Who Will Inherit the Airwaves?

Third Annual Dr. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis Lecture on Diversity in Canadian Media

Rita Shelton Deverell

Build on it

My father’s family was from Jacksboro, Texas, a very small town 60 miles north of Fort Worth. There was a one-room Black school, where my Aunt Linnie Shelton was the teacher and principal. And there were two Black churches, Baptist and Methodist, both without regular preachers, visited by circuit riders, and where my Aunt Linnie was the superintendent of the Sunday School and ran everything.

Twenty-one years ago we had the last of the Shelton family reunions in Jacksboro. Months before the event I wrote from Regina, where we lived then, to my cousin, a medical doctor in Dallas who was the organizer of the reunion, and asked if there was anything we could help with. No, he said. Yet the night before the family reunion church service, it was clear that Aunt Linnie had failed to arrange for a preacher. She looked heavenward and said, “The Lord will provide, the preacher from furtherist away will preach.” This was a veiled but obvious reference to my husband, Rex, a graduate of McMaster Divinity College, Union Theological Seminary in New York, and a full-time playwright.

When the family from Houston, Dallas, Los Angeles, et cetera—and Saskatchewan—packed into the tiny church, it was quite full. And there was an amazing gospel quartet from Mineral Wells, Texas. Strangely, as the service went on, other preachers appeared, sat on the platform, and then gave long resonant prayers.

Finally, the time for Rex’s short-notice sermon arrived. He was very good, garnering many Amens, shouts, preach it brothers, and so forth. Then he delivered what I knew to be his final dazzling point, and one of the God’s Trombones basso profundo voices at the back, on the platform, encouraged him by intoning: “Amen! Now Build on it, Brother!!”

Needless to say, this has been our family’s key story for the 20 years since. Whenever we need to push each other; when we think our splendid son just has not done enough; when we think we have gone the last mile and there are no

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stones left to be turned; or when we are too tired to turn the stones, we tell each other to “Build on it!”

Let us spend our few moments together on the concept of “Build on it” as it applies to ethnic and cultural diversity in Canadian media, Canadian television in particular, in which I’ve spent 35 working years. We’re talking about television as it is practised and experienced by the four designated groups in Canadian federal legislation: women, Aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities, and visible minority workers.²

Two additional ancient professional/personal/political stories, essentially about racial discrimination in broadcasting, will give you some background. Both involve the CBC. I do not cite these incidents to say that the CBC is more Neanderthal than other broadcasters, but simply to give you some history on this matter of diversity in Canadian media.

1974-75: The Take 30 incident
When the position of host was available, I was told by the then executive producer, with no witnesses present, that “some people at CBC think you’d do a really good job, but the Canadian people are not ready to have a Black host of a network TV show.”

Later conversations with veteran broadcaster Dodi Robb, who hired Adrienne Clarkson when Robb was head of Daytime Programming, proved that it matters who makes the decisions from those corner offices. Dodi Robb had been fearless enough to hire a Chinese Canadian. I ran into a less adventurous sort of executive.

Lesson 1: It matters who sits in executive chairs.

1984: The union discrimination grievance
I was prevented from auditioning for the role of a farmer in a drama about farm suicide in Saskatchewan, because the producer said verbally and in writing that “There are no Black farmers in Saskatchewan.”

ACTRA (the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, TV, and Radio Artists) made this a formal grievance, which was settled in the union’s favour just prior to arbitration.

Lesson 2: It matters that people who are concerned about diversity in media stick together.

What is interesting about this story, with hindsight, is that winning changed almost nothing, for me or anyone else. I was momentarily enriched by $10,000, with which we built an extraordinarily nice interlocking brick sidewalk and front deck. But I still didn’t get the acting gig.

More than 20 years later diversity advocates are still saying: If you have to cast a lawyer or “interview a lawyer in news, there’s no reason that lawyer has to be white! There are lawyers of every ethnicity.” This statement was made as part of the quite useful and well planned Diversity Toolkit constructed by the Radio and Television News Directors Association of Canada in 2007.
1985 to 2000
Moving on. You, like me, would like to say that 1984 was in the Dark Ages, and now let’s celebrate how much better things got. And they in fact did.

