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Build It and the Women Will Come? WTSN and the Advent of Canadian Digital Television

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ABSTRACT In fall 2001, over 200 digital television channels were launched in Canada. One of those channels was WTSN (Women’s Television Sports Network)—the world’s first 24-hour television network exclusively dedicated to broadcasting women’s sports. In the fall of 2003, however, WTSN ceased broadcasting operations. This analysis of CRTC policies and personal interview data with Canadian media members argues that while the demise of WTSN can be attributed to the unfortunate pitfalls associated with early digital television rollout and cultural policies, the network’s downfall is best explained in substantially more ideological terms. From the outset, WTSN entered uncharted waters in the Canadian television sport landscape, attempting to showcase women’s sports to a predominantly female audience—a demographic that has yet to materialize for mainstream sports programming.

KEYWORDS Broadcasting policy; Cable systems; Gender and media; Sports programming; Digital television

RÉSUMÉ En automne 2001 au Canada a lieu la lancée de plus de 200 chaînes de télévision numériques. Une de ces chaînes est WTSN (Women’s Television Sports Network), le premier réseau de télévision au monde entièrement dédié à la diffusion des sports féminins 24 heures sur 24.

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WTSN, cependant, disparaît des ondes dès l’automne 2003. Cette analyse des politiques du CRTC et d’entrevues menées par l’auteur auprès de professionnels des médias canadiens soutient que, bien qu’on puisse attribuer l’échec de WTSN à certaines politiques culturelles ainsi qu’aux problèmes reliés à l’expansion trop hâtive de la télévision numérique à l’époque, on peut aussi tirer avantage d’une approche plus idéologique pour expliquer la disparition de ce réseau. En effet, en offrant les sports pour femmes à un public composé majoritairement de femmes, WTSN dès ses débuts s’est aventuré dans un territoire inconnu par l’univers des sports sur les ondes canadiennes, la majorité des femmes n’ayant pas encore montré un intérêt soutenu pour la programmation sportive à grand public.

MOTS CLÉS Politique de radiodiffusion; Systèmes de câblodistribution; Sexe et médias; Programmation sportive; Télévision numérique

This article explores the birth and demise of the Canadian digital specialty television channel WTSN (Women’s Television Sports Network). Launched in September 2001 alongside an assortment of other digital channels, WTSN was the first of its kind in the world, exclusively dedicated to broadcasting women’s sports programming 24 hours a day. From the beginning, WTSN and other digital channels were touted by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) as rich sites of diverse programming that would, among other things, invigorate and advance the distribution and consumption of digital technology in Canada. The CRTC’s decision to launch these digital channels was also based on the assumption that the distribution of digital technology would be financially profitable. In the case of WTSN, however, September 30, 2003, marked its final day of broadcast operations—this after only two years. Canadian Television Inc. (CTV) president Rick Brace explained that “[a] combination of lower-than expected growth and limited access to advertising revenue led to [the] unfortunate decision, along with the high cost of running a sports service” (quoted in Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE), August 29, 2003). As this comment illustrates, CTV Inc. framed the suspension of WTSN’s operations as a decision based on financial feasibility more than other mitigating factors.

Following the model of Robert Sparks’ (1992) study of The Sport Network’s (TSN) birth as a satellite-to-cable network service, this examination of WTSN attempts to demonstrate how two other major factors also explain the digital network’s short-lived existence. First, the regulatory policy context in which digital television came into being in Canada provides insight into the circumstances surrounding WTSN’s creation. Debate over the implementation of digital television in Canada can be traced back to CRTC documents of the mid- to late 1990s. As Canada’s regulatory body, the agency has been both applauded for offering the Canadian consumer market new technologies and services (through awarding broadcasting licences to deserving applicants) and criticized for imposing unrealistic regulations and restrictions on new services (which generally reduce broadcasters’ chances of commercial success and long-term viability) (see Christie, 2003; Killingsworth, 2005; see Raboy, 1990). The implementation of digital television was no exception. For instance, at the time of digital TV’s rollout, some media observers argued that the Canadian consumer market had yet to show strong interest in digital television technology (see Blackwell, 2003; Vikhman, 2002; Zelkovich, 2002). This lack of interest, coupled with the September 2001 arrival of over 200 digital television channels, added to the challenge of building consumer awareness of the new technology.¹

The second factor that this study considers is the ever-evolving nature of the audience. The

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audience commodity, a concept introduced through the work of Dallas Smythe (1977), helps impart an understanding of how WTSN's creators may have envisioned the network's ideal viewer and hence advertiser. For WTSN, securing a lucrative audience commodity was arguably the most important factor in surviving on the then obscure digital television platform. However, although the audience commodity is important to understanding how content is tailored for certain demographics, and how these demographics are sold to advertisers, it falls short in providing a sharper picture of modern audiences that access media content via digital means. Recent accounts and scholarship on the nature of modern media communication have emphasized the need to consider the role of *audience interactivity* in the relationship between content production, dissemination, promotion, reception, and feedback (Berry, 2006; Cover, 2006). Generally speaking, audience interactivity accounts for not only the ability of audiences to exercise choice in how media content may be consumed but also their capacity to participate in the re-fashioning of content and messages through feedback (Baltruschat, 2009; Cover, 2006; Holmes, 2004). As Cover (2006, p. 141) states, the concept accounts for "some element of user control over narrative content in a media or new media text."

Although the regulatory environment presented obstacles for WTSN, alternative explanatory frames also demonstrate how the network's envisioned target audience may have predetermined its demise from the start. I argue that the failure of WTSN was both ideological and gendered, for the network's largest flaw was that its audience commodity was founded on an inherent gender bias. WTSN's objective was to showcase female sports, to predominantly female audiences, in a television sport marketplace saturated with male sports, catering to predominantly male audiences. This analysis provides substantial evidence that in its attempt to reach its objective, WTSN encountered an unsympathetic television sport climate where the cultural standard and very definition of "real" sport was analogous to male sport.

