

# **The Community TV Trade in Canada**

**by  
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**a personal odyssey**



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Every effort has been made to recall names and facts accurately.

Any errors or omissions, and all opinions expressed, are the sole responsibility of the author.

## Part One

We drove two hundred miles to get our show on after the hockey game--the NHL game between Detroit and Montreal. The day before we'd edited the 1/4" tape in our hotel room by synchronizing two video recorders and punching in each shot manually. The title shot was a locomotive coupling to a coal train. The BANG! got your attention. The incentive for this show was to keep trains running through Canada rather than along the proposed new track through Washington State. It was 1972 and we were doing community television.

Revelstoke is a small city in south-eastern BC where a confluence of river valleys creates gentle slopes suitable for railway track. It's just east of Craigellachie where CPR owner Cornelius van Horne hammered in the golden spike. Since the railroad was first built Revelstoke has been a switchyard town, assembling trains to go up through the Rockies or down to the Coast. We were there because the mayor had told us the new railroad could change all that.

Kootenay and Elk Railway was the name of the proposed new line. The main reason it might be built was to move coal from Fernie down to Seattle for shipment to Japan. Some of the motives were economic and some were political.

The new line was one way to weaken the railway unions. We interviewed Brotherhood of Railway Engineers local president Bill King, a diesel engineer, who laid out the employment issues for us.

The mayor drew a dramatic picture of the anticipated impact on the city. We talked to shopkeepers and railroad workers. Then we took everything back to our hotel and cut it down to twenty minutes.

Peter Evans, the reporter and producer, heard about the story because he was our regional resource person in New Denver. We'd been given a federal Local Initiatives grant to bring community television to the West Kootenay, an area covering roughly 5,000 square miles in southern BC. The grant paid ten salaries for a year so we had regional offices in Grand Forks, Trail, Nelson, Castlegar and New Denver.

Our plan was to put together enough programming to justify hooking into the local cable systems, but in Revelstoke we had an issue that wouldn't wait. The closest TV station people in Revelstoke could watch was CHBC-TV in Kelowna, a hybrid broadcaster affiliated with both the CBC and CTV television networks. I phoned to see if CHBC wanted a show about the Kootenay and Elk Railway. They knew about the issue and usually had time available after the hockey game. They couldn't promise anything, but told me to go ahead and bring it in. We got in the car and started driving.

When we sat down with the station manager and the program director, everyone recognized that there was a format problem. They were using 16mm film for local news and 2" tape for network feeds, and we were using 1/4" tape.

With our tiny equipment budget we'd bought a video system from Akai that could use open reel videotape or audiotape. It was lightweight and the picture was good but there weren't very many of them in Canada. CHBC executives liked the show, they liked the idea of getting a Revelstoke audience, but they didn't think the show would stand up to broadcast. They called in their technician.

When he walked in he looked like someone who spent more time with a wrench than a soldering iron. He also looked like someone who'd been doing this for a long time. He watched the tape, rolled the vertical hold, paused it and then said it should work with an image buffer.

As it turned out CHBC was broadcasting bingo games but the cameras weren't stable enough for transmission so the picture went onto a TV that could lock onto the shaky signal, and a big broadcast camera then photographed the image on that TV. The combination of the tolerant TV with the precise camera was put into a box and the box was called an image buffer. The technician said it worked for the bingo so it should work for us, and it did.

Now we needed a hockey game that wouldn't go into overtime and again we were lucky. If you want success in life it's very important to be lucky. It was also a close game. Next followed the national commercials. Afterwards came the local commercials. Then *Kootenay and Elk Railway* came on.

After the broadcast we called the mayor of Revelstoke. He was ecstatic. He and the council had watched the show at City Hall. A TV was also set up down at the union office. We had good word of mouth and we got a big audience. Besides, people in Revelstoke like to watch hockey.

In the end no new rail line was built. The Kootenay and Elk Railway became a footnote in industrial history. Bill King was later elected to the provincial legislature where he served many years as an MLA. Coal trains still wind through the mountains from Fernie to Revelstoke, from Revelstoke to Vancouver; and years later when coal was found in north-eastern BC it was shipped to Vancouver because port facilities were already in place. Eventually a big jetty was built at Roberts Bank where today entire coal trains are unloaded as they roll through without stopping.

I'm not saying all this happened because CHBC-TV had an image buffer, and because we got a story that was too remote for anyone else, but I am saying people feel powerful when television takes them seriously. That does make a difference.

In federal legislation community TV is recognized as one of the three pillars of Canada's broadcasting system. The policy is based on the sovereignty principle: cable companies introduce American culture into Canadian cities so there should be a counterbalance to prevent our traditions from being absorbed and homogenized. Community television is simply an expansion of the National Film Board way of looking at the world, and since the early days of electronic media the National Film Board has been central to our international creative reputation.

In high school I was fascinated by audiotape recording as a technology. At the time it had been around for a little more than a decade. Later I discovered community television while a student at the University of BC when Vancouver Cablevision invited several of us to read poetry on the channel.

I remember their Cambie Street studio had just gotten a colour camera. They wanted to use it instead of their two black and white cameras. For the first fifteen minutes they zoomed slowly in to a close-up of my face and for the next fifteen minutes they zoomed slowly back out. I did my best to adjust the performance to the size of my image on the screen which I could see on the studio monitor. Of course it was live so I had no chance later to evaluate myself, but for the next week I had the odd experience of passing strangers on the street who suddenly recognized me without knowing why. Soon enough however my thirty minutes of fame evaporated.

After graduating from university I wanted a career in the movies but I didn't want to leave Canada, an irreconcilable paradox in that era. Community television showed potential as a transitional career. I recognized my role would be to help others make their shows but I had a good technical background that should only improve with experience; and the political unrest of the day meant governments were looking at alternative media as a social safety valve. There was the risk of being co-opted into a hypocrisy but there was also a good probability that the medium would succeed, this time with the ethical direction that the original developers of television had intended back in the early 30s.

Some cynics said that being on community TV was merely a chance to vent without changing anything but I doubted that. Commercial television, then and now, was the medium that had the strongest influence on which governments were elected to power. I understood Marshall McLuhan's statement, that television was a cool medium, meant that people watching it were encouraged to add their own ideas to the story; whereas film and print, hot media, were much stricter about keeping the audience close to the author. Once that premise is accepted, community TV becomes the truest form of television.

Right after university I applied for a research grant and got it. With what we learned from that project I got a local community development grant which led into a federal grant funding ten

salaries. Two were technical salaries because we had to put together our own transmitter to feed shows out onto the cable systems.

The West and East Kootenays are mountainous regions where no one can receive television over the air, neither from the nearest Canadian broadcast repeater nor from Spokane, Washington. As a result many of the Kootenay cable systems were developed as cooperatives.

Neighbours would get together, run the wire from the mountaintop down through the lanes and the homeowners would connect the wire from the lane to their houses. Then the local electrician would check the connections. I remember in the mid-50s helping my father dig the trench through our back yard so we could bury the cable line. We were very excited finally to have television.

Even after local cable became a business it was typically a one-person business and often that business was part-time. Many systems remained cooperatives. We did our first transmission from one of them at Thrums, a village outside Castlegar on the way to the Slocan Valley. We bought a channel 7 amplifier at a Vancouver electronics supply store and hooked it into the cable distribution head end. Then we hooked our video recorder to the input and played our first show, *Doukhobour History*, for the viewers there.

Doukhobours were Russian pacifists who had their way to Canada paid by Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace*. Many of them settled around Castlegar and Grand Forks. Jim Lipkovits got

permission to tape their world-famous local choir, permission that had previous been denied to national broadcasters. A local offshoot of the Doukhobours, the Sons of Freedom, was opposed to public authority to the point of blowing up schools and bridges. There was a lot of material for a good show.

Our program schedule had music from the Kootenay Valley Folk Festival. We had the local square dancers. We had hiking on Kokanee Glacier. We even had the occasional local news story.

I was driving to Nelson with Mike McMann, our camera instructor, when we picked up a hitchhiker. He was quite excited. He said he'd just been shot at. A man in a passing car had pointed a handgun at him and the next moment he heard the sound of a shot. The car drove away.

We were surprised but we didn't doubt him because some tension had developed in the area between a few long-time residents and new arrivals, many of whom were American draft dodgers avoiding the Vietnam War. The further problem was that many of our younger long-time residents were indistinguishable from recent arrivals so there was a generation gap confused by cultural assimilation along both the age and the national divides. Still we were startled to hear about a gun being fired at a human being.

We took him to the police station in Nelson to make a complaint. As we drove up he jumped in his seat and said "There's the car!" We parked behind it, took out our camera and started filming. At that

point two men walked toward us and said "Get away from that car!" One of them produced a badge.

I'm going into detail here because I think there are certain situations where it's important to have television and back then we had the only television camera in 5,000 square miles. The camera gave us a certain kind of authority, a counter-balance to other forms of authority, and having accessible institutions has a way of civilizing discussion. I identified myself as the reporter and asked about the car. I was told it was a police car.

I told the plainclothes officer our hitchhiker's story and asked if it was possible. The other officer said that if the car's automatic transmission dropped from drive into second it would backfire. He offered to show us. He drove along the street and, when the car passed us, it backfired. It sounded just like a gunshot.

We thanked the two plainclothes police for the demonstration and drove our hitchhiker to his destination. Even though no complaint was laid against the police, I never heard of anything similar reoccurring and we made a point of asking people if they'd encountered anything like that. My guess is that two new police officers thought they were doing what the community wanted, chasing away undesirables, and the next thing they knew they were embarrassed and they stopped doing it.

It seems to me particularly Canadian to show that stigma works both ways. There are two other things worth saying. Commercial news generally exaggerates the prevalence of crime because frightened people are likely to tune in to know where to avoid--generally everywhere. They're also likely to buy goods and services to protect themselves from a remote threat; and, since it's statistically rare and exotic, violent crime is exciting. Television in particular thrives on excitement but community television, television where you see your neighbourhood on the screen, has a hard time surviving on a crime diet because it just seems too silly.

