The Ontario Educational Communications Authority was established in 1970 by an act of the Ontario legislature. Its mandate from the Ontario government was to serve the whole province with educational television. Accordingly, OECA's Board of Directors committed itself to the extension of the basic service to all Ontarians in order to provide educational opportunities more equitably across the province.

While establishing comprehensive Videotape Program Services - VIPS - for use mainly in the school system, the Authority proceeded to build a network of outlets starting with Channel 19 in Toronto. In a short time the network was extended to include Ottawa (Channel 24), Kitchener (28), London (18), Chatham (59) and Windsor (32) in southern Ontario.

Expansion into northern Ontario presented a bigger problem. The novel organizational structure of OECA was one factor in helping solve it.

OECA's corporate set-up is composed of a board of directors, a chief executive officer, an executive director, managers of half a dozen departments, and staff large enough to occupy four and a half floors of a substantial office building on Toronto's Yonge Street near St. Clair Avenue.

What is novel about OECA is that it has constitutionally provided for Regional Councils consisting of 10 to 15 members each in five designated areas of the province - South-central Ontario, Southwestern Ontario, Eastern Ontario, Northeastern Ontario and Northwestern Ontario.

Council members serve for three years and may be re-elected for another three years. Terms of office are staggered so that one-third of the members of each council are elected (or re-elected) each year. No one may hold office for more than six years. They are paid out-of-pocket expenses but are not remunerated for their services.

For the selection of council members each council names a nominating committee of three members plus one person residing in the region who is not a council member. The distribution of memberships in a Regional Council is expected to "maintain a balanced profile which will be truly representative of all learning groups within the region and who will best serve the objectives of the Authority and the Council."

Nominees elected by the council are recommended to the Board of Directors for approval.

What voice have the councils in the
Authority's operations? This depends to a large extent on the initiative, imagination and determination of the various councils resulting from the ideas produced and the commitment shown by their members.

Constitutionally the councils (most of whose members are, or were, directly in education in the school system or continuing education or in the media) have the responsibility of advising the Authority in the development of its policies and operations. They may also, with the approval of the Authority, embark on special projects consistent with OECA's objectives and budget.

How well does this measure of democracy within an important government-funded organization work?

One good example of what the regional councils helped bring about is the expansion of TVOntario into northern Ontario.

About two years ago OECA was feeling the pressure of the provincial government's restraint policy. Increases in budget allowances which would have no more than covered cost rises due to inflation meant that funds for expansion of ETV into northern Ontario would not be available.

Yet that was an area where ETV was needed most. And the Authority had already spent a substantial sum in preparation for extension of "open sector" programs (carried on Channel 19, Toronto, Channel 24, Ottawa, and half a dozen others) to Sudbury and Thunder Bay.

Postponement of this extension made no sense to any of the regional councils which discussed the dilemma. All agreed that it was a blow to the hopes of northern communities where TV programs were very limited in coverage and quality. Some action had to be taken to impress the government that its financial cutback would deny ETV to those areas which most required it.

Members of the Northeastern Regional Council, particularly Elmer McVey, were very effective in prodding the government into allowing plans for ETV expansion in the north to proceed.

McVey is well known in Sudbury for his community work. As president of the Sudbury and District Labour Council he was not only an influential voice among the city's working population but he had a good working relationship with the local Chamber of Commerce.

This civic activist was certain that the government could be convinced that its decision was wrong and bound to rouse resentment among northerners. (OECA is funded by the Departments of Culture and Recreation and of Education) He led the campaign to win the active support of influential citizens and organizations, especially in the Sudbury area. He was given credit by a fellow council member, Jack Wells, for the complete success of the drive.

Wells told True North, the leading community newspaper in the area, "It was the labour council and Elmer McVey who kept the Chamber of Commerce and myself on our toes. Elmer insisted that we were going to get ETV one way or another. He just wouldn't quit."

