Speech

Public Service Media in the Age of Digital Networks

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ABSTRACT For more than fifty years, the public service has been a nexus of media organization, development, and regulation in Canada and several countries in the world. Is public service media still relevant in the age of the internet and digital networks? Before directly addressing this question, this article broadly examines the path that has been hewn by public service media, from its origins—when it played a guiding and influential role in the media landscape—through to today—when its dominance is in question. It links together a set of factors that have triggered a process of redefining public service media, one that may allow it to play the new social and cultural role that is expected of it in contemporary societies.

KEYWORDS Public service; Broadcasting; Media; CBC; BBC; France Télévisions

Introduction
On February 16, 2015, Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated on CJMF-FM (93.0 FM), a radio station in Québec City belonging to media and telecommunications company Cogeco, that “many of Radio-Canada’s employees detest Conservative values.” Nothing new here. We already knew the Conservatives’ sentiments regarding our public broadcaster and indeed they are not the only ones who have had a go at Radio-Canada. Those in power have always accused the Société Radio-Canada (SRC) of bias. For the
Liberals’ Pierre Elliott Trudeau, it was a separatist bastion. “End the insanity!” he re-sounded on October 20, 1969, threatening to put the SRC under trusteeship. Meanwhile, in the sovereigntist camp, there is still great bitterness toward the media in general. Former Québec premiere Bernard Landry recently told La Presse on April 27, 2015, that “had the media treated Quebec independence in a more just manner, we may be independent. The cause would have been better understood by the people.” In sum, the media are held responsible for the gains and losses of both the federalist and the sovereigntist movements, conservatism, and progressivism. My concern today, however, is not with the whole of professional journalism but is centred solely on public service media institutions.

For a few decades now, public service broadcasters around the world have suffered from repeated budget cuts. Here in Canada, these cuts have never been so crippling to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/Société d’État Radio-Canada (CBC/SRC) as during the past years of the Stephen Harper Conservative government. Today it has reached a point where journalists, intellectuals, and union organizers have begun to sound the alarm and have launched a public education campaign to attempt to save CBC/Radio-Canada.

Evidence of this movement can be seen in the creation of the groups Tous amis de Radio-Canada and Ensemble Sauvons Radio-Canada. In January 2015, Ensemble Sauvons Radio-Canada brought together 125 artists to sing about their attachment to Radio-Canada.

In many other countries, such as the United Kingdom and France, public service media institutions have also been under pressure for decades from both left- and right-wing regimes. It is not an exaggeration to state that one can observe a systematic reduction of the role of public service institutions in the field of communications. Some plainly call it a gradual and calculated suffocation of public service media.

The task at hand, both in its amplitude and due to the context in which it is inscribed, relates to a grounding existential question—that of the very existence and social role of this institution. In the age of digital networks and an abundance of programs and services of every kind, is there still a place for public service media? With the exception of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), public television in Western countries has long been financed by both public funds and commercial revenue, the better part coming from advertising (this situation has changed recently in France and Spain). Public broadcasters thus must behave according to their public service mandate and the imperatives of competition imposed by the market (Brevini, 2013). The development of the internet has come to doubly redefine this fragile equilibrium, which is redefined year after year. On one hand, internet-based advertising on social networks and video-on-demand (e.g., Netflix, Amazon) increasingly diminishes the public broadcasters’ audience, as well as that of conventional television and the press. On the other hand, the advent of the creative commons, which facilitates general accessibility by redefining the rules of intellectual property, incites a reinterpretation of the mandate of public television that, according to the Canadian Broadcasting Act (S.C. 1991, c. 11) obligates the CBC/Radio-Canada to stimulate Canadian content creation and production.
Before addressing the question of public service media’s current relevance, I will first map out the significant stages of its evolution, its origins and the time when it played a structuring role in the media landscape, and finally the current question of its dominance in the audiovisual landscape. I will link together a set of factors that have triggered a process of redefining public service media, one that may allow it to fulfill the new social and cultural role that is expected of it in contemporary societies, societies the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has asked us to consider as knowledge societies.

