

WHAT IS A BROADCASTER?

The Changing Nature & Definition Of Electronic Distribution
And It's Impact On Television & Film Production In Canada

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broad.cast (brôd'kast', -kâst'), *v.*, cast or cast.ed, -cast.ing, *n.*, *adj.*, *adv.* - *v.t.* **1.** to transmit (programs) from a radio or television station. **2.** to speak, perform, or present on a radio or television program. **3.** to cast or scatter abroad over an area as seed in sowing. **4.** to spread widely; disseminate: *to broadcast lies all over town.* - *v.i.* **5.** to transmit programs or signals from a radio or television station. **6.** to make something known widely; disseminate something. **7.** to speak, perform, or present all or part of a radio or television program. -*n.* **8.** something that is broadcast. **9.** a single radio or television program. **10.** a single period of broadcasting. **11.** a method of sowing by scattering seed. -*adj.* **12.** (of programs) transmitted from a radio or television station. **13.** of or pertaining to broadcasting. **14.** cast abroad or all over an area, as seed scattered widely. - *adv.* **15.** so as to reach or be cast abroad over a wide area. [1760-70; orig. as *adv.*] - **broad'cast'er**, *n.*

broad.cast.ing (brôd'kas'ting, -kâ'sting), *n.* **1.** the act of transmitting speech, music, visual images, etc., as by radio or television. **2.** radio or television as a business or profession. [1920-25]

Webster's Dictionary

What is a broadcaster? The very word suggests it's own definition, the throwing or casting of something over a large or broad space. It conjures images of a fisherman heaving a large net upon the waters. Webster's Dictionary makes reference to the sowing of seeds, but their primary definition remains directly related to the transmission of radio and television signals.

Technological advances in the way information is created, processed and delivered means the very nature of broadcast media is changing daily. The means by which these electronic signals reach their audience is almost as diverse as the content contained within the signals. Attempting to keep pace with these changes can easily be perceived as an act of futility. Also changing are the ways in which broadcast media are being defined.

These new definitions will play a key role in reshaping the policies of the institutions which currently govern, support and invest in the television and film industry in Canada.

A suggested revision of the Webster's definition of broadcasting could be "*the electronic dissemination of audio and visual material to the general public*". Which means a broadcaster would be "*a person, or corporate entity, electronically disseminating audio and visual material to the general public*".

Sources of production financing within Canada (excluding private investment) such as Telefilm, CTCPF, various endowments from cable companies, and the few remaining provincial government agencies all require an applicant for funding to have commitment from a Canadian broadcaster to exhibit the production. Feature films can also attain production funding through the various broadcast funds by obtaining a television broadcast deal in lieu of, or in addition to, making a theatrical distribution deal. For the purposes of this discussion we will, for the moment, keep our focus on television production; however, the end result will have a similar impact on the feature film production and distribution industries, as will become apparent later in these pages.

These financing sources have been established to support both the production and broadcasting industries. It's not simply a case of investing in a production, but also in making sure the production will have a place to be seen within the country. It is also hoped that the production will also be shown beyond our own borders. This is not a paramount concern when triggering most funding opportunities but it is becoming a growing consideration, especially when the budgets are higher and the need for a significant return on investment outweighs any overt cultural benefits.

There have always been visceral differences between producers and broadcasters when it comes to accessing sources of financing for productions. The separation of producers and broadcasters is seen in the industry (by the producers at least) as essential as the separation of church and state. Vertical integration in the communications industry has seen this argumentative barrier slowly eroding to a middle ground with producers becoming broadcasters and vice versa. The need to establish clearly defined arms-length operations between the production and broadcasting divisions of these companies has become a constant, ongoing and often

frustrating effort on the part of the funding agencies and the smaller players in the production community. How often must the smaller independent producers wish they too could have their own television channel?

