



April 2005 – summary version of Feb.05 note to Senior CBC News Staff

TO: Senior CBC NEWS Staff
(News and Current Affairs - Radio/TV/Newsworld/CBC.ca et al)

FROM: Tony Burman

RE: 'CBC News Study': Our Response

Perhaps more than any time in our lives, the media world is experiencing profound change. It is dramatically affecting how people 'consume' news and how we 'produce' it, and it cuts to the heart of how democracies function in this 21st century. People want more influence over what they get from their news media, and they will get it. Let's not kid ourselves. Our goal (apart from getting out of the way!) is to keep their trust. And this will be even more difficult as public suspicion about journalists and the media remains alarmingly high.

In a real sense, we are at the beginning of a global communications revolution. And, with it, comes both serious risks and exciting opportunities. Here in Canada, at the CBC, it is our challenge – and our privilege – to be at the centre of it.

Revolutions - even polite, Canadian ones – require bold action, and this document outlines a blueprint for bold action. It may only be the beginning, but it is intended to be a sweeping, even radical beginning. This document is our preliminary response to what Canadians have told us about what they 'want' and 'need' from their news media, particularly from the CBC.

✓ *Canadians spoke. And we listened.*

As you know, about 18 months ago we undertook a major CBC News Study into Canadians' attitudes towards 'news' and 'information' in this new century. It was the most extensive study of its kind in Canada. It was intended to help us shape a *CBC News strategy* for the next several years. The study was prepared by two respected independent research companies under the supervision of CBC Audience Research. It drew on the views of thousands of Canadians from all across the country, surveyed in a multitude of settings and circumstances.

From the perspective of Canadians – our audience - the News Study was an effort to identify the challenges ahead for CBC news and current affairs in the months and years to come. It accomplished that - in illuminating, sometimes stark terms. And in the months since the study's early results have become known, there has been considerable reaction within the CBC.

First of all, our senior programmers were encouraged to apply on-air any 'lessons' from the study they felt would improve programming as soon as possible, and they did that in a multitude of ways. The list is impressive, and it's attached. Then, with our brightest CBC staff, we set out to fashion a comprehensive response to the detailed critique that this News Study provided. We launched an unprecedented process within the CBC to tap into many of our best programmers and staff. Over several months, we held 87 discussion groups, in virtually every major CBC centre in all parts of Canada, involving 465 staff. Their challenge was as clear as it was ambitious:

- ✓ *If the CBC News Study reflects what Canadians think of Canada's news media, and what they expect of their CBC, what do we intend to do about it?*

The results of these work groups are contained in a document distributed to the senior leaders of CBC News in February. In considerable detail, they reveal the shape of a comprehensive response - often in very clear, practical, programming terms – to what Canadians say they 'want' and 'need' from the CBC. In principle, we accept what these groups have formulated.

It is important for us not to forget what this News Study emphasizes: that in this exciting 'new world', the CBC is incredibly well-positioned and respected. We are blessed with a gifted and dedicated staff, and a rich and unique history. In the past year, we have brought together our various news and current affairs teams to create a single, integrated *CBC News* division. We are now working together in a way that few people would have predicted was possible a few years ago. Our coverage of the Iraqi conflict, the debate over health care, the federal election, U.S.-Canadian relations and the many high-profile regional initiatives have enriched programming for Canadians on CBC Radio, CBC Television, Newsworld and CBC News Online.

But these successes aside, the challenges ahead are still considerable and the competition will be fierce. And there's certainly no guarantee of success. We need to build on our many strengths but in a way that acknowledges – and corrects – our vulnerabilities.

As you know, the News Study – although very positive about the CBC overall – identified several areas that require work. Making substantial progress in these important areas in the long-term is what will make this initiative so worthwhile.

