

# HOW TO SAVE THE C

**Our national public broadcaster  
has never been closer to collapsing.  
Here's how we can keep it alive.**

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**J**ian Ghomeshi has the perfect voice for broadcasting. His deep, smooth clarity that brims with authority makes speaking on radio seem effortless. "I'm not on the air simply advocating for my job right now, or even for my incredible team," he articulates. "Rather, I believe in this institution. Plain and simple."

These words aired April 11, 2014 on *Q with Jian Ghomeshi*, an arts and culture program featured on CBC Radio One, and the highest-rated show at its time-slot in CBC history. "I was a supporter of the CBC even before I worked here, and I will be long after I'm gone. That is, depending on what the CBC becomes down the road." Ghomeshi was referring to the CBC's abounding number of recent job cuts resulting from a dizzying spiral of economic and political hardships the broadcaster has faced.

The government's recent drastic cuts in funding for the CBC have only increased the financial strain the corporation has been facing since 1985. Now, with its outright dismissal of 657 jobs and loss of hockey broadcasting rights to Rogers Communications, the extinction of the CBC has never been more probable.

## THE CLASH OF FUNDING AND INTERESTS

Known to many as the 'Mother Corp,' the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was created in 1936 to model the BBC, the most prestigious broadcaster in the world. CBC was conceived to counter the influx of American programming that had been penetrating the airwaves across the border, to promote Canadian culture and national unity, and to reduce the growing tensions between Anglophone and Francophone citizens.

Today, the CBC operates with a level of complexity that is unprecedented. Across six time zones, it broadcasts 88 radio stations, 27 television stations, three all-digital services, and 16 specialty services in English, French and eight different Aboriginal languages. Being a public-service broadcaster, it seeks to enlighten, inform, and entertain Canadians from coast to coast, giving our culture a voice and providing us with a unique sense of Canada's place in the world.

Unfortunately, the CBC's ability to fulfill its mandate has been beclouded by government

and corporate interests, the main obstacle being one of funding. CBC's current annual budget is just over \$1.5 billion. One billion of this is garnered from public appropriation and funding from the federal government, while the rest is brought in by commercial revenues.

On March 29, 2012, Ottawa announced a slew of financial cuts to the CBC, leaving the broadcaster with a loss of \$115 million over the succeeding three years.

And the numbers worsen: On April 10, 2014, the CBC was forced to cut a further \$130 million from its budget for the year. Consequently, the broadcaster was left with no choice but to eliminate 657 employees, a dramatic move that left all CBC supporters, myself included, alarmed and disheartened.

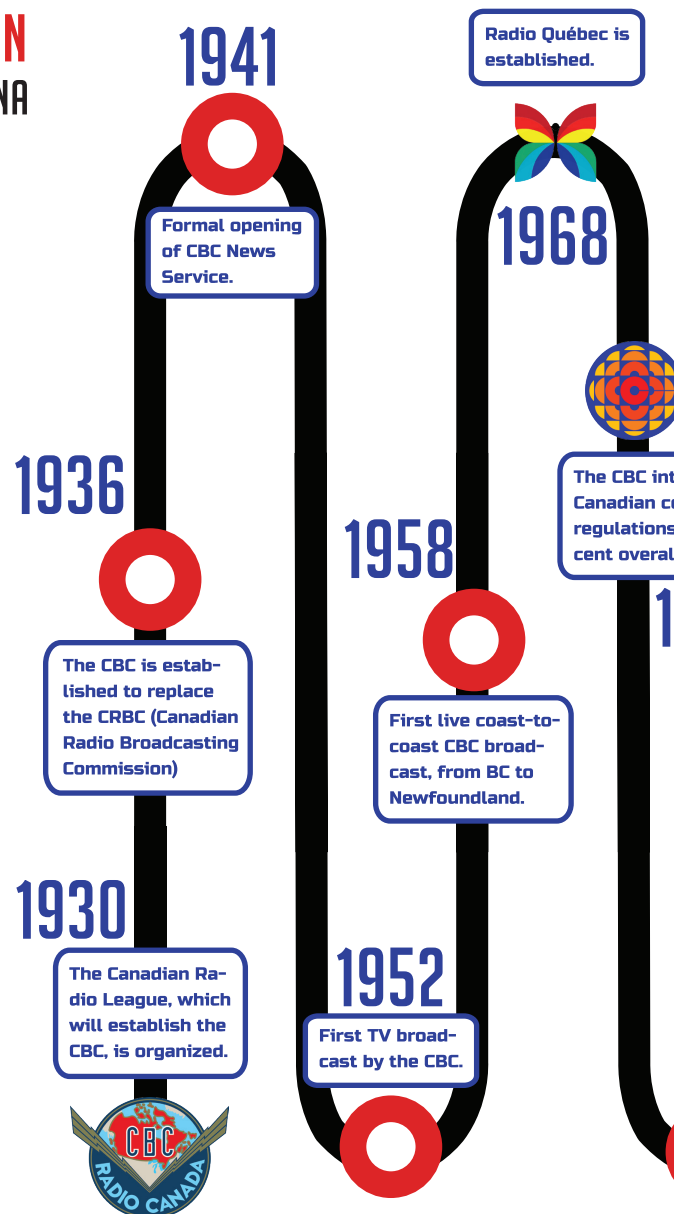
Linden MacIntyre, a CBC employee and public figure known for his 24-year run as host of television program *The Fifth Estate*, was so shaken that he announced his retirement from the CBC by the end of this summer. His aims are to save jobs for young employees, he told *The Star* on May 8.

"Even if you've never heard of most of the 657 jobs and people that are being cut, they're all essential to this organization," he states. "The energies, imagination and the future of an institution depends on the intake of young people [...] They will acquire everything I have acquired and more."

Along with loss of government funding, the CBC has been battling steep declines in its commercial and ad revenues. On May 6, 2014, the broadcaster reported that its ad revenues had decreased by 11 per cent from the previous year, leaving its total at \$331 million. As a new way of life approaches and advertising quickly treks into the digital realm, the CBC may have no choice but to follow in its footsteps.

Losing these funds will undoubtedly bring a plethora of changes to the broadcaster — in particular, to CBC Television. Among these changes will likely be the loss of original Canadian programs, the replacement of high-cost reality series with lower costing ones, and the cancellation of late night news in the north.

On June 26, 2014, CBC reported that because its priorities will shift from traditional broadcast to digital, a layoff of up to 1,500 employees will occur by 2020. Additionally, 90 minute evening newscasts will be stripped down to 30 minutes.



# BC



1988



The Cabinet approves a motion to grant CBC its first all-news channel.

1992



CBC introduces its simplified red logo.

1995

CBC establishes a presence on the web with CBC.ca and Radio-Canada.ca.

2012

Budget cuts to the CBC lead the broadcaster to lose over \$115 million over the course of three years.

2013



CBC loses broadcasting rights of one of its most popular programs, *Hockey Night in Canada*.

## THE CBC SAYS 'GOODBYE' TO HOCKEY

Perhaps the biggest blow yet to the CBC occurred just last year, on November 26, 2013.

This was the day that CBC said a tearful adios to its hockey broadcasting rights as they fell into the arms of Rogers Communications. The big league telecom company wrested control of NHL multimedia with a mammoth 12-year, \$5.2 billion agreement that would re-brand and re-shape *Hockey Night in Canada* (HNIC).

For most Canadians, the sport of hockey flows through our cultural blood. Over time, the sport has connected us and defined us as the proud nation that we are. Over the past 78 years, HNIC has been the crown jewel of the CBC, beginning on radio in 1936, and seeing its first television broadcast in 1952. HNIC has built up a legion of dedicated fans, as well as part-time watchers.

To lose HNIC would not only be a blow to our cultural identity, but just may be the breaking point for CBC. Due to the abundance of ads displayed during game hours and the program's high audience rates, HNIC has consistently delivered over half of the broadcaster's ad revenue.

Furthermore, a CBC bereft of hockey leaves almost 400 hours of open TV time-slotting, and in order to fulfill the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC)'s minimum 60 per cent yearly Canadian content requirement, it will need to come up with a lot of original Canadian programming, and fast. This is programming that the CBC, sadly, does not have the money or time to produce with sufficient quality.

Losing hockey has proven to be much worse than recent federal cuts and will be a game changer (pun intended) for our broadcaster. Such occurrences are the duty of the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting Organization to monitor and make comment on.

Since 1985, Friends, based out of Toronto, has been a non-profit watchdog group for Canadian programming, with a mission to intervene, defend, and enhance the quality of Canadian content. Though many have called CBC's loss of hockey the beginning of the end for the broadcaster, some at Friends feel differently.

Ian Morrison, a spokesperson for the organization, says the loss of hockey may be serendipitous, should CBC manage adequate funding. In a press release from October 2012, he stated that this loss could make the CBC less commercial, and "open new and exciting possibilities [for the CBC] to operate more like a public broadcaster in sharp distinction from its private sector competitors." Without advertising to drive corporate interests, the broadcaster just might have the freedom to fulfill its mandate of enlightening the public with content fit to shape the citizens of a proper democracy.

