

## **Saskatchewan Communications Network Celebrates Ten Years of Innovative Educational Broadcasting**

Toward the end of the 1980s, it was clear that technology would play an exponentially larger role in every aspect of people's lives. In response to a series of public consultations on the future of education in Saskatchewan, the Government of Saskatchewan formed the Saskatchewan Communications Network to address the ongoing educational needs of Saskatchewan's dispersed population.

The fledgling corporation took flight first as a distance education provider, drawing together several partners to provide a system that has been copied in many jurisdictions across North America. SCN continues in this role, delivering credit courses to over 100 Saskatchewan communities.

While it was building a distance education service for Saskatchewan, SCN also applied to the CRTC for an educational broadcast licence. It was felt that Saskatchewan needed to have access to broadcast television that could be used for educational purposes, and that could also support a very young film and video production industry.

Regional television production was decreasing in many centers across Canada, and this was particularly true in Saskatchewan. It was increasingly difficult for Saskatchewan film and video producers to get their programs on the networks. National funding bodies looked for a producer to have a broadcast window before they would consider an application, and national broadcasters weren't interested in programs that they considered to be of "regional interest."

### Getting to Air

SCN entered the broadcast picture, a Saskatchewan "David" competing with several "Goliaths" of the Canadian broadcast industry. SCN's current Executive Director of programming, Richard Gustin, remembers what it was like in those days.

"Liz Lowry arrived from TVO to be the Director of Programming and discovered that first she had to oversee the creation of a broadcast network. There wasn't much of a plan to start out with, so we pretty well made it up as we went along.

Much of Lowry's new job at SCN was to train SCN staff in the business of educational broadcasting. Sadly, Lowry passed away in 1992. SCN remembers her contribution to Saskatchewan television through the "Elizabeth Lowry Award for Best Educational/Instructional Program" at the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival each year.

SCN's Sunni Glaze has also been on staff since day one of SCN. Glaze is currently the Manager of Acquisitions for SCN's Broadcast Network.

"It was a very exciting time for everyone. Although I had been working in the broadcast industry for some time, first with Cable Regina and then with First Choice in Toronto, Liz Lowry was really the only staff person with prior experience in educational broadcasting. She was a wonderful mentor and leader in our first year."

One new staff member that didn't need training was Bill Jones. Jones was a veteran of the broadcast wars for 10 years in the private sector and 14 years in public television with the CBC. His main assignment at SCN was as a go-between with the SCN Regina Office and the head-end at the Division of Audio-Visual Services (DAVS) at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon.

DAVS was (and is) under contract, and therefore not part of the SCN establishment. SCN was building a programming operation; DAVS was charged with developing the means to put it on the air. DAVS had experience narrowcasting distance education courses, and with a lot of equipment and studio space available, was selected to help get SCN to air.

"It was fascinating", says Jones. "Here was a television operation being created from the ground up, and it was being done with some 10 to 15 employees. Should we run to the top and bottom of the clock as conventional broadcasters, or should we just run continuous programs paying no attention to time, or program lengths? Should we intersperse promotional material in breaks in the programs, or should we run programs in their entirety? A scheduling department had to be created; an on-air promotion unit had to be set up; Station IDs had to be designed; on-air hours determined ...fascinating."

All of this was going on as the corporation nervously awaited the result of an application to the CRTC for a broadcast licence. When that decision came down, and if it was favourable—SCN had to be ready. There were some frantic moments.

SCN's original Director of Public Affairs, Anna Willey, remembers it as an exciting and challenging time.

"We had very little time to launch a broadcast operation, and from a communications perspective we were starting from scratch. The challenge was to meet the information needs of cable providers and the general public, and also create some excitement and energy about this new service. We organized a provincial advertising campaign, posters, two videos, a host of special events...it was a fast-paced and exciting time for us, and a real privilege to be a part of it."

The CRTC did grant SCN a broadcast licence on Valentine's Day, and the new broadcaster was in full (by the seat of the pants) flight in a matter of weeks. In May 1991, SCN started broadcasting with a schedule that ran from 2:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. daily, which gave it 2,740 hours per year on-air.

### The Early Years

The early years of SCN on-air saw the new broadcaster seeking programming from Canadian educational broadcasters, and the Saskatchewan film and video industry.

SCN has been able to develop excellent relationships with BC's Knowledge Network and TVOntario, and over the years the three broadcasters have often shared resources to purchase excellent programming for all three networks.

In the early 1990s SCN assisted with several Saskatchewan-made series devoted to arts and culture in Saskatchewan. SCN worked with Saskatchewan Education and the producers to develop programming that was entertaining, and which also filled the need for specific curriculum materials. As part of its commitment to education, SCN broadcasts 10 hours of curriculum-support programming each week to Saskatchewan schools.

SCN was a key development partner in productions such as: *With These Hands* (crafts), *Through the Eyes of a Writer* (Real Eye Media), *Prairie Variations* (music – Camera West Film Associates), and *Expressions: Saskatchewan Visual Art and Artists* (Shadowland Moving Pictures).