In point form, let me remind you about some of the headlines from the CBC News Study:

- ✓ *The CBC is highly- respected and valued by Canadians, but...*

- *All media – including the CBC - define ‘news’ too narrowly, focusing too often on ‘bad’ news that is of little relevance. We use language that is often confusing and frequently choose stories that interest us more than our audience.*
- *‘News’ shouldn’t be a passive act. Instead, ‘news’ must focus on those stories which reveal ‘meaningful change that stimulates meaningful response’, not ‘ambient static’ or ‘news of passing interest’ – which predominates now.*
- *We must deliver more ‘issue-based’ stories that illuminate and provide understanding, and rely less on empty, contrived daily ‘news events’. Although the CBC is regarded ‘better than the rest’, public distrust in the media these days “is intense and overwhelming”.*
- *We must place greater emphasis on ‘positive’ stories that portray accomplishment and triumph, and explain ‘how’ they do so.*
- *Canadians want more diversity in the selection and treatment of stories, more openness and humility – and more accountability from us- about the way we work.*
- *The audience is telling us they want to hear all sides of the story, not just two. They want an end to a simple black-and-white world. And many want increased exposure to more divergent views and perspectives.*
- *The CBC is seen by many as being for older people, not appealing, not entertaining - and too elitist.*
- *Canadians want more international news, not less, and believe more than ever that what happens beyond our borders matters a lot. But they want ‘international made local’. Global stories told in more relevant, local, accessible ways.*
- *Canadians are interested in politics in the broadest sense, but are turned off by how we report it. They want us to focus less on the ‘game’ of parliamentary politics and more on the underlying issues that matter.*
- *And there is a new and stronger sense of Canada’s role in the world and an impatience to learn about it. They want the media – particularly the CBC – to focus more on it.*

The initial News Study report, which was more than 400 pages long with numerous charts and graphs, focused on five broad themes. And it was these five areas which CBC senior staff and programmers explored in detail in their many discussion groups.

1. **What is News?** *This examined how Canadians define ‘news’, and whether it is consistent with how we, as journalists, define it. Are they satisfied with the stories we choose? If not, what kinds of stories do they feel they ‘want’ and ‘need’?*
2. **Telling All Sides of the Story:** *Do Canadians feel we cover stories in a fair and balanced way? Are Canadians satisfied with how we ‘frame’ stories, and whether we provide enough depth and quality?*

3. **How We Tell the Story:** *If every network has a 'style', how do Canadians see the CBC? How do we present our stories? What can we do to broaden our appeal?*
4. **World View:** *How interested are Canadians in international news and information? What are their expectations of the CBC? What do they see as Canada's role in the world?*
5. **Covering Politics:** *As this new political era in Canada begins, how engaged or turned off are Canadians? How do Canadians assess the media's coverage of politics?*

The various CBC discussion groups worked to come up with specific ideas that would respond to what Canadians felt was lacking in the way we 'reported' and 'presented' news and information. *A blueprint for change.* As experienced and innovative programmers, they came up with a list of clear and creative options to meet the challenges ahead.

Our response to the CBC News Study is the outcome of hours of debate about how we can better serve Canadians in the years to come.

In order to enact our response in the months and years ahead...

- Decisions will be made about what can be implemented for the coming season, 2005-06.
- An outline of those decisions, along with a shorter version of the document mentioned above – will be distributed to all staff by September, shortly before the next season begins.
- And then the process will resume to determine the next stage of changes for the months and years to come. We are creating permanent, ongoing Work Groups to monitor the progress associated with the News Study, as well as separate groups focused on News Integration. Our goal is to complete implementation of these key changes well within three years.

The momentum connected with the News Study is very timely. There are growing indications that Canadians feel an increased need for the CBC. In response, CBC Radio, Television, Newsworld and CBC Online are planning exciting new plans for the year ahead. There will be increased investment in regional programming, and an effort to redesign the TV regional supper-hours consistent with the News Study. The National, Canada Now and key current affairs programs will be renewed. *CBC News* will introduce a new Weather Service and, eventually, a new Sports Service. We are working to continue showcasing our journalism outside Canada, particularly in the United States. And among other improvements, the 'look' of *CBC News* on TV and Newsworld will be significantly sharpened. It is in this context that we want to move the News Study to an important new stage.

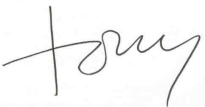
Given this, this note contains the following:

- ✓ *On the next page is a snapshot of the process so far.*
- ✓ *It is followed by a list of the 'early wins' evident on-air in recent months,*
- ✓ *Then 'a glimpse into the future' of CBC News based on the key proposals of the News Study.*

Let me end this note by expressing 'thank you' to many cherished people. Firstly, I'd like to thank the hundreds of *CBC News* staff - actually nearly 500 people from all across the country! – who engaged in the many discussion groups with passion and commitment, and the many who supported these groups in so many vital ways, such as Amanda Pyle, Joanne D'Angelo and Teresa Cregg. If, as the expression goes, 'journalistic cynicism is the refuge of the mediocre', these discussions never slipped into cynicism. They were often skeptical and challenging, as they should have been, but this only strengthened the outcome.

