



CHANNEL

Independent. Local. Two words that sum up the A-Channel’s approach to television broadcasting in Alberta’s two largest centres, and two reasons why, in theory, they should be a major player in the Calgary and Edmonton markets. Then again, in theory, energy deregulation is a spectacular idea. But is A-Channel really either—Alberta or indie, that is? Or are those just buzz words to market to the cynical masses in their 20s and 30s (oh, we of great disposable income and even greater and more disposable ideals) as well as to tap into the lingering small-town Alberta mentality? And what’s at the bottom of the ratings bust in both cities?

Declaration of INDEPENDENCE

BY MIKE BELL

The roots of the A-Channel lie in Brandon, Manitoba, with the family-owned Craig Broadcast Systems Inc., which holds a number of radio and TV stations in that market. That in itself puts to rest A-Channel’s claim of being both wholly local and independent. Then again, by comparison, Craig is a rather small player in the Canadian communications market, and therefore about as close to autonomous as you’ll find.

To be fair, the phrase “very independent” (used heavily in their advertising and promotional material) is touted as indicative of their whole communicative approach, as in “very independent thinking.” But, in this age of bloated media conglomerates, when people like Izzy Asper and Conrad Black are vilified for owning large media empires and using them to further personal and

political agendas, it’s naïve to believe Craig Broadcast doesn’t understand the power of the card it is playing. In fact, when Craig, with no network affiliation, went up against Asper’s mammoth CanWest Global Communications Corporation for the two Alberta licences being granted in 1996 by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), it was often cited as a David versus Goliath scenario, a situation from which, especially when Craig won, the smaller company seemed to take particular joy.

Now Craig finds itself in a somewhat precarious position. The company, particularly in the Alberta market, continues to trumpet itself as the amiable little guy beside the giant behemoth, while itself both growing and aspiring for more growth—kind of a “size doesn’t matter, but pass the pump anyway” mentality.

Drew Craig, the president of Craig Broadcast Systems Inc., who spearheaded the Alberta licence bids, says the size of the company is relative. “As we have grown our company over the last 10 years immensely, from a relatively small operator when we started in Brandon to being what I would term one of the medium- to large-size regional players, the other companies around us have grown by the same proportion.... So we’ve always been portrayed as a smaller player, which we certainly are, but that’s not to say we haven’t grown the company along the way.” Most recently, Craig Broadcast won the rights to several specialty channels, which will begin with the September launch of Connect: The Canadian Teen Channel, aimed at 12- to 24-year-olds.

heavily in content and form—the April 14, 2001, edition of the *National Post* speculated that Craig might sell off its existing stations, including both Alberta holdings, to CHUM. “[Craig] could do what it’s doing now, or it could sell out to CHUM, which is probably the more likely option,” was how the *Post* quoted an unidentified industry source close to the situation. “And CHUM is now certainly in a much stronger position to become the fourth Canadian television network.”

Though there are still whispers in the industry, Craig categorically denies rumours that A-Channel is on the block, even going so far as to post a memo in both stations dismissing the *Post* story, in order to calm employees. “I can tell you they’re not [true].... It’s pure speculation and speculation on the part of industry analysts that say that it seems to make sense for other players to acquire us.

“But we have our own aspirations. We want to grow in this business and that’s what we intend to do.” Then again, Craig is quick to point out, not too much or to the extent of the other broadcasters in Canada and more specifically Alberta. Doing that would, of course, be detrimental to the second—independence—claim in the A-Channel’s marketing strategy.

The fact that competitors are eyeing greater pieces of the market pie, says Craig, only increases the chance that his business will succeed. “As the other players around us have gotten larger they have been more focused on being national networks and national systems,” he says. “So they have, in essence, helped us in our goal to become the local station. As they scale back their commitment to local communities that they serve...it opens up a huge opportunity for us.”

A major reason Craig, despite its Manitoba origin, was awarded the licences in the coveted Calgary and Edmonton markets was because the financial and on-air commitment to an Alberta focus in its application was deemed far greater than that of CanWest Global Communications. “Our proposed A-Channel,” Drew Craig said at the hearings, “will be television for Albertans...focused, exciting, relevant and made for Albertans.”

