

Heritage Minister talks with friends in Toronto

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By Avil Beckford

TORONTO – Saying she was "among friends", former CRTC commissioner and Canadian Women in Communications chair (and current Minister of Canadian Heritage) Bev Oda spoke openly Thursday night in Toronto about the current state of the broadcast and telecom market.

During her informal presentation, Oda acknowledged that there is much uncertainty, many questions and areas where no one knows how broadcasting and telecommunications is going to evolve over the next few years. Instead of fear and trepidation, the industry stakeholders should look at the wonderful opportunities that exist, especially for people who think innovatively, can capture new ideas, and see beyond the traditional ways of approaching things, she said.

In the digital age, we have many who are able to adapt, conceive of creative ideas, and are not bound by the traditional ways of doing things.

As a minister, it's a different role than her 20 years in the industry working for the likes of TVO and CTV, but one that gives her a different perspective and an opportunity to contribute to the industry, and to work with participants over the next few years as it evolves, she added.

The traditional modes of media and communications are changing. We have a generation who are masters of how they are going to receive their entertainment, news and information and they have adapted to their iPods and cell phones, and are not going to move or grow out of it, said Oda. This is how they are going to look for their information and communication, which alters the way we think about the businesses we are in. Those of us in the industry must ensure that we are where those customers are going to be in the future.

When we have people who download, access programs and are able to decide what programs they want to watch, and when they want to watch it, concepts like prime time, scheduling and exclusivity may not apply in the future. As networks and broadcasters, we have to make sure that the audiences, the viewers and listeners are coming to us, she said.

Key challenges raised by the Minister include: convergence; the technical challenges of high definition and digital rollout; lack of a strong industrial infrastructure; and Canadian content.

There isn't a strong industrial infrastructure in Canada because government has historically funded projects. Oda suggested that a better way would be to have about three major studios developing 10 projects, where five are in pilot, three in the marketplace and two are on air. This builds capacity, strengthens the companies and keeps the products coming out and we all have to share the risk-taking with the producers to build the industry, she said.

We are operating in a world where people can go anywhere for video so having a

quota for Canadian content doesn't work, she said. A better way is to look at ways to strengthen the content, and the production industry, so that Canadian content gets chosen instead.

In terms of the future of the CRTC as a regulator and supervisor, like the industry, the Commission has to do things differently, and the government has to ask some fundamental questions to ensure that the future needs of Canadians get met, Oda added.

The Minister concluded her presentation by commenting on the fate of the CBC: "We do sincerely support a strong public broadcaster, but I think the dilemma is, in the new world, in the new environment, what is it that the public broadcaster should be providing. Once we decide that, our government is committed to long-term stable funding..."

"I enjoyed her comments and the way she spoke informally. The message was very revealing because she has the insider's perspective having worked in the industry for so long," said Sara Morton from Sara Morton Professional Corp., after the presentation.

Canadian Media Guild president Lise Lareau, had a different reaction. "It was a bit disappointing that there was no clarity around the fate of the CBC," she said. "The government is saying that there will be stable funding for the CBC once they figure out what the role of the CBC should be, but there are no clear timelines attached. I think that the Minister understands the industry, but she is being very vague and playing the role of the politician."

Avil Beckford is a writer and the author of upcoming book Tales of People Who Get It and the just released workbook, Journey to getting It.