During the next 15 years or so, 1985 to 2000, women, visible minorities, and persons with disabilities in broadcasting made huge gains in who was on the screen. We did it precisely by building on it, with a certain solidarity among the designated groups, and with the support of some industry colleagues.

This was also the golden age of the “study.” We thought we just had to prove to people how bad things were, how unjust, how unlevel the playing field, and they would do the right thing. To know the good is to do it, we believed, along with Plato and Aristotle.

1987 study: ACTRA—Equal Opportunities to Perform
Recently a researcher at ACTRA, who was probably in grade school when we did this study, contacted me and said: “Equal Opportunities to Perform is an important part of our history, unfortunately it was 20 years ago and has been lost. Can you help us locate a copy?” I didn’t want to depress this eager young person and say, “It has likely been lost in more than one sense.”

1989 study: The first WIFT–T, Women in Film and Television, Toronto study—It Matters Who Makes It
We had dismal stats and thought everyone will do the right thing now. When they realize how perilously few women there are in the key creative positions of producer, director, writer, lead actor, they will be shocked and appalled.

I’m not sure in those early days that we paid much attention to ownership of media, executive management, and boards of directors of media organizations. We did not realize how essential changing those positions was to making change in the key creatives.

During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, I used to think that just having places to work for people who looked like me was the challenge. And so a number of us got very busy building places where people who looked like us could be employed in television.

I thought, we thought, that the problem was who was on the screen, questions of portrayal, and of representation. We knew that in order to change that we had to own some of the tools of production, we had to run things. We needed to build our own institutions. But, for me at least, building and owning and running things was a by-product. It was not the central point of the exercise.

Building a new industry
So we built. These were heady days.

1989: Vision TV, the world’s first multi-faith, resulting in an aggressively multi-ethnic and multicultural, television network. I emerged after more than a dozen years as not only the network’s co-founder, but as the only Black woman to have been vice president of a Canadian TV network.

1990: Enter the Disability Network. It was not a network, but first a radio, then a TV program on CBC. This award-winning show was reinvented as Moving On in 1997.

1995: WTN, the Women’s Television Network. A network with a woman
CEO, executive management, large staff of women, headquartered in Winnipeg, doing large amounts of professional development for girls and women through the WTN Foundation, and programming by, for, and about women.

1999: APTN, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. A network with an Aboriginal CEO, primarily an Aboriginal board of directors and executive management, headquartered in Winnipeg, staffed by Aboriginal individuals, doing large amounts of professional development, and producing programming by, for, and about Metis, First Nations, and Inuit youth and elders.

In that rush to change who was “on” the air, in front of the cameras, behind the microphones, I honestly didn’t notice much that the more fundamental change we were making was in who “owned” media, who was in executive management positions, and the composition of boards of directors.

“Ready to start at the top,” is the way we used to joke about just-graduated Ontario journalism students in the Regina CTV newsroom. I did some professional development there in the 1980s. I now think that I didn’t know then how important the top was, and how easily the top for the four designated groups can get toppled.

Robert Fowler, who headed the 1955 commission on the roles of public and private broadcasting, is famously reported by everyone to have said, “Programming is everything, all the rest is housekeeping.”

About 10 years ago Trina McQueen, a most respected colleague who retired from the presidency of CTV in 2000, a unique appointment then and now, turned Fowler’s statement on its head. To summarize Ms. McQueen’s quips as I remember them: “We’re not very good at the housekeeping, and that means the programming cannot follow.”

I now know that if we don’t get ownership right, a very serious form of administration/housekeeping, there is no significant ethnic, cultural, gender, and disability diversity in Canadian TV programming.

Lesson 3: It matters who owns it.

Follow where the top went in the new millennium
Another much-quoted WIFT-T study, this one in 2004, tells us that as of 2001, visible minority people “are significantly under-represented in key occupations and management positions throughout the sectors.

As of 2001, members of visible minorities represented only 5.6% of the workforce in Canada’s large private broadcasters, and only 2.2% of senior management positions in this industry.