According to a CRTC news release explaining their decision, “Craig promised 31.5 hours per week of local programming on each of its Edmonton and Calgary stations. This includes a weekly average of 17 hours of first play local news, scheduled so as to complement other local newscasts; 13 hours and 15 minutes will consist of other local information programs; and 1 hour and 15 minutes will be in the form of variety programming.”

In its ruling in favour of the A-Channel’s bid, CRTC



DAVID BALLANTYNE



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TOP: Host Dave Kelly on the set of Calgary’s Big Breakfast show. LEFT: Drew Craig, president of Craig Broadcast Systems. RIGHT: An A-Channel Hummer generates excitement wherever it goes.

But there is a fear they haven’t grown enough. After two recent, failed attempts to acquire TV stations in both Victoria and Vancouver—ironically, both times, Craig Broadcast lost out to the pony-tailed, Napoleonesque media mogul Moses Znaimer and his CHUM Ltd., from which A-Channel has borrowed

chair Françoise Bertrand said, “The Commission found that the A-Channel proposals will best contribute to achieving the objectives of the Broadcasting Act. In particular, A-Channel has proposed to broadcast more local news and other local productions, and a higher level of Canadian content during peak viewing hours. It has also offered greater support for the independent creative community in Alberta.”

That support came in the form of a \$14-million A-Channel Drama Fund that would, over the course of those seven years, provide financial support to this province’s independent film and television producers—something sorely needed when Ralph and the boys turned off the tap to that community to direct the cash towards...um, something else.

“I think we’ve been very focused, right from the outset,” says Craig, who now resides in Calgary and oversees the operations of both Alberta stations. “The plan from the very beginning was to be Calgary and Edmonton’s local station of choice.”

A quick glance at the on-air schedule for both stations confirms that a heavy emphasis is placed on civic programming. Each weekday yields two hours of live morning television (*The Big Breakfast*, which focuses mainly on local community groups, individuals and businesses) and another three hours of news coverage (the half-hour *News @ Breakfast* and *News @ Night*, and an hour of *News @ Six*, as well as an hour of province-wide content with *News @ Noon*).

Local weekend programming is more specifically targeted: there’s the *Big Saturday Morning*, your typical kiddie cartoon cavalcade, hosted by Calgary *Big Breakfast* host Dave Kelly; a Sunday morning fishing program; and *The Sharing Circle*, airing after the early news on Sunday nights, which deals with native issues. The remainder of the local programming is comprised of local news hits during commercial breaks, community event listings, and a new half-hour program following *News @ Night* called *Buzz*, which shines the spotlight on both Calgary’s and Edmonton’s thriving arts and entertainment scenes.

But it’s in the news shows, or how it approaches the news, that A-Channel believes its appeal lies. The lead story is nearly always of Alberta origin, and even sports coverage gives local amateur athletes their due. Even with *Buzz* the station still includes entertainment stories with its news programming, something that the A-Channel’s competitors rarely do.

“In a 500-channel universe the one place [people] can go to find out what’s going on in their own backyard is the A-Channel,” says Glen Carter, who has been the Calgary *News @ Six* anchor since the show began. “That’s, by definition, what news is: ‘Tell me what happened to me today.’ If we’re local and we’re branded that way, eventually people are going to

come to us looking for that.”

Winning the rights to broadcast Edmonton Oilers hockey games for the team’s extremely successful 2000/01 season was an additional coup for Edmonton’s A-Channel. Though it has failed to secure the rights to the upcoming season, Drew Craig says the brief partnership was a smart one with respect to the station’s programming connection to the community.

Calgary Sun TV writer Kevin Williamson, who was at the *Edmonton Sun* when the stations went live to air on September 20, 1997, agrees local broadcasting has been the front on which A-Channel has been fighting its ratings war. “That’s their niche, that’s what they promote themselves as—local, local, local,” he says. “They probably recognize that for national or international

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news, you’re better off watching CBC or CTV and so they focus on city stuff and they’re very good at it.

