

A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR THE **FUTURE**  
**OF CBC/RADIO-CANADA** IN THE 21ST  
CENTURY



The Canadian   
Internet Society

# Shaping Canada's Digital Future

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Expert Insights and  
Practical Recommendations



## **A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE OF CBC/RADIO-CANADA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

CBC/Radio-Canada is designed to play a key role in the lives of Canadians. And yet, more than 30 years into the digital era, it continues to operate with a broadcast-era mindset that is increasingly out of step with how people engage with media today—and the result is that its relevance is rapidly dwindling.

This is not just a missed opportunity. It's a serious problem. The government created CBC/Radio-Canada to support a sense of shared national identity and understanding, and if that was necessary in 1936, it is even more so today.

The government does not direct CBC/Radio-Canada's operations. The Broadcasting Act defines CBC/Radio-Canada's mandate, structure, and mechanisms for accountability.

The recommendations here aim to help the government support CBC/Radio-Canada in shifting away from broadcast-era, top-down, authority-centred practices toward a new model rooted in transparency, humility, and peer-to-peer collaboration with the public. The goal is to create the conditions in which CBC/Radio-Canada can rebuild trust and provide real value.

### **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

The Canadian Internet Society (TCIS) advocates for a future in which all Canadians benefit from the social and economic opportunities made possible by the internet. We are not interested in preserving the past. We want to influence what comes next. Today, the media environment is shaped by global platforms, creator culture, and virtually unlimited consumer choice. Power has shifted away from old institutions and gatekeepers, resulting in a more open and participatory public sphere.

There are real benefits to this: a greater diversity of voices, more energy and innovation, and more opportunities for people to learn and connect.

But there have also been costs.

Canada's media environment is now dominated by a handful of US platforms that wield extraordinary power over how information and money flow, weakening our digital and cultural sovereignty.

And the landscape is fragmented and chaotic, flooded with misinformation and disinformation, and increasingly unable to support agreement on basic facts—all of which fuels public mistrust, division, and a growing sense of alienation from institutions and authority.

Trust in institutions has declined across the board globally, and CBC/Radio-Canada is no exception. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, public trust in CBC/Radio-Canada has fallen sharply—from 76% in 2018 to 58% in 2023—with only a modest post-pandemic recovery.

Canada's public broadcaster was built for a different era—one defined by information scarcity, centralised authority, and an assumption that institutions could be trusted. And in many ways, that's still how it operates, with limited space for dialogue, co-creation, or public participation. But in today's environment, that approach no longer works.

If Canada hopes to sustain shared narratives and a sense of national identity, it needs media that reflects Canadian stories, values, and debates—and that people actually engage with. CBC/Radio-Canada's role is not just to produce that content and make it available; it is to make it resonant for people, so that in a world of near-limitless options, they will actively choose it because it feels timely, relevant, and real.

Other public media organizations have begun this transition. The BBC has invested in open journalism platforms and collaborative tools. NPR has embraced open-source code and participatory formats. Public broadcasters in Nordic countries are experimenting with citizen-led content and co-creation studios. Canada can and must be part of this global shift—building a model of public media that is digital-first, not just in terms of technology but in terms of fundamental orientation: transparent, open, and collaborative.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

CBC/Radio-Canada was created in the 20th century, in a media environment in which, if you controlled sufficient production and distribution resources, you could expect to reach large audiences. Things don't work like that anymore. Today's media landscape is global, fragmented, and participatory, and the ability to produce and distribute content

no longer guarantees that anybody will trust it or pay attention to it.

And yet, CBC/Radio-Canada continues to operate with broadcast-era assumptions. It treats the internet like a one-way delivery channel for content rather than a civic space where people expect to contribute, collaborate, and be heard. It positions itself as an authority, pushing content outward from the centre, on schedules that are largely fixed and assume large, passive audiences.

That is increasingly misaligned with how Canadians—especially younger Canadians—engage with the media today. In an environment in which legitimacy must be earned rather than assumed, CBC/Radio-Canada is increasingly seen as irrelevant. Younger Canadians are significantly less likely than older Canadians to say it's important to them, and only half as likely to use it frequently.

The failure is not that CBC/Radio-Canada hasn't moved online. The failure is that it has done so without rethinking its fundamental stance toward the people it's mandated to serve.