The larger production companies in Canada are climbing over each other like prospectors on the Chilcoat Pass in their efforts to garner one or more of the new broadcast channels that are being made available by both the evolving technology and the evolving CRTC. Niche marketing is the buzzword of the broadcast community in the 1990's. Niche marketing in broadcasting has been both a response to and a cause of the fragmentation of the viewing markets.

In Canada the new specialty channels are claiming ever smaller target groups as their audience. These decreasing audience numbers challenge and erode the definition of "broadcaster" as it is currently being applied to these new channels.

By contrast there is a delivery system which is evolving in the opposite direction. You've heard a lot about it. It's the internet.

Now, we have all been exposed to an endless stream of blue-sky and sunshine drivel over the promised abilities of the internet, the information highway, the info-bahn, whatever you want to dub it. From the mouths of the net-nerds, the info-entrepreneurs, and the major telecommunications corporations we hear everyday how the internet will change our lives and provide us with untold riches of information, education and entertainment. It's all a load of rosy bullshit, full of promises, promises, promises and not much immediate satisfaction. Yes, the net is growing and the technology around the net is evolving at a head spinning rate, but everyone will admit: it's not TV.

The internet is not TV. Not yet. But that day is fast approaching.

The traditional broadcasting media are currently seeking to narrow their targets further in an effort to guarantee an audience (any audience) for their programming and advertisements. At the same time the internet is drawing larger numbers of users every day who do not have to be enticed to participate; they are more than eager to get themselves online and experience that much hyped realm the author William Gibson

once called “cyberspace” and which is now more commonly and simply known as the net.

The technology to deliver moving images and sound over limited bandwidths is also moving forward with startling speed and efficiency. All to meet the demands of the users and the content providers. It’s still not TV. Not yet. But soon, real soon, it will be.

The net will provide the means to reach a wider audience than traditional broadcast media and is thus growing into a position to usurp both the role and the definition of a broadcaster.

What does this mean? Why should we care if the net can be used to transmit audio and visual material to the general public? Remember earlier when we redefined broadcasting as being “*the electronic dissemination of audio and visual material to the general public*”. Broadcasting is no longer the domain of large companies with satellites, transmitting towers, microwave dishes and government issued licenses to fill the public air waves with their signals.

I am a broadcaster. I’m broadcasting right now by posting this article on the net. I’ve just broadcasted a text document. Does that make me a broadcaster? No, because it’s not really broadcasting, it’s actually publishing, but you get the idea. I can attach sounds to this page and I can also attach moving pictures. I can electronically disseminate audio and visual material to the general public. Does that make me a broadcaster?

Not officially, because the CRTC doesn’t recognize me as a broadcaster. They have not issued me with a license to broadcast in Canada. Why not? Is it because I’m not a large corporation investing millions of dollars in an industry which shapes political will and thus must be equally shaped by that will? Is it because this medium does not have a perceived exclusive benefit to the citizens contained within the borders of this country called Canada as do the so-called “free” air waves? Or is it because I’m broadcasting in a medium over which the CRTC has no control?

I suspect it’s all of the above and, more importantly, who cares?

Any issues revolving around possible CRTC regulations or policies really have no bearing at all on this discussion. The net is quickly growing beyond the ability of the CRTC to have any legislative authority, either in the context of restraint or encouragement of individuals or institutions operating on the net. The traditional role of governance over the media once held by the CRTC is fast becoming superfluous.

The net is turning a lot of things upside down and smashing a lot of the perceptions we have held about communications and entertainment media for the better part of a century.

The net, like money, knows no borders.

That's the whole point of the net. You can be anywhere in the world, talk to anyone who is willing to listen, and disseminate anything you care or dare to. As various governments around the world are discovering to their shock and dismay, any restrictions imposed upon the net and its users are extremely limited in their effectiveness. It's like making laws to keep people from talking to each other or looking at each other when they're in the same room together. All issues of political or moral censorship aside, since they are beyond the purview of this discussion, there really isn't any way to control what people do on the net beyond not allowing them access; and since the net is also becoming a place of commerce there will ultimately be very little incentive to restrict access.

