

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? It's up to viewers to decide

Most weekday evenings at 5 p.m. your humble correspondent plunks himself down in front of a TV set to watch 'The Five' on Fox TV, a political debate show featuring five American pundits debating the issues of the day. It's informative and fun to watch. It is, to be sure, slanted toward Republican views, but unlike many Canadian talk shows and debate forums which essentially feature an extremely narrow range of views it also includes at least one Democrat on the panel. Being the political junkie that I am, it's pretty much my favourite show on television. But if Bell Media president Kevin Crull had his way, I wouldn't be able to watch it. Even though I am a Bell subscriber and that includes TV, telephone and computer services Crull told a TV industry audience in Ottawa last week that U.S. networks such as CBS, NBC and Fox should be booted off Canada's airwaves. Why? Because, he says, Bell would make more money without the competition. It often strikes me as beyond hypocritical when titans of industry and by any measure, Bell is one of this country's largest and most profitable industries argue the merits of capitalism on the basis which I think is sound of competition being good for us, they are often the first to whine when said competition is aimed at their specific industry. It's not as if Bell is suffering. Indeed, earlier this month chief executive George Cope of BCE the parent company of the giant conglomerate announced that the quarterly dividend hit \$542 million, up from \$495 million a year earlier. In his speech, Crull complained that one of the company's major properties, CTV, is having its best year ever in terms of viewers, yet still lost \$40-million last year because of the increased cost of content and further the company is losing subscribers to specialty channels. Maybe so. But Bell Media overall, which owns CTV and a host of other properties, saw a significant 3.9 per cent bump in revenue from a year earlier, much of it from a booming Bell wireless industry. Crull says the problem is the age-old practice of allowing American over-the-air networks to be broadcast free in Canada. 'Canada is the only country in the world that allows American networks to be retransmitted without restriction despite valid and exclusive copyrights held by domestic broadcasters,' said Crull. Of course Canada is. What other English-speaking country borders the giant American market and therefore has a direct interest in U.S. affairs and U.S. entertainment, for heaven's sake? I can't imagine the TV viewers in Outer Mongolia are clamouring for more U.S. reality shows, but there you have it. Crull goes on to claim that since Canadian networks buy most of the popular American shows because, of course, Canadians actually WANT TO WATCH THEM blacking out U.S. channels wouldn't have a big impact on Canadian viewers. Yes it would. For starters, it would mean I couldn't sit down and watch The Five every night. Crull concedes Canadian viewers would miss out on some programs Bell wouldn't buy U.S. news or talks shows, for example but says, 'Do we value Canadian current events and talk shows, or are we okay with Good Morning America and the View?' I would say that's up to viewers to decide. If Canadian current event shows which are decidedly tame and left-leaning don't appeal to people, then perhaps they should be made more appealing. The answer isn't to black out the competition as Crull would have us believe. Bell in the spirit of its' unbridled self-interest is actually going to court to fight a Jan. 29 decision by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications (CRTC) to end the black-out of the popular Super Bowl ads from Canadian television sets. It released a hoked-up poll showing that 69 per cent of 1,000 Canadians surveyed showed it was more important to support broadcasters that paid for program rights than to see U.S. Super Bowl ads. Well, anybody who knows anything about polling knows that if you present a one-sided question pick between Super Bowl ads and the death of Canadian television, for example you'll get the answer you want. The fact is, BCE and other similar companies are recipients of massive amounts of public money through various programs. It owns telephone, satellite, retail stores, television networks, radio stations, several newspapers (including a chunk of The Globe and Mail) and the biggest cash cow of all, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment. Crull should heed a comment by legendary U.S. football coach and commentator Lou Holtz that, 'Never tell your problems to anyone 20 percent don't care and the other 80 percent are glad you have them.' Amen to Ma Bell on that score.