Overall, this examination of the WTSN case employs three qualitative methods. The first is a brief tracing of the evolution and regulatory history of digital television in Canada. Second, the article provides a historical profile of WTSN, including its ownership, programming, intended audience, and financial record. Finally, the findings from 12 interviews conducted from 2004 to 2005 with both female and male Canadian media workers offer practical insight. These interviews addressed, among other topics, the political economy of digital television in Canada, the media representation of sport culture, and the fate of WTSN.² The experiences and knowledge shared by these individuals are indicative of an industry response to digital television in general and Canadian sport media in particular. Their knowledge of Canadian media and television sport is invaluable in considering not only some of WTSN's dilemmas but also how experts in the field of media sport in Canada envisioned the network's arrival in the milieu of regular reporting routines and everyday sports coverage.

TELEVISION AS NATION-BUILDING: A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARLY TELEVISION AND CABLE

Television's role in bringing Canadians together and fostering national identity can be described as one firmly rooted in the ideologies of technological nationalism (Babe, 1990)—a perspective that upholds communications technology as the backbone of nation-building. Historically (and, arguably, currently) the character of this nation-building can be classified as both protectionist and reactionary. For instance, in the late 1940s, concerns over the developed and well-established American television broadcasting system pressured the Canadian government to act in order to

preserve and shelter Canadian culture from impending U.S. domination. Much like its predecessor radio, public television was entrusted with bridging the gaps between geographically and regionally fragmented communities as well as providing a distinct alternative to readily available American television signals that were accessible to some 30,000 Canadian households owning television sets in 1950 (Cavanaugh, 1992). These households easily picked up American television signals via antennae, and the efforts of upstart entrepreneurs keen to experiment with available resources and infrastructure drove early penetration (Canadian Communications Foundation, 2009). Already mandated by the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Act of 1932 to serve the vast geographic regions of the country via an integrated national radio network in both English and French, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was assigned the duty of extending its public service to television broadcasting. This effectively solidified its responsibility to showcase and reflect Canadian culture to Canadians and promoted television as the bearer of national unity (Jackson, 2001).

Television sports programming also figures prominently in the pursuit of Canadian nation-building. American broadcaster signals with ample sports programming were readily available to many Canadians by the early 1950s, and amateur sports, NHL hockey, and significant international events like the 1954 Commonwealth Games figured prominently into the CBC's broadcast schedule, as they served the purposes of delivering Canadian content and fostering broader government initiatives for amateur sport development (Cavanaugh, 1992; Scherer & Whitson, 2009). By the late 1950s, as a public broadcaster the CBC was deeply entrenched in sports programming. By 1961, however, the public broadcaster was no longer the only television network broadcasting sport to a national audience. Although sport remained a dominant feature of CBC programming, the licensing of the privately owned CTV changed the broadcasting landscape. CTV represented competition for the existing CBC network and offered audiences both popular Canadian (e.g., CFL football) and American sports programming (e.g., *Wide World of Sports*) (Cavanaugh, 1992).

The 1960s and '70s proved to be watershed decades for the advancement of Canadian cable services. This phenomenon was fuelled by two factors. First, the Canadian audience was becoming fragmented as households (primarily concentrated in urban areas) that had access to American TV signals prior to the arrival of CBC and CTV television services were less attracted to these Canadian broadcasters and demonstrated this by subscribing to cable services that offered better channel variety (Sparks, 1992). Second, the Canadian government recognized that if left unregulated, such cable services would threaten the Canadian broadcasting system that it had purposely endeavoured to cultivate and protect. In 1968, when the CRTC was created as a regulatory body, it was formally mandated through the authority of the newly revised Broadcasting Act to oversee the licensing of broadcasting services. At this time, cable operations were "reined in" and the definition of the broadcasting system in Canada was amended to include cable television. In the early 1970s, the foundations for satellite-to-cable undertakings were set in place as Telesat Canada launched the world's first domestic satellite communications service (Lorimer & Gasher, 2004), creating a new and expansive platform for potential cable delivery. From 1967 to 1980, the number of Canadian households subscribing to cable television services grew from 517,000 to 4.3 million (Hall & Jowett, 2001).

AGAINST ALL ODDS: THE ARRIVAL OF DIGITAL TELEVISION IN CANADA

Channels offering exclusive genres of programming have been a part of Canadian broadcasting since "narrowcasters" like TSN and MuchMusic debuted in 1984, targeting fragmented segments of

the general audience. By the mid-1990s, however, the ability to win the popularity and patronage of Canadian cable television consumers steadily increased, to a point where as narrowcasters, TSN and MuchMusic had successfully lured substantial portions of the audience from conventional (over-the-air) broadcasters (see Ashley, 1986; Davis, 1989). This phenomenon had been aided in 1989 when both TSN and MuchMusic gained access to the analogue cable system as discretionary services that could be purchased in addition to basic cable (Killingsworth, 2005). With this access, the two narrowcasters effectively secured guaranteed cable and specialty service revenues. Their evolution from stand-alone discretionary services, in hindsight, would place them in a different realm than their future digital specialty counterparts launched 17 years later.

In a 2000 news release, the CRTC announced that it had decided to introduce the digital television platform because it was “convinced that these high quality and varied services [would] help drive the penetration of digital technology in Canada and provide new windows for Canadian talent while offering Canadian viewers a wide array of new choices” (CRTC, 2000a, p. 1). These idealistic sentiments echoed those employed by the Commission in its decision to introduce Canada’s first specialty channels in 1984—MuchMusic and TSN (Sparks, 1992). Then, however, the two specialty channels arguably were not genre competitors, nor were they facing strong competition from other specialty channels.

The cultural imperative was another force behind the Commission’s decision to expand the cable delivery platform. Besides expanding the delivery platform for television, the CRTC believed that digital channels would provide a diverse range of content that would not only reflect and cater to various cultural interests but also appeal to customers. It reasoned that “the most attractive aspect” of this “wide array of new choices” was that customers would be “in the driver’s seat” when determining which services they wanted to pay for (CRTC, 2000a, pp. 1-3). Two policy documents frame the regulatory context for the development and implementation of digital television in Canada: a report published by the Task Force on the Implementation of Digital Television in 1997 and a Standing Committee report from the Department of Canadian Heritage in 2003.