Money, like the net, knows no borders.

The very nature of net technology is placing the powers once held solely by large companies into the hands of individuals. Even as large communications corporations continue to merge into what may become an all pervasive monopoly controlling the flow and use of information, the abilities of the individual continues to grow unabated on the net. It's kind of like knitting a long scarf with the same yarn that is unravelling from the other end.

So, I'm not a big communications corporation. So, I don't have a CRTC license. So what? I don't need any of that. I'm broadcasting. I am a broadcaster.

So what does any of this mean to the television production community? The ability of individual producers and small production companies to operate on the net and distribute their work worldwide is challenging the currently held definitions of a what a broadcaster is. As our industry changes and evolves to make use of the new distribution opportunities emerging from the net the policies of the funding and investment agencies must also change.

Very soon I will be able to place a completed film/video production on the net for all the world to see and, hopefully, enjoy. I will have a potential audience far larger than any of the established and recognized broadcasters within Canada. Broadcasters themselves will make use of the net for the same purposes.

Another buzzword that we have all heard far too much of these days is “convergence”. While it sounds like something you want to take a laxative for, convergence is a pretty good thing, fairly inevitable and it is happening throughout this industry with a speed not many are aware of or prepared for.

As the various technologies converge into one big electronic lump, with a few vestiges of actual practical use remaining, the net and TV will become inseparable. Just as the TV will no longer be just a window to predigested narrative programming, the net will not be solely the domain of interactive programming. Users will be able to access video and film productions via the net. The information highway will become jammed with re-runs of Gilligan’s Island. Shoot me now. Perhaps the laxative wasn’t such a wrong response after all.

So the net and TV are the same thing. So what? So, if a broadcaster commits funding to a production and then uses the net to deliver that production to users, does that “transmission” then constitute a “broadcast” as it is defined in Webster’s? Would it qualify as a broadcast in the eyes of the funding agencies? And most importantly of all, would that production qualify for financial participation from the various funding agencies?

At the moment the answer is no.

The net is not recognized as a means of broadcasting by any of the funding agencies in Canada. As the net continues to evolve it will quickly become a viable and

vital part of the telecommunications and entertainment industry. This is going to happen very soon and when it does the net must be recognized as a broadcast medium. Productions created solely for broadcast on the net must eventually be allowed to qualify for production funding and investment from Telefilm and other funding agencies. The agencies concerned need to start addressing this now.

This recognition is essential to the continued growth and prosperity of the Canadian film and television industry. Indeed, the net may prove to be the means by which the Canadian industry manages to regain a significant measure of control over the distribution of its own product both within and beyond our borders.

As mentioned earlier, the net is very egalitarian. It resists hierarchies and tends to level the playing field between the haves and the have-nots. On the web everyone is equal in their abilities to grab attention.

A single web page of a kid in Manitoba can potentially draw more users than a massive multi-page web site operated by Time-Warner simply because of the content of the page. However, the larger corporations do have something the kid in Manitoba doesn't have: an advertising budget. In the realm outside of the net (quaintly referred to as "the real world") huge campaigns can be mounted to draw users to web sites in the same manner as audiences are drawn into theatres. Vast amounts of cash can be, will be, and are being spent to attach "brand awareness" to corporate web sites and net based services. In this end of the game the bigger boys will always have the bigger voices.

This does not mean the little players will never be heard. Always remember that on the net content is king. Branding will work to draw users only so long as there is something for them to see and do once they have arrived at the much hyped site. If the content is consistently unsatisfying the brand will quickly become a mark of shame and users will stay away in droves.

How will the little players be heard? One of the first enterprises to prove themselves commercially successful on the web were search engines. Yahoo, Alta Vista, and many others provide a much needed service on that crowded and noisy highway of information: directions. Where do I find what I'm looking for? This is like having a television remote control that can look for specific shows based on the viewer's choice

of genre, stars, whatever; effectively narrowing the noise and debris that threatens to overwhelm the senses.

