

Prospects for a History of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

One would be hard pressed to invent a better case study for the examination of the blessings and burdens of "total archives" than the institution of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). It is no exaggeration to describe the CBC as the most significant national cultural institution in Canada in the 20th century. Its achievements are known and admired throughout the world, and its broadcasting has stimulated great enthusiasm and sometimes considerable anger in every nook and cranny of Canada. Yet the CBC's accomplishments have not become part of Canada's collective historical consciousness in the way that one would expect. Every esoteric CBC television drama or provocative documentary seems to call the very existence of the CBC into question. The CBC has fallen into the common Canadian habit of re-justifying its rationale and re-inventing its purpose rather than building upon a tradition. Partly this is due to the ephemeral nature of broadcasting. Partly it is due to the CBC's peculiar and precarious life at the pleasure of Parliament. But in great measure it is due to the fact that the CBC has not developed a greater commitment to its own history. No lack of research money and effort has been spared by the CBC to try to know the future. However, the future has not become any clearer for all of this introspection. Perhaps more attention to the past might have been more fruitful. Thus, if I write with some urgency and personal conviction, it is because I believe that the CBC has been so important to Canada that its history ought to be more widely known and roundly celebrated; even fiercely debated and reviled; but never, never ignored! known and roundly celebrated; even fiercely debated and reviled; but never, never ignored!

The examination of CBC records in archives touches on three of the four dimensions that Terry Cook sketched in his article entitled "The Tyranny of the Medium" (*Archivaria* #9 (Winter 1979-80), pp. 141-149). First, the CBC poses a formidable records management challenge, as anyone remotely familiar with the organization can testify. Secondly, the CBC poses a considerable challenge for archival coordination because of the disparate and far-flung networks the CBC has, by its very nature, created. Thirdly, the CBC, by definition, creates records in all archival media.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT

Broadcasting agencies tend to be particularly unconcerned about maintaining a records management function. The voracious appetite of the airwaves keeps broadcasters running at a frenetic pace. Their preoccupation with tomorrow's programming precludes any concern about their past. The ephemeral nature of their product, the broadcast, encourages their indifference towards the maintaining of records. Moreover, the fact that magnetic tape, which is currently the predominant medium for broadcasting, can easily be erased and re-used, and the fact that it is economical and practical to re-use tape, further contribute to this predisposition. I speak here with some conviction and personal experience for I have been very active in my capacity as an archivist in trying to convince the broadcasting community to take greater notice of its own heritage. The Association for the Study of Canadian Radio and Television (ASCRT), with which I have been closely involved since its inception, has been an interesting experiment to bring together the creative, archival, and research communities in the domain of broadcasting. (For further information contact the Association at its office c/o Radio Drama Project, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West, Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1M8). ASCRT has made some progress, even to the point of broadcasting archives being dubbed the current fashion in the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada *Report on Canadian Archives* (p. 64) but much remains to be done. One of our projects was the joint publication with the Association of Canadian Archivists of the brochure on the preservation of broadcasting records. ("The Need for Preserving Canada's TV and Radio Programming" is currently out of print but is being considered for updating and reprinting by ASCRT). I invite and urge archivists to become

more involved in this and similar associations, and assure you that such involvement will constitute a considerable and stimulating challenge.

All that can be said about broadcasting, generally, is further complicated because the CBC is a Crown Corporation. There exists a very natural and healthy public expectation that CBC material will be carefully preserved and made accessible to the public because the CBC is a publicly supported corporation. This is a perfectly justifiable expectation. The public should indeed be able to scrutinize how wisely or foolishly their money has been spent and the preservation of archives allows for that scrutiny. However, present legislation does not require this of Crown Corporations. The legislative mandate of the Public Archives of Canada is currently being rewritten, and if it is accepted as drafted, it will bring the disposition of CBC records under the jurisdiction of the Dominion Archivist. Though this would mean that the CBC would not be permitted to destroy any records without permission of the Public Archives of Canada, they are not presently included in the Access to Information Act, which would require the CBC to make their records accessible. Also, one has to remember that the CBC itself does not own the intellectual property rights of many of the broadcasts it generates. It simply purchases a limited license from writers, actors, and freelancers. Artists jealously guard their rights to profit from future use of their work. They severely limit what the CBC can do with its programming without negotiating a further payment of fees. Moreover, the sporadic and sometimes arbitrary nature of CBC funding, tied as it is to annual parliamentary approval, has made any systematic continuing records management process most difficult to maintain. To further compound its difficulties, the CBC is physically spread over the country with a high degree of regional autonomy and loyalty. In Vancouver and Montreal the CBC more or less operate from one location but in Toronto, the major English-Language production center, the twenty or more CBC locations further frustrate any attempts at systematic records management. As one might expect all of these realities and problems greatly complicate the efficient management of CBC records. Only when archival projects can be seen to have immediate programming utility are they seriously endorsed by management.