Canadian television in the digital era: The report of the Task Force on the Implementation of Digital Television

The primary focus of the Task Force on the Implementation of Digital Television’s (TFIDTV) 1997 report was to recommend practical strategies for bringing digital television technology to Canadian consumers. Despite this, its membership did not include regular cable television customers. The TFIDTV’s members did include technology manufacturers, established broadcasters, various players in the Canadian film/television production community, and academic observers. Ambiguous evidence of the TFIDTV’s consultation with would-be consumers is limited to a brief paragraph in its report stating that recommendations were drawn from dialogue with “working groups” (TFIDTV, 1997, p. 6).

The task force report cited the potential technological prowess of a digital television distribution system. Two additional forces were behind the TFIDTV’s evaluation of Canada’s need to move the mode of television broadcasting forward. The first was an implicitly framed threat of the then already established and operating U.S. digital television system. The TFIDTV argued that Canada could not afford to repeat the disaster of the DTH (direct-to-home) satellite grey market, where Canadian households residing outside “official” American service boundaries were able to access and pay for U.S. satellite cable television by means of routing bills to U.S. postbox numbers. The second

motive for implementing digital television concerned the technology's "endless growth" potential. The TFIDTV believed that an upgraded and modern digital platform would place Canada at the top of television production with its European, U.S., and South American counterparts. Such a move would also ensure a strong global technological compatibility, which meant that an appropriate mechanism would be in place for the trade and purchase of cross-cultural and international media products.

The strategic framework proposed by the TFIDTV consisted of nine recommendations outlining how the transition from the analogue to digital television platform should be enacted, and eight others that explicitly outlined the steps required for final implementation. Two paternalistic highlights of the report concerned the recommendation that the CRTC take steps toward totally phasing out analogue television transmission by the end of 2007 and a suggestion that the federal government adopt a permanent \$200-million per annum funding allotment for the Canadian Television and Cable Production Fund, which would increase by \$50 million per annum from 1997 to 2007 (TFIDTV, 1997).

Notwithstanding its seven other recommendations for how the CRTC could address digital implementation, the TFIDTV stated that "[f]ailure to move with speed and precision in [implementing a permanent fund would] jeopardize the whole transition process, with concomitant negative effects on the broadcasting system and [Canada's] domestic and international cultural and economic objectives" (TFIDTV, 1997, p. 29). These two recommendations foreshadowed the tone taken by the task force in its remaining outline of steps necessary for digital implementation. Recommendations 10 to 17 explicitly called for heavy CRTC involvement in the creation, regulation, and monitoring of digital television undertakings. In all, while the TFIDTV admirably outlined practical approaches to ensuring reasonable penetration of digital television by 2007, it left the task of determining market conditions and need largely in the hands of the CRTC.

Our cultural sovereignty: The second century of broadcasting in Canada

In 2003 the Standing Committee on Cultural Heritage (SCCH) published an extensive report outlining the successes, failures, and current state of affairs of public/private radio, television, and Internet communication in Canada. Of particular interest are chapters 4 and 12, which detail the state of the audience and make recommendations for a smooth transition into the digital era. Analytically, it is logical to discuss the particular implications of chapter 12 first; chapter 4, which complements a discussion of the audience commodity, will be discussed in further detail after.

Chapter 12 of the SCCH report, entitled "The Digital Transition," begins by acknowledging that the digital revolution will be faced with various challenges, which include marketing to new audiences and striking a fair balance between entertaining audiences and adhering to the regulations of the Broadcasting Act. The committee was informed by various stakeholders.³ Each stakeholder expressed their respective concerns regarding the implementation of digital technology, with particular attention paid to content issues, the acquisition of appropriate production equipment, and economic viability. Specifically, these groups were concerned with three issues: 1) how the transition from analogue to digital transmission would affect audience retention; 2) how digital television would be "phased in"; and 3) how pay and specialty services would be packaged for consumers (SCCH, 2003, p. 432).

Clearly, the SCCH organized much of its study of the digital transition around the audience, yet framed it more as a taken-for-granted afterthought rather than as a fundamental part of and powerful player in a successful digital transition. Although the sentiments of stakeholders in this chapter speak to the practical limitations faced by service providers and, indirectly, shareholders, little evidence is given that everyday consumers were consulted as part of this process of assessing market capacity and need. Implicitly, the SCCH identified consumers as playing a significant role in ensuring market penetration and abiding by copyright laws, et cetera, but actual consumer input and formal address to the committee is not present in the report, notwithstanding a handful of organizations and groups that identified themselves as consumer advocates.

FROM AUDIENCE COMMODITY TO AUDIENCE INTERACTIVITY

In its most basic form, the audience commodity is the product of “mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications,” argues Smythe (1977, p. 3). The content of for-profit or commercial mass media, in this regard, does not solely produce meanings, messages, and entertainment, but markets from which potential audiences are drawn and then sold to advertisers. Smythe (1977, p. 4) adds that when considered as “collectivities,” audiences perform as commodities with specific demographics, such as age, sex, social class, marital status, ethnicity, hobby interests, et cetera. This unique relationship between mass media producers and advertisers is of course highly dependent on the type of programming that audiences choose to watch and the given demographic qualities embodied by its members.

The audience commodity is a significant factor to consider in the story of WTSN for two reasons. First, traditional television sports programming has predominantly targeted an 18- to 40-year-old male demographic mainly interested in watching sports where males are the primary participants (Duncan & Messner, 1998). As the predominant target market for television sports programming, the male audience is valuable not only because of its ability to reach a broad-ranging age demographic but also because the historical development of television sport occurred in an era where males were targeted as primary household financial decision-makers (Jhally, 1982). For WTSN, pinpointing a female audience pool that would be attractive to potential advertisers was the paramount challenge, because females have not historically figured prominently into the psychographic profile of television sport demographics (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). Though financial independence and socio-economic security are increasing for Canadian women, there remains a significant gender income gap that favours males by 21% (Conference Board of Canada, 2009). This factor is noteworthy in the grand scheme of the audience commodity for women's sports programming, because if female audiences are conceived as the ideal viewers, the potential returns for advertisers would be lower than those gained from males.

