

**THE FUTURE OF TELEVISION IN CANADA AND THE IMPACT
OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS ON THE TELEVISION INDUSTRY
IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

**PRESENTATION TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS
STANDING COMMITTEE ON CANADIAN HERITAGE
BY THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA**

11 MAY 2009

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee.

I am very pleased to appear before you on behalf of the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada. My name is Tom Perlmutter and I am the Government Film Commissioner and Chair of the Film Board. With me today is Claude Joli-Coeur, the Assistant Film Commissioner.

We are here to discuss the future of television in Canada and the impact of the economic crisis on the television industry in Canada's local communities. For 70 years now the Film Board has played a vital role in Canadian society as a public producer and distributor of audiovisual materials in the public interest. Among other things, the NFB is recognized for its leadership in the production of documentaries, animation and digital media.

In the past six years the NFB has earned five Oscar nominations and two Oscars. We've obtained Emmy nominations, won the best short film award

at Cannes twice, competed at Sundance with our feature documentaries and enjoyed an enormous presence at the world's two most important documentary festivals, the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and Hot Docs in Toronto.

This year Hot Docs honoured the NFB with the kind of programming focus it reserves for national cinemas. As well, the festival paid tribute to our great Aboriginal filmmaker, Alanis Obomsawin, with a retrospective of her works and an outstanding achievement award. For the third year in a row we swept the top awards at Hot Docs, a sweep we seem to do regularly over the last few years at Canada's equivalent of the Oscars—the Genie and Jutra awards.

In October the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences honoured the NFB with a tribute evening in Washington. Last month Cannes awarded the NFB a gold medal in recognition of our outstanding services to world film and television. Next week we will be honoured in London while plans are underway to recognize the NFB in Japan and Brazil.

We are Canada's best known international cinematic brand and this allows us to serve Canadians in all regions by ensuring a strong Canadian presence in a globalized, digitized universe.

Many of the NFB's activities are designed to occur in the realm of audio-visual "market failure", that is, creating public goods with long-term social

and economic benefits for local communities, for businesses, and for the Canadian public. Such non-market risk taking means undertaking activities such as technological innovation but also developing emerging creators, working with filmmakers from Aboriginal, ethnocultural and official language minority communities, offering a media voice to underserved communities, and innovating in new forms of expression where the market on its own cannot afford to do so. We provide a forum for creators to develop new forms of authentic and relevant audio-visual works that communicate diverse Canadian points of view at home and to the rest of the world. These are public goods with long-term social and economic benefits for local communities, for the audio-visual industry and for the country.

The NFB also plays an important role in marking the major changes and events taking place in Canadian society and ensuring that they connect to all Canadians. We did so with the celebration of Quebec's 400th anniversary by distributing 26,000 boxed sets celebrating Quebec, with the help of Heritage Canada, to schools and public libraries across the country. This is phenomenally important in ensuring that regional voices are heard throughout Canada and are part of the fabric of our country. We are currently in partnership with the Vancouver Olympic committee to use new digital media to engage Canadians across the country from all regions in the Olympic spirit.

But we are not a broadcaster.¹ However, we are part of the wave of the future.

Today, in the midst of technological and economic upheaval, the NFB is applying its creative powers to the multi-platform digital environment. By exploring the possibilities of new technologies, testing new business models, and ensuring distribution to remote and underserved communities, the NFB provides Canadians with a range of new possibilities.

THE TRANSITION TO DIGITAL PROGRAMMING

The transformation from analog to digital formats is the basic technological change that is transforming the audio-visual sector at all levels. This transformation is affecting audio-visual conception and development, production, distribution, exhibition and the nature of social engagement through media. The transition to digital formats is creating new exhibition platforms that are reshaping the audio-visual environment and fragmenting audiences. This is all, obviously, having a profound impact on local broadcasting.

Digital technologies offer more flexibility in conception and development, production, distribution, exhibition and the nature of social engagement through media than do analog technologies. Digital technologies also offer the possibility of fulfilling demands by racial, linguistic and other minorities for highly specialized and personalized niche programming that responds

¹ The NFB owns 14% of the Canadian Documentary Channel. The CBC/SRC owns 82%.

to regional needs. The NFB is committed to such communities, particularly the younger generation of filmmakers, and to working with and training them in the new digital forms of expression.

Although many other countries, particularly in Asia and Europe, are pushing ahead in accommodating and promoting digital technology by articulating a digital vision and investing substantially in it, Canada is lagging behind. Not the NFB.