A Corporate Archives Committee has been set up in the CBC in recent years to attempt to stimulate and coordinate archival activity. Its mandate or authority has never been made explicit and its recommendations are purely advisory. It has been organized by CBC Head Office in Ottawa and thus there is the usual skepticism and reluctance by CBC people elsewhere to have much confidence in it. As presently constituted, the committee consists of the CBC staff who manage the program archives for radio and television. Staff who maintain other records within the Corporation have had little involvement with the committee.

Despite all those difficulties and frustrations, however, dedicated and far-sighted individuals have accumulated impressive and important collections of CBC records both inside and outside the Corporation. Robin Woods has long been the archival conscience of the CBC in Toronto and began both the radio and television program archives. Bill Ross and Don Lytle of CBC Head Office have equally shown much energy in raising the archival consciousness within CBC bureaucracy and production offices. Archives at the CBC are certainly confused and chaotic for all of the reasons I have explained, but they are not nearly as scarce as they might appear at first glance. However, the challenge for archives to develop appropriate records schedules and make comprehensive selection of historical materials without duplication or neglect is daunting. Moreover, in the case of collections of CBC material held by private individuals which may be donated to archives, determining provenance will be immensely difficult. The CBC acknowledges its records management inadequacies and has attempted to redress one part of the problem by writing into its agreement with the Public Archives of Canada the requirement that a thematic guide to CBC sources be prepared and that it include descriptions of private collections. In effect, the CBC hopes to re-establish the provenance of its records through the PAC. That hope may be a fond

and pious one. For the sake of the prospective researcher, however, it had better not be totally fanciful, for otherwise some very distorted and incomplete history will emerge.

ARCHIVAL COORDINATION

The CBC has an explicit mandate to broadcast to every community in Canada and thus has developed a vast array of regional and local production units. Many of these production centers develop strong regional loyalties and insist that archival collections stay in the regions. Their antipathy to Ottawa, Toronto, or Montreal is irrespective of whether it is the CBC itself or the Public Archives of Canada that acts as the depository for archival records. Similarly, research interest for material of regional interest will be strongest in the regions. This is natural and healthy, for it is exactly this regional identity that gives the CBC its vitality and cultural importance in Canada. Nonetheless, the CBC is a federal agency and the Public Archives of Canada has some obligation and responsibility to see that CBC records are preserved. It will require considerable diplomacy and coordination to work all of this out. The agreements the CBC has already signed with the Concordia University for radio drama scripts, with York University for television drama scripts, and with the provincial archives are potential sources of contention. The CBC has been quick and eager to enter into as many agreements as possible so as to alleviate space problems that exist at virtually all of its locations. Some provinces have been quick to sign and are prepared to use provincial resources for the custody of CBC records. Others such as Alberta and British Columbia, are more hesitant. Ought the Public Archives of Canada to step into the breach? Should the archives of the third-largest production center of the CBC in Vancouver be moved to Ottawa? Or should the Public Archives of Canada develop archival operations in its regional records centers? The patch-work situation that is being created will make the work of any serious researcher and scholar investigating a comprehensive theme or question formidable, if not downright impossible.

The geography of the matter is complex in another way. Any attempt to define national and regional historical significance of CBC broadcast materials is fraught with difficulties. A delineation or jurisdiction is implicit in the CBC-PAC agreement signed in November 1981. It judges CBC's programming broadcast on the national network to be of potential national historical significance, while strictly regional activities and broadcasting would be considered outside PAC's jurisdiction. Such a distinction would be arbitrary and perhaps workable, but its consequences might not always be satisfactory. Those programs produced in the regions that were accepted for national broadcast would inevitably include much of the material of greatest interest and importance to the regions as well. Copies could, and indeed should, be kept regionally as well as nationally but that would require very close coordination so that each component of the archival network would know what the other was doing. Otherwise, we could have an incredible waste of time and money in duplicating efforts in some cases and neglecting worthy records in others. I can easily imagine a repetition of the situation in the 1940's when more than one radio station kept recordings of the speeches of F.D. Roosevelt or Winston Churchill and neglected Canadian events. Archives tend to agree that they will cooperate in coordinating information so as to avoid this type of duplication or neglect; but we will require more than good intentions to make this coordination work. Archives will have unequal resources to give to their CBC records and priorities will be constantly shifting. The Public Archives of Canada hopefully will continue to use its resources to effect this coordination, however, it has only the carrot of the laudable objective to encourage archival participation. It is incumbent upon the CBC as the donor to require of archives the necessary consultation. Otherwise, the variety of archival arrangements that the CBC has made, may indeed alleviate space problems but will disperse CBC records so effectively that no researcher, no matter how diligent or well funded, will ever be able to investigate any comprehensive theme or question.

