

October 8, 2004

Télé-Québec Review Working Group  
Quebec Department of Culture and Communications  
Media, Audiovisual and Telecommunications Branch  
225 Grande Allée East, Block C, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
Quebec City, Quebec G1R 5G5

**SUBJECT: Télé-Québec in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: more necessary than ever as a benchmark for our collective identity  
Public hearings by the Télé-Québec Review Working Group**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Working Group:

We are pleased to have this opportunity to express our views and thoughts on the educational and cultural mission of Télé-Québec within the framework of your deliberations, which may be a determining factor in decisions affecting the future of Télé-Québec. We are particularly interested in your review and are convinced we can make a significant contribution, for at least two reasons.

The first reason is that we consider Télé-Québec an essential player in the social and cultural development of both today's and tomorrow's Quebec. There is a clear consensus on this, and we are very pleased by the statement Quebec's Minister of Culture and Communications made in the working paper, when she stated that *the need for Quebec public television is not being questioned*.

The second reason is that there have always been close ties between the National Film Board (NFB) and Télé-Québec ever since Télé-Québec was first established. These ties — which are necessary and highly productive in that they generate many educational, cultural and social benefits for Quebec — are easily explained by the fact that both organizations have very similar missions and many features in common.

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Télé-Québec and the NFB are highly complementary institutions. The NFB is a unique public-sector film and video producer and distributor that focuses on socially and culturally engaged documentaries. It has produced some 11,000 works since its beginnings in 1939. Télé-Québec is a broadcaster which airs a significant number of films contributed by the NFB: between 2002 and 2004, Télé-Québec obtained licences to air 82 NFB productions and co-productions.

The two organizations have also worked successfully as partners on many projects. Examples include *16/26*, a program of drama shorts produced in co-operation with SODEC in the 1990s; the series *Écran Animé*, which celebrated auteur animators from Quebec and elsewhere in the fall of 2002; broadcasts of documentary shorts from emerging auteur filmmakers as part of the series *Libres courts* in December 2000; and the broadcast/discussion of *Bacon, le film* in November 2001. Further on in this letter, we will set out the new partnerships we hope to forge with Télé-Québec within the framework of measures implemented as a result of your deliberations.

We could set out in detail all the factors that bring our two organizations together, be it human resources — Télé-Québec and the NFB play a crucial role as incubators of skills and talents in many cinema and film trades — or our artistic, commercial and management practices. However, the most significant factor we have in common lies at the heart of both our organizations: our educational and cultural missions, which for practical purposes can be expressed in almost identical terms.

Our missions can be summarized as follows:

- **Télé-Québec's** mission is to foster love of learning, encourage the acquisition of knowledge and promote artistic and cultural endeavour and experience among all Quebecers, as well as to reflect the regional characteristics and diversity of Quebec society<sup>1</sup>.
- **The NFB's** mission is “to increase viewers’ knowledge and understanding [in Canada and other countries] of the social and cultural realities of Canada”<sup>2</sup>.

Télé-Québec has a separate commitment to **educate** the public (foster love of learning and encourage the acquisition of knowledge), but that commitment is fully compatible with the NFB’s mission to reflect Canada’s communities to Canadians.

The NFB and Télé-Québec have essentially the same goal: **to present and increase Quebecers’ and Canadians’ knowledge and understanding of the social and cultural realities of Canadian (NFB) and Quebec (Télé-Québec) society**. Both organizations reflect NFB founder John Grierson’s well-known principle: each seeks to be the “eye” of the country or society it presents to capture all aspects of that society, including the men and women in it, their ideals, and their aspirations.

<sup>1</sup> Source: *Act respecting the Société de télédiffusion du Québec*, Chapter 2, section 16

<sup>2</sup> Source: NFB Web site ([www.nfb.ca](http://www.nfb.ca))

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The NFB and Télé-Québec are both government institutions, by their very nature attesting to the Canadian and Quebec governments' commitment to promote what makes their societies and cultures special. In setting up these institutions, the governments of Canada and Quebec had similar goals: to democratize culture, give a voice to those who could otherwise not make themselves heard, and increase viewers' exposure to and understanding of the regions and the very diverse realities of their communities. These goals are fully compatible with those of training, strengthening viewers' sense of **identity**, where necessary strengthening social cohesion, and improving quality of life. Of course, for both the Quebec and Canadian governments, that sense of identity must take account of cultural diversity.

When we compare Télé-Québec and the NFB to private-sector organizations in the same educational and cultural niches, we need to make an important distinction in their approaches to profitability. For Télé-Québec and the NFB, profitability is measured first and foremost in social gains flowing from the creative process that culminates in a film or flowing from the release of films, videos or non-programming services. It is not measured solely in terms of revenue or audience ratings. For example, an NFB film like *Bacon*, which aired on Télé-Québec in 2001, would certainly not have met all profitability targets had it been made by an independent producer. Yet the intensive debate it generated and the repercussions of that debate are in themselves extraordinarily beneficial to society.

