Lack of hi-def TV content called a threat

JOHN MCKAY
The Canadian Press
TORONTO

Canada is falling too far behind the U.S. in the creation of high definition television content and there's no coherent national strategy to improve the situation, warns the man who for the past decade has been overseeing the gradual migration to hi-def from analogue.

"Maybe my cry is slightly a cry in the wilderness," says Michael McEwan, president of Canadian Digital Television, or CDTV, the government-sanctioned industry consortium.

"But if you really add up the amount of Canadian content available, over the course of the year it's in the hundreds of hours, whereas if you look at what's available in the United States, it's in the thousands to tens of thousands of hours."

McEwan's point is that there are now more than a million hi-def set owners in Canada but they are at present using their improved picture and sound to watch either DVDs or imported American HD programming. And this, he maintains, represents yet another U.S. threat to the economic and cultural foundation of our broadcast industry.

At least one hi-def set manufacturer agrees.

"We are at a stage right now where the demand for programming is outstripping supply, a rarity in our business," says Steve Preiner, director of LG Electronics Canada. "It is essential that an industry-wide timetable be established to ensure HDTV services keep up with the growing demand for HDTV programming."

McEwan concedes he might be getting into hot water with the very broadcasters who are members of CDTV but says we are standing at the precipice and staring into the abyss.

CTV has objected to the warning, maintaining that there is only the perception of a Canada-U.S. content gap, that the majority of the network's prime-time schedule is now simulcast in HD, including major sports events and awards shows. In addition, the broadcaster stresses, all of its homemade series, such as *Degrassi*, *Corner Gas* and *Instant Star* are in HD, as will be the majority of its 2005-2006 season production slate.

And CTV over-the-air transmitters will be operational this summer in Toronto and Vancouver.

CTV and Global TV launched limited national HD services last year and this past weekend the CBC got into the act with its first regular programming, including a *Nature of Things* episode and a Harry Potter movie. But south of the border, the conventional American network prime-time schedules are almost 100 per cent available in HD, with specialty options growing rapidly.

Fred Mattocks, executive director of production resources at the CBC, couldn't agree more with McEwan's warnings that, not only are we in danger of losing Canadian TV eyeballs to American drama content, but that as the HD audience reaches a critical mass, slipping from a manageable two years to five years behind the U.S. rollout is dangerous.

But Mattocks says the financial facts cannot be ignored.

"The economics don't support the solution and so all of us ... are doing what we feel we can do given our various accountabilities."

He says because hi-def television is inevitable, programming made now in analogue will not have much of a shelf life. As a result, the CBC is developing content in HD that will have legacy value, such as *Mark Starowicz's Hockey: A People's History* project, expected to air in 2006. Also, he promises, if the NHL gets its act together next season, the CBC will air at least one game a week in hi-def.

Sympathetic to the financial plight of Canadian broadcasters and producers, McEwan is proposing government tax incentives to encourage the conversion to both HD infrastructure and programming.

"We don't have a choice, or we lose the whole shebang and we lose both the economic, cultural core twin mandates that come from the Broadcast Act."

But even McEwan concedes it's the worst of times to expect more tax breaks for an industry already crying for funding just to produce Canadian drama content.

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HDTV demand outstrips available programming

By JOHN MCKAY
Canadian Press

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At least one hi-def set manufacturer agrees. "We are at a stage right now where the demand for programming is outstripping supply, a rarity in our business," says Steve Preiner, director of LG Electronics Canada. "It is essential that an industry-wide timetable be established to ensure HDTV services keep up with the growing demand for HDTV programming."

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In danger of losing Canadian eyeballs

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