AUDIO-VISUAL RECORDS

When it comes to the question of media archives to which Terry Cook has addressed our attention, the CBC presents a reversal of the usual pattern. The radio and television programs that are the CBC's reason for existence are, at the same time, the greatest lure for archives. Indeed, the radio and television programs themselves will have two levels of existence at archives. They are the product of the CBC and as such are essential for any study of any aspect of the CBC. At a broader level, however, the programs also register the perceptions and experiences of their day in poignant and telling fashion. Thus, they will one day be used by researchers just as virtually every researcher today uses the daily newspaper. Hence, it is appropriate that archives are not as reluctant, as they sometimes have been, to acquire audio-visual CBC records. The danger may rather be that the audio-visual records are so attractive and seem to be so distinctive that they skew usual archival practice and theory. Textual records may be neglected and an incomplete archival record result. The question the potential researcher will ask is whether the archives that acquires the television or radio productions will demonstrate an equal concern and priority for the related scripts, production documents, publicity photographs, press releases, program schedules, audience reports, and so on. The CBC has asked this question of the Public Archives of Canada in the discussions leading to the present agreement and has thus asked how this information will be cross-indexed among the various media divisions at the Public Archives of Canada. The Public Archives of Canada has promised that it will produce a cross-media inventory of CBC sources at the PAC and a successful fulfillment of this promise should be a most impressive testimony to the efficacy of total archives. It is perhaps ironic that only because of a donor commitment is the PAC belatedly moving, in this one instance, towards establishing some uniformity of information control amongst its media divisions. The National Archives and Records Service in Washington recognized a similar problem in the early 1970's and devised a computer-assisted procedure to gain administrative control over all record groups. The system has been operational since 1976. Admittedly, NARS' system does not provide access by subject because their priority was to develop the system to facilitate administrative control as quickly as possible. However, the system would seem inexpensive for what it does. They expect to enter some 200,000 series over a period of 20 years and estimate total costs to develop the system, enter the data, and maintain the system to come to \$58,000 annually or an average cost of \$9.75 per series. (*The American Archivist*, vol. 42, #2 (April 1979), p. 167-177) Smaller archives may be saved from this problem because their size prevents the administrative proliferation evident at the Public Archives of Canada. Nonetheless, they should perhaps ask themselves if they are going to muster the equivalent resources to preserve and control the textual documents that are related to the television and radio programs that they are so willing to acquire. Intellectual and physical control over the radio and television programs poses particular challenges. One cannot take a box of records and browse among them as you can with textual documents. Playback equipment, which is sometimes very specialized and expensive, is required. The CBC will inevitably want to recall some items for programming and will expect archives to have developed sophisticated cataloguing and control that allows rapid access. Archives will have to become accustomed to a different time-frame than they encounter with traditional researchers who can sometimes spend a whole month, a week, or at least a day, at the archives. The broadcaster will invariably want his film or radio broadcast the same day he makes the request. Moreover, his priority is to obtain a piece of film or a sound extract, not necessarily the most appropriate document or file. Thus there will be considerable pressure on the finding aids of archives to satisfy this immediate demand.

For current radio and television programming on the national networks, the CBC has a Program Archives for radio and a Program Resources department for television that give impressive and considerable resources and energy to selecting and cataloguing material for further program use. Archives taking responsibility for CBC records should make themselves

fully familiar with the selection and cataloguing done within the CBC, for the often sophisticated and detailed level of internal control may be built upon by repositories accepting CBC material. However, much programming may be discovered by archives, particularly for the past before program archives were fully operational within the CBC. Few programs ever have been broadcast without attendant descriptions in the form of production notes, scripts, or press releases. Time spent in tracing these related documents will not only facilitate the accurate cataloguing of the programming itself but will undoubtedly yield rich related documentation equally deserving of archival preservation.

The conservation of radio and television programs will be costly. Film, magnetic tape, and acetate discs are all fragile supports that tend to deteriorate even under the best archival conditions. Special environmental and temperature controls will arrest some of this deterioration, and the CBC naturally expects that archives will provide these conditions. Copying originals onto other formats may also offer protection against loss of the original, and it has long been archival practice to do such copying when originals appear to be in danger. However, the formats used for copying and the resources the archives is willing to allocate to this function may well not easily satisfy the CBC. They naturally want the best possible broadcasting formats respected so that broadcast quality will always be available if they want to re-use any material. On the other hand, the archives may want to protect a greater quantity of material on less expensive formats and the researcher may be perfectly happy with something less than broadcast quality as long as the information is clear and unambiguous. This potential tension between donor and researcher is always a possibility in any medium and it is the role of an archives to mediate between them. However, archives should be aware that this will arise with CBC programming and should be prepared to propose the difficult compromises that may not be immediately satisfactory.