“They know their market, they know their target and that’s what they’re aiming for.”

Maybe this speaks volumes about the A-Channel’s approach, but its most effective promotional tool has been its logo and name-brand marketing in both Calgary and Edmonton. Whether or not they’re tuning in, you’d be hard pressed to find anyone in either city who has not heard the station’s name or seen its giant black-and-yellow “A” logo. While including sponsorship deals, contests and charity events, the brand-recognition push really began with the well-placed home of the station in each city. Taking a page from their competitor’s book at CHUM, A-Channel located its Calgary broadcasting studio “way downtown” along the city’s C-Train tracks and its Edmonton building on Jasper Avenue, that city’s main downtown strip. In each case, visibility is high: pedestrians view the station easily from the street, while, at the opposite end of the electronic transmission link, TV viewers watch heavy pedestrian traffic beyond the windows of *Big Breakfast* show sets.

But, for raising awareness, even the high-visibility station locations pale in comparison to the fleet of vehicles employed to cover news stories and commu-

nity events such as football games, rock concerts and festivals. More important, with each vehicle comes a crew, usually including on-air personalities who enjoy a tremendous amount of recognition in the community as a result of much location shooting. Most live news feeds, including weather forecasts, are done in very public places. Despite a few undesired side effects—the inebriated can somehow always find a live camera—it’s an immeasurably effective advertis-

launched as an A-Channel, and future stations, should they come, would follow suit.

f only name recognition were enough. “There’s certainly no lack of recognition for A-Channel as a channel,” Craig says. “The difficulty we have is, frankly, with getting the recognition for some of the local shows that we produce.”

So if everyone agrees the local angle is one that should play well, and one the A-Channel has played well, why isn’t it working? In fact, why are audience numbers, for the most part, falling instead of rising?

The sad truth is, despite winning a handful of awards—including Alberta Motion Picture and Industry Awards—for their local programming, in both Calgary and Edmonton, A-Channel consistently scores third in all of its news programming.

In the spring 2001 ratings period, as reported by the BBM Bureau of Measurement, most of the shows took a huge hit. For example, in the age 18+ category, the weekday *Calgary News @ Six* dropped from more than 15,000 viewers a year ago to a little more than 11,000. The *Live @ Five* show—dubbed *Dead @ Five* by one media wag—lost more than half its viewers in the span of two reporting periods, dropping from almost 13,000 viewers to fewer than 6,000. It was subsequently dropped from both stations’ schedules.

That’s something the station has a tough time accepting and explaining.

“Yes, of course,” Carter says when asked if he finds the numbers disappointing. “It’s normal to want the big numbers, and sometimes I wonder why that hasn’t translated as effectively as I’d like it to. That just comes with plugging away, one step at a time, baby steps. You keep growing in the market and eventually it’s there. I think any TV station wants to have higher numbers...but that’s part of the challenge.”

Craig also finds the ratings somewhat disheartening but thinks they will rise with time. “It is somewhat disappointing but...I think it’s the hardest audience to capture,” he says. “When you create a local program, it’s hard to get people to switch from their incumbent news choice.”

Well, it has been almost four years. People know an “independent” and local alternative is out there, so why aren’t they tuning in? It may have something to do with the audience A-Channel serves. There’s no question the programs are skewed towards a younger, “hipper” demographic—hence the indie assertion. Look at the schedule: even beyond the primetime sitcoms like *Friends* and *The Simpsons*, you’ll see shows like *Nikita*, *Blind Date*, *Change of Heart* and *Mad TV*, an obvious attempt to lure the 20- to 30-something urban crowd.

That longing for youthful viewers bleeds into the



TOP: The colourful A-Channel news set. LEFT: Calgary’s *News@6* anchor, Glen Carter. RIGHT: Meteorologist Darr Maqbool broadcasts the weather forecast on location.

ing tool based on a simple promotional premise: You see us, which means we’re here and one of you.