With the simultaneous launch of seven other sport digital channels in 2001 (including ESPN Classic Canada, Fox Sports World Canada, Leafs TV, the NHL Network, the Racing Network, Raptors NBA TV, and X-Treme Sports), Canadian television itself was entering uncharted waters. At first glance, securing an audience for those other channels might have been an easier task than the one faced by an all-women's sports channel. Simply put, these channels supplemented an established genre of sport television programming (i.e., NHL hockey, NBA basketball, professional European football, and rugby) that WTSN did not. WTSN could in fact be considered a radical departure from what traditional television sports programming offered. Because of this, the network would also have to address its potential audience in a radically different way than its predecessors and competitors.

The second reason why the audience commodity is an important factor to consider in the story of WTSN rests in chapter 4 of *Our Cultural Sovereignty*, wherein the SCCH compiles ratings and survey data on English- and French-language television viewing on conventional, pay, and speciality broadcasters from 1993 to 2001. The chapter's general thrust is that Canadian audiences are fragmented along technology and genre lines where viewing of a variety of programming on conventional broadcasters remains high, but such broadcasters face stiff competition from pay and specialty networks that target specific programming genres. For instance, in 2001 audience shares for English-language conventional broadcasters totalled 53% (i.e., CBC and CTV) and 46.9% for pay and specialty services (SCCH, 2003). Importantly, the 2001 numbers also show that CTV/Bell Globemedia Inc. (owner of WTSN) held 18.4% of total audience share—the highest of all ownership groups for English television in Canada (SCCH, 2003). When viewing of television sport is taken into account, Canadian pay and specialty broadcasters garnered 46.9% of all viewing while the CBC came in a close second, at 42.2%. This factor is significant due to the fact that as a new digital specialty channel, WTSN entered a market that demonstrated a desire to view sports. What remained to be seen at the time of the network's inception was whether or not this factor necessarily meant there was room for another specialty sport broadcaster, solely dedicated to women's sport.

As it happens, WTSN was not unique in failing to attract a profitable audience commodity. Poor ratings also haunted EdgeTV (an alternative music network) and PrideVision (a gay and lesbian affairs and entertainment network), two other digital channels launched at the same time (see Jonhston, 2005). Still, WTSN can be considered unique when compared to other digital offerings launched by CTV Specialty TV Inc. in 2001 and beyond because it was the only sport channel that did not survive. Its failure also calls attention to the challenges that traditional media companies have been forced to negotiate in the era of mobile media and increasing interactivity. The failure of WTSN also illustrates that the arcane or underrepresented subject can no longer suffice as the only rationale for attracting audiences.

Discussions of the values of audience interactivity such as user choice and control, which are less applicable to non-digitized texts, have appeared in the pages of numerous trade publications. These discussions have observed that potentially new and lucrative revenue streams provided by the Internet and other mobile technologies are the new focus of many traditional media companies invested in making the transition into the digital age a successful one (see Anonymous, 2009; Bugailiskis, 2005; Gerlsbeck, 2007; Rickwood, 2009; Semansky, 2008). This emerging trend has been cited and embraced by sports networks like The Score—a network that transformed from satellite-to-cable delivery to digital transmission. When re-vamping its television broadcasting headquarters, the network emphasized the concept of interactivity and bragged that its brand of sports programming would allow “hardcore fans” to feel as if they were “hanging out at a high-tech water cooler” (Anonymous, 2008, p. 20).

DIGITAL LICENSEE FRAMEWORK: A REGULATORY HISTORY

Out of over 450 applications for digital television specialty services, the CRTC approved licences for 283, releasing the details of its decision in November 2000 (see CRTC, 2000b). Category 1 services were classified as those making the strongest contribution to diversity in television programming and were granted automatic access to digital service carriers and distributors. Category 2 services were those that could not compete with existing pay/specialty or category 1 channels and were not granted automatic access to digital service providers—instead, they would have to negotiate access

with service carriers.

WTSN was granted a category 1 licence and was required to launch before November 24, 2001. Since all digital service providers were required to carry every category 1 channel, WTSN benefited from being packaged with other digital networks (diginets – an amalgamation of ‘digital’ and ‘network’) for initial distribution. This opportunity was not afforded to category 2 channels. These channels were required to launch no later than November 24, 2003, and their requirement to negotiate with service carriers was to guarantee category 1 licensees some genre protection by providing an artificial “head start” in the market. Another notable criterion on which licences were secured was Canadian content. By the end of the six-year licence term, Canadian programming was to represent 50% of all programming content for category 1 services (CRTC, 2000b).

Interestingly, category 2 licences were regulated by less restrictive selection criteria. During their six-year licence agreement, no Canadian content (Cancon) restrictions were imposed on category 2 channels (see CRTC, 2000b). At first glance, it could be argued that category 2 licences would be more restrictive because of the decreased likelihood of creating a digital service, unlike existing category 1 and pay/specialty offerings. However, even though category 2 licensees like the Racing Network were not guaranteed carriage by digital television distributors, their chances of survival might have been greater than category 1 licensees because of the absence of Cancon regulations (Christie, 2003). Without the burden of producing Canadian content, category 2 networks could spend substantially less on programming production. For category 2 networks, purchasing pre-recorded programming (e.g., from U.S. or other foreign networks) or re-broadcasting events already produced by conventional networks constituted the bulk of programming expenses.

Not surprisingly, the ownership structures that backed the digital offerings were pre-established, successful media players in the Canadian marketplace. In fact, out of the 20 channels launched alongside WTSN, four other licensees came from companies and holdings held under the same BCE conglomerate banner. Five other digital undertakings were owned by a variety of corporate configurations, including Rogers, Shaw, and CanWest Global.

