

Revisiting Broadcasters' Contribution To Public Policy Discussions

By Tim Woods

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Earlier this year, former Reform Party Leader Preston Manning published an article in the Globe and Mail, challenging politicians, voters and the media to reject old-style confrontational politics.¹ On the same day, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative Party was launching television ads attacking Liberal Party Leader Stephane Dion. Network pundits devoured the political irony but made no mention of their own conflict of interest. Political attack ads were not just fodder for discussion, they were paying network journalists' wages.

From the perspective of broadcasters, 'news' is just another program they sell to advertisers and subscribers, along with sitcoms, movies and hockey games. Shareholders define success in the media business just as they do in every other business. If the Conservative Party attack ads are legal, and the account paid, the ads run.

From the living room, the power of broadcasters to influence public opinion and public policy is in plain view. By nearly a two-to-one ratio over newspapers, Americans cited television as their main news source in a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre.² The internet ranked a distant third in the survey. The Conservative Party reached that same conclusion about the influence of broadcasters when deciding where to unleash their attack ads - not on the internet, radio or in print but on television. Given the power of the medium, it's not unreasonable to measure broadcasters' performance from our vantage point as citizens and not just as shareholders.

Mr. Manning argues that complex public policy issues like health care reform and environmental stewardship are not going to be solved by name calling or partisan posturing. *"In the modern news business - and this is as much our fault as news consumers as it is that of the media - short-run is more newsworthy than long-run, simple is more newsworthy than complex, emotional reactions are more newsworthy than*

¹ Preston Manning. "Drop the Extremes in Green Debate" Retrieved March 5, 2007 from web site:

<http://www.manningcentre.ca/en/news/extremes.html>

² The Pew Research Centre, "The Public More Critical of Press, But Goodwill Persists", June 26, 2005. Retrieved March 16, 2007 from web site <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/248.pdf> page 5.

*rational initiatives, conflict is more newsworthy than co-operation, and extremism is more newsworthy than moderation.”*³

An enlightened broadcaster could boost ratings, Mr. Manning believes, by charting a new course. *“Who among our national, provincial, and local media will provide the leadership required to change this approach and place media coverage of the political debate of environmental policy on higher and more constructive ground I suggest that the first journalists to do so will become the news sources most trusted by Canadians for their coverage of environmental issues.”*⁴ Mr. Manning’s solution seems remarkably optimistic for a seasoned politician, but he is certainly raising a vital issue about the appropriate role for media in solving complex public issues.

When popular journalism attracts scrutiny, it is frequently subject to the kind of critique leveled by Mr. Manning. If, for example, two politicians engaging in a lively policy debate exchange ill-considered epithets, where will the news focus be? Sure enough, the answer doesn’t involve an analysis of policy differences.

Sadly, enlightening citizens is not ‘job one’ for journalists or their employers. The survival of any newspaper or broadcast news program is clearly married to its ability to attract an audience. And while this is patently true for private sector media it is also of genuine importance for public broadcasters. With limited resources, no public broadcaster can casually sustain a costly news venture that fails to attract a substantial audience.

To achieve shareholder success, broadcasters must compete with each other and fend off threats from other media. In respecting shareholder rights, broadcasters have a clear mission to attract the largest audience possible. Quite reasonably, investors demand a level playing field that allows broadcasters the freedom to compete.

To achieve success as corporate citizens, broadcasters must be mindful of the community norms applied to all corporations. In addition, they must operate within the confines of the *Broadcasting Act* as regulated by the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). As an acknowledgment of the airwaves being a scarce public resource, broadcasters are required to ensure balance and fair representation in their news and public affairs programming.⁵ This regulatory framework distinguishes broadcasters from newspapers and on-line media.

³ Preston Manning. “Drop the Extremes in Green Debate” Retrieved March 5, 2007 from web site: <http://www.manningcentre.ca/en/news/extremes.html>

⁴ Preston Manning. “Drop the Extremes in Green Debate” Retrieved March 5, 2007 from web site: <http://www.manningcentre.ca/en/news/extremes.html>

⁵ CRTC. Public Notice CRTC 1999-97, *Building On Success-A Policy Framework For Canadian Television*, retrieved March 10, 2007 from web site <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/archive/ENG/Notices/1999/PB99-97.HTM>

Now we come to the crux of the corporate responsibility matter. Are broadcasters putting their singular talents to work in helping us address the complex issues of our day? There are two facets to this question, one pertains to the quality and the other to the quantity of broadcasters' contribution. What kinds of contributions do broadcasters make to community building – and is it enough?

Without doubt, media companies take civic responsibility seriously. Let's consider a typical local broadcaster: CJOH, a CTV affiliate, is the dominant television station in the Ottawa media market. CJOH sponsors an impressive list of charities: The Manulife Walk for Memories, The 65 Roses Cystic Fibrosis Gala, Black History Month, etc. They broadcast telethons. Their on-air personalities work in support of worthy projects year round. News anchor Max Keeping makes over 200 appearances each year.⁶

CJOH doesn't make these vital community contributions for entirely selfless reasons. It's in their corporate interest to burnish a reputation as central players in the community. Sustaining a positive profile for their on-air personalities is crucial. Being seen, being constructive, and being a community-builder is not just soap for the corporate image, it's an elixir for building audience. While each of the contributions made by CJOH to their community is laudable, they are not drawing on the real strengths of television.