PROSPECTS FOR A HISTORY OF THE CBC

But perhaps all of these difficulties would evaporate if the CBC were to take a meaningful interest in its own archives, but the CBC's lack of imagination and conviction in not more actively promoting its own history counsels caution. I believe that it is highly ironic and nothing short of tragic that the CBC has not taken more of an active role in this regard. Government and private institutions, many without a shred of the cultural sensitivity that one expects from the CBC, have done a good deal more to commission the writing of their history. I think of the National Research Council, the Department of National Defence, Canadian National Railways, and other federal public agencies. A comparable broadcasting institution, the British Broadcasting Corporation, invited one of the brightest historians in Britain to write its history, and the 4 volumes that Asa Briggs has published since 1961 have earned him and the BBC much well-deserved praise. The BBC supplies Briggs with a research assistant, a secretary, offices, and the assistance of the documentation centers within the BBC. The 50th anniversary of the CBC is approaching in 1986 and some publicity efforts are being considered. Oral history interviews of retired employees are again being taken up, as they have on a number of occasions when an anniversary loomed.

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on the broad implications for research of the archival treatment of CBC records. The difficulties outlined make it clear that a comprehensive history of the CBC will be almost impossible to write. Admittedly, the CBC itself has led a highly fragmented existence. However, archives should reflect, not further compound this problem. How our society remembers its past is dependent on the evidence that archives have accumulated and make available to the society. Our "remembering", both academic and popular, invariably follows the path of the richest evidence. The decisions archivists make to select, organize, describe and conserve records directly affects what history can be written. Our greatest challenge is to make the decisions that vitalize our knowledge of our past. The

total archives idea which Canada is pioneering holds the potential for releasing a much more complete "remembering" than traditional archives. Yet it also contains very real pitfalls that could just as easily narrow society's memory of human accomplishment and personality.

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"The Lively Archives"

Concern over the archives of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation prompted one of the most interesting sessions at the meeting of the Association of Canadian Archivists in Halifax in 1981. A panel discussion, chaired by Eldon Frost of the Federal Archives Division of the Public Archives of Canada, included Robin Woods of the CBC (and the real pioneer of archives within that institution); Derek Reimer, Head of the Sound and Moving Image Division of the Provincial Archives of British Columbia; and Ernie Dick, Chief of Collections Development for the National Film, Television and Sound Archives at the PAC. In the course of the meeting a great many issues were raised by panel members and informed contributors from the floor and many participants in the session must have gone away acutely aware of the complexities involved in the preservation of the records of the CBC—complexities which have their origin in a wide variety of factors.

The CBC is, and has been, one of the kingpins of this country's culture. Beleaguered and criticised as it has often been throughout its history, nevertheless, the CBC has been one of the bulwarks of a distinctive Canadian identity ever since its creation in the 1930s. If, at times, the sense of identity on CBC radio and television has seemed insecure and ambiguous, this only reflected the uncertainties of Canadians themselves. The CBC for almost fifty years has intimately associated itself with the vicissitudes and anxieties of Canada's search for itself. In addition the CBC has been a major employer of Canadian writers, intellectuals and performers, and a foremost source of popular entertainment.

Until recently, however, the fate of the archival documentation of this great Canadian institution was not a particularly happy one. A great deal of priceless historical documentation from the past was lost and destroyed for lack of a coherent archival policy within the CBC. Robin Woods in his talk at Halifax pointed out that this situation had begun to change, and he sketched out the advances that had been made, but he warned that much had still to be done to convince the CBC of the value of a full and complete archival record. Ernie Dick of the NFTA, who examined CBC archives from the researcher viewpoint reiterated this and laid emphasis on the problems and lack of preservation of the CBC records in the regions.

The question of the regional archives of the CBC emerged as one of the key issues at Halifax. The national record, both in radio and television, has been carefully monitored in recent years and the agreement between the Public Archives of Canada and the CBC with regards to national historic documentation has ensured that such material will be adequately protected. The CBC, however, although it is a crown corporation and federal agency, has directed a great deal of its energy and enthusiasm throughout its history towards the enrichment and explanation of Canadian life at the local and provincial level. Contemporary archival fashion tends to favour the regionalisation of archives. Regions understand regional