In his editor’s note for the November 2010 issue of The Walrus magazine, John Macfarlane—also a founding member of Friends of Public Broadcasting (now Friends of Canadian Broadcasting)—underscored some of the key financial challenges facing the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in the new digital era. At the time of his editorial, the CBC received an annual parliamentary appropriation of $1.1 billion, an amount that ranked Canada “near the bottom of Western industrialized societies in our support for public broadcasting.” Even more troubling, Macfarlane noted, the CBC’s wide range of national and regional services in English and French across three platforms (radio, television, and now the Internet) required $1.5 billion annually to operate. Historically, the gap between the CBC’s annual parliamentary grant and its operating expenses has been bridged by advertising revenues that have been accrued by shows that have been able to reach truly national audiences, including the public broadcaster’s longest running and most popular program, *Hockey Night in Canada* (HNIC).

As a result of these intensifying political-economic pressures, the CBC controversially expanded its flow of programming in the new millennium to include US game shows (e.g., *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune*) and other popular Canadian content (e.g., *Dragons’ Den* and *Battle of the Blades*) to attract larger audiences—and thus, markets for advertisers. Predictably, these decisions generated significant discussion and debate and, notably, drew the ire of many cultural nationalists who have long believed that the public broadcaster’s main contribution to Canadian cultural life should be to “provide culturally desirable programming that private
broadcasters cannot or will not provide.” These debates were also extended to the role of CBC Sports and the provision of popular sports content that is now widely available to most Canadians thanks to the explosive growth of cable and specialty sport channels like TSN and Sportsnet, which are respectively owned by the vertically integrated telecommunications giants BCE and Rogers. As Macfarlane explained:

Until recently, for instance, it was possible to argue that CBC was performing a public service by televising NHL hockey games. Hockey is a staple to which all Canadians should have access, and in remote regions CBC’s was once the only available signal. But no more. In the digital age, private networks have as much reach as the public broadcaster, and just as much interest in cashing in on the public’s appetite for the game—TSN already owns the rights to many weekday games and some playoff series. Still, CBC TV continues to devote an enormous piece of its prime-time schedule to Hockey Night in Canada, not because private broadcasters are unable or unwilling to do so, but because hockey is money. As with Jeopardy! and Wheel of Fortune, the tail wags the dog.4

Readers familiar with the history of these arguments will, of course, be well aware that a similar story has already been fully played out in Québec. In 2004, Radio-Canada’s legendary program, La soirée du hockey, went off the air after RDS (TSN’s sister station) paid an unprecedented amount to secure the exclusive broadcasting rights to all NHL hockey games (national and cable) in the French market. While RDS’s monopoly of the French market broadcast rights provided the NHL and the Montreal Canadiens with even greater revenue streams, it also substantially increased the amount of NHL hockey available to cable and satellite subscribers in Québec.5 Still, the demise of La soirée du hockey marked the end of both an era in Canadian television and an important cultural tradition in Québec. Moreover, from this point forward—and despite initial political opposition by the federal government—the “viewing rights” of Canadians to have “free,” over-the-air access to NHL hockey on the public broadcaster were ruptured along linguistic lines.6

In the remainder of this chapter, I explore the historical and most recent political debates over whether the public broadcaster ought to remain in the business of airing sports content, especially HNIC, on its English-language network. Historically, HNIC has been a crucial investment for the CBC, simply because it acted as a promotional platform for the public network, in addition to providing sizeable advertising-based revenue streams that have subsidized the network’s other programming. Beyond these financial arguments, though, what has ultimately
been at stake throughout all of these debates is not just the fate of hockey (and the Olympics and other major sporting events that are important to Canadians) on the CBC but also the type of role the public broadcaster should play in Canadian life, and thus the future of the network itself. As I note below, these debates culminated in 2013, when Rogers paid an unprecedented $5.2 billion for the exclusive NHL media rights for the next twelve years (beginning with the 2014–15 NHL season), placing the very future of the CBC on an increasingly tenuous foundation. Prior to engaging these most recent issues, though, I want to emphasize some of the most significant political-economic developments that have undermined the role of CBC Sports. These developments need to be understood in relation to a much broader long-standing struggle over the role of public broadcasting in Canada.

THE EARLY DAYS OF CANADIAN TELEVISION

Readers of a certain age will remember that televised hockey was introduced to Canadians in 1952, enabling Canada’s baby-boom generation to grow up watching hockey from autumn until spring. The introduction of the new medium was, incidentally, not enthusiastically endorsed by NHL president Clarence Campbell, who, echoing the fears of the Canadian highbrow establishment, called the arrival of television “the greatest menace of the entertainment world.” Campbell’s reservations would, of course, be quickly dispelled, and by the mid-1950s, watching HNIC on CBC and La soirée du hockey on Radio-Canada had become a quintessential Canadian pastime, inserted into the rhythms of the Canadian year. Revenues from both broadcasts had, crucially, become a significant factor not only in the profits of the Montréal and Toronto teams but also in the finances of the public broadcaster itself. The popular hockey broadcasts, moreover, provided important Canadian content for the CBC’s English-language network, which was, to the chagrin of many highbrow cultural nationalists, already dependent on popular US imports to please audiences and attract advertising revenue. The early days of television have been widely acknowledged as a golden age, a creative era when the CBC enjoyed a monopoly as national broadcaster and regulator of other broadcasters (i.e., the private sector) with a mandate to express and promote a separate Canadian consciousness and sense of identity. It was during this time that Canadians across the country were introduced to a wide array of shows (musical game shows, highbrow quizzes, historical docudramas, concert music, and intellectual panel discussions) and a host of sporting events, including CFL football, wrestling, boxing, women’s softball, roller derby, and, of course, ongoing
coverage of NHL hockey. In fact, by 1958, sports programming—with hockey at the forefront—accounted for nearly 10 percent of the public broadcaster’s TV schedule. Even greater enthusiasm for weekend sports coverage across the country prompted the CBC to expand its programming to include curling, soccer, international hockey, bowling, skiing, swimming, figure skating, and golf.9 However, it was nationally significant events that captured the biggest audiences: five million Canadians watched the 1959 Grey Cup match—only the final game of the Stanley Cup playoffs gained a larger audience.10 The audience numbers for football matches were so significant that the CBC paid the CFL $325,000 for the rights to broadcast the 1960 season.11 Still, by the early 1960s, HNIC and La soirée du hockey were the most widely watched TV programs on the CBC and Radio-Canada, drawing audiences of millions of viewers per week.12

