The New TVOntario: Salvation or Suicide for Public Educational Broadcasting

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Abstract: When faced with privatization by the Ontario government, the public educational broadcaster TVOntario took a pro-active stance in the face of the neo-liberal ideology of reduced public expenditure and institutional restructuring. TVO won short-term salvation by embracing market model methods, but in so doing it may have lost its niche as a public educational broadcaster. It now faces two major policy challenges. It must balance its general-audience broadcast arm with its newly refocused educational arm and it must negotiate possible political interference from the imperative to connect the government’s newly revised school curricula to its new technology-in-education arm. This paper also situates the TVO example as a rejection of the privatization agenda of the Government of Ontario. Finally, this paper uses the TVO example to raise questions about hybrid models of broadcasting.

Résumé: Pour éviter que le gouvernement de l’Ontario ne la privatise, la station éducative publique TVOntario a adopté une position qui prend les devants face à la volonté néolibérale de réduire les dépenses publiques et restructurer les institutions. À court terme, TVO s’est protégé en adoptant des méthodes axées sur le marché, mais celles-ci lui ont peut-être coûté son créneau particulier à titre de diffuseur éducatif public. En effet, TVO doit maintenant relever deux défis politiques imposants. La station doit équilibrer le besoin de s’adresser à un auditoire général avec celui remis au point d’offrir des émissions éducatives. En outre, elle doit parer à des interventions politiques possibles émanant de son obligation de relier le nouveau curriculum scolaire à sa nouvelle branche consacrée à la technologie dans l’éducation. Cet article discute de TVO comme manifestant un rejet des projets de privatisation du gouvernement ontarien. Finalement, l’article utilise l’exemple de TVO pour soulever des questions sur des modèles de radio-diffusion hybrides.

In the complex political and communications environment of the 1990s, strategies to preserve public service broadcasting that have drawn on market-driven broadcasting models have been looked at variously as salvation or suicide. The struggle against privatization1 and the subsequent restructuring of the Ontario Educational Communications Authority (TVOntario) stand as an example of a rare dynamic

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and pro-active response by a public broadcaster when faced with the now familiar neo-liberal ideology of reduced public expenditure and institutional restructuring.

The educational public broadcaster TVOntario has been a cultural agency of the Government of Ontario since its inception in 1970 (Government of Ontario, 1992). It operates two educational, non-commercial television services, TVO (English-language) and TFO (French-language), and provides a wide range of curriculum-based programs directly to Ontario schools. TVO is available to 98.5% of Ontarians and TFO to 76%.

If its ratings are the test of success, TVO’s success throughout the 1990s has been phenomenal. One of its most popular programs, Saturday Night at the Movies, draws 400,000 viewers. Studio 2, its English-language current affairs show launched in 1994, has 100,000 per viewing minute, ahead of NewsWorld and specialty channels (“Peter and the Wolves,” 1996). The TVO Kids weekday programming accounts for almost 24% of the network’s overall viewing hours and 30% of afternoon viewers. Overall, 2.4 million people, or one in five Ontarians, watch TVO and TFO every week. TVO accomplished this while absorbing massive reductions in its government allocation, from $91 million in 1992 to $48 million in 1999.

The Ontario government announced in June 1998 that it was not privatizing but “refocusing” TVO. TVO remained a government agency and was reprieved from the threat of privatization, but the government rejected the renewal option proposed by TVO and instead refocused TVO on a narrow educational role. Although the achievement by TVO in becoming more entrepreneurial and less dependent on government funding is considerable, the expensive current affairs shows and imports it used to attract viewers now seem superfluous to the government’s objectives. In other words, TVO has won the proverbial battle, but could still lose the war.

The new TVO faces two major policy challenges. First, it must create a balance between its broadcast arm, with its popular, general-audience programming, and its educational arm, now to include technology, computer literacy, and skills development and training. Last year, the government launched a $5 million TVO fund to develop skills training programs for the Internet, yet it continues to reduce TVO’s general operating grant. How will TVO manage the competing financial demands? Second, the imperative to connect the government’s newly revised school curricula closely to the technology-in-education arm may create problems of political interference. How will TVO, as a public educational broadcaster, manage potential conflicts between pedagogical objectives and political objectives which may be inappropriate?