I may as well show my colours from the start. I am one of those who believe that communication is more than a game, a business, a bunch of technological gadgets. In the wake of my predecessors Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, but with less enthusiasm for technological determinism than the latter, I am convinced of the structuring force that media is in our societies. The media system of a society has an important role to play in the pursuit of the common good; and it is thus from this starting point that I will discuss the contribution of public service media to québécois society and to Canadian society. Further, this is the inspiration for a project that I embarked upon last year, with my colleagues Aimé-Jules Bizimana and Oumar Kane, and with the support of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) knowledge program. The research project examines the renewal of public service media in Canada, France, and the United Kingdom and nourishes my current reflections on the subject. I will come back to this later.

Origin, expansion, and reconsideration of public service media

Over the course of a study I undertook for the Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force some thirty years ago, I arrived at the conclusion that “from various definitions of public service we can extract the following synthesis: an activity judged to be in the public interest by society and recognized as such by the State. Such an activity cannot be left to private interests and abandoned solely to the laws of the market. The State assumes, directly or indirectly, the responsibility and the control, subjecting it to special law if necessary” (Tremblay, 1986, p. 11).

It would be useless to go looking for an ontological definition of public service. No more than the common good, does it stem from some need issuing from a self-proclaimed natural order. Public service is defined in laws, laws that are based on social consensus. Before becoming a juridical affair, public service was a political question, a sociocultural issue with parameters anchored in a specific territory and a determined epoch.

“The truth is that it is difficult to find criteria that allow for an exact differentiation between what is the general interest and what it is not. Definitions vary according to ideological persuasion and historical situation. Consensus on what constitutes general interest may evolve, as [Léon] Duguit has well noted” (Tremblay, 1986, p. 31). In the UK, France, and Canada, radio broadcasting was defined as a public service almost a century ago, making the radio waves a form of public property and imposing a sociopolitico-cultural mission upon authorized corporate users.

In the UK, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), founded by Guglielmo Marconi and managed by John Reith, broadcast its first program in 1922. It was then converted into a public corporation with a Royal charter in 1927, financed by a post of-
office license fee, and presided over by John Reith. Its objective was to inform, educate, and entertain with total independence from political power and commercial pressure. Reith defined the BBC’s role as “to bring the best of everything to the greatest number of homes” (BBC Story).

In France, public service broadcasting took a different path. Following World War II, the public broadcaster and private radio broadcasters were left to coexist. The Radiodiffusion française (RDF) was created after World War II in 1945, following the nationalization of private radio stations, which were accused of having collaborated with the occupying forces. It became the Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française (ORTF) in 1964 and enjoyed a monopoly until 1981. French law 64-621 of June 27, 1964, states that the mission of the ORTF is to “satisfy the informational, cultural and entertainment needs of the public.”

In Canada, as in France and the UK, radio was initially commercial. Public authorities subsequently became worried about accessibility and the popularity of American private broadcasters. The Canadian government mandated a Royal Commission, presided over by John Aird, to analyze the situation. Citing the influence of American programs and aiming to support the expression of Canadian identity, the Aird report, submitted in 1929, recommended the nationalization of private radio broadcasters and the creation of a national public broadcasting network. The 1929 financial crisis and efficient opposition by private broadcasters ultimately permitted for only the partial and progressive realization of this proposal. The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC) was created in 1932 and then replaced in 1936 by a Crown corporation. Other federal inquiries—the Lévesque-Massey Royal Commission in 1951, two Fowler commissions in 1957 and 1965, and the Caplan-Sauvageau Royal Commission in 1986—then reaffirmed the importance of a national public radio and television service.

Current Canadian broadcasting policy is defined and regulated by the 1991 Broadcasting Act. Here is it specified that “the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, as the national public broadcaster, should provide radio and television services incorporating a wide range of programming that informs, enlightens and entertains.” (Canadian Broadcasting Act, S.C. 1991, c. 11).

The contribution of CBC/Radio-Canada to everyday québécois and Canadian life has been detailed myriad times and it has been generally characterized as playing an important role, for example, in the change in conscience that led to the “Quiet Revolution” in Québec.

The rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, combined with the speedy growth of technological innovation and the rise of competition, led to a general movement toward trends of deregulation that were unfavourable to public service media and trends of re-regulation favouring the private sector. First, commercial radio stations were licensed to complement the public broadcasters. Cable and satellite broadcasting then introduced considerably longer-range transmission possibilities. At the same time, computer network advances increasingly rendered more fluid the established distinctions between broadcasters and network operators. Regulatory revisions followed. Throughout the process, the public service, regularly confronted with budgetary con-
straints, saw its margin of error decrease and competition flourish. It struggles today to find its momentum once again.

**Does public service media still have a purpose?**

To confront the challenges of the digital era, public service media must—I am convinced—first reconsider the foundations of its legitimacy and undertake the necessary efforts to convince citizens of its merit and utility. It may be difficult today, when faced with the abundance of communication networks, to present public service media as bound up in the technical constraints of spectrum scarcity. However, numerous philosophic, cultural, economic, and social reasons continue to justify the maintenance of a strong and dynamic public service in the communications sector, as long as they are expressed in terms adapted to the new media context.

The philosophic reasons I refer to, political philosophy evidently, are rooted in theories of the common good, including the work of Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2014), who present a masterful examination of the concept in their book *Commun*. While their conclusions may be called radical, we find here an ample reflection on the historical construction of the common good as a sociological and political project. Personally, I would like to bring their approach into conversation with another major tradition in political philosophy—that of liberalism. A conversation evoked by Marcel Gauchet (2007) in his book on the crisis of liberalism brings to the forefront another important historical construction that parallels that of the common good: the construction of the individual subject.

But let us get back to the subject at hand—public service media. Recently legitimized by a scarcity of radio frequencies, public service media has made a great effort to reinvent itself in a universe where networks are boundless and audiovisual products of all sorts have multiplied. In many countries, public broadcasters increasingly understand that they must rediscover their popular legitimacy, re-examine their funding models, and re-conceptualize the ways in which they fulfill their mission of stimulating the creation and accessibility of cultural products of various tastes (Brevini, 2013; De Moragas & Prado, 2013; Glowacki & Jackson, 2013).

Counter to the dominant trend of liberalism, one should note the efforts to protect cultural diversity that resulted in the adoption of an international convention by UNESCO in 2005, as well as a movement for the examination and defence of the commons, which has been institutionalized since the beginning of the 1980s. These have reaffirmed the collective character of communication and offer a new framework for rethinking the needs of public service media, redefining intellectual property, and adopting new policies on the accessibility of information, knowledge, and culture.

Since the end of the 1990s, the British government, followed by other Commonwealth governments, such as Australia and New Zealand, then European countries, and finally international organizations, such as the European Union, UNESCO, and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2008), adopted policies for the promotion of “creative industries.” The concept of “creative industries” is quite fluid and its various definitions tend to associate cultural industries and traditional media (e.g., publishing, music, film, radio, television, the press) with other activities where creativity plays an important role (e.g., fashion, digital in-
dustries, artisan industries, advertising, architecture, etc.). In previous decades, neoliberal economists tended to propose that cultural industries be treated as any other industry. The creative industries approach reversed this perspective, proposing a global understanding of economic activities the characteristics of which strengthen creative industries in promoting a creative economy (Lash & Lury, 1994). Cultural industries, formerly considered marginal, are now proposed as a model for the new economy, one that has also been reframed as “creative” (Bouquillon, 2012).

Knowledge, writ large, is a common good, the creation and transmission of which should be of benefit to the collective and its cultural heritage, as well as individual effort. Public service media have a primary role to play in the access and appropriation of knowledge and the sharing of knowledge by all the individuals and groups that constitute a society. In the age of digital networks, and the enormous potential they embody in terms of supporting social inclusion, as well as its opposite—social exclusion—public service media must more than ever fulfill their mission of informing citizens, contributing to their lifelong learning, stimulating their creativity, and helping them share their creative worlds with their fellow citizens.