AMBITIOUS BEGINNINGS: WTSN IN PROFILE

Ownership

From 2001 to the end of its broadcasting run, WTSN was owned by CTV Specialty Television Inc. WTSN and its broadcast sibling TSN were operated under the banner of CTV Specialty Television Inc. (a division within Bell Globemedia Inc.), which was owned by the Canadian conglomerate BCE. At the time of WTSN’s demise, CTV Specialty was responsible for operating other exclusive sports specialty channels, including TSN, its French-language counterpart RDS (Réseau de Sports), and OLN (the Outdoor Life Network—specializing in sport, recreation, and leisure lifestyles). Other non-sport specialty services operated by CTV Specialty included CTV Newsnet (a 24-hour news service), the Comedy Network, and ROBTv (Report on Business Tv—a business news service, now renamed Business News Network (BNN)). The size and number of these holdings is indicative of what some respondents referred to as Bell Globemedia’s “deep pockets.” As Bell Globemedia was an established leader in specialty sport services, most of this study’s respondents suggested that a major reason why Bell Globemedia introduced WTSN was because it could afford to take the financial risk:

TSN has been incredibly successful—probably of all the cable stations out there. It’s

been in existence now for 20 years. But it's just been a cash box. So, they might have thought that it was worth the gamble. ... To them, it was probably just a drop in the bucket. (Respondent 10, male reporter)

They have access to print reporters. They have access to TSN. They have access to their main CTV network. And they have access to Bell as a sponsor ... as the mother company or whatever. I think they've proven that they're willing to take some risk.
(Respondent 6, female host/commentator)

As evidenced in the above reflections, CTV's (Bell Globemedia) backing went beyond financial clout. With Bell Globemedia's access to other sport speciality channels, many respondents reasoned that if WTSN's owners were not able to purchase programming and events, existing synergies would allow for the purchase of women's sporting events already broadcast on sibling networks.

Programming

In its decision to grant a category 1 digital broadcasting licence to WTSN, the CRTC claimed that the shared synergies with the network's lineage of experienced and successful specialty broadcasters would be a particular strength (CRTC, 2000c). Respondents had mixed feelings about this claim. While WTSN's broadcasting lineage was undoubtedly experienced in sports programming, an all-women's sports format did not necessarily fit the mould of its predecessors. When asked to name the top revenue producing television sports, respondents placed NHL hockey, Major League Baseball, NFL football, and CFL football (all professional men's sports) at the top of their lists. These sports were also thought to be popular with audiences and already extensively covered by existing Canadian channels. While women's tennis, hockey, and golf were identified as making modest gains in revenues and viewership in recent history, respondents repeatedly noted that these sports tend to experience sharp spikes in appeal, a pattern that does not generally translate into year-round financial sustainability for sports programming. Not one women's sport was deemed a long-standing, revenue-rich source of programming with a guaranteed audience. One respondent commented:

As far as I know, there is no women's sport that makes money. Women's sports tend to be put in the same category as amateur sports. I wouldn't say public service. But it is almost done more for altruistic reasons. I would think women's tennis makes good money in Canada because again, you don't have to produce it. And it does fairly well. It's not hockey, or football, or baseball numbers, but it's better than basketball, for example. (Respondent 4, male reporter)

The above comment speaks to what some respondents identified as a disconnect between the realities of running an all-women's sport service and the availability of women's sport event programming to broadcast. Here, the case of TSN is instructive. Killingsworth (1999, 2005) and Sparks (1992) have documented that most of TSN's early success as a specialty sport service was attributed to a combination of factors—three of which are particularly significant. First, Canadian brewer John Labatt Ltd. was TSN's original owner. This relationship provided the network with enough financial power to purchase lucrative television broadcasting rights for major sporting events. It also forged a steadfast relationship between TSN's audience—mainly males 18 to 49 years old—and beer (Sparks, 1992). Second, during this time, Labatt also owned the Toronto Blue Jays, which meant that TSN became the Canadian destination for Major League Baseball. Third, and perhaps most noteworthy, due to its nature as an all-sports service, TSN was able to

offer blanket or “bulk” coverage of sporting events that conventional broadcasters could not. That is, TSN could provide coverage of entire tournaments or events uninterrupted and free from regularly scheduled programming (see Killingsworth, 1999). This bulk coverage 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). These three factors rewarded TSN with more than encouraging financial success.

From 2001 to 2002, WTSN broadcast an array of news, documentary, instructional, educational/recreational, professional/amateur, and film programming. The network covered major professional sports such as LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) golf, WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) basketball, and WTA (Women's Tennis Association) tennis. Soccer, curling, swimming, figure skating, and beach volleyball, among others, were also popular sports included in the network's programming. WTSN was also an official broadcaster of the CIS (Canadian Intercollegiate Sport) basketball, volleyball, and hockey championships—Canadian content but not the type that garners high ratings. These sports, while representing a variety of female athletic endeavour and interest, were not easy to broadcast because in many cases they were not produced and ready for purchase. This created a significant cost burden. As one respondent explained, “Sports [are] very expensive to cover, especially ... live. It's one thing to maybe make a talk show or a documentary program or whatever, or programs designed to fit the demographic. But to mount live sports coverage of women's events ... that's expensive” (Respondent 9, male host/reporter). Even though WTSN was able to purchase programming feeds for certain events, it still incurred the high cost of producing original programming and purchasing broadcasting rights for women's sporting events (Houston, 2003; Zelkovich, 2003). In addition, programming that could be harvested from WTSN's existing synergies with brother network TSN and the CTV Television Network was limited to 10% per week (CRTC, 2000b).

To further complicate matters and hamstring the network, 30% of its programming had to be devoted to Canadian content from 6:00 a.m. to midnight (the entire broadcasting day—18 hours) and from 6:00 p.m. to midnight (prime time—6 hours) daily (CRTC, 2000c). Conceivably, WTSN might have been less burdened in fulfilling the 30% rule in the daytime but likely faced significant challenges in offering 30% Canadian content in the lucrative prime-time period, when competition for audiences would be higher. In comparison, WTSN's sport diginet counterparts arguably had deeper and cheaper sources of sports programming to draw from to operate their services and no Cancon requirements. For instance, the NHL Network, principally owned by the National Hockey League (NHL), could access programming without cost via ownership synergies. Raptors NBA TV and Leafs TV were in the same position, being predominantly owned by their respective sport team franchises. ESPN Classic Canada had the advantage of airing programs already purchased by ESPN and TSN, and Fox Sport World Canada featured pre-taped rugby, soccer, and cricket matches (see Houston, 2003). As noted by one interviewee:

You know, TSN had ESPN Classic—these are the cheapest [channels] you could run. You know? I mean really. You pay next to nothing for rights; you bring in some people to talk in the studio for a while. I mean, this is almost a guaranteed winner.
(Respondent 4, male reporter)

Eventually, not being able to access cheap programming affected the quality of WTSN's broadcasting. The high cost of producing most of its original content took a heavy toll on other aspects of the network's “unique approach” to women's sports programming. As early as

October 2001, barely a month after its launch, the network gutted production of *WTSN Connects*, a flagship show that had started out as a two-hour-long weekend news program hosted by Norma Wick. Soon after the program's launch WTSN released two employees and reduced the show from an in-depth look into the world of women's sports to a 30-minute news spot (Zelkovich, 2001). By April 2002, the show and another flagship program, *Fight to the Finish*, were cancelled altogether. Not long after, both Norma Wick and Jennifer Hedger, host of *Fight to the Finish*, were released by the network (Zerbisias, 2002).