No more channel flipping. Just tell the computer what you want: “I wanna see something with my favourite movie star. What’s out there?” Bang! Whizz! “You have three choices, Dave, all of them starring Adolph Menjou.” Media bliss.

This ability to search according to user defined criteria will do a number of things, including reduce the scope and perspective of users and thereby threatening to turn them into willfully ignorant lumps blind to the whatever parts of the world they have excluded from their own chosen form of “self-narrow-casting”. That is a concern for another discussion. For now let’s try to ignore the fact that our audience is becoming deliberately dirt stupid and instead focus on how we can sell our shows to them. There really is no business like show business.

Search engines will also enable the small players to be found with delightful ease amidst the deluge of material from the larger players. Looking for material suitable for children? Looking for something with a good story? There’s the list, and while Disney will most assuredly find its way onto that list so will all the other companies which produce or distribute programming for young people. Still too many titles to choose from? The users can infinitely narrow their selection. Large companies like Disney will want the users to narrow their criteria to nothing but Disney and they will expend a sickeningly huge advertising budget to achieve this.

Fortunately, the very nature of the net encourages users to explore and find new things, even when filtered through the constraints of a self-imposed set of search criteria. There will always be a desire to channel surf, especially when the information waves are more controlled. Users will ultimately find even the most obscure presentations on the web if it fits their chosen search criteria.

Content is king. Branding by quality of content will lead users to return, seeking new experiences and to replay previous satisfying experiences. So there is a lot of room and a lot of opportunity for even the smallest of players to create works that are broadcast around the world on the net.

If the policies of the funding agencies are altered to accept the net as a bona fide means of broadcasting for a production, would a producer with delivery access through the net qualify as a broadcaster? What happens to the separation of church and state with respect to the currently held definitions of producers and broadcasters? It is important for us all to have an understanding of the various elements that are currently being touted as the domain and purview of a corporate broadcaster.

The larger companies have a vested interest to protect and they will undoubtedly attempt to place themselves in a sphere of expertise and ability as a way of defining themselves in contrast to the smaller players. Vertically integrated production and broadcasting companies will encourage the elimination of any required arms-length third party relations between their enterprises. They will all attempt to define themselves as broadcasters by showing the differences between themselves and the smaller players. But branding with icons, logos and advertising does not make a company a broadcaster.

The ability to electronically disseminate audio and visual material to the general public is what defines a broadcaster.

What does this mean? It means that if an established broadcaster distributes a television production on the net, that production should qualify for financing from the various funding agencies.

It means that if a single individual can produce and broadcast content on the net, their production should be equally eligible for financing from the various funding agencies. There will need to be a demonstrable level of expertise by that individual, but once this has been achieved there should be no reason why a single person would not qualify as both a producer and a broadcaster.

This means there will be more players competing for the already scarce dollars out there. The agencies' decisions over which productions get the money will likely end up being based upon the following:

- 1) How Canadian is it?
- 2) How good an investment is the production?

Existing CAVCO criteria should satisfy any tests of Canadian content. A good business plan on the part of the producer and the ability to take a risk on the part of the funding agencies will take care of the rest. The changes in policy will require the agencies to address issues of fairness in their processes of deciding which applicants can lay legitimate claim to being a broadcaster.

The use of the net as a broadcast medium is not some hokey-pokey several years away. It is happening, and it is happening now. Right now.

The very near future of the net holds a great deal of promise for the Canadian television and film production and distribution industry. The ability to make use of that promise rests in the changes which must inevitably occur in the existing policies of the various funding and investment agencies. These changes must be seriously discussed and considered now in expectation of this fast rising future.

By the time we have evaluated the changes which are due to arrive in our future, that future will already be upon us. Let us hope when that time comes we are ready for it.