The Film Crew project *Approach to a Sacred Place* (The Art of Otto Rogers) was supported by SCN from the start, and it generated calls of support from British Columbia after it was shown there on the Knowledge Network. *One in a Million* (Grasslands Productions) featured profiles of interesting and accomplished Saskatchewan people.

### Getting the Word Out

One of the challenges that SCN has faced throughout the years has been to make itself available to the Saskatchewan public, and to let people know that it was there.

From the outset, SCN was a satellite-to-cable service, and the province's large rural and northern populations were not served by cable. This made SCN's job even tougher, but circumstances have changed, and now there are many options for both urban and rural viewers, and SCN is part of most cable, direct-to-home satellite, and "wireless cable" (microwave) systems in Saskatchewan. SCN now

reaches over 250 Saskatchewan communities and an estimated more than 700,000 Saskatchewan residents.

Communicating the existence of the network has always been difficult, and getting people interested in "educational television" has also been a challenge. Over the years, SCN published a Viewers' Guide, which was distributed to individual subscribers, cable outlets, schools, rural service centres, and video outlets.

SCN has always been able to take risks and try new things to fulfill its mandate. In 1999, the SCN stopped publishing its own 24-page guide every eight weeks, and began to advertise program highlights in a weekly two-page spread in the Regina and Saskatoon TV Times. This reaches close to 150,000 people weekly in all parts of the province.

While communicating the good news about SCN has been a challenge, winning viewers and supporters with excellent programming has become a long-standing tradition at SCN.

### Ten Years of Achievement

When SCN first went on-air in 1991, few people could have dreamed of the type of "quiet" success the corporation would have. SCN's Richard Gustin has a background in dreaming. The race car enthusiast - turned media communications student - turned professional photographer - turned visual artist - turned programmer would tell people his fantasy of "someday seeing a Saskatchewan production on an American network," and they would politely laugh.

Gustin's fantasy has been fulfilled so many times that he says, "I hardly notice anymore when a project that SCN has helped nurture shows up south of the border. Since it began, SCN has been involved in hundreds of Saskatchewan projects, many of which have gone on to win awards and air time all over the world."

SCN has become a major supporter of not just the Saskatchewan film and video industry, but also the independent documentary production industry in Canada. Robbie Hart, producer and president of Adobe Productions, commented on SCN's role in the Canadian industry.

"SCN has been an important partner for Canadian independents, especially documentary producers. Over the past ten years, we've been able to include SCN as a second and third window broadcaster on several of our projects. And their licence fees, although small, have helped make the difference in getting our films financed".

SCN has earned a reputation as one of the most efficient and producer-friendly broadcasters in Canada, and this has helped SCN to bring the world's best programming to Saskatchewan, and helped Saskatchewan programming get out to the rest of the world.

Producer Gail Tilson of Independent Moving Pictures Inc. underscores the important role SCN plays in helping Saskatchewan programming get to air outside the province.

"SCN has played a really critical role in Saskatchewan. There is almost no educational product out that SCN hasn't been involved in, and they have developed some really good projects with the independent filmmakers. Product with SCN involvement sells well everywhere around the world. We couldn't do it without them."

### Supporting the Saskatchewan Film & Video Industry

The list of SCN's Saskatchewan "success stories" is endless, and SCN is very proud of the many fine productions it has supported over the years. Since 1991, SCN has been involved in over 500 Saskatchewan-based projects, of which more than 200 have been completed and are available for broadcast.

Among these, Chris Triffo's *Dad* (Partners in Motion) is an amazing and very personal examination of the effects of mental illness on Chris's family. SCN Program Manager Cherie Westmoreland's strong partnering, plus the financial support of SCN, ensured the completion of this exceptional production. The film went on to win two Gemini Awards, and a host of other prizes.

Minds Eye Pictures' *Incredible Story Studio* has been a stunning success, and it got jump-started as a result of substantial SCN support in its first year. The series is now available to over 200 million homes worldwide, and is an ongoing hit with kids wherever it airs.

Other highlights include Donna Caruso's *My Father's Legacy* and *Doll Hospital* (Incandescent Films), as well as the *Scarred by History* series by 4 Square Productions.

One of the projects in which SCN played a major role was producer Lori Kuffner's live, interactive forum on teen suicide called *One Survivor's Message: Don't Kill Yourself* (Independent Moving Pictures). The project involved multiple agencies, a panel of experts, and people from all across the province.

The Camera West production *They Live to Polka* can be counted on to light up a broadcaster's switchboard with positive viewer feedback, and it highlights the enthusiasm of Saskatchewan people for music and dance!

SCN has always worked hard to provide programming for, and tell the stories of Saskatchewan's First Nations and Métis people. Programs such as *Heartbeat of the Earth* (Missinipi Broadcasting), *Circle of Voices* (Blue Hills Productions), and *Indigenous Circle* (in partnership with CTV Saskatchewan) have been part of SCN's mandate for meeting the needs of diverse groups in Saskatchewan.

