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We Knew This Was Coming...How to take advantage of our future

People are funny. We can be a strange and somewhat desperate bunch at times. In this crazy world it is my humble observation that the one power each of us wished we had was the ability to see into the future. If only we could know “what is coming next.”

Think about how this manifests itself. We construct endless probability tables. We hire focus groups. We look at longterm trending and evaluate against the short tail gains. We have Black Monday, “beware the ides of March” and “in like a lion out like a lamb”(or the other way around). We judiciously read our horoscopes along with the daily news(Taurus). We avoid cracks in the sidewalk, we turn away from black cats and we wish on falling stars. We desperately, desperately want to know what future holds for us, and we never want to jinx it.

And yet sometimes, when something is pretty obvious, standing right there before us, we as humans - well our survival instincts kick in and in the most unfortunate ways. Denial. Avoidance. Procrastination. All the tricks we play to make our day to

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day lives more manageable 'in the moment' while keeping at bay, we hope, what is looming right there on the horizon.

Or, even worse, we become 'chicken littles'. We scream the 'sky is falling, the sky is falling' and we careen from crisis to crisis without even stopping to check if the threat is, indeed, even real at all. But some of us seem to really enjoy the drama and adrenaline of a good panic. (thank you, Greece).

This strange dichotomy of both seeking out, and yet somehow denying, avoiding or panicking over the future is what I'd like to talk to you about today. Because at the end of the day, our industry, the media industry, thrives on the illusion of predictability.

Consultants trade on their ability to tell us where we're going next, and they make lots and lots of money – we're willing to pay people dearly for their talents in 'forecasting' in our industry – but the question really is - do we actually have the guts to do what it takes to lead, and not just follow?

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With the passing of Steve Jobs, there has been a lot written about his particular management style. He wasn't always perfect, but he was certainly a barrier breaker and most would agree, a genius. Yet he didn't use a lot of the tools many creative companies do – he had no focus groups, he depended mostly on his own intuition, and with that, Jobs built one of the most innovative and consumer friendly companies ever.

One could say Steve Jobs was a one of a kind, and I, like many others wonder how Apple will go on now without him and his 'experiential intelligence' at the top. It's a risky way to run a company, putting all your eggs into one leadership basket, but I think it does teach the rest of us a little bit about the benefits of being open to innovation, inventiveness, and frankly, I think it teaches us about courage.

We've been getting calls for comment, and I've been reading in the papers so many different angles on the state of television. One article will point to viewership in television being higher than ever 'record hours tuned' – and an article directly opposite is announcing the end of television as we know it. Someone will say 'over the top' is a huge threat to Canadian sovereignty, then headlines say Netflix shares are down 37 percent after dwindling subscribership. No wonder there's confusion out there.

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Everyone is looking for an answer, people are looking to predict the next ‘big thing’ – but in the media world, our world, as there was in Steve Jobs’ world, there is only one common truth. That is, that it's the people – the consumers of media – who really hold the keys.

And back to my original statement. We knew this was coming. Technology would put the power of choice more directly into the hands of the people. Choice, lower prices, I want it when I want it and I don't really want to pay for it has been the mantra of consumers for ages, but now they actually have the means to get what they've been wanting.

So we knew this was coming. We made attempts at business models that would fit this new world into the old world structure, so it would make sense to us. So that we could sell it to our bosses who are still confused over the idea that no, there actually is no formula for a ‘hit show’ no matter how hard you crunch numbers. Now, this was an even wilder concept, turning traditional media on its head. But, if we could make the new world relative to the old world, then we wouldn't have to be so afraid.

And yet it's funny, because it was the very act of trying to make the new world make sense in the old world, that has put us, particularly in Canada, dangerously close to

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missing out on the “new world” game altogether. And believe me, it’s here. No matter how much you want to deny, avoid, or throw up your hands in that ‘chicken little’ way at it, it’s here.

Take the talk around ‘numbers’. Although not quite ‘video killed the radio star’ (and actually it didn’t, if you notice), we’ve been saying for years that audience fragmentation would come to roost at the steps of the conventional broadcaster. Distractions would eat away at the traditional audience numbers and conventional TV was — for all intents and purposes— on its deathbed.

I’m no chicken little, well maybe a bit but in my job I have to move past it quickly, so at CBC we looked at the phenomenon of fragmentation. We saw the rise (at the time) of DVD and now online download consumption and said ‘ok, so what is our priority as a national broadcaster’. And I started our reality television division - but I called it factual entertainment. Not to create cheap makeover shows, but to take advantage of the one strength left to a national broadcaster, especially one with affiliated radio and online. We could take our ability to galvanize a nation over something, a movement, a shared experience. Whether it’s ‘Live Right Now’ ‘A Million Acts of Green’ to the more entertaining Dragon’s Den or ‘Battle of the Blades’, these are shows you watch in the moment, and talked about the next day.