The political economy of the commons, also known as the “new institutional economy,” provides the foundations of an approach to reconcile the work of cultural industries theorists and that of informational economists who define knowledge as a collective resource (Hess & Ostrom, 2007). That is a non-rivalous common good, the use of which does not impede its use by others. The sharing of knowledge does not thus carry with it the risk of provoking a “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968), similar to what may be brought on by the abusive use of “natural” commons (e.g., water, forests, fisheries, etc.) in the absence of appropriate collective regulation. In other words, community sharing can be destroyed through abusive use by individuals aiming to maximize their personal benefit while knowledge and the cultural good outlive individual consumption, as work on the cultural industries and the economy of information have long insisted. Further, the value of knowledge increases with the broadening of its transmission, a reversal of an overly stringent regime of property rights that can lead to a “tragedy of the anti-commons,” as formulated by legal scholar Michael Heller (1998). From this perspective, the abusive retention of information stifles economic development while the transmission and sharing of knowledge enables it.

In the report we prepared for UNESCO in 2013, Robin Mansell and I (Mansell & Tremblay, 2013) argue that rigid ideological pretensions, either market-oriented or in favour of the commons, should both be abandoned. We argue instead for the adoption of a pragmatic strategy founded on the search for a balance between market regulation and public intervention. To defend and promote public service media is not equivalent to advocating for the nationalization of private broadcasters and a public sector monopoly. Instead we support the coexistence of strong public service media alongside prosperous private businesses. Today, however, it seems clear to us that there is a sizeable imbalance in favour of commercial forces, for example in the management of copyright. While creators, individuals, or businesses deserve to be compensated for their contributions and their rights should be protected, the current
copyright protections are excessive. For example, an author’s work does not pass into the public domain until 75 years after his or her death. Such measures hinder accessibility and impede creativity and development. It seems to us that a similar balance must be found between the rights of individual consumers and the public interest in the protection and promotion of cultural diversity, which public service institutions contribute to significantly.

**New challenges in the era of digital networks**

The rebuilding of public service media—should this happen through the modernization of its case for legitimacy—also implies a re-examination of what public service media requires to carry out its fundamental informational, educational, and entertainment mission in the era of digital networks and knowledge societies.

In 2014, Oumar Kane, Aimé-Jules Bizimana, and I began a research project on the renewal of public service media in the internet age in France, the UK, and Canada. Our objective is to analyze the strategies deployed by the BBC, France Télévisions, and CBC/SRC to carry out their mission in the context of digital networks. It is obviously too early to draw conclusions after only a few months of research, but we can make some observations nevertheless. While the interviews we have conducted thus far provide no indication that public service institutions have engaged in conscious processes to rethink their mission in the digital context, they clearly reveal the intention of these institutions to assume their role as conventional media bodies and to assure they are present on all digital platforms.

**Conventional public service**

**INFORMATION**

Digital networks have undoubtedly contributed to the accessibility of information sources. It would be presumptuous, however, to conclude that the traditional media have become useless intermediaries. Accessibility on its own is not enough to improve the quality and plurality of information. It takes time to search out pertinent information, the competencies required to evaluate it, and the requisite knowledge to understand its significance. In sum, while the work of mediators may change in the new digital context, its strategic value has not diminished. To the contrary, it finds itself reinforced within this new context.

In terms of information, history has demonstrated the immense contribution that public service media—independent from political power—can make to democratic life. The BBC is one obvious example both in the British context and globally. The history of the CBC/SRC, while more modest in scale, is no less remarkable. One notable illustration is how revelations made on the SRC program *Enquête* led to the Charbonneau Commission and the current fight against corruption in Québec.

In Canada, and even more so in Québec, the concentration of media ownership has reached frightening proportions. In this context, one should not underestimate the contribution of CBC/SRC to the pluralism of information and opinion, both indispensable to the vitality of democracy. Further, the resources it dedicates to local and regional news—unfortunately constantly threatened with repeated budgetary compressions—are critical for understanding local issues.
SRC journalists constitute more than half the journalists in all of Québec. They are well-trained, well-paid, and adhere to high standards of quality. Their contribution to democratic life in Québec is beyond estimation. Technical progress and the growth of entertainment products in the Canadian market do not even begin to equal the importance of a well-resourced public institution with an editorial policy based on the solid ethical principles of a democratic society.

That said, CBC/SRC’s headlines tend to too often give the impression that they are playing to the tastes of their audience. This criticism is nothing new, but important nonetheless. The human interest factor plays a disproportionate role in the ways people choose and engage with the news and random facts too frequently trump current political, economic, and cultural affairs. Public service media, however, should not be submitted to the same imperatives as commercial broadcasters.

