

"The River of History"

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I

The Way We Were? History as "Infotainment" in the Age of *History Television*¹

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To judge from the scholarly literature, the rise of history television – which now reaches millions of Canadian television viewers every week and tens of millions in the United States – has not been of much formal concern to historians. I find this surprising, partly because such cable services are enjoying enviable success but also because history television executives now routinely take credit for doing what academic historians are no longer thought capable of: making history interesting, entertaining, relevant and popular. History television ought to interest us for any number of reasons,² but I shall limit myself to an exploration of the discursive means by which it legitimizes itself as the last best hope for the historically challenged. In the end, I must say that, although my research has not tempered my opinion that corporate-controlled, profit-driven history television is a poor – and sometimes dangerous – surrogate for professional historiography, it has certainly added a curious twist to my understanding of the current crisis in Canadian history. If J. L.

Granatstein really believes that there are no longer "heroes in our past to stir the soul, and no myths on which a national spirit can be built," at least one inescapable conclusion may be drawn: J. L. Granatstein does not have cable.³

According to *American History Illustrated*, the idea of a cable channel devoted entirely to history was inspired by the "immense popularity" of Ken Burns' 1991 television series on the U.S. Civil War, which was viewed by roughly 14 million people. In the fall of 1993 two "competing cable companies" announced that they were planning to launch history channels: the Liberty/Cox/Advance-owned *Discovery Channel* proposed a service called *The History Network*, while the Hearst/ABC/NBC-owned *Arts & Entertainment* organization proposed *The History TV Network*. Both groups were said to be planning schedules of "documentaries, mini-series, and movies with historical themes" – a generic programming menu virtually guaranteeing that only one of these proposed services would make it to air.⁴ For reasons that are not entirely clear, *A&E* prevailed: *The History TV Network* was re-christened *The History Channel* and launched on 1 January 1995, with an initial audience of one million cable subscribers. The service has since exceeded even its own executives' initial projections; by the spring of 1996 *The History Channel* had 16 million subscribers; by July 2000 it had in excess of 62 million subscribers.⁵

That *The History Channel* was an idea whose time had come had been suggested both by polling data on Americans' historical knowledge and by *A&E*'s own market research. In April 1994, for example, the Gallup organization published data showing that for 21 per cent of Americans "television was their primary source of historical information." Books scored only slightly higher, at 23 per cent. Roughly half of those Gallup had polled said that they were "somewhat or very interested" in history, and fully two-thirds said that "television had not done enough to promote an interest in history." *A&E* was said to be "buoyed by the [Gallup] findings" as it prepared to launch *The History Channel*.⁶ According to Dan Davids, senior vice president and general manager at *History*, "focus groups and quantitative research" had revealed the same trend: "Americans are more interested in history now than they were five years ago."⁷

From the outset, *The History Channel* was conceived as a cable service that would be both educational and entertaining, making it a leading exemplar of the 1990s trend in televisual mass media towards "infotainment." As *History* vice president Charles Maday put it in 1995, just a month after launch, the new channel provided "viewer-friendly, original historical programming that stimulates the mind and creates a level of historical awareness in an entertaining and informative way."⁸ With respect at least to this imperative to "stimulate the mind," *The History Channel* may be said to bear a greater resemblance to "public" television than to its myriad commercial competitors. Unlike *The Learning Channel*, for example, which has abandoned any pretence of pedagogical value in favour of highly sensationalised natural disaster footage and paramedical reportage, *The History Channel* is predicated on the twin notions that history is a weighty business and that its programming cannot be "dumbed down" *ad infinitum* to appeal to a mass audience.

History is thus a "niche" service in the strictest sense, with strong appeal to a *minority* viewership; practically, this means subsidizing the "hard core" historical content – particularly documentaries – with more popular fare, most notably feature films with "historical themes." This has, in fact, turned out to be a winning strategy. Within a year of its launch, *The History Channel* ranked as "the network most [cable] operators intended to add," beating *ESPN2*, *Home and Garden*, *TLC*, *the Cartoon network* and the *Sci-Fi Channel*. When asked about their intentions to add the *History Channel*, cable executives cited the channel's "program quality." As Jack Myers, Chairman and CEO of Myers Communications, put it: "There's a strong perception of the brand from its marketing. And it has a high perceived value in terms of revenue potential for operators."⁹ More significantly perhaps, anecdotal evidence suggests that *The History Channel* was making converts. Writing in 1997, Mark Vittert praised *History's* appeal to "folks just like us, the ones who 'don't know much about.' It's a reprieve for goof-offs like me who sat through Mr. Alverson's history class drawing mazes. It's also a second chance for those of us who thought the Gettysburg Address was too long and drawn out. All of a sudden, I like history – a lot."¹⁰

However much this infotainment strategy has fattened the bottom line at *The History Channel*, and even helped to attract "goof-offs" like

Vittert, it has not resolved the deep tensions inherent in its efforts to be both a thinking person's pastime, on the one hand, and a competitive commercial broadcaster, on the other. From the outset, for instance, *History* was intended to feature blockbuster Hollywood movies. But because Hollywood filmmakers have been known to be cavalier about the historical accuracy of their work, the network inaugurated après-film panels of "guest historians and journalists whose commentary will provide historical context, reveal any dramatic license taken by the director, and explore myths that may surround the subject being presented."¹¹ This is, of course, a case of having one's cash-cow and eating it too! Still, a more serious challenge to the integrity of *The History Channel* has been the perception that its relationship to its own corporate sponsors is too cosy. In late 1996, for example, *History* commissioned a documentary series called *The Spirit of Enterprise*, which was to have profiled the growth of American corporations. When it came to light that the series' corporate underwriters – Boeing, Du Pont and AT&T – were to be given control over the content appearing in their own profiles, a media furore ensued and *History* quickly cancelled the series.¹² In the press release that followed, the network justified its decision by reminding people that "Our mission at the *History Channel* is to adhere to the highest programming standards which our viewers have come to expect."¹³