The NFB was among the first to set the norms for the World Wide Web as a creative documentary medium in and of itself. Our project Filmmaker-in-Residence radically redefined engaged documentary making for a digital world and swept major new media awards both nationally and internationally including a Webby, Rockie, and Canadian New Media Award. But it did something else that is unique: it bridged a gap between the social and the cultural and is one of the few media projects to have been featured in the *Journal of the Canadian Medical Association*. With our partners Bravo!Fact and MarbleMedia, we were the first to create original productions for mobile phones in Canada. We were among the first in the world to produce an interactive feature film, which we did with our partners at the Canadian Film Centre Media Lab.

Through the pioneering development of one of Canada's first e-cinema networks, the NFB is playing a creative and democratizing role in Canada's digital transformation while encouraging the development of minority language communities. E-cinema technology gives New Brunswick Francophones access to a large collection of high-definition NFB films,

screened in French on big screens close to home. This initiative has allowed the NFB to pursue its objective of reaching Canadians everywhere, including more remote and underserved areas where HD movies would not be viable on a purely commercial basis.

Access to the NFB's vast collection of audiovisual materials is essential for all Canadians and a priority for the institution. Now available at NFB.ca, the *Online Screening Room* offers Canadians high quality, free viewing of over 1,000 productions from the NFB's invaluable collection – a national treasure of local information and stories, in both official languages. With the click of a button, viewers can connect to the pulse of Canadian life and creativity across the regions of the entire country.

The new digital environment is also allowing the NFB to strengthen its role in the local educational market. A trusted provider of regional content and a valuable partner of Canadian teachers for more than 70 years, the NFB is increasing its online offering and reaching Canadian youth on platforms of their choice. For example, in partnership with Alberta Learning, the NFB offered over 100 films online to all of the schools in Alberta. Much like the community screenings so fundamental to the NFB's history, web broadcasting of our works and stories serves to bring Canadians in the regions together.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL PROGRAMMING FROM THE NFB

New media is attracting ever increasing audiences, but local television programming, especially local news, continues to play an important part in the political, economic and cultural life of our country. Not only does local programming deliver information and entertainment to millions of Canadians from sea to sea to sea; it also provides an important contributing element to community sharing and building. Conventional broadcasting will remain important in the years ahead because of the lack of high speed access, particularly in remote and underserved communities. In fact, we will shortly be releasing a film that looks at the major impact a local radio station has in a small community--Fort McPherson in the North West Territories. It is directed by Dennis Allen, a filmmaker from Inuvik.

The NFB does not itself produce local news but instead provides other forms of local and regional, informational content as a complement to the local news on television. I mentioned our participation in the 400th anniversary of Quebec City – one of the most significant Canadian historical and cultural celebrations of the past few years. We launched world premieres by renowned filmmakers and contributions to flagship projects that provided the city with a major heritage legacy. One such project was the ground-breaking film about the French explorer, Champlain, which blends documentary, animation and live action, all in 3D. This production was undertaken in partnership with the Museum of Civilization in Québec City and is on permanent exhibit in the Museum's Interpretation Centre at Place Royale. We are currently working on a multi-year major project on the residential schools. It is a way of telling the

stories from regions across the country behind the very moving apology delivered by the Prime Minister last summer.

English Program

Regional production for the English Program, that is production outside of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, is a significant part of the NFB's English-language production budget. The Film Board is involved in a wide variety of projects involving the regions. Here are a few examples:

- Ariel Nasr's powerful documentary, *Good Morning Kandahar*, produced in our Atlantic Centre and aired on CBC Newsworld in 2008, gives voice to the dilemmas felt by young Afghan-Canadians as they grapple with events in their homeland.
- *Hannah's Story*, also produced in our Atlantic Centre and aired by Access Alberta last year, is an engaging documentary that tells the story of an 11-year-old girl who inspires adults to make a difference by her insisting on being seen as normal although she clearly possesses an extraordinary can-do attitude.
- *Sabrina's Law*, produced in the Prairie Centre and aired last year on Global Television, follows Sabrina Shannon's parents journey as they struggle to deal with their daughter's death from complications brought about by anaphylactic shock and embark on a crusade that resulted in the creation of Sabrina's Law in Ontario.
- *Honour Thy Father*, produced in the NFB's Northwest Centre and to be aired this year on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network

(APTN), the Saskatchewan Communications Network (SCN) and CBC Winnipeg, is a documentary based on and structured around the personal experience of filmmaker Gerald Auger following his father's death and explores the chasm that exists between traditional, denominational religions and native spirituality.

