

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

COMMUNITY BROADCASTING:
HI-TECH REPRESENTS A NEW TWIST

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Throughout Canadian broadcasting history, there have been various community attempts to initiate their own broadcasting systems. Commencing with radio, through self help video groups, down to current community owned television-receive only (TVRO) systems, Canada has had an impressive track record. This article reports a case study of two small Alberta communities that received no outside television signals, neither CBC or CIV, or distant U. S. signals. As a result, the communities on their own initiatives went ahead and purchased TVROs so that quickly the townspeople became part of the 20th Century in terms of broadcasting options. However, the new television options were United States' networks, United States' superstations, and United States' pay networks. The article reports findings from a survey in the communities, discusses the federal response, and outlines some of the potential policy problems created by technology.

Depuis les débuts de la radiodiffusion au Canada, on a vu plusieurs cas où l'introduction d'un système de diffusion a été lancée par la communauté elle-même. Le Canada a connu des résultats impressionnants, d'abord avec la radio, puis dans la formation de groupes de vidéo, et dans l'implantation actuelle de services communautaires dévoués uniquement à la télé-réception (TVRO). Nous rapportons ici le cas de deux petites communautés albertaines qui ne recevaient aucun signal de télévision, ni des réseaux anglais de Radio-Canada ou CTV, ni des réseaux américains plus lointains. En conséquence, les communautés, de leur propre initiative, ont acheté un TVRO et, ce faisant, ont permis à leurs habitants d'entrer sous peu sur le plan de la télécommunication, dans le XXe siècle. Cependant, les choix de programmation de télévision disponible étaient tous des Etats-Unis, provenant de réseaux de télévision, de grandes stations de télévision et de la télévision à péage américains. Dans cet article, nous présentons les conclusions formulées à partir d'une étude faite dans les communautés en question, nous examinons la réaction du gouvernement fédéral, et nous donnons un aperçu de quelques problèmes de principes suscités par la technologie de communication.

The co-operative movement in Canada dates back to the nineteenth century. Most of these organizations were "born of need" and "developed amid...optimism" (MacPherson, 1979, 1,2). Although they vary in size and structure most have a rural or remote perspective. Usually they are concerned with their own community and with improving some aspect of the community's standard of living. One definition of Canada's co-operatives is that of "...common people putting to good use their ingenuity and common sense in the working out of a better life for all in the community...[in] the whole world" (Kerr, 1945, 57). Co-operatives are based on the democratic principle of one person, one vote, or one share, one vote. Members, through mutual self-help, cooperate to establish and run various enterprises on the basis of volunteerism.

Within the broad realm of Canadian broadcasting, co-operatives are not an innovation. As early as 1935, the Antigonish Movement, co-sponsored by the CBC and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, founded the Farm Radio Forum. Father Cody, of St. Francis Xavier University's Extension Department, used radio to assist Maritime communities initiate self-help programs. The Antigonish Movement continues to be a classic model for community and public interest broadcasting.

Because people wanted to be involved with the information and media that affected their lives, more experiments were begun, such as the co-operative **Winnipeg Citizen** in 1949. Also, the advent of cable television allowed more opportunity for community groups to address their problems in public communication forums.

The Fogo Island experiment in Newfoundland in 1967, the National Film Board's Challenge for Change series (1967 - 1972) and the Wired World radio station in Kitchener-Waterloo (now Cambridge) are examples of how the media can be utilized to effect social change (Gwyn, 1983).

In addition, many television and cable co-operatives have recently been established in Western Canada. A spokesperson for the CRTC described many small communities in Western Canada that have formed co-operatives or non-profit societies to bring television to their residents. These organizations have raised funds to establish systems whereby they rebroadcast signals picked up off air or via satellites.

Some communities held municipal referendums which allowed them to collect funds through a tax base levy. Others, particularly in British Columbia, were given one-time "start-up" grants by the provincial government. The two stipulations for these grants were that the groups be non-profit and that they be licensed by the CRTC.

This method of using TVROs to bring television to isolated communities has become very popular in the last three to five years. A TRVO is a receiving dish that is aimed so as to pick up signals from one of the broadcasting satellites. There are an estimated 5,000 TVROs in use across Canada now, but all are not co-operatives. Some are owned by private homeowners and others by commercial businesses, such as taverns, health clubs, or motels. Co-operatives vary in size from large organizations like Western Media Co-operative which serves nineteen

communities in Western Manitoba to much smaller ones like Empress and Acadia Valley with approximately sixty subscribers each. Many TVRO undertakings have been licensed by the CRTC, but not all. This is important for two reasons. First, the spread of TVROs has been so rapid that it is almost an impossible task for the CRTC to keep up with them. Secondly, most TVROs are adjusted to pick up United States' satellite broadcasts and, as such, the owners deliberately avoid any contact with the CRTC.

