

Comment: Canada would benefit from a stronger CBC

JO-ANN ROBERTS / TIMES COLONIST

JANUARY 9, 2015

I read with interest the letter to the editor ("CBC has little to show for its public funding," Jan. 7) about what Canadians get for the money that is spent on CBC/SRC. I wish more Canadians were asking that question and I wish the CBC was able to spend more time and money telling its shareholders, the Canadian public, what they get for their investment.

So, let me get started on my crusade to advocate for a stronger CBC by putting the numbers cited in the letter — ratings — in some context.

Ratings tell only a small part of the story. Let's look at what Canadians get for the \$29 per person they invest in CBC/Radio-Canada.

- In radio: Programming in English, French and eight aboriginal languages and in five languages on the web-based international radio service, Radio Canada International.
- In TV: CBC Television, Ici Radio-Canada Tele, CBC News Network, Ici RDI, Ici Explora, Ici ARTV (part ownership) and documentary. The CBC operates services for the Canadian Arctic under the names CBC North and Radio-Canada Nord.

- Online: cbc.ca/ici.radio-canada.ca, CBC Radio 3, CBC Music, ici.mu, and ici.tou.tv, and 20.2 per cent ownership of satellite radio broadcaster Sirius XM Canada, which carries several CBC-produced audio channels.

All of this is done with a budget that is at its lowest since 1990 in inflation-adjusted dollars.

It is also important to note where Canada ranks in funding when it comes to public broadcasting. A recent report by Nordicity, the media consulting company quoted by the letter-writer, shows that Canada is almost at the bottom when it comes to per-capita funding. Of the 18 developed countries surveyed, the average funding for the public broadcaster is \$82. Canada is 16th at \$29. I would also add that the majority of these countries operate in only one language, not 10, and a couple of time zones, not five.

This is not to say we should not be asking if we are getting our value out of the dollars we are spending on the CBC. Of course we should be asking this question. We should be asking a few other questions as well: How do we want to fund the CBC? Should it be determined by the government of the day or should it be at arm's length from government? Should it compete with private broadcasters for advertising dollars or should it be funded in such a way that advertising is not needed?

Ratings are aimed at advertisers and it's like comparing apples and oranges. CBC competes with private broadcasters who are offering American shows in prime time, not shows that are created here. It's much cheaper to buy ready-made U.S. shows and then spend money on advertising them to a Canadian audience.

The CBC-TV lineup is 93 per cent Canadian. The money is spent making the shows, so it follows there is not as much funding available to promote them.

While it is easy to point a finger at CBC's TV ratings being lower than private broadcasters', it is interesting to note that for the past two years, CBC Radio One has broken audience records. In fact, CBC Radio One is the No. 1 morning show in Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, Ottawa, Halifax and Victoria.

Finally, the Nordicity report from October 2013 concluded that "Canada has one of the lowest levels of government financial support for public broadcasting, despite the fact that it [Canada] has a socio-cultural environment that is likely to generate relative high potential benefits from public broadcasting."

In other words, we as a country have a lot to gain from a strong public broadcaster. I think it's time we decided how we should fund it so that it can live up to its full potential.

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