

Why We Need the NFB

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The NFB was established when there was little sustained indigenous film production in this country. A public-sector producer made sense to establish a Canadian audiovisual presence. What is the argument for an NFB today when Canada has an energetic, creative private-sector production industry and a range of policy instruments to ensure that it remains supported? Do we still need a public-sector producer? My answer is a definite yes. I would add that it is even more necessary today, in a digital era, than ever before. I have come to that conclusion based on my extensive experience in the private sector, a wide range of discussions and encounters within Canada and internationally and my work at the NFB. Here are my essential arguments:

Institutional continuity. Over the course of its history Canada has developed unique institutions. Their relationships with communities and Canadians have been woven into the fabric of this country and become an integral part. The NFB was established in 1939 and has become one of those defining cultural institutions. Institutional continuity is essential, but not a static continuity; an organization should not survive merely because it was created in the past. Institutions remain vital when they are dynamic and reinvent themselves to meet the demands of new generations while remaining true to their core mandate. The NFB has done so successfully.

The value of the brand. For almost 70 years Canadians have invested in the National Film Board. Has that investment reached the end of its useful life? Should it be considered a sunk cost? Or would we be doing a disservice to Canadians by not continuing to manage and derive full benefit of that investment? My belief is the latter. There is enormous value in the NFB brand. In fact, there are very few Canadian brands that have the positive national and international attributes of the NFB. The Film Board speaks of integrity, social engagement, commitment to diversity, artistic innovation and authenticity, all characteristics that play out in several ways. In terms of production, for our domestic and

international partners, the brand is a guarantee of excellence; for the subjects of our films it is an assurance of integrity. In terms of audiences, the brand is a guarantee of a serious exploration of important social issues based on Canadian values. For Canadians the brand evokes a deep emotional connection (the “I remember” experience that speaks to the desire and need for a continuity with our past) and also a sense of pride such as many Canadians felt, for example, when the NFB won this year’s Oscar for animation. These things do matter. Emotional engagements are the lifeblood of a nation, and pride matters because it draws the world’s attention to the country’s creative possibilities; it matters because it gives Canadians a sense of possibility; it matters because it gives us the confidence to achieve.

An important heritage. The NFB is the caretaker of an enormously valuable and important Canadian audiovisual heritage. The 13,000 films, the 500,000 still images, the extensive sound library are not simply an archive to be mined; they are the pulse of Canadian life and creativity across the years. The release of Norman McLaren: The Master’s Edition with an accompanying feature film of his work last year was a cinematic event that echoed from the Cannes film festival around the world. It was a dedicated work of technical re-mastering that took four years. The NFB rescued this great artist from the vaults and gave back to Canadians and the world an absolutely vital artistic heritage. This event inspired maestro Kent Nagano to blend the works of McLaren with great classical music at an evening with the MSO. Similarly, Michel Lemieux has been touring the world over the last few months with a remarkable stage spectacle called Norman, also based on the works of McLaren. There is a great deal more work to do in releasing and highlighting NFB classics.

Taking the risks the private sector cannot. Non-market risk taking means stepping into areas of “market failures,” such as subsidizing emerging filmmakers, working with Aboriginal and diverse filmmakers, offering a media voice to underserved communities, innovating in new forms of expression where the market on its own cannot afford to do so. These are public goods with long-term social and economic benefits for the industry, for communities, for the country. It is in these specific, non-market forms of risk taking that the NFB remakes and revitalizes itself; this is its evolutionary mechanism. Now, let’s be clear that dealing with “market failures” does not mean bypassing the private sector. Often central to these activities are partnerships with the private sector. It is just that the critical addition or leadership of the NFB makes possible what would have been either impossible or difficult to achieve. For example, broadcasters at home and abroad have often made it clear that they will commit to a risky project

because the NFB is a partner.