**Education**

Public service media has historically been a formidable agent of public education. It has allowed artists to present their work and the public to participate in the evolution of culture here and elsewhere. Through its accessible cultural and scientific programming, CBC/SRC, along with educational broadcasters such as Télé-Québec and TVOntario, fulfill a role that is not undertaken by any private media body.

The interactive nature of digital networks opens up new dimensions in popular education. Public service media, through their mandates, are obliged to explore these dimensions, to stimulate innovation so they may benefit disadvantaged populations. It is up to public service media to assume a leadership role in popular education innovation.

CBC/SRC today offers over 3,000 programs and educational resources on the website Curio.ca. However, the site can only be accessed through an intermediary institution (e.g., school board, government ministry, school, public library, university, CEGEP) that has subscribed to the service. The cost of membership varies depending on the size of the institution. Should not a public service media institution such as CBC/SRC freely offer access to educational resources to the whole of the population? This is what France Télévisions does through its website, offering the whole of its content freely, even to foreign visitors. BBC offers similarly free resources to a global public through iWonder.

**Entertainment**

Entertainment, without a doubt, is the area in which public service media suffers most severely and efficiently from private sector competition. The question begs to be asked: Is it worth dedicating public resources to it? Major private media groups have long argued for the retreat of the public sector from these profitable activities, that the free market can take care of things sufficiently. “Why invest public monies in the retransmission of sports events, variety shows, or drama?” The State has nothing to do with it, leave it to the market, they say.

However, if this argument can be made for public television, should it not also be made with regard to the construction of infrastructure as well as the organizing of sports and cultural events? If entertainment belongs squarely in the private sector, why grant fat subsidies to the Formula 1 Grand Prix, to numerous festivals, to bicycle...
races, et cetera? When we begin to ask the question in these terms, the response seems even more obvious! It is not quite clear to our governments that entertainment belongs uniquely to the market, or at least that their approaches to the subject have been far from coherent.

All the same, entertainment is a sector in which public service media must review its choices and practices. When faced with the broadcast of certain programs, it is legitimate to ask what distinguishes the public broadcasters from their commercial competitors. Competition for advertising is surely a familiar vice.

While public service media continues to play an undeniable role in the production and diffusion of entertainment, it must re-centre itself according to its mandate, which obliges it to innovate and to satisfy all types of audiences, including minority and marginalized populations. Evidently, these obligations are not easily compatible with advertising revenue, and public authorities should take this into account when it is time to vote on the broadcasters’ annual funding envelopes.

In Canada, as in France and the UK, public enterprises play an essential role in assuring the creation and maintenance of independent regional and national audiovisual production by providing indispensable channels for distribution. The law obliges them to do so, yet we still need to provide them with the adequate means to carry this out efficiently.

**An innovative digital presence**

I have alluded to this several times already: in order to confront the challenges of the digital era, public service media must be a leader in innovation. It must be provided adequate resources to assume this role, as innovation comes with a price. In another media sector, the GESCA group has demonstrated—with *La Presse* and other French-language publications—that enormous investments are necessary to be on the leading edge of innovation. In this case we are talking about more than $40 million. Nothing will happen if we rely on short-term Web-derived revenues without paying the price for long-term gains.

Our research has nonetheless already shown that in the three countries examined, despite the budgetary restrictions that public broadcasters must contend with, considerable and original efforts to counter them are being deployed to assure a dynamic public service presence on all platforms and devices.

France Télévisions was slow to build up a Web presence. Today it maintains several sites offering a number of services, including the ability to watch all of its programs for seven days following original broadcast. The French-German public television broadcaster Arte was a trailblazer that quickly demonstrated a leadership in innovation through its engagement with the internet.

Public broadcasters in France and the UK, as in Canada, have multiplied their initiatives to ensure their presence on digital networks and to eventually make a profit from them, within their regulatory constraints. This presence is impressive. Take, for example, France Télévisions:

- A website for the central broadcaster and a website for each of the five national television channels.
- Five digital publishing platforms:
The resources that are dedicated to this may seem enormous ... but they remain limited. For example, the digital budget of France Télévisions increased from US$50 million in 2011 to US$85 million in 2014, an increase of 78 percent. However, this sum is less than 3 percent of the total budget (US$85 million/US$3 billion).

