

“Going begging: building tasteful programming in Canada during and after the bigger downturn.”

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Although they acknowledged daily that their broadcasts were going out to significantly different audiences, public service broadcasters in the British Empire/Commonwealth measured themselves and their programming in relation to the wealthier and more experienced British Broadcasting Corporation. The comparison was hardly fair, but the BBC was the most visible model of non-commercial broadcasting for those who were convinced that public service was the way to go. Aspiring to provide a similar service in the Dominion did not constitute a betrayal of listeners’ trust, but rather settled the nerves of some listeners eager to stay in touch with Old Country ways and doings. It was a complex field in which to broadcast. When the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation chose not to carry a speech by the Duke of Windsor, the decision prompted complaints that the only place to hear the speech was on US radio, and that the CBC had been at the same time too eager to emulate the BBC in ignoring the former King’s career since abdication. Being too British would not fly with some listeners, and the CBC did not help its own reputation in this regard. The network’s first General Manager had been with the BBC for more than a decade, and declared in 1939 that the CBC’s programming policy was quite simply “that of the BBC, adapted to Canadian requirements.” Paradoxically, the BBC widened its electronic reach during an era in which the empire was coming apart. For the CBC, the example of the BBC was both an inspiration and an unattainable standard, and the story of the CBC’s first few years on the air reflect this tension. Tailoring programming to an audience that expected quality to be kept up even as the programming day lengthened was a tall order, made even more difficult by limited budgets in which (unlike the BBC example) wire transmission costs and time zone concerns figured prominently. Though there was considerable debate in the late 1920s and early 1930s over what sort of broadcasting system Canada would or could adopt, to claim poverty and cede the field to commercial broadcasters never seriously occurred to those who had the most power to shape the system. The 1930s were broadcasting’s moment in Canada, and despite the impact of the depression – perhaps aided by the severity of the depression – the public service option found enough money and timely support to survive and ultimately thrive in wartime. The financial costs of broadcasting came second to the abstract and deferred costs of not broadcasting, as leaders in the field of public broadcasting saw most commercial fare appealing to the least sophisticated audiences. To lower the tone of programming would be to give up the most crucial fight at its most important stage, the stage when listener expectations were still being formed. In comparing the CBC and BBC, Gladstone Murray encapsulated this very well when he noted: “Neither organisation can claim any advantage over the other in a consistent routine of crisis and strain inevitable to the impact of a new agency of communication. Yet one firmly believes that each in its own way will protect and enrich the intangible assets of the communities served, perhaps decisively.” Precisely what these assets were and how they could be enriched and protected can be better discerned by looking at how the two organizations co-operated, diverged and negotiated the movement of programmes, ideas and personnel across the Atlantic. This paper (which represents the

first section of a chapter on the CBC-BBC relationship from the book I'm writing on programming and taste in early Canadian radio) explores the extent to which the new Canadian public service network looked selectively to the UK for inspiration, for cautionary tales, and for programmes to fill its schedule. Given limited finances, a huge geographic area to serve, and a bountiful supply of American programming, the conditions in which the CBC was launched in 1936 could hardly have been less auspicious. However, thanks to a relationship that could be characterized as consistently warm during the 1930s, the CBC had come to expect that BBC broadcasts would be available to them for the asking. Though this eased the burden of producing content early on, when the BBC did not send its coverage of the Munich Crisis to the news department-less CBC, an American feed had to be found at considerable expense. As well, the CBC had to contend with the possibility that listeners might not reflexively laud everything the BBC might send. Critically-acclaimed radio still might fall flat with listeners, and so CBC staff often cast about for fresh programme ideas that might click. Programming staff suggested military bands and talks by prominent literary figures as potentially attractive productions to be beamed over, even while carrying on a dialogue with their BBC counterparts about the vulgarity of music hall shows and the incompatibility of the British and North American senses of humour. What to choose, and how to deploy it over what I have elsewhere called a 'fledgling' network were questions testing CBC personnel who at the same time desperately wanted to help their service mature quickly and contribute its own productions to the transatlantic (or even the continental) exchange of programmes. First the CBC had to establish its own approach to programming. Overall, this transitional period was notable for the bold declarations radio people made regarding listeners, their tastes, and the abilities of various programmes to meet and to broaden the range of material that listeners might consume. The elephant in the room was often readily-available American programming, but the CBC's determination to account for the listeners who wanted to know "why we couldn't get Big Ben at 7.00" indicates that the elephant was not as powerful as we might expect. Emerging from the last half of the 1930s as a service that recognized and used the political and cultural ties between Britain and Canada without venerating them seemed to be the aim of the CBC, an organization that forced itself to play catch-up during difficult times. It is hoped that the paper will contribute most directly to the symposium's themes of Transnationality and Representations of Crisis.

Len Kuffert teaches history at the University of Manitoba. He published *A Great Duty: Canadian responses to modern life and mass culture* in 2003, and has since been working exclusively on radio, especially on the concept of taste and its relationship to programming in Canada.