LILLEY: Canadians are ditching CBC, so why do we keep funding it?

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Every single time I critique CBC, I’m told that we need to have the state broadcaster, that Canadians rely upon it.

But the numbers would beg to differ.

Whether we are talking audience share or advertising revenue, CBC is a broadcaster in decline.

Did you know that across Canada, over a total of 27 stations coast to coast, the average audience for CBC’s supper hour newscast was 329,000 people? That’s not 329,000 people per market, that is across the country.

Compare that to just one of CTV’s local supper hour newscasts, CFTO in Toronto, which averaged 1.4 million viewers per night in the first week of 2020. That doesn’t include other major markets like Vancouver, Montreal, Calgary or Ottawa where CTV outstrips CBC. It doesn’t include Global News, which is dominant in Western Canada and like CTV doesn’t take a $1.5 billion per year subsidy from the taxpayers.

These CBC ratings aren’t numbers that I’ve made up, they were contained in CBC’s most recent annual report and highlighted by Ottawa-based media outlet Blacklock’s Reporter.

Other nuggets in that annual report include that CBC’s prime-time audience share in television was 5%, down from 7.6% in 2017-18. We also learned that CBC News Network’s total audience share is 1.4% of all TV viewers.

These slumping ratings mean slumping ad sales, the report says advertising revenue is down 21% overall — the decline in English Canada was actually much bigger, a 37% drop. If it were not for CBC’s French language division having a pretty good year, things would have been much worse.

Ad revenues dropped from $318.2 million in 2018 to $248.7 million in 2019 and things are not likely to get better. Well, except for the increase in government revenue.

Justin Trudeau’s Liberals were elected on a promise to increase CBC’s base funding by $150 million a year. That promise has been met and I’m sure Trudeau will soon be considering more money for his favourite news and media outlet.

Meanwhile, as I reported about two weeks ago now, CBC is asking the CRTC for permission to broadcast less Canadian content on TV even as they take more of our money. As part of their broadcast licence renewal application, the state broadcaster is asking the broadcast regulator for permission to show less “mandated content,” meaning less Canadian content.

Would we even notice?

CBC’s latest attempt to get ratings heading in the right direction has seen them bring in Family Feud Canadian Edition. Nothing says telling Canada’s stories to Canadians quite like importing a dated American game show and selling it like it is something new.

What’s next? Showing Home Alone 2 and editing out Donald Trump?

CBC does well in radio — as someone who worked for years in private radio and competed against CBC Radio, I can say they have an audience and do a good job.

Yet on TV, Canadians are voting with their clickers.

Long before cutting the cord became a concern for TV executives, CBC was the third horse in a three-horse race. They were the least preferred option for comedies or dramas and the least preferred for news.

This may come as a shock to some media folks, especially on Parliament Hill, but CBC’s The National has been the third most watched national newscast for decades. Their recent reboot has only made things worse, pushing ratings below 400,000 viewers a night and at times I am told below 300,000 viewers.

CBC is out of touch with Canadians and what they want to see.

Their supporters may say ratings shouldn’t matter for a state broadcaster like CBC but if they aren’t producing shows we want to watch with their massive subsidy then what is the point of continuing to fund them?

**Why Canada still needs the CBC**

* Jan 30, 2020

**This letter was**[**published in *The Globe and Mail***](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-why-canada-still-needs-the-cbc/)**yesterday by our President and CEO, Catherine Tait.**

This is an important year for Canadian culture and for the national public broadcaster. This week, a panel appointed by the federal government will make its recommendations on the legislation that governs broadcasting, and the mandate of CBC/Radio-Canada. In parallel, the CRTC, our regulator, has launched a public process to renew our TV and radio licences.

Since I became the president and CEO of CBC/Radio-Canada 18 months ago, I have been struck by Canadians’ profound attachment to their public broadcaster and their willingness to engage in lively conversation on what we should and should not be doing.

One thing is clear to me: Canadians count on their public broadcaster for much more than trustworthy news. They count on us for their connection to language – and to place. They count on us to reflect their cultures, their perspectives, their shared experiences, as well as their unique realities as Canadians.

And yet, in the digital age, our very *raison d’être* remains hotly debated. It’s a debate we welcome. Canadians have a stake in the role of their national public broadcaster in the 21st century.

I think it’s important to start with the facts: CBC/Radio-Canada today is not just a TV and radio broadcaster. We are an English and French multiplatform media company – the only one mandated to serve all Canadians. We continue to reach Canadians on linear television and radio; but we reach them in ever-increasing numbers online and on mobile, and through our audio and video streaming platforms.

We create content in eight Indigenous languages. We operate in six time zones. More than 21 million Canadians access our digital services each month. Our podcasts are downloaded more than 10 million times each month. And every day, thousands of hours of our programming, news and entertainment, in English and French, are streamed on demand by Canadians on a variety of devices.

This ambitious collection of services is your national broadcaster.

While foreign streaming services provide phenomenal choice and brilliant programming, their missions differ from ours. They monetize investments in content by leveraging a massive global subscription base. Our focus is on Canadians, first and foremost. While social-media services double-down on optimizing their users for commercial return, your public broadcaster seeks to create a safe place online for civic and civil discourse.

CBC/Radio-Canada’s mandate is to inform, to enlighten and to entertain Canadians. Our choices in entertainment programming are guided by principles of diversity and inclusion, gender parity, and of reflecting the realities of contemporary Canada – along with great storytelling.

We know that Canadians are proud of the international successes of shows such as *Kim’s Convenience* and *Schitt’s Creek* because they are authentic Canadian-told stories – and they are entertaining.

And for the times when we want to come together to celebrate as a nation, CBC/Radio-Canada shines a light on our athletes at the Olympics and Paralympics; CBC salutes our best writers through *Canada Reads* and our best musicians during the Juno Awards weekend; and let us not forget that through Radio-Canada’s annual year-end celebration, *Le Bye Bye* – not to mention the daily draw of *District 31* – francophones across the country continue to connect in record numbers.

An important point about the “inform” part of our mandate. I often say that the beating heart of CBC/Radio-Canada is our news operation – and the extraordinary work of our journalists, at home and around the world. We remain one of Canadians’ most-trusted sources of news and information, all day, across all of our platforms. Our journalists work hard every day to strengthen that trust. A look at our recent coverage of the Newfoundland snowstorm, the tragic plane incident in Iran, or the federal election coverage from coast to coast to coast points to the value of this trust. It is our most precious asset.

But it is also fragile. We are not a pure play digital company with the benefit of a single bottom-line imperative. We are a multi-faceted media company seeking to earn the continued trust of our citizens, to encourage healthy democratic debate, to support creators and their storytelling, and to serve all Canadians, whatever their age, their race, their sexual orientation, their political stripe, their location or their economic situation.

This is your 21st-century public broadcaster.