The TVO story is a key defeat for the neo-liberal privatization agenda of the Ontario government. Before coming to power in June 1995, the Conservative Party’s election platform included a promise “to actively explore the sale” of assets, including TVO. Now well into its second electoral mandate, the government has accomplished little in this regard. Related to this is the hard-fought battle by TVO and its supporters against privatization. The TVO campaign follows a
pattern found in other examples of campaigns that counter neo-liberal legislation and policy initiatives, notably in Great Britain (Deacon & Golding, 1994) and New Zealand (Scott, 1995). The engagement of the public in the campaign struggle and the ideological coherence of the government are critical to the success of such campaigns. TVO, with its strong membership base and community presence, was well positioned to maximize these assets, while the government’s coherence in the end was lacking. But has the privatization battle left the new TVO in an impossible financial and policy situation? How much more growth potential does TVO have before a renewed restructuring process is necessary? If needed, can the public be mobilized again?

The TVO example also raises significant questions about the viability of hybrid models of broadcasting. Can the two be balanced or is it impossible for a public educational broadcaster to serve two masters, the market and the public?

Political and policy environment
The crisis facing TVO in the early 1990s was not unique. Other public and educational broadcasters in the Western world were coping with the same reconsideration of the role of public institutions, linked to a neo-liberal project that had its roots in British Thatcherism in the late 1970s. Thatcherism was symptomatic of and a major contributor to a wider political and social crisis which saw “a profound shift in people’s attitudes to the State and to the State’s proper role in social life” (Garnham, 1983, p. 20). Thatcherism and market model ideology were supported by other complex environmental trends (internationalization, deregulatory ideology, technological change, and social changes) that put pressure on public institutions to adopt market models (Dyson & Humphreys, 1988). By 1985, major public broadcasting institutions in the Western world were suffering what Raboy (1989) calls an identity crisis, “as they became less and less able to satisfy their publics, increasingly fragmented and self-identifying by interest group rather than national collectivity” (p. 70). Under attack ideologically, economically, and socially, public broadcasters seemed unable to mount a defence in support of their values or vision. Their strength of purpose was being eroded from within, as the traditional proponents of public broadcasting were “replaced by managers, accountants and technical experts with different commitments and priorities” (Rowland & Tracey, 1990, p. 19).

Few options were open to public broadcasters. They could resist and maintain the status quo, which earned little support, or they could resort to what Rowland & Tracey call the “temporary barbarism” of the market model—abandoning their purity in order to survive. The economic or market model viewed the audience as consumers and the cultural or public model saw the audience as citizens, but the distinctions between the two models and the assumptions underpinning them were becoming increasingly blurred (Jeffrey, 1996). In Canada, broadcasting is already a hybrid system with cross-development. It is shifting towards the private sector at the same time as the private sector is becoming more reliant on public money and public policy measures (Raboy, 1996).
Educational broadcasting faces as inhospitable a political and economic environment as that facing public broadcasting. In the U.S., the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) has long been under attack, facing cutbacks and the threat of privatization. To Rowland & Tracey (1990), the first wrong steps were taken by PBS in the 1960s, when it emphasized general audience programming over its traditional, instructional programming in order to attract corporate sponsors. In so doing, its education function and focus became lost.

In Canada, Access: Learning and Skills Television was once owned and operated as an educational service by the Alberta government. It was sold to the private sector for $1 in 1994. The strategy of the owners was to narrowcast, keeping a tight focus on learning and returning the network to its educational roots (Livesey, 1997). In 1995, the CRTC granted a license to Access, allowing the private for-profit enterprise to become Alberta’s official educational broadcaster. In a July 1999 decision, the CRTC allowed Access to increase commercials from 6 to 12 minutes per non-educational hour (CRTC, 1999).

