

Community Media Centres

Libraries of the 21st Century

Public libraries have been re-evaluating their role in the digital age as book loans continue to decline. What about evolving into a community media centre? That's the vision of the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS), and endorsed by the Canadian and Ontario library associations.

Imagine walking into a community hub where you could take classes in the latest media tools of the day. Those might include Facebook to keep up with friends, Twitter to follow political hot topics, a web design package for your small business, or a video editing program to showcase the work of your not-for-profit. The media centre holds a radio and a broadcast TV licence, and streams output from a community web portal. When your website is done, a link is placed on the community web portal, so that visitors and residents can find you, and the video for your not-for-profit is scheduled for playback on the community TV channel for the next day. Your job is done and you go home. And, you know there's a resource centre to help you the next time you have a media project to do or a new skill to learn to keep up in our dynamic digital world.

Ongoing Role for Libraries – in Promoting Literacy

So is this really a role for the library? Aren't libraries just passive collections of books? Since the 1800s, libraries have been offered as a basic municipal service, alongside schools

and hospitals. Schools and libraries, in partnership, spread print literacy throughout Canada. Children learned to read and write in school, and libraries supported their literacy in adulthood, as their information needs grew and changed. Citizens participated in local and national affairs by reading newspapers and periodicals, and by joining organizations.

In the early 20th century, radio burst on the scene, supplementing the role of newspapers and periodicals in keeping people connected at the national and local levels. In smaller municipalities, where there wasn't a "business case" for a commercial radio station, community radio stations have often filled the gap. There are over 200 community radio channels in Canada today. They are often staffed by volunteers, with a professional or two to guide their efforts. Municipalities are sometimes involved in the start-up of new community radio channels, and use them to communicate local priorities with residents. Some community radio channels are collocated with municipal facilities; a few broadcast from libraries.

The introduction of radio didn't drive a need for a new kind of literacy training in the general population. The skills we already learn in school and at home (talking, listening, reading, and writing) were easily transferable to consuming and producing radio content. Community radio channels train residents who want to contribute how to record and edit audio, and listeners, well ... just listen!

Impact of Television

In the latter half of the 20th century came television. Video requires a more challenging mix of skills: reading and writing (like print), audio production (like radio), as well as the capture and manipulation of moving pictures.

Authorities grasped that there were different skills needed by viewers, as well as producers of television. Moving images bypass the verbal and analytical faculties that we use when reading or listening to the radio. Video and film have been widely acknowledged as the dominant media of the 20th century: powerful and visceral, with the greatest potential to influence audiences for better or for worse.

With the introduction of cable TV in the 1970s, the Canadian government was concerned that American programming might overwhelm Canadian audio-visual culture. The CRTC required cable operators to set aside one channel as an open-access platform for local expression, and for Canadians to gain media literacy skills in the new dominant medium of the day. Even if we didn't take advantage of the platform every day, policy makers felt it was important for us to understand how audio-visual messages are constructed, in order to better interpret

CATHERINE EDWARDS is the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS). She advises community groups, municipalities, and government agencies in Canada and abroad regarding community media best practices. See <cactus.independentmedia.ca> or call (819) 772-2862.



When cable TV and the first video Portapacs came to Canada, the requirement that each cable operator offer training and equipment to communities was the government's way of putting "the mirror machine" in the hands of every community. Image from *VTR St. Jacques* by Bonnie Sherr Klein, National Film Board of Canada.

messages broadcast to us from local, national, and international sources.

By the 1980s, there were almost 300 cable community TV channels across Canada and most (if not all) communities with 10,000 people had their own local TV channel, as did more than 100 smaller municipalities. Big cities like Toronto and Vancouver had as many as a dozen "neighbourhood production offices,"

where individuals could learn media skills and borrow equipment, just like a library.

Many municipalities as well as provincial and federal officials used this platform to address constituents "face-to-face," using interactive formats such as the "call-in." Although this community resource was administered by cable companies in Canada, in most other jurisdictions (for example, the U.S.), the

funding for community media that came from the cable industry flowed either directly to municipalities to administer community channels, or through municipalities to not-for-profit associations.

Fogo Island and the Mirror Machine

A famous case study helped form Canada's pioneering community media policy. On Fogo Island off Newfoundland, residents survived by fishing until the late 1960s, when large trawlers began to threaten their livelihood. The Government of Canada's first impulse was to move the islanders to the main land, but a bright spark suggested sending an NFB film crew to capture what islanders themselves thought should be done.

The results were surprising: Islanders insisted on viewing and editing the footage before it went to Ottawa. In the process of reviewing their own and their neighbours' thoughts on their common challenges, they discovered that they were more articulate than they had thought, and came up with solutions to their own problems.

Ottawa dubbed the new tool "the mirror machine," and began sending NFB film crews into communities across Canada facing endemic economic hardship. In each case, the process of articulating the community's challenges on film generated its own solutions.

When cable TV and the first video Portapacs came to Canada, the requirement that each cable operator offer training and equipment to communities was the government's way of putting "the mirror machine" in the hands of every community.