Creating the civic society. In his book on Canada, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, John Ralston Saul writes, "Canada's strength—you might even say what makes it interesting—is its complexity; its refusal of the conforming, monolithic nineteenth-century nation-state model. That complexity has been constructed upon three deeply rooted pillars, three experiences—the aboriginal, the francophone, the anglophone." Today, there is a fourth pillar—our diverse population. Canada is in the process of articulating a profound, complex, nuanced sense of an evolving Canada, with a very different notion of the nation state. Documentary, by virtue of its ethics, its methods of operation, its creative engagement at the leading edge of social change, has a profound role to play. No cultural institution has taken to heart that complexity and given it its fullest expression as has the NFB. Here the NFB is at its best, a necessary player in the task of forming a civil society, a multi-identified nation within a common framework of democratic, social and community oriented civil values.

Revitalizing the public space. In Canada we are witnessing a narrowing of broadcast options and a broadening of digital possibilities. Both trends demand vigorous support, extension and renewal of the public domain.

Television will remain a key driver of production and means of reaching audiences. Mergers may be good for the financial health and long-term viability of broadcast operations; they are not good news for diversity of views and means of expression. If we want a vibrant media culture, we need more doors, more places where creators can experiment, explore...create. And it is not enough that we already have one national public broadcaster. It leaves one with the same problem; it accedes to the ongoing erosion of the public space. The long-term health of the private sector--where wealth generation rests on something as ephemeral as creativity--depends on, demands a multi-dimensional, risk-taking public arena. The NFB provides what neither our private nor our public broadcasters can.

The digital realm. Television is a tightly controlled medium with high barriers. What does public space mean in a free-wheeling digital media universe where the barriers to entry have apparently eroded; a universe where everyone is potentially both creator and broadcaster? Why do we need public institutions to mediate the relationship of creator, creation and audience?

Let's take a brief look at this seemingly open universe.

The parent companies of the top ten Web sites are American. They include Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, Time Warner, News Corp and Disney. Sure, many are donning their Canadian coats...Google.ca, Yahoo.ca, Youtube.ca. So what

we see is a borderless universe that is not quite borderless. Virtual realms do not mean realms without context. If MySpace or YouTube allow anyone to upload, to partake of the audiovisual realm, it is within a particular context, driven by certain sets of values and conditions. And of course commercial interests are quick to figure out ways to appropriate the sites that become hits. Whoever controls the context ultimately controls the message.

Another statistic of crucial interest to Canada is this: over 70% of the sites on the Web are in English. Yet French is fundamental to our national identity. We need to ensure its ongoing cultural presence in the overwhelming anglophone tsunami of the Internet.

This is not about barriers or creating walled gardens. We need public providers to create alternatives, to allow for a public diversity. I underline the word public.

One of the most powerful characteristics of the digital realm has been the replacement of the public space with personal space. Become my friend; join my network; look at what I'm doing. The personal is exposed but it is not public.

Personal space does not mean public space; in fact it may be inimical to public space. It is exclusionary of that public space because it is founded on fundamentally different precepts, values and intents.

This is not to deny the necessity, importance, or vitality of that personal space; it is to say it cannot do what the public space can and must do.

Many NFB films have been very personal and intimate but with a public purpose—the author says, I am sharing my or my subjects' stories because they intersect with large public issues. I'm thinking of the films of Alanis Obomsawin, who has contributed immeasurably to a profound interaction with and understanding of First Nations.

By comparison look at *Lonely Girl*. Many of you may be aware of this ongoing online serial that seemed to be the unadorned confessions of a teenage girl in southern California. It looked like the epitome of what personal expression on the Net was about and attracted an enormous audience; it was of course a pastiche whose intent was only to play, which it did cleverly, on the forms that social networking welcomes.

The ensuing debate centred on what is fake and what is real, certainly an ongoing issue in the virtual world but I think less interesting than the question of authenticity.

It is there that the NFB situates itself...a place for authentic, socially engaged public dialogue through innovative creative media making.