**CTV and the New Era of Competition**

The CBC’s dual role as national broadcaster and regulator was, however, soon to end, thanks to the long-standing struggle by private broadcasters and their ideological allies to establish an independent broadcasting regulator, the Board of Broadcast Governors (BBG). Nongovernment stations (second stations) in cities where the CBC already existed were installed, and in 1961, the first national private network, CTV, was launched. In this respect, the role of sport was paramount in the establishment of Canada’s second national network. Nicknamed “The Network That Means Business,” CTV emerged in stark contrast to the birth of the CBC, which was intended to be a public instrument of nationhood. While the pursuit of profit unabashedly motivated the businessmen who had invested in CTV, they also shared an ideological affinity with showcasing Canadian private enterprise and destabilizing the public broadcaster’s dominance over an expansive national television industry.13

It is also important to emphasize the paramount role of sport in the establishment of CTV. The BBG had earlier awarded John Bassett (the owners of the strongly pro-conservative newspaper the *Toronto Evening Telegram* and the CFL’s Toronto Argonauts football club) the television licence for the lucrative Toronto market, and, to the surprise of the CBC, Bassett purchased the 1961 and 1962 rights to broadcast the Big Four (Eastern CFL) games and the first right of refusal for the Grey Cup. Bassett, however, lacked the facilities and a national network to distribute his newly acquired CFL content and was therefore unable to provide the games with sufficient exposure for advertisers. However, Spencer Caldwell—one of
Bassett’s rival applicants for the television station in Toronto—had received BBG approval to form a network in December 1960. Bassett would ultimately join with Caldwell’s network to secure a distribution system for the CFL games, an action that, in turn, prompted the other seven newly licensed private stations to sign up to the network. Thus, it was precisely the merger between Caldwell’s national distribution network and Bassett’s sports content that secured the BBG’s final approval in April 1961 for CTV to begin operating. As Michael Nolan notes, “Without the ‘Big Four’ eastern conference of the CFL, CTV might never have emerged as a network.”

The entrance of CTV immediately set the stage for a new era of competition for sports broadcasting rights between the public and private networks, resulting in significant increases in television revenues for various sports leagues. Meanwhile, Canadian sports fans from coast to coast would enjoy an even greater amount of televised sports coverage. From this point forward, though, the CBC would be obliged to meet its private sector competitors “on their own ground in order to remain ‘competitive’” for the most popular sports broadcasting rights.

By the mid-1960s, in the midst of a long postwar economic boom that would last until the early 1970s, 92 percent of Canadian homes were considered to be television households. Here, it is important to emphasize the impact of increased prosperity, especially for Canadian working people, whose “postwar life and expectations came to be defined by unprecedented levels of geographical mobility, individualized consumption, home-centered recreations, and, significantly, the baby boom.” It was within a climate of low unemployment, high disposable income, suburbanization, greater home and car ownership, and substantial increases in the purchase of light consumer goods that both CBC and CTV continued to stake their claims and battled to build significant weekend audiences for advertisers via expanded sports programming. CTV, for example, began to show less expensive broadcasts of Wide World of Sports—obtained through an arrangement with ABC in the United States—that blended major US and international sporting competitions and Canadian sporting events to deliver “the younger, larger, higher income families in CTV’s ten vital marketing areas.” CTV also quickly took aim at the broadcasting rights for the Olympic Games and established a notable presence in providing coverage of a succession of Winter Olympics, beginning with the 1964 Games in Innsbruck, Austria. Notably, by 1961, CTV had secured the rights to broadcast NHL hockey games on Wednesday nights.

Still, even with the entrance of CTV, the CBC enjoyed a significant presence in homes across the country through telecasts of professional and amateur
events, including Canadian college athletics, track and field meets, skiing, and the Summer Olympic Games. However, it was the sport of hockey and weekly broadcasts of HNIC that remained the most valuable and popular sport program for the public broadcaster: as Richard Gruneau and David Whitson note, “The value of these (largely male) audiences increased strikingly through the 1960s, as television became the major publicist of the new postwar consumer society, educating people about new consumer goods and services and new consumer identities.”