Like other co-operative organizers, the Albertans of Empress and Acadia Valley were motivated by need when they created their co-operatives to run TVROs. Both communities described themselves as being "media wastelands." They knew that television signals were available. They also recognized that neither the public nor private sectors were willing to make these services available to them. Their small populations gave them neither political clout nor financial profitability. They then proceeded to do what Rollie Thompson recommends in a federal government study, they formed a third sector -- the community enterprise (Thompson, 1976).

Thompson defined a community enterprise as a risky or difficult undertaking taken on by a small community - a controlled collective that is not financially dependent on government or business financing, and whose main purpose is to satisfy a need in the community. The two community organizations involved meet the above criteria.

Thompson suggested that the government recognize this third sector and consider such

approaches when the private or public sectors fail to meet the needs of the people concerned. He further recommended that although the government might help in the beginning with financial aid, no other interference should occur.

He believed that the growth of this sector has two major benefits. First, it can result in a better balanced economy since it cuts down on government expenditures. Second, it reintroduces community awareness, especially in those areas in which people expect their needs to be met by outside groups.

In 1980, CRTC Commissioner, Real Therrien, headed the Committee on Extension of Service to Northern and Remote Communities. The Committee acknowledged that communities like Empress and Acadia Valley existed in a media vacuum. The report stated:

Canadians are justifiably proud of their achievement in providing broadcasting services in two official languages throughout so vast a country, but there is no room for complacency about an achievement that is incomplete. Those who are best served may find it hard to believe that there are thousands of Canadians who have no television at all, and even some who do not have radio" (Therrien, 1980, 1).

It explained moreover that "remoteness" is not always a function of geography. In fact, "there are communities little more than 100 miles from the largest metropolitan centers that are remote in the broadcasting sense" (Therrien, 1980, 4).

Section 3(e) of the Broadcasting Act states that "all Canadians are entitled to broadcasting service in English and French as public funds become available." The Therrien report recognized the inadequacy of available government funding and suggested that Canadians who are in need of television service may be required to finance the extension of services to their areas themselves.

The Therrien committee's first recommendation was that "the CRTC should immediately call for licence applications for the delivery, in remote and underserved areas of a range of Canadian satellite television services that would be attractive to Canadian audiences" (Therrien, 1980, 3). The CRTC followed through on this recommendation by licensing the CANCOM satellite service which originally carried four Canadian signals but has recently expanded to include four American networks, as well.

Both Acadia Valley and Empress have been directed by officers of the federal Department of Communications to apply to the CRTC for a licence. Residents fear such an application would result in an attempt to restrict their choice of programming. They would have to access the Canadian Anik satellite or subscribe to the expensive CANCOM service.

Furthermore, if the groups proceed with licensing, under what category do they belong? They are not really broadcast undertakings nor cable operators. They tend to see themselves as MATV systems. Does this mean they are exempt from cable or broadcast regulations? Do they qualify for an MATV licence? Or do they even need a licence?

In November 1983, the CRTC ruled that MATV services could only offer what Canadian cable companies were offering. Therefore, no popular United States' services like Home Box Office, ESPN, or MTV are permissible for Canadian TVROs under this new ruling. Yet these American services are what subscribers in the small communities appear to want. They are not establishing co-operatives to purchase TVROs to pick up the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Furthermore, First Choice and Superchannel, the Canadian pay television services, do not want Canadian TVRO operators pirating their signals.

The Situation in Empress and Acadia Valley

The town of Empress, Alberta is located in an isolated area near the Saskatchewan border and is 145 kilometers northeast of Medicine Hat, Alberta. Acadia Valley is a small rural community about 170 kilometers northeast of Medicine Hat. Both villages, prior to the purchase of a community TVRO, were, in terms of today's urban standard, media wastelands. Services were either non-existent, sporadic or late. Newspapers arrived from one to three days after publication. Radio signals were sporadic, especially in Empress. Television reception was very limited and of poor quality. Prior to introducing the TVRO system, both communities had attempted to erect large receiving antennas to improve distant signals. The towns of Acadia Valley and Empress spent \$ 50,000. The net result was not entirely satisfactory. One resident stated, "It was like having a constant snowstorm inside your television set."

For these reasons, the townspeople formed co-operatives to buy and operate TVROs and 5 watt rebroadcasting systems. Residents were canvassed for donations and volunteered their time to select programs and to manually switch the equipment. As a result, residents now enjoy two channels of clear television programming available from the American television satellite Satcom III.