As of 2001, visible minorities were not represented amongst CBC/Radio-Canada’s most senior management group” (WIFT-T, 2004).

The CBC’s own statistics for 2006 tell us that as of 2006, people with disabilities in the CBC are 2.1% of the workforce. That’s in any capacity. And members of visible minorities in any capacity are 5.7% of the workforce (CBC/Radio-Canada, 2006).

International Women’s Day is next week
In all likelihood there will be some type of very insightful documentary on CBC
Radio, which I listen to a great deal, where girls and young women tell us that they don’t really call themselves “feminists.” They’ll say that all those equal opportunity battles have been fought and won, that they do not have to be as pushy and mouthy as Doris Anderson, June Callwood, Maya Angelou, Michele Landsberg, Jean Augustine, et cetera, et cetera. These younger women may even assert we are living in a “post-feminist era.” Many of us somewhat more mature women hear this and weep . . . or want to smash their bobbleheads!

Maybe we no longer need a Women’s TV Network because we’re in a post-feminist era? In 2001, this hardy band of television professional women based in Winnipeg was sold to Shaw/Corus, reduced drastically in staff size, moved to Toronto, and now does a kinder/gentler/funnier sort of programming.

As of 2001 until this date in early 2008, Vision TV had zero visible minority persons in executive management, and as of 2006 zero visible minority persons on the board of directors, although corporate website information cites two Aboriginal men on the board. Perhaps in addition to a post-feminist era we live in a post-racialist era?

And a post–disability rights era? In 2008 the CBC’s website tells us that “Moving On has moved on”—off the air (cbc.ca). So maybe we do not need a Disability Network? In the early days of the program they raised their own money to produce the show.

Maybe we no longer need pay attention to three out of four of the designated groups because the broadcasting industry, as it is presently constituted, will look after all these diversity matters itself.

That is precisely what the CRTC said in its denial of the Canada One licence application in July 2007. For those of you who didn’t follow this saga, Canada One applied for a licence to broadcast English-language drama in prime time with visible minority people in the key creative positions and world drama on visible minority subject matter. The proposed network had visible minority ownership and executive management.

Let’s look for a moment at the CRTC’s denial of the Canada One application. I don’t bring this up to say that the application was perfect, but to look at the Commission’s rather curious justification for turning it down. I should also note that I had no official relationship to Canada One, but did appear as a positive intervener and voluntary advisor, because I thought and think that visible minority ownership of TV is crucial at this moment. To quote the denial decision:

Canada One TV could launch as early as 2008. The applicant committed to airing original Canadian drama programming in prime time in year five (2012, based on a 2008 launch). In the Commissioners’ view, if present efforts by broadcasters continue, by that point, the Canadian broadcasting system will have made more gains in the on-screen and off screen representation of cultural diversity. (CRTC, 2007, emphasis mine)

Bear with me. There is lots of math here and two problems with this denial. The first problem is an error. The applicant in fact said it would do prime time diversity drama from year one of its licence, 2008—not start in 2012, as the Commission later asserted.

Second, and this is from the CRTC’s own transcripts, is what the research
group actually said at the hearing about how fast the industry would fix the diversity problem itself:

The Researcher: “When we did the 2003 report on diversity in Canadian television, which is some 400 pages—and you are familiar with it, of course, because the Commission was a participant—we looked at some 400 hours of programming. . . . That report showed the presence gap. The numbers were as follows:

In 2003, 13.5% of all dramatic roles were filled by visible minorities. In the primary roles—these are the money roles, basically, so the lead character roles—the representation is 10.3%. At that point, 18.5 was the benchmark for English-speaking Canada. . . .

We replicated the study under the same fundamental basics . . . again this is on the public record, the first and the second study. . . . The primary character representation in Canadian drama went from 10.3% to 12.2%. That is including one movie that happened to appear on CTV during the sample period, which was Hollywood and Bollywood. If we had actually taken that out, it would have gone down a bit further.

The Chairperson: What if you add Little Mosque on the Prairie?