By 1994, the federal government had begun a series of massive budget cuts to its allocation to the CBC, eventually cutting $400 million (27%) from a budget of $1.5 billion. The CBC has increasingly looked for more partnerships, joint projects, and sponsors. One unsuccessful attempt to provide new direction and vision to CBC was the 1995 mandate review (Mandate Review Committee, 1996). The review committee defended public policy support to Canadian cultural industries and warned against allowing the marketplace to take over from government. One proposal to help finance CBC was a national levy to be administered through cable and phone companies. The mandate review further demonstrates the precariousness of the situation facing public broadcasters. Although it made a skillful case for CBC, backed up by practical proposals, the report was mocked for suggesting another tax and dropped from public view.

While the CBC mandate review was underway in 1995, an election was held in Ontario. The Premier of the new government, Mike Harris, spoke immediately about TVO: “How can we get the best quality service at the best price. … If privatizing TVO can accomplish that, then we’re prepared to privatize TVO” (McCann, 1995, p. C9). In the political environment of 1995, TVO’s situation encapsulated questions about the future of public broadcasting, but also played a role in the new government’s ideological agenda of privatization.

The campaign
Deacon & Golding (1994) and Scott (1995) have written about campaigns against legislative initiatives of neo-liberal governments. Deacon & Golding focused on the campaign against the poll tax introduced in Great Britain in 1986 and Scott used New Zealand’s 1991 campaign against the Employment Contracts Act as an example. There are common factors between the two examples (Scott, 1997), and these are shared with the TVOntario campaign against privatization. A significant factor relates to the necessity for the neo-liberal government to maintain the “ideological coherence” of its legislative agenda. Conversely, another factor is that ultimately the political interest of the government on occasion outweighs its
ideological interest. In the TVO situation, the government revealed its intentions early and only wavered when it became clear through the campaign that opposition was overwhelming. At that point, the political imperative took precedence and the government backed off.

TVO differs from the other two examples because it contained a second campaign that emerged at a key time. The actions taken by TVO to prevent privatization flowed from a comprehensive, internal strategic plan adopted early in the decade. In effect, the plan was a public relations campaign to save TVO that was grounded in operationalized component strategies to the overall plan. It was joined later (1997-98) at a critical time by a formal campaign sponsored by TVO’s staff union. The separate second campaign allowed TVO to take a “good corporate citizen” approach to its relations with the government, while the union campaign was more blatantly oppositional.

**Actors**

The communication of a policy or the campaign against it depends on a certain circle of actors. Normally with political communication, the relationship amongst the actors can be illustrated as representing either government, media, or public. The TVO campaign is more complicated because TVO is both an agency of government and a representative of the public. Similarly, Peter Herrndorf in his dual roles of Chair (advocate) and CEO (adversary) of TVO represented the government and public, respectively.

In media theory, actors are also known as sources. Some actors/sources have “structured preference” to media because of their powerful or privileged institutional positions in society. Their systematic over-access to the media allows them to offer their opinions about controversial subjects and to have their definitions accepted, that is, to provide the primary definition of an issue (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978). The activities of these actors are important because they offer insights into the informal and day-to-day channels of policy formation. They also show more concretely how primary definers successfully frame debate.

A significant individual actor in the TVO story is Peter Herrndorf, Chair and CEO of TVOntario between 1992 and 1999. Herrndorf could be considered the consummate primary definer, as the highest-ranking representative of a mainstream institution, by virtue of his high-level public broadcasting and private sector experience, and as a media-literate spokesperson. His position as both Chair and CEO is strategic and powerful in an environment of change, allowing the Chair/CEO to both direct change as a leading member of the Board of Directors and then to implement the Board’s decisions within the organization as Chief Executive Officer.

The second campaign, called “TVO Matters!,” was run by a collective of actors from the union local at TVOntario, CEP-NABET Local 72M (1997). The campaign’s province-wide activities consisted of news releases, pamphlets, speaking engagements, fundraising, a video, buttons, and advertisements. This was a remarkable effort from a union local in an organization that had been down-
sized from 565 employees in 1993 to 417 in 1997. According to campaign materials, union members felt personally committed to TVO: “We truly believe in the need for top quality, non-commercial educational programming.”

