Coyne, Andrew. “Why the CBC should be more like HBO”. **Maclean's,** 12-12-2011

There is an undeniably sinister quality to the apparently coordinated campaign of harassment currently under way against the CBC. Were it just occasional sniping from the Tory backbench, were it simply the Quebecor/Sun Media empire beating its favourite hobby horse, were the National Citizens Coalition merely on one of its crusades-were it even all three together-you might call it business as usual.

But when you consider the links between these different organizations-the Prime Minister's former communications director Kory Teneycke is vice-president of Sun News Network, while the director of the NCC is the former Conservative candidate and online maven Stephen Taylor-the whole thing takes on a different cast. At what point do we conclude that this relentless public mauling at the hands of government MPs and their private sector proxies is intended not merely to expose the CBC to proper scrutiny as a public agency, but to intimidate it in its function as a news organization?

The problem the CBC faces is that whatever their motives might be, its antagonists are, on the whole, right (you should pardon the expression). They are right in terms of the immediate controversy, i.e., whether the corporation is obliged to comply with access to information requests, even from its competitors: clearly, under the law, it must. While the law makes exception for certain types of documents, it cannot be up to the CBC alone to decide which documents qualify for this exception, as a court has lately ruled.

And they're right in their more general proposition: that it is long past time for fundamental reform of the corporation's mandate and structure. Put simply, the case for a publicly funded television network has collapsed. It has done so under the weight of three inescapable realities.

The first is the CBC's own woeful performance, at least when it comes to English TV. The corporation has always been unable to decide whether its mandate was to be an elite/niche broadcaster serving audiences the private networks would not, or whether it was to be a mass-audience, nation-uniting broadcaster. Trying to do both, it has succeeded in neither: its programming is not, on the whole, particularly good or particularly popular.

The second is that the conditions that once justified public funding are no longer present. In television's technological infancy, the combination of "spectrum scarcity" (only three or four channels) and the total reliance, given the impossibility of charging viewers directly, on advertising as a source of revenue, made for monotonous viewing: lots and lots of the same types of shows, all aimed at the broadest possible audience. Advertisers had no interest in how much people wanted to watch a given show, only that they were watching it. The case for public broadcasting, then, was not so much to supplant the market as to recreate it: to mimic the diversity of choices on offer in most normal markets.

But there are hundreds of channels now, and viewers can pay directly, not only for each channel, but each show. There is no longer any appreciable divide in the range and quality of offerings on public and private television: the real divide now is between subscription channels, like HBO, and the "free" advertising-financed models. And yet this world, too, is fast becoming obsolete.

This is the third point: network television, of any kind, is doomed. Recent years have already witnessed a sharp decline in the amount of time spent watching television, while the dwindling television audience is further fragmented between more and more networks.

Fast-forward five years from now, and it's quite clear that television will no longer be delivered in the form of separate channels, each streaming a series of programs one after the other. Turn on your TV, rather, and you'll see a screen full of icons representing the shows you subscribe to: the iTunes model. Indeed, that's how many people watch TV now.

Put it all together, and there is simply no case for continuing to aim hundreds of millions of dollars every year at a single point on the dial. It's not good for taxpayers. It's not good for viewers. And it's not good for the CBC itself, and the people who work there. The best television, as on HBO, emerges from a partnership between creative producers and a passionate, demanding, discerning audience.

Put the CBC on pay, then, and watch it soar. It could still be a public broadcaster, and some of its services could still be subsidized. But the main English network would be a subscription channel, rather like the CBC News Network, or perhaps a constellation of them, each charging a separate fee.

Longer term, as I say, the whole network model will have to be rethought. Even if public funding were still considered necessary, the better model may well be Telefilm: i.e., just fund programs, wherever they appear, rather than the network and all its expensive infrastructure.

So big change is coming. That much is certain. The question is whether the CBC will get out in front of it, or whether it will drag its heels, hankering after a world that has gone and isn't coming back.

Perhaps the present controversy will clinch the case. So long as the CBC is dependent on the public purse, it will always be vulnerable to political pressure and the vagaries of budget cuts. Freed from that dependence, it would be free to chart its own course, accountable neither to advertisers nor to backbenchers, but to those best and wisest of judges, its viewers.Why the CBC should be more like HBO

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