The Researcher: First of all, this was done in May 2006. Actually, that is a good point, because if we added Little Mosque on the Prairie, the numbers probably would have gone up a little bit more, if that was available to the private sector. The issue is: How sensitive are the numbers in which one program could make a substantial difference—a 10, 15, or 20% difference in the overall representation numbers?

The key point I wanted to make is, what happened in the two years was that the incidental character numbers went from 14.9 to 24.4% . . . there were more visible minorities as cab drivers, doormen, waiters and girl Fridays on-screen in that period . . . But the primary numbers really didn’t move all that much, only 2% . . . To catch up to today’s population benchmarks for the whole of English Canada, for primary characters, would take about 10 to 15 years. If you wanted to catch up to Toronto and Vancouver, it would take some 40 years plus. (CRTC, 2007, emphasis mine)

My conclusion is that the primary reason for the CRTC’s denial is at best questionable, in addition to faulty math: That the industry would look after all these diversity matters itself, and very soon. Forty years, in my view, is not soon, when I personally have already been working at it for 40 years! Four unrealistic years is not soon either, nor is 10 or 15.

Lesson 4: It matters who regulates it.

The Radio-Television News Directors’ Association 2007 Diversity Toolkit DVDs, which I commend them for, would suggest that newsrooms, at least, have a long way to go on the representation question. And they must be very far behind in
terms of who is in charge, because the news directors interviewed in the tapes are primarily White males, the experts on diversity are White, and only in the “Business Case” tape do we have diversity experts who are . . . well . . . diverse.

That’s curious too. Everyone is very fond of saying that media exist only to make money. If diversity sells, and IBM and banks can figure that out, why is it such a difficult concept to grasp in media, which allegedly is only concerned with profit? Other industries are drastically ahead of broadcasting. So it must not be true that all broadcasters really care about is money and profit. Because if they did, they apparently would diversify.

Therefore the media industry must really care about something else. I will speculate, and I am only speculating, about what media really cares about: It is keeping the tremendous power of television in the hands of those who have always had it. And among the ways that can be done is to seem to have a lot of activity around “diversity” in media—without actually changing anything, doing anything, and most importantly not changing who has power.

**Don’t be fooled by diversionary diversity tactics**

They give the appearance of action. I will quickly name seven smokescreens that mask non-action.

1. *Words as a smokescreen.* Say “diversity” a lot. Mean anything and absolutely nothing by it.

2. *Women as a smokescreen.* White women, that is. Now don’t get your backs up about this. I am not questioning the intentions of any particular woman. Intentions may be very solid. But White women have been used since time immemorial by men who really do not want to lose power. Look to politics—our one woman prime minister became PM when the party was absolutely sure to lose and no “man” wanted the job. Kim Campbell became a place holder. And in my view that is what is happening in many diversity portfolios in broadcasting.

3. *Honours as smokescreens.* I adore honours and would scream to the heavens if any of mine were taken away! But honours do not carry power. Better to appoint achieving broadcaster members of the four designated groups to symbolic positions and not make them CEOs.

4. *Consultation as a smokescreen.* This is actually a joke among Aboriginal individuals with whom I have worked. “Consult with us and then do nothing we say.”

5. *Training as a smokescreen.* My gosh, by now at least some of the Aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities, and visible minority broadcasters who’ve been trained must be ready for real jobs.

6. *Cosmetic diversity as a smokescreen.* Change who is on the screen, change portrayal somewhat, without changing who is in executive management, who owns the media, and who is on the board of directors.

7. *The exception as a smokescreen.* What do you mean we’ve not promoted the four designated groups? There is one woman who is a CEO.
Who will inherit the airwaves? I am speculating that this millennium’s consolidation of owners primarily keeps power in the hands of those who have always had it. I am not asserting that this is a well thought out strategy to achieve such an outcome. There is little doubt, however, that the gains of the late 1980s and 1990s have been seriously eroded.

What I especially do not want to see happen is the considerable diversity gains that have been made by the CHUM family (now part of CTV) and by OMNI (a long-time part of Rogers), and by the CITY stations (now part of Rogers)—I do not want to see these gains swallowed up, and these wholes become less than the sum of their former parts.

