

Supporting Independent Media to Grow

Innovative financial models along with public policy support are key

By Greg Macdougall

OTTAWA—If independent and alternative media are important to the success of social movements, then finding ways to fund that media is something that needs to be taken seriously.

This is a subject of vital discussion, and there are people in Canada and abroad working on suitable approaches to this problem, both in terms of structural models and also supportive public policy.

Viable media projects are able to sustain themselves over the longer term as well as allowing a more diverse set of media-makers to take part, especially those who aren't able to pour so much of themselves into a (low-to-no-paying) "labour of love."

Christine Crowther, a PhD student in Communication Studies at McGill and part-time Journalism lecturer at Concordia in Montreal, sees a need for broad support networks to get involved in advocating for public policy supporting responsible journalism.

"We're talking about people who care about journalism and public policy taking responsibility to put these issues on the public agenda in various circles: in community journalism organizations, in professional journalism organizations, through professional associations, through unions," Crowther told *The Dominion*. "There is a history of public policy supporting journalism in this country. It's a matter of making sure that Canadians understand that."

Along with a need for public policy support, independent media-makers are also confronting immediate funding challenges to keep their media outlets and projects afloat and sustainable.

One inspiring model is led by Tom Stites, Founder and Director of the Banyan Project in the US. The Banyan idea won a Game Changer award from the We Media Conference in 2010, which paved the way for Stites' fellowship to work on the project at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society.

The project is also heavily backed by the National Cooperative Business Associ-

ation in the US because it is a co-operative model, something akin to *The Dominion/Media Co-op*. The Banyan Project seeks to be the first community-level journalism co-operative in the United States.

The first place they will try out this model is Haverhill, Massachusetts, a city of 61,000 that last had a newspaper 14 years ago. The aim is for this model to be used in many different cities experiencing a journalism deficit, across the US and eventually elsewhere.

Stites explains the starting idea was a value proposition to "deliver journalism that people experienced as relevant to their lives, respectful of them as people and worthy of their trust." The co-operative model was deemed to be the best way to deliver this service even prior to the recent collapsing of traditional journalism business models which didn't necessarily deliver on those three vital aspects.

The Banyan business model will rely almost entirely on financing from inside the community, not only in the form of regular memberships, but also through community advertising, "extra" memberships specific to businesses or institutions, crowd-sourcing, foundation funding and ancillary sales. Content will be free to view online, but a provisional membership will be required to engage in the interactive portions of the site.

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"Think of it as a food co-op," Stites told *The Dominion*. "We are operating at the community level where civic engagement happens and the idea is that these news co-ops are going to be generators of civic adhesion and engagement. That's where you get a really rich democracy and...you can have a healthy co-operative."

There will also be the Banyan Publishing Corporation, a non-profit organization

or maybe eventually a co-op of co-ops, to provide the sophisticated software infrastructure for both the journalism and community engagement website features and for what is needed to successfully run and administer a co-operative.

"The Internet culture is changing; for a long time, the idea was start your thing up, get a lot of people engaged in it, and then we'll figure out how to monetize that," says Stites. "There are not very many [journalism] places where it has worked. So I do think that the kind of deliberate work that my colleagues and I have been doing for three-and-a-half years now seriously, to build this model and shape it and start to test it and do it with real care, is crucial."

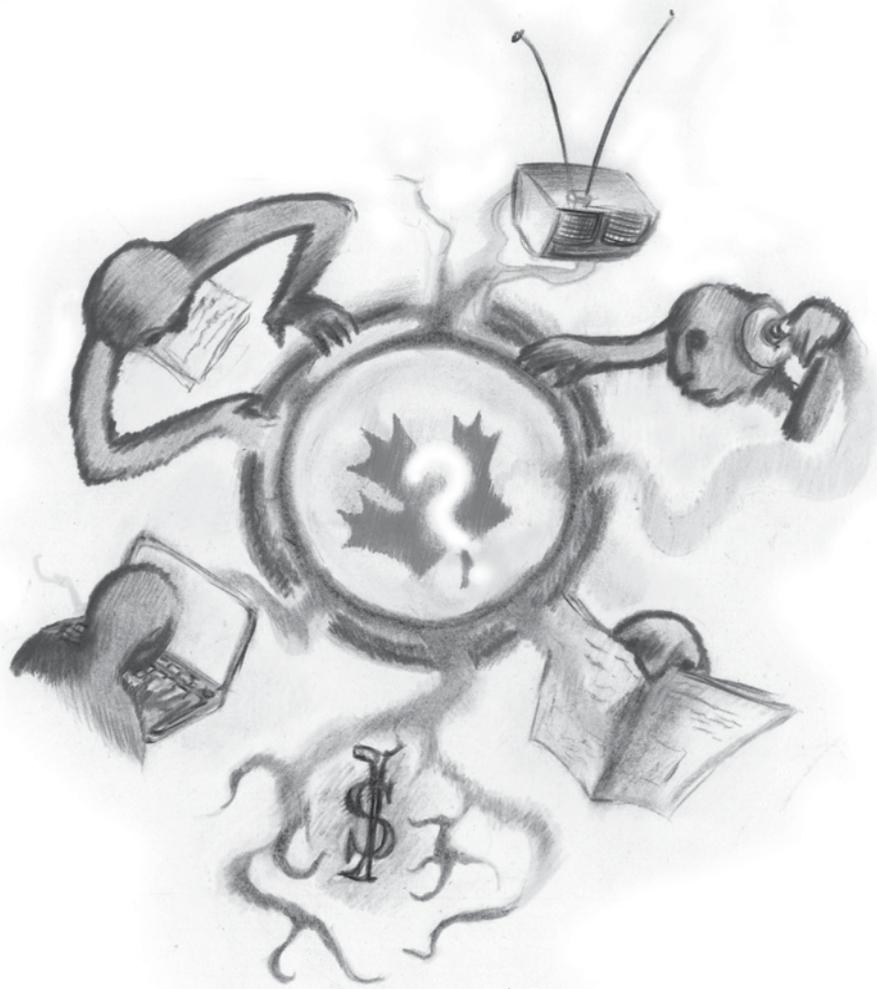
Another person who's been looking at how different types of media projects can finance themselves is David Skinner, a professor of Communication Studies at York University in Toronto.

