

Stay tuned... (again)...

So remember in the last issue where we whooped out a final last rallying cry for the campaign for Canadian drama? Well you can put your flags down for another year. Sort of.

Just as performers were getting ready to storm Ottawa, the CRTC came out with an unexpected mid-season “Woah I didn’t see that coming” cliff-hanger and postponed the full-scale review until April 2010 and has issued one-year licence renewals.

ACTRA and our coalition partners have been waiting for the opportunity to fix the CRTC regulations that have all but wiped Canadian TV drama off the air. ACTRA’s drama campaign has been about preserving our culture and performers’ jobs. It’s all about work opportunities: the more Canadian content we can get on our airwaves, the more work there is for you. Obviously we’re disappointed that our members, who have been suffering the effects of bad regulation for 10 years now, have to wait yet again.

However it’s no secret that changing technology and the economic downturn have combined to create short-term challenges and a potential upheaval, not only in Canada but around the world. People – no, make that private broadcasters – are panicking. And long-term decisions made in times of panic are rarely good ones.

It’s been quite a dramatic few months. At the CRTC and the Heritage Committee’s TV hearings, Canada’s private conventional broadcasters have declared the system “broken” and “in a state of crisis.” They’ve threatened to shut down local stations unless we meet their demands for deregulation and fee-for-carriage. And we’ve watched broadcasters and big cable companies take out national full-page ads to buy and sell TV stations for the price of ‘a cup of coffee and a donut.’ If you listen to the broadcasters you’d think the sky had not only fallen, but that it had turned to black molten lava.

It is ACTRA’s belief that conventional television is not in crisis. It is facing the same challenges as any industry in transition and confronting a global recession.

Our industry and its key players have faced significant challenges in the past and have weathered the storm – remember how TV was going to be the death of radio?

If broadcasters are having difficulty with the downturn, it’s the result of their own lousy business decisions... they are blaming you, me, and everyone else who thinks that we should be able to see our own stories on our TVs.

In 2008, private conventional television broadcasters in Canada made a profit. While low by historical standards, they still made a profit. The days of double-digit growth in conventional advertising revenues may be gone, but conventional broadcasting will not disappear

by Joanne Deer, Director of Public Policy and Communications

tomorrow. Canadians will still want to tune in for their local news and event drama. YouTube will not replace CTV or NBC as a means of mass advertising any time soon.

The health of specialty channels also gives weight to the idea that you need to take a broad look at the industry as a whole before declaring the patient critical. Specialty channels made \$2.9 billion in profits last year and who owns most of these profit-generating machines? CTVglobemedia owns 32 and CanWest, 21.

The fact is, if broadcasters are having difficulty with the downturn, it’s the result of their own lousy business decisions. Unfortunately private broadcasters are blaming everyone but themselves. They’re blaming cable companies for taking their signals for free. They’re blaming you, me, and everyone else who thinks that we should be able to see our own stories on our TVs as they point to obligations to broadcast Canadian programming as the source of their financial troubles.

It’s a silly claim, seeing as the ‘obligations’ they complain about are pretty slim thanks to the CRTC’s disastrous 1999 Television Policy that removed expenditure requirements for Canadian programming. Out of a total 28 hours a week of prime-time only eight of those have to be priority programming. Also thanks to the 1999 policy,

Bruce Dinsmore, Charlotte Arnold, Colin Mochrie, Richard Hardacre and Stephen Waddell urge the CRTC to provide shelf space and funding for Canadian content on-line at the February New Media hearings.



Fred Chartrand



(Left:) Team ACTRA shows some muscle at the May CRTC TV Hearings: **R.H. Thomson, Julie Stewart and Richard Hardacre.**



Cheers & Jeers

Cheers to Heritage Minister James Moore for bringing funding for television, new media and emerging platforms together under the Canadian Media Fund and giving us a two-year, \$310-million commitment

Cheers to MPs on the Heritage Committee for setting up hearings on the so-called TV ‘crisis.’

Jeers to private broadcasters for blaming CanCon regulations for their self-inflicted financial woes.

Jeers to NS Liberals for circulating semi-nude pics of ACTRA member **Lenore Zann** when she announced she was running for the NDP. The photo is from a TV series in which she appears in character. Exploiting a performer’s performance for political gain is dirty tricks indeed!

For more cheers, jeers and commentary hook into ACTRA’s Twitter page at www.twitter.com/ACTRAnat.

low-cost entertainment magazine, variety and reality shows are counted in those 28 hours. The week ACTRA went to make our case before the CRTC, CTV and Global each had just two hours of scripted Canadian drama scheduled, that’s out of a possible 28 primetime hours on each channel.

Under the current regulations, English-language private OTA broadcasters spent 61% more on foreign programming than on Canadian – \$739.7 million versus \$452.8 million – in 2008. Hardly oppressive.

Guess what else? ACTRA and some of our friends got together and did a study that shows that Canadian programming can be, and is profitable, especially when you account for the repeat airings across multiple specialty channels.