Secondly, it's good to resolve things informally. A decision based on conscience rather than compulsion is more durable. Maybe that's just talk from a cold climate where people have to work together to survive, but really I suspect it's the kind of interaction that works anywhere.

Today a significant part of the population of the Slocan Valley is either the families or the descendants of the draft dodgers who came up in the 70s. Nearby live Doukhobour families who no longer fear that the Sons of Freedom will come in the night to burn their barns and houses as a blow against materialism.

I renewed our grant for a second year but by the time our next renewal was due my co-workers were rebelling against the hierarchical structure. They wanted to make the application themselves.

I felt the important thing, now that we had a slate of programs and a successful transmitter, was to convince the CRTC (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission) to grant us core funding. Whatever happened with our third grant, I would go to Ottawa to put our case before the CRTC. As it happened, the grant was turned down.

I hitchhiked from Trail to Ottawa. I recall it took five days. When I arrived I naively asked to speak to Pierre Juneau, the chairperson of the CRTC. He was busy but I was kindly invited to talk with Frank Spiller, the vice-chair and expert on community television policy. We talked for two hours.

He was aware of the West Kootenay Television experiment but only in its general outline. At the time the CRTC had no budget to travel to the regions so it was crucial for any group impacted by government regulation to come to Ottawa, a realization that determined the growth of Canada's largest cable companies. That imperative would be re-emphasized for me over subsequent decades but paradoxically I've only visited Ottawa this once. It feels like over the years I've been in steady correspondence with the CRTC but I've never been back to Ottawa.

Frank Spiller took particular pride in the Nation Film Board's Fogo Island video experiment. Since it's widely known I can summarize it briefly. Fogo Island is a small settlement off Nova Scotia well out into the Atlantic. NFB documentary producers

thought it would be better for the islanders to record what was most important to them rather than letting the interpretation be done by outsiders. NFB producers showed the islanders how to use movie equipment and then let them do their own shooting and editing.

Up to this point documentary shooting ratios were constrained by 16mm film cost. In *VTR St. Jacques* the NFB decided they had a wonderful opportunity to try out the new portable video recorders recently introduced by Sony into North America. Videotape was cheap and reusable. After residents in the Montreal suburb were trained on the camera equipment and given a few months to shoot their scenes, the NFB brought in an editing system and taught everybody how to use that. The resulting series of shows established a production principle soon to be ingrained in Canada's new community channel legislation.

The policy fundamentally was to broaden the number of people making television and, more importantly than that, help them make good television by giving them the skills to say what they intended. After going through the production experience, anyone watching television could understand how it had been made. Even those production team members who didn't shoot scenes themselves would understand the audiovisual grammar and be harder to manipulate subconsciously.

That was the great promise of video. Literacy usually didn't mean that you'd write a novel but it probably meant you'd exchange letters with your friends. You could read the deed to your house or write a

petition to your government. Media literacy had a broader social significance, a promise that remains to this day.

After leaving Ottawa and visiting Rochdale College in Toronto and Vidéographe in Montreal, I went back to Vancouver. I felt some of the problems with West Kootenay Television resulted from small towns spread over a wide area. In the city things might happen faster.

Shortly after returning to the West Coast I read an event announcement in the newspaper and went to the meeting. A new group, the Satellite Video Exchange Society, was forming to encourage international exchange of independent video. The Bronfman Foundation and the Secretary of State had funded a conference and now the group wanted to establish something more permanent.

We put the two hundred tapes from the conference into a library. Because people were always arriving from one country or another to visit and bring tapes, we called the library Video Inn. Because some of the artists were from Japan we were able to establish a relationship with Sony so we could recommend what we'd like to see in new equipment.

Because of my experience I thought we should get tapes onto the community channel but Vancouver continued to have a hypersensitivity about image quality combined with an inferiority

complex toward the commercial stations. In fact commercial stations at the time were more open to independent programming than the community channel was. One show was a notable exception--*Master of Images*, produced by Byron Black--which on one week would be polished comedy and the next week abstract to the point of inscrutability.

At Video Inn I volunteered as a technician, observing the management dynamics of a volatile group. The paradox that rises out of encouraging people to tell their own stories on television is the natural expectation of freedom to use expensive and complex video equipment. It's not a naturally profitable situation. Governments recognize their improved credibility when people participate by speaking out publicly, but they don't always like what those people say. When a media library is publicly accessible you include larger social issues that show up as education or health in provincial budgets, but that doesn't mean that everyone who walks through the door will be well-educated or mentally healthy.

Video Inn's genesis meant that it had an international outlook, and it was necessarily tied to the federal government. Soon we got our core funding from the Canada Council and that has continued to this day. I was grateful for the chance to work on some remarkable shows but after a while I realized the focus of the group was not my primary goal. I decided it was finally time to work for someone else for a paycheque.



West Kootenay Television had had money for salaries but no money for equipment. Video Inn had money for equipment and rent but any work there was strictly volunteer. During my five years at Video Inn I drove taxi part-time and gradually used up all my savings on making shows. When I got a job at the BC Ministry of Health my income immediately tripled.

I stayed there for six years and made approximately two hundred videos, a few of which are still in use. I left because the position was moved from Vancouver to Victoria and for family reasons I didn't want to go. After a short hiatus I went to Rogers Cablesystems where I worked first as a technical service representative and then as a network control technician until I was able to save enough money to finance early retirement.

During my fourth year with the provincial government I had returned to community channel volunteering. There were several factors. I recognized that production was controlled by the cable licensee but at that time the community channel was being encouraged to do more outreach, particularly in Kitsilano, the neighbourhood where I lived.

Because my job in Health was to provide social services, the staff I supported appeared from time to time on the community channel, being interviewed about a social issue or explaining a service. Health Ministry staff were also on the Knowledge Network and the commercial stations, though not as often. Sometimes I produced support footage so I learned what was expected.

Conviviality was also an incentive for me to get back into community TV. Friends who were already volunteering at the community channel recommended it to me. I liked to watch a few of the shows. They were quirky, original and well-produced. I could see that volunteers were able to originate shows and had most of the control over how they were made.

I applied to be on the volunteer waiting list. A month later I was setting up lights and coiling cables. A month after that I was shooting items, sometimes three a week. Gradually I specialized in editing until after a year I was the news magazine post-production supervisor, polishing other people's clips. Editing would be my main role over the next twelve years that I volunteered out of the Kitsilano office.

It was a welcoming environment. We were one of eleven neighbourhood offices in BC's Lower Mainland which is the area surrounding the City of Vancouver. I still have an old call sheet showing sixty-one technical volunteers and seventeen reporters for our single office. Thirty-five of the techs and twelve reporters worked on shows during the month this call sheet was in effect. There were four regularly scheduled shows with the most labour-intensive, *Freestyle*, the live news magazine, coordinated by a seven-person production team.

We were neither the smallest nor the largest office so it's a fair bet that during any month there were close to a thousand

community channel volunteers in Greater Vancouver. When I started volunteering Rogers was the cable operator after buying Premier Cablevision, which in its day had bought out Vancouver Cablevision.

There were several volunteers who were continuing with their third owner. Rogers was consolidating smaller systems all across Canada and the company naturally faced some local resentment so it was good publicity to have a popular community channel.

We had good equipment. Each neighbourhood office had two news cameras that were the same model used by NBC in the United States, one step up from the cameras used by our local CBC station. We had Chyron graphics just like NBC. No expense was spared as far as infrastructure was concerned.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, I joined just after a neighbourhood office staffing cutback. For the first few years I was there our office had one manager, though by the time all the neighbourhood offices would be shut down they were back to a manager and a coordinator.

In Canada community channels are funded by a tax on cable companies called a levy which is based on licensee subscriber revenues. At one time it was 8% of the net, then 10% of the net but generally it's been 5% of gross revenues. That's what it is today in smaller systems with fewer than 20,000 subscribers but in larger

cities the community channel gets 2% of the gross with the other 3% going to the Canadian Television Fund.

In Greater Vancouver company annual reports typically show 600,000-700,000 subscribers who pay \$30-\$60 a month, often more, for cable. If you do the arithmetic, a rough estimate gives you annual revenues around \$350 million which gives you a community channel budget of \$7 million.

That doesn't mean that each neighbourhood office had a budget exceeding half a million dollars. There were three television studios in Burnaby, Richmond and Kitsilano that absorbed a lot of that money. Nevertheless it's a reasonable guess to say each neighbourhood office could spend a quarter of a million dollars each year.

That's about \$3,000 of support per volunteer, just at the neighbourhood office level. Studio investment would multiply that figure. The CRTC specifically forbade Bureau of Broadcast Measurement ratings figures but anecdotal evidence supports an average audience of 30,000. Our reporters knew the shows were popular because they were constantly being recognized.

When I look at my volunteer call sheet I see the names of two CBC reporters, one Global reporter, a director and a technician for the *Highlander* Canada/France TV coproduction, a technician for *Stargate SG-1* and a CBC drama writer, along with several

prosperous industrial TV producers. Many people volunteered so they could build up demo reels to get paid work. A fair amount of the time they were successful. Of course the majority of people volunteered not as a career stepping stone but just for the fun of it, or to help others, or because they had a cause. And that was the way community television was intended to be.

The first community TV show I really noticed in Vancouver played music videos, a new concept at the time. The hosts were two radio disk jockeys who were tired of using a playlist from head office. They wanted to be the ones to choose the music. Some was local and some was from Europe. Today music videos are a specialty channel staple but back then the format was unique; pioneered, like so many concepts, by independent producers on the community channel.

Years later I was a fan of *EarthSeen*. Its raison d'etre was to promote environmental awareness but many shows had an outdoor adventure component. I could watch contemporary footage from many areas I wanted to hike through, shot with a lightweight camera carried in a backpack.

Several of the items I shot myself were purely visual. Glass blowing and kite festivals come to mind. Our news magazine was packaged monthly. Many shows included a seasonal item. We couldn't do breaking news but we were well-suited to larger issues that developed over time. One of these was a land use debate at the western tip of Vancouver.

In 1907 the BC government reserved land to create the University of British Columbia at Point Grey. After students made the Great Trek in 1922 to establish a campus there, part of the territory was cleared for buildings but a much larger forested area was left undeveloped. It became known as the University Endowment Lands.