To meet its mandate today, CBC/Radio-Canada must shift from gatekeeping to enabling—from controlling the conversation to facilitating and supporting it. It must modernize not just its technology, but its mindset and its practices. Only by showing up differently for Canadians, with transparency, openness, and humility, can CBC/Radio-Canada begin to rebuild trust and closeness with the people it's mandated to serve.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

These recommendations aim to support a public media system that is trustworthy, future-facing, and centred on public value. They move from foundational structural reforms to governance and oversight realignment, to practical steps. They will require significant culture change.

### **1. Strengthen structural foundations**

To ensure CBC/Radio-Canada is independent, stable, and able to focus on the public interest:

- i) Stabilize funding:** Establish multiyear, statutory funding to protect against political interference and enable long-term planning.

**ii) Ensure independent governance:** Shift CEO appointment to the Board of Directors; require board appointments to follow advice from an independent advisory body.

**iii) Decommmercialize:** Phase out advertising and sponsorship across all platforms.

**iv) End digital subscription fees:** Eliminate paywalls on services such as CBC Gem Premium and ICI TOU.TV Extra.

**v) Exclude CBC/Radio-Canada from private media subsidies:** Make CBC/Radio-Canada ineligible for funding mechanisms intended for the private sector, such as Online News Act revenues, the local journalism initiative, and journalism tax credits.

## 2. Embed digital-first at the level of governance and oversight

To transition CBC/Radio-Canada from a legacy broadcaster to a digital-first, community-centred civic platform at the level of governance and oversight:

**i) Mandate a digital-first operating model:** Amend the Broadcasting Act and licence to make digital service delivery the default, and to reposition CBC/Radio-Canada as a facilitator of civic engagement.

**ii) Introduce digital-first performance metrics:** Use Section 15 of the Broadcasting Act to direct the CRTC to hold hearings and report back on the CBC/Radio-Canada's performance in areas such as digital audience reach and share, engagement and usage depth, discovery and accessibility, and content impact and resonance.

## 3. Operationalize digital-first at the level of organizational practices

To put in place practical building blocks supporting CBC/Radio-Canada's transition into a digital-first, community-centred civic platform:

**i) Earmark public funding to support citizen creation:** Earmark part of the CBC/Radio-Canada parliamentary allocation for investment in infrastructure supporting citizen creators and participatory media, such as:

- Public training programs and how-to materials supporting people's creative self-expression.

- Community access studios, community-run servers, maker spaces, and equipment lending libraries.
- Mentorship programs and creator-in-residence initiatives.
- Space on CBC/Radio-Canada’s digital platforms for citizen-created videos, podcasts, and other community-created works.
- Mechanisms for community-centric curation and governance to surface and support high-quality public value contributions.

**ii) Reaffirm commitment to original newsgathering and factual reporting:**

Reallocate editorial focus and resources toward forms of journalism that are essential to public accountability and civic life but are no longer reliably produced by commercial actors, such as local reporting, beat reporting, investigative journalism, journalism covering Indigenous issues, explainers, and international journalism. Consider this to be infrastructure upon which others can build.

**iii) Promote broad public access and reuse of CBC/Radio-Canada materials:**

Make it policy to release all CBC-owned content under open licences (e.g., Creative Commons CC0 or CC-BY) to make it freely available for republication and reuse—not just by the public, but by anyone, such as community news outlets, educators, startups, and private media organizations. Make it policy to release all non-sensitive code under open licences as well, with documentation to enable reuse.

## CONCLUSION

TCIS is focused on the future, and we believe CBC/Radio-Canada must be too. In a world in which foreign platforms increasingly control Canada's digital infrastructure, content discovery, and public discourse, CBC/Radio-Canada has a central role to play in helping Canada maintain cultural and digital sovereignty.

Addressing platform dominance will be essential to this future. CBC/Radio-Canada should help ensure that Canadians’ cultural and economic contributions circulate within the Canadian ecosystem rather than being captured by foreign platforms.

We want CBC/Radio-Canada to serve the people and earn trust by being present, useful, and independent. We urge the government to act to create the conditions in which CBC/Radio-Canada can re-earn its place as a cornerstone of a connected, informed, and self-determined Canada.

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