I'd also like to thank Christine Wilson, her colleagues in CBC Audience Research, and the CBC's Learning and Development department, who at the outset helped make this News Study so credible and important. And, of course, the many CBC management and program leaders who motivated the various groups and kept this process on the rails in spite of many other distractions. You can find their names in the Reports which follow. Finally, I'd like to give special thanks to Juli Lyons whose remarkable persistence infused every phase of this project. With a steady hand, she oversaw much of this process and ensured that this historic CBC chapter will help us enrich all of Canadian journalism. This is not the end of this story. Far from it. It's a wonderfully inspiring beginning.

Onward...



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➤ **Chronology: The Story So Far...**

❑ Spring 2003

Research for News Study begins. Most extensive of its kind in Canada. Two independent companies – under supervision of CBC Audience Research- in the field in every region of Canada: one collecting qualitative research; the other focusing on quantitative.

❑ November- December 2003

News Study findings presented to CBC News senior leaders from across the country. Summaries of research sent to more than 2000 staff throughout CBC.

❑ January- June, 2004, and beyond

Changes begin appearing in CBC programming as first response to News Study findings.

❑ February- May 2004

Series of staff workshops across Canada focusing on five key themes of News Study: **1) What is News? 2) Telling All Sides of The Story; 3) How We Tell the Story; 4) World View; and 5) Covering Politics.** In all, 87 discussion groups involving estimated 465 staff held in every major Canadian centre. Each group submitted its own ideas on how the CBC should respond to what Canadians are telling us. All reports posted online in CBC.

❑ October – December 2004

Five senior CBC News teams review research findings and discussion group reports, and propose ideas for three-year blueprint for change.

❑ February – September 2005

Final reports (included in this document) distributed to senior CBC News staff. Process created to effect immediate/ medium-term/and long-term changes. Initial emphasis on current programming and upcoming 2005-06 season.

❑ Next Stage, 2006-07

Focus will shift to subsequent seasons, 2006 and 2007, and longer-term changes.



➤ ***Early Wins: CBC's First Response...***

After initial release of the News Study, our senior programmers were encouraged to 'implement' as many immediate changes as they thought feasible. There were many occasions when CBC's on-air programming was improved. Here are some examples:

□ **1. 'What is News?'**

- On CBC Radio, there were initiatives to expand 'categories' of stories on local morning programs.
- In the Tsunami story on TV/Radio/CBC.ca, aggressive efforts to make its coverage extremely diverse and illuminating.
- Introduction in February on CBC.ca of new arts section consistent with News Study's appeal to broaden definition of 'news'.
- In Halifax, coverage of the Concert for Asia highlighting 'people making a difference', and in Labrador, more frequent profiles of successful community initiatives and items that explore 'family life' issues.
- On Montreal's Canada Now, three-month pilot with reporter assigned to pursue stories that often slip by normal assignment process (personal finance, parenting, education, entertainment, personal security and other practical issues that deal with people's lives, close to home).

□ **2. 'Telling All Sides of the Story'**

- New CBC Newsworld program 'The Hour' based on News Study's focus on fresh perspectives and wide range of stories.
- Monthly critiques of Radio news programs now emphasize expanding breadth of stories and perspectives.
- In the Maritimes, local unit has adopted a set of program priorities derived directly from News Study research. Reporters/producers understand they should be looking for stories particularly related to these categories: Diversity, The Family, Politics Without Process, People Making a Difference, The Rural Experience and Fun.

□ **3. 'How We Tell the Story'**

- On CBC Radio's World at Six, reporters are being allowed more time for analysis and context.
- Launch on CBC Television of new Sunday Night news program emphasizes innovative story-telling and better use of personalities, and increased profile on The National of 'National Road Stories' traveling across Canada and the world.
- In Winnipeg, course for staff provided by cameraman and producer on ways to tell and present stories (including through lighting) that connect better emotionally with audiences.

□ **4. 'World View'**

- Radio News moving in direction of 'pocket bureaus' with goal of expanding coverage to new regions.
- Creation of new 'Correspondent' documentary series on Newsworld and new emphasis among all Radio/TV bureaus to make international stories more 'local' in relevance and connection.
- In Newfoundland and in the Maritimes, special efforts to focus on local citizens who are involved abroad in major international stories such as the Tsunami, the conflict in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

□ **5. 'Covering Politics'**

- In the Federal election coverage - with the CBC News Inquiry examining the 'health of Canada's democracy' - there was unprecedented collaboration among Radio/TV/CBC.ca news and current affairs teams all across the country, resulting in a uniquely diverse mix of perspectives.