History Television, the Canadian cable service launched in October 1997, was not only conceptually derivative of the U.S. *History Channel* but also owed much of its early success to the cross-border promotion of its American forbear via A&E.¹⁴ In the fall of 1996, the CRTC approved the addition of twenty-eight new specialty channels to Canadian cable television. Of these, only four were granted "immediate priority," namely *CTV News One*, *History Television*, the *Comedy Network* and *Teletoon*; the others were reported as having to wait "until new digital-compression technology expands the potential of the cable universe."¹⁵ Originally a partnership between Alliance Broadcasting and CTV, *History Television* was tagged from the outset as "a Canadian version of A&E's *The History Channel*," though in true Canadian broadcasting fashion network executives were at pains both to differentiate their service from the American and to imbue this differentiation with ideological import. Asked prior to launch how *History Television* would differ from *The History*

Channel, Janet Eastwood, vice president of marketing and communications at Alliance, observed: "It's going to be less jingoistic than the U.S. service in that it will be less focused on wars. The focus is going to be on the real people who made a difference in the lives of Canadians."¹⁶ Notwithstanding the fact that *History Television* had adopted the same sort of "branding" strategy that had made *The History Channel* such a success in the United States, it was a matter of some pride to Alliance executives that their service was "all Canadian" and especially that they had "bought nothing from the American *History Channel*."¹⁷

In truth, like both A&E and *The History Channel* before it, *History Television* was dominated at the outset by World War II programming. Norm Bolen, vice president of programming, said unapologetically in early 1998: "We are doing a lot of World War II. And a lot of people are watching.... When people don't want to watch war, we won't run those programs." Bolen added: "If we only ran war, we might do very well with older men. Whereas we need the 25 to 49 age group which is most attractive to advertisers. And we are getting them as well."¹⁸

World War II documentaries may have been delivering *History Television*'s primary audience in its inaugural phase, but such programming had already gone a long way towards alienating viewers and critics who had harboured high hopes for the new channel. In the spring of 1998, *The Beaver*, a popular Canadian historical magazine, asked its readers "What should lovers of history make of *History Television*?" and invited them to submit their comments.¹⁹ The *History Television* schedule "struck them as too predictable, too foreign, and particularly too militaristic – an endless diet of old war footage." Some women respondents noted that *History Television* was "hugely dominated by men and by male views of history." Meanwhile, Peter McFarlane, a Montreal journalist, was quoted as saying, "The impression I have gotten is that history began in the summer of 1945." He added suggestively: "Even the non-World War II stuff tends to treat the past as a simple known thing that has been adequately recorded and only need to be assembled and related. Coming to grips with our history, it has always seemed to me, is a struggle."²⁰

For *History Television*, as for all private sector interests operating within Canada's heavily regulated broadcasting environment, decisions about "the kind of content we want to offer" are never as straight forward

as Bolen's comment might imply. In this country, television and radio broadcasting licences are subject to the myriad conditions imposed by the federal regulator, the CRTC; they include powerful provisions for the maintenance and promotion of "Canadian content." Television licensees in Canada must make explicit commitments, not only to a specified quantity of Canadian programming, but also to the expenditure of a fixed proportion of revenue on its production. The CRTC is empowered by the *Broadcasting Act* to make licences subject to strict limits on vertical integration, allowing it to mandate that a fixed percentage of the programming broadcast by a licensee be produced at "arms' length" from it or its parent company.

Whether this seemingly strenuous regulatory apparatus in Canada is as heavy-handed in practise as it appears in law has been the subject of considerable debate over the years. Whatever one's position on this question, it is important to note that the mere existence of the federal regulatory apparatus has fashioned a unique "civic" broadcasting discourse in this country, one which centres on the rather earnest question of whether or not the programs aired by licensees edify Canadians. Needless to say, this discourse tends to sit uneasily alongside other, competing discourses, most notably those which are oriented towards the bottom line. In fact, what is aired on *History Television* is understood differently by different constituencies, and these discursive differences are carefully managed by those whose task it is to fashion a history channel that must appear to be all things to all people.

One of the most important constituencies to which any publicly traded commercial broadcaster must appeal is its corporate shareholders and the "investment community." From an investment perspective, it is important to note that *History Television* is but one small element – albeit a profitable one – within a highly diversified film and television empire, one which is openly attempting to transcend its national origins and join the ranks of the global entertainment giants. In the spring of 1999, *History Television's* parent company, Alliance Communications, was granted regulatory approval to merge with its erstwhile domestic rival, Atlantis Communications.²¹ With a market capitalization of roughly US\$370 million as of July 2000, the merged company, Alliance Atlantis Communications Inc., trades on both the Toronto Stock Exchange and

the Nasdaq. The corporation's operations now encompass virtually every phase in the production and distribution of "filmed entertainment," hence its organization into three broad operating groups: Television, Motion Pictures and Broadcasting.