Evaluating social gains is not easy, however, nor is quantifying in dollar terms the optimal cost of missions conferred upon organizations like Télé-Québec and the NFB. This is a crucial issue, all the more so since — as the Quebec Minister of Culture and Communications indicated — your proposals will have to be based on the assumption that public funds will be put to the best possible use and that new sources of funding can potentially be identified.

One might say that the “social benefits” desired should also be maximized. Given that culture and communications are becoming increasingly globalized, media and TV channels are proliferating at an astounding rate and new social issues are constantly emerging, those social benefits are now more necessary than ever.

The media landscape has changed drastically with the proliferation of channels and media, with cultural and technological upheaval, and with privatization. These changes have brought about a significant shift: the more connected we are collectively to the world as a whole, the less time we have to be connected individually to the realities of Canada and Quebec, to tell our own stories and to talk about our origins, our problem and what makes us different. Because of the way markets work, cultures with the greatest means to occupy media space worldwide achieve overwhelming visibility. Those with fewer means can of course not match that visibility, so one effect of cultural globalization has been that whole segments of our national culture never see the light. Paradoxically, some regions of Canada and Quebec are less familiar to people in our cities than parts of the world they have never personally visited.

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At the end of the day, democracy may suffer because, to function as it should, a healthy democracy requires citizens who are aware of and knowledgeable about their country, their region and the issues that affect them. Citizens must also be able to apply critical thinking, to have media outlets for their opinions and to access something other than mass-market culture — preferably, their own community's culture. Moreover, the groups that together make up society must know enough about one another to gain appreciation and respect for one another. None of that can come about if communities have access only to the mass media.

We are convinced that the NFB and Télé-Québec represent practical and dynamic responses to these problems. As an alternative to mass-market culture, the NFB and Télé-Québec provide access to culture not driven by the bottom line, and proffer diversity instead of uniformity.

Like the NFB, Télé-Québec is a crucible of creative innovation and unique experiences, where artists prefer bold risks over proven formulas, and where works reflect the realities of our culture by giving artists in many disciplines and of varied inclinations the opportunity to express themselves and show their works. Télé-Québec invites people to think about what they hear and see, to engage in discussion and to learn, as well as to be entertained. Télé-Québec is a voice for youth, seniors, women, the regions, and all those who are excluded or have no forum to speak.

Nevertheless, social and technological changes as well as changes in the media have been so profound in recent years that some aspects of Télé-Québec's approach and role, particularly its educational role, may no longer apply in the same fashion. Many educational networks in Canada and elsewhere have encountered the same problems. Networks like Sask TV, Alberta Access, Knowledge, TVOntario, France 5 and PBS have — as has Télé-Québec — been forced to rethink their approach. Recent experiences have made it necessary for us all to take a fresh look at the viability and relevance of educational television. A number of questions spring to mind: Have we asked too much of television as an “educator”? And is a network like Télé-Québec, which has nothing in common with Télé-université (TÉLUQ, a distance learning institution), not geared more towards culture than towards education? Moreover, if Télé-Québec were to be a genuine educational network, should it not strengthen its ties to the Quebec Department of Education?

What we are certain of in our own minds is that we cannot review Télé-Québec's mission unless we first set aside the framework within which it currently operates. But before we can do that, we must pursue two avenues of reflection. First, can Télé-Québec extend its reach beyond Quebec's geographic boundaries, and second, does the almost immeasurable speed of technological development not force Télé-Québec to move beyond television?

Historically, Télé-Québec has operated solely within Quebec. But in our view, the network's extension into some foreign markets, particularly in Europe and Asia, as well as into major projects like *Arctic Mission*, appears especially promising. **The NFB has acquired considerable expertise in prospecting these markets and negotiating**

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**agreements with foreign partners, and would be happy to assist Télé-Québec if it were to move in that direction.**

We believe that the best way for the two institutions to co-operate on this approach would be to set up joint committees to develop Télé-Québec's business interests outside the province, with clearly established areas of responsibility and a well-defined plan. Naturally, we would receive support from financial partners like SODEC. There is also another way for Télé-Québec to export its products: **the NFB could be responsible for the international distribution of programs produced or co-produced by Télé-Québec.**

Télé-Québec has many instruments available to fulfil its mission. Here, we will consider two: documentary broadcasts and on-line services, both NFB areas of expertise. To assist you in your deliberations, we would have specific recommendations on the partnerships that would be most useful to Télé-Québec.

Documentaries are one of the best vehicles through which a community's diversity, or a country's most diverse regions, can be reflected with the aim of educating viewers or stimulating discussion. The documentary genre has proven its worth since the very beginnings of the film industry, and today is more popular than ever.