➤ *Highlights: A Glimpse into the Future...*

In recent months, there have been many ideas from *CBC News* staff responding to what Canadians told us in the News Study. This binder includes virtually all of them. We're determined to move quickly, and even for the most ambitious ideas being put forward, we want to complete this phase of the process well within three years. So, in the end, what will this *new world* look like? Looking at the stimulating ideas that weave throughout this document, here's a glimpse at what that future will look like...

□ **1. 'What is News?'**

- By focusing on fewer stories, and doing them better, we need to significantly increase our original journalism on daily news and current affairs programs. Canadians want more stories that reveal 'meaningful change that stimulates meaningful response'. In their view, this would crowd out the 'ambient static' that often dominates news programs now. They want a less passive 'news' process: What should they *do* about the 'news'? How can we help them answer this?
- In a pro-active and methodical way, create space in our programming for the kinds of stories the News Study says we neglect. These include more issue-based stories reflecting the diversity of Canadian society; more positive stories exploring examples of accomplishment and triumph; more contextual stories explaining the background of complicated issues; and fewer forgettable stories tied to contrived or empty news 'events'.
- Create 'destination' segments on our flagship programs - and throughout CBC Newsworld - that would become the instant symbolic homes for our way of broadening the definition of news. These segments should be creatively branded, and given distinction and pride-of-place in the lineup. Examine the current pattern within our radio and television news programs with the goal of creating more flexible lineups. We needn't be slaves to an outmoded, commercially-driven, old-fashioned news model: Expand the length of news items. Expand the length of interview clips. Reinvent the model.
- Make staff renewal an immediate priority. Some senior staff have been in their positions too long. Move staff around more among program units, particularly senior leadership. Give others opportunity. Identify the gaps in our staffing, and make strategic hires. Encourage Editorial and intellectual diversity on staff. Hire for: Diversity, range, openness, creativity and curiosity. Assess current recruitment practices. Hire the enterprise gene: discipline, dynamism, rigor and vigor.

- Shake Up the Assignment Process. Everyone must know they are expected to deliver smart, original, and practical story ideas. Experiment with 2-day assignments. Fewer stories, better done. We need to ask ourselves when we begin to shape assignments and program lineups: Do we have to do this story today? Should we acknowledge the story today and develop it tomorrow? Would it be more interesting tomorrow when we can add context and navigation? Do we have to do this story at all?
- Create an integrated urban issues unit at the national level to speak to the reality that 85% of Canadians live in cities. Set up a new system of SWAT teams with TV, radio and CBC.ca to explore topical issues. Develop research teams for more "Reality Checks." And reintroduce beats for expertise, including 'soft beats' that often get closer to the core of what matters to people.
- We need to construct a new reality in which programs and assignments are created without the tyranny of the artificial 'news peg'. And we need new criteria based on the News Study findings to judge our programs. Set targets, and enforce them.

□ **2. 'Telling All Sides of the Story'**

- Avoid the media trap of 'framing' complicated stories in conventional *black-and-white* ways. The richness of intelligent and thoughtful discussion usually lies in the *greys*, and Canadians – far more than the news media – know that.
- Create a checklist for story choices to develop a broader range of stories. Our program 'gatekeepers' need to be more open-minded. Leaders should be trained to ensure they are allowing and encouraging intellectual diversity at the story meetings. We should also be conscious that some in our audience, if not the majority, feel the CBC too often reflects a liberal perspective in our treatment of stories and issues.
- Set clear objectives for all. Reward success. Measure our work for impact and resonance with Canadians - not for how long it took or how hard we worked. Underwrite education and training for staff in special areas, not just legal. Raise the floor for the generalist, and raise the ceiling for the specialist.
- Give the Big Story each day a Big Treatment. Canadians expect and want that from the *CBC News*. To position ourselves to do that, we need more of a pattern of 'task force journalism', project-by-project. The group should be expandable - depending on the topic and the needs of programming. We need to commit standing resources to make this happen, and augment as necessary.
- Create a 'Life Unit' similar to the one at the BBC – providing programming far from conventional 'hard news' but of a kind that can be more meaningful and engaging to many in our audience. This would focus on stories, issues and challenges of everyday life.
- Zero base all journalistic resources in terms of strengths, education, interests, etc., and assess effectiveness of how we do business against priorities.
- Know Thy Audience.