Now, on the ownership question we’re almost back to where we started. I am not questioning the integrity, or the intentions, or the well meaning-ness, of the present owners. Perhaps further disenfranchising women, people with disabilities, and visible minority people is indeed an unintended outcome of consolidation that has unfortunate real effects. Smaller players meanwhile (the Craigs, Toronto One, Vision TV, Channel M) are either getting swallowed up or impersonating their larger colleagues, perhaps to whom they can sell their assets?

The big owners are, of course, CTV, Shaw/Corus, Quebecor, Rogers, and CanWest, and the public broadcaster CBC/SRC.

As of this day there are:

0 disabled persons owners, but then again there never were any.

1 woman president, according to corporate website information, the president of Broadcasting for CanWest. But then again there has always been only one woman at a time, for a grand total of three. Universities, the construction industry, and the Supreme Court do a great deal better.

0 visible minority owners in TV. Stats are also worse than the 1990s as I’ve indicated in executive management, which in some organizations has been reduced to 0, 1, or 2, for an entire TV industry.

Then there is an APTN. I will say more in a few moments about its special and precious place.

Here again what is to be gained from making women, persons with disabilities, and visible minority people so scarce, to non-existent, at the top?

I don’t know. But let’s shed some light on the power question with art, with drama, with insights from your great Québec playwright Michel Tremblay. He concludes in his play *The Impromptu at Outremont* that the four heroines are not really concerned about the health of the arts, as they loudly assert.

Before, everything was for us. I mean people like us. . . . Everything belonged to us. . . . look like us. Everything was done in relation to us. . . . Did we complain then that our “art” was unfair, that another world existed that also needed to be talked about? No, of course not! But now that the roles are reversed and we’re all but cut out of the picture, now that a new generation of artists who don’t think like ours did, who don’t
talk like ours, and who act instead of complaining, has displaced our holy elite, we cry scandal and treason! The next thing you know we’ll be calling for human rights! But in truth it’s not the survival of art that worries us; we couldn’t care less about art. What we really want, like everyone else, is to forget that the rest of the world isn’t like us and to draw everything into our own self-satisfied clique. (Tremblay, 1981, p. 76)

A by-product of almost no women at the top, zero visible minorities, and zero disabled persons is that power remains with the same group, Tremblay’s “clique.”

**The Great Debaters—An exception**

I’d like to call attention to an exception to the south of us. *The Great Debaters*, produced by Oprah Winfrey, directed and starring Denzel Washington, is a story of triumph, how an all-Black debating team from a segregated college in Marshall, Texas, beat Harvard.

On the other hand, the movie is totally accurate about how those folk in 1930s Texas could be as smart, refined, moral, intellectual, dedicated as they wanted—and still could not protect themselves and their children from lynch mobs. This is the Texas of my Aunt Linnie.

If Oprah didn’t have the money and the power that she has, would this movie have been made? Would the Hollywood industry have taken care of this itself? The latest about Oprah is that she is starting her own TV network. She knows it matters who has the power, the money, who owns.

**In reality, there is nothing for me to complain about in my individual life and career**

When all is said and done I’ve worked at my chosen professions, my art forms, every day for 40 years, a rare and splendid privilege. I have been honoured for that work, and made at least enough money to buy some version of what most executives buy. It should be enough.

So what am I uneasy about? Thinking a long time for this speech, I realize that the great tragedy is that folk like me are not left with actual power, able to pass on in this industry to the next generation, not to mention the next seven generations. We do not inherit.

Which brings me to APTN specifically, on this evening when this lecture is named for Dr. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis. APTN is significant as long as it is owned, managed, and controlled by Aboriginal peoples, all three of the main groups of them: Inuit, Metis, and First Nations. Warning: as APTN becomes an increasingly valuable asset, the people who have always been in control of most of Canada’s media will be willing to take it over.

