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An R3 4 You and Me: CBC Radio 3's public service youth broadcasting

This paper discusses the role of CBC Radio 3—a new media, youth-oriented initiative from Canada's national public broadcaster. Radio 3 has emerged in a context shaped by technological change and audience fragmentation. Radio 3 developed as an appropriate and successful response to these challenges. With an increased focus on diversity, community-building and cultural journalism, it could become a dominant force in new media.

Introducing...

Few Canadians know of their national public broadcaster's third radio network, CBC Radio 3. No wonder! Radio 3 is not our parents' conventional radio network. It "has been developed by CBC Radio to meet the needs of younger listeners, while taking advantage of new delivery platforms. CBC Radio 3's blend of cutting-edge contemporary music is streamed over the Internet, is a podcasting service, and is one of the services offered by Sirius Canada (CBC 2007, 26).

Among these three offerings we find a mixture of traditional radio and new media innovations. Radio 3's satellite channel is essentially a traditional radio station served over new transmission lines. To receive satellite radio, listeners must purchase a special receiver and pay a monthly fee. However, the satellite feed is high-quality and reaches almost all of North America, expanding CBC Radio's reach to all corners of the nation. Sirius launched in December 2005, and now claims over 500, 000 listeners (although, there is no way of knowing how many listen specifically to Radio 3; Pratt).

Radio 3's innovative podcasts—recordings of radio shows made available for easy download—are issued both daily and weekly. The flagship Radio 3 Podcast is the "number

one listened-to music podcast in Canada with approximately 200, 000 downloads per week as of December 2006" (CBC 2007, 32). This is joined by the weekly R3TV video podcast, and the weekly R330 chart show, among others. Once downloaded, podcasts can be transferred to portable music players, allowing listeners to carry Radio 3 around with them, until they have the time and inclination to tune-in. As a bonus, the podcasts display rich metadata, such as band photos and internet links to match each song played.

Radio 3 finds its original home online at radio3.cbc.ca. The heart of the site is New Music Canada (NMC), a massive repository of original music uploaded directly by Canadian independent artists. Every song can be enjoyed for free (not downloaded) and every band has the ability to remove or add their own music. Artists may also keep a weblog, and post information about upcoming tours, point of sale, artist bios, etc. NMC promotional copy currently boasts "over 10, 000 bands and nearly 60, 000 individual tracks" (CBC Radio 3) ranging from roots and electronic, to rock, folk and hip hop. Despite this sheer volume of music, Radio 3 is constantly adding Canadian studio and concert recordings going back to the late 90s. As of September 2007, this site has featured a live radio stream, complete with hosts (though wholly independent of the Sirius feed). Unlike the satellite feed, this radio is fully embedded in the Radio 3 website, which means each song played links to its entry in NMC. If listeners are interested by the songs they hear played, they have instant access to the artists' profiles, including more music by the artist. Listeners can even build their own playlists by sifting through the database. On any given week 35, 000 unique visitors will make 50, 000 visits to the Radio 3 website (Pratt).

The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage's 2003 report *Our Cultural*

Sovereignty is especially enthusiastic over Radio 3, describing it as "an appropriate and cost-effective [way] to reach a wider, and younger audience" and recognised the special role of "cross-platform strategies" in its success (216). Yet however successful to date, Radio 3's mandate demands a great deal more than it currently offers. Understanding Radio 3's history, and the context surroundings its development allows for recognition of its successes and deficiencies alike, and makes clear the mandated future.

The Long Birth

Radio 3's history is putatively short, but based on its staff, traces back as far as youth programming has found a home at CBC. As early as the 1970s CBC Radio had "The Great Canadian Gold Rush," a pop music show, later joined by the new music show "Neon" (Wisdom). The 1983 English Radio Development Project paved the way for two new shows on Radio 2's late-night spots, "Brave New Waves" and "Nightline" (Sahota 68). With the addition of Saturday evenings, these timeslots remained dedicated to youth music for 23 year ending in Spring 2007. Radio 3's success is partly a reflection of the experience of its producers and hosts, many of whom worked on these groundbreaking, experimental radio shows.