WTSN, THE FEMALE AUDIENCE, AND MAKING THE APOLITICAL POLITICAL

Examining TSN's envisioned audience is useful to understand the logic underlying WTSN's envisioned audience. In TSN's original licence application, it was initially proposed that a broad spectrum of men and women of "all age groups" would be targeted (Sparks, 1992, p. 333). Later on in the licence application, however, the criteria were expressed differently, proposing to appeal to a "dedicated sports fan." As Sparks (1992, p. 334) notes, this was problematic because "[t]his conception of the viewer-as-dedicated-sports-fan conflicted with the notion of 'men and women of all age groups' already cited, and corresponded more closely to the composition of network sports audiences which traditionally were male." Regardless of this discrepancy, TSN went on to successfully use the idea of the "dedicated sports fan" to sell its image and secure itself as a powerful brand for consumers interested in all-sports programming.

WTSN's intended audience as proposed in its network application was less ambiguous than TSN's. WTSN said it would produce programming

showcasing all aspects of women's sports and sports of interest to women ... [and would] focus on women in the sporting world and their fans ... [and] develop meaningful and proactive sports oriented programs for women: all produced with and for women, addressing topics and issues that are timely and relevant. (TSN, 2000, p. 4)

This excerpt explicitly identifies women as WTSN's intended audience. The intention to cover "all aspects of women's sports and sports of interest to women" retrospectively was considered highly problematic by all interviewees. On the one hand, most observed that, with the exception of the Olympics, "all aspects of women's sports" was not a viable basis for a sports network because mainstream television sports programming had rarely featured all-women's events on a consistent basis. On the other hand, according to respondents, "sports of interest to women," such as figure skating or other Olympics event programming that has previously attracted large female audiences, could not adequately support an all-sport format service, since they are stand-alone events rather than sports that have lengthy seasons complementing routine sports broadcasting practices.

Overwhelmingly, in addition to the poor implementation of digital technology rollout that was identified as a great disadvantage to WTSN and other diginets, the most pervasive theme to emerge over the course of interviews was that the predominant female audience was the most damaging criterion on which the network was based:

[S]o when you come out and you try to push something on a female audience, the audience is not there first of all because traditionally women are not [television] sports watchers. But they are now the sporting audience, they are becoming fans and you're gonna see them at games. But they're not necessarily fitting the package to watch

WTSN. (Respondent 7, female commentator)

Many women watch sports to spend time with their husband or boyfriend or whatever. So unless women themselves tuned to it, it wasn't gonna get the viewership. [T]imes may have changed more than I think but I still don't think there are all that many women out there ... a giant chunk of the [female] population that turns to sports first when they turn on the TV. (Respondent 5, male reporter)

These views contrast markedly with the rationalization for WTSN as outlined in its licence application. Specifically, the application slightly departed from not only envisioning women as its intended viewers but made further distinctions when it highlighted "women as fans," and bringing its proposed "women's perspective" to broadcasting. The following statements represent the most ideological sentiments in the network's licence application:

Until now, there has been no broadcasting service whose sole focus is achieving the growth, popularity and acceptance of women's sports, women athletes and women as fans ... The WSN concept is entirely original. Our emphasis on sports of interest to women and women's perspective on sports will contribute to the goals of developing positive role models for women and youth, developing female Canadian athletes and developing their sports. Sports on television tends to be programmed for men and the programming itself emphasizes men's sports by a very significant margin. There can be little doubt that Canadian women's sports is [sic] underrepresented on Canadian television ... The uniqueness of women's roles, goals and needs in sports is rarely if ever addressed on television ... WSN will showcase the diversity and uniqueness of women's sports and women athletes in a way that is just not being done today. (TSN, 2000, p. 5)⁴

These statements convey the outlook that WTSN would not be a commonplace addition to specialty sport television. They also explicitly exude a political critique of the under-representation of women's sports on television—one that is firmly entrenched in liberal feminist sentiments of gender equality and the reclamation of media space and production practices. The interviewees did not regard this to be a fruitful approach. Explicitly targeting an audience in this manner was regarded as being too aggressively political and consequently counter-productive to the goals of attracting an audience and legitimizing women's sport within television sport culture.

The claims made in the application statements cited above illustrated awareness of long-standing gender inequality (the problem) and the potential value, if granted licence approval, of WTSN (the solution). For respondents, politicizing WTSN would not lure a viable female audience to watch women's sports. The following interviewees' remarks addressed this concern:

There was a show years ago, called Women in Sport. First of all, I don't like that title ... It comes off [as] carrying the torch. Women in Sport, it turns people off ... The women's branding I think actually hurts. Because what you end up doing is you end up sort of creating this little niche for it. But you don't need to. You need people watching. You just need eyeballs. [They were] saying, "This station is really only for women." And it shouldn't have been. It should have just been about female sport. (Respondent 7, female commentator)

Just having ovaries doesn't make every woman exactly the same as every other woman.

I hope I'm not saying anything out of line but ... barring the intensely, intensely militant feminist, who will say, "We are only going to watch only because it's women ... and because we are gonna support women regardless of what's on there," the reality is, that you can't sort of just corral women like a bunch of cattle out in the wilderness somewhere and say, "Here's the women's show, you guys watch the women's show," while all the guys go and watch their stuff. That's not realistic. Women have brains and interests and everything else just like men do. (Respondent 5, male reporter)

You just can't sort of say they're just going to rush off to support a cause—that's not how it works. Women will watch if they are interested. But it won't be just because [they're] going to do it for the cause. They're not going to watch it for that reason. I think it is complex. But I know you can't assume that they're watching with a sense of solidarity. (Respondent 9, male host/reporter)

Another statement from the license application claimed that WTSN would attract a previously untapped "audience mix" that would appeal to different types of advertisers (TSN, 2000, p. 5). While this excerpt identified an "audience mix," it was clear that women would be the primary demographic and they would be a desirable demographic for advertisers of women's health products, sporting apparel, and cosmetics—products that have not traditionally supported the production of television sports programming.