The recession of the early 1980s left UBC short of money and there was a strong push to use the endowment lands for housing. Residential real estate was and still is quite valuable in the Vancouver area, and this land had the potential to be one of the most expensive neighbourhoods in the city.

On the other hand the fact this forest had been undeveloped for most of a century gave it unique value as parkland. It included the Camosun Bog, an environmentally sensitive area.

Because of heavy rainfall from the Pacific Ocean, Canada's west coast is the world's only temperate jungle. Much of the Endowment Lands already had hiking paths cut through the ferns and the trees. A seniors' group keen on keeping those trails brought the issue to our local TV office.

Their first concern was to make it widely known that planning for the housing development was already well advanced. They wanted a park and they understood that was going to be a political matter.

I put an audiocassette recorder in my pocket and walked the length of a trail with two of them while they talked. Next I edited the narrative to four minutes. Then I went out with another volunteer and shot scenes that illustrated the narrative. The item went on our news magazine.

There was enough response that a couple of months later we did a follow-up. We had space for two live interviews, 5-8 minutes long, in our one-hour show. For one of them we invited a university representative to debate with a park supporter while one of our reporters moderated the discussion. If housing was developed, UBC could use the money to keep student fees down and develop new programs. The issue had two clear sides. Our job as a broadcaster was to see that they were both represented.

Again time passed, public discussion intensified, newspapers began to cover the story; and we brought the spokespeople back for a live phone show, *Nexus*, which by then I was directing. We had a panel and a moderator and we were live for an hour. We always had calls waiting. By then people cared about the issue.

About six months after that Premier Bill Vander Zalm, the leader of BC's Social Credit party, made an announcement. Education and parks are both provincial responsibilities. Premier Vander Zalm declared that the area would be set aside for parkland and would henceforth be known as Pacific Spirit Park. It became the largest park in the Lower Mainland, half again the size of Stanley Park.

The creation of Pacific Spirit Park was the largest story I worked on in my years as a Kitsilano NTV volunteer. Several features of that experience show how community TV works.

Instead of being a life or death issue it was a quality of life issue. Those people most knowledgeable and affected were able to present differing points of view on air. They had ample television time each to make a case, and they got on screen at the moments when their arguments mattered.

As so often happens in politics, each side succeeded. The park supporters certainly felt that they won, but the University was able to argue repeatedly for increased funding and in fact it benefited in subsequent provincial budgets.

The extra Point Grey housing has instead been built closer to the city centre, and one of the attractions for buyers is that they can walk in Pacific Spirit Park. The new park continues to be a popular destination for mountain bikers, hikers, strollers walking their dogs and equestrians riding their horses. While there are inevitable conflicts no one could ever say that the park is underused. Creating it has turned out to be a popular decision.

At the time I started working for a paycheque I had an exit strategy in mind. I had been used to living frugally. If I could save enough money so that 5% of my savings equalled my annual living costs, interest payments should give me a sustainable income.

I'd be able to do volunteer work without going from grant to grant. Generally it seemed to me that the complicated process of applying and lobbying for a grant was more tedious than working at a job, and the likelihood of being paid at the end was far less certain.

I estimated that, with the advantage of compound interest, saving twenty years worth of living expenses would take ten years. In fact it took fourteen. It did however turn out to be a practical plan. At a time when the economy was again under pressure, when businesses were encouraged to be lean and mean and get more for less from each employee, I was able to retire early to live off my own income.

Shortly before I chose my retirement date two of the people working beside me were laid off. When I quit, both were offered their jobs back but one had already been hired by a video game company which, for him, was a dream come true. The other did come back and three new people were hired to replace the two of us who were gone. Experience does create efficiency, particularly in a highly specialized job.

The vice-president responsible for the layoffs was fired. As is usual with dismissed vice-presidents he left the office immediately. The senior vice-president and a security guard watched while he cleaned out his desk.

I had liked the job but I was happy to be my own boss again. I'd finished my year directing Nexus and now I was back to editing. Each year there were award competitions among community TV offices in Washington, Oregon and BC. The temptation was for each neighbourhood office to put together all-star crews to win plaques. I found myself doing final trims on what were already pretty good rough cuts. There was a potential for cliquishness.

I also volunteered to be on the board of directors of a television industry association. I had always been a joiner and I was comfortable with budgets. The association had an income because it operated a social club--a bar. After I was elected to the board I asked the manager if there was any mail I should look at. He said he was glad somebody was finally taking an interest and handed me two big garbage bags full of unopened letters.

I took two days to sort everything into three categories: the first was bills or letters; the second was bills that were overdue; and the third was overdue bills where legal action was threatened or had already commenced. I then started to deal with that last group of letters.

It took three months to get things somewhat under control. Arrears were being paid down in an orderly fashion. The association's legal standing had been reinstated. There was still a discrepancy between costs and sales that was harder to resolve.

Inventory was vanishing. More to the point, it had been that way through at least two managers and several boards of directors. It took more than a year to uncover old records buried away in boxes.

Once I had the cash register tapes I hired a good auditor who confirmed my suspicions. On his advice I consulted a lawyer who told me I had to fire the current manager. That's what I did.

The annual general meeting for the association was a week later. I was not re-elected. Some months later the now-insolvent association privatized management of the social club. All these events were emotionally volatile.

When you're working for no pay it's especially demoralizing to be fired. I spent most of the next year sticking to my old routine. I kept busy. When you're used to maintaining activities outside of work, they'll quickly expand after you've retired to fill as much of your time as you'll let them. I edited items and went to community TV parties. Then on March 11, 1997, with two dissenting opinions the CRTC removed the requirement for cable companies to offer a community channel.

That is where my story begins.

## Part Two

It's hard after more than a decade to recollect the social insecurity triggered by CRTC Decision 1997-25. In Vancouver a thousand volunteers were dismissed as ten of eleven neighbourhood offices were shut down. The lone group refusing to go quietly was the Van East neighbourhood office on Commercial Drive.

A dozen long-time volunteers there were prepared to mount a well-publicized protest if their office was closed. Rogers agreed to let them keep their camera, edit suite and other equipment; to pay office rent to the end of the lease which had another fourteen months to run; and to give the group \$10,000 in cash on the condition that it incorporate itself as a non-profit society. The result was C.M.E.S. Community Media Education Society.

Van East attracted volunteers from several offices that were being shut down. I was asked to join to handle the budget. I said I was happy to be on any committee except production, which seemed to me to be the one field where there's be no difficulty finding people. Van East had been producing several shows: news magazine *East Side Story*, interviews on *After Hours*, environmental issues on *EarthSeen*, and *Nitewatch*, a live phone-in show.

With the closure of the neighbourhood offices the remainder of the community channel schedule was filled with programs produced by Rogers, the regional cable licensee. The new network

concentrated on a few flagship shows in heavy rotation. One of the first concerns for the Van East group was getting good airtimes. In that we would not succeed.

C.M.E.S. had four committees: steering, funding, programming and law. I had to get to know all of the Van East volunteers. There were a few I'd become friendly with over the years and I'd edited a show there once when it needed to be done in a hurry but a lot of the people were new to me.

It took too long for me to realize that the funding committee was aiming high, looking for celebrity support, trying to get one big grant. We approached the Canadian Television Fund and were told it only supported projects that already had guaranteed income from a commercial broadcast licence.

We did get a Canada Council grant to pay for an artist in residence, along with equipment. The first year we were able to upgrade our edit suite and the second year we got a digital camera. Giles Chin did animation projects and worked with children's groups. We hoped the Canada Council relationship would develop into core funding but then Council policy shifted to more abstract art and the money wasn't renewed.

Foundations and government agencies hesitated to give us money because they knew that CRTC regulations required community television to be supported by the broadcast distributors. The cable levy became our funding albatross.

The law committee got to work collecting and studying every CRTC decision that might affect us. We started with 1997-25 and went back to CRTC 1991-59, the decision that continues to define what community programming is intended to accomplish when it does exist. We read the *Broadcasting Act* with special attention to the sections on community TV. We looked at how Parliament and the CRTC phrased their policies.

Several of our members wanted to find a passage in the *Broadcasting Act* that would form the basis for a lawsuit against the CRTC. For several reasons I didn't think that was a promising approach. First, in Canada you can't sue a government body without the Queen's permission. Secondly, lawsuits are much more frequent in the United States than they are in Canada (or anywhere else in the world for that matter) so the impression that you get from American TV shows that lawyers can solve all your problems doesn't work nearly so well under British common law.

In Canada even a favourable court decision is unlikely to deliver a sizeable cash award. Thirdly, while the CRTC decision appeared to contradict several goals of the *Broadcasting Act*, there was political momentum at the time to minimize government involvement almost everywhere.

It seemed to me that public support above all else was essential to create an independent participatory public access community channel. It was a political issue.

Several of us each read the *Broadcasting Act* to be clear on what its goals are. The theme of the Act is to create and maintain a unique Canadian identity. Thus we need something different from American television, otherwise we may end up with American laws and social policies. The Act recognizes that we are most likely to find what makes us different, our distinct culture, at the grassroots level where Canadians interact with the climate inside neighbourhoods, which in many cases pre-date the creation of the United States, and among cultures that did not choose to immigrate into the American dream.

During the recent era of globalization when economic evangelists were denying the necessity for nations and governments, it felt a bit anachronistic to take a stand for Canada. On the other hand many of us had spent years responding to small but devoted audiences. There was a realistic chance we could win politically.

Thanks to the weak Canadian dollar the commercial television and film industry was well-established in Vancouver. Local crews had a lot of experience and could compete for jobs against anyone in the world. Since Hollywood movies of the week and TV series hired technicians who therefore were no longer available to do training videos or documentaries, we formed a production subsidiary to generate income to support the volunteer outreach of C.M.E.S.

This new team was incorporated as ICTV Independent Community Television Co-operative. There were a couple of details that quickly limited its effectiveness in its intended role. In the bylaws there was an unalterable clause making the group not-for-profit. The goal was to prevent individuals from using publicly-financed office equipment to subsidize their private businesses but the effect was to complicate sales which are hard enough to get in the first place.