Broadcasting youth programming on Radio 2 was never easily accepted. David Wisdom, the host of Radio 2's "Nightline" and "Radio Sonic," claims that "There was—and still is—resistance to the fact that there is such a thing as what they consider pop music on the CBC. There are still producers here who think it's killing the CBC." This pressure led to the late-nineties proposal for a separate Youth Radio Network, aka Radio Three. According to the 1999 Corporate Plan, this network would have served "Canadians under the age of 30, an often-overlooked demographic group that deserves better. […]

Radio Three will provide an important new outlet for young Canadian artists whose work is often excluded from commercial radio" (10). According to one of the proposal's writers, Radio Three would have provided "an interesting mix of music, popular music and conversation and information" (Sahota 64). The goal then, was to migrate and expand Radio 2's youth programming on the YRN, including new music, youth cultural and information programming.

In 2000, CBC received a new President with a conservative vision for the Mother Corp. The proposal for YRN was scuttled, but a budget of $1.5 million was provided to put Radio 3 online (Sahota 71). Unlike the Radio 3 of today, the original site was more experimental and disintegrated. The very first Radio 3 initiative to launch was not even an exclusively audio enterprise: *120seconds.com* allowed Canadians to upload audio, video, photography, written work, even multimedia applications. Much like NMC feeds today's podcasts, Radio 3 harnessed this repository of free content to create the R3 Magazine. Sahota describes the magazine as a weekly "digest, featuring poetry, fiction, photography, profiles on Canadian arts communities, artists, musicians and a variety of articles with accompanying spoken word audio (including streaming music selections voted upon by *newmusiccanada* audiences)" (72). The Magazine received numerous radio awards, including the prestigious *Prix Italia* and numerous New York Festivals (CBC Radio 3).

Nevertheless, when CBC announced that Radio 3 would be part of its satellite radio proposal, the Magazine and virtually all its staff were cut loose, with more traditionally radio-oriented staff hired in replacement (Sahota 84). Over 2005, Radio 3 was reshaped into the network we experience today. Leaving behind the expansive vision of the R3

Magazine and *120seconds.com*—encompassing multiple media and cultural reporting—Radio 3 has narrowed down to its current mandate expressed in the CBC's 2007 Strategic Objectives: "CBC Radio 3 should be a driving force in contemporary music, identifying and promoting leading-edge Canadian talent. (CBC 2007, 27).

In this brief history, there were two key decisions affecting Radio 3's development. The first was bringing Radio 3 online, ditching conventional radio. The second was reorienting Radio 3 away from multimedia and cultural reporting, to focus on its core competency, the NMC repository. While both of these decisions are justifiable given changes to the media landscape, it seems that Radio 3's mandate demands a bit more.

A Context of Change

At the time that the YRN proposal was conceived of and written, the radio industry had already begun to change. Escalating copyright fees have cost commercial radio stations close to $50 million over 10 years, which combined with changes in listening habits will cost the radio industry a further $39 million by 2010 (CAB). The UK's industry in the last year alone lost 9% of their previous revenues (Ofcom 2007, 18). While copyright is certainly an issue, changes in listenership present a more compelling problem.

This change is indicated by Australia's 1985 ANOP study, which found that 91% of 15-24 year-olds listened to the radio (Sternberg 111). This is very close to the UK's current overall rate of 92% daily or weekly radio listenership (Ofcom 2007, 239), indicating that youth probably used to listen as much as anyone else. In Canada, this is no longer the case. Sahota notes that between 1990–97, children and teenagers logged a 1.8 hour drop in listening, totalling only 10.4 hours or radio per week. This 9% drop accompanied a

drop by 18-34 year-olds, who totalled only 18–19 hours a week (61). Compared to the 2001 national average—21.7 hours a week—the youngest Canadians were tuning out in dramatic numbers (OCS 75).