What, then, does Alliance Atlantis tell investors about *History Television*? Here is an introduction that was available at the corporation's online *Investors' Overview* site in June 2000:

History Television, launched in October 1997, features an entertaining and informative blend of movies, biographies and original historical documentary programming from Canada and around the world.

History Television reaches 60% of English Canadian cable households, with 4.14 million paid subscribers. *History Television* reaches almost 4 million Canadian viewers each week. The network's programming spans a wide range of time periods as is evident by its theme nights: *20th Century Mondays*, *Ancient History Tuesdays*, *Canadian History Wednesdays* and *History of War Thursdays*. Three nights a week, viewers turn to *History Television* for some of the greatest stories ever brought to film. *History on Film* delivers top-notch entertainment with a fascinating historical perspective.

History Television is ranked among the top 5 Canadian Specialty networks in Average Minute Audience. *History Television's* audience has grown a dramatic 73% for Adults 25–54 Winter 2000 over Winter 1999.²²

Clearly, Alliance Atlantis is interested in impressing upon investors the solid performance and especially the growth potential of one of its flagship broadcasting properties. Here, the news is all good. Reduced to its performance statistics, *History Television* is an unmitigated success story, reaching four million Canadians weekly and almost doubling its viewership in the lucrative 25–54 age group in the last year. Whatever J. L. Granatstein may think, to the international investor the case is clear: Canadians are fanatical about their history!

According to the Specialty Board of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters – a lobby which bills itself "the representative of the majority of Canadian programming services, including private television and radio stations, and networks, and specialty television services" – the news is not nearly so good. In a detailed presentation to the CRTC in

November 1998, the Specialty Board painted a grim picture of precariously situated Canadian specialty channels besieged by foreign competition, technological change and even regulatory indifference. Indulging heavily in the "civic" Canadian broadcasting discourse noted above, the Board prefaced its remarks by reminding the Commission that "specialty and pay services play an increasingly important role in the Canadian broadcasting system," by providing jobs, by making available "new resources for Canadian program production" and, above all, by "providing Canadians with access to niche programming that speaks to them, tells their stories, and reflects their realities."²³

The Board emphasized that the Commission must be vigilant in safeguarding the specialty channels' access to cable subscribers because nothing less than Canadian *culture* hangs in the balance:

Fair and equitable access is of central concern to Canadian specialty channels. Cable is the dominant distributor of television services, and will remain so for at least the next five years and probably beyond. Broad, fair, and equitable carriage on high-penetration tiers is thus essential to the success of Canadian specialty services, and to their ability to contribute to Canadians' demand for more and better programming. *If they are to continue to play a role in supporting Canadian cultural objectives, fair and reasonable access to cable subscribers is essential.*²⁴

Fear-mongering over Canadian cultural independence was a major feature of the Specialty Board's presentation.

Under the ominous heading of "Competition from Non-Contributing U.S. Service," the Board told the CRTC bluntly that "once U.S. services 'occupy the turf,' it is almost impossible for a competitive Canadian service to launch." This is because, as "highly-specialized niche services, [specialty channels] focus on meeting the viewing needs of a particular audience, whose attention can be fickle" and because they face increasing competition from "non-Canadian satellite services, and even the Internet." The Board concluded:

The most meaningful contributions specialty services make to the system is through expanding diversity, increasing the number of hours of available Canadian programming, viewing to Canadian programming, and the resources available for producing such programming, particularly in niche areas. The

CRTC must continue to ensure that Canadian specialty services are able to offer distinctive programming in well-defined niches, that is complementary to the programming offered by other services, and that Canadian specialty services 'occupy the turf' in as many niches as possible.²⁵

When *History Television* executives appear before the CRTC, they tell a similar story and, moreover, they indulge in precisely the same sorts of discourses as the CAB.

In stark contrast to the rosy picture the company places before investors, the version to which the federal regulator is subjected takes the form of a long-suffering but absolutely vital national institution, one whose selfless mission it is to shepherd Canadians out of the historical darkness and into the grandeur that is their own past. Consider, for example, *History Television's* presentation to the CRTC's Television Policy Review in October 1998. Appearing before the Commission on behalf of *History Television* were Phyllis Yaffe, then President and CEO of the service, Norm Bolen, vice president of programming, and Jennifer Fong, in-house regulatory counsel. It fell to Bolen to bring the Commissioners up to date on the important work the channel was doing, and he did so in superlatives, emphasizing the contribution *History Television* was making in the realm of independent Canadian film production and in the lives of ordinary Canadians:

We believe that the type of programming shown and originated by History Television is of tremendous value or quality. Our programs give a voice to the stories that make up our heritage, which we have all too often ignored.

We are particularly proud of series, such as *The Canadians*. *The Canadians* is a *History Television* original biography series which presents real stories of the men and the women who built this country and established its character. Another series is the award winning *A Scattering of Seeds*. This series documents the lives of ordinary immigrants who came to Canada to make a better life for themselves, from the Schumiatcher family in Calgary who gave us Alberta's famous white cowboy hat to Mary Ann Shadd, the first black woman to edit a newspaper in North America.