“And the buzz on the street confirms that,” says Glen Carter. “You go out on the road and you see it. I see it every day [in location shoots]. People are smiling, people are pointing, people are saying, ‘Hey A-Channel!’”

Williamson agrees: “Getting their crews out, getting their identity out—I think they’ve been extremely successful at that. Whether it’s news or sports or entertainment, they have their people out there...and it shows.”

In fact, so successful have they been that the Craig Broadcast station in Brandon was recently re-

way the A-Channel provides local news coverage. Borrowing another page from Znaimer's CHUM stations, more specifically CITY TV in Toronto (also home to MuchMusic, Bravo and other specialty stations), A-Channel dispenses with the traditional, staid presentation of the news in favour of such "novelties" as hand-held cameras and standing news anchors.

Williamson agrees this might be a problem in two cities where news is still viewed as existing in a conservative domain. "The fact that the news isn't doing as well as the other stations could be because the formula of young reporters carrying around cameras maybe doesn't work with the older viewers that prefer older, 'more experienced' newscasters," he says.

Actually, it's not appealing to the younger viewers, either. Maybe, despite all the cosmetics, despite all posturing to the contrary, A-Channel isn't really offering an alternative. It is not a different voice on the prairie landscape, just another one.

As you watch the programming, you can see cautious content butt heads with avant-garde form to create something like intellectual inertia. In the end, both sides lose out and the A-Channel's programming winds up being exactly where it can't succeed: in the middle of the road. Take away the hip mobile reporters, strip away the MuchMusic camera angles and silence the brash musical intros, and you'll find that most of the content doesn't differ greatly from the competition. Unlike Znaimer's vision, there is nothing revolutionary about the A-Channel approach to broadcasting, and, as with every other mainstream media outlet, there's nothing truly challenging or groundbreaking about what's being transmitted.

That would be fine if the viewer hadn't been promised an alternative. Spinning that "independence" web to include a truly alternative way of thinking about news should, in theory, result in breaking news stories, or at least offer different perspectives on and voices from those stories. But look at how the A-Channel approaches major stories. Even during the sweeps period—a specific time, either in fall or spring, when audience numbers are measured—the special reports often rely on old standby stories such as undercover cameras at raves or hackneyed "stings" as underage teens buy cigarettes. It's status quo journalism.

Former employees—and there are many—have left the station bemoaning the fact they were sold the independent-thought line when they first went on board, only to later discover a prevalent conservatism or, at best, caution. Whether that caution comes about because management is hyper-aware of Alberta's right-of-centre political and ideological environment

(and the concomitant almighty advertising dollar) or because, as many have suggested, the Craig family itself is a very conservative-minded clan, doesn't make a lot of difference. What matters is that the result has caused viewers on both ends of the political spectrum to feel alienated and—even more hazardous to the long-term health of the station—apathetic: two words that management must have hoped would never define the channel's "A".

And that's why A-Channel's failing. Not because the audience has yet to find it, or even, as Craig offers, because the way in which the ratings are recorded in Alberta—diaries rather than meters—gives the new channel a disadvantage.

The question now is, can the situation be rectified? Unfortunately, that's rather doubtful. The hole in which Craig Broadcast finds itself is almost inescapable. To make a drastic change either way in programming direction right now would be like starting from scratch and might, first, be seen as panic, something advertisers don't appreciate, and second, alienate a further chunk of the station's audience, something it can't afford to do.

The only real glimmer of hope takes us back to the beginning, back to the independence factor. Because the station is as independent as you can get, run by a family that oversees day-to-day operations and doesn't answer to anyone in decision-making, there is the

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faint hope drastic change could happen. Then again, a final word from the president of A-Channel might just snuff out any of that hope.

On whether the station has been a success, Craig asserts, "It has. When we go back and look at what we proposed at the CRTC hearing...we have made that proposal come to life.... I think the greatest measure of our success has been when people come up and say, 'I can't imagine Calgary (or Edmonton) without you guys.' That for us says it all."

That we're now imagining Alberta as an A-Channel-free province says something else entirely.

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