Most cooperatives charge fees to their members to pay for services or generate seed capital. This one didn't. Community TV volunteers felt that they contributed to society by working without pay. Paying for the opportunity to volunteer was further than they were prepared to go. For many it was more than they could afford.

In spite of these structural difficulties the Van East office continued to be a busy place. The office had always won a disproportionate share of awards, partly because its neighbourhood included the poorest postal code in Canada, but also because it was a multicultural area with a lot of respect for originality.

When we entered the Best of the Northwest festival during our first year *East Side Story* was declared the best newsmagazine in the Pacific Northwest, beating other shows made with paid staff. Our producers took pride in their shows. We drew courage from their optimism.



All too soon we were approaching the end of our lease. We went to negotiate a renewal. We were told the neighbourhood was booming and the rent would double. There was no point bargaining. We were simply too far apart. We started looking elsewhere.

We had some income from training outside groups. We'd done an information video on the youth program at the local community centre. We tried a viewer funding drive because that was the way Co-op Radio got donations from its listeners. We negotiated with the cablecaster for a share of the levy. Our fourteen months at Commercial Drive were almost up. At the last moment we got another \$10,000 grant from Rogers.

We had two choices. Commercial Drive had a lot of pedestrian traffic but we were at the less-travelled end. We could move to a much smaller office in the heart of the Drive or to a nearby industrial area with more than twice the space. Either location was available for the same rent we'd been paying. The larger space would have room for a studio. That appealed to our more ambitious members.

In February, 1998, we moved into our new office on East Hastings Street. Soon we passed the hundred member mark. I was a judge at the Green Extreme Film Festival which combined environmental activism with surfing and mountaineering. The first prize went to a documentary on indigenous activism.

We got occasional donations from former volunteers who were now doing commercial work. Laid-off community channel coordinators returned to do workshops and seminars. We felt we had enough momentum to approach the Vancouver Foundation, the wealthiest foundation in Canada.

One of our strengths was that we had inherited an archive of over 300 shows spanning twenty years of Vancouver history. Many Lower Mainland offices saw their tape archive go straight into the dumpster.

The tapes at the Van East office had survived. Several episodes were of enduring significance and could be rerun periodically. Others were a good source of archival footage. Lynda Leonard organized a team of volunteers to research and edit a one-hour show entitled *East Side Story 20th Anniversary* which included Rick Hanson, Bruce Erickson and other prominent Vancouver figures, along with events showing how East Vancouver had developed over the years.

The Vancouver Foundation required us to have a charitable tax number. We submitted our qualifications to the government but were told that neither C.M.E.S. nor ICTV had a charitable purpose under the definition currently in use. Other media groups had gotten their charitable tax numbers when the judging process was less restrictive. If we liked we could reapply later.

In spite of this setback we were attracting international attention. We had two volunteers from Brazil and later a delegation came from Brazil on a study tour examining how TV there could be more egalitarian. A professor from Japan visited to see if our experience would be relevant there and later sent us a copy of his book.

Closer to home we hosted a talk by a Simon Fraser University communications professor. It was enthusiastically received but we might have done better with graduate students. Our openness created a level of confusion that was very difficult to organize.

We were now a recommended referral for a nearby halfway house where people with mental illnesses were reintegrating themselves into society. Our members were supportive and everybody got along well together but a lot of energy continued to go into solving the same basic problems for new people over and over again.

As we beavered away getting our new office organized, the CRTC finally came to town. This was the opportunity we had been waiting for--several of the original members in particular--and we talked a lot about what we needed to ask. We were still optimistic that, if the CRTC realized the consequences of their 1997 decision, they would reverse it.

When we went into the hearing I learned something about my colleagues. In order to give a presentation we had to put our names

on a speakers' list. That didn't seem like it would be a deterrent to me, particularly for interviewers accustomed to talking on television; but in fact out of a dozen of us only three signed the list.

I ended up being the third to ask my question and I got a thorough cross-examination from the commissioners on commercial television practices, but not much on the role of public or community TV. I was beginning to realize that the people appointed by the Prime Minister's office to be CRTC commissioners tended not to see television first and foremost as a public service.

The panel worked as a team. There would be a sympathetic commissioner and then an intimidating commissioner. We had a member of our own group who was a forceful and passionate speaker. She got no questions. She was thanked and sat down. Our next speaker was not so direct, a little vague. He got the questions that should have gone to her.

When my turn came I no longer expected a sympathetic hearing. I stuck to facts. I kept it short. I got one hostile question where I was able to attack back. We had been given our chance to speak but I wasn't sure we'd been heard.

More worrying to me than the Commission's indifference was our own lack of depth in public debate. I knew that all the people in our group who had come down today were comfortable speaking out at meetings; but here, in front of the ones who had the power to

decide for or against their cause, they were afraid to speak. It wasn't that they had nothing to say. They were afraid.

After that day I began watching to see which of our members concentrated on working with beginners to see how new talent might develop, and which of our members were looking instead for a powerful ally who might at a stroke get for us what we needed.

In the first case I think you do get a grass-roots organization but it's not entirely natural for television which is so often celebrity-driven. Even with a strategy based on encouraging leaders of the future, it's hard to be selective when you have a volunteer open-door policy. It's a dilemma I was never able to resolve.

We did have an organizational success later in the year. We had been given one large job that had paid most of our bills for the year and the producer of that project agreed to take over the leadership of our funding committee. It was a practical move based on accomplishment. I saw our willingness to move beyond abstract planning as a sign of maturity.

We had another funding success that year. For a long time the Van East office had made a real effort to cover First Nations issues, partly because of the large Native population in East Vancouver. Patrice Leslie did four interviews on the Gustafson Lake standoff that were so popular they later ran nationally on Vision TV. Now United Native Nations had a project to train aboriginal youth in media skills and they wanted ICTV to do the television training.

It was a two-week set of workshops. It was challenging. We had some students who were exceptionally talented and others who probably should have been elsewhere. At the end of it one graduate went on to be an NFB producer, another became a CBC camera operator, several went on to do their own art or industrial videos; and the one who I thought was the most talented did one outstanding item, but ultimately she decided that raising children was her most valuable role.

Altogether we thought it was a successful undertaking. UNN agreed and at the end of the workshop we all had a big feast.

We were also involved in another indigenous situation halfway around the world. In Nigeria the Ogoni people on the Niger delta were systematically oppressed by the Nigerian government so that the oil on Ogoni land could be sold cheaply to Shell. The oil extraction methods also caused environmental problems. Ken Sera-Wiwa, a poet and popular TV soap opera producer, led the protest against the Shell giveaway. He and several other protesters were hanged.

It was a local story for us because activists in East Vancouver, including veteran *EarthSeen* producer Sid Chow Tan, had formed the Ogoni Solidarity Network. When Ken Sera-Wiwa was still alive they had been protesting at Shell gas stations to bring the issue to the attention of the North American public. We had done items on the protests for *East Side Story*, and of course *EarthSeen* gave regular coverage to the environmental side of the story. The ICTV

involvement was prominent enough that Dr. Owens Wiwa, the murdered poet's brother, visited us early in 1999 to raise awareness of the Niger Delta oil exploitation. He was interviewed on our shows.

Deciding what counts as local is a constant concern for community TV. Obviously people are aware of what happens beyond their neighbourhoods. Typically the test for grey areas is that if private broadcasters and the CBC are covering something, community TV doesn't have to. That means, for example, that a neighbourhood office will have very little interest in crime or celebrities or crime involving celebrities.

On the other hand there are many international issues where local people are heavily involved long before their elected leaders realize it's time to run to the front of the protest march. If community TV doesn't show initiative in these cases then the issues go underground and that is generally not good for anybody.

Sometimes these developing ideas will be controversial, something an advertiser would prefer to avoid, and that narrows the programming choices available to bigger broadcasters. It's always important to keep a good mix of entertainment and issues on the schedule, and to make sure local controversies get at least as much airtime as events affecting the neighbourhood from outside. Only where the goal is to homogenize potential media topics is there a motive to trivialize community TV.

We continued to believe we were entitled to a share of the cable levy. When the Concord Pacific lands were developed on the north side of False Creek a new cable company, Novus, was granted a licence to serve the area.

In fact the terms of their licence meant potentially they could serve all of Greater Vancouver. I knew that existing regulations required their system to have a community channel so I approached the general manager and offered to provide it.

He said they couldn't go that far just yet but it would certainly help them if they could demonstrate some local programming. So far they had a small subscriber base--fewer than 6,000--but they had great expectations.

We began providing shows to Novus. We received a small monthly donation which was independent of the hours of programming delivered. After six months our payment was doubled. I repeated that we were in a good position to operate their channel using the levy formula of 5% of Novus gross revenues.

Novus was currently sending the full 5% to the Canadian Television Fund so giving the money to us would be revenue-neutral for them. We'd shown we could deliver the programming. The viewers liked what they were seeing.

Novus had now moved to larger offices on West Georgia Street and had ambitious plans for expansion. The general manager asked if he could get shows more frequently and I agreed. We planned to

meet again in three months with the prospect of a more formal agreement.

ICTV began delivering shows twice as often and, as a sign of good faith, we doubled the running time for each exhibition package. We could do that because we had an archive and by now we knew what the Yaletown audience liked.

After three months I called and asked for an appointment with the general manager. I was told he was no longer with the company. I said we had payments due for contributing to the Novus community channel. I was told the company was insolvent and I should submit our claim to the bankruptcy trustee.

I went from the main Novus reception desk to their old building to pick up our tapes. I hadn't been doing the deliveries so the playback room was new to me. There were four shelves. Our tapes filled three shelves. The fourth shelf had a six-month old show from the BC Institute of Technology beside half a dozen NFB titles.

After the bankruptcy the company moved to a smaller office in an industrial neighbourhood and continued to do business as usual without having to pay any of its former creditors.

Since we had received money from the Canada Council we joined the Independent Film and Video Alliance which gave a common voice to independent art and industrial video producers. That took me back to Video Inn where I found I was one of what

they now called the Originals. The new generation at Video Inn was eager to be helpful but they continued to feel television by its very nature automatically censored artistic work. They were happy however to do technical exchanges and host ICTV screenings.