By the early 1960s, however, the entrance of cable television had begun to radically transform the continental media landscape, thus opening the door to US signals and threatening to further overwhelm the broadcasting system with foreign content, while siphoning audiences away from both CTV and CBC. Cable quickly provided subscribers with an expansive array of viewing options, better reception, and, for anglophone viewers, the most popular US programs. The ongoing expansion of cable also fragmented audiences to unprecedented levels and undermined the notion of public broadcasting based on understandings of a “mass” audience, while naturalizing the idea of “markets” of subscribers and, beyond this concept, discourses of consumer choice. Despite these challenges, Canadians across the country “demonstrated a marked preference for their own news and current affairs, as well as for Canadian sportscasts” on CTV and CBC.

As the competition between the public and private sectors intensified over the course of the next decade—a development that further escalated the cost of sports properties—the amount of airtime dedicated to sport on the public broadcaster emerged as a target of criticism on two widely different fronts. First, CTV’s executives resented having to compete against the public broadcaster for the most popular sports broadcasting rights that captured lucrative national audiences for advertisers. CTV, like its public competitor, was also losing market share to a burgeoning cable industry. Second, many of Canada’s cultural elite openly disagreed with the CBC’s emphasis on professional sport and other examples of mass/commercial entertainment (especially popular US programs) at the expense of other so-called highbrow programming.

The CBC was attacked on both fronts during its licence renewal hearings in 1974, although the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) ultimately supported the concept of public broadcasting and the centrality of the CBC within the Canadian system in its licensing decision. However, while it also encouraged the public broadcaster to continue to provide popular sporting programs for all Canadians, the CRTC rejected the notion that the CBC and Radio-Canada should target a mass audience:
The Commission has never believed that the CBC should abandon entertainment programming, including popular presentations and sports. . . . It is understood that the national broadcasting service should retain a suitable proportion of this kind of programming. . . . However, despite the need for the CBC to continue to provide “popular” broadcasting service, the Commission is of the belief that the CBC, as a public service institution, should guard against considering itself as a “mass-medium” and particularly against considering its audience as a “mass.” . . . The CBC must not consider its audience as an agglomeration of 20 million more or less accessible revenue-producing consumers, but rather as an active community of people, with real and varying communication needs.  

Predictably, the CRTC hearings “had shaken the CBC’s image of itself, and the public image of the CBC” and had provided a platform for not only its opponents but also its advocates to criticize sharply the public broadcaster and its role in Canadian social life.  

Considering the growing impact of the cable industry, by the mid-1970s, the public broadcaster was under siege from a variety of fronts. The question of what counted as a suitable proportion of commercial sports programming for the public broadcaster was revisited during the CBC’s licence renewal hearings in 1979. At this point, the CRTC bluntly noted that “a major problem faced by both television services, was that of sports.”  

Even some within the CBC openly argued that the public broadcaster had allowed live sports events to roar like a cannon-ball freight train through our prime time schedules at certain times of year, mostly during playoffs. This has been particularly disruptive on the English network where the combination of live prime time sports and U.S. programs has been a significantly limiting factor in expanding Canadian-produced programs. . . . Moreover, we’ve been forced to reduce the length of our season for our major news and current affairs programs because of sports gobbling up prime time in the early spring.  

The escalating critique of the CBC’s production of commercial sport demonstrated that by the 1970s, the English-language network was already fully dependent on professional sport to attract audiences and had willingly embraced standard North American marketing and mass programming practices. Radio-Canada, in contrast, functioned more as a regional enterprise that, despite growing competition from the private sector, offered a more diverse and ambitious platform of popular French-language programming without relying almost exclusively on professional sport to attract sizable and loyal audiences.  

These tensions would become even
more pronounced over the course of the next decade, while the presence of sport on both networks, but especially the English-language network, would be challenged more acutely because of the continued expansion of cable television and satellite services and the arrival of specialty sport channels.

THE NEW DIGITAL BROADCASTING LANDSCAPE

At the dawn of the 1980s, “with economic tremors from the end of the postwar boom rocking the economy and U.S. satellite signals nibbling at the edges of the broadcast system, the federal government developed a new policy vision for the communications sector.” At the heart of this agenda—and set against the “threat” of foreign satellite broadcasters—was an expanded subscription cable system that heralded the entrance of an unprecedented wide range of specialty Canadian and foreign programming services. These new specialty channels would be restricted to the discretionary tier, to be purchased by household subscribers on top of a basic fee paid to local cable companies. The channels were, in these respects, considered private undertakings regulated by market forces.

One of the most significant developments in the history of Canadian sport broadcasting occurred in 1984, when the CRTC licensed the country’s first twenty-four-hour cable sports specialty channel, TSN (then owned by the Labatt Brewing Company). Its sister network, the all-sport French-language service RDS, was licensed in 1989. TSN was clearly established to promote the Labatt brand and products, but it was also a crucial circuit of promotion for the brewery to market its Major League Baseball team, the Toronto Blue Jays, to a principally male demographic that advertisers wanted to target. These developments foreshadowed the patterns of cross-ownership and cross-marketing that would fully materialize in Canada in the new millennium as vertically integrated media conglomerates merged their distribution networks with popular sporting content to capitalize on a host of promotional synergies. Despite its early licensing conditions, TSN quickly emerged as a competitor to the major national networks and attracted subscribers to cable in a cost-effective manner. Moreover, as a result of TSN’s sole focus on sport, the emergent cable channel provided full coverage of entire tournaments, sporting events, and playoff series without disrupting regularly scheduled prime-time shows. Such a development provided TSN with an immediate competitive advantage that “offered guaranteed exposure for sporting events, which in turn enticed other leagues and event organizers to side with TSN rather than any of the other ‘big three’ Canadian conventional broadcasters (Global, CTV, and CBC).”