So if it’s not Canadian content obligations that has broadcasters in a bind, then what’s the issue? Well, to a great extent, the private broadcasters’ challenges are largely self-inflicted. In an orgy of self-indulgence, they bid up the price of U.S. programs, sometimes buying a series not because they want to show it, but to prevent their competitor from acquiring it. They also spent billions of dollars acquiring new broadcasting properties (see above note on specialty channels!) so they could become oligopolies and have done so by borrowing money at a time when interest rates were high.

Their reckless business decisions meant that even after years and years of often record-breaking profits, when the advertising market softened, they had no flexibility to adapt and ride out the temporary downturn.

So why blame Cancon? It turns out, private broadcasters are opportunists. Private broadcasters are seizing on what they call a ‘crisis’ to hold us hostage on the issue of fee-for-carriage, to leave communities without newsrooms and free themselves of regulation that perhaps they never wanted in the first place. (Funny how they want to get rid of the regulations that require them to invest in Canadian programming, but seem perfectly happy with the simultaneous substitution rule that has made them so profitable for decades.)

If you’re not going to air Canadian programming, why do we need you?

Our question to broadcasters is: “If you’re not going to air Canadian programming, why do we need you?” The only raison d’être Canadian private broadcasters have is to bring us Canadian programming.

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In addition to deregulation, broadcasters are also looking for fee-for-carriage. That is, broadcasters want cable companies to pay them for carrying their channels. We're not against fee-for-carriage. But we are against giving private broadcasters a new source of revenue and getting nothing in return. If the CRTC decides fee-for-carriage is the way to go, then we want some conditions: we need guarantees that all revenues from fee-for-carriage will be seen on the screen in the form of local and dramatic programming; cable giants should not be allowed to pass the buck on to hardworking Canadians; and the CBC must be included.

So what do we do until our next kick at the regulatory can? We push back against the tidal wave of woe and try to hold the line until everyone can take a deep breath and see that the sky is not, in fact, falling.

In May, Richard Hardacre, R.H. Thomson and Julie Stewart presented ACTRA's case before the CRTC. A week later, Richard and Wendy Crewson appeared before the Heritage Committee to make our case to Members of Parliament.

Now we'll focus on getting prepared for the next round of CRTC hearings into whether to re-introduce spending requirements for Canadian programming this fall and the long-term licence renewals in Spring 2010. We'll also keep rallying members, building coalitions and raising awareness.

Talk about the longest ending e-ver. ■



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Contact ACTRA...

ACTRA National Office

300 – 625 Church St | Toronto ON | M4Y 2G1
TEL: (416) 489-1311/1-800-387-3516
FAX: (416) 489-8076
EMAIL: national@actra.ca
www.actra.ca

ACTRA Performers' Rights Society

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300 – 625 Church St | Toronto ON | M4Y 2G1
TEL: (416) 489-1311/1-800-387-3516
FAX: (416) 489-1040
EMAIL: prs@actra.ca | racs@actra.ca
www.actra.ca/racs

Union of B.C. Performers

400 – 1155 West Pender St | Vancouver BC | V6E 2P4
TEL: (604) 689-0727 | FAX: (604) 689-1145
EMAIL: info@ubcp.com | www.ubcp.com

ACTRA Alberta

304 – 1300 8 Street SW | Calgary AB | T2R 1B2
TEL: (403) 228-3123/1-866-913-3123
FAX: (403) 228-3299
EMAIL: alberta@actra.ca | www.actraalberta.com

ACTRA Saskatchewan

212 – 1808 Smith Street | Regina SK | S4P 2N4
TEL: (306) 757-0885 | FAX: (306) 359-0044
EMAIL: saskatchewan@actra.ca | www.actra.ca/sask

ACTRA Manitoba

203 – 245 McDermot Ave | Winnipeg MB | R3B 0S6
TEL: (204) 339-9750 | FAX: (204) 947-5664
EMAIL: manitoba@actra.ca | www.actra.ca/winnipeg

ACTRA Toronto Performers

200 – 625 Church St | Toronto ON | M4Y 2G1
TEL: (416) 928-2278 | FAX: (416) 928-0429
EMAIL: info@actratoronto.com | www.actratoronto.com

ACTRA Ottawa

The Arts Court | 170 – 2 Daly Avenue
Ottawa ON | K1N 6E2
TEL: (613) 565-2168 | FAX: (613) 565-4367
EMAIL: ottawa@actra.ca | www.actraottawa.ca

ACTRA Montreal

530 – 1450 City Councillors Street
Montreal QC | H3A 2E6
TEL: (514) 844-3318 | FAX: (514) 844-2068
EMAIL: montreal@actra.ca | www.actramontreal.ca

ACTRA Maritimes

103 – 1660 Hollis Street | Halifax NS | B3J 1V7
TEL: (902) 420-1404 | FAX: (902) 422-0589
EMAIL: maritimes@actra.ca | www.actramaritimes.ca

ACTRA Newfoundland/Labrador

685 Water Street | P.O. Box 575
St. John's NF | A1C 5K8
TEL: (709) 722-0430 | FAX: (709) 722-2113
EMAIL: newfoundland@actra.ca | www.actra.ca/stjohns