A program entitled *Our House* is a unique documentary presentation about the story of the Canadian House of Commons hosted by the Honourable Gilbert Parent, Speaker of the House of Commons. *Our House* was broadcast proudly

on July 1st this year as part of *History Television's* special all-Canadian Canada Day schedule. These are just a few examples of how *History Television* attracts viewers with quality Canadian programming.²⁶

Commissioner Andrew Cardoso then prefaced a question for Bolen by emphasizing that *A Scattering of Seeds* was important because it addressed "the absence of cultural diversity being aired on our airwaves" and countered the claim that "our diverse history is not shown and, indeed, most of our history books don't do that, either." He went on to laud *Our House* as well for its ability to "popularize our political history."²⁷

This exchange between Bolen and Cardoso raises any number of fascinating questions. Firstly, what is one to make of the total absence of reference to non-documentary programming at *History Television*? Although no formal content analysis of *History Television* programming has yet been undertaken, it appears that programs aired on the channel are of four general sorts. The most popular fare consists in imported movies and popular series, which presumably reach large, broadly based audiences with neither a particular investment in history nor loyalty to *History Television*. The second could be characterized as filler. Shows like *Rat Patrol* and *Combat!* are inexpensive re-runs lacking a significant viewership or appeal to advertisers. The third consists in prime-time light fare, typified by Canadian-made shows like *It Seems Like Yesterday* and *History Bites*. The fourth are the documentaries – serious, fact-based programs which clearly constitute the "hard core" historical content at *History Television* and undoubtedly attract the service's most dedicated history aficionados. That nothing whatsoever was said in this ostensibly broadly based review of Canadian television policy about *History Television's* regularly scheduled airing of American patriotic chestnuts or blockbuster Hollywood movies illustrates something of the power of the civic discourse I described above.

Of the four *genres*, it is clearly the documentaries that carry the lion's share of the channel's obligatory "Canadian content" – a strategy calculated not only to demonstrate *History Television's* commitment to Canada's indigenous film industry but to draw symbolically upon Canada's pedigree in documentary film-making.²⁸ The channel's airing of documentaries also gives it a high degree of intellectual credibility in the low-common-denominator world of commercial broadcasting. It may

well be that, given the historic domination of the Canadian broadcasting market by American shows, neither regulators nor licensees perceive any great need to dwell upon the obvious, namely that cheap American programming has always been a cash-cow for Canadian broadcasters. It is also true, moreover, that the discursive means by which *History Television* couches its appeals to the CRTC have been fashioned by network executives in such a way as to maximize their perceived contribution to the nationalist "goals" of the *Broadcasting Act* – a strategy for which they can hardly be faulted. What is striking, however, is the extent to which the regulator itself appears to have accommodated to this discourse. That Commissioner Cardoso should grant *History Television* the absurd but symbolically invaluable virtue of being the only bulwark against total historical ignorance in Canada, for example, speaks volumes about the ways in which this discourse works to marginalize other sites of historical inquiry. Indeed, the Commissioner's remarks give credence to the notion that "most of our history books" are inadequate, particularly when it comes to the question of Canadian "diversity" – a comment which constitutes a wholesale indictment of the historical profession.

A second, related question is what to make of the extraordinary emphasis in the exchange between Bolen and Cardoso upon independent documentary film-making generally and on *A Scattering of Seeds* in particular. Transcripts of the hearings reveal that Bolen's comments were meant largely as a prologue to *History Television's* main lobbying effort, aimed at persuading the Commission that, as CEO Phyllis Yaffe put it, the existing conditions of Alliance's broadcasting licenses put "conventional broadcasters ... at a considerable competitive advantage over *Showcase* and *History*."

Yaffe's remarks centred on the relationship between state-funded production subsidies, in the form of grants from Telefilm's Equity Investment Program, and the Commission's prohibition on vertical integration – or what is known in industry shorthand as "self-dealing between broadcasters and producers." Three questions now faced the Commissioners, she argued:

First, should conventional broadcasters be able to access Telefilm's Equity Investment Program for their own drama or under-represented category productions; second, should specialty services owned by producers continue to be prohibited

from triggering Telefilm's Equity Investment Program for its owners' productions; and, furthermore, should these same services continue to be prohibited from running their owners' productions in first window regardless of whether Telefilm money is involved[?]

The essence of Yaffe's argument seems to have been that, as long as the CRTC continued to be vigilant in thwarting the vertical integration of its specialty channel licensees and Canadian content providers, conventional broadcasters – who have always been allowed to “produce for themselves” – should have no claim on TEIP financing. On the matter of vertical integration itself, however, Yaffe was prepared to be ambiguous. Having explicitly questioned whether specialty services ought to “continue to be prohibited from running their owners' productions,” she then assured the Commissioners that “Regardless of this difference in regulatory treatment, *Showcase* and *History Television* are prepared to live with the current self-dealing rules. Under the current situation, we accept the self-dealing rules because they continue to be a necessary protection to ensure that Canada's independent production industry remains strong.”²⁹

Clearly, while Alliance executives' repeated claims of support for independent documentary film-making in Canada can be read as a function of Canada's civic broadcasting discourse, they also constitute a crucial *strategic* element in the corporation's more broadly gauged approach to regulatory politics. It is no great stretch of the imagination to suppose that executives within vertically integrated conglomerates such as Alliance Atlantis would much prefer to privilege the airing of their own companies' productions to the purchase of others.' After all, this is practically a working definition of the currently fashionable idea of “synergy” that inspired the rash of entertainment industry mergers in the Time Warner/AOL vein. Within the Canadian regulatory environment, however, as Yaffe's comments attest, concessions on vertical integration constitute a sort of *quid pro quo*, in which broadcasters are favoured by other, sometimes less obvious material benefits; these include the highly profitable pricing schedules the regulator grants cable providers and the protection of the specialty channels' content monopolies in the domestic market. Ingratiating themselves with CRTC commissioners on the question of the regulator's strict “self-dealing” rules was especially important to Alliance executives in October 1998, moreover, since formal

application to merge with Atlantis was filed with the CRTC the following month. Indeed, as the Commission's published account of its decision to allow the merger shows, the onus on Alliance Atlantis to avoid *even the appearance* of favouring its own productions was made a condition of the regulator's acquiescence.³⁰