The government was inundated with more than 8,000 letters and telegrams demanding ETV for the north. In recognition of his untiring efforts McVey was named to the Northeastern Regional Council.
Of course, many other people and organizations were helpful. So were the views presented to the responsible cabinet ministers by OECA's board of directors. But the stand taken by the councils and particularly the action by the Northeastern Council stand out as an example of effective participatory democracy.

The map below shows how heavily weighted to the south was "open sector" programming until the two northern links were put in place.
Councillors' Views

Criticism of programming may often reflect regional concerns but doesn't stop there. Phil Rostow, Northern Affairs Officer for the Ministry of Natural Resources at Red Lake, agrees that people want to see the often-neglected northwest area receive its due. But he doesn't agree that too many of TVOntario's shows are Toronto-centred. He believes that shows like Ontario Scene, which examines the culture, history, habits and problems of various parts of the province have served his region well. He sees part of the function of a councillor in the northwest as keeping producers aware of events or locals of interest for filming.

In marked contrast to the lakes and forests north of Lake Superior is the fast-spreading urbanization of Metro Toronto. Here Charity Grant is, among other things, a special lecturer on immigration at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Social Work.

Miss Grant's particular interest is multiculturalism - an interest she shares with other councillors in the South-central Region. As a member of the council she wants to ensure that the programming of TVOntario has relevance for the region's many immigrants. She believes that the subject of multiculturalism should be discussed fully and frankly, even those aspects of it which people are reluctant to talk about. "I think we should address ourselves to real problems rather than show what beautiful, exotic places our immigrants come from. No culture is entirely beautiful and it does a dis-service to romanticize their background."

Miss Grant is working with several other councillors (among them Ken Jeffers, executive director of the Harriet Tubman Centre in Toronto, Ross Johnson, coordinator of learning resources for the Northumberland and Newcastle Board of Education, and Pauline Weber, an educational media consultant for the libraries of the Wellington County Board of Education) in preparing an annotated bibliography of OECA programs and materials, which will contain specific recommendations and criticisms directed to the requirements of a multicultural society.

Feedback to the Authority is, of course, only one lane of the two-way street regional councillors travel. They are also defenders and explainers. One who counts herself among that number is a new councillor, Moira Couper of Bayfield.

Mrs. Couper believes firmly in the goals of educational television and sees an even greater potential for it as more and more leisure time becomes the norm. She wants to use off-air OECA services such as videotapes as springboards or tools for discussion groups at libraries and the like. But she finds it's not an easy task.

First of all, we live in an area of the province where people have to travel long distances to meet for a seminar or a workshop. It may be only ten miles, but in the winter ten miles is a long way out here. And this is a rather conservative area. An innovation like using a videotape meets with more resistance than you might think. And I find myself in a nebulous position. Where I live, the OECA signal isn't received very well. It's not easy to sell something like the OECA when we were told we'd have the service and many of us don't." And yet Mrs. Couper toils energetically on.

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Mike Barkwell is another volunteer regional councillor who voices the concerns of a particularly important group, senior citizens.

Barkwell is a welfare counsellor for the Department of Veterans's Affairs in North Bay, Ontario. "These people living on pensions have a lot of time on their hands," he says, "and it's a shame what the usual bill of fare of commercial television offers them."

Barkwell is disturbed that so few of the pensioners he knows can receive TVOntario, the Authority's television service. "Here we have a substantial alternative to what's on the other stations - and up here there aren't that many - but most people can't get it. People are pretty far-flung up here and most of them live outside the cable service area. In fact, I can't get TVOntario on my set."

On a hotel television that does receive the station by cable service Barkwell saw a program on death and dying. "That program had a lot to say to the people I know," he commented. "After all, they have to face the prospect of dying, and thinking of death occupies them more and more. But the program didn't talk to them. I think shows like this have to get down to the nitty-gritty."

Since the councillors receive no remuneration, the amount of work the Authority can expect of them is a constant worry. Happily, according to the supervisor of councils, Suzanne Grew, "most councillors work very hard and are willing to work even harder."