That would turn out to be a lifesaver as Shaw began cutting ICTV shows from the lineup. First to go was *Nitewatch* in a general shift away from live phone shows toward more controlled formats.

Next we were told that *East Side Story* (then in its 21st year, making it Canada's longest-running community television show) could continue only as a supplier of two-minute clips to *Plugged In*, a new series being assembled by a consortium of several cable companies. Its purpose was to deliver a news wheel to casual viewers.

There would be no time to tell a story or develop an idea. That meant *East Side Story* was off the channel. To keep the show going, we continued to produce it to tape. Each month we would put the new episode into the Vancouver Public Library and show it wherever we could find an exhibition space.

We also circulated a petition calling for a return to a participatory public access community channel. Once we had a thousand signatures our MP, Libby Davies, took it to Parliament for us. Our only chance was political. Because so many of the stories we

covered were social issues we also talked with Jenny Kwan, our MLA.

With the new millennium the CRTC returned to Vancouver. Over a week they reviewed multicultural TV, TV in the classroom, and whether the Fraser Valley could support a new private broadcaster. We attended as many hours of the hearing as we could because we continued to believe that if we wanted real community TV we would have to understand just how the CRTC works.

There was an intervention by Wally Oppal, then a BC Supreme Court judge, who praised TV for its ability to orient immigrants to the laws of their new land. Later the MP for Surrey Central spoke about the lack of TV information about society, about government, even about geography. Those are all areas where before the CRTC 1997 decision community TV would have been active.

We learned about several issues that would directly affect ICTV and that would continue to grow in importance. First, Craig and Look TV each proposed new broadcast distribution undertakings with community channels, and each was supported by numerous community groups specifically because of those community channels. Secondly, there was an intervention from New Media BC asking the CRTC for regulations to encourage activity in developing computer and game media.

Thirdly, the Commission heard more specialty channel applications, a format that was already successfully fragmenting the commercial broadcast market. Anyone listening to the whole hearing would have to anticipate the possibility that television might cease to be a mass medium.

The main decision arising from this hearing was CRTC approval for a Fraser Valley religious station with an American evangelical emphasis. It operated briefly but soon lost money, and was bought by Rogers and repurposed.

By now ICTV had become a group of people who mostly had never volunteered for either Rogers or Shaw, and that was because we had grown. Most of the former cable volunteers who had created ICTV were still with the group, coaching, instructing or doing their own projects. We had a busy office and it was a good social scene. We felt it was time to build a broader network.

We had already been in touch with NUTV at the University of Calgary, a student station that also accepted outside volunteers. We knew about Valemount in north-central BC where the geography near Mt. Robson meant their best technical strategy was to rebroadcast stations from a central transmitter after picking up what they could with their mountaintop antennas; and, since they were broadcasting anyway, they decided to offer over-the-air local community TV. We also met Cathy Edwards who was putting together a TV series on community television around the world.

Langara College was happy to host a panel discussion with some of our producers along with representatives of other groups in BC and Alberta. The two-hour discussion was condensed into a one-hour show. We still had some airtime and we needed viewers to be reminded of what community TV could be.

We kept busy. We tried to have a broad understanding of public service. I worked as a polling clerk in the November 27 federal election. Jean Chrétien was re-elected for his third consecutive majority. For the first time the Canadian Alliance dominated BC, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Our international representation expanded with the arrival of a Rwandan refugee who had lost both parents and seven brothers and sisters in the genocide. He was the sole survivor from his family. Because so much of what we did was social activism he might have thought at first we could be a source of money to help rebuild his homeland, but of course we didn't have enough money for ourselves.

I assumed like all our other volunteers he was there to learn how to operate a camera and to edit in a persuasive way, so that's what we did. He was diligent and talented but his experiences had left him with an urgency that went far beyond what we could encompass. Within a month he was speaking to small groups and within six months he was speaking to large ones. Soon he left for greater fundraising opportunities in the United States.

By now we were active with IMAGE, the Indigenous Media Arts Group, which put on an annual film and video festival. We were lucky enough to do training workshops for them that brought us some much-needed income.

Our NDP MLA, Jenny Kwan, helped us get a grant to do a business plan. The guidelines were broad enough to let us do capacity building and structural assessment. The main effect was that it got our producers away from their shows long enough to think about how our group was going to keep going.

We had had some money from workshops, some money from the Canada Council, some money from Novus and now some money from the province, but it wasn't enough to keep us in our space on Hastings Street.

We moved to a nearby side street where we had the same square footage but it was up on the third floor. Now we neither had the storefront visibility on Hastings Street nor the Commercial Drive pedestrian activity. You'd have to know exactly where we were to find us. It was not a friendly neighbourhood to walk through.

In fact we were on a prostitution stroll. The women in our group were not comfortable. The public accessibility that is the *raison d'être* of community television was gone. The group was becoming insular. The studio that was the justification for the large floor space was never built--just tape on the floor showing where the walls would go.

Our cause still had momentum, however, and ironically we began to get newspaper coverage. The city had free advertising weeklies that competed through their neighbourhood stories and each of them now did an item on us.

With Libby Davies, our NDP MP, we did a press conference that got radio and newspaper coverage, particularly in the Chinese language press. We were on CBC Radio. We were on Co-op Radio. We were in the Columbia Journal which asked if we could do a continuing column on media.

We were being interviewed by graduate students and professors. Simon Fraser University had organized a Media Democracy Day conference and we were actively involved. We handed out brochures, talked to people and sat on panels. We videotaped events and were interviewed by other groups.

After five years we were becoming thoroughly discouraged by the tight control cable companies had managed to keep over the community channel levy money. We had intervened frequently with the CRTC to point out the conflict of interest in having private companies administer public money. We had to assume we were being ignored. We wanted to do something substantial with the business plan money we'd received from the Province of BC. We put together an over-the-air community transmitter proposal and submitted it to the CRTC.

It was a hefty document. We had to do an engineering plan but more particularly we had to make a policy argument demonstrating the social benefit of our proposal.

Such an appeal to the public good is characteristic of every broadcasting application to the CRTC. If you look at the original application for CHUM, Canada's first private TV station, you can see the owners are proposing something very close to the 1991-59 community television standards.

They promise local programs delivering measurable public benefits. It was only after CHUM had been licensed and was operating that they began applying for exemptions, first to carry Canadian football, and then American football, and ultimately as many American programs as they can buy.

The difference in our case was that we had already spent years doing what we said we were going to do, and our constitution included a clause preventing anyone using our organization for profit. We wanted a poison pill so that our licence could never be bought or sold.

By now none of our shows was on the community channel. By now everything being broadcast was either a cable company show or a private production promoting goods and services.

After a year the CRTC ruled against our transmitter application, saying that the city of Vancouver already had too many over-the-air stations.



Having no outlet was hard on our group. *After Hours* was the last public access show to be taken off the channel. Some of our members thought we should be more commercial, looking for sponsors or advertisers. Others thought we should be more aggressive, supporting activists no matter how extreme. Positions were starting to harden. We were developing factions.

On the other hand we were much more sophisticated politically than we had been when we started. We had a relationship with our representatives at every level of government. At every opportunity we intervened with the CRTC about community channel policy. We had meetings with the CRTC's executive director in Vancouver to see whether we could compel the cable operator to carry our shows, and later she came to speak to our membership and answer their questions.

When there was a call for comments on community television, CRTC 2001-129, we mobilized everyone we could find to write in and tell their friends to do the same. The CRTC got 221 letters from concerned Canadians.

At the same time Parliament's Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage was in Vancouver as part of a cross-Canada tour to examine the entire broadcasting system. In Cabinet, Heritage is the ministry responsible for the CRTC, the Canada Council, the CBC and all things uniquely Canadian. After I spoke in front of the Committee I was asked questions by MPs from each of our political

parties. The Bloc Québécois was particularly interested in our relationship with FedeTVC, le fédration de télévision communautaire autonome du Québec. For years our two groups had been cooperating on policy issues so that was good.

My presentation stuck to the themes of participation, independence and public access; and, above all, the importance of effective regulation. Liberal and NDP MPs asked me good questions on technology or policy and several of my answers eventually made it into the Committee's final report, *Our Cultural Sovereignty*, often called the Lincoln Report after the Committee Chair, Liberal MP Clifford Lincoln.

I was particularly heartened by the comment from Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance Vice-Chair Jim Abbott representing Kootenay-Columbia, a familiar riding from my days with West Kootenay. Revelstoke, the city where we made *Kootenay and Elk Railway*, is in Kootenay-Columbia.

I remember Jim Abbott said there were several points on which I might expect he would disagree with me, but there was one area where he was in total agreement and that was the importance of independence. That was all he said.

He spoke to make me comfortable, not to score a debating point. In fact what impressed me most about the Heritage Committee was how disciplined and efficient it was; how members of all parties

worked together according to individual knowledge rather than political allegiance; and how civil it all was.

On our side we had street protesters who'd been arrested. On their side were faces I'd seen shouting abuse in Question Period; but here I felt there was a genuine effort on all sides to understand the situation by people who knew they would be accountable to the electorate and to history.

I was in an optimistic mood after the hearings. I felt we had been well-prepared and that questions had been answered. The weeks that followed were an anti-climax. We still produced clips for *East Side Story* and planned policy through the Independent Film and Video Alliance. One of our First Nations video students had gone on to the National Film Board. Now we were able to go and see her show at the Pacific Cinematheque.

Phoenix-like Novus had risen again from the ashes of its bankruptcy. The former owners continued to work there as employees. When our shows were airing those managers had been part of the company but they had only a vague idea of what the community channel was expected to be, beyond the fact that they had to have one. To demonstrate good intentions they hired a series of coordinators but each time we talked to their latest employee it was as if the wheel was being re-invented.

It's not that our meetings didn't go well but after the talk there was no action at all. After several years Novus was still a small system. One thing I always had recognized was that, as long as the community channel budget was a percentage of cable company general revenue, it was important for cable revenue to be substantial. In the case of Novus it didn't look like that would happen.