None of this is to suggest that *History Television* is disingenuous in its commitment to independent Canadian documentary film-making. However, this commitment can only be understood in the discursive context of Canada's regulatory broadcasting environment. The truth is that, however exemplary they might be with respect to the stated goals of the *Broadcasting Act*, Canadian-made documentaries are extremely expensive to produce and notoriously difficult to “sell” on commercial television. *A Scattering of Seeds: The Creation of Canada*, one of the documentary series venerated by Bolen in his remarks before the Commission, is an especially noteworthy case in point. Its production was chronically underfunded and, when finally aired, the program failed to recoup its costs. According to a document filed with CRTC by the Canadian Independent Film Caucus in June 1998, the producers were still scrambling to “recoup [their] investment through international sales,” most notably by selling single episodes “to the mother countries of several immigrant groups whose stories are told in the series.”³¹ Indeed, the “best distribution news” had come, not from television at all, but from “the educational market.” Jerry McNabb of McNabb and Connolly, the series' educational distributor, was quoted as saying that the sales of the series were “great! The best thing since *The Kids of Degrassi Street* series.” According to McNabb the series “meets a great need in the education system for Canadian historical material,” hence his expectation that “one million children a year for the next three years will see at least one episode of the series in the classroom.”³² *A Scattering of Seeds* was, at the time of the CIBC presentation, said to be “ready to begin production of its much-anticipated second season but it is in crisis. Despite its critical success, its proven popularity, and its importance to the educational system, the series may not be able to raise its budget.”³³

Whatever else may be said about *A Scattering of Seeds*, the salient point is that this account of the series is a far cry from the confident, self-aggrandizing language of *History Television's Investor Relations* précis. It is true that this description of *A Scattering of Seeds* was intended – as

were three other similarly styled "case studies" – to persuade the federal regulator to decisively "increase the quantity of documentary programming available in the schedules of both private, conventional broadcasters and specialty services."³⁴ But even so, there remains a great discursive gulf between the Cardoso/Bolen exchange, in which the series was said by the latter to represent "the very essence of what we are about at *History Television*," and this rather more troubled rendering by the CIBC. The case of *A Scattering of Seeds* also shows that the Canadian regulatory apparatus itself makes strange bedfellows. At one level, the interests of independent Canadian film-makers are quite at odds with those of commercial entertainment giants like Alliance Atlantis: not only are the broadcasters largely prevented from airing their own productions, but they are required by the federal regulator to capitalize the films of the independents and later to air them – often to relatively small, unprofitable, even "fickle" audiences. Yet the CIBC insisted in its brief to the CRTC that "[d]ocumentary programs are a prominent part of many broadcasters' schedules and the primary reason for the success of Canadian specialty services *Discovery*, *History Television*, and *Vision TV*." The fact remains that, however much Canadian-made documentaries may serve to edify *History Television*, they do not reach large numbers of viewers and they do not pay the bills. Therein lies the deep, perhaps irreconcilable tension between the civic discourse with which the channel conducts its business with the federal regulator and the bottom-line discourse with which it placates its shareholders.

At present, the arbiters of these competing pressures at *History Television* are Sydney Suissa, vice president of programming, and Cindy Witten, director of independent programming. Given their control over programming at *History Television*, – which does, after all reach four million Canadians weekly – Suissa and Witten may be said to exercise an extremely important gatekeeping function with respect to what passes for history in Canadian popular culture.³⁵ Suissa holds an honours BA in history from the University of Calgary, as well as a Master's degree in journalism. In my correspondence with him I was impressed, not only by the seriousness with which he takes his responsibility for delivering historical content to Canadian television viewers, but with his keen sense of the relationship of *History Television* to the academic study of history. Indeed, I was struck by his confident, unapologetic conviction that a

profit-driven history-based television service has an extremely important contribution to make in the lives of Canadians, not least because professional historians have abandoned the field.

I opened our correspondence by asking him to elaborate on *History Television's* mandate to enhance Canadians' understanding of their own history. He did not mince his words:

By and large I agree with Jack Granatstein: the political and social agendas that have weighed history down have made it boring and comatose. The greatest contribution *History Television* can make is to revive Canadians' interest in our history. That is the true mandate and it can only be done through well researched, well told stories that are rich in narrative, drama, and character.³⁶

History Television employs no historians but Suissa affirmed that they are "used extensively on nearly all the documentaries we commission" and also that they are regularly invited "to discuss movies after they've been aired." He added: "In a more informal way, I have a circle of historians that I feel free to consult with on specific historical questions or issues."³⁷ Like Norm Bolen and Andrew Cardoso, Suissa subscribes to the notion that *History Television* is the solution to the problem evident in Canadian history. That *History Television* was one of the sponsors, along with Angus Reid and the Dominion Institute, of the famed November 1998 history quiz – in which "60% of respondents failed a 15-question test about basic historical facts" – speaks directly to this claim.³⁸