The target audience for WTSN was considerably less ambiguously defined than that of TSN. Paradoxically, however, the interviewees articulated clearly that this approach was ultimately a weakness. The perception that WTSN was rationalized on the basis of political arguments about gender inequity in sport television was viewed as one reason why the network found it difficult to establish an audience. In this regard, politicizing women's sports was perceived to have precipitated the downfall of WTSN because women, according to above interviewees' accounts, were not necessarily apt to be persuaded to watch sports just because women were the participants. Later—and ironically, because women were the intended audience for the network—they were not only blamed for its downfall but also in some ways chastised by some respondents for not demonstrating wilful and collective political agency by watching WTSN en masse. The following remarks exemplify this politically charged double-edged sword:

None of my friends were watching. Very few of my friends were subscribing. They are big sports women. They are fans, they are athletes; some of them are high-performance athletes. They weren't subscribing and they weren't watching. Regardless of my social campaigning at the outset saying, "Listen girls ... you better sign on; we all have to support this." ... I was saying, "You know, girls ... come on. You gotta subscribe to this. Do your part. Because if we don't support this and it fails ... it's going to be a *long* time before someone tries again." (Respondent 2, female commentator)

My feeling is the women were at fault for letting that go down the toilet... . [L]et's face it, there are a lot of women out there in major positions of authority for revenue. If they wanted it, here was their chance to keep it going. Now there is absolutely no excuse in the world for them to say, "There's nothing for us." (Respondent 3, male host/reporter)

IN THE RED: WTSN'S FINANCIAL RECORD

As noted above, TSN's 1989 move from individual pay service to the discretionary tier created

a stable foundation upon which to cultivate its future market. After being packaged with other specialty channels and sold as the first tier to consumers, TSN was able to collect both advertising and cable subscription revenues (Sparks, 1992). When compared to pay-per-view services that relied on advertising revenue alone, having these two revenue streams put TSN at an advantage in terms of attracting sufficient capital required to run a profitable 24-hour sports service. When asked about the importance of having two secure revenue streams (cable subscriber and advertising), then network president Rick Brace remarked: “You couldn’t run the service if you run on advertising alone [...] You’d be out of business” (quoted in Killingsworth, 1999, p. 47). This observation ironically foreshadowed the conditions under which WTSN subsequently launched as a digital television service. Its major revenue sources were digital television service subscriptions and advertising. Table 1 below sheds more light on the glaring disparity between WTSN’s revenues and expenses from 2002-2003.

The numbers

In 2000, the Canadian Cable Television Association (CCTA) estimated that there were 500,000 potential digital cable customers in Canada. By March 2002 Decima Publishing reported that there were 2.9 million digital subscribers (Anonymous, 2002). These numbers raise concerns regarding WTSN’s ability to exist as a service without access to substantial digital television subscriber revenue. The network relied heavily on both digital television subscriber and advertising revenue to make a profit. This, coupled with only 317,866 customers subscribing to its service in year one, makes it reasonable to assume that unless the network’s advertising revenues were significantly high, it did not have much chance to at least break even. Figures filed with the CRTC show that WTSN’s total revenue in its inaugural broadcast year was \$693,856, while expenses totalled \$3,132,181 (CRTC, 2004). WTSN’s sport diginet contemporaries like ESPN Classic Canada, the NHL Network, and Raptors NBA TV had comparable financial data, but what separated these stations was that they were category 2 licensees and, on average, their revenues exceeded those of WTSN in 2003 (see Table 1).

Table 1: WTSN and category 2 sport diginet financial data, 2002-2003				
	WTSN	ESPN Classic Canada Canada	NHL Network	Raptors NBA TV
2002				
Total Revenue	693,856	601,837	1,363,985	1,463,164
Total Expenses	3,132,181	2,146,602	4,876,603	5,057,693
Number of Subscribers	317,866	318,108	328,930	318,000
2003				
Total Revenue	1,422,387	1,436,920	3,305,938	2,720,042
Total Expenses	4,595,625	3,703,775	6,648,278	5,116,670
Number of Subscribers	426,743	434,583	446,105	408,967
Source: CRTC, 2004, Individual pay and specialty services: Statistical and financial summaries (pp. 44, 46, 54, and 63).				

Their greater revenues provide some evidence of these channels being successful in attracting more subscribers and advertising revenue than WTSN. Interviewees also speculated that because their category 2 status liberated them from the strict Cancon restrictions of category 1 stations like WTSN, these stations were not in jeopardy of ceasing operations, even though they did not have promising subscription numbers. After only one month of operation WTSN had not attracted strong ratings. In October 2001, the channel registered 600 per minute audience in prime time, a rank of 34 out of 50 digital channels (Zelkovich, 2001) (and see Table 2).

When reflecting on this period of time, interviewees speculated that perhaps WTSN was never really expected to be profitable. They also cited a combination of factors to explain the poor ratings: poor programming quality, a lack of diverse content, and that WTSN was not afforded enough time to iron out the “kinks” associated with digital rollout. One respondent remarked that no digital network would heavily invest in programming estimated to reach less than 2% of the audience unless it were “a pet project” where losses could be completely written off (Respondent 11, female reporter). The following comment also expresses this judgment:

[I]t must have been a pretty big risk. However, there are also political workings in place that we don't know about. Another

Table 2: Diginet ratings per minute, October 2001		
Channel	Ratings Per Min.	Rank/50 Diginets
ESPN Classic	2,200	13
X-Treme Sports	1,600	19
Fox Sports World Canada	800	31
WTSN	600	34
Leafs TV	200	37
Raptors NBA TV	200	37
Source: Zelkovich, 2001		

thing that was expressed to me was the budget that they had was not good. So, your hands are tied with what you can show, with how much people you can hire.