## RADIO: CANADA'S SURVIVING MEDIUM

But what about CBC Radio? How is this medium holding up commercially? The reality that not many anticipated is that CBC Radio is flourishing remarkably compared to its TV sector.

Though heavily impacted by federal cuts, CBC Radio One has not been subject to ad revenue stress, as there are absolutely no advertisements on air. Along with being the most historical broadcast medium, Radio One has virtually no American competition, and produces an astonishingly high standard of Canadian-content programs, including news, politics, and culture.

Long-standing shows such as *As It Happens*, *Quirks and Quarks*, and *The Current* offer fresh voices on news and culture privy to being Canadian.

I'm quite accustomed to radio; for years, my household has awoken to the sound of the bubbling coffee maker and *World Report* emanating from the kitchen. I feel the programs I've listened to have both educated me and have given me a more distinct sense of my place as a Canadian. I can confidently state that CBC Radio has outlived the commercial hardships, while consistently producing content in sync with the CBC's mandate.

CBC Online is also progressing fairly well. With its foot in the doorway to the digital age, it makes for a decent supplement to TV and radio broadcasting. Digital-savvy users are able to skim through content at their will, picking out the information that is most relevant to them. Even if CBC's TV presence will wane, it seems that its radio and web presences will stay strong.

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; (60 per  
t).

970

The CBC became the first broadcaster in the world to use an orbiting satellite for television service.

1978

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## PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND TRUE QUALITY

It's clear that public broadcast TV has found itself in the tight clutches of commercialism, and has experienced far greater funding withdrawals than its sister media. Wade Rowland, author of *Saving the CBC: Balancing Profit and Public Service*, recognizes that commercial influence seems to have entranced the CBC with a fixation on ratings.

Commercial markets use ratings to measure program quality. The problem with this system, however, is that they only measure the number of heads; if a program receives a large number of views, then its marketers view this program as successful.

High ratings seem to be dependent on thrill and spectacle — how entertaining programs are. This has twisted recent news programs into what's been termed as 'infotainment,' a style where settings are flashy, anchors are more photogenic than skilled, and the news is permeated with crime stories and fluff that otherwise have no significance to the viewer.

Of course, high ratings do not reflect the true quality of any program.

This is where public-service broadcasting steps in. Its aims are cultural rather than economic: to enhance public life and enrich all individual lives. According to Rowland, the true quality of a news program lies in leaving viewers as better, more informed and involved citizens.

Apart from exploring and criticizing society, true quality means that content must appeal to a broad range of tastes and interests. Public broadcasting can provide programs for particular ethnic, cultural, gender, and minority interests — those that are, for the most part, denied or ignored by corporate media.

Dr. Robert Hackett is a professor specializing in journalism and media studies at Simon Fraser University. He has completed several content analyses of CBC-TV News during his career, as well as a Newswatch Canada study comparing how the corporate press covers CBC versus commercial broadcasters.

"Public broadcasting is essential to simulating a public sphere," Hackett says. "[It is] a space where different segments of society can engage in conversation on matters of common concern, in principle free from domination by powerful or wealthy private interests."

Dr. Hackett goes on to cite the "strong correlation between robust public broadcasting in a media system, and the level of political information and engagement amongst the citizenry."

Unfortunately, the current Canadian government has been less sympathetic to the concept of public broadcasting than any other government in Canadian history. It's even more disheartening that, due to the American oversaturation of corporate media in Canada, many of my peers are confused or even clueless as to what public broadcasting even is,

and what the political and cultural differences between Canada and the United States are.

What will we be as a country if CBC is no longer, and our culture becomes so integrated with America's that we can't distinguish it from our own? It's a sad and frightening point, worsened by how close it has come to being a reality.

## IS THERE ANY WAY TO SAVE THE CBC?

The opposition facing our national broadcaster is so daunting, it seems difficult to think of any way to liberate the CBC from its mess. But apart from eliminating all of its commercial influences, there are still a few strategies left that could help rejuvenate the CBC, and our cultural identity along with it.

The first is to create a style of funding similar to that of the BBC. Britain's public broadcaster is outstanding not only due to the quality of its programming, but because it is entirely publicly funded. While Canadians pay \$29 each year for CBC, every Brit with a TV shells over about \$270 CAD yearly. This is enough to make them choke on their biscuits and tea if their programming ever dipped below quality.

Dr. Kathleen Cross, a professor of communications at SFU with a research background in politics and news media, feels a different style of funding is the first and foremost priority for saving the broadcaster.