We have been successful in reinventing ourselves. In terms of programming we need to stay focused on our core mandate. The NFB is at its best when it takes risks. We serve the industry and Canadians when we eschew the ordinary, the formulaic and the standard; when we push boundaries; when we reinvent form and experiment with grammars for new technologies; when we search out the stories that aren't being told; when we are doing what cannot be done at all or done readily in the private sector. We are your creative producing partners in making the extraordinary.

We will ensure that there is increased clarity, transparency and timeliness in our programming criteria and processes. We will, in the new year, consult with filmmakers and the industry about these issues.

As a public-sector institution we have a particular duty to connect with Canadians. We must explore the landscape of new possibilities, including various forms of Net-based distribution and digital cinema. In January we are launching Canada's first e-cinema network, a pilot project with the francophone community in Acadia. We have installed high-end HD projectors and servers in five communities and will be offering a rich alternative French cinematic experience to communities that have never had that possibility before.

In 2008 we will be launching a major initiative to give Canadians anytime, anywhere access to the treasures of the NFB vaults. We are working to enhance our deep connection with schools across the country. In terms of transforming society—this is where it begins, and teachers across the country are hungry for the Canadian content that the NFB provides. Consequently, we need a long-term strategy for digitizing our collection.

The NFB is truly remarkable, one of the finest cultural organizations in the world—an institution that inspires pride on the part of Canadians and envy around the world. This year alone the NFB, or with its co-production partners, received the following accolades: an Oscar, the Genie for feature documentary, two Canadian feature doc awards at Hot Docs, the GSM prize for original mobile content (the Oscar of the mobile world), the Focal Award for conservation presided by Lord David Puttnam and Sir Jeremy Isaacs, the Canadian New Media award and the John Grierson prize for innovation at the Sheffield Doc Festival. In addition, we were the only Canadian prize winner at Cannes. We have also been nominated for an international interactive Emmy. This past week we have a record number of films—seven—at the

world's most prestigious documentary festival—IDFA in Amsterdam...we will have two feature docs at Sundance—a co-production with Peter Raymont, Triage—a powerful human rights documentary; and Yung Chang's remarkable *Up the Yangtze* (a co-pro with Eyesteel films). Two weeks ago Jennifer Baichwal's *Manufactured Landscapes* (a co-pro with Danny Iron and Nick de Pencier) opened a month-long celebration of documentaries at the Pompidou Centre in Paris and opens commercially there next week. We launched at TIFF, in partnership with the Canadian Film Centre, North America's first interactive feature film...the list goes on and on. These accolades are for just this year—an extraordinary record for one rather small institution.

The NFB is living through a creative resurgence, but the picture is not all rosy. Every year the NFB is squeezed financially by its eroding government allocations. In ten years we have lost well over 20% of our purchasing power primarily due to the lack of indexation of our costs. As a result our productive capacity is reduced. I have to say a word here about our staff. They are among the most creative, dedicated, hard-working people I have met in my career. They are passionately devoted to the mission of the NFB and have responded to the challenges of doing more with less. But there is a limit to what any organization can or should expect of its people.

Urgent special needs like digitizing the collection are not being met. In England the government announced a 25 million pound investment in the BFI for digitization. Holland launched a national digitization strategy in July. France has given INA, its national audiovisual institute, special appropriations for the long-term digitization of their collection.

We need to move on this issue. The NFB cannot sit on its hands and hope funding will turn up. We have to move on digitization even as we put together the case for additional funding. This is a vital investment in our future—but for the time being an investment that is coming out of our operating funds.

I want to emphasize that we are doing our part—we are looking at how we can generate new revenue streams with our assets in the digital universe; we are looking at how we can improve our work processes and save money that way; we are putting in place better planning systems to help achieve efficiencies...but we cannot solve all our financial problems on our own.

Unless attention is paid to these issues, we are in danger of diminishing a unique national treasure. Thank you.