In the UK, a state with comparatively advanced digital radio and mobile phone infrastructures, more recent stats show that drops in radio listening are further apace: down 17.3% for 25-34 year-olds, approximately 8% for younger listeners (Ofcom 2007, 235). Overall, radio listening hours are down 2% while internet use is up a staggering 158%. In 2006, Ofcom reported that 16-24 year-olds were well above average in their internet use, logging three hours a day. Canadian numbers are older, but considering that average internet use doubled between 1997–2001 to total 9 hours a week—Canada is likely comparable. At the time, half of all 6-16 year-olds were already logging at least 1 hour of daily internet use (OCS 106-8).

Of course, some of this time online is spent listening to internet radio: 12% according to UK data (Ofcom 2007, 239). But the drop in radio listening is not only attributable to the internet: in Canada, there are new specialty and pay-television services, as well as digital and satellite radio, and internet content can now be carried around on iPods and iPhones (and non-Apple comparables). While the UK's "16-24 year olds spend on average 21 minutes more time online per week [... they] spend over seven hours less time watching television" (Ofcom 2006). Internet use accounts for only a portion of time lost to conventional broadcasters. Audience fragmentation is particularly noticeable among youth, as they seem more willing to adopt participatory multimedia; for broadcasters, this means youth are not simply changing transmission mode, they are actually consuming less, and creating more. This observation is backed up by data from

the 2006 Ofcom report, showing that "70 percent of youth (compared to 41 percent of the general populartion) have used some kind of social networking site, such as MySpace, and 20 percent have their own website or blog." The internet's technologies of choice have unleashed the populations desires, and the radio industry cannot afford to ignore this new reality. Already, 49% of UK youth want more control over how they listen to the radio, and 59% want it to be easier to choose what is listened to on the radio (Ofcom 2007, 90).

An Appropriate Response

Fortunately, audience fragmentation is not a new phenomenon. As *Our Cultural Sovereignty* notes, "similar periods of change have swept through other media. Perhaps the best example is the magazine industry" followed by the book industry (113-14). General interest magazines have responded to the proliferation of niche magazines and subsequent audience fragmentation by forming their own niche markets. The book industry's complementary response has been to put more resources into marketing and promoting selected materials.

Radio 3 seems to have been formulated as a similar response. Its target audience is anything but general: youth, but only covering music related to youth, and arguably only rockist music. As the strategic goal states, Radio 3 exists for the sole and limited reason of 'identifying and promoting leading-edge Canadian talent.' Based on the explosion of Canadian independent music, much of which was first featured on Radio 3, it should be considered a successful reorientation to audience fragmentation along the model provided by the publishing industry. In fact, both CBC's 1998-99 Corporate Plan and the 2007-08 Corporate Plan describe YRN/Radio 3 as a "specialised" or "unique niche radio

service."

In other respects, Radio 3 has successfully met the challenges of technological and economic change. Radio 3 does not have to worry about rising copyright fees, since it licenses the music on NMC for free. It might actually provide a service to commercial broadcasters by launching the careers of emerging, independent (and thus cheaper) artists who are paid in CDN dollars (although this particular concern may have recently been inverted). More importantly, Radio 3's cross-platform presence ensures that youth audiences retain service by the public broadcaster. As Ofcom's 2007 report shows, over half the time spent online by youth and adults 25-44 years-old is dedicated to downloading music or video. Internet radio accounts for one fifth to a quarter of time online, and social networking another quarter (81). Closer to home, a 2000 Environics poll showed that over 55% of youths' time spent online was dedicated to music (OCS 108). In 2001 Edison Media Research corroborated the Environics poll's finding that between 80-85% of youth's total extracurricular time is spent listening to music (OCS 109). Given music's importance to youth, it seems clear that CBC Radio would regain a sizeable market share if only it made good music available to youth. Radio 3 has been doing this on youth's own terms—by inhabiting a diversity of media, and incorporating participatory and social networking technologies.

