers are as devoted as claimed, they should be happy to pay. Or if it's too much to ask people to pay the full cost of a flagship, all-purpose channel they might only watch a couple of hours a week, then it could continue down the path defined by CBC News Network, and divide itself into a constellation of specialty channels: CBC Arts, CBC Sports, etc.

That would be better for taxpayers, for viewers, and, I'd argue, for the CBC itself. Freed from dependence either on the whims of advertisers or the shifting winds of political favour, it could concentrate its efforts where they should be, on its audience.

And if this were 10 years ago, that's where the argument would end. But in that time television has entered a second technological revolution, more profound than the first. With the advent of digital video and its distribution over the Internet, all of the traditional boundaries and definitions have broken down. Example: newspapers are increasingly in the video business, as CBC is increasingly in the print, or at least text business. Example: small independent, often amateur, video producers have acquired enormous followings online, while traditional broadcasters have seen their audience shares dwindle.

Already many people are "cutting the cord," abandoning both network television and cable in favour of online streaming video distributors like Netflix and Hulu. Now look forward a little. In a year, maybe two, Apple will bring out a new version of Apple TV, doing to television what it did to the music business. And if Apple doesn't do it, somebody else will.

There aren't going to be such things as channels - separate, sequential streams of programs you watch at a particular time. You'll turn on your TV and see a screen-ful of icons representing your favourite shows.

How far off is that? Consider that YouTube is six years old. Hulu is five. Netflix, in its current incarnation, is four. Boxee, one of the new breed of hybrid media services, is two. Which is to say not new, but old. And we're still debating whether to fund a flagship broadcast network?

I've laid out why I think public funding of television is no longer necessary. But even if you don't buy that, even if you think we still need public funding - does it make any sense to deliver it through one network? With all of its overhead, and all of its distribution costs?

One tiny pinprick in an ever-expanding universe of television options? Or would it not be better to fund television productions, that could appear anywhere, on any platform, via any distributor? The Telefilm model, in other words - though I'd abolish Telefilm, too.

Change is coming. Change - vast, torrential, landscape-shifting change - is here. The only question is whether the CBC will get out front of it, or be dragged along and chewed up in its wake. There are a lot of good people at the CBC. No doubt Canadians will still want to watch the programs they produce. But Canada no longer needs the CBC.

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