However, despite the successful first year of operation, the Empress and Acadia Valley TV co-operatives are in danger of being shut down. In the Fall of 1982, a radio inspector from the Federal Department of Communications visited the villages and informed the co-operatives that they were operating unlicensed broadcast undertakings and that they should take steps to correct the situation.

The alternatives offered these communities were:

1. Attempt to qualify for a CRTC licence.
2. Subscribe to the Canadian CANCOM service.
3. Discontinue the service.
4. Maintain the status quo through a special exemption from CRTC regulation.
5. Ignore the CRTC.

What follows is the report of a study of the two Alberta communities to determine the attitudes of the subscribers to the various options outlined above.

Method

The study was carried out using a mail survey from Calgary, sent to every household in each community. A total of 164 questionnaires were mailed out with 72 going to Acadia Valley and 92 to Empress. A total of forty-two completed surveys were returned for a response rate of 26%. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data.

The small number of respondents was somewhat compensated for by the richness of the answers qualitatively. Several respondents obviously cared about this issue and took every opportunity to share their opinions, comments and suggestions.

Results

A. Background

The demographics of the respondents in Empress and Acadia Valley are highly similar. The vast majority (86%) have lived in one or the other community for at least six years, resulting in a stable population. Both villages had a large proportion (50%) of one or two member households and 45% had at least one adult over fifty years of age. All owned television sets and 91% of the sample watched the satellite delivered television.

B. Usage

The average number of hours viewed per day was about three, mostly during the evening. Both groups ranked movies as their number one

choice of programming (35.7%), with news (16.7%) and sports (14.3%) a close second and third. More respondents in Acadia Valley ranked sports as their first choice (22.7%) than did those in Empress (5%) while the reverse was true regarding news and public affairs programming.

C. Appraisal

When asked to rate the programming available, 25% of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction, thirty percent were satisfied and one third (33%) were neutral. The most common complaint was the presence of sex, nudity and violence in much of the programming.

When rating the delivery system of the programming, 43% were neutral, 19% dissatisfied and 26% satisfied. Many of those who indicated dissatisfaction commented on the poor reception prior to the installation of the new system. Few comments dealt with present problems. In fact, most of the comments regarding the present quality of the delivery system emphasized the improved signal reception and clarity.

Only 19% of respondents viewed television as unimportant in their lives. Comments indicated that television provided a means of keeping up with current affairs and was a welcome form of entertainment in small communities.

Table One

APPRAISAL OF TVRO IMPACT

Item	Acadia Valley Percentage	Empress Percentage	Combined Percentage (n = 164)
1. How satisfied are you with the present television programming in your community			
No Answer	9.1	10.0	9.5
Very dissatisfied	13.6	15.0	14.3
Dissatisfied	9.1	15.0	11.9
Neutral	36.4	30.0	33.3
Satisfied	27.3	20.0	23.8
Very satisfied	4.5	10.0	7.1
2. How satisfied are you with the present system of television programme <u>delivery</u> in your community?			
No Answer	9.1	15.0	11.9
Very dissatisfied	9.1	15.0	11.9
Dissatisfied	4.5	10.0	7.1
Neutral	54.5	30.0	42.9
Satisfied	13.6	20.0	16.7
Very Satisfied	9.1	10.0	9.5
3. How important is the availability of television programming to you?			
No Answer	4.5	5.0	4.8
Very unimportant	9.1	5.0	7.1
Unimportant	4.5	20.0	11.9
Neutral	50.0	35.0	42.9
Important	9.1	15.0	11.9
Very Important	22.7	20.0	21.4
4. How much has the availability of more television programming changed your lifestyle?			
No Answer	4.5	5.0	4.8
Very little	36.4	35.0	35.7
Little	22.7	20.0	21.4
Neutral	27.3	30.0	28.6
Much	9.1	0.0	4.8
Very much	0.0	10.0	4.8

Table One Continued

Item	Acadia Valley Percentage	Empress Percentage	Combined Percentage
5. How much has the availability of more television programming changed life in your community?			
No Answer	4.5	25.0	14.3
Very little	27.3	30.0	28.6
Little	22.7	10.0	16.7
Neutral	40.9	15.0	28.6
Much	4.5	20.0	11.9
Very much	0.0	0.0	0.0
6. What action do you think should be taken if your community was ordered by authorities to dismantle the present system of television delivery?			
No Answer	36.4	45.0	40.5
Discontinue the service	22.7	5.0	14.3
Cable TV license	13.6	25.0	19.3
CANCOM	4.5	10.0	7.1
Other	22.7	15.0	19.0
7. How much effect would be felt by the community if you were forced to discontinue the service?			
No Answer	9.1	15.0	11.9
Very little	0.0	10.0	4.8
Little	0.0	0.0	0.0
Neutral	22.7	25.0	23.8
Much	40.9	25.0	33.3
Very much	27.3	25.0	26.2
8. How much effect would be felt by the community if you were to change to CANCOM delivered programming?			
No Answer	22.7	35.0	28.6
Very little	4.5	10.0	7.1
Little	13.6	5.0	9.5
Neutral	9.1	20.0	14.3
Much	36.4	10.0	23.8
Very much	13.6	20.0	16.7