An argument could be made that the CBC is even obliged to service these new media platforms. McKinsey & Company's landmark study of 20 public broadcasters found that "public broadcasters have helped 'raise the bar' by exerting pressure on private broadcasters to produce [...] high-quality programs" (OCS 180). The study's *McKinsey Quarterly* summary notes, however, that the public broadcaster can only exert pressure

when it programs from a position of strength (Blake 22). Thus not only must the CBC provide "high-quality, distinctive" programing online and over satellite radio, but it must stake out its dominance early in the game. As Radio 3's former Director Robert Ouimet writes on his blog, Canadians would "be far better off with one kick ass Canadian channel on those new satellite services, than ten or fifteen auto-pilots working their way through the MAPL catalogue." When he declares that Canadians need "inventive and responsive programming that works hard to attract an audience" he is likely thinking of CBC Radio 3.

Radio 3's strategy has been particularly astute given the industry climate, as reflected by the CRTC's recent decision on the Commercial Radio Policy 2006. *Friends of Canadian Broadcasting* had raised the issue of whether content providers should commit to Canadian content floors on new media platforms (Morrison). While the CRTC's decision was necessarily limited to conventional radio, it responded indirectly by acknowledging that new "regulated and unregulated technologies for the distribution of music to consumers" such as MP3 players, podcasting and internet radio were a "challenge" setting the context for their long-contemplated policy. One would assume, then, that they intend for such technologies to remain unregulated in the future.

The CRTC's alternative strategy for promoting Canadian content is to strengthen funding mechanisms that emphasize "the creation and promotion of audio content broadcast through the development of Canadian musical and spoken word talent, including journalists. This approach should help to increase the amount of high-quality Canadian music and spoken word material, and promote emerging Canadian talent." While they do not dicuss new media platforms, their thinking clearly aligns with Radio 3's

strategy of aggresively promoting leading-edge Canadian talent. In fact, Radio 3's current

Director Steve Pratt explains that their place on Sirius satellite radio is crucial to fulfilling

their mandate, since exposing American audiences to Candian arts and culture gives a

tremendous and unique advantage to these musicians. Thus, in form and function, Radio

3 has responded appropriately and successfully to the challenges posed by audience

fragmentation and technological change.

Diversity

Nevertheless, it is important to consider in what ways Radio 3 might better serve the

CBC's mandate. Becoming a niche service is a big change for youth programing that was

once carried on national airwaves. The Mandate itself only commits the CBC to broadcast

"throughout Canada" to "national and regional audiences" (3.1.m.ii, vii). However, it

would seem that the strategy behind Radio 2's youth scheduling had aimed to do more

than simply reach youth audiences. As Philip Savage (YRN co-author) explains, listeners

use radio "vertically, they follow through on the one channel" without surfing the

airwaves (Sahota 66-67). Thus, in "attempting to balance the duty of an arts and culture

service with the realities of listening habits" (67), Radio 2 seems to have employed what

McKinsey & Company term "sophisticated scheduling" (Blake 23). Classical music gave

way to jazz in the late evening, which then transitioned to the more experimental Brave

New Waves after midnight—a transition which hoped to keep earlier listeners tuned-in

long enough to give more daring programming a chance. This strategy finds statistical

justification in the experience of public service television (23), and may have been

intended by the 1983 English Radio Development Project (Sahota 68).* Regardless of

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* As a simple anecdote, I discovered *RadioSonic* and later *Brave New Waves* precisely because I
turned on Radio 2 expecting to hear jazz, and was instead serenaded by electro-acoustic conga.

whether similar data was provided to Radio 2's management or not, they actually paid more attention to the huge volume of complaints received. From these they decided that it was impossible to serve popular and classical music on the same station. Despite the merits of more diverse programming, Radio 2's audiences were mutually exclusive, and mutually disappointed (64).