In documents made public by SRC, we have not found clear and precise sums relating to the costs of digital services. A rapid Web search, though, provides proof of the extent of its efforts. Radio-Canada manages a central website and a panoply of specific sites.

Television and radio:
- ICI Radio-Canada Musique
- ICI Radio-Canada Première
- ICI Radio-Canada Télé

Other sites:
- Archives
- CBC.ca
- Contenu éducatifs – Curio
- ICI Artv
- ICI Explora
- ICI RDI
- ICI Tou.tv
- Jeunesse
- Radio Canada International

And then there is what CBC offers in English:
- Aboriginal
- Books
- CBC Connects
- CBC Home
- Comedy
- Contests
- Digital Archives
- Documentaries
- Games
- Kids
- Local
- Music
- News
- Parents
- Radio
- Sports
- TV
- Weather

The BBC, as we will see, boasts significantly greater offerings than its Canadian and French counterparts.

News

World regions
- Africa
- Asia
- Europe
- Latin America
- Middle East
- UK
- US & Canada
An administrator at France Télévisions summed up the all-points Web strategy during an interview with us in 2014:

Stick to the uses of our fellow citizens, honestly. In other words, admit ... whether its in news or entertainment, admit that a large part of our audience, a part of the public isn't, doesn't care about the big events and consumes news and entertainment in a different way. For news, this is particularly true, news, it will have to arrive in real-time. And so we, we continue to have our primary mandates: to inform, to entertain, to help people understand, but frankly the way to deliver this to the public is on its way to changing completely. So the primary mandates remain, but the way in which we respond to change—and this is how we respond, on digital media—this needs to be re-conceptualized. This is why we embarked on a strategy we call hyper-distribution, which consists of saying that everything we do, each program, each bit of news must be available everywhere, much more complicated than simple radio or television broadcasting, something you can nail down. But we didn't have a choice. We're obliged to be everywhere ... we'll see in 10 years or five years a few winners and a few losers, you know it's certain that not everybody is going to come out alive on all these screens and technologies. But at this point, we absolutely need to be distributed as widely as possible in a way that reaches, continuously, the largest audience possible.
The attitude toward the internet in France and Canada differs in a fundamental way. France Télévisions is a public corporation situated outside the commercial logic of benefits-seeking. Thus it considers the internet to be a new vector to reach different segments of its audience, above all youth. It broadcasts public announcements on some of its sites, but considers the Web to be an investment in programming rather than a source of revenue. As the same France Télévisions administrator noted:

Why do we have expectations of digital media that we never had for conventional media? This is a question I ask myself. Or we admit once again that there are a number of projects that merit public financing. In which case there’s no reason today why this is limited to the television, but is instead on all the networks. We don’t apply the same logic to it; or we consider that the market takes care of itself and that we don’t need to invest public money into it and at the same time we close down public service media. But I don’t see why we’d be any better at auto-financing with digital media than we were with traditional television. I think it’s completely absurd to continue to finance traditional over-the-air television services that are less-and-less used and, at the same time, insist that digital services auto-finance.

The CBC/SRC, to the contrary, has a tendency to want to extract dividends from its Web activities that would permit it to compensate for a decrease in government subsidy and increased advertising competition on conventional networks. Thus as viewers, we consume advertising, pay subscriber fees to access Curio.com and to access some of the programs on TouTV. Despite all of this, revenues from digital services remain ridiculously low, less than two percent as indicated in the 2013–2014 CBC/Radio-Canada Annual Report (CBC/Radio-Canada, 2014, p. 133) (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Digital programming (in millions)</th>
<th>Total budget associated with provision of services (in millions)</th>
<th>Percentage of digital programming</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>$10,104</td>
<td>$591,388</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>$11,244</td>
<td>$726,705</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
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Table 1: Digital programming revenue, 2013–2014

Source: CBC/Radio-Canada, 2014, p. 133

An adequate and stable funding
I mentioned numerous times that this is unavoidable. A solution must be found that provides for adequate and stable funding for public service media. The situation at CBC/SRC has become untenable.