The growing popularity of films like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and of events like the Rencontres internationales du documentaires in Montreal, as well as the emergence of cinemas like Ex-Centris that screen almost nothing but documentaries, attest to Quebecers' and Canadians' growing appreciation for the documentary genre. Here at the NFB, we have noted that viewing audiences at the screenings we arrange across Canada are growing, and any discussions held after screenings are becoming increasingly animated. The discussions that followed *Bacon, le film*, aired by Télé-Québec in 2001, illustrate this convincingly.

The documentary genre is part of the niche occupied by Télé-Québec, which year in year out airs an average of 800 documentaries from all parts of the world. However, **we believe that Télé-Québec could and should broadcast more documentaries.**

**On this issue, the NFB would like to explore promising avenues to modify its current relationship with Télé-Québec. The NFB would like to become more than just a documentary supplier; it would like to be the network's genuine partner, and enable Télé-Québec to take advantage of NFB expertise and of the NFB's extensive collection, on whose heritage value we cannot put a price.** The network could perhaps guarantee the NFB a specific slot for feature-length documentaries, or at least guarantee a certain number of programming hours for NFB documentaries. I would be happy to assist Télé-Québec in many areas, including selecting films for broadcast, developing new documentary niches, or preparing to release films in theatres or on television. As a first step, we could discuss a formula for co-operation that might include an NFB representative on a joint committee.

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**Another potential avenue for co-operation would be transforming online educational services into a high-speed one-stop shop.**

Télé-Québec's *Carrefour éducation*, which provides excellent support for students and educators, may be considered the national forum for French-language expertise and teaching tools available on the Internet or on video and DVD support for schools. But we believe that the *Carrefour éducation* service and Web site should be positioned more effectively and better organized, and its archive holdings distributed more efficiently, so that *Carrefour éducation* becomes even more popular than it is now.

In Quebec, budgets governing access to teaching tools other than textbooks are decentralized and held by individual school boards, schools or even classes. This is very different from systems in other provinces, such as Ontario. As a result, in Quebec some schools and many teachers have difficulty accessing the audiovisual resources distributed by Télé-Québec and the NFB. **The situation could be improved if *Carrefour éducation* were repositioned and reorganized according to recommendations made and measures taken by MEQ, the Quebec Department of Education, to facilitate access to online materials for as many schools as possible.** This approach would be fully in line with Télé-Québec's intention, as expressed in its 2000-2003 Three-Year Plan, to strengthen its partnership with MEQ and educational-sector institutions.

Distribution by streaming should also be considered, because downloading is still the most common way of viewing online resources. To protect copyright, *Carrefour éducation* posts a warning that viewers are prohibited from reproducing documents, but once documents are downloaded any ill-intentioned user can reproduce them at will. Streaming, which requires a high-speed connection, would be completely secure because the resources viewed would remain archived on the *Carrefour education* site at all times.

Télé-Québec was a major partner in the MEQ pilot project on the digital educational network. As part of the project, all schools under the Laval, Seigneurie des Mille îles and Les Affluents school boards were connected to one another and to the Internet by a fibre-optics network. The project was very successful in such areas as integrating new information and communication technologies (ICTs) into educational practices, and also made it possible to identify problems in the educational sector, such as licensing costs and royalties for access to online audiovisual resources. On September 28, 2004, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, chaired by Quebec Minister Pierre Reid, expressed support for a concerted financial strategy to facilitate access to online digital resources for teaching purposes. The NFB and Télé-Québec could work in tandem to develop umbrella agreements and establish Quebec-wide distribution programs for digital broadcasting in schools. This would be a first in Canada.

The close ties between MEQ and Télé-Québec could also lead to other successes in the educational sector. Education on the media, development of critical thinking, use of new ICTs and citizen involvement are all promoted in Canadian school programs, and all require a physical communication infrastructure (such as high-speed networks) as

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well as an institutional infrastructure. This means that Quebec's public broadcaster plays a crucial role and has significant responsibility. With its ties to French-speaking Canada, the NFB would be a very useful partner in revitalizing interactions and devising projects with educational value.

Our final thoughts are on the process by which Télé-Québec generates new youth programs. The process has many stages, can take over one year to complete and may take several years to become profitable, as *Cornemuse* did. The NFB would like to consider this issue with Télé-Québec to determine how the two organizations could work together as partners to make the process less cumbersome, and if possible — this would be the primary goal — to launch a new generation of youth programs, made right here for our own communities.

It would be an honour to appear before you during your public hearings, so that we could have an opportunity to discuss in greater depth the avenues for reflection we have put forward in this letter.

We hope that our suggestions will make a positive contribution to your deliberations.

Yours truly,



Jacques Bensimon  
Government Film Commissioner and Chairperson

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