□ **3. 'How We Tell the Story'**

- Express more Personality in our presentation. We need to be more engaging, less remote. We need a more appealing tone. We should train and encourage producers to work with reporters to achieve this.
- Adopt and Embrace contemporary Production Values for Television. Update Graphics Technology. Hire Graphic Producers. The CBC has fallen behind our competitors in this crucial area, and we cannot afford to.
- Create, implement and keep revitalizing a risk-taking culture. Let's park excessive 'caution' at the door. We need to keep reinforcing this with staff.
- To encourage leadership throughout the CBC, and beyond, nurture and revitalize a 'star' system among our on-air and off-air staff. Identify 'stars' and up-and-comers. And shake up the system when they aren't performing.
- To reach out to a wider audience, we need to be more diverse, on- and off-air. More youthful and more open to new perspectives.

□ **4. 'World View'**

- The expression in the News Study – “making international local” – reflects Canadians' understanding that what happens outside their borders now affects their everyday life. We need to do a better job in connecting our coverage internationally with our audiences at home. Among other things, that requires more daily research (perhaps coordinated in our Toronto newsrooms) on how international developments relate to the stories and issues in Canada.
- Need to explore a range of new models for broadening coverage of the world, particularly South East Asia, Africa, Latin America and the heartland of the United States of America.
- Create a global affairs content unit to serve multiple clients as an umbrella group for international stories. Its mandate would be to coordinate all international coverage, from news and programs. Also, create a Pacific World Desk in Vancouver; expand coverage of the U.S. through use of Canadian-based reporters; and assign a “Canada's role in the world” beat.
- Pay much more attention to Canadian initiatives internationally. Through the work of Canadian NGOs, individuals, businesses and government agencies, Canada has a presence in many parts of the world. This is one way of making international stories 'Canadian'.
- Broaden international coverage to go beyond events and incremental developments to include more human-centered stories. To develop these stories, which are more labour-intensive and time-consuming, more time needs to be given to correspondents.

- Have a system in place where correspondents can pitch these kinds of stories. Needs a process that is more transparent, so everyone knows what stories are expected and when. Set up a Works-In-Progress list that is very specific about what stage stories are at and when they will be done. This should be monitored and used regularly.
- We need to create a category of contributor that is in-between a stringer and full-fledged CBC international correspondent. That may involve cost-sharing a reporter with another media outlet; partnerships with other broadcasters; having someone on retainer for a longer period of time, etc. This would be a way of increasing the quality of pieces and keeping costs down.
- Television's newscast, *The National*, should resume, and expand, the practice of carrying a fast-paced nightly world-wrap segment with first-rate graphic production on key happenings overseas. This could also include an 'intelligence file' on international news. This would give the audience a sense we're plugged into stories worldwide and are constantly updating our "watching brief".
- Change the name of the foreign desk to *International Desk*. Drop the term 'foreign' from the way we promote and market programs, as a term describing our international correspondents and do not use it in any future program titles.

□ **5. 'Covering Politics'**

- Set original journalism as a priority for *CBC News*. Produce more 'Reality Checks', perhaps as a signature for all *CBC News* platforms. Use National Road Tours as a programming device to focus on political issues.
- Support original ideas with resources. For example, as a news service we could decide to commit 20% of our political coverage reporting resources to original journalism.
- Reduce the demand on Ottawa from the programs. Set a limit on the number of stories a program can have. Put a hard cap on the number of stories the bureau does in a day.
- Recognize that all items cannot be only 1:45 minutes, or 2:15 minutes. Some need to be 4 minutes, even longer. Hear the exchanges between reporters and guests. Longer clips, not 8 seconds, but 30 seconds +.
- Create a new Newsworld political unit with the mission of doing politics differently, a sandbox program, rotating people through the unit.
- Reward originality. Assign enterprise/investigative accountability stories every week. Make originality a prerequisite in story approval. Change story meetings so that assignments include ideas for formats and treatment.
- Devote a percentage of radio/TV reporting resources on the Hill to original in-depth journalism. Come to a broad agreement on exactly what 'original journalism' means, what qualifies and what does not. Set clear expectations for reporters, assignment desks and producers.