November 28, 2016

The CBC has lost its way

By KONRAD YAKABUSKI

*The Globe and Mail*

*If a bigger, more predatory public broadcaster only kills off private competitors, how does that serve the public interest?*

Every once in a blue moon – or is that a supermoon? – the CBC does something worthwhile. The public broadcaster had one of those moments in August when it gathered millions of Canadians around their TVs, radios, tablets and phones for the last stop on the Tragically Hip's final tour.

Mind you, this "national celebration" of the Hip was a strictly English-Canadian party. The public broadcaster is still a two-headed beast. Its French and English services remain cultural strangers to one another. They epitomize our two solitudes instead of bridging them.

This alone might be a reason to rethink the public broadcaster's mandate in the digital age. But it's hardly the only one. Ottawa is pumping an additional $675-million into the CBC at the very moment the country's leading private media outlets are struggling to stay afloat amid fragmenting audiences and advertising dollars. Something about this picture just isn't right.

Instead of using the cash infusion from taxpayers to improve core services, particularly regional news operations, the CBC is using some of the money to expand its digital footprint into yet more areas where it competes directly with private media for the same advertising dollars.

But if a bigger, more predatory CBC only kills off private competitors, how does that serve the public interest?

The culturecrats who run the CBC and the Canadian content producers who live off it get their backs up whenever anyone dares suggest that the public broadcaster has not only outlived its original purpose, but may now be inflicting irreparable harm on the domestic private media landscape.

"We don't think that we compete," CBC/Radio-Canada president Hubert Lacroix insisted, incredulously, before the House of Commons Heritage committee last month. "There is nothing in the [Broadcasting Act] or in our mandate that prevents us from delivering these services to Canadians in the most effective way – on the contrary."

So change the mandate. The latter currently does not explicitly prevent the CBC from competing with private media. It should.

The English CBC continues to spend millions on entirely forgettable sitcoms, dramas and reality shows that exist primarily as a source of income for a small clique of Canadian producers and artists. If these were high-quality programs that filled a void left by private Canadian broadcasters, they might serve a purpose. But they don't. Besides, Canadians do not watch them, forcing an already bloated CBC to seek advertising revenue elsewhere.

Hence, the CBC's push into digital opinion content. Compared to dramatic programming, this is a low-cost venture that might actually turn a profit – and kill off a few already dying newspapers in the process. Nonsense, Mr. Lacroix retorts, noting all of the CBC's digital platforms brought in only $25-million in ad revenue in the year to March 31 – before the launch of CBCNews/Opinion.

The CBC has set its sights on vastly growing its digital-ad revenue, with ambitious targets. If Canada was suffering from a lack of diversity in media opinion, there might be a public interest in encouraging a new competitor. But a state-owned media outlet would not be anyone's first choice to fill the gap.

There is not much Ottawa can do about Google and Facebook. But it can rein in the CBC. Hence, Conservative leadership candidate Maxime Bernier's proposal to turn the CBC into a kind of PBS/NPR North makes sense in 2016. A more appropriate model might be an adequately funded national version of TVO, which does so much good with so very little.

Who doesn't yearn for a Canadian version of *Frontline* or science, history and cultural programming on all platforms that makes us better citizens? "Do we need a public broadcaster that runs bad Canadian copies of popular American shows?" Mr. Bernier asks. "Do we need a public broadcaster that now has a website devoted to opinion journalism that competes with newspapers and magazines?"

Unfortunately, there is little chance Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government will move to restrain the CBC. The Liberals are deeply enmeshed with the culturecrats and Cancon artisans who still see the CBC through 1960s lenses as all that distinguishes us from Americans.

The truth is that the CBC, in its current form, is an anachronism that leverages its massive public subsidy to engage in predatory behaviour in no one's interest but its own.

Mr. Bernier's rival for the Tory leadership, Kellie Leitch, wants to abolish the CBC altogether. It's not the only area where Ms. Leitch goes overboard. But you can't say the CBC hasn't been asking for it.