Let's draw a thoroughly Canadian comparison from the hockey world. Sydney Crosby is an undisputed star of the National Hockey League. He's Canadian, but works for an American NHL team, the Pittsburgh Penguins. What contribution should he make to Team Canada at the 2010 Winter Olympics? Should he cheer from the sidelines, send a cheque or deliver a stirring speech in Team Canada's locker room? The NHL, the Pittsburgh Penguins and even their fans understand that Crosby is going to suit up and skate his heart out for Team Canada.

We need to find new ways to enlist broadcasters in using their best and most unique talents to bolster our democratic processes. Their ability to assemble audiences and to facilitate constructive discussions on political issues is unquestioned. To tap that potential, we needn't challenge the way reporters cover the news or deny broadcasters advertising revenue from political parties. Instead, the power of the medium and the expertise of their journalists should be the well from which broadcasters draw their community donations.

We know there is more to civic engagement than a trip to the ballot box. Citizens, stakeholders and governments are struggling today with highly complex challenges. To make informed and sometimes tough decisions, we need a more fulsome engagement between citizens, policy makers, experts and politicians. And that's where the media has a role to play.

⁶ CJOH web site. Retrieved March 6, 2007 from web site: <http://www.cjoh.com/community.asp>

Let's take climate change as an example. People want action, but they also want to avoid new taxes and restrictions on their own lifestyle. Is it juvenile to hold conflicting ambitions? Not at all. It just looks that way when the depth of investigation is limited to slogans, fifteen second sound bites or a pollster asking you twenty questions while you peel vegetables and set the dinner table.

If you gather people together to have a thoughtful discussion on climate change you'll get many animated discussions. If you prepare participants with background material you will get well informed animated discussion. And, if you frame those discussions with credible policy options, you'll get a valuable insight into the capacity of ordinary people to dig into the heart of a political challenge.

We can't bring every interested Canadian into a single conversation on issues like climate change. But we can and should bring representative samples of communities together to discuss the issue, the choices and the kinds of sacrifices that may be required. The media could play a pivotal role in broadcasting such deliberations – enabling the broader community to engage as viewers or more directly through website forums or other online tools.

Just a handful of current media programs engage citizens in discussions of policy issues. CBC has Peter Mansbridge hosting 'town hall' meetings and Avi Lewis has his *Big Picture* program. If you care about public policy, these shows are more appealing than *Canadian Idol*, but they're still about attracting audiences, and entertainment. Mansbridge and Lewis are brilliant communicators and a credit to their profession. They're also stars. The citizen participants are essentially a supporting cast in a show with a public affairs theme.

Broadcasters can do better. They need to view new investments in civic discussion in the same fashion as they view the sponsorship of a telethon. It's not a news event. Enabling a community discussion on climate change, or a new transit system, or health care reform can, and should, be viewed as a community-building exercise, utilizing the media's unique talents and contributions, taking advantage of their communication skills and market reach.

The 'ask' of broadcasters is not to discard their editorial independence, abandon their obligation for balance or to act like boy scouts while competitors scoop up market share. The 'ask' is for media outlets to seek out opportunities where their investment in community building corresponds to their skills and resources.

In terms of dollars invested in community building, broadcasters are influenced by healthy market competition and normal business constraints. The public is certainly not the obstacle to an increase in corporate contributions. If a local television station throws its expertise into a prominent community challenge, their efforts will be warmly received.

The CRTC could and should play a role encouraging broadcasters to direct new effort towards the health of our democratic processes. Whenever a broadcaster sells their

license, the purchase must be approved by the CRTC in its role as regulator. It has become the custom of the regulator to require the purchaser to provide a tangible benefit package to the public equal to ten percent of the purchase price. For example, in the upcoming takeover by CTVglobemedia Inc of CHUM Ltd, the purchase price has been set at \$1.4 billion.⁷ The tangible benefit package is going to be in the tens of millions of dollars.

Typically, the tangible benefits package arising from these takeovers involves gifts and investments that nurture the health of broadcasting, such as the development of Canadian content. The scope allowed broadcasters for these tangible benefit packages is really quite broad. For example, in 2001, CTV purchased CFCF-TV Montreal.⁸ The \$14.15 million benefits package included \$1.8 million to the Signature Presentation Series and \$50,000 each to Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, PEN, Conseil de Presse du Québec, and the Writers' Trust of Canada. With just a modest encouragement from the regulator, there is every reason to believe broadcasters would expand the menu of their investments to include community building initiatives that draw on the strengths of the primary asset – access to the airwaves.

Many argue that confidence in our democratic institutions has diminished. Voter participation is down, cynicism towards the political process is up. And set against that backdrop is the daunting complexity of today's public policy challenges. To reinvigorate Canada's political processes we need to be creative and we need to draw on all available resources. Broadcasters should put down their chequebooks, suit up and skate for Team Canada.

⁷ CRTC Broadcasting Notice of Public Hearing CRTC 2007-3. Retrieved March 10, 2007 from web site:

<http://www.crtc.gc.ca/archive/ENG/Hearings/2007/n2007-3.htm#1>

⁸ CRTC Broadcasting Decision CRTC 2002-40; February 15, 2002