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Crucially, in 1989, TSN gained access to the analogue cable system as discretionary services that could be purchased on top of basic cable, and from this point forward, TSN would be able to accrue both advertising and cable subscription revenues, further solidifying its financial foundation and its ability to secure the top major league sports properties.

In addition to the full entrance of cable sport specialty channels, debilitating political pressures were also on the horizon for the CBC. In 1984, a new Conservative government gained power and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney declared the country to be “open for business,” thus setting the stage for the landmark free trade agreement with the United States in 1988. It was within this ascendant neoliberal policy environment that the federal government immediately directed the CBC to cut its budget by $75 million. At the same time, policy makers embraced a host of market reforms that would eventually lead to the further expansion of the broadcasting system according to the prerogatives of private capital. These trends were heightened during the early 1990s as a result of the impacts of globalization, market liberalization, and the emergence of new satellite and digital technologies that radically transformed the broadcasting and telecommunication industries. All of these developments were evidence of “a ‘power shift’ toward the subordination of the public interest to private, commercial interests” and of the ascension of a new era of “consumer-driven” digital television characterized by unprecedented levels of consumer choice and customized channels.

The vast increase in channel capacity and the emergence of increasingly capitalized competitors like TSN, however, also sharpened the competition for popular sport programming that could generate national audiences for advertisers. As a result of these pressures, during the early 1990s, private broadcasters and their ideological allies—most notably, the Globe and Mail—renewed their lobbying efforts to force the CBC to abandon its coverage of the most lucrative sports, the most significant being NHL hockey and the Olympics. The political campaign against the CBC was in full evidence over the course of the public broadcaster’s licence renewal hearings in March 1994. It must be noted that by this point, CTV had already been the Canadian broadcaster for the 1988 Winter Olympics, in Calgary, and the 1992 Summer Olympic Games, in Barcelona. During these hearings, CBC executives were repeatedly grilled by CRTC chairman Keith Spicer (and other commissioners) and forced to defend the CBC’s continued investment in increasingly costly sports content, especially when other private networks were more than willing to take over those broadcasting rights.
While spatial limits prevent a full treatment of those CRTC hearings, I want to emphasize some of the claims that were made by CBC executives in defence of CBC Sports. First, CBC president Tony Manera noted that in the early 1990s, sports content generated 31.6 percent of the English-language network’s revenue and 17.5 percent of the French-language television revenue, for a combined 28 percent of the corporation’s total advertising revenue. Moreover, the CBC defended its reliance on sport programming (10 percent of its English-language schedule) by simply noting that despite its escalating cost, sports content was still vastly cheaper than the production of original dramatic programming. Finally, CBC executives also emphasized the symbiotic relationship between various sports and the public broadcaster:

Without hockey . . . to even out our costs across the country, I don’t think the CBC could justify maintaining crews and the mobiles that it has across the country that enable us to do all of the other events that we do, such as the CFL. And I would boast that the Canadian Football League may not have survived without the CBC’s support over the years . . . I think it has been the public exposure that we have been able to give to the league that has enabled the league to survive . . . And without the hockey balancing effect in our schedule, in our resource mix, we couldn’t have had those resources to apply to the CFL, or to the Canada Games, or to the Arctic Games, or other events like that across the country. 

Sensing that the CBC was well and truly on the defensive, CTV, only two months after the CRTC’s hearings, released a document titled “A Perspective on the CBC,” which accused the public broadcaster of losing vast amounts of public funds in the competition for sports content. This was, moreover, a document that was explicitly aimed at damaging CBC Sports during a time of fiscal austerity. Indeed, between 1993 and 1997, the CBC’s budget was cut by almost one third (significantly impacting on local programming services), while the Official Opposition Conservatives intensified their calls to privatize the public broadcaster.

It is impossible to deny that all of these pressures contributed to the CRTC’s recommendation in July 1994 that the CBC, “particularly the English-language network,” decrease its emphasis on professional sport. For the CRTC and critics of the public broadcaster, most Canadians now simply had access to “alternative sources of such coverage, including commercial broadcasters and a dedicated sports channel on cable.” Not satisfied with the CRTC’s recommendation, CTV continued its attack on CBC Sports during a parliamentary committee on Canadian Heritage hearing later that year. The Globe and Mail, meanwhile, fanned similar arguments
the 500-channel universe nearly upon us, the public broadcaster needs more than
ever to focus its resources on the things that make it distinctive, the things that
others fail to do. Sports plainly is not one of them. The CBC should hang up its
sports blazers and let private broadcasters take the mike.”

In light of this ongoing political campaign, the role of CBC Sports and,
beyond that, the mandate of the public broadcaster were taken up by the House
of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage only two years later. The
committee recommended, once again, that the CBC should dramatically reduce
its coverage of professional sports. Its report also suggested that the CBC should
remain in the business of broadcasting NHL hockey but should avoid the con-
gestion that occurs at playoff time—when games are shown in prime-time hours
almost every evening for seven or eight weeks—by sharing the rights with private
sector broadcasters. Committee members complained about what they saw as the
public broadcaster’s “excessive enthusiasm for sports programming,” commenting:

For the past decade, CBC and Radio-Canada have both chosen to provide
blanket coverage of each round of the Stanley Cup playoffs. It involves one
or more playoff games for up to six nights a week, for a period of at least
seven or eight weeks in April and May. Despite Canada’s ongoing love affair
with hockey, we believe that the CBC has simply lost its sense of proportion.
It disenfranchises millions of viewers (who are not hockey fans) for several
months, completely pre-empts other parts of the program schedule that a
public broadcaster might be expected to telecast, and consistently delays the
major nightly news and current affairs shows on both of its networks.

