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Canada’s Broadcasting Policy Debate

Le gouvernement conservateur du Canada, élu en 1984, a entrepris la révision de la politique canadienne de radiodiffusion. Ce qui a mis en lumière la nature insolite de la radiodiffusion canadienne en tant que microcosme de la société canadienne et en tant que modèle pour comprendre le rôle contemporain des systèmes nationaux de radiodiffusion dans les pays industriels. Alors que le Gouvernement et l’agence de réglementation procédaient de concert avec la tendance globale vers la déréglementation et la privatisation dans le domaine de la radiodiffusion, un important groupe de travail fédéral (Sauvageau-Caplan) produisait un rapport remettant l’accent sur les objectifs socio-culturels qui, depuis toujours, caractérisent la politique canadienne en matière de radiodiffusion, et proposant d’amplifier, de revitaliser, et de diversifier le rôle du secteur public. En somme, le débat qui a suivi fut révélateur des contradictions qui sous-tendent le processus d’élaboration de la politique de la radiodiffusion au Canada, où des objectifs tels que ceux-là se retrouvent systématiquement à la remorque des intérêts politiques et économiques de court terme. Cette communication fait l’examen des détails du débat en question, et le situe par rapport à la notion d’un espace public où les médias de masse sont censés jouer un rôle social du premier ordre en tant qu’institutions prééminentes de la vie publique démocratique.

Our Canadian pattern in these public matters seems to be fairly consistent.... First we get into a muddle. Then we have a Royal Commission which recommends a public agency. Having set up the public agency, we let it get into another muddle. This brings on the infuriated attacks of the private enterprise people, all made with the holiest of motives. We
then have another Royal Commission. This time we compromise, maintaining the public agency but allowing private enterprise to come into the picture too. Eventually some sort of balance gets worked out... this is our Canadian pattern, now quite well-marked and distinctive enough to be unique. (Lower 1953, 173)

These words, by the eminent historian A.R.M. Lower, were published in 1953, barely a year after television was introduced in Canada. Already, a debate was under way among Canadians about the possible introduction of private-enterprise television in Canada, which up until then had enjoyed the public service variety alone.

Indeed, there has hardly been a time, since Canadians invented commercial radio in 1919, that questions relating to the ownership, control and content of broadcasting have not been the subject of public debate. Concerned citizens like Arthur Lower have had ample occasion to give their opinion, although not all have shared his influence — a member of the country’s intellectual elite, Lower was privately consulted by royal commission chairman Robert Fowler and had a hand in Fowler’s 1957 report.

In the previously cited article, Lower made an astute observation about public policy formation in Canada:

Here in Canada, because of our scattered population public opinion is always weak in expression, so that “what the public wants” will probably not be the main determinant of government policy... lobby groups and associations, representing no one but themselves, may well come to prevail on government. In such an event, the sphere of public television will be sharply limited and, perhaps, eventually destroyed. (Lower 1953, 171-2)

More recently, and in somewhat more sober fashion, political scientist Vincent Lemieux (1985) has characterized the policy-making process in Canada, particularly with respect to broadcasting, as “technocratic”, that is to say, dominated by the decisions of experts whose claim to authority is based on alleged competence rather than political responsibility. At the opposite end of the policy-making spectrum would be a “democratic” process, where open debate in Parliament, public forums, and even public opinion surveys led to the identification of policy problems and the formulation of solutions.

Lemieux’s comments were made in a position paper to the most recent body to study the Canadian broadcasting system, the Task Force on Broadcasting Policy chaired by Gerry Caplan and Florian Sauvageau that reported in September 1986. The Report of the Task Force has attracted wide
public attention and re-focused the debate on broadcasting in this country, but, predictably, this public focus has so far had little real impact on policy.

It is in this respect that it is fair to say that the Canadian debate on broadcasting — and cultural politics generally — is at once a microcosm of the general forces at play in Canadian society, and at the same time a highly instructive example of the issues reshaping communications in all the advanced industrial societies.

Some background

The Conservative government Canadians elected in 1984 quickly demonstrated a determination to radically restructure broadcasting in line with its own neo-liberal image. Its mandate to the Task Force set up in April 1985 called for an industrial and cultural strategy for broadcasting that took into account “the overall social and economic goals of the government, of government policies and priorities, including the need for fiscal restraint, increased reliance on private sector initiatives and economic goals of the government, of government policies and priorities, including the need for fiscal restraint, increased reliance on private sector initiatives and federal-provincial cooperation...” (DOC 1985).

Public response pushed the Task Force into the public eye. What began as an advisory group to the Minister of Communications turned into a public consultative body, under public pressure. But even as it was deliberating, the system continued to evolve.

The new government provoked concern for the future of public broadcasting when it instructed the national public broadcaster, the CBC, to reduce its budget by some 10%. It introduced legislation intended to limit the independence of the regulatory agency, the CRTC. A month after setting up the Task Force, by rescinding a cabinet directive to the CRTC, it liberalized existing restrictions on concentration of media ownership. It lit a fire under the cultural industries community with an ambivalent attitude towards the question of including cultural industries in the pending “free trade” negotiations with the United States. The CRTC, meanwhile, continued on an independent course of remaking the industrial shape and regulatory framework of Canadian broadcasting through a series of decisions on the very questions the policy review was intended to address.

The Task Force Report published in September 1986 went against the grain of these developments. Sensitive to the traditional bases of Canadian broadcasting, and to the articulated public concerns to which it had been exposed, the Report reiterated the essential public service nature of Canadian broadcasting, and introduced a number of important new notions concerning broadcasting as public service. At the same time — still consistent with traditional Canadian policy — it was careful not to undermine the position of broadcast-related private enterprise.
Marc Raboy

The central theme of the Task Force Report — "Canadianization" of broadcasting — tends to obscure consideration of the fundamental question that thoughtful critics of actually existing broadcasting have been raising (see, e.g., Fulford 1987), and that underlies much of the content of the Report: what kind of Canadian broadcasting do we want a Canadian broadcasting system to deliver, and what kind of structures should be put in place with this in mind?

The present debate on broadcasting in Canada thus continues the well-entrenched historic tradition of focussing on the fuzziest of nationalist notions while preventing serious consideration of the actual connection between stated Canadian broadcasting policy objectives and the social demand with respect to broadcasting.

When one looks for this connection, one quickly concludes that the real issue is not "Canadianization", but "democratization", and that the real gap between the promise and performance of the Canadian broadcasting system does not emanate from the national origin of its programming, but from the structures and practices it has put in place, and the interests — albeit Canadian — that these have generally served.

Canadian broadcasting policy has been characterized, historically, by a strong and consistent call for autonomous Canadian broadcasting structures and content. This has resulted in the development of a strong public sector; but also, deliberately, in the development of a lucrative private sector. It is a commonplace that neither sector has successfully met its designated national policy objectives, and so it is with begrudging reluctance that the Canadian public treasury continues to support, at substantial cost, a national public sector in broadcasting, while the legislative apparatus and regulatory agency maintain in place a series of mechanisms designed to ensure the protection and economic benefit of some several hundred privately-owned broadcasting undertakings (radio and television stations, cable companies, satellite-to-cable services).

As several recent observers (e.g., Tunstall 1986; Cantor & Cantor 1986) have noted, the United States of America seeks to export its own structural models and ideological policy framework to other countries as a strategic means of supporting a world market for U.S. communications software and hardware. Canada is at the cutting edge of this strategy, and in certain respects, Canadian broadcasting policy (and communications and cultural policy generally) has gone against the grain of U.S. designs. Indeed, contrary to Canadian government announcements, a strong case can be made for the view that cultural questions will necessarily be at the heart of any free trade agreement between Canada and the U.S. (see, e.g., Nelson 1986).

But it is important to realize why Canadian governments have sought to guard a degree of national autonomy in broadcasting, and in order to do so it is necessary to dig deeply into the historic political and economic agenda of Canadian broadcasting policy. Upon examination, it becomes evident that all rhetoric notwithstanding, the stated socio-cultural objectives of Canadian
broadcasting have always taken a back seat to politics and economic development of private industry (see Raboy 1985, 1986a, 1986b, on which the following section is based).