Commercial revenues in English and French Services suffered due primarily to a softer television advertising market, down approximately 5% for all conventional broadcasters. Other pressures were added in the final months of the fiscal year, including disappointing performance for some individual prime-time programs in the key 25–54 year-old demographic
(a demographic that drives advertising revenue) on CBC Television, and the announcement by the NHL that it had chosen to deal exclusively with Rogers for the next 12 years. For 2014–2015, these factors, combined, represented pressures of approximately $47 million. As well, advertising revenues from CBC Radio 2 and ICI Musique were much lower than anticipated, for a shortfall of approximately $13 million.

Additional pressures of about $72 million came from increases in fixed costs, such as rent and property taxes ($42 million), and the government’s reintroduction of a salary inflation funding freeze for fiscal years 2014–2015 and 2015–2016 ($30 million).

These financial pressures came after the Corporation had absorbed almost $390 million in budget reductions and reallocations since 2009, largely due to the 2008–2009 recession; our cost reduction initiatives following Federal Budget 2012, which reduced our funding by $115 million over three years; the elimination of the Local Programming Improvement Fund (LPIF); and reduced funding from the Canada Media Fund (CMF). We had to make the difficult decision to cut more than $130 million from our budget across the Corporation, including a workforce reduction of 657 full-time positions over the next two fiscal years, with 573 to be cut immediately to balance our 2014–2015 budget. This will result in one-time severance payments estimated at $33.5 million. (CBC/Radio-Canada, 2014, p. 19)

The internet in general, and social networks in particular, provide fierce competition to both written and audiovisual traditional media by capturing advertising. In this context, public service media’s attempt to resort to advertising becomes even more problematic than it was before. Nevertheless, the governmental strategy of decreasing public funding necessitates advertising revenue and increasingly limits public service media’s funding options. The race to build audience mass to maximize commercial revenue does not seem to be the best path for fundamentally renewing public service media.

The BBC is funded through a license fee. France Télévisions is as well, but also relies on advertising. The budget of CBC/SRC is assured through parliamentary credits voted on annually and in constant decline, and by advertising revenue that is increasingly difficult to obtain.

In France, the advertising portion of France Télévisions revenue was severely reduced by President Sarkozy, who introduced a law aimed at cancelling advertising during prime-time broadcasting. This cancellation, initially proposed for all the France Télévisions channels as of January 5 2009 (except for RFO), was postponed a couple of times. It was finally decided to suppress advertising from 8:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. in 2015. Two measures of financial compensation are foreseen but both have been contested in court and may never come into practice:

- A 3 percent tax on sums paid by advertisers to broadcast their messages on television services;
- A 0.9 percent tax on the sales revenue of telecommunications service providers.
Freeing public service media, as much as possible, from the constraints of advertising market orientation is necessary if it is to assume its general mandate more freely and in a more innovative fashion. However, quick-fix solutions must be avoided because they offer no real financial compensation, dramatically impoverishing the broadcasters they are supposed to liberate. France Télévisions is unfortunately evidence of such a painful experience.

At the same time, in Canada, the CBC/SRC must cope with decreasing parliamentary funding as it laboriously attempts to augment its commercial revenues by, for example, increasing the rates of its offerings on TouTV. Here it is useless to hope for multiyear financial planning.

Conclusion
Today, we impose a task of titanic proportions on public service media institutions. We want them to cater to a general public that they will inform, educate, and entertain in a way that is original—distinct from what this public is offered by the private sector. We also want them to adapt to the universe of new media and have an innovating presence on digital networks. And we ask that they do this on a reduced budget, with fewer personnel, and without competing with private broadcasters for advertising dollars.

The new challenges of the digital age make public service media all the more pertinent. We must give it the means to innovate, to renew itself in order to better assume its sociocultural mission, rather than let it slowly suffocate by constantly choking off its financial resources. This task cannot be adequately accomplished without proper public education and the participation of the public. Decision-makers must implement participatory mechanisms to recreate their mandates, reaffirm their relevance, make their offerings known—through digital media as through conventional—and open themselves up to the creative contributions of their publics. To fulfill this mission, the public service must be able to count on dynamic human resources and public funding that meets its needs. To get there, it will most definitely require our support as citizens and as intellectuals.

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Note
1. CEGEP is the acronym for Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel.

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