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PRIVATE BROADCASTERS' FIRST INTEREST IS CANADIANS

BY GLENN O'FARRELL

When future historians look back on our times, they will surely observe that private broadcasting has become the most powerful instrument of national expression available to Canadians today. Day after day, they achieve this by putting Canada first.

This is true of the lyrics and songs, news and information, fiction and non-fiction programming carried to virtually every household in the country by private broadcasters.

Canadian television consumers now have access to one of the richest and most diverse menus of programming in the world. Private broadcasters rely on the revenue they earn from airing the programs they produce and/or acquire from both domestic and foreign sources to meet their regulatory obligations and reflect the values and realities of Canadians.

Canadians expect to watch dramatic programming — but the fact is that Canadian drama is not market-sustainable. In fact, Canadian conventional broadcasters can, on average, expect to earn \$275,000 an hour on U.S. shows, while the airing of one hour of Canadian dramatic programming will typically incur a loss of \$100,000. It's no secret — revenues from U.S. programs are used to subsidize the production of Canadian programs.

Canadian drama must compete for audiences with well financed programs from south of our border and multi-faceted promotional campaigns that spill into Canada. Despite strong efforts to promote their own schedules, Canadian broadcasters must face the relentless publicity machinery for American entertainment products.

The private Canadian broadcasting system is producing as much so called "10/10 drama" as public funding can support. Canadian broadcasters now

provide close to nine hours of English-language Canadian drama and comedy programming for every hour that an English-language viewer spends in front of the television.

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Regardless of our geographical proximity to the biggest English-language entertainment producer in the world and our small domestic market, the success of Canadian drama deserves recognition. Of all viewing to Canadian drama, English-language

private television and specialty and pay broadcasters captured 79 per cent of all audiences. On the French-language side, private broadcasters captured 71 per cent of the audience. Total spending on drama by conventional television broadcasters, not counting public funding, has increased by 20 per cent between 1999 and 2002, reaching \$77 million in 2002.

The list of individual success is long and diverse. For example, *Corner Gas* has audiences of over 2.5 million viewers; at TVA, *Occupation Double* has achieved audiences of 1.9 million viewers; Global's *Train 48* is certifiably a hit; CTV has shown 30 Canadian made-for-TV movies between 1999 and 2001 that achieved over 1 million viewers; Showcase managed to reach audiences of 800,000 viewers when it aired the season 3 finale of *Trailer Park Boys* and CHUM continually invests in Canadian feature films.

Over the last 10 years, the volume of

Canadian drama produced has multiplied by a factor of 4.5. What's important to note is that at the same time, the multiplication of channels has increased viewer choice. Since 1996, the number of English and French-language services licensed by the CRTC has tripled, growing from 38 to 118 Canadian services available today, vastly expanding programming choices.

As the industry awaits the CRTC decision on English-language drama, expected to be announced at the Canadian Association of Broadcasters' 78th annual convention today, the question becomes this: how do we ensure that Canadians watch what is produced by Canadian producers, actors and creators? Because at the end of the day, it all comes down to putting audiences first. And that is putting Canada first.

GLENN O'FARRELL is the president and CEO of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters.