



Columnist Jack Knox

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Went to a taping of a comedy show for the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network the other night. Lots of fun.

The remarkable thing: It had aboriginal people in it.

This didn't use to be noteworthy. A generation ago, when specialty channels appeared on your TV, there was a correlation between the name of the network and its content.

Turn on the History Channel, you could expect to see a show about history. Go to The Learning Channel, you might learn something. A&E had both A and E.

No more. Now it's nothing but Ice Road Housewives and inbred, possum-gnawing hillbillies. (Broadcasters used to sign off the broadcast day with O Canada; now it's the theme to Deliverance.)

"I remember when Bravo used to air operas," laments Jack Donaghy on a 30 Rock episode after Liz Lemon waxes on about her favourite reality show, Wedding Bitches.

Now Canada's version of Bravo shows nothing but Criminal Minds and Flashpoint.

That at least leaves Bravo more high brow than the channel born as the Arts and Entertainment Network in 1984. It changed its name to A&E in 1995, when the plays and concerts gave way to the likes of Dog the Bounty Hunter, Billy the

Exterminator and Hoarders. Its last frou-frou show, Breakfast with the Arts, aired in 2007. This past Friday was given over entirely to a Duck Dynasty marathon. Really.

Other channels also condensed their names as they drifted away from their original purposes. The Outdoor Life Network was renamed OLN when its content shifted to UFO Hunters, Ghost Hunters and Operation Repo.

Likewise, The Learning Channel begat TLC, which gave us Toddlers and Tiaras, which begat Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, proof that everything Bin Laden said about the moral corruption of the West was right. TLC also gave us Jon & Kate Plus 8, Sister Wives and Strange Sex — yup, we're learning a lot.

OK, the History Channel skewed toward the bloodier aspects of our past, mostly black-and-white Second World War documentaries, from the start. But at least that was real history, unlike Swamp People, Outback Hunters and Cajun Pawn Stars. (If you want war shows, best flip to A&E: Storage Wars, Parking Wars, Shipping Wars.)

Some give up their original purpose altogether. MTV, a big-haired music video phenom in the 1980s, now offers Teen Mom 2, Snooki and 16 and Pregnant. Over on Much Music, Saturday's fare included Saved by the Bell and Dude, Where's My Car.

When Canada's Life Network launched in 1995, it was all about home design, food, gardening and the like. Six years ago, it morphed into Slice, home to the likes of Bulging Brides and The Real Housewives of Orange County/Atlanta/Vancouver/Port Hardy (I think).

When National Geographic launched in 2000, its programming was supposed to comprise "feature documentary programming in the areas of geography, world cultures, anthropology, remote exploration, natural conservation and geopolitics." Now it's Domsday Preppers, Alaska State Troopers, Female Corrections Officers: Dallas, Border Wars and Wild Justice. Everybody's armed.

Some grasp at the most tenuous connections. On Saturday, APTN showed that First Nations classic movie, What Stays in Vegas, starring Cameron Diaz, who has just enough Cherokee blood to qualify as native in TV land.

They should be thrilled with the aboriginal comics featured in She Kills Me, the show shot in Victoria last week.

Even those channels that stay true to their roots like to ramp up the tension. Turn on the Food Network, you don't know if you're going to see chef Gordon Ramsay explode or Guy Fieri suffer a massive jammer on Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives. Pretty sure we're going to see The Walking Dead on the Food Network soon. (Some people find zombie shows gruesome, but I was raised on Scottish cooking.)

The thing is, they only show what we'll watch — and apparently what we like to watch are rednecks and train wrecks who make us feel relatively good about ourselves. Waste half an hour of your life following Honey Boo Boo, Snooki, Dog or any combination of Kardashians, you'll be banging on the Vatican door, demanding to be elected pope.

Those specialty channels, they make us feel special.

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