We had no airtime on the community channel. One of our directors was homeless although, to be fair, she had already been homeless when she started volunteering. We were close to being homeless ourselves. We knew that our rent money would run out in a very few months. We were looking for new ways to exhibit our programs so we were delighted when Alex MacKenzie at the Blinding Light Cinema offered to put us on the schedule.

From our perspective the night was a big success. We came close to filling the theatre and the quality of our audience was most encouraging. We attracted a good percentage of local politicians, community activists and filmmakers. They supported our cause and they wanted to see what we'd been doing. It was revitalizing.

We were getting verbal support but it wasn't translating into funding. Our annual general meeting was dispirited, acrimonious on occasion, and the new directors understood that they might have to preside over an orderly dissolution of the society.

That was our situation in early October when the CRTC released its new decision on community channel policy, Public Notice CRTC 2002-61. We read it eagerly and were not disappointed. The first thing we saw was that we now had the right to have our shows on the community channel and that right was going to be enforced.

Secondly, if the broadcast distribution undertaking (a clumsy phrase normally shortened to BDU) refused to provide a community channel, then a not-for-profit group could apply to operate a community channel on that BDU system and--most importantly--the not-for-profit group would get the 5% (2% in cities) of gross BDU revenue levy money.

We were delighted. When we appeared at Media Democracy Day later that month we were the centre of attention. We were a success story. We had understood from the beginning that we needed a new law and now we had it. The cynics were wrong. Our political system worked.

### Part Three

That day I had two memorable conversations. One was with Herschel Hardin who had written *Closed Circuits*, a book about his attempt to establish independent community television in the 1970s. It's an important book so I'll summarize it briefly. In Victoria the owner wanted to sell the system. Herschel was able to put together enough financing so that his group, the Capital City Cable Cooperative, was able to make the highest bid for the entire Victoria cable network.

The owner said he'd prefer to accept a lower bid in order to prevent the system from being sold to a cooperative. In defiance of traditional economics he was prepared to suffer a cash penalty to remain true to his market ideology.

Herschel appealed to the CRTC for a public hearing. The CRTC said the licence was private property and the owner could sell to whomever he wished. Herschel, thoroughly disillusioned, returned the money he'd raised and published his book as a warning against trusting the CRTC.

He was happy that now we had a good policy, as far as it went, but he had continuing doubts wherever the CRTC was concerned that things would really work out in the end.

My second conversation was with a member of the board of the Vancouver Public Library. She knew our history. She knew we'd

worked with many community groups. She wondered if there was any way that the interests of our two organizations could be coordinated. It was just a preliminary question but in the years to come it would show increasing promise.

That spring we wrote another letter with long-term consequences. The cable companies were getting into the telephone business by installing cellular networks so Telus decided it would follow Bell's example and start offering TV distribution.

I didn't think we should automatically oppose every corporate initiative so we wrote a letter of support for Telus with the provision that the Telus community channel would be independent of the company. It would be our first chance to test the independent licensing clause in CRTC Broadcasting Decision 2002-61

Telus quickly replied to the CRTC saying that it had not proposed to provide community programming as part of its application, and thanked us for our intervention. There the matter would sit for the next two years.

We were continuing to intervene in other CRTC hearings, particularly anything to do with digital television, since at first glance it might appear that community channels can be supplanted by the Internet. We were putting some of our items on the Internet and we could see that narrowcasting was fragmenting audiences. We wanted to keep a system that had already shown, within a local context, that it could attract a general audience.

I was now into my seventh year with C.M.E.S. I had accomplished what I'd set out to do at that first meeting and I was prepared to pass on the torch. We were guaranteed four hours a week on the community channel and that guarantee was being honoured. There were glitches in the system but the producers of the shows were handling those. Other society directors found us space in the old Co-op Radio building and we moved there. Things were managing without me.

I still came by to help out. I wired the edit bay in its new location. I was corresponding with Andre Desrochers at CTGC community TV in Chateauguay, south of Montreal. We wanted national teamwork. I was invited to participate in the UNESCO World Symposium on the Information Society where we discussed Canada's requirement for Internet bandwidth.

At that time the debate was between 800 Kbps to handle business text or 1.4Mbps for still pictures. 3 Mbps was the extreme high side being considered.

The example I gave was from twenty-five years earlier back when I still subscribed to American Cinematographer. Disney wanted to clean its *Snow White* negative and the Cray supercomputers at the Pasadena Jet Propulsion Laboratory were available. The negative was digitized, scratches were taken out, and the image was transferred back to 35mm negative with no loss of resolution. The memory required was three terabytes.

If we were handling terabytes, not megabytes, a quarter of a century ago, I said we should anticipate as much capacity as possible. We wanted to use the Internet for more than just financial statements. ICTV was already streaming moving images in little boxes. We might not need theatrical bandwidth but we were going to need more than was being proposed. The report went off to Geneva, Switzerland, and I went back to the office.

We had a detailed agreement with Shaw explaining what support we could expect from them to produce and exhibit our shows. Once again we negotiated unsuccessfully for a direct share of the levy money. Sometimes compliance with the services we had been granted was half-hearted.

For example *EarthSeen* was given three hours of editing time from 7:00 am to 10:00 am, a bit early, particularly since the door to the building didn't open til 9:00. You can't edit much in an hour. We also had a show taken off the air when an author doing a book reading at the Vancouver Public Library was taped calling the United States a rogue nation.

We went to the director of the local CRTC office and asked whether our shows could be censored for commercial purposes. At the time the cable company was trying to sell its holdings in the United States.

The CRTC director set up a meeting between Shaw's program director and ourselves. While we were waiting, she read us the relevant Broadcast Distribution Regulation which said in a nutshell that the BDU could do whatever it wanted.

We said that CRTC policy specified certain access standards. We were told that policies were advisory, and only Broadcast Distribution Regulations were law; yet another detail we were learning.

After twenty minutes the Shaw representative still hadn't shown up. Finally the CRTC director phoned. The Shaw manager had been waiting for us to come there.

It was an understandable misconception about status. The manager apologized. We rescheduled for the following week.

In that week Michael Lithgow looked up the pertinent Broadcast Distribution Regulation and learned that the CRTC director had read only the first paragraph to us. There were two more paragraphs that buttressed our own position.

At our next meeting we were well-prepared. Shaw's program manager was repentant, particularly when the CRTC director learned that all our shows were prefaced with this message: "The following program does not express the views of Shaw. It is being shown to fulfill a CRTC requirement."

We got a key card to get into the building early. In fact we got cards for each of the *EarthSeen* producers. We got access to a field kit with a full set of microphones and no broken lights. We got a new prime time slot. The program that had been censored was shown.

A year later the CRTC Vancouver Director retired. She wasn't replaced.

After more than twenty years I became involved again with Video Inn. The entire board of directors had resigned because it looked like they'd be more than a hundred thousand dollars over budget. The staff asked one of the original members if she could form a new board and I was asked to join.

I think we were expected to sit quietly and take the blame for the previous administration but in fact by reducing certain programs and delaying hiring we cut costs by 20% and came close to breaking even.

Video Inn had been operating as a collective and the opinion of the paid staff was that the Board of Directors was a formality which should never interfere with the decisions of the workers. I had been one of the people who wrote the constitution at the time the Satellite Video Exchange Society (Video Inn's legal name) was incorporated.

I found our original constitution in the filing cabinet and then looked for any amendments during the years I'd been away. There

had been some changes but nothing affecting the relevant clauses: the board was empowered to hire staff and the staff served at the pleasure of the board.

At our next joint meeting of the board and the collective we had a lively discussion about our constitution and the benefits of being incorporated as a society. Those employees who felt this new direction, this hands-on approach by the board, was not progressive voluntarily left the organization. Our costs went down. We hadn't had to fire anyone.

I was the treasurer and it was a big job. We were all volunteers but we had eight paid staff, commercial property rent payments and significant hardware costs. We also had a group of artists who preferred not to spend time analysing money.

That was okay. The second year we were able to hire again, start new programs and normalize the fiscal year. Our credit union saw us as a good risk and we had a chance to buy a new office, formerly a professional recording studio. Ultimately we didn't buy because the group chose to stay on the east side of the city but at least we had options.

There was some interaction between ICTV and Video Inn but it was limited, primarily because ICTV saw Video Inn members as artists rather than activists. In fact Video Inn began a social action organization and art is typically driven by the need for change, but the divide was probably cultural rather than logical.

On the other hand everyone at Video Inn had to work on grant applications and that was seen as a specialized task at ICTV. One reason is that foundations receiving ICTV applications often asked why the BDU levy wasn't being used to support ICTV, and of course that is what should have been happening.

As Vancouver concentrated on revitalizing the Downtown Eastside, ICTV and Video Inn joined other groups redeveloping public space in the old Woodward's building. We worked together because ICTV had the street credibility and Video Inn had the money. It was a big project combining market housing, low-cost housing and office space for community groups. ICTV already had a studio plan from our broadcast transmitter application. We delivered it to the architect and it became part of the plan.

With the Woodward's project one of many signs that independent media groups were starting to work together, we settled into a routine. Korean administrators setting up community television in that country visited us. Another federal election had been called in Canada. I went to an all-candidates meeting and queried two of our incumbent MPs about community channel policy.

June 28, 2004, brought in Paul Martin's minority Liberal government. The Alliance had been merged with the smaller Conservative party and Stephen Harper was now the leader. The Bloc Quebecois showed the biggest jump, up 40%, responding to the sponsorship scandal. The NDP showed the biggest increase in

popular vote, up 7%, compared to drops for both the Conservatives and Liberals, but NDP tacticians were unable to translate the public support into parliamentary seats.

155 seats were needed to govern. The Liberals had 135 and the NDP 19, one short of a working coalition. Nonetheless Paul Martin would be Prime Minister for the next two years.

There was one development that caught my eye. Two years had passed since Telus applied to the CRTC to offer television over its telephone system. We had supported their application, contingent on the community channel being licensed independently. Telus affirmed it did not plan to offer a community channel. The CRTC awarded Telus a BDU licence.

Telus was now starting to roll out its service. I went to our local CRTC office and told the information officer that our society was going to apply to provide a community channel for the new Telus service. He said, "If you do that, you'll get the levy money." "I know," I said. He said, "They'll go through the roof."