The not-so-secret weapon in the campaign was the people of Ontario, a huge collective set of actors. Herrndorf termed “every person both a potential viewer and a taxpayer” for whom TVO needed to be indispensable and give value for money, the twin necessities from the CBC mandate review (personal communication, March 20, 1999). There were three overlapping sets of Ontarians. The largest group was the 11 million citizens of Ontario, followed by a smaller group of 2.4 million TVO viewers, followed by a still smaller group of about 85,000 members — those who paid money annually to belong to TVO. Thus, through its members, TVO had an initial supportive and identifiable stakeholder group. On-air membership drives raised awareness and reinforced the message that TVO was under threat. Polling consistently showed that Ontarians supported TVO against the government. In December 1997, Environics found that 60% of Ontarians polled opposed a sell-off of TVO, a notable increase of 12% from just three months earlier. The polling company suggested that opposition to selling off TVO “intensiﬁed … perhaps as a result of the province-wide public hearings,” which will be discussed later (Environics Research Group, 1997, p. 1).

The political opposition at Queen’s Park were also actors in the story. This is an important feature of the policy campaign analysis undertaken by Deacon & Golding (1994). The Parliamentary process leads media coverage, which provides the public with information: “If an issue is marginalized by the main political parties, it is highly unlikely to attract consistent attention in the media” (p. 182). TVOntario was mentioned in the Ontario legislature 39 times in a 10-month period in 1996-97 (Government of Ontario, 1993-99).

Throughout the campaign, the government as actor maintained its ideological coherence, as laid out in its neo-liberal election platform, Common Sense Revolution (Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, 1994). As the privatization review of TVO was delayed and timelines lengthened, however, it became obvious that there was conﬂict in the Cabinet as to how to handle TVO. When the launch of the privatization review was ﬁnally announced in June 1997, the spokesperson seemed uncertain how the government would proceed: “We need to assess the appropriate role for government in TVOntario’s future” (Mackie & Harris, 1997, p. A1).

The media, as Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts’ (1978) secondary deﬁners, were important actors in the framing of the TVO issue. Most cultural analysis in Ontario is carried out by cultural columnists of major Toronto newspapers, supplemented by trade magazines and the occasional mainstream magazine article. There is a history of support by these columnists and writers for mainstream and powerful cultural institutions. Cultural actors themselves, the media assigned to culture tend to provide the “oﬃcial” record of cultural activities. A scan of The Toronto Star, The Globe and Mail, The Financial Post, Marketing,
Playback, and Broadcast from 1993 to the present reveals consistently positive and supportive coverage of TVO.

Strategies
The process for privatization undertaken by the government was straight-forward. It signalled its intention, examined the institutional candidates for privatization, and announced the different tracks for the various boards and agencies. It referred TVO for further review and contracted with a private-sector advisor, Rothschild’s, to help develop options.

On its part, TVO accepted that change was inevitable and that it must be “managed.” It acknowledged on its Web site the “dramatic changes in the economic environment” and the government’s “need to cut back sharply on its spending.” It also positioned itself as a unique service—“an intelligent, high-quality alternative”—that would be lost to Ontarians if public funding dried up. Herrndorf acknowledged the right of the government to determine TVO’s future, but he also sought actively to mitigate the government’s plan through TVO’s own strategic planning: “We started this way before the Tories did. … We assumed certain things were going to happen in the 90s” (personal communication, March 20, 1999). To TVO, managing change did not include overseeing the implementation of the government vision of privatization.

TVO’s strategy took to heart that the keys to success in broadcasting are “quality of content and efficiency of delivery” (Raboy, 1996, p. 179). Herrndorf’s public statements emphasized good programming and value: “We are a unique example of a corporation that is creating the efficiencies the private sector demands while … providing the quality educational programming that only the public sector can provide” (TVOntario, 1995, p. 11).

The TVO survival strategy looked inward first. It began with an all-staff retreat in September 1992, part of a major strategic planning exercise that ultimately created the institution’s strategic plan, summarized in the document, Managing Change in the 90s (TVOntario, 1998a). Component strategies of the plan addressed all aspects of staffing, structure, and revenue potential. The strategic plan called for non-government revenues to increase by 15% per year to 2000. This overhaul was accompanied by aggressive membership drives that saw a steady increase in memberships to more than 85,000. The plan generated sufficient documentation—3,000 pages—to provide the government with the research base that formed its eventual assessment in the privatization review.