Ms. Grew is the personable and obliging Manager of Regional Relations who, with her colleagues in OECA leadership positions, looks upon the council members as the "grass roots" of the Toronto-based Authority. They keep the educators and producers at the flagship station, Channel 19, aware of local concerns, problems and beefs. And of course they are a very effective volunteer lobbying force for the Authority.

Council Meetings

Constitutionally each council elects a chairman, vice-chairman and secretary-treasurer annually.

Sam Dragich is chairman of the Southwestern Ontario Regional Council. He lives in Windsor where he is principal of Edith Cavell Senior Public School. Since Dragich is beginning his sixth year as a councillor, he's in a good position to trace the development of the councils and their relations to the Authority.

"At the beginning, quite frankly, we had to feel our way. In those days we tended to look toward the Corporate Division (management) at the OECA for leadership and direction and it's quite true that then Corporate did control the dialogue. After all, our biggest concern then was to get the signal - and that involved negotiations that we didn't have the expertise to conduct on our own. Well, now we've got the signal.

"OECA was sharp enough to bring us along slowly and I appreciate that. They kept us informed and they consulted us. But as the OECA matured its relations with its councils grew and matured also. Now we have much more influence.

"Take the meetings. (Each council meets at least four times a year to
exchange information and make suggestions. Each year each council presents a written report of its activities, with policy recommendations, to the Authority.) We used to discuss matters that the Corporate Division thought we should discuss. Now I can sit down and draw up our agenda."

Rap Sessions

If the breakthrough can be dated, Dragich says it was four years ago during RAP I. That was the first time all the councillors in the province convened in Toronto for what the name implies - a rap session with OECA staff and executives. In Dragich's opinion, "It was a real flop. We had very little input into what would be done, what issues would be discussed. But in retrospect it was a good thing - it cleared the air. There are basic understandings that have to be reached before you can get on to serious business.

"In the aftermath of RAP I, the Authority realized that it was time to let us have a hand in the planning; so now the RAPS are positive and each year we get to know each other better. Nowadays we can even make suggestions about programming or promotion and, by gosh, sometimes I've seen results on the television within two weeks. It's a far cry from the early days when we were told firmly that our suggestions about programming 'could wait'."

Until the autumn of 1975, when Channel 24 in Ottawa brought TVOntario to much of eastern Ontario, Channel 19 in Toronto was a solitary station. Nurturing that Toronto-based signal into a province-wide network was for a time the major part of the councillors' work. It no longer is. Their field of interest has widened as the ETV network has expanded.

Francophone Affairs

Jean Leveille, Director of Education for the Prescott-Russell Separate School Board, and once a coordinator for a special studies commission for official languages in Ottawa, is a Hawkesbury resident who is a councillor for the Eastern Ontario region. He recalls a meeting not long ago attended by some 40 to 50 interested citizens who expressed their views to the councillors.

"It was extremely profitable. I would like to see many more of these groupings of people for regional councillors to listen to. All too often at meetings I've watched members try to pull all the sheets over to their side of the bed: the librarians want more library service; the educators are only concerned with in-school broadcasts and services. I think a broader exposure to public opinion through meetings like this would put an end to that. If it's at all possible, I think the OECA should provide funds for just this sort of meeting."

Yet there is one commitment to which the OECA will remain unswerving - its recognition of what Executive Director David Walker calls "the French fact in Canada". The OECA's Board of Directors has committed itself in principle to establishing a separate French-language network, and recently the Educational Media Division, the huge programming arm of the Authority, was split into two divisions, one for programming and material in French, the other in English.

Another extremely valuable body which advises and consults with the OECA is the Advisory Council on Francophone...
Affairs. M. Leveille, in addition to his duties as regional councillor, serves on this council along with nine other members. Its function is to keep the Authority apprised of the particular problems, interests and attitudes of the French, particularly the Franco-Ontarian, population.