Saskatchewan producers aren't shy about acknowledging SCN's role. Gerald B. Sperling, President of Four Square Productions Canada Limited, says: "SCN plays a creative and stimulating role in both education and independent film production in Saskatchewan. As independent producers, we have thrived in the first instance because of SCN's active participation in our projects. SCN should be celebrated and enhanced."

### SCN: Unique in the Industry

Like all broadcasters, SCN strives to meet the needs of the people who pay the bills. In SCN's case, the people of Saskatchewan are paying the bills. SCN President and CEO James Benning is a career civil servant who grew up near Weyburn, Saskatchewan and has worked in Toronto, Regina, and internationally. He takes great pride in SCN's ability to manage its affairs within a very tight budget, and still pursue change and innovation.

"SCN is a key part of Saskatchewan's educational community," says Benning, "and it has been key to a lot of great development in Saskatchewan's film and video industry."

Benning has been at SCN since 1992, and he credits SCN's staff for the development of the network.

"SCN has been fortunate to have a knowledgeable, hard-working, and innovative staff over the years. Our technical staff has done miracles within a limited budget. In hard financial circumstances SCN was able to make the transition from analog to digital broadcast systems, and we were one of the first in Canada to do so!"

When speaking specifically about the SCN Broadcast Network, Benning says, "What makes SCN different is the quality of the people working here, and their commitment to bringing worthwhile programs to our audience."

SCN's role as both a distance education provider and an educational broadcaster has provided some unique opportunities for programming on the Broadcast Network. SCN has been able to assist content providers to package their distance education programs into broadcast formats of interest to the public. SCN also pioneered the broadcast of university credit courses that were also available to the general public.

## Uniquely Saskatchewan

SCN's contribution to the Saskatchewan film and video industry has been well documented in various studies, research papers, and industry testimonials over the years. As well as presenting Saskatchewan-produced programming, SCN has also worked very hard to present views of Saskatchewan to itself.

SCN and the Saskatchewan Writer's Guild (SWG) collaborated on a series of video shorts to celebrate the SWG's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. These beautifully produced shorts feature 15 Saskatchewan writers reading from their own works. This has given Saskatchewan people access to their own writers and stories in a video format that really celebrates the written and spoken word.

When the Saskatchewan Arts Board celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, SCN proposed a series of station IDs using Saskatchewan art works in the permanent collection of the Board. The resulting IDs have presented Saskatchewan art to many people who were not previously aware of the collection.

SCN continues to work on new projects like these, giving Saskatchewan people a mirror image of themselves through their stories, art, music, and colourful characters.

## The Next Ten Years

One of the key players in the future of SCN is Manager of Technology David Stanchuk. He has been with SCN since the early days, and has been responsible for the network's amazing technical transformation.

Says Stanchuk, "We could see early on a great advantage to SCN in switching to digital, and by moving to an open standards based system, we have achieved even greater efficiencies and capacity than originally thought. The move to digital has also positioned us for the ever promised 'convergence' of media, and has given the Province a platform for an important role in broadcasting, distance education and data networking."

While the proliferation of new channels has caused some to question the value of a provincial broadcaster such as SCN, there is no question that there is a place for a broadcast service that plays a different role. Although there are many options available in Saskatchewan for television viewers, SCN is the only broadcaster serving the province that is programmed by and for Saskatchewan residents.

Sat Kumar is an SCN program manager with a long history in broadcasting. As a former producer in commercial television, a long-time CBC producer, and a

former Director of the University of Regina School of Journalism, Sat has strong views on the role and importance of SCN.

"SCN is a public broadcaster, but unlike the CBC, it doesn't have a split personality—there are no ratings or commercial considerations in our programming decisions. SCN is also different from the so-called Specialty Channels. SCN does not arrange life into neat little niches and force-fit programming into them. Holistic programming is the best way I can describe it, which is not to say it isn't fun."

Kumar goes on to describe SCN's programming goals: "...we bring the best programming we can afford from Canada and the world to our own Saskatchewan audience. We endeavour to reflect the cultural diversity of the province, with special emphasis on Aboriginal productions and, in general provide a balance and alternative to U.S. dominated television."

Kumar's colleague, SCN program manager Cherie Westmoreland, elaborates on the idea that SCN is a "different" kind of broadcaster.

"SCN is eclectic, intelligent, alternative television and cannot be defined by a particular style, packaging format or narrow program content definition. SCN is a place where you can see and hear the passion, creativity and heartfulness of the Canadian independent filmmaker."

For ten years, SCN has worked hard to give Saskatchewan people expanded opportunities through its distance education and broadcast services. The SCN Broadcast Network will continue to be a leader in promoting Saskatchewan productions and producers, and in bringing the best programming from around the world to Saskatchewan television.

Alexandra Bródy has been a devoted SCN viewer for many years, and one of her comments really captures what SCN strives for in the future. She said, "SCN is what television should be, and seldom is."

**Iain MacDonald**