There were two turning points in the campaign. The first was the announcement by TVO in June 1997 that it had developed and delivered to the government an alternative plan for survival. Under the plan, TVO would become a not-for-profit agency and would receive government funds on a fee-for-service basis. The strategic value of the TVO proposal to the campaign was significant. The plan was “a symbol that TVO was not going to get into a debate over the status quo,” says Herrndorf. “It changed the nature of the debate” (personal communication, March 20, 1999).
The second turning point in the campaign was the public consultations. The government struck a three-member panel to lead a community forum in each of five cities, where participants could respond to six pre-determined questions only. The panel reported back in February 1998 that there was “clear public opposition to selling TVO to private interests. … [P]articipants … told us they would urge the government to consider TVOntario both a public service and a good investment” (Levy, Adam, & Smith, 1998, p. 26).

Both turning points contributed to the eventual retreat by the government from privatization. TVO’s strategic coup in terms of opposing a neo-liberal policy was being able to divert the government from its agenda and to gain the support of the public to a degree that the common-sense solution was for the broadcaster to stay in public hands. TVO was able to get the ear of the government because it had shown it could restructure, implement internal efficiencies, and downsize—all the “good corporate citizen” neo-liberal catchwords. The limitations of the government’s willingness to listen in the public consultations helped solidify public opinion, as shown in the polling results, and provided the public with a specific entry point into the debate.

Finally, on June 26, 1998, the government announced that TVO was to remain a provincial agency and become “the vehicle which launches the [province’s] lifelong learning vision” (Ontario. Office of Privatization, 1998b, n.p.). TVO was split into two parts: the existing broadcast arm and a new branch to co-ordinate technology in learning: “TVO will become the central coordinating body for learning technology in the province. … Operations will be improved by re-focusing TVOntario’s broadcasting mandate and enhancing the emphasis on partnerships with the private sector” (Ontario. Office of Privatization, 1998a, p. 2). The government moved TVO from reporting through the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Recreation to the Ministry of Education and Training, which emphasized the link to its newly revised school curricula.

Similar to the fight against the poll tax in Britain, political opposition and the public became engaged in the struggle and the government backed off. But the decision left TVO with both political and policy problems that may yet threaten its long-term survival.

Political and policy implications

Political
The government’s decision on TVO is a clear example of “political imperatives [that] characterize the policy making process” (Raboy, 1995). As The Globe & Mail reported after the announcement, the government was “aware of the political clout of TVO, [whose] … members across the province … have contributed to TVO’s financing” (Mackie, 1998, p. D4). There are two points to make about political imperatives concerning privatization and politicization.

Privatization
Despite the promises of the Common Sense Revolution and the neo-liberal rhetoric of the government, little was accomplished on privatization in the govern-
ment’s first mandate. Media reports throughout 1998 picked up on internal dissent in the government regarding privatization (Blackwell, 1998; Kaihla, 1998; “Tories Must End TVO Uncertainty,” 1998). This internal dissent speaks to the lack of ideological cohesion necessary to successfully implement the structural change involved in neo-liberal policies. A second problem was that the government did not adhere to the successful communications strategy, important in campaigns, of using one identifiable spokesperson to deliver its message (Scott, 1997). The lead on the TVO file was confusing, moving between the Premier’s office and the ministers of privatization, culture, and education, and the government’s messages were similarly unclear. In addition, the government was well aware of the effect of the campaign on the public and understood the potential political power of 85,000 TVO members. In the circumstances, the government chose to put political imperatives before ideological ones and settled for a refo-cused TVOntario. But the government backed off only so far. Although it did not privatize TVO, neither did it accept the not-for-profit model put forward by the broadcaster. Moreover, TVO was to return to its educational roots, which ran counter to TVO’s preferred option.

