

CBC has its share of the shakes A Newsworld dawns.....2

SE ENTERTAINMENT

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Did you hear a long sigh around midnight?

That's when This Country, **CBC Newsworld's** prime time flagship, hosted from Calgary by Whit Fraser and Carol Adams, was scheduled to close down its debut broadcast.

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The Canadian all-news and information channel made its way for the first time yesterday at 6 a.m. into the homes of some 4 million cable TV subscribers across the country, after two years of planning and troubled relationships with the federal government, private TV operations and cable companies.

It vowed yesterday, in proud promotional segments almost on the hour, every hour, that Newsworld would never sign off.

So was it a sigh of satisfaction or a sigh of embarrassed relief that echoed across the land at midnight, from one CBC broadcast centre to another?

It was not a slick, well-rehearsed debut, by any standard. Newsworld's first day was riddled with technical glitches, confused performances, incomplete reports, muddled audio and video connections and long, irritating silences.

Opening day jitters

More often than not program anchors seemed only too pleased to give up air time to dazzling green and purple computer-generated graphics touting Newsworld, or to an astonishing number of commercials, most of them prepared especially for the channel's first airing.

Put those mistakes down to opening-day jitters. A new national network, especially one that relies on up-to-the-minute satellite communications with other parts of the country and the world, is not an easy thing to get off the ground. Technical and performance problems, abundant yesterday, will soon disappear.

What Newsworld, a commercial CBC enterprise whose \$20-to-\$25-million annual operating costs will be met by advertising revenue and mandatory cable subscriptions, did manage to impart was the sense that Canadians want and deserve a unique perspective on national and international events.

It was refreshing, in This Country's first-hour sweep across the nation, between 6 p.m. and 7, to get a first-hand assessment of issues that affect our countrymen in St. John's (drugs in prisons, low student ratings in math and science), Halifax (impaired driving charges laid against federal cabinet minister Bernard Valcourt, a local favorite) and Ottawa, where CBC's senior parliamentary correspondent Don Newman hosts several updates on political matters during the afternoon and evening.

But that's not enough. Newsworld, in its first day, fell badly behind American commercial network and pay TV's Cable News Network (CNN) coverage of the execution of U.S. Colonel William Higgins by Iranian terrorists in Beirut.

Though Newsworld led with the story early in the day, it failed to advance it significantly until well into the afternoon. And by then, the gruesome video of Higgins' dangling corpse had been on American TV for hours. Even in This Country's first newscast at 6 p.m., the lengthy lead story on Higgins was attributed to CNN, ostensibly Newsworld's major competitor in this country.

There were other problems:

* Anne Petrie's midday show from Winnipeg was a disaster. Her report on Higgins included a telephone interview with Robin Wright, an uncredited "Middle-East expert" in Washington, whose assessment of the situation, for all we know, was as valid as Donald Duck's.

* Petrie's Coast To Coast national phone-in inquiry into the alleged exploitation of environmental concerns by big business fell apart under the weight of unrelated rants by viewers, obviously partisan speeches by supporters of one side or the other, and by audio and video glitches that prohibited any real debate between spokesmen for the Loblaw's grocery chain, which claims it sells "environmentally friendly" products, and the Greenpeace environment protectionist group. To make matters worse, Petrie seemed to think the Loblaw's spokesman was company president David Nichol, and blushed effusively when corrected.

* And Report On Business host Cecil Foster is wooden, confused, and his reports almost incomprehensible to ordinary viewers.

Antonia Zerbisias' view/D3.

ART Star color photo (Eglinton): Alison Smith on This Day set
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