We absolutely must do a better job of keeping the assets in our families, of maintaining our inheritance. Katharine Graham, celebrated publisher of the *Washington Post*, said it eloquently in her autobiography (1997). That as much as she’d like to think that she was talented, hard working, and intelligent—what really separated her from other women who were the same was that her father founded and owned a newspaper, which he handed over to Mrs. Graham’s gifted but unstable husband. She took over the media assets, her inheritance, with an iron fist after her husband’s suicide.
If that is true for Mrs. Graham, how much more true is it for visible minority, Aboriginal peoples, disabled persons in media? If we own an asset we must insure that it is passed on to our literal or figurative progeny. Other than that we shall inherit the wind—not the airwaves—and so shall our children and their children.

Why is this important? Are we simply trying to obtain “power”? Maybe. But ownership is important for all the reasons with which you are familiar:

- The business case is solid. Diversity pays.
- It is just. Why should more than half of the population be excluded from this area of human endeavor?
- If we do not represent Canada as it is, in all its ethnic and cultural diversity, we risk massive social dislocation and alienation.
- And finally, why exclude and waste talented people? As the United Negro College Fund slogan goes: “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.”

I have six suggestions—rather, strategies—to prevent us from inheriting the wind:

1. Solidarity, among the four designated groups, without asserting interchangeability. Be there for each other, without seeking to replace each other.
2. Lobby the regulatory authorities, and the rest of governments, not to sanction the flipping of assets, executive managements, and mandates. Whatever gains have been achieved by the four designated groups can simply be eroded in asset flipping.
3. Continue to apply for, and build political support around, TV networks for the three not-represented groups: women, persons with disabilities, and visible minority peoples.
4. Lobby for real targets that existing broadcasters must reach very soon, especially, but not limited to, in senior management, executive management, and boards of directors. Benchmarks for the key creative positions, and portrayal, are obviously needed. Why indeed are there countless arguments about this? If there is so much industry political will to do it anyway, then achieve the benchmarks and then they can be dropped.
5. Maintain, and do not sell or transfer ownership of, whatever assets the four designated groups have. This applies especially to APTN, the group currently with the assets.
6. Mentor, in an extremely serious way, the next generations. If you’re in the four designated groups and you have significant experience in media, as I have, you know that people before you as well as you yourself, fought for you to be there. Pass it on. Each one teach at least 10. And if you’ve past your 60-something birthday, as I have, you are extremely aware that the goals I’ve set for diversity in media will not be accomplished in our working lives. In the 1990s I thought they would.
In view of the setbacks of the new millennium, I know they will not be. Therefore mentor as many people as possible in our industries who have another 20 or 30 or 40 years left to work.

Broadcasting should be regulated to grow and maintain the assets of the four designated groups. Yes, that means targets. Yes, that means ownership. And yes, it means that consolidations and mergers cannot erode the modest gains on the diversity front that the previous organizations have made. Those are all matters for regulation.

As things now stand, we will inherit the wind, not the airwaves. It is the task, I believe, of each of us to keep going back to the regulators, governments, other industry players, and the Canadian people until the four designated groups are in an ownership position, well represented in executive management and boards of directors.

So we can “Build on it”.

Notes
1. This lecture was delivered at Concordia University on February 28, 2008. The lecture series is in honour of Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, Chippewa (1939-2007), whose academic career focused on Northern and Aboriginal media and communications. She was Professor Emeritus of Concordia University, where she served as Dean, Faculty of Arts and Science. She received a National Aboriginal Achievement Award in 2002 for contributions to Aboriginal communications. Previous lecturers are Tom Perlmutter, National Film Commissioner; and Jean LaRose, CEO of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. The lectures are sponsored by the Centre for Research-Action on Race Relations (CRARR).

2. The four groups are named in Canada’s Employment Equity Act and Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Judge Rosalie Silberman Abella, Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, 1985:

It is not that individuals in the designated groups are inherently unable to achieve equality on their own, it is that the obstacles in their way are so formidable and self-perpetuating that they cannot be overcome without intervention. It is both intolerable and insensitive if we simply wait and hope that the barriers will disappear with time. Equality in employment will not happen unless we make it happen.

References