**Politicization**

As Raboy wrote in 1989 and continues to document, “policy making in Canada has never been as political as it is today” (p. 355). Nowhere is this more clear than in the concern surrounding the potential for politicization of TVO. The move of TVO from the Culture ministry to the Education ministry in 1998 was intended by the government to connect TVO’s programming more closely to school curricula. Herrndorf expressed “no fears” that the Education ministry would interfere with broadcasting content or that TVO would become a propaganda arm of government. Yet in response to media queries about the potential for politicization, Education Minister Johnson was less unequivocal: “We haven’t had the opportunity yet to determine what TVO’s programming should be. Clearly the Ministry of Education will have to determine its priorities” (quoted in Foot, 1998, p. E10). The desire and the ability of politicians to “determine” broadcasting priorities and play a role in programming is exactly the concern. As the Privatization Minister indicated at the time of the announcement, the government was not privatizing TVO because it was needed “to deliver on this vision we have” (quoted in Foot, 1998, p. E10).

**Policy**

TVO now faces the challenge of maintaining its general audience, a lower priority of its main funding source, the province. It must balance this with its new, higher-priority market-oriented technology-in-education service. Several factors have or will come into play as TVO juggles the two responsibilities:

**Quality programming**

TVO based its successful survival strategy on policies of quality programming and bureaucratic efficiencies. Yet its programming policy decisions funnelled large portions of its programming budget to two public affairs shows, *Studio 2* and
Panorama (the latter is the French-language current affairs program on TFO).

While large amounts of money are spent on Studio 2, in-house production has decreased by almost 25% (TVOntario, 1998c).

One of the problems with externally produced programming and imported, popular programming is the ability of TVO, as Ontario’s educational public broadcaster, to reflect Ontarians. In their analysis of the benefits and drawbacks to joint ventures, Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn (1993) conclude that the benefits to such ventures are primarily financial, while a drawback is the loss of control and cultural specificity. In response, TVO considers that reducing in-house production and channelling more dollars into co-productions and acquisitions were a key factor in meeting their financial realities. “Sometimes you get a product that’s not exactly what you want,” says TVO’s Blair Dimock, but “we have to stay within our cost structure” (personal communication, March 19, 1999).

Much of TVO’s membership increases have come after in-house production decreased. Programs more likely to generate new income are the imported programs that are under attack by those who want more indigenous and education-focused programming. This and other general-audience programming, although good for viewer loyalty, presents another problem for a niche channel like TVO. TVO put its commitment and its scarce programming dollars into current affairs and imported general audience programming, which eroded its traditional niche of educational broadcasting. Its main funder, however, decided to refocus the broadcaster on its educational mandate—its traditional niche. In essence, TVO is a niche broadcaster without a niche.

CBC and TVO

Like TVO at the beginning of the 1990s, the CBC is over-ready for a new direction. Unlike TVO, CBC’s response to cutbacks was to spread them out across the network rather than redefine its priorities. The CBC Mandate Review Committee, on which Herrndorf was a member, felt that the CBC had drifted away from its public broadcasting mandate “without any explicit statement by CBC of a change in its strategic directions or programming policy” (Mandate Review Committee, 1996, p. 71).

TVO’s survival strategy consciously avoided the CBC route of relying on commercial advertising because that would affect program decisions. “A lot of people believe that CBC should be more like TVO,” says Herrndorf. “TVO took on public service activities … while CBC gave up on arts, science and some documentaries. Their audience switched to TVO” (personal communication, March 20, 1999).

Since 1999, under new president Robert Rabinovitch, the CBC is setting a TVO-like path. It is undergoing a re-engineering process while reducing commercials, promoting sponsorships, and attempting to maintain quality programming. Thus, in a sense, CBC is chasing TVO, while TVO is chasing Access.

Mandate

While CBC underwent a mandate review in 1995, TVO moved into the future without a new mandate to lead the way. TVO’s legal mandate from the Ontario
Educational Communications Authority Act (1969) is “to initiate, acquire, produce, distribute, exhibit … programs and materials in the educational broadcasting and communications fields … and to engage in research in those fields.” Yet TVO closed down its research department and in-house production decreased substantially in the restructuring.