For their part, the Radio 2 youth hosts took pains to separate their shows from the previous lineup. As former *Brave New Waves* host Brent Bambury recalled, "people think that we're so defiantly in-your-face that there's just no way they can connect with us, and in some ways that's the image we like to keep in the first part of the program." Radio 3 host Grant Lawrence described opening Radio 2's *RadioSonic* as "a cold bucket of water in the face of whoever is listening [...] starkly different" (Sahota 78). Clearly they are not trying to build a general audience appreciative of experimental and emerging music—a task suggested by the CBC's mandate to "contribute to shared national consciousness and identity" (3.1.m.vi). In fact, when interviewed about Radio 3's target demographic, Pratt responded that he prefers to think of his audience as a "psychographic [...] an audience built around finding things that they like." This statement ignores the fact that Radio 3 has three separate radio streams that are explicitly programmed by Radio 3 staff. These streams (including the podcasts) comprise Radio 3's primary interface, and the primary way in which listeners will discover new artists.

By prioritizing the simple availability of new music (whether late-night on Radio 2 or on a searchable online database) over audience reach, CBC Radio forsakes a further aspect of its mandate, to "reflect the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada" (3.1.m.viii). Audiences tune in based on what is available on NMC. Availability is

determined by which artists are familiar with Radio 3 and comfortable making use of its system. In the absence of a serious advertising budget, Radio 3 has built its awareness by word-of-mouth, which has allowed the music to grow exponentially (Sahota 80). However, cultural communities which discover NMC later in the game are relatively swamped, and less likely to gain exposure on the radio streams. By hiring its staff from the Vancouver music scene, Radio 3 has successfully gained the trust of the urban, independent music industry (Sahota 75). But relying on its staff for outreach has neglected those communities without a direct connection, and thus skewed the diversity of NMC's music.

According to Pratt, Radio 3 further relies on its staff to sift among new albums and uploads to program the radio streams. When asked whether these weekly cullings prioritize cultural diversity, Pratt noted that there was no real policy on the matter, but that his staff "live, eat and breath music," that they actually belong to the music scene and they "must understand their place within this scene." It seems that he considers the independent music community inherently diverse. However, this assumption erases the prejudices that inevitably underlie various staff's tastes and experiences as musicians. While their contributions to Radio 3 are obviously valuable, they must nevertheless strive to look outside their own experiences to include unrepresented voices. Canadian youth would undoubtedly benefit from hearing their fellow youth exploring First Nations drum music, spoken word poetry, electro-acoustic noise, etc. Yet a quick breakdown of the latest R330 chart (week ending 20 December 2007) reveals *at most <u>three</u>* songs out of thirty that are not rock or rockist. By serving only a niche audience of indie rockers, Radio 3 neglects the multicultural and generalist directives in its mandate.

Community

Former Director Ouimet would disagree with this verdict, noting that independent music communities "don't listen to CBC radio at all so the fact that they can have a bunch of people streaming pop music [...] it's hugely successful in fulfilling CBC's mandate which is reaching all Canadians" (Sahota 76). But of course, the goal is not simply to reach all Canadians, but to create a community of Canadians responsive one to another over the medium of the public broadcaster. To its credit, Radio 3 does in fact recognise its community-building responsibility, and has founded its existence on this activity.

Because Radio 3 only plays user-submitted music, it can only succeed by gaining musicians' trust and providing them with tangible benefits. David Wisdom remarked that his radio show "wove around the record store people [...] record stores [and labels] are always really important in music scenes." More a place for commerce, a record stores is the hub of a community, allowing musicians to meet and develop influences and inspiration—and for audiences and financiers to interact with their cultural leaders. CBC Radio came to serve much the same purpose, networking these communities from coast-to-coast. In the post-plastic age, Radio 3 provides a similar forum for tastemaker, audience and artist. Radio 3's website features participatory, community-building technologies—from audience-driven ratings system, blogs for artists and staff, to integration with Facebook, and the social photography site Flickr. But Radio 3's hard work is not creating an online community, it is building real cultural communities on Canadian soil. As demonstrated by former *Brave New Waves* host Michael Barclay's comments, good radio's influence stretches well beyond its listening limits: "this [band] didn't have time to sit at home listening to the radio anymore. They were too busy out in

the real world, making it happen." No longer impeded by Radio 2's late-night timeslot, these active, integrated artists are Radio 3's ideal listeners.