So, early community media policy was primarily an attempt to address economic hardship, although it simultaneously gave a platform and a face to every community's cultural and civic life as well. We need to see ourselves accurately if we are to develop a common vision and to pull together to achieve it.

The More Things Change ...

But, hasn't everything changed since then? Well yes ... and no.

The building blocks we use to create messages are the same: print, audio, and

THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR EXPERIENCE



LOOPSTRA NIXON LLP

BARRISTERS AND SOLICITORS



THE STRAIGHT ANSWER

Everything Municipal

135 Queens Plate Drive, Suite 600, Toronto, Ontario M9W 6V7

Tel: 416-746-4710 Fax: 416-746-8319

gannibale@loonix.com

www.loopstranixon.com

images. What has changed are the tools and flexibility to combine them – just think of any multimedia website – and the platforms for distribution. It's not just about newspapers, radio, and television anymore. It's the internet and a whole gamut of wireless devices. "New media" is mostly old media repackaged and available in new places.

The essentials are the same:

- ▶ Community members need media literacy skills to master the building blocks, as well as knowledge of the current tools for presenting them.
- ▶ Communities need access to platforms to distribute those messages, so that the community has visibility, and can participate nationally and internationally in the digital economy. This is where digital community media centres come in. They:
 - ▶ teach media literacy skills of the day;
 - ▶ lend media tools to the community; and
 - ▶ distribute the community's messages in-house and outside.

Evolution of the Library

The evolution of a library to a full-blown digital community media production and distribution centre can have a number of steps, and many libraries are already on the path.

For example, until funding was cut by Industry Canada in 2012, many libraries hosted the 3,000 CAP sites (Community Access Portals) across the country. At their most basic, they were passive internet portals for residents without internet access at home. Many took their mandates further, however. For example, the CAP site at the Inuit hamlet of Clyde River on Baffin Island

(population 1,000) promotes skills in television and film production across Nunavut territory. In a more urban setting, Hamilton's public library offers media training, gallery space, and hosts a multitude of cultural events that provide visibility for Hamiltonians.

So, what is standing in the way of more libraries taking on this mandate?

- ▶ Federal policies for community media are obsolete.
- ▶ Local resources are strained to keep up. Industry Canada has yet to publish its Digital Strategy. Meanwhile, CRTC policy still requires cable operators to pump in excess of \$130 million annually into cable "community channels." This is nearly half a typical library budget, calculated municipality by municipality. Yet more than three-quarters of the channels that once existed have closed. Cable companies have consolidated their resources in larger centres. Where training opportunities still exist, they are in traditional TV production and the output is available only on cable TV.

At the local level, the grade 11 language arts curriculum in most provinces includes a module on "media literacy." A few high schools have installed full-blown media production labs, but most schools spend a few weeks critiquing ads or cautioning kids about web use. There's not enough time to build a comprehensive skill set, and nowhere for ex-students to go for updates over the course of their lives, as the media landscape continues to evolve.

Meanwhile, many local newspapers, radio, and television channels have closed in an environment of intense media ownership concentration. Communities are less visible to themselves than ever before.

While the internet and social media are filling some of the gap, they tend to be better at linking "communities of interest" internationally than in aggregating local audiences, especially using video. Think of communities that have lost a local newscast ... There's nothing quite like live video and event coverage to pull communities together and to create a sense of common endeavour.

New Role for Libraries

There is a new role for libraries if they wish to take it on. Digital community media production and distribution centres don't necessarily have to fall under one roof.

Communities could offer media training out of a community centre, use the traditional library for archiving of content, and broadcast using robocams at multiple locations where civic and cultural events occur: the town hall, local arenas and sporting fields, and theatres. Community web portals can aggregate the output for sharing virtually. Event listings collected by the local newspaper may be simultaneously listed on the web portal, and posted as a text bulletin board on the community TV channel at off times when no moving video is being played.

The first step is to develop a coherent strategy for local media, with clearly defined goals, whether they be economic development, greater social inclusion, or more visibility for local culture. CACTUS provides assistance to municipalities and community groups wishing to develop a local media strategy and to set up community media centres, in partnership with and building on the work of existing organizations such as libraries. **MW**

SULLIVAN MAHONEY^{LLP}
LAWYERS

**MUNICIPAL, PLANNING AND
 ENVIRONMENTAL LAW SECTION**

V.F. Muratori	T.A. Richardson*	W.B. McKaig
S.J. Premi	R. Vacca	J.P. Maloney
	M.D. Atherton	

** Certified Specialist*

Municipal Law (Local Government/Land Use Planning)

St. Catharines (905) 688-6655
 Niagara Falls (905) 357-0500

Demand Excellence.

Understanding municipal law demands lawyers who know the ropes. You are in strong hands with SmithValerioté.

Robert M. Mullin
 B.A. (Hons.), LL.B., LL.M., A.C.C.I.
 800 746 0685 x255

Nicola Melchers
 LL.B.
 800 746 0685 x363

smithvalerioté.com

SMITH VALERIOTÉ
LAW FIRM LLP
 Municipal Lawyers