CBC executives, understandably, vigorously defended the commitment they
had made to HNIC and to televising the playoffs in particular, pointing to the huge
audiences that hockey attracts and the advertising revenues that hockey telecasts
bring to the network, revenues that subsidize other programming. However, over
the course of the next decade, the CBC would face even greater financial uncer-
tainty, as both Liberal and Conservative governments cut funding allocations from
Parliament. Because of these financial pressures, as Macfarlane suggested in his
2010 editorial, the CBC’s English-language network has become more and more
similar to a commercial network, designed as it is to maximize audience ratings
and advertising revenues while also fulfilling its public service obligations. These
developments have, in turn, amplified criticism from both cultural nationalists,
who complain that the CBC has increasingly strayed from its mandate as a public
service network, and private broadcasters, who want the opportunities that NHL hockey affords the CBC.

However, just as the public sector was dealing with significant cutbacks, the CRTC began to license new specialty sport channels (e.g., Sportsnet) owned by the major corporate players in the broadcasting industry. Equally important, the federal Liberal government rescinded long-standing regulatory frameworks that once kept broadcasting and telecommunications markets separate; barriers that had earlier separated print, broadcasting, telecommunications, and information/computer sectors evaporated, triggering an unprecedented acceleration of mergers and acquisitions. In 2000 alone, BCE bought CTV, acquiring TSN/RDS in the process; struck an alliance with the premier national newspaper, the Globe and Mail; and combined CTV and the Sympatico-Lycos portal (and its other content creation assets) to form Bell Globemedia. A year later, in 2001, Rogers (by then the owner of the Toronto Blue Jays) acquired Sportsnet from CTV.

Overlapping these broader dynamics of convergence and concentration was the entrance of digital television: in 2001, over two hundred CRTC-approved digital TV channels went to air, including a host of new specialty sport channels. Nearly all of the new digital channels were, of course, backed by the most successful and, indeed, pre-established media players in the Canadian market. All of these developments point toward tighter integration in the communications and what has come to be called “infotainment” industries as deep-pocketed telecommunication giants like BCE and Rogers now compete for premium sport content that can now be distributed and cross-marketed to subscribers through a host of integrated digital information and entertainment platforms. Prepared to overpay for sports broadcasting rights in the present as an investment in the future growth of subscribers to pay-TV, Internet, and mobile products (among other distribution outlets), vertically integrated companies such as Rogers and BCE are now able to vastly outbid the CBC, which is inevitably limited by constraints on the public purse and lacks equivalent distribution networks, let alone professional sports franchises. Unlike the CBC, Rogers and BCE can, crucially, recover some of their costs through multiple revenue streams, including ads, subscription rates, and the “fees for carriage” that they receive from other satellite and cable companies. And, in the new millennium, a number of properties that had previously aired on CBC Sports (e.g., CFL football, curling, the Olympics, MLS soccer, and the Toronto Raptors) were purchased by BCE and Rogers to supply much-needed popular content to their growing number of distribution networks.
It was within this context—and following the controversial demise of *La soirée du hockey* in 2004—that the Canadian media began widespread speculation on the potential demise of HNIC, with the CBC’s $65 million-a-year contract with the NHL due to expire in 2008. In the summer of 2006, several media reports suggested that a battle was looming between the CBC and CTV-TSN, with the latter reported to be willing to pay $140 million a year for NHL broadcasts. In fact, by late 2006, the plight of CBC Sports had become so acute that even former CBC president Tony Manera—one of the biggest proponents of the role of sport on the public broadcaster—publicly reversed his position on the issue of hockey with a now familiar argument:

At the end of the current contract, CBC should stop broadcasting professional hockey. In the past, I have passionately insisted that Hockey Night in Canada belongs on the CBC for very good reasons. It is an important part of Canadian culture and makes money for the CBC, attracting large audiences. But it is time to let go. Hockey fans will still be able to watch hockey on private networks, and the CBC talent will go wherever the game goes.⁴⁶

However, to the surprise of many, including perhaps Manera himself, in March 2007, the CBC and the NHL announced a new six-year deal rumoured to be worth $600 million: a stunning increase from the previous annual fee of $65 million. Still, despite the retention of this valuable “property,” there was no shortage of criticism directed at CBC Sports for pursuing increasingly expensive sports broadcasting rights in the new millennium—rights that would soon escalate to unprecedented levels by 2013. In the next section, I discuss why HNIC has been such a vital staple of the CBC’s English-language network and why it has been historically important for the public broadcaster to have a visible presence in such a key element of national popular culture.

**The Importance of Hockey Night in Canada to the CBC**

I bring two interrelated arguments into relief here. First, critics of CBC Sports are correct in their analysis of the new realities of the digital sports broadcasting marketplace dominated by vertically integrated telecommunications empires. With the CBC inevitably limited by constraints to the public purse, since 2007 it has simply seemed impossible for CBC Sports to compete against the new business models of Rogers and BCE, models that have inflated the cost of sports broadcasting rights to unprecedented levels. In light of the new economic realities of professional sport, for many, including the most passionate supporters of public broadcasting like Tony
Manera who have long defended CBC Sports, the time had finally arrived for the CBC to simply leave professional sports to the private sector. As I have noted above, these criticisms had become even more pronounced in the new millennium thanks to growing concerns about the English-language network’s programming, which regularly duplicated the commercial programming of private networks.