Ought historians to take this usurpation personally? Frankly, I think not. As Suissa himself put the case to me: "*History Television* is not a school, it is a television channel."³⁹ That professional historians play a strictly adjunct role at *History Television* does, however, bring one back to the decisive issue of programming. Given that the living rooms of Canadians are no place for the "political and social agendas" of professional historians, nor for the "boring and comatose" products of their labours, the question arises as to what kind of "history" *History Television* actually offers. Here, too, Suissa is dauntless. When asked whether "decision-makers at *History Television* distinguish between entertainment and educational content," he replied, evincing yet again the discursive ease with which documentaries are made the standard-bearers for *History Television*: "The distinction is in the treatment, in the way the

documentary is told. I avoid pedantic styles, where the emphasis is on explanation and analysis rather than on dramatic storytelling. Any well told story is educational, though its primary objective is not necessarily educational." When asked whether the bulk of his audience share derives from the screening of Hollywood films, Suissa conceded that blockbuster movies are popular because of their "marquee value" but insisted that "there is also great appetite for documentaries from Canada and the rest of the world." He did admit, however, that "documentaries will always be a harder sell, and will draw a smaller audience than movies. This is the reality throughout television and is not specific to *History Television*."⁴⁰ Lastly, when invited to comment on the "popular" series *History Bites* and *It Seems Like Yesterday*, he anticipated my scepticism regarding their historical worth, volunteering: "Their mandates are to look at history with a sense of humour and satire, to give viewers a sense that human history at times can be silly, random, and absurd."⁴¹

In fairness to Suissa and his colleagues at *History Television*, it is important to recall the vote of confidence the CIBC gave the channel as a dedicated programmer of Canadian-made documentaries. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that *History Television's* reputation for airing the best international documentaries is deserved. In February 1998, for example, when the Oscar documentary nominees were announced, the channel was in the enviable position of having scheduled two of the nominated films for the period before the award show, namely Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls* and Mark Jonathan Harris' *The Long Way Home*.⁴² That *History Television* does indeed have its moments of profundity is undeniable. I would cite, for example, its extensive programming in "remembrance" of Hiroshima as a most impressive case in point.

As Canadian media mogul Moses Znaimer once remarked, however, what matters on television is not the show but the flow – an aphorism that seems to me to carry special import for *History Television*. Having taken so much credit for broadcasting the sublime, surely the channel's executives may be taken to task for also airing the ridiculous. What is one to make, for example, of its four-part "soap" on the life of British fascist Oswald Mosley, in which the subject's love life figured more prominently than his politics?⁴³ What about the weekly spectacle of having Ann Medina – formerly one of the CBC's most respected foreign correspondents – say the words "Hello there. I'm Ann Medina. Welcome

to *History on Film*, a discovery of our past through the movies"?⁴⁴ What about Rick Mercer's "hope that his reference to Adolf Hitler having one testicle will one day make it to air" on *It Seems Like Yesterday*?⁴⁵ What about *History Television* underwriting the Credo documentary *Pioneer Quest: A Year in the Real West*, in which two couples were paid \$100,000 each to "build and share a shelter where they have to live off the land without any modern conveniences, including running water, for one full year"?⁴⁶ For that matter, what about *Rat Patrol* and *Combat*?

In short, in spite of Sidney Suissa's confident claims about the pedagogical and civic virtues of *History Television*, I am not persuaded. Nor do I believe that my calling into question the channel's mix of documentary versus more popular programming is a case of academic hair-splitting. There is a vast difference between *History Television's* enormously profitable overall market penetration and the modest audience it generates for indigenous documentary programming. According to data published by the CIBC, the largest first-run English-language audience for *A Scattering of Seeds*, never exceeded 135,000 viewers, and some "episodes" did not even reach this number. This is a mere fraction of the 4.14 million paid subscribers *History Television* boasts in its *Investor Relations* précis, a ratio which seems to speak for itself. While it is the Canadian-made documentaries that *History Television* executives privilege when speaking to the federal regulator and academic historians, it is clearly other kinds of programming that constitute the channel's most popular – and profitable – fare. *History Television* may even be said to be a commercial success in spite of – rather than because of – its commitment to indigenous documentary film-making. In the absence of harder data on audience share and especially advertising revenue, I can only conclude that the channel's extraordinary emphasis on Canadian-made documentaries constitutes a discursive and ultimately a strategic valorization of a cable service whose real bread and butter consists, like most of its competitors, in delivering historically inconsequential programming to an indiscriminating mass audience.

I have not taken Sidney Suissa *et al.* to task because I believe them to be disingenuous. On the contrary, one can hardly blame *History Television* executives for indulging Canada's longstanding civic broadcasting

discourse, nor especially for spinning their programming schedule for maximum regulatory and critical effect. My point is that, ironically perhaps, Suissa and the historians he claims to be usurping today find themselves in precisely the same boat, trying to keep history alive and vital in an age in which – as the Swedish poet Kjell Espmark put it – “we have quietly accepted the disappearance of the past.”⁴⁷ The most telling line in my correspondence with Suissa, arguably, is that “the greatest challenge is not coming up with stories [from our past] or making them, but rather in getting Canadians to watch them.” This seems to confirm my view that history is indeed a hard sell these days, whether in the classroom or on television. This is evidence of a far deeper, essentially *cultural* dislocation in public life, in which history has largely ceased to provide the social, cultural, economic and political architecture within which Canadians contextualize their lived experience.⁴⁸

As for Canadian-made documentaries like *A Scattering of Seeds*, perhaps the heirs to the historiographical throne in our televisual age, it is heartening to discover that they continue to reach *millions* of Canadians in the classroom but only tens of thousands in prime time. The subtext of so much of the politicking that takes place in front of the CRTC appears to be that – to paraphrase the American philosopher Kevin Costner – if you air it, they will watch. Yet, for all of their goodwill and civic rectitude, the combined weight of *History Television*, the CRTC and even the CIBC cannot draw more than a handful of television viewers to even the most celebrated of Canadian-made productions. I conclude from this pattern that the rumoured usurpation of historians and history teachers by commercial television broadcasters has been greatly exaggerated.