As the political environment forced structural changes to broadcast institutions, these changes have inevitably had an impact on their mandate and vision. Change has occurred so rapidly that operational requirements have replaced a clear sense of raison d’être—exactly what public broadcasters feel they have lost (Rowland & Tracey, 1990).

Although the CBC mandate review spoke to the need to reflect “Canadian voices, values and experiences,” such cultural specificity is not protected in TVO’s current mandate. Herrndorf’s speech to TVO staff in 1992 mentioned the changing face of Ontario and the need for representation as one of the challenges facing the broadcaster. Nearly a decade and one restructuring later, this challenge remains unaddressed.

A refocused TVO cannot fulfill an outdated mandate that does not reflect its new structure and purpose. TVO needs to develop a mandate that reflects Ontario. A clearly defined mandate would give TVO a sense of mission as it develops its next strategic plan as well as provide some protection from politicization.

TVO strategic plan
TVO had considerable early success in carrying out its strategic plan for the 1990s, summarized in Managing Change in the 1990s (TVOntario, 1998a). The plan committed TVO to 15% growth per year in net self-generated revenues to the end of the decade and generating 50% of its own income by that time. In its own fiscal year summary for 1997-98, however, neither Schedule Underwriting nor Sales and Licensing—TVO’s highest financial priorities—achieved their targets. In the area of membership and fundraising, TVO’s revenue projections until 2000 relied on lowering its fundraising costs, increasing its membership by an average of 7.5%, and receiving an average of 6% higher donations per member—every year. By 1998, TVO was already falling short on the critical category of number of memberships (TVOntario, 1998b). It lists its number of members as “tens of thousands” on its Web site, rather than provide specific figures as it once did. The target of 50% net self-generated income is still far off, if not unachievable, and raises questions about the continued growth potential for self-generated revenue at TVO. In 1998-99, after seven years of cuts from the province, it still receives 74.3% of its funding from government.

Failure to meet these targets will see intensified reliance on market methods for revenue generation in TVO’s next strategic plan. It will also make TVO more vulnerable to any future attempt at privatization. In November 1999, former Culture Minister Isabel Bassett was appointed to the joint position of Chair/CEO. Keeping the two positions together under the direction of a trusted former minister showed that the government will maintain close ties to TVO. In July 2000, two years after its reprieve from privatization, the new TVO made its first major
announcement, a $5 million Lifelong Learning Challenge Fund that operates on a matching grant formula between TVO and the private sector. The fund launched TVO’s “new media” strategy, the first outward sign that TVO was taking up its next strategic challenge.

Public service and market models
TVO’s path through the 1990s is a rare example of a pro-active response by a public broadcaster to the threats posed by neo-liberal policy agendas. TVO’s strategy was to adhere to the restructuring ideology while maintaining the vision of a public broadcaster through commitment to quality programming. As we have seen, however, dangers exist for the entrepreneurial public broadcaster. Rowland & Tracey (1990) examine the worldwide challenges to public broadcasting and caution against the market model response. Their description of strategies undertaken by some public broadcasters resemble TVO’s initiatives:

[They] apply more aggressive and competitive scheduling, to erode core program commitments, to use ratings-based marketing nostrums, to pursue coproductions and cofinancing in a frantic revenue-driven belief in international sales potential, to adopt commercial financial community attitudes toward generating capital, and to achieve organizational “efficiency”, cost-effectiveness, and zero-based budgeting. In short, the strategy is to respond to all the technocratic catchwords of the modern era by adopting them. … These institutions appear to be evolving internally in ways that will not redefine public service ideals but destroy them. (p. 20)

Others are convinced that a mixed public service-market model is the only viable solution (Jeffrey, 1994), believing that public service ideals can be maintained and may even civilize the market model. The CBC existed as a warning that a defensive or reactive position could not be the only weapon used by public broadcasters against market encroachment. Instead, TVO embraced Rowland & Tracey’s “temporary barbarism” in an effort to survive. Of the pro-active fight to save TVO, Herrndorf says, “any organization that waits to have policy done to them probably deserves its fate. Organizations have to engage the government in policy formulation” (personal communication, March 20, 1999).