Against these claims, though, it is important to recognize that historically, a woefully underfunded CBC has struggled to develop genuinely popular content that consistently reached national audiences throughout the broadcasting week, especially during prime-time hours. Anglophone Canadians have also traditionally preferred to watch popular US television programs, and the viewing opportunities provided by digital television have only amplified the available options. In light of this set of pre-existing limits and pressures, *HNIC* was, for decades, the most popular and profitable program for the CBC. Hockey coverage, moreover, has historically provided an important promotional platform for the network while capturing vital advertising revenue streams that subsidized the CBC’s wider range of cultural content. According to Richard Stursberg (the former head of the CBC’s English services), *HNIC* has been so central to the financing of the public broadcaster that without the show, “the CBC would fall into a grave financial crisis that would imperil its survival.”

Indeed, for Stursberg, and many other CBC executives, it has simply been inconceivable for the CBC to even contemplate replacing the four hundred-plus hours of prime-time Canadian sports content with original dramatic programming that would be expected to compete against the most popular US dramatic and entertainment shows airing on CTV and Global:

An average one-hour drama costs the CBC between $400,000 and $450,000 per hour to commission on a total budget of $1.2–1.4 million (the rest being made up from the Canadian Media Fund and tax credits). Given their normal audiences, Canadian dramas rarely make $200,000 in advertising revenue. This means that each hour of drama commissioned by the CBC produces a loss of at least $200,000. It can be seen, then, that if four hundred hours of hockey were replaced with four hundred hours of drama, the CBC would need to find an additional $80–100 million. At the same time, the Canadian Media Fund would have to be supplemented with another $80–100 million, and the government’s television production tax credits would be further drawn by a comparable amount. In other words, if the government wanted the CBC to eliminate hockey and replace it with original Canadian drama, the costs would be somewhere between $240 million and $300 million.
Since this was written the costs have escalated even more. This latter scenario is, of course, impossible given the recent financial cuts to the CBC, leaving the CBC with two remaining options to replace the hundreds of hours of popular hockey telecasts:

Break the Canadian-content quotas (now 80 percent on CBC prime time) by replacing Hockey Night in Canada with foreign shows, or replace it with repeats of shows that are already available on the prime-time schedule. Apart from making Saturday nights unspeakably boring, this latter course would also ensure a significant collapse of CBC’s share of the Canadian audience, with further consequences for its reputation and relevance.49

This leads to a second cultural argument that revolves around both the mandate and “ambition” of a contemporary public broadcaster.50 Those of us who have defended CBC Sports over the years have argued that the potential loss of HNIC would announce a new era in public broadcasting in Canada with a narrower mandate for the CBC, one in which the role of the public broadcaster is excellence in news and current affairs, original Canadian drama, and “specials” (in the arts, in Canadian history, and in documentary): that is, programming that attracts small enough audiences so as to be not commercially viable. With such a radically reduced mandate, moreover, the role of CBC Sports would no longer be to broadcast the professional sports that are “major league” in Canadian popular culture. Instead, it would be to showcase amateur and “emerging” sports that Canadians do not regularly see on the commercial networks. As noted throughout this chapter, this vision of the CBC and this model of what a public broadcaster should be—an alternative to commercial television—has long been the model supported by many cultural nationalists, and indeed, it is not unlike the subscriber-supported Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States: a kind of PBS North. However, it represents a strategic retreat from the more populist—and, frankly, more ambitious—mandate that the CBC sought to assume through the middle part of the twentieth century. This latter mandate was, of course, based on a model in which the CBC does all the things that cultural nationalists believe in, while also seeking to be relevant to a wider sector of the population by creating national audiences for programming that was genuinely popular. HNIC, over the years, was clearly the most successful of these programs.

It might be suggested that previous supporters of CBC Sports, like Manera, were further pushed to revise their former aspirations for the network after decades of cuts to the public broadcaster by successive Liberal and Conservative governments. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, hard decisions and cuts came in almost every
area of programming—in news and current affairs (for example, sacrificing local supper-hour news broadcasts in order to concentrate resources on *The National*), in original drama, and in the arts—and the conclusion appeared inescapable: the public network could no longer do everything that it had done in the past. To many of the CBC’s most dedicated supporters, then, it appeared regrettable but necessary that the public network concentrate its limited resources on providing Canadians with cultural programming that the private sector will never provide, simply because it is not popular enough to be commercially viable.