The CBC series *Canada: A People's History* has been heralded as a revolutionary breakthrough in historical television programming since its launch in October 2000, and it has clearly struck a chord with large numbers of Canadians. Only Canada's public broadcaster could have realized such an ambitious and lavish project, which sets *A People's History* well apart from anything that Canada's independent documentarists and private-sector broadcasters could together deliver. Even so, in the absence of consistent data on the series' market penetration, it is not easy to gauge its true impact among Canadian television viewers. In early 2001, CBC publicity claimed, for example, that “[e]pisodes 1–5 of the series, produced in both English and French, attracted audiences of

roughly 2.3 million Canadians to CBC and its French-language counterpart Radio-Canada” in its inaugural season.⁴⁹ Later the same year the CBC made the even more grand boast that *A People's History* was “the most watched documentary in Canadian history: one of every two Canadians watched some part of the series.”⁵⁰ Given the enormous publicity that accompanied the launch – and hence the likelihood that some viewers tuned in simply to see what all the fuss was about – it is impossible to gauge the extent of Canadian viewers' episode-over-episode loyalty to the series or, more pointedly, to get any sense of the impact these programs have had on their understanding of Canadian history. What does seem noteworthy, however, is that the strongest market for *A People's History* is expected to be, as it has been for most of its predecessors, in the schools. By the autumn of 2001, according to the CBC, “approximately 80% of schools across the country are expected to have access to the series, either from purchasing the series themselves or through their School Board's licensing of duplication rights.”⁵¹

Certainly Mark Starowicz, the much-celebrated executive producer of *A People's History* and director of the CBC's Canadian History Project, envisages a grand future for historical programming at CBC-TV. Working from the premise that “[j]ournalism is a sub-set of the historical profession,” he intends to “establish the Project as a permanent history department [at the CBC], similar to that which is maintained at the BBC.”⁵² Such a development would without question be good for Canadians and good for Canadian history, but many questions remain. Of these, the most compelling is whether *A People's History* was in fact the harbinger of a revolution in television broadcasting or something far more ephemeral.

Endnotes

- 1 The following essay has previously appeared in Robert Wright, *Virtual Sovereignty: Nationalism and the Making of Modern Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004).
- 2 On this at least, Leo Groarke and I agree. However, we disagree on much else. While he castigates the historical profession for specialization, which “implies a process of reduction and compartmentalization” and operates “by reducing broader questions to narrower ones which are said to be more tractable” (see Leo Groarke, “Teaching History: The Future of the Past,” 69 in this volume, I contend that it is

precisely this attention to detail and this reluctance to view history as a blueprint for the future that make the work currently being undertaken in history departments valuable.

- 3 J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998), 3. See also Ken Osborne, "Review of Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?*," *Canadian Historical Review* 80:1 (March 1999) 114-18; A. B. McKillop, "Who Killed Canadian History? A View from the Trenches," *Canadian Historical Review* 80:2 (1999): 269-99; and Bryan D. Palmer, "Of Silences and Trenches: A Dissident View of Granatstein's Meaning," *Canadian Historical Review* 80:4 (1999): 676-86.
- 4 "Cable Companies Plan History Networks" *American History Illustrated* 28:4 (September/October 1993): 15.
- 5 John Flynn, "It's All History Now" *Brandweek* 46:18 (29 April 1996): 6; "History Channel to Debut," *History Today* 29:6 (February 1995): 12.
- 6 "History Channel to Debut," 12.
- 7 Dan Davids, cited in Flynn, "It's All History Now," 6.
- 8 Charles Maday, cited in "History Channel to Debut," 12.
- 9 Jack Myers, cited in Flynn, "It's All History Now," 6.
- 10 Mark Vittert, "Thankful for History" *Triangle Business Journal* 13:13 (28 November 1997): 39. <<http://triangle.bizjournals.com/triangle/stories/1997/12/01/editorial3.html>> (5 August, 2004).
- 11 "History Channel to Debut," 12.
- 12 "History Channel Dumps Corporate Profile Series" *Advertising Age* 67:24 (10 June 1996): 2.
- 13 Cited in "History Plan Rewritten" *Advertising Age* (7 June 1996).
- 14 Alliance executives acknowledge that they benefitted greatly from *The History Channel's* US\$10 million dollar ad campaign spearheaded by the New York firm Moss/Dragoti and centring on the slogan "Where the past comes alive."
- 15 John McKay, "Four New Cable Outlets Getting Ready to Launch" *Canadian Press* (11 May 1997).
- 16 Janet Eastwood, cited in John McKay, "Four New Cable Outlets Getting Ready to Launch."
- 17 Norm Bolen, cited in Christopher Moore, "History Television: Stay Tuned" *Beaver* 78:1 (February/March 1998): 50.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Peter McFarlane, cited in *ibid.*
- 21 See *Decision CRTC 99-106* (19 March 1999).
- 22 Alliance Atlantis Communication Inc., *Investors' Overview*; <http://www.allianceatlantis.com/corporate/inv_relations> (1 November 2000).
- 23 Canadian Association of Broadcasters, *A Submission to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission with Respect to Public Notice CRTC 1998-44* (30 June 1998) [emphasis added]. This document is available at the Canadian Association of Broadcasters website, at <http://www.cab-acr.ca/english/research/98/sub_jun3098.shtm> (15 October 2000).
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Norm Bolen, cited in *Transcript of Proceedings for the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission Canadian Television Policy Review* 14:9 (14 October

1998) [emphasis added]. This document is posted in full at the CRTC website at <<http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/transcripts/1998/tb1014.htm>> (15 October 2000).