I asked him if he'd accept our application forms. I pointed out that CRTC 2002-61 provided for exactly this situation and I wouldn't like to believe it was an idle promise. He stamped our application as received and promised that it would be delivered to Ottawa.

A week later we got a parcel in the mail. The CRTC in Ottawa had returned our documents with a note that they only accepted applications submitted electronically. More particularly they required them to be encoded using a security protocol with a particular Windows program that wouldn't run on my Macintosh.

One good thing about our local CRTC office was that they had a public computer in their research room so citizens could look up decisions electronically. I tried to submit our application on that but the security code wouldn't work--too public.

At that point I asked another information officer for help. It was approaching the end of the work day so she asked me to come back in the morning. I was happy to do that.

I was back there when the office opened. First she tried the public computer to make sure I hadn't overlooked something. Then she tried her own computer but security wouldn't recognize it because she was on a network. She tried her boss's computer but it was connected to the same network. She called Ottawa to have her computer taken off the network and that was successful.

I had all the required documents saved as rich text or as PDFs so it was easy to transfer them to her hard drive. The last hurdle was that we manually had to enter three pages of corporate description--address, officers, more addresses, dates--and it had to be entered line by line.

After she finished typing everything and attached all the documents, she entered "Send". A failure message immediately appeared and all her typing was erased.

She was not a fast typist but by now she was getting determined. All the data was typed again. She double-checked that all the boxes were filled accurately. She opened all the menus to see whether she'd overlooked any instructions. The "Send" button was highlighted. She pushed "Enter" and again everything was erased.

She phoned Ottawa. Reception there transferred her to an information officer. She explained the problem. She was advised to contact her local CRTC office. She said, "I am the local CRTC office!"

There was a pause. The person on the other end asked if he could get back to her. Fifteen minutes later he did. Technical service in Ottawa was on the other line and would wait while we typed everything in again. After a further fifteen minutes we were ready for another try.

All the data was complete and the "Send" button was lit. She pushed "Enter". Nothing happened. She pushed it again. Nothing happened. Her frustration was palpable.

Earlier she'd used the mouse to click the "Send" button but everything had been erased. Now she tried clicking again. Finally this time it worked. Moments later Ottawa said it had the application.



We were both delighted. We had developed the kind of camaraderie that comes from a shared ordeal. She gave me her card and asked me to call her if I had any other complications. As it turned out complications in the next phase would be political, not technical, and there was no need to take her up on her offer.

Three months went by during which we had another federal election. Stephen Harper was now the Prime Minister with a minority Conservative government.

Eleven days later in Seattle the World Trade Organization met amid heavy protests, the Battle in Seattle. Network television emphasized the rioting and violence. Two days later ICTV was handed video shot by the protesters. ICTV news stories about the event gave time to the issues that had led to the protests.

On December 20th the CRTC emailed C.M.E.S. a letter demanding a formal agreement with Telus before our application could proceed. If we could not reach an agreement by January 4th our application would be returned to us yet again.

Of course this was the two-week period surrounding Christmas and New Year's Day, not the most convenient time to schedule negotiations.

I was out of town visiting my in-laws as I usually did over Christmas, but I was able to check emails on my nephew's computer. The files for our application were back in Vancouver but, as so often happens in these situations, adrenalin took over.

I read the email at lunchtime and by the afternoon I'd written a three-page reply. I wasn't going to send it right away. I wasn't going to pester Telus over Christmas. I wasn't going to insult the official at the CRTC, tempting though that was.

I was being asked for our formal agreement with Telus. My reply was that the agreement was the original Telus letter saying that they had not proposed to provide community programming as part of their application.

I was being asked whether Telus had informed me when they planned to begin operations. Global TV had reported Telus was already selling TV services to Edmonton subscribers and would be available in Vancouver in six months. The CRTC should know better than we could whether that story was correct. That was my answer.

I asked for a two-month extension on the CRTC deadline. Nobody replied to say that it hadn't been granted, so early in the New Year I wrote to Telus. Two weeks later I had a reply saying the Telus executive was out of the country but would respond on his return. I let the CRTC know. A month after that we were invited to start talking with Telus.

Before that meeting could happen, however, Telus decided it might choose to produce its own community programming. I thought the syntax was revealing. Rather than operate a channel to encourage volunteer participation they thought first about producing

their own programming; but, to be fair, that's what all the other BDUs were doing by then and Telus said as much.

There things sat for a further six months. The following December, at the beginning of the month this time, the CRTC copied us on a message they had sent to Telus, asking Telus if and when it would offer a community channel and how C.M.E.S. would be involved. For the first time in a year we were getting support from the CRTC.

Telus replied promptly and their response was admirably direct. They were going to operate their own channel, it would be truly unique and they intended to keep all the levy money. The CRTC wrote to say it would keep our application on file pending receipt of a proposal from Telus.

A further six months went by. Suddenly we were copied on a Telus reply to the CRTC updating their community channel proposal. It continued to be vibrant and compelling but indefinite, unlike our own detailed plan. Six weeks later I got a phone call saying the C.M.E.S. application would be going before a CRTC public hearing in Kelowna.

That got Telus moving. Our hearing was scheduled for October 30th. Their competing application was submitted on October 5th. Along with it came a letter objecting to our application being heard at all, accurately observing that other BDUs had unquestioned control over the community channels on their own systems.

Because it was only five days before our hearing we expected to attract a lot of interest at the annual Media Democracy Day. This year instead of being at the public library it was at the SFU downtown campus. It didn't seem as busy but we still enjoyed the day, seeing old friends and making new ones.

The following Monday we were in our rented car on the road to Kelowna. Just as we were passing through Chilliwack on the freeway my cellphone rang. It was the audiovisual company associated with the CRTC. They wanted to know if we intended to book our video playback through them. They were already setting up equipment for the other presenters. Because all of us would be getting a bulk discount, our share would be only a thousand dollars.

We were startled. First of all, we had assumed that the CRTC would have its own DVD player. We could have brought one but now we were already on the road. Secondly, when I worked for the Ministry of Health I had set up audiovisual equipment for a lot of conferences and a thousand dollars seemed high for that service, let alone one thousand dollars per presenter.

The salesperson was on the phone and at a hundred kilometers an hour we had to make a decision. There was only one answer. We said no. We'd find another way.

We had some snow going over the Coquihalla. It got heavy after we turned near Merritt and the traffic, the little of it that there was,

crawled down the long hill to Lake Okanagan. We got to our motel just before 9:00 pm. By 9:30 we were doing a final polish on our presentation. We felt confident and were in bed by midnight for the big day tomorrow.

The hearing convened at 9:30 am. We went to the clerk to learn when we were scheduled. First the Commission had to hear competing applications for Kelowna's new commercial radio licence. That was the main order of business. The clerk hoped we might be heard by the end of the week but she couldn't promise anything.

Again our plans would be changed. Our motel was reserved just for two days. Our car was rented for three. We had an intervener supporting us who'd taken the day off work to drive up from Vancouver.

On the bright side we had time now to rent our own playback equipment and that meant we'd be able to show our community TV demo reel. It also meant we'd be able to attend the various hearings and get a sense of how the Commissioners were questioning other people. It had taken years to get to this point. We could afford another week.

On the second day, when I arrived to listen to the other presenters, the clerk had a helpful tip. The expensive audiovisual system had been trucked up from Vancouver but the hearings were

taking place in a hotel and most hotels have their own audiovisual equipment. She had been asking around and now had a business card for me.

I'd already called some local A/V companies so I knew the local prices and the hotel was competitive. We agreed to pay \$85. The hotel technician would set up the equipment and play our tape. That was one problem taken care of.

Each morning I went to the clerk to see how the schedule was progressing. On Wednesday there was a possibility we might be heard Friday afternoon. Thursday morning there was suddenly a chance we could be heard late that afternoon; and that's what happened.

Our hearing began on November 1st, 2007, almost eleven years after Rogers shut down the Kitsilano Neighbourhood TV office where I had been volunteering for twelve years. The speed would have been called glacial in the old days before global warming. We had been persistent, however, and now we hoped to grab the moment.

Brock MacLachlan spoke first about our history and the importance of regulation for community television. Lynda Leonard showed a compilation of community programming, past and present. I concluded with a technical outline and personnel requirements for strong local production.

The first questions from the Commission were to discover whether residents outside the big cities would have real influence and of course we intended that they would. We already had several letters of support from people in small towns, along with mayoral letters from middle-sized cities like Prince George and Medicine Hat.

We were asked if people from distant communities would be on our board of directors. I said yes. Lynda was asked whether we would still proceed if the licence was divided between BC and Alberta. She said yes.

Our business plan was examined. Brock pointed out that, since core funding necessarily accompanied the licence, we would be far more appealing to foundations providing grants for social initiatives. The independent licence would have a multiplier effect.

I said we would avoid advertising because that would compete unfairly with commercial TV stations. The levy money would be a stable revenue source.

Would we be able to guarantee that 60% of the exhibition schedule in each town was made in that town? No, not with a one-day-a-week outreach coordinator, unless the schedule was one or two shows in constant rotation; but other BDUs had nothing local in any of the small towns where they exhibited. We could gather locally-produced shows throughout a region and exhibit them across that region.

We were facing a difference of opinion over what constituted local access. The next question was whether we could provide anything that a profit-based corporation wouldn't. In the words of Commissioner Ronald Williams, "What makes you better than that?"

Plainly we were into the adversarial part of the cross-examination. In case there was any doubt, Commissioner Williams then said he had trouble reconciling the idea of people in big cities making all the decisions for people in small communities throughout two provinces.

That was exactly the opposite of what we had proposed, but it sounded like it was going to be the argument that would be used to decide against us.

I had to rebut him emphatically. I believed that people in small towns would be more enthusiastic than in the cities, and they would drive the development of the channel. I pointed out that we were fighting against people who centralized everything. I hoped my argument would make it into the decision.

Next the chairperson questioned us about membership. Lynda talked about shows we could rely on that were already being produced. She was asked whether the BDU didn't have the right to filter programming. Lynda answered that shows should follow CRTC guidelines and community programming shouldn't be filtered to target a commercially-defined demographic.