He's co-editor of the newly released book, *Alternative Media in Canada* (UBC Press, 2012). A few of the book's chapters look at this issue, including Skinner's, entitled "Sustaining Independent and Alternative Media."

He looks at three main alternative media outlets: *rabble.ca*, *The Tyee*, and *The Dominion/Media Co-op*. "[The] people that do run these organizations are very entrepreneurial, so they often cobble together different kinds of financing to keep the organization going," he told *The Dominion* in an interview. "They may have some sort of membership dimension, where people provide even a small monthly amount; they may also solicit donations from unions or other kinds of organizations; or look to philanthropists to help support them through different times. Some of them even have different kinds of advertising."

While Skinner describes the three alternative media outlets as extremely valiant and creative efforts, he also highlights the role of federal policy.

"It's not as though we're talking about these being unsuccessful organizations that need a hand out of some sort,



Jadis Dumas

that's not the case at all. Historically in Canada, almost all media fields have had some kind of policy help from the federal government simply because the economics of media production in Canada make it much more difficult to produce media than say in the United States, and as such Canadian media fields simply get filled up with American product," he says. "It's only at this time, in this historical moment, that really the government is retreating from that role. And it's at a moment where it's particularly important, I think, for them to maintain or even step up that effort."

Crowther agrees that government has an important role in supporting a strong and healthy media environment. She was the lead co-ordinator of and part of a diverse volunteer team that put on the Journalism Strategies conference in Montreal last spring.

"The framework of the conference was based from the outset in the notion that public policy has a key role to play in journalism in Canada," she says. She went

on to say public policy not only refers to the federal government, but also municipal and provincial governments, as well as educational institutions such as universities.

The conference was meant to generate ongoing networking and discussion around public policy advocacy. Crowther noted that OpenMedia.ca, which does advocacy work on net neutrality in Canada, was featured prominently at the Journalism Strategies conference as an organization to look to and work with on public policy advocacy.

"Community-powered" news organization OpenFile.ca was represented on the conference panel, "Paying the Bills," by their CEO Wilf Dinnick. "Community-powered" means that users suggest stories they would like to see covered, suggestions get voted on and leading suggestions are added to the "file." Journalists are assigned to cover the stories that are voted the highest.

Both the cost structure and revenue streams are non-traditional, stemming from the fundamental idea behind the

site's concept: "If we started from scratch journalism, like we weren't shifting from a newspaper model to digital, and we were just working in digital, what would we do? And we'd say, 'Well, social media is connecting everyone, why don't we hear from people what they want to see reported, what's important to them?'" Dinnick told *The Dominion*.

Dinnick explains that there is less overhead to OpenFile than a traditional news organization due to the user-generated portion of the process that doesn't require comprehensive news coverage, but more of a selective approach. There is also a different market to sell the content to; they work with news, media and marketing organizations that pay for some of what the OpenFile journalists produce.

The notion of new or alternate journalism as "social entrepreneurship" is something Tom Stites of the Banyan Project welcomes as a label. He notes that public policy could help journalism, but he's not waiting for anyone to take up his suggestions: "The most important support government could offer journalism would be to absolutely insist on net neutrality, and then subsidize the net so that broadband access is ubiquitous."

David Skinner noted that one "self-starting" concept that can help alternative media outlets in becoming more sustainable and successful is the model of The Media Consortium in the US, which provides its member organizations collective public policy advocacy, along with offering up economies of scale for developing and distributing content and support for technical infrastructure. This model of collaboration could also be something that would work in Canada.

There is no shortage of discussion about the many available possibilities for a better future for independent media in this country. Perhaps, as Crowther notes, it is time for people who care about journalism and public policy to put these issues on the public agenda.

Greg Macdougall is a media activist, organizer and learning coach based in Ottawa on Algonquin Territory. Find more of his work online at EquitableEducation.ca.