I'm not trying to have any conspiracy theory [but] it was almost set up to fail.
(Respondent 12, female host/anchor)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From its very inception, WTSN faced an uncertain future. As a digital service it had a limited audience pool from which to draw, which led to difficulties attracting advertisers. To compensate for its limited audience reach, WTSN had to create services that would: a) lure established audiences away from existing analogue conventional broadcasters and specialty channels; and/or b) cultivate a completely different audience with unique programming. As discussed above, WTSN made a bold attempt to do the latter. Due to the nature of category 1 digital television licences, this option was reasonable given the uniqueness of its intended programming. The anticipated audience, however, did not materialize, leading to the question of why its owners did not instead apply for a category 2 licence. If the overarching motive of the CRTC was to “maximize the production and exhibition of new Canadian programming” (CRTC 2000b), the demise of networks like WTSN has demonstrated that the laissez-faire market approach to television broadcasting that may have been of extreme benefit to TSN and MuchMusic some 25 years ago has turned into a liability for many new digital services. Put another way, when given the choice of purchasing digital services on a per channel basis, between the arrival and demise of WTSN, Canadian consumers did not support the new technology in sufficient numbers to make most channels financially viable.

The ideological dimension cannot be understated as a contributing factor in WTSN's demise. By design, WTSN may have attempted to attract an audience that perhaps was not even aware of the channel's existence or wholly convinced to subscribe. The proposed predominant female audience may have been a larger threat to the channel's success than the digital platform on which it was delivered. For that reason, any logic in cultivating a female audience would be rendered illogical

because of the impracticality of delivering such a demographic for television sports to advertisers. The network's licence application claimed that WTSN would fill a gender void in television sports programming. For the most part, these claims were based on many liberal feminist objectives of gender equality. Although little evidence supported WTSN's self-proclaimed identity as a feminist venture, it is safe to say that the network did appropriate many feminist codes in its creation and eventual programming production. This appropriation may have been unavoidable based on the fact that the CRTC's own impetus for introducing digital television was itself ideologically entrenched. The cultural imperative of advancing and enhancing diversity through commercial television representation, while aptly noble, placed WTSN's for-profit orientation at a clear disadvantage. This of course raises the issue of whether cultural interests or those that address democratic ideals are best represented by for-profit enterprises at all. Scholars have argued that the relationship between cultural interests and for-profit media has tended to be toxic at best (see Jhally, 1987; Rowe, 1996; Sauvageau, 2006; Taras, 2006). Moreover, this relationship must be revised and reconsidered in the modern era of audience interactivity and the ongoing migration from traditional media forms to those embracing digitization.

The question that remains is how to reconcile cultural interests, which also may well be decidedly feminist ones, with the economically driven philosophies of audience commodities. If the purpose of media cultural policies (à la the CRTC) is to honestly address Canadians as citizens who uphold and desire the merits of equity in representation and access to a diversity of television genres, then the traditional logic of the audience needs to be revised. This would obviously involve a considerable paradigm shift, as the socio-cultural value and rewards gained in representing periphery or marginal groups would have to be regarded as just as appropriate and serious as the economic ones. If, however, the intent of such cultural policies is to address Canadians as consumers, then outcomes like that experienced by WTSN will persist as consumer choice and "bottom line" interests of private broadcasters will trump all else. Currently (and paradoxically), the cultural directives underpinning policies that are intended to foster diversity by granting exposure to underserved genres and groups are executed by a private sector with little interest in these goals. Adjudicators of potential television licensees that propose similar services in the future will undoubtedly cite WTSN as evidence of economic failure and question the merits of trying again. Implicitly and explicitly, however, such perspectives will inevitably be based on the premise that cultural interests should answer to the pressures of the economic imperative. This, of course, does not bode well for truly addressing new segments of the audience that desire options not available in the mainstream television landscape.

A final ideological factor that was not formally recognized by those interviewed was that of the economic imperative. Respondents were well aware of the necessary requirements for sport to be "successful" on television. That is, they consistently cited the commercial market logic of profit-making as a practice that exists, almost alone and without any input or influence from outside agents. The profit-making philosophy as the ultimate marker of success for the television-sport marriage was not examined with the same level of criticism as the decision to launch WTSN as an exclusive women's sport network. In other words, the ideological dimension of the economic imperative was not wholly problematized by the respondents interviewed. This was curious in light of the fact that some respondents deemed women's sports, even professional women's sports, best suited for the same level of television attention as amateur sports—public broadcasting. Although the economic imperative was held up as a common explanatory frame for the demise of WTSN, the gendered politics of media sport, consistently and, at times, uncritically identified during the interviewing process, also led to the demise of a network purportedly fashioned to attract a

predominantly female audience. Further, there was little distinction between how female and male interviewees responded to the typical gender politics of the broader social world. While many acknowledged that societal gender inequality still presented challenges for female athletes in the sport realm, male sport was held up as the cultural standard of television sports programming and was both implicitly and explicitly linked to the definition of “real” sport. In turn, what was largely problematized was not the current, common-sense model of male-centred sports programming but female sports, and female audiences for sports altogether. Ultimately, the opportunity to broadcast radical representations of women’s sport will exist, but economic imperatives will undeniably do more to stifle these innovative attempts than promote them.

NOTES

- 1. Observers have argued that the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, attracted many audiences to cable and analogue cable news services, resulting in a spike in ratings at the expense of other types of television services.
- 2. These six men and six women (referred to as both interviewees and respondents in the article) represent a range of print and television commentators, print and television reporters, and television and radio hosts and anchors. Semi-structured interviews were based on conversations about the history of television sports broadcasting in Canada, popular television sports, knowledge of digital television, women’s sport, and WTSN. This list of subject matter is not exhaustive. The mean duration of each interview was approximately 90 minutes.
- 3. These stakeholders included industry groups (e.g., the Canadian Association of Broadcasters and Canadian Cable Television Association); think tanks and lobbyists (e.g., Communications Research Centre Canada); and members representing the public and private broadcasting sectors (e.g., the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and CanWest Global).
- 4. In its original licence application, WTSN is referred to as “WSN.”

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