However, it seemed that to adopt this strategy and pursue this path—the PBS North path—would radically reduce the place of the CBC in the lives of most Canadians outside the educated elites. Over twenty-five years ago, in a thoughtful polemic decrying the failure of the parties of the European Left to identify themselves with the aspirations of ordinary working people, the English sociologist Stuart Hall argued that there was no aspect of popular life where the Left could afford not to be present.51 For Hall, the Left had been rightly critical of the manipulations of popular aspirations associated with lifestyle advertising, and of the possessive individualism and mobile privatization that consumer culture encourages. Yet what the leftist critique had routinely failed to acknowledge and address—and, indeed, continues to fail to understand—is that what Hall describes as the “daily experience of ‘the market as provider’” has meant that many people view the private sector not as a manipulator (even though most of us are fully aware of advertisers’ attempts to manipulate us) but as a system that opens up new possibilities for a more enjoyable private life.52

For over sixty years, the presence and national popularity of *HNIC* on the public broadcaster has sent a powerful message to Canadians that the CBC was not prepared to abandon one of the most important features of the nation’s popular culture—NHL hockey broadcasts—to the market, or the private sector. Indeed, one of the cumulative effects of the CBC’s sixty-year commitment to airing NHL hockey was simply that the public broadcaster maintained a regular and visible presence in the lives of millions of (but not all) ordinary Canadians and existed as a source of many of our most vivid experiences of fun and community. I have speculated elsewhere that if the CBC were to retreat into catering solely to educated and “alternative” tastes, the public broadcaster would largely disappear from the lives of much of the Canadian population, and political support for the CBC would further decline (which is exactly what CBC critics in the Conservative Party actively wish for). This is precisely why in the past, I have argued that CBC Sports must
seek to maintain an active presence in the professional sports that matter most to Canadians, particularly with HNIC.

CONCLUSION: THE DEMISE OF HNIC

The escalation of the costs of sports broadcasting rights in recent years has, however, now made those arguments impossible to defend. Indeed, by 2012, it was once again widely anticipated that the public broadcaster would be easily outbid by TSN and Rogers for the NHL’s media rights. And in 2013, Rogers purchased the exclusive rights for all Canadian NHL broadcasting for the next twelve years at a cost of $5.2 billion dollars—a staggering amount of money that vastly exceeded what the CBC was prepared to pay. Importantly, the CBC did manage to secure an agreement with Rogers to continue to air HNIC for an additional four years once the public broadcaster’s contract with the NHL expires in 2014, although Rogers will assume full editorial control over HNIC—a not insignificant development that will, astonishingly, open the public airwaves to private interests. CBC executives also granted Rogers access to the public broadcaster’s Toronto studios and office space, while fifty CBC production staff lost their jobs. Those producers and other employees (many of whom have worked in CBC Sports for over thirty years) who survived the layoffs were forced to relocate to other offices to make way for staff from Rogers—developments that have infuriated remaining CBC staff.35

The CBC will pay nothing for its four-year arrangement with Rogers, nor will it receive a cent of revenue from the advertising that airs during HNIC. Still, even without editorial control and the ability to generate advertising income, the continuation of HNIC, at least for the short term, will provide vital prime-time Canadian content for the CBC and will spare the public broadcaster from having to produce other costly original programming to fill the void left by hockey telecasts. Moreover, while the CBC will lose roughly $100 million in advertising revenue annually, it will save a similar amount by not having to pay for the NHL broadcasting rights; the CBC will also save an additional $55 million per year in production and sales and promotion costs.34 In other words, there may be a net gain of approximately $55 million per year until the CBC’s four-year agreement with Rogers expires. Canadian sports fans, meanwhile, will have considerably more choice of hockey games that will air on a number of Rogers-owned specialty channels, in addition to the Rogers-controlled HNIC on the CBC until at least 2018 (although not in French).
However, at the conclusion of the CBC’s four-year agreement with Rogers, Canadians from across the country may be required to pay increasingly costly fees to access NHL content. Indeed, just as the CBC has been granted a four-year grace period to come to terms with a future without HNIC, those four years will also allow Rogers to calculate how to monetize its hockey content. These developments will thus signal the end of the “viewing rights” of Canadians to have access to over-the-air coverage of hockey telecasts, while also marking another stage in the privatization of the sport-media complex in Canada and, in many respects, a further enclosure of the digital commons. Indeed, while the CBC and Canadian taxpayers have supported the NHL for over sixty years (even longer if we consider the radio era) through extensive and high-quality coverage of the sport of hockey, it appears that the private sector is now set to reap the benefits from this historical public foundation—a quintessential example of what David Harvey has conceptualized as “accumulation by dispossession.”

Predictably, these most recent developments have only amplified all of the historical questions surrounding the very future of public broadcasting in Canada and the type of role that the public broadcaster should play in contemporary Canadian life. For example, will the CBC be able to survive without advertising revenue from NHL hockey after the agreement with Rogers expires? What Canadian content will eventually fill the four hundred-plus hours of prime-time programming? In a neoliberal era dominated by anti-tax ideology, will there be a political appetite to increase the CBC’s parliamentary appropriation or to consider introducing a tax on private broadcasters and distributors to revitalize and, indeed, expand public broadcasting in Canada? Will ordinary Canadians continue to watch the CBC without HNIC or other popular content, including Don Cherry’s Coach’s Corner, which has historically drawn a demographic of viewers who would not otherwise watch the public network? What would Canada look like without the presence of a public broadcaster that has the ability to provide a wide range of content (including sport) for all Canadians, regardless of their level of income, in the digital era? Finally, should there be legislation, as there is in Australia and many European countries, to enshrine the “viewing rights” of Canadians to have free, over-the-air access to sporting events of national significance?