If the mixed model gains acceptance, it would be critical to establish the limitations on the commercial aspects of the enterprise. There is a general acceptance of underwriting and sponsorships, but currently the line is drawn at commercials. Access’s recent success at CRTC in upping its commercial minutes may be an opening for those who would redraw the line. Months before the Access decision, TVO’s policy on advertising appeared to be changing to offer advertisers “more flexibility” after an internal decision to change some of its advertising rules (“Media Briefs,” 1999, p. 4).

The path to an acceptable alternative model needs to begin with a re-examination of the ideals of public service broadcasting. Blumler (1993) supplies benchmarks for a distinctive mission for public television that acknowledges market pressures. He reformulates a mission that comprises essential tasks (such
as programming for children and expression of cultural identity) and value commitments (such as programming quality, diversity, and innovation).

Blumler removes public broadcasting from its negative and neglectful categorization in modern society as “not” being the market model and restores it to its proper place as a core necessity of the citizenry. In analyzing the public broadcasting mission on its own ground, rather than on the contested ground of the marketplace, Blumler returns us to the essentials of communication and citizenship in an age of information.

He also tackles the implications of commercial revenue sources on the public service mission. He considers advertising as “inherently antagonistic” to public broadcasting because it evaluates programming uni-dimensionally and program diversity suffers (p. 411). He believes, however, that a framework of rules and “integrity-safeguarding policies” can make sponsorships and co-ventures supportable (pp. 420-422).

TVO’s valiant attempt to survive is commendable and understandable, and the CBC may well be taking up the same strategies. But on a practical level, we have to ask ourselves if the TVO story is over. The potential for the politicization of TVO is considerable and the government is still well positioned to privatize. Just before the June 1999 provincial election, Premier Harris indicated that the private sector could still take over much of TVO’s programming mandate. It is a blunt reminder that the neo-liberal agenda is still the force behind TVO’s struggles. Unfortunately, once TVO was “saved,” it appeared to fall off the political, media, and public agenda. The government may be counting on what Tiffen (1989) calls “differential reality” before making its next move: Now that the public drama is over, the invisibility of implementation takes over (p. 189). If there is to be another round in the privatization war, it may be harder to round up the troops.

Privatization, however, may not be TVO’s main enemy. On a philosophical level, for all its skillful community-building and impressive record of regeneration, TVO suffered from “a crisis of the imagination” (Garnham, 1983, p. 20). It was unable to conceive of a different way of looking at public service and its critical component—the public—other than to seek market solutions. TVO is no doubt aware that “Canadian broadcast policy … [is] an important site of public action. Broadcast policy making is thus one of the central components of the public sphere of communication in Canada” (Raboy, 1995, p. 475). But the limits of its mixed-model vision were apparent, even as Herrndorf set out his vision in a speech early in his tenure at TVO:

We can provide a ‘haven.’ We can, as a community, take possession of a small part of the television landscape, and harness the power of the medium for the public good. For purposes that don’t have to do with maximizing profits, but rather, for providing our kids with a safe, healthy environment in which to learn and grow, and for giving the rest of us as opportunity to expand our minds and discover the world. A place that treats viewers as citizens, and not just as consumers. (TVOntario, 1995, p. 6)
Instead of providing a haven, TVOntario’s salvation depended on opening the door to the marketization of public educational broadcasting, aided by a neo-liberal government that sees education as a computerized training ground. TVO and those who would follow it must “peer not to the horizon to see if the enemy has arrived, but into their souls” (Rowland & Tracey, 1990, p. 22).

Notes
1. Privatization can be defined as “a general description of economic initiatives that aim to increase the reach of market institutions and philosophies at the expense of the public sphere” (Murdock & Golding, 1989, p. 184).
2. In this paper, the term “TVO” will be understood to include TFO.
3. The two will be referred to here as “the campaign” unless noted separately.
4. Peter Herrndorf and Blair Dimock, TVO Director of Government and Community Relations, generously agreed to be interviewed on March 20 and 19, 1999, respectively, for a previous draft of this paper. Dimock also provided access to internal TVO documents.

References


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