Tomorrow's music industry will be vastly different from that of David Wisdom. In the UK, 90% of last year's recorded singles were sold online (Ofcom 2007, 5). Instead of the record store, people could make Radio 3 their first stop when shopping for new Canadian music. To become such an important pillar in the Candian music scene, Radio 3 must continue its efforts in the non-virtual world. Its recording sessions with promising but undiscovered artists are earning well-deserved fame, giving important boosts to young musicians, and drawing more traffic to the website. Radio 3 recorded 70 sessions in 2003, funnelling between $ 150, 000 - $ 200, 000 into the pockets of emerging artists (Sahota 79, 88; Belanger 125). In the last few years, Radio 3 has enhanced its efforts, by partnering with record stores, local-scale venues, and music festivals to capture sessions in front of live audiences. In 2004 it even organised a cross-country tour, featuring a dozen francophone and anglophone bands and photo-blowups from the R3 Magazine (Sahota 79). The CBC must grant Radio 3 more funding to further these initiatives, and Radio 3 must continue to innovate real-world events in support of Canadian artists. By securing a critical place in Canada's cultural communities, online services such as NMC are guaranteed continued success.

Cultural Journalism

Given that Radio 3's success depends on growing its community presence, and increasing the diversity of its listeners and contributors, it must also re-evaluate its singular focus on emerging music. Music programming (even pop) is more important than some might credit it, especially for youth. Media facilitate "the process by which

youth come to acquire, or resist acquiring, behaviors and beliefs in the greater social world" (Belanger 128). As K. C. Montgomery notes, adolescents frequently listen to music in *private*, because it helps them discover an identity, and learn to handle unfamiliar emotions (Belanger 128). Thus Belanger concludes, "civic youth media sites that use music as a vehicle for youth expression tap into their developmental needs [...] through active participation." Radio 3 clearly has this nailed. But what makes the internet so interesting, and what the R3 Magazine revealed, are the myriad ways in which music married to photography, poetry, sound art and journalism can elicit a deeper, fascinating range of youth expression. Given the range of possibilities inherent to the platform, it would be irresponsible (and probably impossible) to "reflect Canada and its regions [... and its] multicultural and multiracial nature" (1.3.m.ii, viii) using music alone. Some equally participatory and groundbreaking form of cultural journalism is necessary to complement Radio 3's music service.

There is significant evidence that youth would not only need, but desire and value journalism on their national public broadcaster. Australia's Broadcasting Corporation's national youth network, Triple J, actually does cover news and current affairs. In the late ninties, they programmed 5 hours of news per week, and 15 hours of current affairs (117). At that time, a survey found that close to 40% of youth considered radio as the best source for the most news, and 72% of youth claimed "they would miss not having any news on the radio" (117). Clearly, the perception that a youth radio network does not require journalism rings false.

Radio 3's current cultural journalism consists of 1-3 minute interviews and short vignettes featuring independent artists. An issue of the weekly R3 Magazine consisted of

25-40 pages of rich, multimedia cultural reporting. According to a semi-official estimate published in the Toronto Star, traffic during the R3 Magazine era hit 5.5 million page views per month, from 400, 000 – 500, 000 visitors (Sahota 73). Recently interviewed, Steve Pratt now claims 200, 000 page views per week, from 35, 000 unique visitors. Even considering the earlier numbers are likely inflated for public relations sake, there is a noticeable decrease in traffic. Whether these statistics present a legitimate argument for the return of cultural journalism, it is undeniable that Radio 3 used to provide a more innovative and compelling exploitation of new media platforms.

In Radio 3, the CBC is building a model for strong, public service broadcasting in the age of fragmented audiences and myriad delivery platforms. With increased funding and resources, Radio 3 could be the pillar for emerging cultural communities that it aspires to be. Yet it must first identify and welcome those cultural communities it has thus-far ignored. It must also find ways to re-introduce genuine cultural journalism that supports youth expression over rich, multimedia platforms.

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