The early conceptions of broadcasting in Canada were as varied and unclear as some of the sounds that came through the air on a stormy night. Broadcasting had one purpose for the new nationalists of post-World War I English Canada, another for the activists of the adult education movement, and yet another for the proponents of provincial autonomy in Québec. The much celebrated and often cited Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting of 1929 (the Aird Commission) forged a consensus among these diverging interests to make a powerful argument in favour of a national, public broadcasting monopoly — that, as we well know, was never implemented (see Canada 1929).

A uniquely Canadian, and much underestimated social conception of broadcasting was articulated in the 1930s by the organizers of the Canadian Radio League, and particularly, the young socialist Graham Spry. Spry saw the question of broadcasting as intimately related to the broader issues of freedom and democracy, and in a string of publications and public interventions in the early 1930s indicated a view of broadcasting that corresponded to an ideal conception of the public:

... the problem is the problem of free public opinion. The issue is freedom. Let the air remain as the prerogative of commercial interests and subject to commercial control, and how free will be the voice, the heart of democracy.

The maintenance, the enlargement of freedom, the progress, the purity of education, require the responsibility of broadcasting to the popular will. There can be no liberty complete, no democracy supreme, if the commercial interests dominate the vast, majestic resource of broadcasting. (Spry 1931, 227-8)

The idea that broadcasting was a public resource belonging to the community, rather than a commercial vehicle, attracted all but that sector of private enterprise that was directly interested in broadcasting industries (station owners, receiving set manufacturers, advertisers).

But the movement for public broadcasting had two driving motives, and these were often contradictory: broadcasting was to be a vehicle for social development (and especially a voice for the disenfranchised), and it was to be a tool for developing Canadian national unity. Throughout the subsequent history of Canadian broadcasting, the second motive has taken precedence over the first, and most of the time, the two have taken a back seat to a third, unstated motive: the development of a Canadian broadcasting industry.
Marc Raboy

In short, while the potential of broadcasting in the process of democratic, human emancipation has been recognized, our system has mainly served to protect the idea of Canada from external and internal threats of fragmentation and disintegration, and to develop a sector of the economy in which Canadian capital could flourish and expand.

Broadcasting has also provided a prime example of the growth of technocracy, of "integrating administration and politics in the public interest", as political scientist J.E. Hodgetts wrote in 1946:

It must be recognized at once that the "public interest" is merely a convenient political hypothesis which will provide a sanction for state intervention and which will, at the same time, presumably create a standard against which government policy can be measured. (Hodgetts 1946, 459)

The problem of the CBC, Hodgetts wrote, was that

... having delegated both "administration" and "politics" to an independent corporation, we are faced with the problem of keeping the agency responsible for its defining and interpreting of the public interest.... (Hodgetts 1946, 465)

From the beginning, the CBC was used to champion Canadian centralism in the national interest, thwarting the emergence of all non-national public broadcasting alternatives. The provinces especially were excluded from any involvement in broadcasting, until, in the tense constitutional climate of the 1970s, Ottawa finally conceded them a piece of terrain, the so-called "educational television" that has since emerged as an independent public broadcasting sector in several provinces. Indeed, the struggle for provincial broadcasting in Canada furnishes a fine example of the quintessentially Canadian contradiction between the notions of public interest and nationhood.

During the national unity crisis of the 1960s and 1970s, the governing Liberal Party's insistence on using the CBC to promote a unitary vision of Canada led to inclusion in the Broadcasting Act of an unprecedented, highly politicized "national unity" mandate for public broadcasting, and of various attempts to influence the CBC's approach to the crisis. This was somewhat put to rest after a 1977 inquiry by the regulatory agency, the CRTC, which found that the CBC could not be blamed for its reporting on the independence movement in Québec (CRTC 1977).

Since the Québec referendum on sovereignty-association in 1980, the national question has receded into the background, and in 1986, the Task Force on Broadcasting Policy recommended removing the CBC's national unity mandate from the law altogether.
The need to consolidate internal unity was one strong argument for maintaining a public sector in broadcasting. The relatively weak potential of Canadian capital to sustain a private sector was another. The most transparent declaration of this factor in policy making was made in 1961 by the Liberal Party's parliamentary spokesman on broadcasting, J.W. Pickersgill, then in opposition:

It is precisely because we were afraid the whole market would have been taken by U.S. interests if there had not been public participation that we have had this public participation. I have never heard any Canadian who was not a socialist defend it on any other grounds.... I think it would be far better, if we could have the assurance that the broadcasting would be Canadian, to have entirely private broadcasting. (Canada 1960-61, 8754)

By the 1980s, broadcasting business in Canada was big enough to enable a strategic thrust based on active promotion of indigenous Canadian broadcast capital. By the time this was spelled out for the public by Minister of Communications Francis Fox in a 1983 policy paper (DOC 1983) the ascendancy of private over public broadcasting was well established.

But, outside the political and bureaucratic spheres, broadcasting was perceived otherwise in the different segments of Canadian society. As in the other western countries, the renegotiation of the parameters of public life was forced onto the agenda by the social movements of the 1960s, and broadcasting was one among many objects of struggle.

Within the traditional confines of public broadcasting, that is to say, the CBC, conflicting conceptions of broadcasting were evident, for example, in the celebrated row of 1966 surrounding the popular and irreverent television public affairs program, "This Hour Has Seven Days." The creators of "Seven Days" insisted on the right to use television as a medium of social exchange, and not merely for political transmission. The apparently arbitrary power of management, on the other hand, illustrated how far the CBC had moved from the ideals of the pioneers of Canadian public broadcasting.

At the same time, new approaches to broadcasting entirely outside the traditional structures were generated by community activists anxious to use media. The development of light and inexpensive technologies held out the utopian promise of "community broadcasting," a practice that appeared to be ideally suited to decentralizing and de-professionalising media production, while increasing access and public participation. But community broadcasting was never recognized as a full partner in the system, to be fully developed so as to meet the needs that could not be filled by either national public broadcasting or commercial private broadcasting. Under mild regulatory pressure, the cable industry gave desultory support to community
Marc Raboy

access broadcasting, but the possibility of community control as an alternative basis for public broadcasting was never seriously explored.

Elements of the present debate

We are perhaps three months away from the introduction of new broadcasting legislation. There is a consensus on one point: new legislation is long overdue. But broadcasting legislation is always long overdue in Canada, a result of the difficulty of reconciling socio-cultural objectives of mythical stature, a historically deep-rooted vision of “Canada” as a place to do business, and a stubborn public which insists on aggravating the due process of technocracy by repeatedly calling up the contradictions between rhetoric and reality.

In considering the debate that will culminate in the new legislation, it is important to try to distinguish the packaging from the substance. With respect to the Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force Report, therefore, it is important to recognize that while maintaining the historic Canadian policy emphasis on cultural sovereignty, it has attacked the myth that Canadian culture can only be promoted by omnipotent central agencies under the exclusive control of the federal government. In fact, while this aspect has not made the biggest headlines, the most significant contribution of the Task Force Report is its insistence that the social and cultural objectives of Canadian broadcasting can and must be met by a multiplicity of agents, and that these objectives must be broadened to meet the needs of the communicationally disenfranchised of Canada, not only those of a political elite.

Although it almost never uses the term, the Caplan-Sauvageau Report opens a space in which one can argue that democratization of Canadian broadcasting is a major policy objective. If the Canadian policy debate were to be shifted to this level, it would change the way in which the problem of cultural domination was perceived in Canada, and, to the extent that Canada is recognized as the nation most exposed to American cultural fallout, it would influence perception of cultural imperialism on a world scale.

The Caplan-Sauvageau Report proclaims the legitimacy of hitherto marginal forms of broadcasting as tools of social development, and argues forcefully for their recognition in law. But it does this within the framework of the classical Canadian policy discourse, and its emphasis on nationalism and national institutions.

Historically, so the argument has gone, Canada has needed a strong public sector to ensure that a portion of the market remain Canadian. But the existence of a strong public sector has not ensured openness and accessibility of the system to the multiple, diversified publics that make up Canada.

