

Canadian TV: If it ain't broke ...

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GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

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Over the past three weeks, in a public hearing room in Gatineau, Que., the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) heard all sides of a debate over the regulatory framework for the distribution of television services to Canadians. The core discussion featured two opposing views: those advocating for broad deregulation allowing market forces to define the broadcasting industry, and others recommending measures to strengthen the diversity of Canadian voices and the public interest role broadcasting has long played in this country. In its wake, this fundamental paradox: Do Canadians view their broadcasting system as consumers or as citizens?

As we make our way into each new day, how many of us consciously distinguish between the attitudes or actions of our "consumer" selves as opposed to those connected to our "citizen" selves? Some might even ask if it is possible to make such a distinction. In all likelihood, such questions seldom preoccupy any of us during our morning commute to work or school.

Yet the implications that flow from the answer to that question provide significant insight into who we are and where we are going and, for that matter, where our broadcasting system might be going.

The fact that Canada is a capitalist democracy enjoined with many other nations in an integrated global economy challenges us all to understand the growing dilemma we face in harmonizing and reconciling our status as both consumers and citizens - the tension between our individual consumer interests versus our collective interest in establishing rules that seek the common good.



CRTC Chairman Konrad von Finckenstein is seen through a camera monitor as Rogers Communications Inc., appears before the CRTC hearing earlier this month. (*Sean Kilpatrick for The Globe and Mail*)



Robert B. Reich addresses the issue in his latest book, *Supercapitalism*.

Arguing that we all have within ourselves elements and interests of the investor, the consumer, the worker and the citizen, he says a critical balance has been lost. He writes that it is the citizenry that is most threatened by the "supercapitalism" now defining the American economy.

In effect, he suggests capitalism is dominating U.S. democratic institutions. Mr. Reich sees a need to reassert the public interest through a creative application of government regulation focused on the public interest and the attainment of societal goals.

Of course, government regulation can also miss the mark. This can be the result of political overreaction, poor design or a failure by government to modernize regulation to meet new economic, social and technological challenges. This is not unique to America.

On our side of the border, Canadian government regulation is frequently complex, sometimes obscure, and almost always somewhat controversial.

It touches on everything from nuclear safety to the integrity of the food system, from emission standards for cars through to the underpinnings of the financial system.

And for many decades, we have also had federal regulation of Canadian broadcasting.

Canada's system of broadcast regulation is an example of how the system can work. Today's regulatory regime, though imperfect and in constant need of fine-tuning, is the result of years of evolution. It has developed through numerous public consultations, reflecting technological, social and cultural changes in our country, with measured responses and reforms by both elected officials and a succession of CRTC commissioners.

Simply stated, we have the very best broadcasting system in the world and, not surprisingly, the very best example of tangible outcomes in the history of Canadian cultural policy. Today, we have access to more than 500 local and discretionary Canadian TV services, operating in English, French and more than 40 other languages, including the world's first Aboriginal people's network.

Canadians enjoy more access to domestic television services on a per capita basis than anywhere else in the world. Furthermore, the system's primary measure of success is in audience delivery: more than 70 per cent of English-language viewing and more than 95 per cent