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News, and sports, and reality shows, all rely on the same premise, that people HAD to tune in, to be part of the experience, because you couldn't download or buy the DVD or you'd miss out on being part of the experience.

So back to the numbers – is 'in the moment' programming the solution? Well not 100 percent. There are more issues. My own sister has 'unplugged' and watches no television off of cable except when she travels in hotel rooms. She is, like so many, watching all the shows, but circumventing traditional distribution. We are absolutely marching towards a digital world.

But up til now, we haven't been that good at putting a value on that space. In fact even still we can't seem to agree how to 'count the numbers' in order to make them count. And yet some of that technology, being so close to the consumer, can give us a really clear picture of who is watching what and where. But we can't see our way yet to figuring out how to count it. And when we do, we aren't good about telling the story of how the sum equals all the parts.

Take the call I got recently asking that some 25-54 overnight numbers were down on CBC. Did they know, that shows like Being Erica have about a 30 percent pvr rate? That The National isn't just on CBC at 10 but on CBCNN? That our news app is one of the fastest growing apps in Canada now being used by x Canadians? And

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what about those 25-54's? The kids watching Heartland don't count? Nor the boomers quickly marching past 55? There's so much more to the story than a panic over your 25-54 numbers. And it's a good story that many broadcasters can also tell.

Our language has to start changing to keep up with the new reality - because those changes are demands of our public. It's our fellow Canadians who 'want it when they want it' and they couldn't give a damn if we haven't figured out the business model to give it to them. CBS or BBC or someone else outside of Canada has, so they'll just go there online thank you very much.

We need to update our definition of success and align it with what the people, the consumers want. It's no good to be fighting the 25-54 primetime numbers battle when I've got committed and loyal users who'd much rather be streaming a show on their ipads or get their news off the CBC news app. It's like the tail is wagging the dog.

And it's starting to show.

If we want innovation, we can't keep waiting for the systems to catch up. Or it's time to seriously look at those systems and make them relevant. Otherwise we're held

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back and that doesn't make sense competitively within Canada, and it certainly doesn't make sense on the world stage. We risk getting eclipsed.

When 37 percent of Canadians say that at least once a day they check into news on mobile, and that it is for them their first and primary source of news information, we cannot as content creators let the old world and traditional media hold us back.

Traditional media isn't dead but it is actually reborn and reformed. Right now it works really well together with the formats we've been used to. TV and radio aren't dead but they are instead rejuvenated by their new neighbour digital. Like newspapers and magazines who had their deadly fates prematurely sealed, audio and visual media has a new life in digital. And the challenge to reinvent to suit the public's needs gives us the chance to create better content than ever before. And to deliver it in different ways.

We are announcing today the launch of our new local Hamilton service for CBC. We will, with new technology and digital presence, be serving an area we never could before. But if you're waiting for a tv station or a radio station, that wasn't the solution for us in Hamilton.



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Instead what we will be doing is serving Hamilton, and Hamilton's neighbourhoods, with the kind of mobile online and digital information it's been asking for and we want to supply. There will be a station, but it is a trimedial one with a distinctly digital focus. Again, giving those 37 percent of Canadians (and growing) news in their hands as they want it, about their own communities.

We want Hamilton to be our centre of innovation for the CBC, and learn from it how we can serve Canadians better across the country.

So yes, we see the future, and while it would be easy to say 'the sky is falling' what we choose to see is open skies - a total room for reinvention. A way forward.

At the CBC the distraction of the debate over our television programming is past us - when I can watch non-commercial BBC's Strictly Come Dancing featuring a soap star and a former teen singer beat ITV's programming for the night, it's pretty clear worldwide that public broadcasters alike know - that you can't be a modern public broadcaster without a public.

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And that's the public who is demanding from all it's broadcasters entertaining and engaging content made for them and delivered to them how and when they want it.

Canadians are calling for it. We can't let them down. And I think for any of us who chose this field as their dream job - and let's face it, even with all the challenges we all pretty damn lucky to be doing what we do every day - the idea of injecting a little 'experiential wisdom' as Jobs called it, is kind of a fun, reinvigorating proposition. And maybe we all look ahead and see what is pretty obviously in front of us as a new beginning, embrace it, learn how to talk to our bosses about it, and start playing with it, we have the chance as Canadians to be world leaders as we were in communications in the trailblazing days of Rogers and cable, the days of Marshal McLuhan. We know what people want, and I think in the end, it's not just our job, it's our pleasure to be the ones to provide it to them.

Thank you.