The real question is less related to national origin than it is to control of the system that determines what gets produced, and what gets transmitted.
This is where democratization comes in, and this is where the current debate on the future of Canadian broadcasting is most revealing.

The Task Force proposals introduce the idea of a diversified public sector comprising not only federal agencies like the national public broadcaster (the CBC), the federally funded broadcast program development fund (Telefilm Canada), and the National Film Board, but also the growing sector of provincial broadcasters, community broadcasters, and proposed new independent, non-commercial satellite-to-cable services.

While the proposals are not couched in a framework of democratization per se, that would be the effect of implementing them — increasing public access by multiplying the number of entry points to the system and the control points at which participation in the different components of the system could be possible.

These proposals have thrilled neither the government nor the policymaking establishment, and at this moment, there is good cause to expect that their essence will not be realized.

Already, the Report has been bypassed by events. The CRTC has completely rewritten regulations governing radio, television and cable undertakings, and authorizes an unprecedented degree of corporate concentration in the absence of clear policy guidelines (see, e.g., CRTC 1987a, 1987b). The Québec government, held up as a model for its commitment to community broadcasting, has drastically reduced its level of support, and is generally more sympathetic to the needs of private sector development than the Task Force Report (see, e.g., MCQ 1987). But the best illustration of the policy deformation process is to be seen in the struggle surrounding the key Task Force proposal for a new public service, Television-Canada. The struggle involves Ottawa, Québec, the private sector, and the CRTC; only the public is absent from the jockeying taking place to determine the shape of this crucial new sector.


Now aside from the gargantuan, if not impossible, task that this implied, there were further constraints. Normally, the standing committee would have been the forum for a full public discussion of the report and its proposal. The time frame drastically limited that prospect. But at the same time, the CRTC was proceeding with a call for applications for new so-called "specialty services" — really, a whole new generation of satellite-to-cable services: the cutting edge of the new technology, where all the theoretical and rhetorical questions relating to cultural sovereignty, the relationship of public to private sectors, and the future make-up of the "package" to be available to individual consumers, are being played out. Because of the CRTC’s accelerated agenda, the parliamentary committee felt
Marc Raboy

it had to accord priority to the question of specialty services, although its mandate was to examine all aspects of broadcasting.

The question of specialty services strikes at the heart of the Task Force proposal to create a new non-commercial public agency independent of the CBC, Television Canada, to help redress the existing imbalance between Canadian and foreign programs available under the present system. The proposal has migrated through several versions. The Minister of Communications, for example, has said she favours a mixed, public-private, consortium; while the Québec Ministry of Communications thinks the emphasis should be placed on private, specialized services.

Opinions expressed to the parliamentary committee varied, rather predictably, according to the interests of the parties expressing their views. Provincial broadcasters, for example, preferred to see new federal funds put into supporting provincial broadcasting initiatives. More important, the Canadian Cable Television Association told the committee: "... we are not persuaded the description of this channel given by the task force would be a palatable or attractive service to our subscribers at the price proposed." (Canada 1987, cited on p.32) The Satellite Communications Association of Canada took another view: it felt the proposed new services represented excellent opportunities for developing Canadian broadcasting, and should be given priority.

Here we see a certain historic pattern being played out: an established sector of private broadcasting enterprise (cable) opposes introduction of a new public service, while a new emerging sector that stands to benefit from expansion of the system (satellite dishes) supports it. Citing the past record of introduction of new services, such as pay-tv, the parliamentary committee reported:

The most serious danger in the coming hearing on applications for specialty services is that decisions will be made based on a series of unrealistic promises from the applicants about what they are going to do for Canadian programming. (Canada 1987, 24)

It further noted, with remarkable self-restraint:

That there is no consensus yet on the creation of these services is not particularly surprising, given that they remain very general concepts and that they affect different interests in different ways." (Canada 1987, 32)

Finally, the parliamentary committee proposed that the Minister of Communications take the lead in convening all parties to consider establishment of new not-for-profit services, and expressed the wish that the CRTC not foreclose on such a possibility.
Canada's Broadcasting Policy Debate

The CRTC meanwhile announced that it would award licenses for specialty services on the basis of hearings to be held in July, 1987.2

Conclusion

At one level, Canada's broadcasting policy debate provides some indication of the issues at stake and the choices available in broadcasting, not only in Canada, but in advanced societies in general. But it is possible that the most interesting aspect of the debate lies in what it reveals about the policy-making process.