For some, including the Globe and Mail’s Konrad Yakabuski, the loss of HNIC will allow the CBC to “refocus,” simply because it “removes the taxpayer-funded network from the professional sport bidding war it should never have entered in the first place. Budget cuts have forced the broadcaster’s leaders to reimagine a leaner, cleaner CBC where quality is not a dirty word.” For Yakabuski, the CBC’s
continued dependence on hockey has gone hand in hand with a “dumbing down” of the network with populist shows as opposed to more “challenging” programming replete with “thoughtful political debate,” such as Patrick Watson’s Struggle for Democracy. Others, meanwhile, have suggested that the loss of NHL hockey is a necessary step to shift the CBC away from commercial sponsorship entirely and to become a “true” public broadcaster which airs programming that addresses viewers as citizens as opposed to consumers.58

As I have noted throughout this chapter, there has always been a constituency of Canadians who have passionately supported a vision of public broadcasting that has no room for genuinely popular content such as professional sport and perhaps even other dramatic programming, such as Murdoch Mysteries and Republic of Doyle, that reach large audiences. Yet the inherent risk associated with these arguments is that they encourage—and indeed, normalize—a smaller and less ambitious mandate for the public broadcaster, one in which the CBC seems almost destined to morph into a PBS model that only provides content that the private networks deem unprofitable.

In my opinion, we need to think carefully about any political position that further shrinks the role and visibility of the CBC in the lives of ordinary Canadians. The CBC can’t simply become a network that only airs shows featuring high culture, the arts, and politics. It also has to provide the type of content that others—especially young Canadians who may not share the tastes and political preferences of cultural nationalists—are interested in watching on a range of platforms, precisely so that they feel like they have a stake in the CBC and a sense of ownership of a public institution that they pay for. That is, while the public broadcaster needs to provide rigorous and critical coverage of the arts, media, and current affairs (content that the private sector will not even contemplate), so, too, must the CBC find new, creative ways of maintaining a popular presence in key elements of national popular culture, including remaining in the game of airing sports content if future opportunities arise.

Moreover, as younger generations of Canadians embrace the seemingly endless possibilities associated with the digital world, the CBC will need to continue to expand its online presence and transform its role from public service broadcasting to public service media.59 In fact, a more substantive online presence may provide an advantage for the public broadcaster because it avoids the need for additional digital specialty channels to which various distributors (e.g., the CBC’s competitors—BCE and Rogers) would have to commit.60 Indeed, the CBC will have an opportunity—like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) did with
its unprecedented coverage of the 2012 Summer Olympic Games—to showcase a full digital/online platform for all Canadians across the country.

The next four years represent a landmark moment for a broad national discussion and political debate on how the CBC can be reshaped as a public broadcaster that has meaning for Canadians from across the country, and one that can produce unique, informative, and entertaining Canadian content in the digital era. For generations of Canadians, HNIC represented a powerful and enduring point of connection with the CBC and a key source of enjoyable experiences of community. It is now up to us to imagine a public broadcaster that can make similar types of connections in a radically different media environment as a sixty-year viewing tradition that has contributed mightily to Canadian culture fades from the screen.

NOTES

3 Macfarlane, “Editor’s Note.”
4 Ibid.
5 Gerry Frappier, president and general manager of RDS, personal communication, 8 June 2012.
8 Scherer and Harvey, “Televised Sport and Cultural Citizenship in Canada.”
9 Rutherford, When Television Was Young, 241.
12 Rutherford, When Television Was Young, 245.
14 Ibid., 27.
18 Nolan, CTV, 143.
19 Scherer and Harvey, “Televised Sport and Cultural Citizenship in Canada,” 55.
20 Rutherford, When Television Was Young, 242.
22 Rutherford, When Television Was Young, 141.
23 CRTC (Canada), Renewal of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s Television and Radio Network Licenses (Ottawa: CRTC, 1974), 11. The CRTC was established in 1968 to supervise, regulate, and license all broadcasting undertakings, including traditional transmitting enterprises and the new receiving enterprises associated with the cable industry.
24 Raboy, Missed Opportunities, 246.
25 CRTC (Canada), Renewal of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s Television and Radio Network Licenses (Ottawa: CRTC, 1979), 36.
26 Ibid.
31 Sparks, “Delivering the Male.”
33 Raboy, Missed Opportunities, 294.
36 Ibid., 38.
37 Ibid.


41 Launched in 1998 by CTV as a regional network (with four feeds for different regions), Sportsnet covered local teams, providing an important revenue stream for those franchises.


43 For example, ESPN Classic Canada, Fox Sports World Canada, Leafs TV, the NHL Network, the Racing Network, Raptors NBA TV, X-Treme Sports, and the ill-fated Women’s Television Sports Network.

44 Neverson, “Build It and the Women Will Come?” 35.

45 For example, in December 2011, BCE and Rogers telecommunication companies paid more than Cans$1 billion to acquire a 75 percent stake in Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment to secure the television rights to the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Toronto Raptors, and Toronto FC (Rogers already owns the Toronto Blue Jays) that will air on the Rogers-owned Sportsnet channels and BCE’s TSN channels. BCE and Rogers also now control MLSE’s other distribution channels including Leafs TV, NBA TV Canada, and GolTV Canada.

It should also be noted that Rogers and BCE can overpay for various sports broadcasting rights and amortize those costs over various properties and platforms (television channels, Internet, radio, and print properties), including recently approved multiple feeds (e.g., TSN2, RIS, RDS2, Sportsnet ONE, etc.), and mobile phones. Or they can simply join forces as a consortium to secure broadcasting rights, just as they did to win the rights to the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver and the 2012 Summer Games in London with an exorbitant and entirely unprofitable bid of Cans$153 million.


48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 149.


52 Ibid., 19.
58 Rowland, “Without Hockey.”
60 David Masse, director of CBC Sports, personal communication, 15 July 2010.