

BOOK REVIEW

Canada's Video Revolution, Pay-TV, Home Video and Beyond,

by Peter Lyman, published by James Lorimer and Company, in association with the Canadian Institute for Economic Policy, 1983, 173 pp., \$16.95 (cloth), \$7.95 (paper).

Peter Lyman is an optimist. Managing Director of the Ottawa-based consultants Nordicity Group, he has just completed this study of the future of Canada's communications system. **Canada's Video Revolution** documents, in startling detail, what this country's communications systems are in for, and the consequences to each of them.

New communications technology is radically changing the basic fabric of the traditional cultural industries: print and electronic media. It is giving birth to new variants such as videotex and videodisc; it is substantially altering the electronic cultural industries of radio and television; and it is causing great uncertainty about the continuing viability of other established cultural industries, such as newspapers, film and publishing.

That said on page one, Lyman then proceeds to walk us through his own optic of the future, in 173 very tight pages. He starts with the technological advances that are propelling us into this *Communication Galactica*: microelectronics, miniaturization; information and data storage; transmission and switching technologies. All in a clean, comprehensible prose, that even laypersons can grasp.

From there, with the technological implications in hand, Lyman roller-coasters us through the probabilities. New delivery systems with acronyms like MDS (multi-point distribution system) STV (off-air subscription TV), DBS (direct broadcast satellites), fibre optics. With a benign calm he rattles on about interconnecting components, before many of us are really comfortable with subscription pay, home computers or even video games.

Lyman lays out an historical pattern that has afflicted the country since Mackenzie King asked Sir John Aird in 1929 what Canada should do about radio. First arrives the technology (take your pick - film, radio, cable, colour). Then come the entrepreneurs with a desire to harness it for profit.

Applications are made for appropriate licencing, distribution franchises are obtained, then wham-bam, government intervenes. In twentieth-century Canada, new communications technology has meant new means of importing foreign (read American) ideas, attitudes, programs, spirit. And as each new technology has arrived, the government's reaction naturally has been to retard the introduction, until its cultural implications have been assessed.

In 1920, radio became a North American reality. By 1932, the forerunner of the CBC was established. In the early 1940's television was in place. In 1952,

CBC got into television. Ten years after the Americans got colour, Canadian TV introduced it. And the story is more or less the same with pay-TV. Ten to 20 years after the fact, the Canadian service is introduced - a more or less parallel facility - with cultural components built in.

This time round, however, is different. New technologies are coming out of the skies (low-and-high-power satellites, fancy off-air services), through the wires (cable, tiered and multi-faceted); telephone, and fibre optics), in our homes (computers, video games, burglar and fire alarms) and into the work place (VDTs, robotics). And no regulation in the world is going to get at most of these systems.

Pay-TV is a kiddie video-arcade game next to the fancy stuff that's on its way. And one can understand now why John Meisel and the CRTC are in for a decade of migraines. Simply, the permutations Lyman throws up are beyond regulatory enforcement. And reading *Canada's Video Revolution*, one now has some idea why Francis Fox's *Broadcasting Strategy* is such an inchoate jumble of incoherent thrusts.

For example, here's Lyman on the direct broadcast satellite:

The ultimate extension of a satellite distribution system in broadcasting is to render unnecessary the terrestrial middleman (ie., the cable operator or rebroadcaster) by equipping homes with a reception antenna or "dish" to receive the satellite signal directly.

Render Ted Rogers unnecessary? Perish the thought. No wonder the government of Canada's *Broadcasting Strategy* now favours open piracy of American signals. It may be the one hope of keeping an obsolescent technology going.

But there's more. Specifically, the implications the technology has for theatrical film distribution and exhibition:

The specific proposal by the lead DBS proponent... is to launch direct-broadcast-satellite system powerful enough to transmit television signals directly into every home equipped with an inexpensive rooftop dish of only 0.6 m in diameter.

One of the bonuses of such DBS technology would be high-definition television, providing an image equal to a 35 mm projected image in every home, bar or movie theatre.

For film producers, the consequent savings would be films shot, edited, processed on videotape, and then transmitted to every outlet equipped with a dish, and prepared to fork over dollars for projection. Thus, film distribution and exhibition as we know it, and any film policy efforts to impose a levy or quota also become endangered. From Destounis to Gathercole, the implications of Peter Lyman's book are: rethink your positions.

And still, there's a shiny-nose WASP optimism about many of his conclusions:

The communications sector and the

information and entertainment industries represent a large proportion of the growth that will take place in the 1980's. But how does the economic performance of cultural activities relate to the objective of fostering Canadian cultural activities?...

It is assumed that Canada will produce a large number of artists, technicians and entrepreneurs in the new cultural industries. ... successful artists and technicians will gravitate to an environment that provides them with opportunities to grow and gain further experience. They need to work with other creative people and require audiences to sustain them economically as well

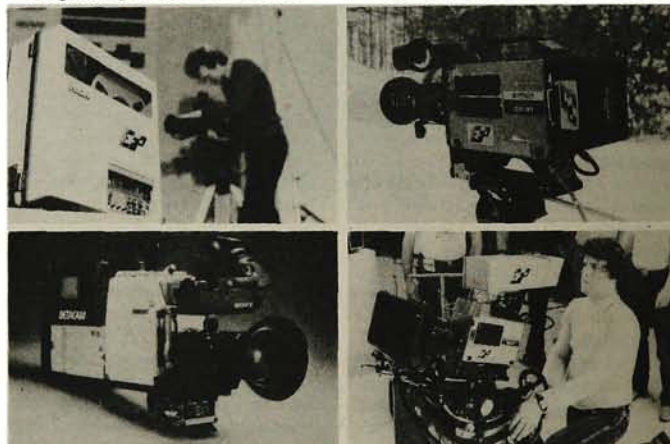
as provide feedback on their work. It is not enough to produce for very small audiences; hence the importance of cultural industries and technology to culture.

The importance of technology to culture is now mandatory study for everyone in film and television; from minister to technician, distributor, cable operator, or regulator, Peter Lyman's book, *Canada's Video Revolution*, keeps making that connector - technology to culture to technology - over and over again. And each time he explores the connectors, new implications emerge.

This book is a must for everyone.

Peter Pearson

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