## Do we want corporate media to define us, or would we rather define ourselves?

"Funding [for the CBC] needs to be separated from the whims of political interference," she says. "CBC will always be vulnerable to punitive funding cuts, as we have seen for years, from a sitting government who doesn't like to be held to account. The BBC model is a better model for funding."

Kross also proposes another option. She states that "we need the appointment of CBC board members to be separate from political interference." I wholeheartedly agree; the CBC president is currently appointed by the federal cabinet. Talk about political bias! For the past 50 years, these board members have all — I repeat, all — been men with interest in accounting and finance.

The CBC needs board members who are diverse in both interests and gender, ones who are at arm's length from the government, who understand and are passionate about the values of public broadcasting.

I would also suggest that the CBC solicit proper funding to open its production studios to original programs once again. While shows

such as *Heartland*, *Republic of Doyle*, and *Murdoch Mysteries* reflect Canadian settings and values, they are among a select few.

I'll admit, I'm caught off guard when I see things that are distinctly Canadian in film and TV. I feel a twinge of renewed pride in my country; I feel a sense of belonging that's previously been stifled. These are valuable feelings I wish would spread throughout Canada — they are long overdue!

Finally, in light of the digital age we live in, traditional broadcasting should expand and evolve with digital and social media. But as a digital deficit infiltrates our nation, we need to find inventive, low-cost ways to support our content creators.

Reilly Yeo is a community engagement specialist for OpenMedia.ca, based here in Vancouver. Apart from her previous work with Amnesty International and *The Walrus* magazine, Yeo directed the Reimagine CBC project in early 2012. Through a forum, Yeo and 10,940 other Canadians crafted a clear, low-cost proposal for CBC's future in the digital age, which was subsequently reported to CBC President Hubert Lacroix.

"I believe that public institutions should follow the guidance of the public," Yeo told *The Peak*. "[The CBC should] create participatory processes that can meaningfully empower the people who love CBC to defend and strengthen it."

"This is particularly important in the digital age, where we have new opportunities to

connect people all across the country, [and] new challenges as old funding models — particularly investigative journalism — are breaking down."

Yeo suggests that the CBC expand its digital services by creating more online participatory processes, to allow for active citizen engagement in accordance with its mandate.

The Reimagine CBC website also proposes the broadcaster should "enrich the digital ecosystem with the best content of CBC's past and present, freeing the CBC archives and bringing television and radio online." This could be accomplished by creating a no cost CBC-Netflix competitor, from which users could enjoy content from an archive of on-demand information, with legendary programs such as *Canada, A People's History*.

## A NATIONAL CONVERSATION: WHO ARE WE AS CANADIANS?

While researching for this piece, I stumbled across a blog entitled CBC Exposed. The webpage, while haphazardly designed and littered with profanity, serves as a watchdog and collective of pro-privatization news stories on the CBC.

The site claims that CBC is an arrogant, wasteful operation that abuses Canadian citizens of our tax dollars which could instead be used for healthcare and education. That it plagues the media with a liberal bias and lack of transparency. That it is very clear — to them at least — that Canadians want the CBC privatized.

This is simply untrue. I am Canadian, and I'd like nothing other than for the CBC to remain public.

While I understand and respect the views of those against the CBC, I feel there's a fundamental lack of understanding as to what the CBC is, and why it hasn't clearly fulfilled its mandate recently. I'll admit its quality has deteriorated, but this is chiefly due to government and commercial influence.

Yes, our tax dollars could be spent elsewhere. Yes, other public broadcasters could play the CBC's role, though likely on a much smaller scale. But the CBC provides Canada with a single, central hub for democratic information and debate. It creates a public space for us to discuss national issues such as healthcare and education, so that we can decide, as a unified country, where our tax dollars should go.

It creates a national consciousness, and this is a public necessity.

If not for the CBC, who would serve language minorities and other communities to make them known throughout Canada? Who would ensure that Aboriginals remain intrinsic to our heritage? Privatized media certainly will not — they'll ultimately look after their own interests, instead of the interests of the Canadian people.

I care about our broadcaster. I echo what CBC President Hubert Lacroix has proclaimed. If we care about the CBC, it's time for us to embark on a national conversation about the future of our heritage, democracy, and our place in the media industry.

Who do we want to be as Canadians? Do we want corporate media to define us — and distort us in the process — or would we rather define ourselves? I sincerely hope you believe in the latter.

As Jian Ghomeshi brings his plea to a close, he leaves us with a profound message: "If you don't believe in public broadcasting that's a perfectly legitimate point of view. But, if you do, then maybe it's time to assert yourselves, Canada; and frankly, maybe its time for those of us who work [at the CBC] to do so too." **P**