There is no question that Canadian authorities have let broadcasting get into a muddle. But while most of us fumble around in it, for some it is a muddle lined with gold.

Policy making in Canada has never been as political as it is today, and there has never been a greater need to bring the process closer to the people. The choices are fundamental to democracy, yet they are made mainly by functionaries in the interests of business. There is, increasingly, a gap between the stated objectives of Canadian broadcasting and the concrete measures taken to carry them out.

Since the 1920s, broadcasting has been one of the central arenas of the public sphere in western society. In the 1980s, with the ideological winds prevailing towards notions such as "privatization" and "deregulation", the public function of broadcasting is being challenged. In response, critics of the shortcomings of the classical public broadcasting tradition have necessarily begun to rethink the idea of the public with respect to broadcasting (see, e.g., Mattelart, Delcourt and Mattelart 1984; Robins and Webster 1986). At the same time, in all the western countries, policy making goes on.

The Canadian case is revealing in every respect. From its early days, broadcasting in Canada has been one of the privileged areas of struggle concerning conflicting and competing notions of Canadian society, the Canadian nation, and the Canadian public. But with concern tending to focus massively on the "national" problems of the Canadian broadcasting system, it is often difficult to raise one's voice to deal with the system's "social" problems. Reframing the fundamental issues in Canadian broadcasting in terms of social objectives rather than national purpose would make it possible to consider broadcasting as an active influence on social life. As a clarion call, "democratization" appears to be more pertinent than "Canadianization", despite the evident problems of cultural sovereignty posed by the present globalization of communications.

The emphasis on national considerations has only been maintained at the cost of subsuming the other major tensions in Canadian broadcasting: between public and private ownership, between different jurisdictional models, between different structural approaches. By persistently
Marc Raboy

camouflaging these issues, the cultural sovereignty argument has in fact prevented the democratization of broadcasting in Canada.

The September 1986 Report of the Task Force on Broadcasting Policy underscored this dilemma. It contained a number of important elements which reaffirmed and broadened the notion of public service broadcasting, but submerged them in a wave of rhetoric whose key word was “Canadianization”. At the same time, the Task Force accepted the prevailing logic of the need to develop Canadian “cultural industries” as an intrinsic good in the national interest, regardless of their impact on the social objectives attributed to broadcasting.

Meanwhile, the contours of Canadian broadcasting are being reshaped by regulatory decisions and administrative initiatives, even as it is being debated in public forums. This in itself is grounds for arguing the need to re-centre broadcasting decisionmaking in the public sphere. More important, however, is to keep sight of the reason for keeping broadcasting in the public sphere in the first place.

The public sphere is a battleground, in which conflicting interpretations of reality compete with each other for the right to be taken as representative of public opinion and the public interest. In modern society, media are the central institutions of the public sphere. The debates surrounding media — and in the framework of contemporary western political culture, these debates focus on policy — are thus determining to the democratic quality of public life.

Moments of crisis often have the salutary effect of permitting the emergence of hitherto unimagined social possibilities. It would indeed be a richly ironic paradox if in response to the apparent threat to the traditional public role for broadcasting, new approaches emerged that were more suitable to the democratic potential of media.

To quote Bertolt Brecht (writing in one of the earliest essays on the new technology of radio, in 1927): “If you should think this is Utopian, then I would ask you to consider why it is Utopian.”

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Notes

1 The Mulroney government finally introduced Bill C-136 in June 1988. After long debates and numerous amendments, the proposed new Broadcasting Act passed third reading in the House of Commons, but failed to gain Senate approval before the November 1988 election was called (See Raboy 1989).

2 Licenses for eleven new services, in English and French, were awarded in November 1987. The CRTC decision proved to be highly controversial, and parts of it were contested variously by consumer groups, the federal government, advocates of more...
French-language programming, and some private broadcasters. Only the cable industry was universally satisfied (see Raboy 1988).

References

Marc Raboy

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