Next we were asked how we knew, without paying for a survey, that people in the towns in our licence area really wanted community television. It turned out the question was really to determine whether we had the kind of money to deliver the show quality the Commissioner assumed community TV viewers wanted. After our years of making shows where the cash unique to a particular episode was seldom as much as a hundred dollars. it seemed like an odd question.

It was also our last question. Our two supporting interveners had been unable to stay during the week to speak for us. All that was left was the opposing intervention from Telus.

Telus' Director of Broadcast Regulation took pains from the beginning to dissociate her company from the community channel practices of other BDUs. Telus for its part strongly supported community television and their video-on-demand service had many innovative features. As the description became fulsome the CRTC chairperson reminded the Telus director that her comments had to be about our application, not her own.

The main argument from Telus was that, since it was now willing to offer a community channel, section 29 of the Broadcast Regulations meant that the Commission had no authority in Telus' view to licence C.M.E.S. as a community-based service to be funded and carried by Telus.

It was our turn now to reply to Telus. Brock said he didn't understand why commercial TV had to dominate every square inch of the media. Lynda reminded the commissioners of a show Shaw wouldn't run because it included a glee club of former Telus and BC Tel employees, and that was promoting the competition. Why should publicly-funded community television be so closely tied to corporate brands?

I reminded the Commission of the success of independent community television in Quebec. Here we had developed our proposal over several years and only now, after we had forced the issue, was Telus coming forward. As far as BDUs being better financed to spend above the levy, in the early years at least, that looked to me like private control over the public podium.

That was it. It was over. The Commission continued on to the Jim Pattison Broadcast Group which was hoping to get a Kelowna radio licence, and we went to a local independent coffee shop where we could decompress and think about what had just happened.

We'd done our best. We knew that the questions about centralizing everything in big cities and paying for the channel ourselves if the levy was suspended could be used against us; but we had replied to those objections and then reiterated our replies. Our position was clear, assuming our answers remained in context, and we had to hope that that wouldn't be too big an assumption.

A month ago we'd felt like it was a success just to be heard. Now we felt like we really had a chance.

We went back to the hotel to return the rented DVD player and TV to the A/V coordinator. When I took out my wallet he said there was no charge. There had been a minor glitch at the start of the playback, nothing serious, but for him that was enough to cancel the fee. Besides, he believed in what we were doing.

One more nice thing in a good day. I have always known there are a lot of people who believe in what we do. When Jane Jacobs says there is an essential ethical divide between people who do commercial work and those other people who work in the public interest, she solves a dilemma that puzzled me for a long time. How do you recognize the moment when a profit becomes a bribe? How do you quantify externalities, the things people do with no hope of payment? In fact we've all been in situations where the mention of money is offensive. No one wants to be poor but, once we have enough, everything after that can be free if you want it to be. I think that's what a lot of people expect.

We paid our somewhat larger motel bill, drove home to Alberta and returned the car, and settled back into the familiar routine. Andre Desrochers from CTGC in Chateauguay came out to shoot some video around the Talking Stones south of Calgary, so we each had a chance to practice an unfamiliar official language.

I was interviewed for a feature in one of the weekly entertainment papers. One of the dailies had a business story saying Shaw had made an offer to buy out the Campbell River Television Association but the CRTC annual general meeting had voted in no uncertain terms to refuse any initiatives in that direction so we decided mistakenly we had nothing to worry about there.

On January 30th, 2008, just within the ninety days allowed, we received the CRTC's verdict. In Broadcasting Decision 2008-19 our application was denied.

It was acknowledged there had been numerous interventions supporting us. The Commission was satisfied we were structured for community input but doubted that would be practical in fourteen centres throughout BC and Alberta.

In particular, since our budget was based on the Telus budget, the Commission doubted we had enough resources of our own to continue to provide service if Telus revenues fell short of expectations--those same expectations that had justified the licence Telus itself had been granted.

In other words we were entitled to the levy money only if we didn't need it. It was also pointed out that we were refusing to put advertising on the community channel.

Thirdly, the Commission took the position that regional distribution of local production did not qualify as local access. I

could see during our examination in Kelowna that the questioning was being slanted in that direction. The first time I was asked I took the position that centralized distribution was the only practical solution, at least while the channel was starting up.

The follow-up question made it clear we were being painted as the big cities preaching to the smaller towns. During the rest of our questioning I emphasized over and over again that in fact I expected the smaller centres to be much more involved than the cities. My exact words were that we hoped to have no centralized programming.

Those corrections did not make it into the decision. I did say that a show made in Terrace would be distributed to Lethbridge and vice versa. In fact it's not difficult to customize a schedule for a small region or even for neighbourhoods within a municipality.

The Commission continued to take the position that 60% of the schedule had to be produced in Lethbridge and distributed from Lethbridge, and we all knew that Telus didn't have the subscriber base for that to happen.

It wasn't a huge surprise. We'd all read *Closed Circuits* and there was little reason to believe that the underlying assumptions had changed. Back then Victoria's cooperative had had the money and still been rejected. We had the street credibility from our access shows (which is why so many people intervened in our behalf) yet we were still turned down for not being local enough.

At least we had managed to test the sincerity of the provision in 2002-61 to fund an independent community channel. For the time being that would have to be enough.

In May I got a call from a reporter at the *Globe and Mail*. We were finally going to get national newspaper coverage. The headline was "Is community TV facing its Waterloo?"--not quite the story I wanted to tell but, at the same time, not an unreasonable question to be asking. Those of us being interviewed for the article managed to make two important points.

One is that it's important for the community channel to be somewhere it can be found easily, usually low on the dial among the popular commercial stations. The other point is that the Internet is not going to replace the community channel. If you want something to be local, the Internet is not the model that you want.

In June Calgary's *Fast Forward* entertainment weekly ran a community TV cover story entitled "Fade to Black". There was a theme emerging here and it wasn't exactly what we'd been hoping for.

Things were also changing in Campbell River. On the pretext of increasing competition the CRTC licensed Shaw in April to overwire the territory served by Campbell River TV.

Shaw immediately offered to buy the CRTV assets. At the previous CRTV AGM the membership had charged the board of directors not to sell and instead to develop the services offered by

the association. Now the CRTC was letting them know that they wouldn't be able to get away with that.

In July CRTV had a special general meeting to sell to Shaw. It failed to gain a majority so on August 23rd the Board of Directors convened another special general meeting. Originally the requirement had been that 75% of the 13,000 Campbell River TV Association members would have to approve any sale of CRTV assets. Now the bylaw would be changed to 75% of members actually voting in person or by proxy.

More particularly, the bylaw change itself would be approved by that smaller group. If the sale went through, there would be a direct payment of \$3,000 to each member of the Association.

The process had several anomalies. Not-for-profit association members were benefiting personally as if they had invested in a private corporation. The monthly cost for cable service in Campbell River was far less than in the cities licensed to the big companies. In spite of the marketing implication the deal was tempting because increased costs were in the future and the purchase payment was now.

Campbell River residents opposed to the sale appealed to the CRTC and also questioned the legality of the sale under the BC Societies Act. The BC Registrar of Companies said they did not have the staff to express an opinion. The CRTC said the sale could proceed by administrative approval rather than by public hearing as

long as no public policy issues were involved. The only appeal would be to the Governor in Council -- in other words, the Prime Minister's office.

Undeterred, CRTV members opposed to the sale persuaded the CRTC to hold a hearing in Gatineau, Quebec. It was scheduled first for November 13th, and then the date was extended to December 8th after a heavy volume of letters. Meanwhile Shaw threatened CRTV with a lawsuit over misuse of digital TV signals.

Letters came not just from Campbell River but from people across Canada, including members of the original NFB Challenge for Change program who were concerned about the direction community TV was headed. Campbell River had always encouraged strong participation on the community channel. It seemed likely now that community programs would be made for them.

Finally on January 20th, 2009, the CRTC approved Shaw's application to buy CRTV. No interveners were able to appear and the decision took only a few minutes. There were fourteen other applications to get through on the same agenda. One commissioner said that the staff briefing indicated that there was no significant opposition to the sale of CRTV.

As I write this it's spring in Calgary. The CRTC has announced it will have a general hearing about community TV in November, 2009--this autumn. There's a worldwide recession commonly blamed on lax regulators smoothing the way for big companies to



get bigger, often with other people's money. Canada's broadcasters are on the verge of bankruptcy. Canada's cable giants on the other hand continue to be very profitable.

There are more than a few hints that the CRTC looks longingly at the Internet as a convenient forum for the kind of public discussion we once saw on community TV, but it's been very hard to monetize the Internet at a personal level. The public levy on cable revenues made the community channel a social force back in the days when licensees took the regulator seriously.

Even today when a nation protects its television industry, as is done in the United States or France, television advertising is fifty times the value of Internet advertising. A lot of people may use the Internet but they don't like to pay to do it.

As a result Internet bandwidth is being throttled in favour of customers willing to pay a premium for better service. A massive protest has been mobilized against this particular tactic, but other clever strategies will follow. And, if the Internet can be turned into a profit generator, who stands most likely to benefit? In Canada at least, the cable companies.

Even though I criticize certain cable company actions, it would be a mistake to assume I demonize them. Under the regulations community TV is funded by a percentage of cable revenues; the greater the revenues, the more there is for community programming.

If the regulator lets the BDU shift money intended for public expression into its own advertising budget, blame the regulator; but we've just gone through a decade when big media have preached that government is bad and the invisible hand of the market will usher us all into Utopia. I take little satisfaction in saying it hasn't turned out that way.

If it's conservative to value individual freedom and individual expression, then community TV has always had conservative values. In publicizing the interests of society at large, community TV is liberal. As for being socially progressive, well, that's what the law says we expect from community TV.

What I do object to is weak democracy where people feel their votes don't matter and what they say makes no difference. I object when those with minority opinions are told that they've lost and that they will always lose.

I will say simply that there are a lot of things money can't buy; that it's satisfying to work with a group of people and then see our local shows side by side with popular entertainment; and that the independence of a nation, this particular nation, Canada, depends on us being recognized in our own neighbourhoods.