Results indicate that respondents did not believe that the availability of television had changed their lifestyle or that of the community significantly. Of those who did acknowledge change, some respondents saw positive effects such as less isolation while others considered the effect to be more negative, for example, less community interaction.

Although forty percent of the respondents did not answer the question regarding action to be taken in the event of government intervention, this was clearly the area in which many respondents had strong opinions. No alternative was clearly acceptable in either community. CANCOM was the least acceptable, with only 7% of the respondents choosing it, since it would require a monthly fee.

Discussion and Summary

From the descriptions of Empress and Acadia Valley it is plain that these communities have, after several attempts and with considerable personal sacrifice and expense, entered the media world of the Twentieth Century. The major question that remains unanswered is whether or not the Federal regulatory body, the CRTC, will decide in favour of allowing a demonstrated consumer service to continue or whether they will adhere to their stated broadcasting policy, requiring preference for Canadian signals and stations.

As the Therrien report suggested, these Canadians did fund their own projects. Their complaint now is that they have already spent

much more than the average Canadian for two channels of television service and they simply cannot be expected to contribute any more. The TVRO allowed them to obtain high quality television signals for the first time. But the basic problem is, and this applies to almost all TVROs, that the new signals come from the United States. Since most TVROs are the least expensive models, they can lock onto only one satellite at a time and thus it is the United States' Satcom III, and not the Canadian Anik ones, that is preferred. Satcom III has ESPN, MTV, HBO, Showtime, CNN, Cinemax, etc. for a choice totaling twenty-four different channels or services.

It is questionable whether the Empress and Acadia Valley undertakings could presently qualify for CRTC approval. Neither community can afford the expense of lawyers and no attempt has been made by any Federal agency or department to explain to them their actual position. They are confused by the process and unsure of their rights. Also they are reluctant to open the issue. They realize that they do not have even a single Canadian service or channel.

The Therrien report maintained that planning of broadcasting policy should become more flexible. Basically, this is viewed as the means of resolving this issue in Empress and Acadia Valley. The communities suggest that the CRTC view their situation as a special case due to the remote nature of their undertaking and the lack of any economic impact on local broadcasters or carriers since there are none. But they also realize that if the CRTC wants to make an example of some system, their's is a good choice.

Furthermore, they do not see themselves as broadcast undertakings. They believe that they should be classified as individuals operating a TVRO and therefore be exempt from licensing requirements under the 1983 policy.

They could perhaps be classified as master antenna television (MATV) systems and, since they do not impact on any licensed cable operator, be allowed to operate under these terms.

It is important to acknowledge here, that these communities jealously guard what they perceive as their right of freedom of thought and expression as guaranteed in the **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**. They believe that any attempt by the Federal government to force them to relinquish their satellite service amounts to censorship and violates their fundamental liberties.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the proliferation of TVROs represents a growing threat to the legitimacy and power of the CRTC to enforce the Broadcasting Act as well as certain provisions relating to Canadian content. In part, the problem has arisen because of the increasing sophistication of the technology as well as the continuing decline in prices for receiving equipment. With every new generation of TVROs the sophistication becomes greater and the cost cheaper and thus the proliferation increases. Therefore, this is not a problem that will go away, in fact, it will be exacerbated over time. The major concern to date has been the impact of these unlicensed or pirate systems on local broadcasters or cable operators. Yet, as the case study described here indicates, there are also systems operating in

Canada that do not impact on local broadcasters or carriers. To allow them to proceed while at the same time disallowing such actions in other areas will put the CRTC in a position of having a discriminatory two phase policy. On the other hand, to universally enforce its policies is almost an exercise in futility. There are simply too many pirate, or as the owners call them, pioneer systems. In fact, the operators see them as private systems and have little concern or regard for the larger public interest objectives of the CRTC.

In summary, the situation presented by the TVROs is a very perplexing one for the CRTC and it will not go away. To attempt to enforce current rules and regulations would be extremely difficult, if impossible. Yet, on the other hand, to simply ignore them and watch these systems grow, will clearly undermine the Canadian broadcasting system since the bulk of the TVROs are aimed at United States' satellites. The situation brought on by high-tech represents a major and difficult public policy question for the federal government.

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