As a result of these arrangements, Leveille is able to say that, from a Franco-Ontarian point of view, things "get better and better all the time". Of course, he recognizes that there are problems, too - chief among them being, as always, budgetary constraints. Still, he insists, "My principle has always been, 'words are all right but actions are better'. We have the words (the approval in principle of the French language network), now we need the money."

Nevertheless, in his monitoring of the number of services and documents for Francophones, Leveille remains optimistic. "I'm encouraged," he says.

Planning Committee

The five regional councils and the Advisory Council on Francophone affairs exist largely to keep the OECA Board of Directors, management and staff in touch with the Authority's clients, the citizens of Ontario. There are, however, other instruments of information that serve to keep the OECA responsive and aware. Chief among these is the Planning Committee, a 22-member body consisting of OECA Board members, executives, staff, as well as regional councillors and people with no other connection to the OECA.

Dr. Lewis Miller, head of OECA's Research and Planning department and secretary of the Planning Committee, says that the committee "has no stars, because every member is a star".

As its name implies, the Planning Committee was established to help the Authority with long-range decisions, not day to day ones. The questions it considers are broad, at times almost abstract: In what directions are we headed, why, and how?

The kind of information the Planning Committee uses might be described as intelligence: it keeps abreast of developments, trends, changes in society that could have profound impact on the way the OECA will function. As Dr. Miller says, "On the Planning Committee we're not concerned with next year, we're concerned with 1995."

Some of the "intelligence" is of the purely technological variety vital to the operation of a late-twentieth-century communications network. Developments in such fields as fibre optics, video discs, even satellites, are discussed and assessed by committee members and recommendations are made to the Authority.

As well, the OECA must be kept aware of long-term developments in education: curriculum changes, new styles and theories of instruction, demographic changes in the schools. Since a large proportion of the OECA's staff consists of educators, liaison with the educational community is particularly close and, as a result, the Authority has been able on occasion to jump the gun, e.g., by anticipating the introduction of world religions courses into Ontario school systems.

And of course, as a large and influential corporation, the OECA must take into account changes in lifestyle, in the economy and labour market, in legislation and the political climate.
All these aspects of the social condition come with the purview of the Planning Committee.

The data on which the Planning Committee bases its recommendations often come from the OECA's own Research and Planning department which monitors the effectiveness of the Authority's services. Audience research is the most obvious example of this; the French and English broadcast schedules reflect the finds of the department.

In commercial television stations "ratings" would be the word for this function, but at the OECA it differs both in depth and in ultimate goal. Low "ratings" are tolerated here if the show in question serves a particular need or a particular segment of the community.

One of the most valuable documents the OECA has produced is The Demand for Part-Time Learning in Ontario by Research and Planning's Ignacy Waniewicz; it demonstrates a surprisingly intense desire for educational opportunities outside traditional schooling.

That is exactly what the OECA is all about. But in the process of satisfying the desire it wants to dispel the image of educational television as "a talking head in front of a blackboard". It aims at presenting programs which are attractive and entertaining as well as instructive and relevant. And to do that most effectively it relies on a number of individuals to keep it informed, to criticize and to help. By means of the regional councils, the Advisory Council on Franco-phone Affairs and the Planning Committee, the OECA believes it can come ever closer to achieving the goals it has set for itself.

BEING CONSIDERED FOR COMING ISSUES

Articles by William Melody on the Innis Conference at Simon Fraser University; Donald Theall on Harold Innis; News Manipulation in El Mercurio, Chile, by L. Ruiz, Santiago; the CRTC Dilemma by Herschel Hardin; French and English Broadcasting in Canada by Arthur Siegel; The Functional Analysis of Speech Communication Behaviour by James Owen; The Centrifugal Culture by Stewart and Sherry Ferguson; The Emergency Measures of Madame Gandhi by Eric Murray; Paul Rutherford's "Making of the Canadian Media" by Earle Beattie; Calvinism and the Mass Media by Trudy Murphy; Television Criticism by John C. Conner; The Language of the Want Ads by Crad Kilodney, and others.

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