- *The Big Drive* is a short animation film by award-winning Anita Lebeau from Winnipeg. It tells a story that is profoundly anchored in the experience of growing up on the Prairies. I can assure that this very particular, very regional story will travel the world. *Rose and Violet* does the same for Newfoundland and *Uncle Bob's Hospital Visit* for PEI. Incidentally, it is another animator from Winnipeg, Cordell Barker who is taking Canada to Cannes film festival this year.
- *Radiant City*, a film by Albertan Gary Burns, was a story that was very much set in Calgary and found audiences across Canada.

The NFB also leverages our resources to create maximum impact in local communities by fostering sustainability. For example, about four years ago we launched a short film program in the Yukon that succeeded in bolstering the community there. Two years ago we launched a pilot project with the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, the Nunavut Animation Lab, designed to develop new skills among emerging and established artists to help them tell their stories using state-of-the-art animation equipment.

We are currently undertaking a major digital project on the economic crisis which will involve filmmakers from regions across the country.

French Program

The National Film Board (NFB) maintains two French production studios outside Quebec, while the Montreal studio participates actively in production outside Montreal. French Program is consequently involved in projects across Canada, as indicated in the Annual Report on Results of the Implementation of the *Official Languages Act* published by the Film Board.² Moreover, in 2008-2009, French Program production outside Montreal yielded a widely varied number of films.

Last year, the NFB's French Program produced eight works in Ontario and Western Canada, as well as six works in Acadia, created by filmmakers of exceptional talent. For example, *360 Degrees* won the Best Short Documentary award at the 2008 Winnipeg Aboriginal Film Festival, and *The Trap* garnered the Best Acadian Short Film award at the September, 2008 International Francophone Film Festival in Acadia. In Quebec, our regional activities included a documentary co-production for Télé-Québec with Productions Nova Media in Abitibi, three documentary projects across Quebec and an interactive site on Innu culture in collaboration with the Musée de la Côte-nord (Museum of the North Shore Region) and an Aboriginal production company in Maliotenam.

In addition, the vast majority of the Film Board's mid-length and feature-length films are eventually broadcast on television, often regionally, by Radio-Canada, TFO and Canal D. For example: *Front Lines*, produced by

² The 2007-2008 report is available at http://nfb.ca/OLA41_20072008_results

the Ontario and West Studio, is a tribute to Canadian combatants in World War I, chronicling the conflict through the words of five soldiers and a nurse. It aired on Radio-Canada, RDI, TFO, CBC, CBC Newsworld and WNED Buffalo. This year, the NFB is also working on a project with the TVA Group.

The NFB also contributes to regional community life while at the same time participating in the education of our young people through its programs for emerging filmmakers. The Tremplin competition is open to emerging francophone filmmakers outside Quebec. The Engage-toi competition gives a young francophone filmmaker outside Quebec the chance to travel across Canada and make a short film each month, which is then put online. Programs such as these are vital for forging links with emerging French-speaking artists outside Quebec.

CONCLUSION

The universal nature of digital media favours the globalization of audiovisual production, distribution and public access. The new digital services, including mobile video broadcasting services and web sites catering to consumer, user-generated, audio-visual material have the potential to draw audiences and advertising revenues away from licensed Canadian television services, including local stations. As a result of the multiple distribution channels available on the Internet, Canadians are turning to foreign, often U.S. web sites because there is a deficiency of domestic choices.

We at the NFB are doing our part. In many areas we are leading the way.

But no one player can accomplish all that needs to be done on their own. We need, as an industry and in terms of public policy, to take a larger and a longer view. We need to bring public and private sector together in a partnership to craft a national digital strategy that will form the basis for the creative economies of the future and that can give local broadcasting the due that they need and deserve.

We need to ensure that Canadian audiovisual infrastructure meets the needs of today and tomorrow – local, regional and national. That means advanced digital networks, both broadband and wireless; we need rich Canadian content that is both multi-platform, cross-platform and unique creations to particular platforms; we desperately need training for new modes of production; we need to evolve business and financing models that currently remain for locked within a linear traditional mode; we need to multiply the creation of digital co-productions with regional partners; and we need to work a lot smarter at building digital brands that will capture the imagination of our regional audiences.

We can take this challenge and turn it into an unprecedented opportunity. If we dare. If we're bold enough. If we have the vision.

This concludes our presentation. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.