- 27 Andrew Cardoso, cited in *ibid.*
- 28 In its 1998 presentation at the CRTC's Canadian Television Policy Review, The Canadian Independent Film Caucus lauded the work of John Grierson and the National Film Board, which "... led the world in the development of compelling new documentary film making techniques - styles which became renowned as 'cinema direct' and 'candid eye.'" See *A Level Playing Field for the Documentary* (29 June 1998) at <<http://www.cab-acr.ca/english/research/1998.shtm>> (15 October 2000).
- 29 Phyllis Yaffe, cited in *Transcript of Proceedings for the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission Canadian Television Policy Review* 14:9 (14 October 1998).
- 30 See *CRTC Public Notice 1999-48* (20 May 1999) at <<http://www.crtc.gc.ca/archive/eng/Notices/1999/PB99-48.htm>> (15 October 2000). It is also worth noting that the merger was conditional on increased "Canadian content" provisions. Sydney Suissa, Vice-President of Programming at *History Television*, told me that this minimum content requirement is likely to be exceeded by Alliance Atlantis over the term of its licenses.
- 31 According to the CIBC's "case study" of *A Scattering of Seeds*, the initial capitalization of this thirteen-part series was so precarious that the producers "had to defer their entire fee." *A Scattering of Seeds* went on to enjoy both great critical acclaim and "popular success," winning top prize (the Gold Medal for Best Documentary Television Series) at the Worldfest in Houston, Texas. In Canada, the series was said to have been "well publicized," translating into "excellent" ratings on both *History Television* and *Historia* (see *A Level Playing Field*).
- 32 Jerry McNabb, cited in *A Level Playing Field*.
- 33 Cited in *ibid.*
- 34 Cited in *ibid.*
- 35 It is perhaps testimony to the mystique of televisual media that Suissa's name appears nowhere in recent Canadian historiography, even though he is clearly one of the country's most influential historical popularisers. It is worth recalling in this connection that an earlier generation of popularisers - most importantly Pierre Berton and Peter C. Newman - enjoyed no such anonymity.
- 36 Sydney Suissa, Interview by author, June 2000.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Jason Botchford, "Canadians Flunk Out in War History: Poll," *Toronto Sun*, 11 November 1998.
- 39 Suissa, Interview by author, June 2000. As for the criteria by which documentaries are selected for broadcast on *History Television*, Suissa listed the following: "i) the quality of the storytelling; ii) the quality and originality of the research; iii) the production values; iv) and the subject."
- 40 Suissa, Interview by author, June 2000.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Claire Bickley, "Nominated Documentaries Air Before Oscars," *Toronto Sun*, 17 February 1998.
- 43 Claire Bickley, "Fascist Immersed in Soapy Froth," *Toronto Sun*, 13 November 1998.

- 44 Christopher Moore correctly observed that most of *History Television's* on-screen personalities were "refugees from the bloodlettings of recent years in CBC and CTV current affairs departments" and noted "a painful hint of Ted Baxter about them when they suddenly became historians." See "History Television: Stay Tuned," 50.
- 45 Rick Mercer, cited in Claire Bickley, "Shedding a Little Lite on the Past" *Toronto Sun*, 3 December 1997. Recounts Mercer, of *History Television's* refusal to sanction this bit of historical speculation: "They say, 'You can't say that,' and I'm saying, 'Why? Is the Hitler family going to get upset?' [They say to me] 'Is that true?' This is the History channel and we want to be accurate." [I say] 'For the point of this show, he only had one ball, okay?' Then we picture the Grade Eight student writing the paper, 'Hitler only had one ball. Footnote: *History Television*.'"
- 46 Pat St. Germain and Bill Brioux, "Sex Charge Kills Pioneer Dream," *Sun Media*, 7 June 2000. See also Robert Williams, "Pioneers Press On," *Winnipeg Sun*, 27 June 2000.
- 47 Kjell Espmark, cited in John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Penguin, 1998), 30.
- 48 See Robert Wright, "Historical Underdosing: Pop Demography and the Crisis in Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81:4 (December 2000): 646-67.
- 49 CBC Press Release "CBC Delighted by Response to Canada: A People's History" (2 January 2001). <http://history.cbc.ca/history/?Mival=PressContent2.html&press_id=4978> (4 August 2004).
- 50 CBC Press release "CBC Announces BCE Sponsorship of Season Two of Canada: A People's History" (7 August 2001). <http://history.cbc.ca/history/?Mival=PressContent2.html&press_id=6246> (4 August 2004).
- 51 CBC Press Release "Season Two Fact Sheet" (1 September 2001). <http://history.cbc.ca/history/?Mival=PressContent2.html&press_id=6246> (4 August 2004).
- 52 Tod Hoffman, "Making History," *McGill News Alumni Quarterly* (Fall 2001).

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